

Western Balkans on the European Council agenda

Overview of discussions since the Lisbon Treaty

SUMMARY

The western Balkans have featured regularly on the agenda of the European Council since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009. Three dimensions – enlargement, counter-terrorism and migration – have been at the centre of the EU leaders' discussions on the subject. However, the message has often seemed technical and EU leaders have appeared less inclined to offer a strategic view of future relations between the EU and the western Balkans. The European Council has held one strategic debate on the western Balkans, in March 2017, when it discussed the then deteriorating security situation in the region and agreed to keep it under review.

In February 2018, with its strategy for the western Balkans, the European Commission sent a strong political message of openness and inclusiveness to the countries in the region. Two successive country reports adopted in 2018 and 2019 recognised progress made by Albania and North Macedonia and recommended opening accession negotiations with both countries. In the absence of an agreement at the 15 October 2019 General Affairs Council, the European Council was asked to give a green light to accession negotiations, a decision that EU leaders postponed until spring 2020. In the interim, the European Commission proposed new, more flexible and dynamic, rules on the accession process. At their 26 March 2020 video-conference meeting dedicated to the COVID-19 outbreak, EU leaders endorsed the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia as agreed by the General Affairs Council on 25 March 2020, under stricter country-related conditionality rules, but without mentioning a date for the start of negotiations.

1. Introduction¹

Against the backdrop of the [revival](#) of the enlargement project supported by the European Commission, the European Council most recently referred to the situation in the western Balkans at its [October 2019](#) meeting. EU leaders decided not to give the go-ahead to accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia owing to a perennial divergence of views between Member States, with France and the Netherlands opposing the move. Prior to this, in 2018, under the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, an EU-western Balkans summit took place in Sofia on 17 May 2018, raising high political expectations among western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and

¹ This briefing updates two EPRS briefings: [The European Council and the Western Balkans](#), of May 2018, and [Western Balkans: State of play in the European Council](#), of October 2019.

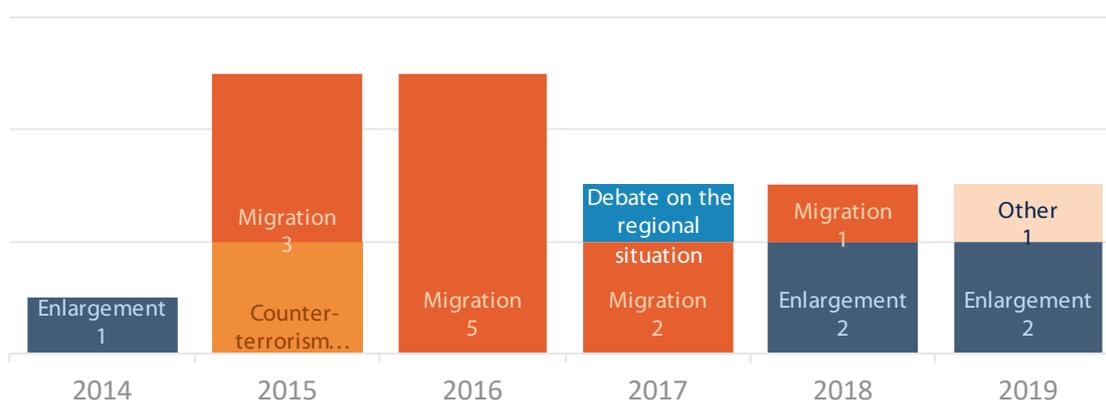
Herzegovina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia).² The summit focused on security and 'connectivity' (transport and energy), both flagships of the Commission's February 2018 [communication](#) 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' (hereafter referred to as the [strategy for the western Balkans](#)). That relatively dense agenda appeared a year after the March 2017 European Council meeting, at which the Heads of State or Government discussed the then [deteriorating situation](#) in the western Balkans. At the time, there was an [awareness](#) among EU leaders that the western Balkans were key to European stability and security.

In this context, this briefing will analyse the actions and main messages of the European Council towards the western Balkans in three policy areas: enlargement, counter-terrorism and the external dimension of migration. These topics have been at the forefront of European Council discussion of the western Balkans since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009.

