

## There is renewed focus in EU enlargement in the Balkans

Written by Charles Tannock on 12 April 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

The EU enlargement process is necessarily slow, but there is room for optimism, writes Charles Tannock.



Charles Tannock | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made it clear in 2014 that there would be no enlargement during his mandate. This was a fact so evident that it needn't have been said.

That it was, suggested to some a sense of EU disengagement from the Western Balkan region, and a sign of waning enthusiasm for future enlargement as the EU battled with multiple challenges.

As President Juncker returns to Brussels from a tour of the region to attend a Council summit dealing with Brexit, four years on the mood is more optimistic.

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The renewed strategy for enlargement in the Western Balkans, published by the Commission this February, makes clear the EU's renewed commitment to seeing all six countries of the region eventually joining the European Union. For Montenegro and Serbia, this commitment goes so far as to even suggest a potential accession date of 2025.

While ultimately the decision to accept new members is a political one, the process designed to reach that point is decidedly objective.

By putting progress on justice and the rule of law at the centre of that process, all other considerations are weighed against these fundamental areas. This is a sensible approach, which may take more time than some may wish.

Nevertheless, it is the best way to ensure a smooth transition to full EU membership and, more importantly, to provide assurances to the public that the criteria for new members is sufficiently stringent.

That the process is long and drawn out has allowed some detractors to suggest failure. However, this is far from the truth. It is a cliché to talk of complicated history when it comes to the Balkans but it is nevertheless true, and untangling the contemporary problems and legacy of that fairly recent bloody history cannot be achieved overnight.

To take one example, last week the Parliament of Kosovo signed off on a border demarcation agreement with Montenegro. This was the culmination of a process that started with consultations between the two in November 2012.

In those years, we have witnessed a series of protests, repeated failed votes in Parliament, and even a change in government to see that deal agreed. This is slow progress but it has achieved success.

Agreement on this issue has been linked to the granting of visa-free travel within the Schengen area for Kosovo, a significant milestone and an illustration of the strength that EU carrots can have in effecting change and reform in the region. Yet we should not allow this to lead to any sense of complacency.

The political balance in Bosnia-Herzegovina remains tense, leading opposition figures are facing trial in Montenegro for allegedly colluding in an attempted assassination plot of its former Prime Minister, while Russia continues to exert a strong presence in Serbia and across the region more generally.

It is a time when we in the West are becoming ever more familiar with issues surrounding manipulation of the media and intervention from third countries in elections and in our democratic systems.

The countries of the Western Balkans, with greater fault lines to be exploited and less resources to fight back, are at the forefront of these battles as they seek to move in a Euro-Atlanticist direction.

The 2025 perspective for Serbian and Montenegrin accession is an ambitious one. This is even accepted as such in the strategy setting out the ambition. Regardless of the date, however, what is more important is that countries are assessed on their own merit, the so-called regatta principle.

There cannot be an assumption that certain countries will join together, as we cannot assume that those countries will make sufficient progress at the same rate.

Montenegro, for example, is far ahead in reaching the required benchmarks compared to Serbia, yet the 2025 perspective assumes they will both be ready at the same time. This is not only unfair but it also serves to undermine the very process that has been designed to funnel reform, which is designed to reward progress along the 'more for more' basis.

2018 has certainly seen a renewed focus on EU enlargement in the Balkans. The next few months will offer more of the same. The Commission is soon to publish its annual reports on the EU accession progress each country is making, while London prepares itself for the fourth year of the Berlin Process format, designed to foster cooperation amongst countries of the Western Balkans.

I too look forward to writing my annual report on Montenegro as standing rapporteur for the country in the European Parliament.

The enlargement process is necessarily slow but it is far from on hold.

### **About the author**

Charles Tannock (ECR, UK) is Parliament's rapporteur on the 2016 Commission report on Montenegro

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