



**EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans  
10 S&D Proposals**

- 1. Guaranteeing fully-fledged EU membership: Membership is and remains the final goal**  
Enlargement has been one of the most successful EU policies, expanding the area of democracy, peace and prosperity across our continent and as such is of common interest to both the EU and the candidate countries. The aspiration of countries to join the EU has made the Union more influential, strengthening its capacity to promote positive change in the candidate countries. The enlargement process allows the EU to exert its influence and to kick-start reforms that otherwise may take much more time to be implemented in the candidate countries. However, opening accession negotiations does not mean automatic membership and the reforms must be home-driven. In addition, a stronger focus is necessary on public debates within member states and on the concerns of EU citizens in order to make the process both inclusive and successful.
- 2. Ensuring a merit-based approach**  
Accession of any country will only happen if and when the necessary conditions are met. We are not prepared to make any concessions. However, we insist that the progress of each country is assessed fairly at each stage, case-by-case, and on the basis of clear merit-based pre-established criteria, going beyond an internal ticking exercise by the European Commission services and including much needed involvement and ownership on the part of member states. At the same time, the countries of Western Balkans should be provided with a stable framework for accession, and support during this process which ensures clarity, predictability, credibility and coherence and where conditionality is sincere and promises are kept.
- 3. Clustering chapters in policy areas**  
This methodology will allow for a more structured process, which can account for the interconnections between chapters and can help the candidate countries to better focus their reform priorities enhancing their depth and quality while also maximising results. Conducting simultaneous negotiations on different chapters should be made possible. 'Clustering' chapters, policies and programmes in the enlargement process works as a method aiming to a more focused and yet flexible approach where progressive stages are home-driven profound transformation reform processes rather than stumbling blocks.
- 4. Gradual access to EU policies/financial instruments**  
The principle of political engagement and gradual access to the EU policies/instruments, including through increased access to financial support should become a key aspect in the enlargement process. The closing of negotiation chapters should open up the

possibility to participate in EU programmes, to be involved in certain sectoral policies and benefit from targeted financial instruments – in order to introduce concrete benefits and incentives during the negotiation process. The possibility to make use of structural and investment funds before accession enables candidate countries to improve. eg: infrastructural projects - a gap where currently China jumps in.

5. **Emphasising Rule of Law and negotiations on chapters 23 and 24**

The reversibility of the negotiation process - which already exists - shall be strengthened by developing more specific and clearer benchmarks and revision processes in order to enhance the credibility of the negotiations and in order to strengthen the corrective mechanism. Emphasis should be put on political and financial conditionality, with a clear link to progress in implementing the measures assumed in the negotiations on chapters 23 and 24, namely Rule of Law, corruption and organised crime, as well as the respect of human rights and media freedom. The examination of legislation covered by these chapters should start the moment of candidate status is granted. The use of all available instruments of the process, including the 'imbalance' clause, should be further explored to strengthen EU leverage on these two chapters as the area where the EU should put the most efforts in and where the link between progress and funding is strongest. The EU must also strengthen its internal Rule of Law mechanism.

6. **Developing a Green New Deal in the Western Balkans**

The European Commission proposed a major shift in its promotion of the European Union, with a transformative Green New Deal at its centre. Given the environmental challenges faced by the Western Balkans, their location, geographically surrounded by EU member states, and their membership perspective, the EU should start by looking at these countries with an inclusive approach and with an engagement strategy that works in both directions, with candidate countries themselves interested in becoming part of this transformational process. It would strongly improve the health of citizens and help the transformation to a new, green economy.

7. **Enhancing the process with stronger and more effective political governance**

In order to improve and enhance the engagement of the EU in tackling difficult questions or to overcome political setbacks which could negatively affect the process and prevent reforms altogether, it is necessary to strengthen and to streamline the decision making process while also better defining the objectives of actions. The European Council should require unanimity only to open or close accession negotiations. The European Commission, however, should define clearer benchmarks in consultation with, and full involvement of, member states on the opening and closing of individual chapters. The EU should grant additional engagement in helping solve outstanding regional and bilateral issues, including border, statehood and governance issues, offering assistance and high-level political support to foster reconciliation.

Attention should also be devoted to third countries operating in the Western Balkans. In this context, although the CFSP is the exclusive competence of the member states, deepening the alignment of Western Balkans candidate countries to the CFSP should be a priority. Accession is about the commitment to EU norms and values, both inside and outside the EU, and aligning the Western Balkans candidate countries to the CFSP is part of the process of adopting the *acquis*.

**8. Promoting socio-economic cohesion already before accession**

Addressing the main concerns of EU citizens in terms of social dumping is directly linked to encouraging a strong social dimension in the reforms linked to the accession process. By promoting growth and the EU social acquis in the candidate countries, better conditions are created for decent work, equal treatment and general well-being at home. Social tensions are mitigated, opportunities for young people are offered, brain-drain is reduced and conditions for the elimination of unfair competition are created. Promoting cohesion and ensuring equal treatment of all workers and the respect of labour and social law is the best way to tackle social dumping. Young people in the Western Balkans are very pro-European and deserve more attention in the accession process, especially as they suffer from high youth unemployment and often experience precarious working conditions. The accession process should thus seek ways to promote opportunities for them, such as in volunteering and civic engagement, foster participation in existing mobility programmes, such as Erasmus+, and establish new programmes, including for intraregional mobility.

**9. Widening the benefits of a new approach**

A renewed accession process must take into account current negotiation processes and current candidate countries. While clarity and coherence of the current negotiation process should not be modified, benefits provided by a renewed approach should be taken advantage of in terms of governance, participation, conditionality and financial support.

**10. Contributing to the Future of Europe**

The Conference on the Future of Europe should seek ways to include representatives of EU candidate countries. This would be in line with the practice of the Convention on the Future of Europe of 2002, where the previous 12 candidate countries were invited to attend and to contribute. Thanks to the enlargement perspective, new dynamism can be injected into our common European project, triggering the necessary reforms for the EU itself and responding to the negative message echoed by Brexit. We are convinced, therefore, that enlargement towards the Western Balkans is of fundamental importance and has to have a key role in all discussions related to the Future of Europe.