2. European Council debates on the western Balkans since the Lisbon Treaty

The European Council has regularly referred to the western Balkans in its conclusions since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (see Annex). The main topics addressed are enlargement, counter-terrorism and the external dimension of migration. Between 2010 and 2014, enlargement was the only western Balkans-related topic on the agenda of the European Council. A shift occurred in July 2014, when the then European Commission President-elect, Jean-Claude Juncker, [announced](#) a 'break from enlargement'. From that moment on, the enlargement topic ceased to be highlighted at European Council meetings. This situation continued until March 2018, when EU leaders announced that the Council would hold a debate on enlargement at its June 2018 meeting. Since then, the western Balkans have appeared regularly on the European Council agenda, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Incidence of western Balkans-related topics in European Council conclusions



Source: EPRS.

The security aspect gained weight in European Council debates between 2014 and 2017. The rising number of foreign fighters departing from the western Balkans prior to 2014 and the [large number](#) of returnees around the same period posed a security threat to the EU (see Box 2). The European Council consequently considered strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation with the region. The outbreak of the migration crisis in 2015 led the European Council to refer regularly to the western Balkans as it sought to stem migration flows along the western Balkan route. The debates on counter-terrorism and

² Following the entry into force of the Prespa Agreement in February 2019 and a constitutional reform in the spring of 2019, the name 'Republic of North Macedonia' was established as the new constitutional name for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Both names are used in this briefing, depending on the moment in time in question.

on the external dimension of migration placed the internal-external security nexus at the centre of the EU's focus on the western Balkans. Along the same lines, in 2016, the [EU Global Strategy](#) stressed the need to foster EU external action to achieve stability within the Union and in its neighbourhood. At that time, analysts warned that the multiplication of [technocratic](#) messages and the absence of a clear [political commitment](#) to the region could lead to 'reform stagnation' and/or backsliding in the region. They also indicated an increased risk that the region might disconnect from the European project, owing to accumulated [fatigue](#) with an uncertain European perspective among western Balkan populations.

By March 2017, political instability was at its peak in several countries, including the [former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia](#), which was bogged down in a long-lasting political crisis that it only overcame at the end of May 2017 with the formation of a [new government](#). [Across](#) the region, ethnic rivalries and nationalist rhetoric were rising, and were most pronounced in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). External actors, in particular [Russia](#), [Turkey](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#), were seeking to increase their influence through an increased cultural, media, and economic presence in the region.

Faced with the deteriorating political and security situation across the region, the European Council held a debate on the western Balkans at its 9 March 2017 meeting. Prior to that meeting, the European Council President, Donald Tusk, declared that he would 'propose to leaders that [the EU] take action, including in [its] strategic communication'. In a similar vein, the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini, [expressed](#) her expectation that the European Council would 'send a very strong message of engagement, commitment and openness' to the region, with a view to EU integration. The Heads of State or Government aimed to [reassure](#) countries in the western Balkans of the EU's support and commitment to the region. Although not focused on [enlargement](#) in their debate, the EU leaders, at the [request](#) of President Tusk, reaffirmed the western Balkans' 'European perspective'. The European Council [assessed](#) the situation as being 'fragile' enough to continue to 'keep it under review' but did not formally request in its conclusions that the European Commission take steps towards enlargement. On 15 March 2017, in the European Parliament, both Tusk and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker [spoke](#) of a European perspective for the western Balkans. They did not mention the term enlargement, but the grounds for revising the EU's policy in this area were already present (see also Section 3 below). More recently, in July 2019, in her political guidelines, the then European Commission President-elect, Ursula von der Leyen, [confirmed](#) the EU's open door policy towards the western Balkans, while stressing the importance of pursuing the accession process that 'offers a unique opportunity to promote and share our core values and interests'.

2.1. European Council and enlargement to the western Balkans

2.1.1. Ground rules for enlargement defined by the European Council

As in previous enlargement rounds, future enlargement to the western Balkans is governed by the rules [defined](#) at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. At that time, the Heads of State or Government set out a series of criteria with which countries wishing to join the EU were to comply in order to become a member. These include political criteria (institutional stability, rule of law) and economic criteria (functioning market economy) as well as the development of the necessary administrative and institutional capacity to implement the *acquis* and fulfil membership obligations.

Two other European Council meetings have further clarified the parameters for the enlargement process to the western Balkans. First, the June 2003 [Thessaloniki](#) Summit reiterated the 'European perspective of the Western Balkan countries' and for the first time recognised their vocation to 'become an integral part of the EU, once they meet the established criteria'. Second, meeting in [Brussels](#) in December 2006, the EU leaders held a debate on enlargement and spoke of 'consolidation, conditionality and communication', the three pillars of the [November 2006 European Commission strategy](#). They endorsed stricter conditionality at all stages of the negotiations, as a lesson learned from previous enlargement processes. The Heads of State or Government also confirmed that 'administrative and judicial reforms and the fight against corruption' would be addressed earlier in the

accession process. The EU leaders stressed that efforts to comply with the accession criteria would be evaluated separately for each country and that they would 'refrain from setting any target dates for accession until the negotiations are close to completion'. Of the six countries currently covered in references to the western Balkans, only the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia held candidate country status by 2006. On account of backsliding in reforms, mounting corruption and an unstable political situation up to May 2017, as well as the issue of its name, the EU accession process with that country had been at '[an impasse](#)', and accession negotiations have still not opened.

The December 2006 European Council meeting was the most recent to focus on the ground rules for enlargement. The June 2008 European Council meeting was the last, until March 2017, to debate the regional situation in the western Balkans and adopt conclusions on each individual country's progress.

More recently, in autumn 2019, France circulated a [non-paper](#) calling for stricter conditionality and 'reversibility' in the accession process in the event that an aspiring country put reforms on hold or departed from EU values. This proposal came as a result of democratic backsliding in several western Balkan countries and with a view to making the process more dynamic. In an attempt to provide a response in time for the [March 2020](#) European Council, the European Commission presented a new communication, [Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#), aimed at streamlining the accession process.

2.1.2. Impact of the Lisbon Treaty

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty further institutionalised the role of the European Council in enlargement, by [recognising](#) that 'the conditions of eligibility agreed upon by the European Council shall be taken into account' (Article 49 TEU). The Treaty introduced a permanent, full-time President of the European Council and put an end to the primary role played by the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in European Council meetings. These two institutional changes have had an impact on the European Council's approach to enlargement in its debates.

The introduction of a full-time President of the European Council had a direct impact on the European Council agenda and conclusions. From December 2009 onwards, the agenda was steered by the President and no longer by the rotating presidency of the Council, which, until then, was using European Council meetings to advance presidency priorities at least in part. During the first mandate of Herman Van Rompuy as President of the European Council (December 2009 to May 2012), the growing economic and financial crisis at the time led the European Council to focus on [crisis management](#) rather than on detailed monitoring of progress made in different policy areas, including enlargement. Given the overall economic situation, deepening EU integration by revamping the economic-governance system of the EU was favoured over widening the Union by including new Member States. This approach was consistent with the line defined by the European Council in 2006, when EU leaders outlined the importance of 'consolidation' and did not specify any date for a future enlargement.

Before the Lisbon Treaty, by contrast, the rotating presidency of the Council played a significant role in European Council meeting preparations and contributed to shaping their outcome. The predominant role of the rotating presidency in promoting enlargement was highly visible, for example, in the cases of Austria, Greece and Slovenia. The term 'western Balkans' first entered the European Council conclusions at the December 1998 European Council meeting in Vienna. Austria then held the rotating presidency for the first time. EU leaders stressed the importance of regional cooperation and considered the situation in each of the countries in the region. The Greek Presidency in 2003 culminated in the Thessaloniki European Council meeting and the EU-Western Balkans Summit, where it was confirmed that the enlargement process would continue after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. In 2006, the second Austrian Presidency hosted a [ministerial-level](#) conference with the western Balkans countries in Salzburg, where the status of Kosovo, regional stability and the region's European future featured high on the agenda. The western Balkans also featured high among the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency in 2008, and progress was made in several policy areas, including police cooperation, where the accent was placed on organised crime and the fight against terrorism.

Figure 2 – European Council meetings considering enlargement to the western Balkans



Source: EPRS.

The rotating presidency lost its central role in preparing European Council meetings with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, although it is not entirely irrelevant. On 16 September 2016, the Slovak Presidency hosted an informal summit of the 27 Heads of State or Government in Bratislava. This allowed the rotating presidency to play a central role in steering the early stages of the Future of Europe debate. It also led to the introduction of a new practice of the rotating presidency hosting a summit in its own country, during its six-month term, on a topic of interest to the presidency (for example the Tallinn Digital Summit on 28-29 September 2018 reflected one of the Estonian Presidency core priorities). As a result, analysts [point to](#) a slight revival of the rotating presidency's role. The organisation in mid-May 2018 of a summit in Sofia on and with the western Balkans, a Bulgarian Presidency priority, confirms this pattern. Further confirmation comes from the Croatian Presidency, which has identified the western Balkans as a priority and [has planned](#) to host a summit with countries from the region in Zagreb on 6-7 May 2020.

