

EU and Western Balkans: a profound and deepening partnership

Eurochambres calls upon the countries of the Western Balkans and the European Union to set up a clear timeframe for the implementation of reforms leading towards the EU accession of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In order to prepare for accession, the EU should support the digitalisation of companies, entrepreneurial knowledge and training through regional partners, such as chambers of commerce and industry. EU support for key infrastructure and structural reforms in the candidate countries are interlinked.

The Western Balkans is a part of Europe. It is a region of strategic importance and the EU has a common history and a common future with Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Trade relations with the Western Balkans precede political developments: presently, the European Union is the largest trading partner, investor and donor of the Western Balkan countries. Exports to the Western Balkan countries have more than doubled in the last ten years and imports have more than tripled during the same period.¹

Unfortunately, political progress towards the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries has stalled in recent years. To revive a dynamic towards accession, Eurochambres suggests the following steps:

- A clear **“timetable” for the six Western Balkan countries leading to full EU accession**. This has been the case for the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and has proven to be a decisive incentive to carry out the necessary reforms in a relatively short period of time.
- The **revised enlargement methodology**² should be applied rigorously during accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro to make the process more dynamic. Reforms, especially those focusing on independent judicial systems, impartial public administrations, the fight against corruption on all governmental levels and upholding fundamental rights are primarily in the interest of the candidate countries. They not only need to be adopted as law, but a solid track record of their consistent and continuous application must have been established by the time of EU accession. Objective criteria should be the leading principle on the **opening of negotiations** and the adoption of the negotiation box for other candidate countries that fulfil the criteria, such as North Macedonia or Albania.
- We support the early accession concept of the EU that aims at aligning and harmonising rules in the Western Balkan countries with **EU norms and standards prior to their formal accession**. Eurochambres supports proposals aiming at better information sharing with Western Balkans partners of different EU technical committees and Commission working groups, in particular dealing with economic, financial and standardization issues. This concept might in the future entail perspectives towards selected privileged access to the European Single Market or parts of it in accordance with the adaptation of EU rules or other facilitations, such as lower roaming fees. The EU has a positive track record of facilitations ahead of the previous rounds of enlargement in 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013 which could serve as blueprints.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/western-balkans/>

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181

The Western Balkans is an important partner region for the EU. Therefore, we should not wait for EU accession to support these countries through financial support and knowledge sharing. Eurochambres suggests in particular:

- **Dissemination of knowledge on digitalisation, EU law and vocational training for SMEs through regional partners**, such as the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum³ and local chambers. In recent years, some substantial improvements in the digitalisation of companies, chamber support for SMEs, and support in complying with EU standards in environmental and consumer protection or in vocational training have been implemented through these associations.
- The EU should offer future Member States from the Western Balkans **privileged partnerships in key strategic areas**, such as cyber security, combat against organised crime, security of energy supplies and migration. This helps to promote the EU as a strategic partner and is at the benefit of all EU partners.
- The deliverables defined in the **Berlin Process**⁴ can facilitate trade with the Western Balkans considerably. Eurochambres fully support the Western Balkans - EU Green lanes initiative launched jointly by the Transport Community and CEFTA Secretariats with the goal to facilitate the flow of essential goods and the roadmap aiming at the reduction of roaming fees between the EU and the Western Balkans countries.
- Until all Western Balkan countries join the EU and become part of its Single Market, the **“Common Regional Market in the Western Balkans”** may help to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, border controls and foster trade within the region. The EU should support these efforts as preparation for the European Single Market.
- Provide additional support for a timely implementation of the **Green Agenda** for the Western Balkans in order to meet the Sofia Commitments⁵ and establish a solid foundation for achieving climate neutrality by 2050. This includes mainstreaming the green and low-carbon transition of the economy.
- The **permanent business dialogue** between the EU and the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum is an important means to engage the business community in the enlargement process and helps to identify problems in trade rapidly and to suggest concrete solutions.
- The EU should increase its **pre-accession support** for future Western Balkans member states, rigorously conditional to improvements in their individual reform processes. Besides support for institution building, this should encompass key infrastructure projects, innovation capacities and anticipate structural investments that the European Regional Development Fund covers for full members. We fully support the measures foreseen in the Economic and Investment Plan⁶.

A reliable enlargement strategy of the European Union increases the acceptance of key structural reforms in Western Balkans countries. The economic benefits for the citizens in the region resulting from these reforms and the reliability of institutions in Western Balkan countries go hand in hand. It is now time to deliver.

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³ <https://www.wb6cif.eu/>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_3401

⁵ <https://www.rcc.int/docs/546/sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-rn>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811