

Supporting the Western Balkan states in their path to the European Union

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, contrary to international law, is a stark reminder to us that the development of democracy and the rule of law in our eastern and south-eastern neighbours is in our very own interest. The integration of the Western Balkan states in the European Union is therefore one of the most important issues facing Germany and the EU. Russia destabilises the region calculatedly with disinformation campaigns and “fake news” as well as invoking a supposed Slavic brotherhood between Russians and Serbs. In addition, Russia intentionally and continuously provokes ethno-nationalistic tensions to weaken the democratic forces that strive for the Euro-Atlantic integration. We firmly stand against any attempt to increase rather than overcome ethno-nationalistic tensions in the Western Balkan states.

With the grant of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova as well as potentially to Georgia, there is a growing concern in the Western Balkan states that our focus could shift decisively towards eastern Europe. We will drive forward the EU enlargement process for the six states. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are part of the European family. They are in the middle of Europe, surrounded by the EU member states of Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. Our goal is the full membership of the EU for the six Western Balkan states. We therefore warmly welcome the grant of EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022 as well as the beginning of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a clear political signal by travelling to North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia prior to the EU-Western Balkan summit in the first half of 2022, before stressing the goal of the full membership for the six Western Balkan states in his speech at Charles University in Prague on 29 August 2022. A successful recommencement of the Berlin Process on 3 November 2022 and the visit by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Albania and North Macedonia a few weeks later underscore the importance Germany attaches to the region. The expectations raised, including those at German politics, must not be disappointed. There needs to be concrete steps and initiatives at the European level to accelerate the accession process for the Western Balkan states, as other actors, China and Türkiye among them, are exercising increasing influence in the region. For example China is using its financial power to buy political influence on large-scale, credit-financed infrastructure projects.

Keeping promises

The EU enlargement policy was the most successful instrument of European foreign and security policy for a long time. However the EU has lost its credibility in the Western Balkan states in the past 15 years. In 2023 the promise the European Council made in the Thessaloniki agenda has its twentieth anniversary. Since then only Croatia has joined the EU in 2013. The European Union delayed the accession negotiations because individual member states torpedoed the once-successful enlargement policy by burdening it with bilateral conflicts or for reasons of election tactics. Consequently the EU has not kept its promise to reform-ready states such as Albania and North Macedonia, even though both countries have made demonstrable progresses and fulfilled the conditions asked of them. The vacuum thus created is filled by nationalistic actors in and outside the region and exploited for destabilisation and disinformation through

economic, ideological, and military influence. Consequently the disappointment over the stasis has increased in the region and led to a loss of trust in the EU among people and local pro-democratic forces.

If the EU wishes to win back credibility, the enlargement policy may neither be instrumentalised for domestic political purposes nor delayed by retrospective supplementary conditions by individual member states. The time must end for short-sighted blockades motivated by bilateral points of conflict. The prolonged dispute with Greece on the issue of the name of the North Macedonian state and the Bulgarian insistence that North Macedonia first meet the Bulgarian demands of a common history before starting the accession negotiations have persistently weakened the pro-European forces in North Macedonia and damaged the EU. This must not be repeated in the future EU accession negotiations, including other candidate states.

Democracy, not stabilitocracy

The hitherto pursued approach in the EU enlargement policy, primarily supporting stability in the hope the established elites in the Western Balkan states would introduce the reforms necessary for their EU prospects on their own initiative, has mostly failed. German and European engagement with the aim of EU accession in the region must be henceforth more clearly directed towards the strengthening of the states in the Western Balkans as pluralistic democracies. In searching for cooperation and alliance partners, it means engaging and working together more closely, strongly, and actively with the democratic and pro-European minded forces in the parliaments, parties, and civil societies, alongside at the level of the executive powers that are often co-opted by ethno-nationalist interests. The SPD already maintains contact with sister parties in the region, as do other democratic political parties in Germany. This must be enhanced, through a closer involvement of these parties in the political consultations on democratisation and accession processes on the one hand, and through more support and facilitation of forming viable and transparent inner party structures and the development of programmes oriented towards meeting the needs and demands of the people on the other. An increase in the cultural exchanges as well as an education system that connects not disconnects, fosters a culture of dialogue, and leads to understanding for different perspectives are central foundations for the consolidation of democracy in the six states. More youth exchange opportunities will serve that end as well as common or mutually agreed textbooks. Cooperation is strengthened also by the creation of interdependency through common research and development in innovation.