3. Enlargement: evolution and state of play

The country-specific approach prevailed over the regional dimension between 2010 and 2014. In 2011, when, in the context of the conclusion of accession negotiations with Croatia, EU leaders reaffirmed the European perspective on the western Balkans, their message to the region was conciliatory. Moreover, no other reference to the regional context of the western Balkans was made in European Council conclusions until March 2017. Nonetheless, the European Council systematically endorsed the Council conclusions on enlargement during this period (see Annex).

The [planning document](#) presented by Herman Van Rompuy in June 2012, at the beginning of his second term in office as President, mentioned that the European Council would keep enlargement on the agenda. EU leaders would concentrate on major decisions, such as granting candidate country status and opening or closing accession negotiations. This approach had

already been visible during Van Rompuy's first mandate, when, for example, the European Council granted candidate country status to Montenegro (December 2010) or acknowledged the conclusion of accession negotiations with Croatia (June 2011). The same trend continued during his second term in office (June 2012 to November 2014), when the European Council granted candidate country status to Serbia (March 2013), and endorsed the opening of accession negotiations with Montenegro (June 2012) and Serbia (June 2013), and the opening of negotiations on a stabilisation and association agreement with Kosovo in June 2013 (Figure 2).

However, one country has been totally absent from European Council conclusions since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its domestic political situations led to a stalemate in discussions at the EU level, and no major decisions were made during the period, leading to its absence from European Council conclusions. The same applies to the then former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which was mentioned for the first time in the European Council conclusions in [June 2018](#), when the country managed to establish good neighbourly relations with both [Bulgaria](#) and Greece. The [Prespa Agreement](#), which was brokered in [June 2018](#) between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and entered into force in [February 2019](#), allowed the ending of a decades-long name dispute and the establishment of the 'Republic of North Macedonia' as the country's new constitutional name.

The June 2014 European Council meeting coincided with the start of the first mandate of Donald Tusk as President (December 2014 to May 2017). It was also the last European Council meeting at which a major decision on enlargement was taken, in conferring candidate country status on Albania. During President Tusk's first mandate, the crisis management dimension prevailed and the EU leaders' debates focused on crises both domestic (for example, migration, security) and foreign policy (for example, Ukraine). More recently, in December 2019, following the earthquake in Albania, EU leaders [agreed](#) to provide the country with humanitarian aid.

Enlargement towards the western Balkans was absent from the European Council agenda between June 2014 and March 2018. EU leaders made no political and/or strategic commitment to the region during that period. The European Commission pursued work at a technical level, whilst the Council continued to take stock regularly of developments in all countries in the region. Certain analysts considered this to

Box 1 – The EU and the western Balkans in a nutshell

The conflicts in Yugoslavia were the first real test of the nascent EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP) in the early and mid-1990s. They showed that the Balkans would remain a persistent source of instability for the EU unless a sustainable integration perspective was offered to the region.

The western Balkans' European outlook took shape slowly but steadily between 1998 and 2003, at a series of European Council meetings where both the regional situation and that of individual countries were debated. At the June 2003 European Council meeting in Thessaloniki, EU leaders made a political commitment to enlargement to the western Balkans, provided the countries meet the membership criteria.

The EU's commitment to stabilise the region was increasingly visible from 2003 onwards through the different common security and defence policy (CSDP) military and civilian operations and missions (EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EULEX Kosovo) and through [targeted assistance programmes](#) aimed at supporting, inter alia, capacity-building and cross-border cooperation.

The six countries forming the western Balkans are moving at different speeds and via different paths towards EU integration. Two countries are currently seen as frontrunners in the European Commission's 2018 strategy for the western Balkans, namely Montenegro and Serbia. Both have candidate country status and are well advanced in their accession negotiations, although [progress](#) in fulfilling the accession criteria is still required. Two other countries – Albania and North Macedonia – have candidate country status and await the green light to begin accession negotiations. The other two countries in the region – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo – are further behind in the process due to their domestic political situations. At this stage, they only have Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU, and need to show substantive progress on both political and economic criteria to advance further. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, [electoral reform](#) had not been completed in time for the October 2018 elections and remains a [priority](#) in the reform process. In the case of Kosovo, the normalisation of relations with Serbia is a prerequisite for advancing. Kosovo has made [progress](#) in reforming its public administration, whilst judicial reform is at an early stage.

constitute a strategy of '[benign neglect](#)', and underlined the risk of instability [generated](#) by EU, as well as US, disengagement from the region.

