

A CREDIBLE ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVE FOR AND ENHANCED EU ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WESTERN BALKANS



«If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready. But thereafter the European Union will be greater than 27 in number. Accession candidates must give the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights utmost priority in the negotiations.»

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address, 13 September 2017

THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

The process of joining the EU broadly consists of 4 stages:

- 1** The Western Balkans have an EU accession perspective. Already today, they benefit from substantial EU assistance, from Stabilisation and Association Agreements providing far-reaching access to the EU's internal market, and detailed policy advice. The new strategy covering the Western Balkans adopted by the Commission on 6 February 2018 foresees significant enhancement of EU support.
- 2** When a country fulfils basic political, economic and reform criteria, it can become an official candidate for membership.
- 3** The candidate then moves on to formal membership negotiations. These cover 35 chapters, across all policy areas, to ensure that candidates are fully prepared to become members. There is a strong focus throughout on reforms in fundamental areas such as rule of law, human rights, and reforms in public administration and the economy. For the Western Balkans regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are essential for progress on the countries' respective European paths.
- 4** When negotiations and accompanying reforms have been completed to the satisfaction of both sides, an Accession Treaty is finalised and ratified and the country joins the EU.

ENLARGEMENT CRITERIA

The Treaty on the European Union states that any European country may apply for membership if it respects the democratic values of the EU and is committed to promoting them. The EU also needs to be able to integrate new members.

Countries wishing to join the European Union must have:

- ▶ stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- ▶ a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU;
- ▶ the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

In order to **meet the well-established membership criteria** and in their own interest, the Western Balkans need to implement **comprehensive reforms** in crucial areas. The **rule of law, fundamental rights and governance** must be strengthened significantly. Judicial reforms, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and public administration reform need to deliver real results and the functioning of democratic institutions needs to be seriously enhanced. Economic reforms must be pursued with vigour and structural weaknesses, low competitiveness and high unemployment addressed.

All countries must unequivocally commit, in both word and deed, to **overcoming the legacy of the past**, by achieving reconciliation and solving open issues well before their accession to the EU, in particular **border disputes**.