

GETTING EU ENLARGEMENT 2025 RIGHT ON ANTI-CORRUPTION: A CIVIL SOCIETY VIEW

THE KEY POINTS

The President of the European Commission has announced 2025 as the target year for the next EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans, with frontrunners most likely being Montenegro and Serbia. Yet, the EU Member States are far from united behind this statement. A number of countries support this pledge and continuous economic support for a European future of the region. However, **persistent rule of law concerns** prevent leading Member States from committing to a specific date for the Western Balkan enlargement. The EU would need to carefully balance the desire to provide actionable commitment for enlargement in the Western Balkans with the reality of objectively slow progress in anticorruption in the region to keep hopes and pressure for change open in the Western Balkans, while staving off Euroscepticism in the EU.

At 26% of the population, corruption levels in the Western Balkans remain high, despite the fact that local and EU efforts have resulted in a stable decline. Progress has been slow and erratic. It is not unusual for the region that achieved advancements in good governance in certain periods of time are lost to regress in the next. Specifically, in the 2014 – 2016 timeframe, corruption pressure – the primary quantitative indicator for the levels of corruption in the region – has relapsed in some countries, but the overall improvement in the region was marginal. According to SELDI's Hidden Economy Survey and other sources the **hidden economy occupies between a quarter and a third** of the SEE economies.

It is, thus, necessary that the planned **increase in EU support for the WB** be complemented by an intensified and coordinated anticorruption drive, which focuses not only on technical assistance through service contracts but on **spurring and supporting genuine local anticorruption civil society drive**. Such positive intervention could prove instrumental for the success not only of anticorruption initiatives but also for improving economic governance and labour market functioning. It is thus of no surprise that the main concerns, cited by the SEE population in the Balkans Barometer 2017, are namely unemployment (67%), the economic situation (46%), and corruption (32%).

In 2018, the European Commission is expected to introduce a **reinforced Enlargement Strategy** and a new Progress Monitoring Mechanism. This will seek to leverage the pledged additional support from the EU Member States for the Western Balkans and to ensure EU conditionality works better in particular in rule of law in this enlargement round. The upcoming two EU Presidencies in the region – Bulgaria and Austria - are expected to provide a **critical window of opportunity for accession** discussions. Along with that, the EU budget for the next financial framework 2020 – 2027 would bring further insights as to whether and how Enlargement would actually happen.

Local political elites from the Western Balkans, have signalled their **preference for quick enlargement with less conditionality**, including efforts in the rule of law and anticorruption. In a series of public statements in late 2017, political leaders from all countries in the Western Balkans have expressed **concerns about “double” or “harsher” standards** vis-à-vis their countries compared to previous enlargements. They have also spelled out the risk of choosing a different model such as China, Russia or Turkey if there is no clear path to accession. This demonstrates both lack of willingness to take responsibility for the strategic orientation of their countries but also **the fragility of institutions**, which can easily be captured and circumvented by private, including foreign interests.

The Western Balkans should **engage into a much deeper and wider regional cooperation**, in order to help justify and sustain the created momentum for larger European support. The governments will have to unambiguously demonstrate attainment of tangible progress and concrete results in the areas of anticorruption, good governance and rule of law to be granted access to and make efficient use of increasing EU support. This can only be achieved by decisive action, channelled through comprehensive cooperation platforms, gathering national governments, regional initiatives, European and CSOs actors.

Good governance and anti-corruption are and should remain central priorities across all fields of reform, to ensure stable economic development in the region. In particular, introduction of credible mechanisms for tackling high level corruption, alongside continuing technical assistance for reducing systemic administrative corruption. **Civil society participation remains critical** for sustained anticorruption progress. Principles of locality, targeted funding and independent civil society action should be further incorporated into the main national, regional and European initiatives for the development and integration of the Western Balkans.

As a leader of change in the region, the **EU should create more tailored policy instruments and engage directly with local civil society groups** for an effective fight against corruption. This calls for a **reinvigoration of regional initiatives**. A number of such initiatives such as the Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which have provided a good platform for development and cooperation, will need to be strengthened, expanded, and replicated.

Next to improving technical capacities and restructuring bureaucratic frameworks, the EU should focus on **further commitment and engagement on political level**. Generating actionable political will in the region should start with the alignment of the agendas of multiple EU stakeholders, including EC's Directorate Generals, local EU delegations, the European External Action Service, foreign ministries of member states, political party families, and the European Parliament, **agreeing on common good governance agenda for the EU integration of the region**.

Effective prosecution of high-level corruption is the only way to send a strong and immediate message that corruption in the Western Balkans would not be tolerated. This is clearly a very high political price required from among the ones who would likely sit on the negotiation table. Hence, it is critical that the **EU keeps political pressure high**, while pursuing further separation of powers, democratisation, and de-monopolisation in the Western Balkan.

In parallel, **anti-corruption efforts should be zoomed in at the level of public organisations**, to follow up on the quality of implementation of the numerous formally adopted anticorruption policies and plans and close the implementation and efficiency gaps.

This quest for good governance goes through ensuring independent evaluation, effective cooperation, improved institutional performance and, most importantly, the attainment of tangible anti-corruption results. An **independent corruption and anti-corruption monitoring mechanism** needs to be introduced on national and regional level in order to provide robust data and analysis and integrate both corruption diagnostics and anticorruption policy evaluation. The mechanism should be implemented through national and/or regional civil society organisations and networks independent of national governments.

Supported by



This website is funded by the European Union. A project implemented by a consortium led by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation.

Navigation

[History](#)
[Events and News](#)
[Publications](#)
[News from Partners](#)
[Multimedia](#)
[Resources](#)
[Quotable](#)
[Charticle](#)

Executive Secretariat

Macedonian Center for International Cooperation
PO Box 55 st. "Nikola Parapunov" bb
Skopje, Macedonia
Tel: +389 2 3065 381
Fax: +389 2 3065 298

Knowledge and Outreach

Center for the Study of Democracy
5 Alexander Zhendov Str.
1113 Sofia, Bulgaria
Tel: +359 2 971 3000
Fax: +359 2 971 2233
Email: seldi@online.bg

Stay Updated

Full name:

Institution/Organization:

Country:

Your E-mail*:

[unsubscribe](#)