Goodwill and conditionality

In order to retain the appeal of an EU accession as impetus for reform, there needs to be flexible approach in the accession process that rewards progresses more swiftly through increased involvement and cooperation in selected areas but equally sanctions backward steps heavily. This applies not only to states that are already formal candidates for EU accession but to all six Western Balkan states. The entire financial aid packages must be tied to the real strengthening of the rule of law, expansion of independent media landscape, and respect and regard for democratic institutions, and such spending must be accounted for. This conditionality allows a better support process on the EU side and creates a direct incentive to the parties to develop concrete proposals in political competition instead of mobilising primarily on the basis of ethno-nationalistic divisions. All of this can only succeed if a functioning justice system is developed to fight simultaneously against political meddling and organised crime. The conditionality must be transparent and noticeable for the respective applicable country in progress and in regress. This bolsters those supporters who engage genuinely for democracy and the rule of law. It will thus become clear to the people which of their governments want to make democratic progress.

Regional cooperation

The reduction and ultimately overcoming of existing ethno-nationalistic conflicts is central to the long-term positive development of the region. That such is not in any way illusory is demonstrated by the European Union itself. The path is dual: the first runs through the support of a mutual understanding between peoples at the level of the civil society, for instance through the concept of the Regional Youth

Cooperation Office (RYCO). Without new trust at interpersonal level there will be no societal reconciliation between the six states. A very important element in this context is the political and societal reckoning with the war crimes with the goal of reconciliation and trust-building between the people of the region. To that end, an intensification of historical-political work is necessary. Self-victimisation and trivialisation or even denial of genocide and war crimes must be overcome and empathy for the respective other side needs to be fostered. Only then would trust-building succeed as the foundation for a permanent reconciliation. The other path runs through regional networks in the areas of the economy and infrastructure.

The Western Balkan states share the long-term goal of a vital interest in an integration into the EU despite their differences and conflicts and on which basis integrative progresses are possible. As the cooperation in the areas of coal and steel in the European Coal and Steel Community was the germ cell of European integration, areas should be identified in which adhesion to the European standards could already initiate a limited integration to a common market as a trust-building and preparatory measure before the membership in the European Single Market. This is where the Berlin Process comes in. In the first meeting held under the newly-formed SPD-led Federal Government on 3 November 2022, emphasis was placed on the Common Regional Market, energy security, and the Green Agenda (energy and climate change as well as environmental protection). The conclusion of three agreements on mutual recognition of university degrees, personal ID documents, and certain professional qualifications in addition counts as remarkable success. With such, a foundation has been laid for better mobility of people that strengthens the togetherness in the region. Not least the Berlin Process as a motor for the EU accession process could be restarted by these agreements.

The common interests of the peoples in the Western Balkan states must be at the heart of the efforts for cooperation between the countries of the region. The progress towards and accession to the EU itself must not create new borders, but help overcome existing ones. Cross-border regional cooperation is a cornerstone of European integration. Any initiative that brings the states and societies of the Western Balkans closer together is to be welcomed, if all states in the region are involved equally. For this reason we express our support for the integration of the “Open Balkan” initiative by Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania in the Berlin Process that includes all six states.

In the course of the global socio-ecological transformation, we support the Western Balkan states additionally on climate, environment, and nature protection. It is important for us that social and ecological aspects are not played against each other in political measures but augment and benefit mutually (applying the synergy effects).

First steps into a new era

The ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has put the EU in motion. After many years of stasis, all 27 EU member states under the French EU Council presidency gave the go-ahead for the first accession conferences with North Macedonia and Albania in June 2022. The condition for the final start of negotiations is a constitutional amendment. The North Macedonian parliament must vote with a two-thirds majority to recognise Bulgarians living in the country as a minority in the constitution. Bulgaria is only prepared to agree to start the accession negotiations with North Macedonia on this condition. There must now be no further unilateral conditions set.

A long overdue step was the decision to lift the visa requirement for citizens of Kosovo in December 2022. Kosovo had fulfilled the criteria for this step already in 2018. From January 2024 visa-free entry into the EU for the citizens of Kosovo will be possible as it is already the case today for citizens of other Western Balkan states.

With both these steps the EU has broken the long-standing impasse. Finally Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted the candidate status at the European Council in December 2022. The new dynamic must be maintained and strengthened. In this respect the candidate states are asked to make further reform efforts.

