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LITHUANIA'S INTERESTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EU ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Policy paper

DR. LINA STRUPINSKIENĖ

Summary

Due to geographic proximity and strategic position, the stability of the Western Balkans is crucial for the Euro-Atlantic area. However, the recent decline of democracy, mounting social and ethnic tensions, as well as the potentially destructive activities of external actors (mainly Russia and China, but also Turkey, and the UAE) are becoming more and more alarming. Not surprisingly, the recent EU discourse calls for renewed engagement in the Western Balkans and stresses the joint security challenges that need to be urgently addressed. For Lithuania, this region is particularly important because of significant political involvement of actors that are key to its foreign policy (e.g., Russia and the USA). Moreover, instability in the Balkans would inevitably weaken the EU and NATO, and result in less energy and attention to the Eastern Partnership countries prioritized by Lithuania.



LINA STRUPINSKIENĖ: In 2008, Lina graduated from VU IIRPS with a bachelor's degree in Political Science, and in 2009, she received a master's degree in Conflict Studies and Human Rights from Utrecht University. In 2010 she interned at the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (Office of the Prosecutor), where she worked on the case of the Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadžić. In 2015, Lina defended her doctoral dissertation "The Impact of the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia on Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina" at the VU IIRPS. Currently she works as the deputy director for studies at the IIRPS VU and teaches courses related to analysis of violent ethnic conflicts, transitional justice and peace studies. In addition, Lina is a member of the Western Balkans Experts Pool at The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE, Helsinki). Her area of expertise is the Western Balkan region.

This policy paper presents three possible scenarios for further EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: rapid enlargement, short-term delay and indefinite postponement or complete cessation. It then outlines the possible outcomes for three groups of countries: 1) Serbia and Montenegro (already negotiating), 2) Albania and North Macedonia (about to start negotiations), and 3) Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (potential candidates). Finally, policy recommendations for Lithuania are presented: a) to provide active political support for further enlargement by taking better advantage of existing formats; b) to closely monitor the progress of the negotiations in order to prevent the accession of the states that are not yet ready, at the same time ensuring a credible enlargement perspective by supporting a clear and fair system of sanctions and incentives; c) to provide technical assistance to countries negotiating by sharing own transformation experience and expertise; d) to promote the alignment of EU policies in the Balkans and in the Eastern Partnership countries, which could promote deeper integration, greater transparency of EU policies and reduced administrative costs; e) to build expertise and strengthen the existing knowledge of the region in Lithuania, including in various ministries (not only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Introduction

Despite being one of the largest regions in Europe, the Western Balkans are still not fully integrated into the European Union and NATO (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo are non-members). Its strategic positioning and geographic proximity make its stability crucial for the Euro-Atlantic area. However, recently, there have been increased concerns over Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States expanding their influence, the visible democratic backsliding, and increasing ethnic and social tensions. Partly because of this, the idea of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans was revived in 2017, when the former President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker said in his annual report that Serbia and Montenegro could expect to join the EU by 2025¹. In February 2018, the EU Commission presented a strategy “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”². Nevertheless, more than three years after the adoption of this strategy,

it has become apparent that the return of the EU to the region has not brought any tangible results. In the meantime, the distant and uncertain prospects of eventual EU membership are undermining the EU's transformative leverage in the Balkans. Conditionality works well when membership criteria are clear and equally applied, when their implementation is strictly but fairly monitored, the conclusions are communicated in a transparent manner, and there is no doubt about the pending “award”. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Probably the most worrying regional trend is the continued rise of authoritarian tendencies which further exacerbates problems with democracy, rule of law, corruption, state capture, freedom of expression, and freedom of the media. For example, the situation in Serbia has been deteriorating since 2012. Since coming to power, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has repeatedly curtailed political and civil lib-

erties and rights, undermined the independent media, and attacked political opposition groups as well as civil society organizations. According to *Freedom House*, an international organization that monitors democracy in the world, Serbia, that previously ranked as a semi-consolidated democracy, now ranks only as “partly free”. The other countries of the Western Balkans – Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, and North Macedonia – are also considered “partly free”. Only the EU members, Croatia, and Slovenia, are ranked as “free” countries³.