The line [set](#) by the then European Commission President-elect, Jean-Claude Juncker, on 15 July 2014, when he outlined his policy priorities for his term in office in the European Parliament, proved no longer completely sustainable. At that time, Juncker had announced a pause in enlargement, but confirmed the continuation, at technical level, of on-going negotiations. He returned to the European Parliament on [13 September 2017](#) and [stated](#) that the western Balkans needed 'a credible enlargement perspective', thus paving the way for a new strategic document on enlargement to the western Balkans.

The urgent need to act in the western Balkans, resulting from a deteriorating security situation, democratic backsliding and growing enlargement fatigue, was underlined at the 9 March 2017 European Council meeting. This led to a policy reassessment, particularly visible in the case of the European Commission.

The 6 February 2018 Commission strategy for the western Balkans offered a clear prospect of enlargement to all six western Balkan countries by the end of 2025, provided that they met the accession requirements. The [action plan](#) accompanying the strategy details the EU's [support](#) to the region, in six flagship initiatives: 1) rule of law; 2) security and migration; 3) socio-economic development; 4) increased connectivity (transport and energy); 5) digital agenda for the western Balkans; and 6) reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.

When advancing a date, albeit provisional and conditional upon accession progress, the European Commission wished to send a [strong political signal](#) to the region and underline the EU's commitment to enlargement. This approach is nonetheless in opposition to the 2006 European Council conclusions which stated that 'the Union will refrain from setting any target dates for accession until negotiations are close to completion'.

Remaining non-committal on a date until negotiations are close to completion might prove, in the long run, beneficial to both the EU and the western Balkans, for at least three reasons. First, while emphasis on a clear date might be a push factor for public support for the EU integration process in the short term, it might have the opposite effect later on if the accession date is not met.

Second, accession to the EU is, as outlined in the Commission's strategy, 'a merit-based process' which might advance or stagnate depending on the path of reforms and the level of internal political stability. This is already the case with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which in December 2005, became the first of the six countries in the western Balkans to receive candidate country status. However, it subsequently experienced a deep internal political crisis, which also impacted on the country's ability to solve the name dispute with Greece.

Third, progress made by each country will be evaluated separately depending on each country's ability to increase its reform efforts. Some of the objectives to attain in the integration process are of a technical nature and more easily achievable, particularly if clear benchmarks are [defined](#) and observed throughout accession negotiations. Nevertheless, politically sensitive aspects linked to solving existing bilateral disputes and establishing good neighbourly relations might, in certain cases, prove more challenging to resolve.

The [Berlin Process](#) has allowed leaders from the region and some EU leaders to come together in a process initiated by Germany with the aim of countering the shadow over enlargement. It was instrumental in facilitating progress on solving bilateral disputes, including through the introduction of [annual country reporting](#) on progress made.

In 2018, a window of opportunity led to the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement, thus putting an end to the name dispute between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece. Meanwhile, the European Commission President at the time, Jean-Claude Juncker, [called](#) upon Serbia to solve its dispute with Kosovo. This dispute is not only about establishing the border, but, as [expressed](#) by the European Commission, requires a 'legally binding normalisation agreement', which would allow a

resolution of the current situation whereby Serbia does not recognise Kosovo. A solution to this problem would allow both countries to advance in the integration process. However, in the case of Kosovo, accession to the EU would also require a change of policy by the five Member States that do not currently recognise its status (Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia). In the autumn of 2019, during his European Parliament [hearing](#), Josep Borrell, then HR/VP designate, stressed that the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue would be one of his priorities. More recently, in January 2020, visiting Kosovo in his HR/VP capacity, Josep Borrell [stated](#) that the European Union was 'not complete without the western Balkans' and confirmed the EU's commitment to facilitating the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue.