Catching up economically, building pluralistic, parliamentary democracies with functioning checks and balances, freedoms of press and expression, the rule of law, as well as strong civil society and free trade unions are vital. The fight against corruption and organised crime must be demonstrably boosted and lead to successes, in which inquiries are pursued, crimes prosecuted, and convictions secured at all levels. The Council of Europe plays a special role in the closer integration of the Western Balkans into the European community of nations. The monitoring process conducted in the Western Balkan states checks constantly for the safeguarding of the standards of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights and highlights where there is a need for reform.

Albania and North Macedonia are already on a good path. The rule of law, separation of powers, judicial independence, fight against corruption, organised criminality, and drug trafficking, gender equality, protection of human rights, as well as a responsible state leadership alongside economic reforms are the main challenges as before. Albania is striving for constructive relations with all its neighbours and is an important actor for the stability, security, and a successful integration of the region into the EU. Not least the Albanian government shares the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU completely. These efforts should be acknowledged more widely and Albania should be treated on an equal footing as a partner. After the first accession conference in summer 2022, the screening by the EU Commission should now be supported with all vigour. The same applies to North Macedonia, who, along Montenegro, was able to attain independence as the only part of Yugoslavia without war. The country remains in the EU's waiting room, even though the Social Democratic government has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to the Prespa Agreement and their capabilities in their political agenda. There should be strong support and political backing from Germany on this path and for a swift implementation of the EU screening. At the same time the country could be granted access to funds in the areas of energy and food supply, winter help, and infrastructure help before the accession negotiations.

Montenegro has been conducting negotiations on an EU accession since 2012 and a leader in this respect for a long time. The country is well advanced in the accession negotiations and is showing great successes. However its pro-Western orientation is at stake. While Montenegro is aligned to the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, the country is trapped in a deep constitutional crisis domestically. It remains to be seen if the possible new elections in early 2023 lead to a renewed stability, or derail it from its path towards the EU. For advances in the EU integration it is important that the workings of the institutions are re-established, illiberal influences from Serbia and Russia pushed back, and West-oriented partners in parties and civil society strengthened. Also the increasing Chinese engagement in financing infrastructure must be scrutinised. Germany should offer support above all in the strengthening and stabilising of parliamentary democracy and their institutions. That in particular applies to the further reforms of political parties oriented towards democracy and the rule of law, which are the conditions for a closer partnership and ultimately for the EU accession.

Kosovo has submitted its application to join the EU in December 2022 as the last of the Western Balkan states. We firmly support Kosovo's membership in the EU as well as the Council of Europe. Kosovo must satisfy all accession criteria especially in the area of protection of minorities. Kosovo has been striving for formal recognition since its independence from Serbia in 2008. Even within the EU, five states, namely Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, and Cyprus, have not recognised Kosovo as independent. So that the EU can speak with one voice, there is a need for a new initiative with strong German support. A normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo is a precondition for EU accession for both countries. Both countries are responsible, but they also need our support. With reference to the recent tensions in north Kosovo, it is important that Kosovo's government meets its obligation to set up an association of Serb-majority municipalities as agreed in the Brussels Agreement. It is also necessary to consider the reservations of Kosovo's government in setting up such an association of municipalities. The association must be aligned to the constitution of Kosovo and may not have executive powers. The creation of the association is explicitly not comparable to the creation of an entity in the form of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the establishment of municipal councils, Kosovar Serbs must continue to recognize the Kosovo state institutions and not pull out of them. We wholeheartedly support the initiative of Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron of France to strengthen the EU-

led normalisation talks. The relations between Kosovo and Serbia must be placed on a sustainable footing. The conflict with Serbia is the reason why the Federal Armed Forces have been deployed in the framework of NATO-led international security presence in Kosovo (KFOR). The “Kosovo Force” or KFOR has been in the past a central anchor in stability of the region and enhanced the public security and order in Kosovo.

Serbia has been conducting accession negotiations with the EU since 2014 that have been progressing very slowly. During President Aleksandar Vučić’s term of office, there has been an increasing hollowing out of democracy in the country, which is alarming. The continuing autocratic tendencies in Serbia must be countered. As the most populous country with central significance, especially in the context of Serbian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, Serbia can deescalate or escalate tensions and thereby make the entire region more or less stable. Serbia has been playing a destabilising role time and again especially in respect of the relationship with Kosovo. It must be made clear to Serbia that any destabilising policy in the region stands in the way of EU-integration. We support Serbia’s path towards the European Union. However Germany and the EU cannot ignore democratic regress at the price of supposed stability. Supposed stability at the cost of the rule of law and democracy cannot be sustained and is no motor of EU integration. The focus of German and European policy in Serbia must lie in the support of a pluralistic parliamentary democracy. At the same time Serbia is most receptive to Russian and Chinese enticements. President Aleksandar Vučić has been conducting a dangerous see-saw policy between the West on one side and Russia and China on the other. Both states support Serbia in the Kosovo question. Serbia must place itself clearly on the EU’s side and join wholeheartedly the EU sanctions against Russia in view of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Aligning itself with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU must be a precondition for substantial progress in the accession process.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been granted the candidate status by the European Council in December 2022. As SPD Parliamentary Group we greatly welcome this decision as a political signal. Following the elections at the beginning of October 2022, there is a chance of a capable coalition government for the first time in a long time.

