

Western Balkans in the spotlight in 2018

With positive messages and increased attention coming from the EU, 2017 seems to have ended on a high note for the Western Balkans. 2018 starts with the region being high on the agenda of Bulgaria's EU Council Presidency, and promises a favourable context for advancing its EU bids. For this to happen, however, the six WB countries need to show results on the core EU-related reforms.

2003-2018: progress made over 15 years

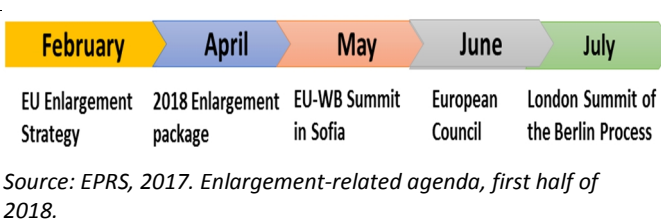
At the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Thessaloniki [Summit](#), the EU declared its 'unequivocal support' for the region's European perspective. Over the ensuing 15 years, Croatia did become an EU Member State, but for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia the path to accession has been strewn with multiple (some shared, others specific) challenges that have prevented more concrete developments. There is progress, albeit slow: four countries have candidate status; BiH has applied for it; and only Kosovo has not. Visa-free travel, one of the most tangible results of the process, benefits all but Kosovo. All six have stabilisation and association agreements (SAA) with the EU, and Montenegro and Serbia, currently dubbed 'frontrunners', are negotiating multiple chapters of the EU *acquis*.

Since 2003, the EU has also changed: having had three enlargements (2004, 2007 and 2013) and welcomed 13 new members, it is currently negotiating one departure from its ranks for the first time. Over time, its approach to enlargement has grown stricter, involving stronger focus on the 'fundamentals': rule of law, economic governance and democratic institutions. The EU has been criticised for having side-lined the WBs' accession process; a 2017 [Balkan barometer](#) shows that the WBs' enthusiasm has also waned. The [Berlin process](#), on the other hand, is often highlighted as a trigger of positive dynamics in regional cooperation, most recently with the agreed set up of a [regional economic area](#) and a [transport community](#) at the Trieste Summit.

Enlargement in the spotlight: will 2018 be a year of opportunity?

In 2014, the newly elected European Commission stated that there would be no enlargement during its term. Following this initial message, however, a number of events in 2017 pointed to [growing willingness](#) to bring enlargement higher on the EU agenda, thus also [boosting](#) the Western Balkans' expectations for 2018.

In March 2017, HR/VP Federica Mogherini [visited the region](#) and acknowledged its fragility and exposure to internal and external challenges. The [March 2017 European Council](#) reaffirmed the EU's commitment to the region. In his 2017 [State of the Union address](#), Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, stated that the EU has to maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the WBs. In a subsequent [letter of intent](#) to the EP and the Estonian Prime Minister, the Commission announced a [new initiative](#), to be launched with a 2025 perspective: an EU accession strategy for Serbia and Montenegro as frontrunner candidates. In a recent [address](#), French President, Emmanuel Macron, said that a clear EU perspective for the region would keep external powers at bay. Bulgaria, holding the EU Council Presidency since January 2018, has WB enlargement among its priorities; accordingly, an [EU-WB summit](#) is scheduled for May 2018 and there are plans to [extend](#) EU 'roam like at home' policy to the region. These initiatives, together with the Commission's soon-to-be-published [enlargement reports](#), promise to shape a packed agenda until mid-2018 (Figure 1).



Supporters of WB enlargement argue that it is in the EU's interest, as the WB are part of Europe and stability in them is linked to stability in the EU. Other [supporters](#) see further enlargement as a test for the EU's aptitude to act as a global player and as a 'success story' that the European project needs.



The Western Balkan six: state of play and priority issues

Apart from the country-specific issues, experts observing the region have identified a number of trends, such as [erosion of democracy, rule of law](#) and media freedom, [slack economic performance](#), [fast-rising nationalist sentiments](#), and external influences, all of which require priority action. The challenge lies, therefore, in speeding up the enlargement process, but without compromising the quality of reforms.