Despite a positive report from the European Commission, recommending the opening of accession negotiations with both Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, EU leaders did [not focus](#) on enlargement at their May 2018 meeting, which signalled that the subject remained divisive among Member States. More recently, in October 2019, when both the [General Affairs Council](#) and the European Council concluded in a stalemate, there were clear indications that diverging national views concerning the opening of new accession negotiations could only be overcome by first reforming the accession process. At the time, this sequencing [generated](#) criticism from several Member States and EU institutions' representatives, some of whom considered this approach to be a 'historic mistake'. In the interim, the European Commission published a communication outlining a new methodology for the accession process. This new methodology is based on four main guiding principles: credibility, a stronger political steer, dynamism and predictability.³ The French President, Emmanuel Macron, [considered](#) that the European Commission had done 'a remarkable job', thus indicating that the October 2019 deadlock was about to be overcome. On 24 March 2020, on the basis of the [preparatory work](#) conducted at ambassador level, the [General Affairs Council](#) reached a political agreement on opening accession negotiations with both Albania and North Macedonia. Strict country-related conditionality was introduced, but there [was no indication](#) of a clear date for the opening of accession negotiations. EU leaders subsequently [endorsed](#) the opening of accession negotiations with the two countries at their video-conference meeting dedicated to the COVID 19 crisis on 26 March 2020.

3.1 European Council and counter-terrorism cooperation with the western Balkan countries

The European Council has called twice, in February and December 2015, for stronger cooperation on counter-terrorism with countries in the western Balkans as part of broader debates on the fight against terrorism. The 12 February 2015 informal European Council debate on terrorism was a last-minute addition to the [agenda](#). This was a reaction to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris on 7 January 2015, and [confirmed](#) the European Council's ability to respond to crises rapidly. It called for action to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation with countries in the western Balkans and referred to 'new capacity-building projects', including in the area of border controls, and 'better targeted EU assistance'.

A number of decisions with implications for counter-terrorism cooperation with the western Balkans were adopted shortly prior to, or as a result of, the 12 February 2015 meeting. For example, the Foreign Affairs Council [decided](#) to step up counter-terrorism capacity in certain EU delegations in February 2015. As a result, a [post](#) of security/counter-terrorism expert for the western Balkans, reporting to the Head of Delegation, was established in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, the [European Agenda on Security](#), adopted in April 2015, called for the extension of anti-radicalisation work to countries in the western Balkans and the sharing of the experience gained within the EU through the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) with them. This led to civil society capacity-building projects on countering radicalisation. The European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) that stressed the

³ A recent EPRS briefing, [A new approach to EU enlargement](#), provides a detailed overview on the European Commission communication 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' of February 2020.

Box 2 – Terrorism in the western Balkans

The break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the conflicts of the 1990s continue to have consequences in the western Balkans today. First, large amounts of illegal weaponry, particularly small and light weapons, mines and explosive devices, are still present in the region. These continue to feed into [illicit trafficking](#). Furthermore, they [were](#), and still can be, acquired by terrorist groups. This represents a significant security risk for both the EU and the western Balkans, despite [increased](#) regional cooperation efforts and a strong ministerial-level commitment to reduce and control arms proliferation.

Second, the conflicts of the 1990s attracted foreign fighters from outside the region. The post-conflict period led in certain parts of the western Balkans, and, in particular, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to [cash flows](#) from Gulf States channelled inter alia to education institutions. Analysts [consider](#) that 'the seeds of radical Islam were planted' then and led 20 years later to exporting foreign fighters to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. All countries in the region have been affected to different degrees, although Bosnia and Herzegovina and [Kosovo](#) were more exposed to departing foreign fighters in terms of numbers. These countries also had to address the challenge posed by returnees or individuals transiting the region towards EU countries. Experts [estimate](#) the number of people who have left the region for conflict zones in the Middle East since 2011 at up to 1 000, and the number of returnees at 250. Western Balkan states amended their legislation and, in line with [UN Security Council Resolution 2178/2014](#), criminalised travel for terrorism, participation in foreign conflicts and training in view of terrorist activities, as well as their financing and facilitation.

importance of overseeing how EU assistance money is being spent, in order to avoid its misuse for 'proselytism, indoctrination and other extremist purposes'.

