



## Reviving European policy towards the Western Balkans

by Luigi Scazzieri  
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European foreign policy towards the Western Balkans is in crisis. The EU has sought to stabilise Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia by promising them membership. But, as accession to the EU has stalled, nationalist forces have grown stronger, and regional and internal reconciliation after the wars of the 1990s has been undermined. Bosnia is at risk of breaking up, with Serb leader Milorad Dodik pushing for secession, and a return to violence is possible. The lack of a credible prospect of EU membership has contributed to democratic backsliding across the region and allowed Russia and China to gain influence.

In this Centre for European Reform policy brief, '[Reviving European policy towards the Western Balkans](#)', research fellow Luigi Scazzieri assesses the reasons for the current crisis in European policy towards the Western Balkans, offering recommendations for the EU can revive its foreign policy in the region.

The key reason behind the current crisis is the stalling of the EU accession process. Montenegro and Serbia's accession negotiations have made little progress since they started in 2012 and 2014 respectively. EU leaders have not started talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as they had promised to. Meanwhile, Kosovo remains far from starting talks, as it is not even recognised by five EU states, and Bosnia is deeply dysfunctional and at risk of fragmenting. The EU is preoccupied with internal matters and many EU states are concerned about the Western Balkan countries disrupting the Union's functioning if they become members. At the same time, reforms in the Western Balkans have faltered, in part because EU membership seems increasingly remote.

However, the EU should not give up on enlargement, as it remains its most powerful tool to foster regional reconciliation, dampen revanchist nationalism, promote better governance and reduce Russia and China's influence. The EU should push ahead with plans to integrate candidate countries more closely prior to accession, to provide achievable medium-term goals, and redouble efforts to tackle corruption, state capture and democratic backsliding. EU members must also be more assertive in their efforts to tackle the region's security challenges, working with the UK and the US. They should act resolutely to make the fragmentation of Bosnia impossible and push forward efforts to end the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.

The author of the paper, Luigi Scazzieri, said: *"The stalling of EU enlargement has contributed to a negative spiral in the Western Balkans, with rising authoritarianism, nationalist recrimination and ethnic tensions. The EU, working with the UK and the US, needs to rise to the challenge and reverse these negative developments before they gain further momentum. If they fail to do so, the challenges in the Western Balkans will only grow larger."*

### Note for editors:

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