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# European money accelerates the path of the Western Balkans towards EU membership



The European Union is trying to regain focus on the Western Balkans, the only region still not integrated into the Union. Because of the long-term path to membership, it is becoming an easy target for Russian and Chinese influence.

For this purpose, EU leaders met with the Western Balkan leaders on December 6, for the first time in the Balkans. The meeting took place in Tirana, the capital of Albania, which was a symbolic message that Europe wants to change the current, not sufficiently caring, attitude towards the region.

They repeated their messages about speeding up the Balkan states' path to membership of the EU. There was no real difference compared to previous meetings, but there was much talk about common foreign policy and particularly about European money intended for the region. Balkan leaders have pledged to follow the EU's restrictive policy towards Russia, which is an important promise for Europeans, considering that the Western Balkan countries are still far from EU membership and therefore very susceptible to Russia's destructive influence. Also, more than previously, there was talk about the use of European financial funds intended for the region, which have significantly increased recently.

The EU's financial effort is a more convincing sign that the Balkan region has a better chance for faster integration than the patronising rhetoric of European leaders. The money invested in improving candidates' ability to join the EU is reminiscent of the last major and successful integration in Europe, when in 2004 almost all of Eastern Europe, formerly part of the Soviet bloc, was absorbed.

## A more offensive EU

The absorption of the Balkans into the EU will take much longer than the previous large-scale wave of integration of the countries from the former Soviet bloc, which ended in 2004. The Balkan Six, which consists of five countries that emerged from the former

Yugoslavia, as well as Albania, are not yet close to EU membership by formal standards. But they trust that the political decisions of the top of the EU can accelerate that process. Just as the EU's geopolitical interests accelerated the integration of Eastern Europe 18 years ago.

European leaders have also raised such expectations since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in Berlin on Nov. 3 that all the countries of the Western Balkans were part of free and democratic Europe, and that it was the shared job of the EU and the region to turn the European future that was promised to them into reality. The chancellor said that, now, when Russia was waging a brutal war against Ukraine, it was time to overcome internal conflicts.

Brussels has supported the new rhetoric towards the Western Balkans with finances, which together indicates a more offensive approach, and possibly, an acceleration of the slow Balkan progress towards the EU. From January, the Balkans will have access to one billion euros of EU support for the purchase of energy products for the economy and households, primarily liquid gas, in order to lessen the impact of shocks from the large increase in fuel prices.

## Repeating the success story from 2004

Researchers from The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies and Bertelsmann Stiftung reminded us that money and stronger economic integration are a successful way quickly to adapt candidate countries to EU standards. Their recent research draws a parallel with the large-scale wave of enlargement from 2004 as a good recipe for the Balkans, and its faster integration into the EU.

It is based on the considerable difference in time for meeting the criteria for EU membership between the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the Balkan Six. While

Hungary, Poland, the Baltic States and others from Eastern Europe spent 8.5 to 10 years from submitting their candidacy to full membership, in the Western Balkans the same process has been ongoing for 13 years (Serbia) or 14 years (Albania), and even up to 18 years (North Macedonia). And it is still nowhere near to a successful completion.

The key to faster movement, according to researchers, is that the long wait in the EU's backyard slows down economic growth. In the case of the Western Balkans, incomes are only 30-40% of the EU average. Doubling European financial support to the region, for example, from 1% to 2%, would raise the GDP of these countries by a fantastic 14%. And the burden on the EU budget would be negligible – financial support for the integration of six small Balkan states would burden EU members by less than 0.04% of their GDP.

The experience of the EU's Eastern European members, which joined the Union 18 years ago, is applicable to the Balkans. It showed a dramatic economic transformation in the course of the process of accession, particularly from the moment they became members of the Union.

The cost of the integration of the large Eastern European bloc proved to be a good economic and political investment for the EU 18 years ago. In the case of the Western Balkans, It can be even better now.

“Achieving membership in the EU is the most essential game changer in the region”, says the Western Balkans Futures - Strategic foresight report for 2030, prepared by researchers from the Visegrád Group, to which four Eastern European EU members belong.

“Russia and its proxies (ie, Belarus) increase military engagements, invasions as well as hybrid attacks and threats on the EU’s eastern borders while China continues to make inroads with large scale infrastructural investments, strengthening their presence on the continent. Wishing to thwart any further advancement, the EU begins to speed up the ascension of the vulnerable Western Balkans.”