EU leaders referred again to cooperation with the western Balkans at their December 2015 meeting, when the fight against terrorism featured high on the European Council agenda, stating that 'the EU will urgently strengthen counter-terrorism engagement' with countries in the region. The three lines of action defined in February 2015 are still being carried out today. The European Council has [regularly](#) reverted to the topic of counter-terrorism, and taken stock of progress made since. In preparation for the Sofia summit, EU home affairs ministers [discussed](#) counter-terrorism cooperation with the western Balkans at their meeting in March 2018. In May 2018, the [Sofia declaration](#) identified the fight against terrorism as one of the priorities for EU-western Balkans cooperation. Later in the year, the EU and the western Balkan countries adopted the [joint action plan on counter-terrorism for the western Balkans](#). Its aim is to boost counter-terrorism cooperation and deliver on the fight against terrorism priorities, including, inter alia, legislative harmonisation, support to capacity-building, particularly on countering terrorist financing and combatting money laundering, and strengthening cooperation with partners, including Interpol, Europol and Eurojust.

Regarding operational counter-terrorism cooperation, Europol established a [European Counter-Terrorism Centre](#) in early 2016. The centre allows sharing of intelligence and expertise on terrorism financing, and combats online terrorist propaganda and extremism. To facilitate operational cooperation with countries in the western Balkans, Europol has [concluded](#) operational and strategic agreements with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. These agreements are general cooperation agreements, which facilitate the exchange of information with countries in the region, including on counter-terrorism. Since December 2017, Kosovo has been on the Europol [list](#) of 'priority partners for strategic cooperation' allowing for intelligence-sharing, including on counter-terrorism.

Regarding judicial cooperation, Eurojust has concluded [cooperation agreements](#) with Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In October 2017, at the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum, ministers [recognised](#) the importance of judicial cooperation agreements in fighting transnational crime. The countries in the region without cooperation agreements with Eurojust were encouraged to conclude them as soon as possible.

3.2. European Council and migration: addressing the challenges of the western Balkan route

The outbreak of the migration crisis in spring 2015 led EU leaders to put the issue on the agenda at all of their [six meetings](#) held in regular or informal settings between April 2015 and December 2016. Four of these meetings underlined the growing challenge posed by the increasing number of migrants arriving by the western Balkan route. In September 2015, the Heads of State or Government went further and called for targeted support for the western Balkan countries to help them manage growing migration flows, including through the use of the [Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance](#) (IPA).

On 8 October 2015, a [high-level conference](#) at ministerial level was organised in Luxembourg to address the challenges of migration flows on both the western Balkan route and the central Mediterranean route. Ministers focused on support for transit countries in the western Balkans, and decided to 'provide immediate first line principled humanitarian assistance'. In parallel, on the initiative of the European Commission, a [meeting](#) resulting in a 17-point operational action-plan was held in Brussels with the leaders of eight EU Member States (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Romania and Slovenia) and three western Balkan countries (Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia), all 'concerned and most affected by the emergency situation along the Western Balkans route'. As a concrete development, [weekly monitoring](#) of the situation on the Western Balkan route was instituted and has allowed for the [exchange of information](#) on concrete operational actions between the relevant EU institutions, EU Member States and the western Balkan countries. Twice monthly monitoring, now reduced to monthly monitoring, was introduced progressively as the situation on the western Balkan route stabilised.

The western Balkan route was on the leaders' agenda at [five](#) out of six European Council meetings organised in 2016. Most attention was devoted to the region in the first quarter of the year, at three meetings ([18-19 February 2016](#), [7 March 2016](#) and [17-18 March 2016](#)), where the European Council expressed its [concern](#) regarding 'the continued and sustained irregular migrant flows along the Western Balkans route' and called for enhanced cooperation between the EU and the region. The [EU-Turkey statement](#) on migration of 18 March 2016 helped release pressure on the western Balkans. From 2017 to 2019, the western Balkan route was absent from the European Council agenda. However, following Turkey's breach of the 2016 agreement with the EU in February 2020, the extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council of 4 March 2020 [concluded](#) by recommending that 'the EU should further develop a coordination mechanism with the Western Balkans countries' and that status agreements between countries in the region and Frontex should be 'concluded and implemented'. [So far](#), the status agreement with Albania is the only one in force, while other similar agreements await signature or have not yet entered into force.

