



July 2021

The Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia, Kosovo,^() Montenegro and Serbia – have developed enduring relationships with the EU in their efforts to join the Union. At the 2003 [Thessaloniki Summit](#), EU Member States engaged to fully and effectively support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, so that they would become an integral part of the EU once they meet the established criteria. However, over the years, expected progress has faltered. Regional disputes, such as the unresolved Serbia-Kosovo issue, as well as the fragile internal political environment in some of the countries, have effectively hindered the accession process. Following the 2008-2009 crisis, economies and investment have not developed fast enough either. The slow pace of reforms overall and the increasingly uncertain domestic context, coupled with growing influence of external actors, and the EU's own internal difficulties, have complicated the case for enlargement. Many challenges remain, and the Covid-19 pandemic put the region in the spotlight, deepening the gap between their European potential and realities on the ground, where the EU is competing with other global actors, such as Russia and China. In recent months, the Western Balkans have come under increased EU attention.*

In February 2020, the European Commission presented a new enlargement methodology. The new approach aims to strengthen the process by pushing reforms forward, notably in the areas of rule of law and the economy. It aims to make the accession negotiations more credible, more predictable, more dynamic and guided by a stronger political steer. However, this new methodology could slow down accession negotiations, if internal reforms are not adopted at a certain pace. In March 2020, the European Council sent a positive signal by giving the green light to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. However, substantive talks have not yet started. In May 2020, the [EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb](#) reaffirmed unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. The EU is determined to strengthen its support to the region's political, economic, and social transformation. The [Investment Plan](#), adopted in October 2020, will use some €9 billion with the aim of spurring the long-term economic recovery of the region and its convergence with the European Union. Slovenia, which holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, between 1 July and 31 December 2021, strongly supports the Western Balkan countries' accession process, and has announced that it will host an EU-Western Balkans summit in autumn 2021.

EPRS publications

[Albania: No closer to joining the EU](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, June 2021

A candidate country since 2014, Albania has made slow progress in its advance to EU membership. This is particularly due to persistent corruption, lack of media freedom and minority rights, as well as a dysfunctional judicial system.

[North Macedonia's accession prospects dimmed](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, June 2021

North Macedonia became an EU candidate country in 2004, but bilateral disputes with neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria have so far blocked its accession negotiations.

^{*}*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*

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[Serbia: EU accession progress stalled](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, June 2021

The EU launched accession negotiations with Serbia in 2013, but since then the process has stalled due to unresolved regional issues such as the dialogue with Pristina.

[Bosnia and Herzegovina: Difficult path towards EU membership](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, June 2021

Despite Bosnia and Herzegovina being identified as an accession candidate in 2003, internal political instability and lack of political reforms have dampened the country's prospects of joining the EU.

[Montenegro: 2019 and 2020 country reports](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, May 2021

The European Commission's reports on Montenegro in 2019 and 2020 confirmed progress in accession negotiations. However, the Commission deplored the state of freedom of expression and media freedom.

[EU support for vaccination efforts in the Western Balkans](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, May 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has accentuated the call for global solidarity and increased the need for health care and social support in the Western Balkans. The EU's response has included the 'Team Europe' facility, but also delivery of vaccines to the region, where the EU is competing with other global actors, such as Russia and China.

[Belgrade-Pristina dialogue: The rocky road towards a comprehensive normalisation agreement](#)

Briefing by Branislav Stanicek, March 2021

Despite the initial success of the Brussels Agreement in 2013, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue remains stalled due to deep-rooted historical tensions and asymmetrical expectations regarding the normalisation agreement.

[Macro-financial assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the coronavirus crisis](#)

'At a glance' note by Branislav Stanicek, May 2020

In April 2020, the European Commission submitted a proposal for a decision for macro-financial assistance (MFA) to support ten enlargement and neighbourhood partner countries in their efforts to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, for a total amount of €3 billion.

[A new approach to EU enlargement](#)

Briefing by Branislav Stanicek, March 2020

A revised methodology for EU enlargement was announced in February 2020, aiming to boost the accession process by making negotiations more transparent and efficient.

Further reading

[The six policy priorities of the von der Leyen Commission. State of play in spring 2021](#)

In-depth Analysis, edited by Étienne Bassot, April 2021

See chapter, 'A stronger Europe in the world', by Branislav Stanicek

[Towards a more resilient Europe post-coronavirus. Options to enhance the EU's resilience to structural risks](#)

Study by EPRS, DGs IPOL and EXPO, European Parliament, April 2021

See chapter, 'Stabilising the European Neighbourhood', by Branislav Stanicek

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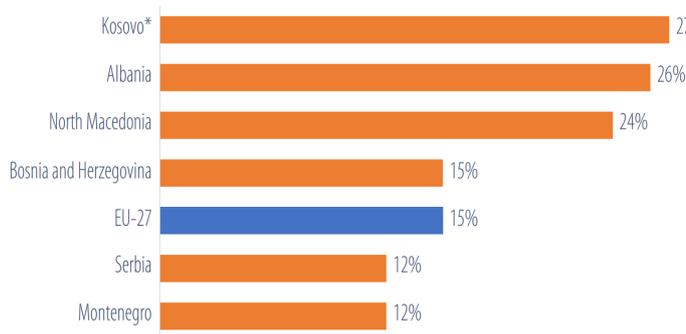


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COVID-19 pandemic: annual excess mortality rate in the European Union and in the Western Balkans



Excess mortality due to COVID-19 has been high in the EU-27. The Western Balkan countries have also been badly affected, and the rate has been particularly high in Kosovo*, Albania and North Macedonia.

The EU acted swiftly to support its Western Balkan partners, adopting a €3.3 billion package in April 2020.

In April 2021, the European Commission announced that it would deliver 651 000 BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines to these partner countries, in addition to some 260 000 jabs already supplied under the COVAX facility.

Source: The national statistical offices of the Western Balkan countries and Eurostat, 2021.

(*) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 (1999) and the International Court of Justice opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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