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Parliamentary Dimension
Bulgarian Presidency of the Council
of the European Union

Meeting of the LIX COSAC 17 – 19 June 2018, Sofia

Background Information

Session II: Integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans – a new impetus to EU enlargement policy

The European Union (EU) perspective of the Western Balkans (WB) is a main priority of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and its Parliamentary Dimension. The Presidency has put a strong focus on the connectivity (within the region and between the region and the Member States) in all its aspects – transport, energy, economy, communications, digital, facilitation of people-to-people contacts.

As reaffirmed in the Council's most recent comprehensive position (General Affairs Council (GAC) Conclusions of 15 December 2015; doc. 15356/15), the Union's enlargement policy remains based on the 2006 renewed consensus on enlargement, which is a consolidation of commitments, fair and rigorous conditionality and better communication. Rule of law issues, economic governance, the independence of media and public administration reform are considered fundamental areas, where the focus is put on sustainable and lasting implementation of reforms. Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations form an essential part of the European integration process of the WB, and contribute to the overall stability in the Old Continent.

A series of events and documents related to enlargement and the European perspective of the Western Balkans mark the calendar of the Bulgarian Presidency.

On the 6 February the European Commission adopted a strategy for 'A credible enlargement perspective for - and enhanced EU engagement with - the Western Balkans'¹, confirming the European future of the region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. A credible enlargement perspective requires sustained efforts and irreversible reforms. Progress along the European path is an objective and merit-based process² which depends on the concrete

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/the-enlargement-process_en.pdf



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results achieved by each individual country. The Strategy sets out an Action Plan with six concrete flagship initiatives³ targeting specific areas of common interest: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. The European Commission proposes to gradually increase funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance until 2020, in so far as reallocations within the existing envelope allow. In 2018 alone, €1.07 billion of pre-accession assistance for the Western Balkans is already foreseen, on top of almost €9 billion from the 2007-2017 period. The Strategy explains the steps that need to be taken by Montenegro and Serbia to complete the accession process around 2025; while others could catch up, Montenegro and Serbia are the only two countries with whom accession talks are already under way. The Strategy also marks that the EU itself needs to be ready for new “members of the family” – once they have met the conditions – including from an institutional and financial perspective.

On 17 April 2018 the European Commission adopted its annual Enlargement Package, including seven individual reports /the Western Balkans and Turkey/. The Commission recommended to the Council to decide that accession negotiations be opened with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and with Albania, in light of the progress achieved, maintaining and deepening the current reform momentum in particular areas. For the first time, together with the Enlargement Package, the Commission also published its annual assessments of the Economic Reform Programmes for the Western Balkans and Turkey.

A series of summits and different fora with a clear-cut and specific tasks – focusing on ways to strengthen European integration in the region and ensuring financial support for the development of joint infrastructure projects /road, rail, energy and digital/ have been organized during the Bulgarian Presidency with the participation of the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, ect.

The EU-Western Balkans Summit took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 17 May 2018. The summit was aiming to inject new energy in the EU-Western Balkans relationship. It was centred on the theme of connectivity in a broad sense, with view to improving the links between the EU Single Market with the Western Balkans, and also the ones within the region. It reaffirmed the EU's commitment towards its Western Balkan partners and

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans_en.pdf



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reiterated the region's belonging to the European family. It was also focused on strengthening the mutual cooperation in the field of common challenges, such as security, migration, geopolitical developments and good neighbourly relations.

According to the findings in the COSAC 29th Bi-Annual Report, the National Parliaments/Chambers, which discussed the Commission`s Strategy in committee sittings or in plenary, have expressed full support for the European Perspective of the Western Balkans, highlighting the importance that each country should be allowed to join the EU individually, once all criteria and conditions are met. When it comes to rating the importance of the six flagship initiatives of the Strategy, the majority of the respondents have point out that the rule of law is the most important one. The majority of National Parliaments/Chambers have expressed support for further involvement of the Western Balkans in COSAC work and activities.