The region is also facing significant economic challenges. None of the countries are currently ready to withstand the competitive pressure of EU's single market, therefore, important economic reforms are often delayed. In general, the economies of the Western Balkan states are underdeveloped, dependent on loans and subsidies, and heavily regulated by the state. Most people work in the public sector, leaving the private sector weak and underdeveloped. There is an ongoing structural shift, but it mostly covers the services sector rather than manufacturing. Moreover, the transport infrastructure remains underdeveloped (especially railway). Although real unemployment rates in Albania⁴ and Kosovo⁵ are at their lowest levels in the last decade (11.7% and 25% respectively), the citizens throughout the region consider unemployment to be one of the most pressing problems (39% in Serbia and 56% in Albania and Kosovo⁶). Due to mass emigration and brain drain, the Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable. A Balkan Barometer survey found that more than a third of the population are seriously considering leaving, mostly to European countries⁷.

Finally, reconciliation and transitional justice processes are stalling, and nationalist tendencies are intensifying. The investigation of war crimes is not well organized, trials for war crimes are slowing down, ongoing cases are

often politicized, and there is an underlying ethnic bias, even though more than two decades have passed since the war. Many missing people are still being sought, and cooperation between the states of the former Yugoslavia is sporadic, making it impossible for the courts to exchange documents and witnesses. Moreover, local human rights organizations have documented a disturbing trend of glorification of convicted war criminals, many of whom have already completed their sentences and are welcomed back to the region as heroes. They are being awarded with national awards, parks and streets are being named after them, and they often participate in public events as guests of honour⁸. Issues of memory politics and history education remain heavily politicized, in line with the growing nationalist tendencies already mentioned. This is particularly evident in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they contribute to preventing good neighbourly relations. The best example is the stalling negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina over the status of Kosovo. Despite numerous recent summits, little progress has been made. While Serbia opposes the idea of mutual recognition, Kosovo does not accept anything that does not include full recognition.

Consequently, the region lacks overall stability, the EU influence is waning, and Euroscepticism is on the rise. A number of external actors (particularly Russia and China) are taking advantage and offering security, political, and military alternatives. For example, China supplied large quantities of vaccines to Serbia during the pandemic, and Serbia used them to strengthen its influence in the region, offering vaccinations not only to its own citizens but also to those in neighbouring countries. It is not surprising that EU discourse since 2018 has been focusing on security challenges that have become the main consideration for the EU return to the region. In addition, an interesting symbiosis have developed between the

local authoritarian leaders and the Eurosceptics within the EU. For Eurosceptics, authoritarianism outside the EU is evidence as to why enlargement and cooperation (beyond *realpolitik*) with countries in Southeast Europe is a mistake, while it allows authoritarian leaders in Southeast Europe to promote narratives of rejection and victimhood.⁹ Growing Euroscepticism within the EU, along with a number of efforts by EU members to block the start of the progressive Balkan negotiations, has diminished pro-Western support in the region, giving their opponents more tools and legitimacy.

To sum up, in the short-term, Lithuania and EU both would benefit from a credible enlargement to the Western Balkans perspective and in the long term – their full integration into the EU. The EU expansion into the Western Balkans would boost the EU global influence and help stabilize the region, ensuring democracy, economic prosperity, and sustainable peace. This would reduce the likelihood of renewed territorial conflicts close to EU borders and limit the destructive influence of third parties, mitigate terrorist threats and help manage legal and illegal migration more effectively. Furthermore, it is vitally important for both the EU and Lithuania that the negotiations do not stall, that the process is closely and strictly monitored and that a clear system of sanctions and rewards is introduced clearly assigning responsibility for leading necessary change. All of the above, should help mitigate EU member concerns over importing new tensions or even third-party interests to the EU. So far, Lithuania's position on the Western Balkans has been the following: various formats are used to support further enlargement, with a specific focus on security interests and foreign policy priorities (specifically, strengthening the EU and NATO), at the same time trying to ensure that countries are not admitted prematurely (Russia's growing influence in Serbia is causing particular concern, fearing Serbia may become a

certain "Trojan horse" for Russian interests in the EU). However, due to the fact, that from the beginning of Lithuania's independence, its policy priorities have been organized around the East-West axis, there was little attention paid to the Balkans. We have only a few experts working on the region, most of them are based in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, the most pressing matter is to now shape our position at EU level and in bilateral relations with the Balkan countries in a more active and much more detailed way than before. Otherwise, Lithuania will not be able to contribute to the stabilization of the region and would also significantly undermine its ability to assist the Eastern Partnership countries, as the tensions in the Western Balkans inevitably lead to less attention being paid by the EU and NATO to the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Sources and methodology