With their ongoing EU accession talks, **Montenegro** and **Serbia** are currently seen as the region's frontrunners. Despite domestic [political polarisation](#) and [tensions](#) with Russia, in June 2017 Montenegro joined NATO. It is [ahead](#) in the EU accession process, having opened 30 chapters and provisionally closed three, and having no major bilateral issues with its neighbours. The Commission urges it to keep the pace of reforms and economic growth and to deliver results with regard to the rule of law and the fight against corruption. **Serbia** has opened 12 of 35 chapters, two of which are provisionally closed. It expects to open [three new ones](#) in early 2018. Progress with the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo (Chapter 35) are the two critical issues that are [essential to the pace](#) of its talks. Achieving greater independence of the judiciary and freedom of the press, lowering corruption and aligning more strongly with EU foreign policy are key to progress.

Albania expects a [green light](#) to start accession talks in 2018. The EU has commended Albania's constructive regional role, alignment with EU foreign policy and reform efforts that include the adoption of a new vetting procedure for the judiciary, a key judicial-reforms package and constitutional amendments. To advance, Albania needs to implement judiciary reforms and tackle corruption and organised crime more efficiently.

From a frontrunner in the 2000s (the first to get candidate status and sign a SAA), the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's** EU prospects have dimmed, reaching their lowest during the country's recent [political crisis](#). While its new government, in office since mid-2017, has shown resolve to remedy the situation, FYR Macedonia has to deliver on a sizeable ['3-6-9 reform agenda'](#) that builds upon a set of ['urgent reform priorities'](#) and the [Pržino Agreement](#). It has also yet to address sensitive issues with some neighbours. Relations with Bulgaria are said to be on a [good track](#) after a recently signed friendship treaty, but to unblock the country's EU bid, a breakthrough on its name dispute with Greece is needed. Conditions appear to be [favourable](#): both parties have shown readiness to cooperate. With [elections](#) coming up in 2019 (parliamentary in Greece, presidential in FYR Macedonia, and European elections), the timing appears right for the next steps.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) hopes to receive candidate status, but is [delaying](#) in answering the Commission questionnaire of late 2016. Its complex decision-making process has made reaching political compromise a daunting task even for simple issues, and keeps the country entangled in a ['zero-sum game'](#). While the region expects positive momentum, 2018 has difficulties in store for BiH. With elections to be held in October 2018, ethnic and political [tensions](#) have started to rise. As ruled by its constitutional court in December 2016, BiH has to reform its electoral law or risk further chaos and delays to the implementation of its reform agenda.

Kosovo's EU bid faces many challenges, not least the fact that five EU Member States have not yet recognised it. It has pledged to deliver quick progress on key SAA reforms and hopes to get a clear commitment on its EU future. However, despite support from the [EU's rule of law mission](#), organised crime and corruption levels are high and the judiciary remains vulnerable to political interference. Normalisation of relations with Serbia is a [top priority](#), as is the implementation of key reforms. Additionally, to benefit from visa-free travel to the EU like the rest of the region, Kosovo has to meet two requirements: ratify a border demarcation deal with Montenegro and improve its track record in the fight against corruption.

The European Parliament's position

EP President, Antonio Tajani, recently stated that ['the future will be one of enlargement'](#), confirming the EP's traditional support for the Western Balkans' EU integration, expressed in its annual resolutions over the years. In its [2017 annual report](#) on human rights and democracy, the EP stressed that 'enlargement policy is one of the strongest tools for reinforcing respect for democratic principles and human rights' in countries aspiring to become EU members. The EP supports democratic processes therein through [mediation](#), election observation and engagement in debate on topics relevant to accession. A recent example of an EP contribution is the [EP-mediated dialogue](#) in FYR Macedonia, which started in 2015 and helped lead the country's political parties to agreement. In January 2018, the EP is to launch the ['Jean Monnet'](#) process, to continue its debate with the Macedonian parliament. To [increase its credibility](#) in external policy, the EP has repeatedly urged full [recognition of Kosovo](#) by all EU Member States. As for the Western Balkans, the EP has continually stressed that the region needs political resolve to address outstanding issues on a national and regional level.