4. State of play and outlook

Enlargement is set to be a key priority for the EU in the years to come, as outlined by the Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, European Parliament, David Sassoli, and European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. It is also a priority for the rotating Croatian Presidency of the Council, which has planned to hold a summit with the western Balkan countries in May 2020. A preparatory informal meeting between representatives of the EU institutions and the heads of state or government of the western Balkan countries was held on 16 February 2020. Following that meeting, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, [noted](#) that, in an effort to facilitate approval of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the Commission had [reviewed its methodology](#) regarding the accession process. On 24 March 2020, the General Affairs Council reached a political agreement to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia under stricter country-related conditionality, without indicating a clear date for the beginning of negotiations. EU leaders, meeting on 26 March 2020 to discuss the COVID-19 crisis response, expressed their political support for the move.

Annex – Main messages of the European Council on the western Balkans (2010-2019)

European Council meeting	Debate/ orientation/ decision	Brief mention	Outcome
16-17 December 2010	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 14 December 2010 Council conclusions on enlargement candidate country status for Montenegro
23-24 June 2011	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - confirmed the European perspective of the countries in the western Balkans, provided the path of reforms is maintained - will revert to the topic in December 2011
9 December 2011	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 5 December 2011 Council conclusions on enlargement decisions on the EU's enlargement process: Montenegro and Serbia - recalled its December 2006 conclusions
1-2 March 2012	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 28 February 2012 Council conclusions on enlargement candidate country status for Serbia
28-29 June 2012	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed the Council decision to open accession negotiations with Montenegro on 29 June 2012
13-14 December 2012	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 11 December 2012 Council conclusions on enlargement and the Stabilisation and Association Process
27-28 June 2013	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 25 June 2013 Council conclusions on enlargement - decided to open accession negotiations with Serbia - authorised the opening of negotiations on a stabilisation and association agreement with Kosovo.
19-20 December 2013	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 17 December 2013 Council conclusions on enlargement and the stabilisation and association process
26-27 June 2014	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed 24 June 2014 Council decision to grant Albania candidate country status
12 February 2015		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strengthen security and counter-terrorism cooperation, including through capacity-building projects and EU assistance
25-26 June 2015	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'a high-level conference will be organised to address the challenges of the Western Balkans route'
23 September 2015	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assistance to the western Balkans countries, including through IPA, to help them cope with the refugee flows - preparation of the western Balkan route conference to be held on 8 October 2015 in Luxembourg
15 October 2015		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow up to 8 October 2015 high-level conference on the eastern Mediterranean route and the western Balkan route, particularly on stemming migratory flows and fighting criminal networks
17-18 December 2015		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow up to the High-Level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean and the western Balkan route, through support for completing registration in accordance to EU standards - strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation with the western Balkans
18-19 February 2016	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concern about the continued and sustained irregular migrant flows along the western Balkan route - need for further coordinated action - concerned about the humanitarian situation of migrants and calls for use of all EU and national means available to address it - concerned about the humanitarian situation of affected Member States and considers it necessary to set humanitarian assistance internally, in cooperation with the UNHCR - welcomes the European Commission's intention to make concrete proposals

European Council meeting	Debate/ orientation/ decision	Brief mention	Outcome
17-18 March 2016			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - calls for stronger cooperation with the western Balkan countries in tackling migration - invites the European Investment Bank to present, by June 2016, a special initiative allowing to rapidly mobilise additional funding for sustainable growth, vital infrastructure and social cohesion
16 September 2016 (EU-27, Bratislava)		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continued support for the western Balkan countries
20-21 October 2016		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continued support for the western Balkan countries
15 December 2016		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continued support for countries along the western Balkan route
3 February 2017		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continued support for countries along the western Balkan route
9 March 2017	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discussed the fragile situation in the western Balkans - stressed the importance of staying on the reform path, of good neighbourly relations and of inclusive regional cooperation initiatives - European perspective reconfirmed - support for EU-oriented reforms
22-23 June 2017		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vigilance on the western Balkan route will continue
19 October 2017		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - support to the western Balkan countries
22 March 2018			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - looking forward towards the EU-western Balkans summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018 - the Council will address enlargement in June 2018
28 June 2018			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed the Council conclusions on enlargement - welcomed the Prespa Agreement
13-14 December 2018	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discussed the situation in the western Balkans without adopting conclusions
20 June 2019	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - endorsed the Council conclusions on enlargement
17-18 October 2019	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - considered enlargement again prior to the May 2020 Zagreb EU-Western Balkans summit
12-13 December 2019	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - support to Albania following earthquake

Source: European Council conclusions, EPRS. ● Informal European Council; ● Informal EU-27 meeting

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