This policy paper reviews the current situation in the Western Balkans and examines the prospects for further EU enlargement, from the perspective of the Republic of Lithuania and the EU. Three possible scenarios are presented and assessed: rapid enlargement, short-term delay and indefinite postponement or complete cessation. As the countries of the Western Balkans are very diverse and find themselves at different levels of EU integration, they are divided into three blocks:

- Negotiations have already started – Serbia and Montenegro;
- Negotiations should start in the nearest future – North Macedonia and Albania;
- Negotiations will not start anytime soon – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo.

Major risks associated with each enlargement scenario are discussed and policy recommendations for the Republic of Lithuania are provided. The policy paper is based on secondary

(reports from international organizations and local NGOs, academic articles, EC reports, and public opinion polls) and primary sources (15 interviews with non-governmental organizations monitoring the situation in the region: 4 in Serbia, 3 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 in Croatia, 2 in Kosovo, 1 in North Macedonia, 1 in Montenegro). Human rights, transitional justice and reconciliation, as well as the most relevant issues for civil society, were discussed during the interviews.

Due to the limited scope of this policy paper, only a summary of the analysis of different EU enlargement scenarios (rapid enlargement, short-term delay and indefinite postponement or complete cessation) in each country group (Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia and BiH and Kosovo) are presented (see Table 1). However, when discussing a particular country group, the most likely outcome for that group is presented in more detail, thus, covering all three scenario variations.

Alternative policies for individual groups of countries and their assessment

Serbia and Montenegro – negotiations have already started but are currently stalling. The countries show only very limited progress (see Table 2), new chapters of negotiations have not been opened for some time. Although the latest European Commission progress report on Serbia and Montenegro is quite strict and specifies the key issues, in general the EU institutions or individual countries only express restrained criticism and offer little beyond generalised statements without a concrete “how”,

as if quietly endorsing the ongoing state capture of the increasingly authoritarian regimes. It is interesting that EU members such as Hungary (especially its Prime Minister Viktor Orbán) and Slovenia (especially its Prime Minister Janez Janša) have become strong advocates of Serbia joining the EU as soon as possible. Unfortunately, their support often goes against the general EU policy in the region. Hungary, for example, has helped escape former North Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola

Table No. 1 Assessment of the alternatives for further EU enlargement

	Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo	Albania and North Macedonia	Serbia and Montenegro
Rapid progress in negotiations	High risk (not ready, no progress)	Low risk (ready, show progress)	High risk (not ready, no progress)
Short-time delay	Medium risk (process review required)	Medium risk (currently ruled by pro-democratic forces, but this may not last long)	Medium risk (process review required)
Postponement for a long time	High risk (region becoming destabilized; third parties gaining influence)	High risk (region becoming destabilized; third parties gaining influence)	High risk (region becoming destabilized; third parties gaining influence)

Gruevski, who is accused of serious crimes in North Macedonia, and Hungarian-owned media companies ran an active propaganda campaign against the PRESPA agreement, endorsed by the EU and NATO. Meanwhile in Serbia, the enthusiasm for joining the EU has declined. Serbia is the only country in the region where less than half of the population supports EU membership, and as many as 32% believe that their country will never join the EU¹⁰. Local politicians use this as an argument for strengthening ties with third party actors (e.g., Russia and China) who willingly assist the ongoing state capture. All in all, Serbia and Montenegro appear unwilling to reform, so their accession is at a greater risk of being hasty, trying to blindly limit the influence of third parties in the region regardless of the real preparedness to join the EU. Major risks associated with the **Rapid Progress in Negotiations** scenario:

- The European Union will become weaker, more divided, and will face more difficulties while making decisions. There is also a risk of the erosion of the common liberal and democratic values as well as the principle of the rule of law. Because of its geographic proximity and similar strategic position, it is likely that after being accepted Serbia and Montenegro will gravitate toward the Visegrad countries, Slovenia, and Croatia, and will strengthen the bloc that is becoming less and less liberal.
- Serbia and Montenegro might serve as “Trojan horses” for spreading Russian or Chinese influence as both countries have a great deal of influence there and strong cultural, economic, and political ties.
- The bilateral relationship between Serbia and Croatia is strained, and unresolved disagreements may be “imported” into EU discussions and end up complicating joint solutions requiring solidarity.

- There is an increasing risk of mass emigration and brain drain from the Balkans to the EU, which will first and foremost weaken the Balkan states (but in the short-term could be beneficial to the EU).

In conclusion, the leaders, especially those in Serbia, do not seem particularly keen on reform and advancement of EU membership. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that none of the two negotiating countries currently are ready. The EU must define its position and actions towards them by imposing sanctions and obligations, and a strict, clear, but fair mechanism for monitoring progress. The EU and Lithuania would both benefit most from tangible progress and the establishment of strong democratic institutions in both countries, but so far, they have been moving in the opposite direction. Unless things change dramatically, it is likely that, in the long run, Serbia will find itself in a situation similar to that of Bosnia and Herzegovina today, when the prospect of EU membership will no longer be an attractive incentive for democratic reform.

Table No. 2 Annual report of the EC on the progress of the Western Balkans (2020)
(compiled by the author)

	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia	Montenegro	Kosovo	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Public administration	some	some	none	some	limited	none
Reforms of law enforcement	good	good	none	limited	some	none
Fight against corruption	good	good	some	limited	limited	none
Freedom of expression	some	limited	none	none	limited	none
Organised crime	good	some	some	some	limited	none
Fundamental rights and freedoms	some	some	good legal framework	some	good legal framework	limited
Economic criteria	some	limited	some	some	some	limited

Albania and North Macedonia – the start of negotiations is currently being blocked by Bulgaria. North Macedonia and Albania should start negotiations in the near future. EU institutions and most of the member states support the start of negotiations and believe the process should begin as soon as possible. Both European Council and European Parliament unanimously supported the start of negotiations. The leaders of Germany, the Visegrad countries, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Baltic States and other countries have also made clear statements in this regard. However, the negotiations stalled due to bilateral disputes. North Macedonia has been successful in resolving a historical disagreement over the name of the country with the signing of the PRESPA agreement with Greece in June 2018. Despite this being seen as the official reason for the suspension of the negotiations, the start of negotiations in October 2019 was blocked by France. The country argued the EU

needed important domestic reforms before anything else. It was a particularly painful blow to North Macedonia, who was expecting smooth opening of the negotiations. The government of prime minister Zoran Zajevev was forced to resign, and early elections were held. Luckily, the government managed to secure victory and remain on the pro-European course. However, after France withdrew its veto, negotiations were again blocked by Bulgaria. The latter uses disagreements over Macedonian ethnic identity and language as a pretext; however, it is more likely that Bulgarian leaders are playing the nationalist card trying to mobilize political support at home. Bulgaria's unexpected veto has been preventing the start of negotiations for more than six months now. It has been well known in the past that Bulgaria and North Macedonia disagree on some issues, but Bulgaria has never suggested that those differences could become a reason for blocking negotiations. Most EU Member States and senior

officials believe that such blocking is unjustified and that negotiations should start as soon as possible. The current situation (where clear progress is being made and all conditions for the start of negotiations are being met, but the “award” is still being withheld) seriously undermines the credibility of the EU, demotivates the countries of the Western Balkans and weakens pro-Western leaders in the region. While North Macedonia and Albania will have a long way to go before becoming full EU members, the conditions for starting negotiations have been met, and the European Commission, the European Parliament, and most EU Member States have all expressed support for starting negotiations. Greatest risks associated with “**Short-Term Delay**” scenario:

- Pro-democratic leaders in Albania and North Macedonia may find it increasingly difficult to secure political support, because the delay empowers pro-Russian and anti-liberal forces that oppose them (the situation may eventually become similar to that of Serbia when the political elite is no longer motivated by the promise of enlargement);
- There will be a decrease in EU influence not just in Albania and North Macedonia, but throughout the entire region as well, further discrediting the enlargement project;
- The detrimental influence of Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States will continue to grow.

