Western Balkans: the next wave of EU enlargement?

Western Balkan countries could be next to join the EU. Discover what the EU is doing to facilitate their accession and how much progress has already been made.

It has been a long-term goal of the EU to have Western Balkans countries join at some point. However, there are currently moves to find ways to facilitate the process. Bulgaria, in charge of the EU presidency, has made it a priority and is organising a top-level summit in Sofia in May.

What countries will be affected?

Candidate countries include Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered a potential candidate.

What are the criteria for being an EU candidate country?

In order to apply for EU membership a country has to be European and respect the EU’s democratic values. It also needs stable institutions guaranteeing democracy and the rule of law; a functioning market economy; and the ability to take on and carry out the obligations of EU membership.

How does the enlargement process work?

A country can become an official candidate once it meets basic political, economic and reform criteria. It can then start formal negotiations on 35 chapters covering many different policy areas with the EU. Once negotiations and reforms have been completed, an Accession Treaty is
finalised, which needs to be ratified by all existing EU member states and the country itself before the country can join the EU.

**How much progress have the Western Balkans countries already made?**

Montenegro and Serbia are the frontrunners. Montenegro has opened 28 chapters and provisionally closed three, while Serbia has opened 10 chapters and provisionally closed two. The other countries are still preparing or are considered to still be in the starting blocks.

These countries already benefit from EU funding, detailed policy advice, as well as Stabilisation and Association Agreements, giving far-reaching access to the EU's internal market.

*Check out our fact sheet for the current status of each Western Balkan country.*

**What is the role of the Parliament?**

MEPs debate and vote on annual progress reports for each country, which is an opportunity to identify areas of concerns.

The Parliament's approval is also required before a country can join the EU.

**Latest news**

The European Commission published its [Enlargement Strategy Paper](#) on 6 February, which cites 2025 as an indicative joining date for Serbia and Montenegro. Commission representatives discussed the strategy with MEPs during a [debate in plenary](#) in Strasbourg on the same day.
MEPs broadly welcomed the strategy, but also stressed the need for reforms in the Western Balkans.

David McAllister (EPP, Germany), rapporteur for Serbia, said: “Stability, welfare and peace in the entire continent can only be secured when we, as the European Union, support these particular countries to meet the various structural challenges and overcome the various local issues that exist.”

Charles Tannock (ECR, UK), rapporteur for Montenegro, said: “2025 is some way off still but we cannot ignore rising scepticism in some parts of the EU to all future enlargement, with particular concerns about corruption and organised crime.”

Find out more

European Commission: Western Balkans enlargement
Commission page on enlargement
Briefing: the enlargement of the Union
Briefing: enlargement prospects for Western Balkans (2016)
Serbia and Montenegro are likely to be the next countries to join the EU. Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash