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The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia) have developed long-lasting relations with the EU in their efforts to join the Union. In 2003, the six received unequivocal confirmation of a future within the EU. Over the years, the EU has adjusted its conditionality, putting stronger focus on key areas such as rule of law and democratic governance, but expected progress has faltered. Economies have not developed fast enough, either. The overall slow pace of reforms, the increasingly uncertain domestic context, coupled with growing influence of external actors like Russia, Turkey and others, and the EU’s own difficulties complicated the case for enlargement. In 2014, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said that no further enlargement would take place during his mandate. However, since late 2017 the Western Balkans have been back in the spotlight of EU attention. In September 2017, President Juncker highlighted their credible enlargement perspective – a message reaffirmed in the 2018 enlargement strategy, published in February. The strategy sets a clear direction for the region, and promises stronger EU engagement. On 17 April, the Commission published its new enlargement package, with individual reports highlighting progress and remaining obstacles for each country.

Challenges remain, but 2018 has brought a new dynamic. The WB are a priority of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council, and the subsequent Austrian and Romanian Presidencies are likely to maintain this focus. Two summits are to be held: on 17 May, Sofia will host the first EU-WB Summit since 2003 and, in July, the Berlin Process summit will take place in London. This renewed EU engagement, if backed with strong local will for reforms, could lead to long expected progress. Accession talks are ongoing with Montenegro and Serbia, and the Commission has recommended launching them with Albania and FYR Macedonia, although the latter has to solve its name issue with Greece. Work on BiH and towards Kosovo’s Stabilisation and Association agreement continues.

Western Balkans: Country economic indicators and trade with EU
Infographics by Giulio Sabbati, Velina Lilyanova, EPRS; Caterina Francesca Guidi, Globalstat, EUI, April 2018
This series of infographics shows business and socio-economic indicators and trade with the EU for each Western Balkan country: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

Western Balkans: Enlargement strategy 2018
At a Glance by Velina Lilyanova, March 2018
The Commission’s new enlargement strategy sets a clear direction for the six Western Balkan countries, by giving them a credible enlargement perspective, and pledges enhanced EU engagement. It indicates 2025 as a possible enlargement date. However, aspirants must first deliver on key reforms, and solve all bilateral disputes.

Western Balkans in the spotlight in 2018
At a Glance by Velina Lilyanova, January 2018
2018 starts with the WB high on the EU agenda, and promises a favourable context for advancing their EU bids. For this to happen, however, the six WB countries need to show results on the core EU-related reforms.

Youth challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans
Briefing by Velina Lilyanova, September 2017
Young people from the region are confronted with multiple challenges: high unemployment levels, outdated education systems, ‘brain drain’ and poor intra-regional mobility, all of which require urgent measures.
External actors' influence in the Western Balkans

'At a glance' notes by Gisela Grieger, Velina Lilyanova, Philippe Perchoc and Martin Russell

External actors, such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, China and Saudi Arabia, building on historical, economic or religious ties, have left their mark on the region and/or continue to seek greater involvement, raising concerns.

Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II)

'How the EU budget is spent' briefing by Martin Svášek, June 2017

IPA II helps candidate and potential candidate countries to adopt the reforms needed to qualify for EU membership. Under the 2014 to 2020 MFF, the IPA II allocation is €11 698.67 million, or 1.8 % of the total MFF.

Anti-corruption efforts in the Western Balkans

Briefing by Velina Lilyanova, April 2017

Anti-corruption reform is a key EU requirement and while it has proven to be an incentive for reforms, the latest assessments show that corruption continues to permeate the region.

Media freedom trends 2017: Western Balkans

'At a glance' note by Velina Lilyanova, May 2017

Media freedom continues to be undermined by systematic shortcomings, and remains a priority reform area. In recent years, the region has seen a trend of media deterioration and has not made progress in addressing challenges.

Further reading

The Berlin Process and the Trieste summit 2017

'At a glance' note by Velina Lilyanova, July 2017

The Western Balkans’ Berlin process: A new impulse for regional cooperation

Briefing by Velina Lilyanova, July 2016

Rights and empowerment of women in the Western Balkans

Briefing by Velina Lilyanova, June 2017

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Enlargement: state of play

Sources: European Commission

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