The situation in Albania and North Macedonia may change in the next six months, because the official start of their negotiations is named as one of the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency. However, if negotiations do not start this year, the Bulgarian veto could be replaced by another French veto, as the French presidential election campaign will begin next year, and more than half of the French believe that the EU enlargement to Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, or Bosnia and Herzegovina would have bad or very bad

outcome. Interestingly, the most recent analysis of the French population’s views on EU enlargement to the Balkans concludes that the issue is not crucial in the presidential election, and many respondents could be easily swayed¹¹. Thus, one might conclude that the real reason for France’s dissatisfaction lies elsewhere, e.g., they do not want to see the centre of power shifted towards Germany by the accession of the Balkan nations to the EU. Anyway, the negotiations with these two Western Balkan countries would serve the interests of both the EU and Lithuania. Again, as in the case of Serbia and Montenegro, it is important for Lithuania that progress is strictly monitored and that a reliable system of penalties and rewards is put in place. In order to accomplish this, it is best to become more involved in the negotiation and monitoring processes, especially when it comes to discussing the public sector reform, the protection of fundamental civil rights and freedoms, freedom of expression and economic development reforms.

Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – potential candidates. Despite a clear European perspective, neither country has been granted the official candidate status. Stabilization and Association Agreements became effective in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015 and in Kosovo in 2016, but the countries are facing serious problems that prevent further progress (see Table 2). Kosovo is mostly affected by the unresolved bilateral dispute with Serbia regarding the status of its independence. By the way, four EU member states, namely Spain, Cyprus, Romania and Greece, do not recognize Kosovo’s independence, despite the positive EP resolution adopted in 2010. Whereas, Bosnia and Herzegovina is mostly paralyzed by the overly complicated internal governance system established by the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, which prevents it from taking necessary reforms. With regards to the potential candidates, EU Member States take a similar position to that on Albania and North

Macedonia. Those who support faster integration of North Macedonia and Albania also support the integration of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thinking that membership is an important guarantor of security and stability in the region, that could prevent local conflicts and empowerment of third parties. Similarly, those who speak against further enlargement, extend their criticism towards BiH and Kosovo, claiming that neither of them is ready. In the worst-case scenario, membership could be postponed indefinitely, which would mean regression, and a departure from the pro-Western course. That is why more actions are required and ongoing reforms need to be monitored more closely. Greatest risks associated with the **“Indefinite postponement or secession of the negotiations”** scenario:

- There is a risk of destabilizing the region, potentially even threatening the resumption of armed conflict over territories with Serbia (both in the Serbian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the northern part of Kosovo);
- Delay may undermine the influence and credibility of the EU and NATO in the international arena;
- Strengthen dangerous third parties in the region as well as outside of it. For example, Russia, encouraged by the EU and NATO failure in the Balkans, may become even more active in the Eastern Partnership countries;
- Further encourage emigration, since citizens are frustrated by the situation, and no longer see prospects in their own country;
- Increase the possibility of environmental disasters near the EU borders. As China invests more in the region, major infrastructure projects are underway, and high-pollution factories are being built with significantly lower safety requirements. Numerous environmental disasters in the region are already being attributed to China.

Currently, neither Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor Kosovo are ready to start accession negotiations. For the situation to change, a great deal of political will, leadership and bold, creative decisions are needed. The potential EU role here could be that of a mediator and a moderator. Nevertheless, the situation is unlikely to change dramatically in the near future (five years)¹².

Recommendations

In the last thirty years, Lithuania's foreign policy has focused primarily on the East-West axis. It is not surprising, since most of our diplomatic and foreign policy goals have been related to either the West (to join the EU and NATO and assume an important role there) or the East (to break free from Russia's influence, to defend ourselves, to gain energy independence, to contribute to the democratization and Europeanization of the Eastern Partnership countries). As a result, these objectives have long dominated the political agenda, leaving few resources and energy for other goals. However, geographically, historically, and culturally, the countries of the Western Balkans are an important part of Europe, with which Lithuania has much in common. We share, for instance, a common experience of post-Soviet transformation, a pro-Western course, and strive for greater integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Previous enlargements of the EU have only strengthened the EU status as a global player, and helped the new members, including Lithuania, to develop sustainably. Thus, being a relatively new member of the Union who understands the importance of integration, it is crucial to demonstrate solidarity. Furthermore, certain regional processes relate to Lithuania's national interests: the enlargement of the EU and NATO, and the development of a common security and defence policy. Failure to expand

into the Western Balkans would undermine the credibility of the EU and NATO, which would be disadvantageous. Because of destructive activities of third parties, uncontrolled or poorly controlled migration, a weak economy and related emigration, the region could become vulnerable relatively quickly. Greater problems and instability in the Western Balkans inevitably mean that the EU and NATO will have less energy and attention available to the Eastern Partnership countries, which are crucial for Lithuania. Consequently, the strengthening of the influence of third parties in the Balkans will also strengthen their influence in the Lithuanian neighbourhood.

In spite of the relevance of EU enlargement to the West Balkans, Lithuania has played no significant role in the region so far. It is usually argued that the Western Balkans are geographically too remote, that Lithuania has minimal economic ties and labour mobility, and lack experts and resources. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the reasons mentioned above, Lithuania should strengthen its position in the region, striving for its representatives to occupy more important positions in various EU and NATO institutions, related to the Western Balkans and their security policy. The ultimate goal of these countries is to become full members of the EU, but that will only be possible if the conditions for membership are met. It is therefore crucial to become more involved in monitoring progress of the countries and share our unique experiences of transformation, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, public governance, the quality of democracy, civil liberties and rights, the fight against corruption and transitional justice. Most important policy recommendations for Lithuania are the following:

1. Demonstrate active political support for further enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans. Various existing initiatives and informal groups can be used for this purpose, in order to support the idea of

further enlargement, help maintain the dynamics of the process and the credibility of the membership perspective (e.g., Friends of Enlargement Group, EU strategy for the Danube Region, Three Seas Initiative). Three Seas Initiative is particularly valuable, as many of its current members are located in the Balkan neighbourhood. Should the countries of the Western Balkans be accepted to the EU, it is highly likely that they would join this initiative, therefore, speedy involvement would encourage Balkan cooperation with the Central European countries, especially those that support enlargement. There are several reasons why enlargement is relevant to Lithuania. First, the Western Balkans are the scene of rivalry between the great powers (US, Russia, China, EU, NATO), the outcome of which is important to Lithuania. The failure of Euro-Atlantic integration would destabilize the whole region and would be a serious blow to the credibility of the EU and NATO on the international arena, which would be detrimental to Lithuanian national security. Second, the instability in the Western Balkans inevitably means less attention being paid to the Eastern Partnership countries, a key area for Lithuania.

2. Support should not be unconditional. In order to prevent the accession of the countries that are not yet ready, to ensure greater interest and progress in the Western Balkans themselves, and to prevent Russia (but also China) from acting through Serbia, Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is important to contribute more actively to strict but fair monitoring of the negotiations. More specifically: a) to encourage the EC reports to be better linked to the new EU enlargement methodology (e.g., structured accordingly, progress assessed in each cluster separately) and to include clear penalties, incentives and commitments for the future; b) to take the position that issues of reconciliation and transitional justice are a

matter of the entire international community, therefore, it is essential for the countries of the Western Balkans to have a clear regional and national policy on how to continue to implement transitional justice with clearly defined responsibilities on how to move forward, ensuring transparent investigation of war crimes, evidence-based memory policy, balanced education reform, and effective regional cooperation; c) to develop an incentive system that links progress of the countries to tangible benefits in the short term (e.g., countries that meet certain requirements could have partial access to the EU Structural Funds and be involved in other decision-making processes in the EU; such as full access to the EU internal market and de facto “unions” (customs, energy, banking, digital unions), participation in certain sectoral EU policies (e.g. Euro, Schengen, PESCO), gradual involvement into the activities of the EU institutions (e.g. electing representatives to the European Parliament, initially without the right to vote), allowing delegate representatives to European regional or economic and social committees, etc. Such a system would make a significant contribution to the socialization of the Western Balkans into the EU, would remove the “emotional weight” from the membership/non-membership fact, and help to strengthen the credibility of the negotiations by offering tangible benefits here and now.

3. Offer technical assistance to negotiating countries by sharing own experience of transformation. Lithuania could take the lead and proactively offer its valuable expertise by offering to monitor the negotiation process in certain areas. For example, in the fields of public sector transformation, sustainable use of natural resources, absorption of EU structural funds, energy, agriculture, as well as the management of the brain drain and mass emigration, the fight against disinformation, etc.

4. Strengthen relations between the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. The countries of the two regions share important similarities. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as the countries of the Western Balkans, are weak democracies that require initiatives to strengthen democracy and ensure the rule of law. The regions are equally interested in strengthening their economies, in gaining energy independence, in sustainable usage of resources, and in introducing better, more connected transportation systems. Greater coordination and harmonization of EU policies in the two regions would promote their integration, could act as an additional incentive for the Eastern Partnership countries, contribute to the transparency of EU policies (more coordination, more similarities, more standardized practices that work), and even help reduce administrative costs within the EU.

5. Build expertise. For Lithuania to participate more actively in the discussions involving Western Balkans, it must strengthen its expertise of this region. Until now, our area of interest has been primarily the Eastern Partnership region, however, it is important to expand the field of knowledge, starting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and involving other sectoral ministries (e.g., transport, energy, justice, national defence, interior). This will be particularly relevant once the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania start, when Lithuania’s positions on various issues (not only on security and foreign policy issues) need to be outlined in detail. An example of good practice is the “Enlargement Academy” established in 2015 by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which¹³ brings together different ministries and their competencies.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jean-Claude Juncker, “State of the Union Address”, September 13, 2017, Brussels https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_17_3165.
- ² European Commission, “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, February 6, 2018, Strasbourg, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.
- ³ Freedom House, “Democracy Under Siege”, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.
- ⁴ Statista, “Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020”, accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453933/unemployment-rate-in-bosnia-herzegovina/>, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/444445/unemployment-rate-in-albania/>, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/440532/unemployment-rate-in-serbia/>, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/510247/unemployment-rate-in-macedonia/>, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/808795/unemployment-rate-in-montenegro/>.
- ⁵ The World Bank, “Country Overview: Kosovo”, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kosovo/overview#3>.
- ⁶ Regional Cooperation Council, “Balkan Barometer 2021: Public Opinion Analytical Report”, June 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/122/balkan-barometer-2021-public-opinion>.
- ⁷ “Balkan Barometer 2021: Public Opinion Analytical Report”.
- ⁸ Youth Initiative for Human Rights, “War Criminals in Public Life”, 2015-2019, unpublished report (using its content is permitted by the organization).
- ⁹ BiEPAG, “Policy Brief: EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans in a Time of Uncertainty”, September, 2016, <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/EU-Enlargement-in-the-Western-Balkans-in-a-Time-of-Uncertainty.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ “Balkan Barometer 2021: Public Opinion Analytical Report”, 44.
- ¹¹ Christine Hübner, Jan Eichhorn, Luuk Molthof, Srđan Cvijić, “It’s the EU, not Western Balkan Enlargement”, Open Society Foundations, 2021; https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/its-the-eu-not-western-balkan-enlargement#publications_download
- ¹² The situation in Kosovo is more dynamic than in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- ¹³ The Academy was established and coordinated by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but is also affiliated with sectoral ministries responsible for fields related to the negotiations for EU membership, for example, national defence, agriculture, justice, transport, economy, interior, etc. The Academy considers the recommendations of the EC and provides support to the representatives of the Western Balkan countries in the relevant areas of the integration process, by organizing short-term and long-term trainings, and sharing good practice. As for Lithuania, the Enlargement Academy could be used to gather internal expertise and prepare positions, in order for Lithuania to have the clearest possible opinion not only on negotiating issues related to foreign policy and security (monitored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), but also, for example, transport, energy, economics, justice and other aspects.