



A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process - Commission lays out its proposals

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Today, the European Commission put forward a proposal to drive forward the EU accession process, by making it more credible, with a stronger political steer, more dynamic and predictable.

Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, **Olivér Várhelyi**, commented: *"The European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission. We are working on three tracks: Firstly, today we propose concrete steps on how to enhance the accession process. While we are strengthening and improving the process, the goal remains accession and full EU membership. Secondly, and in parallel, the Commission stands firmly by its recommendations to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and will soon provide an update on the progress made by these two countries. Thirdly, in preparation of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May, the Commission will come forward with an economic and investment development plan for the region."*

Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans

A more credible process: The accession process needs to build on trust, mutual confidence and clear commitments by the European Union and the Western Balkans. Credibility should be reinforced through an even **stronger focus on fundamental reforms**, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration as well as the economy of the candidate countries. When partner countries meet the objective criteria, the Member States shall agree to move forward to the next stage of the process, respecting the merits-based approach.

A stronger political steer: The political nature of the accession process requires a stronger **political steer and engagement at the highest levels**. The Commission proposes to increase the opportunities for high level political and policy dialogue, through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts. Moreover, **Member States should be involved more systematically in monitoring** and reviewing the process. All bodies under Stabilisation and Association Agreement will focus much more on the key political issues and reforms, while Inter-Governmental Conferences will provide stronger political steering for the negotiations.

A more dynamic process: To inject further dynamism into the negotiating process, the Commission proposes to group the negotiating **chapters in six thematic clusters**: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; external relations. Negotiations on each cluster will be open as a whole – after fulfilling the opening benchmarks – rather than on an individual chapter basis. Negotiations on the fundamentals will be open first and closed last and the progress on these will determine the overall pace of negotiations. The timeframe between opening a cluster and closing the individual chapters should be limited, preferably within a year fully dependant on the progress of the reforms.

A more predictable process: The Commission will provide greater clarity on what the EU expects of enlargement countries at the different stages of the process. It will make clearer what the positive consequences progress on reforms can bring, and what will the negative consequences will be when there is no progress.

To encourage demanding reforms, the Commission will better define the conditions set for candidates to progress and will provide clear and tangible incentives of direct interest to citizens. Incentives could include accelerated integration and "phasing-in" to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes - while ensuring a level playing field - as well as increased funding and investments. The more candidates advance in their reforms, the more they will advance in the process. Equally, the Commission proposes more decisive measures proportionally sanctioning any serious or prolonged stagnation or backsliding in reform implementation and meeting the requirements of accession process. Negotiations could be put on hold in certain areas, or in the most serious cases, suspended overall, and already closed chapters could be re-opened; benefits of closer integration, like access to EU programmes, could be paused or withdrawn, and the scope and intensity of EU funding could be adjusted downward.

Next steps

The Commission hopes the Member States will endorse the proposal, in parallel with the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, ahead of the European Union-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb on 6-7 May. For the summit the Commission will consider how to bring forward investment, socio- economic integration and the rule of law for the Western Balkans region.

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