Over a quarter of a century after the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina must develop into a modern state based on the rule of law and with a constitution with strong democratic institutions in which all citizens enjoy the same rights and have the same duties in the whole territory regardless of their ethnic or religious background. This in particular entails the equal participation in the political decision-making process. Reforms of the voting rights as well as the constitution thereby the implementation of diverse decisions of the European Court of Human Rights since 2009, in particular the cases of Sejdić-Finci, Zornić, Pudarić, Šlaku, and Pilav, are necessary to bring the constitution of the country in line with the European Convention on Human Rights. We urge for a swift implementation of the court decisions. We reject any form of ethnic-based nationalism.

The SPD Parliamentary Group reaffirms its commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and stands against any attempt to undermine them from within or without. This includes but not limited to the threats of secessions and attempts to set up a third entity. In particular we call on Croatia and Serbia as direct neighbouring states and former belligerents to fulfil their obligations arising from the Dayton Agreement, respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and work towards peace, European values, and cordial neighbourly relations. We condemn equally the illiberal and destructive interference of EU states, for instance Hungary, and of non-EU states, especially Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran. We oppose such interference resolutely.

The Office of the High Representative based on the 5+2-Agenda and Operation EUFOR ALTHEA remain necessary at this moment. Both institutions enjoy our support. The international community has the obligation to engage carefully, respectfully, and for the well-being of all people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Our responsibility

The status of “eternal candidates” undermines not only the credibility of the EU but even more the position of pro-European and democratic actors in the six Western Balkan states. More years of stalling policy will further destabilise and increasingly dilute the European vision. The Western Balkan states must not be left behind by the dynamics in Eastern Europe unleashed by the war in Ukraine.

We can push directly for the necessary reforms in these countries. For such, direct communication with the parliaments, parties, and civil societies in the region must be enhanced with the goal of strengthening the reform-oriented forces. The massive emigration from the Western Balkan states that at the moment is slowing down the economic convergence of the region with the EU, hampering foreign investments, and upsetting the social fabric, can only be reversed if the life opportunities of the people improve concretely by political economic reforms as well as reliable policy from the EU. Enabling and reliably regulating the mobility of people from the Western Balkans is part of the path towards EU integration. The Western Balkans Regulation created by the Federal Government in 2016 for taking up employment in Germany is an important step. This must also be flanked by effective measures against exploitation and precarious employment.

At the same time the social and economic risks of an increased mobility in the EU for the economies of the Western Balkan states must be addressed. A promising approach is the introduction of the economies into the EU internal market through cooperation in research and development by which innovative economic system can be established. As such the Western Balkan states have already been associate members of the last EU framework programme for research, Horizon 2020, and benefit from infrastructure measures, joint projects, as well as mobility measures for engineers, doctors, and doctoral and post-doctoral students.

The existing human rights standards must be adhered to and implemented with view to those seeking protection. We want to fulfil our responsibilities and German strategic interests in the region by continuing bilateral engagement in the development cooperation.

An initial accession of two or three states from the region that have successfully concluded the accession negotiations could act as a positive impetus for the reform efforts in the remaining countries and their civil societies. All opportunities in the EU accession process that accelerate a rapprochement between the Western Balkan states, make such more tangible for the people in the region, and enable more participation must be explored. Germany and France are tasked jointly to assist the countries energetically in the implementation of necessary reforms.

Peace and security in Europe as geostrategic goals can only be achieved with a strong and capable EU. In truth it also means that the EU must make more progress to remain capable even with more than 27 members. The majority principle must also become the norm in the voting of the European Council, where it still does not do so today. A possible way to ensure the capabilities of an EU with more than 27 members is the use of the so-called bridging clauses. Another path is the convocation of a Convention to amend the European Treaties as demanded by the Conference on the Future of Europe and proposed by the European Parliament. As parliamentarians, we see it as our role to reach out to our colleagues in the hesitant EU member states and win them over for the expansion of qualified majority voting.