



BULLETIN

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The Prospects of EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2013

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A memorandum signed 7 March with Slovenia ultimately frees Croatia to accede to the European Union, which is scheduled for July 2013. It will likely be the last round of enlargement to the Western Balkans this decade, due to the early stages of other countries' involvement in European integration. Therefore, in the coming years, the effects of this process will be less visible in the region. Meanwhile, it is in the interest of Poland that the EU enlargement policy is more effective, also in the context of the recent Czech-German-Polish-Swedish proposal to strengthen the Union's cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries.

Croatia's Membership. The central event in EU enlargement policy in 2013 is the accession of Croatia. Although the Accession Treaty has not yet been adopted by a few countries, the only threat that could have delayed the enlargement was the lack of ratification by Slovenia. The agreement reached between the two countries involves a solution of a dispute over bank deposits held by Croatian citizens and taken over by Ljubljanska Banka (the Bank of Ljubljana) after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Croatia demanded compensation and Slovenia insisted that the government in Zagreb remove the power of attorney in matters related to deposits. In the past, the government in Ljubljana blocked the EU's negotiations with Croatia for 10 months in late 2008 due to a conflict over the course of the maritime border.

The memorandum provides for the adoption of the Accession Treaty by Slovenia, which was the only Member State that had not started the ratification procedure. The agreement was made possible by Croatia softening its position and a recent motion of no confidence for the government in Ljubljana as well as a declaration by Slovenian Prime Minister-designate Alenka Bratušek of greater openness to compromise, which also may have had an impact.

Other Countries in the Region. Montenegro is the only country in the Balkans that has been negotiating accession since June 2012. For now, it has managed to close one of 35 negotiation chapters. This coincides with the pace of Croatia at this stage of EU entry negotiations, which lasted six years and took another two years to prepare and ratify the Accession Treaty. On this basis, it can be assumed that Montenegro in 2013 may open a few chapters, but will not join the EU by the end of the decade. Although it is more advanced in some reforms than Croatia was at the beginning of the negotiations, and also the country is several times smaller, a range of changes consist in the introduction of an efficient system of state functioning, regardless of its size. In addition to this, in the case of Montenegro it may not be any facilitated due to only a few-year-old independence.

Macedonia, an EU candidate country for seven years, will probably not open its membership negotiations in 2013, despite a number of recommendations from the European Commission. This is because there is no breakthrough in a dispute over the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia, which is the reason why the country's further integration with the Union has been blocked by Greece. Meanwhile, opportunities to accelerate membership talks in 2013 may open before Serbia, which has been an official candidate for a year. The EC is likely to recommend the opening of negotiations with Serbia in April. This is because the normalisation of relations with Kosovo—which is the key condition—has proceeded smoothly (including the implementation of border and customs solutions) and applied to an even wider range of issues (the functioning of state institutions in the north of Kosovo). Besides, the status of the dialogue has been raised (the first meeting of the two countries' presidents).

Apart from judicial and administrative reforms, a key condition for Albania to obtain an EC recommendation for being granted candidate country status (in response to its EU membership application submitted in 2009) will be the implementation of democratic principles needed to hold parliamentary elections this June. Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet submitted a membership application and is unlikely to make progress in integration with the Union in 2013 because its political leaders lack the will to adapt the country's constitution to the European Convention on Human Rights and undertake reforms to strengthen state institutions. Kosovo, in turn, is still subject to the Schengen visa requirement and does not have the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, which makes it an exception in the region. However, the EC has suggested that the SAA could be signed despite the lack of recognition of Kosovo's independence by five EU countries. Negotiations on the agreement are unlikely to start this year due to the need for further reforms and a prolonged feasibility study process. However, taking action to achieve this goal alone would be a visible achievement for Kosovo.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland. Croatia's accession will be proof of the EU's attractiveness to third countries, despite the economic problems in some Member States. It will also provide evidence that reforms undertaken by states aspiring to EU entry eventually result in membership, which may have a mobilising effect on the governments of other countries in the region. Despite this, the state of European integration in the Western Balkans shows that the success of this process will be less visible in the coming years. This does not serve the Union, which should be interested in instant political and economic stability in the Balkans achieved through an effective enlargement policy. Nor does it serve the goals of Poland's foreign policy, an important element of which is democratisation in the EU's immediate surroundings. Thus, it is in Poland's interest not to allow the pace of the Balkan states' integration to decelerate.

More active Polish support for Balkan countries seeking EU entry is also important due to a recent proposal for greater openness of the Union to Eastern Partnership countries, including through the creation of a free trade area with the EU and strengthening relations with the Union based on democratic reforms in individual countries. However, the ambition of Poland is also to present the perspective of membership to these countries in the future. Meanwhile, a failure or complications of enlargement policy in the Balkans could create a situation in which it would be more difficult to encourage Member States to cooperate with the Eastern Partnership countries in a way that could lead to these countries' EU accession in the future. In addition, a clearer Polish commitment to Balkan states' integration with the EU would consolidate Poland's image as a promoter of democratic values and a country that looks after all foreign policy directions in the EU's immediate vicinity.

As a new Member State in Central Europe, Poland is for the Balkans a credible example of a successful transformation and the benefits of membership. These should be used as an argument to mobilise other Balkan countries to undertake reforms. More active support for countries in the region on their way to the EU does not mean that Poland will have to incur high financial or political costs. However, in order to facilitate the achievement of these objectives, Poland could find it worthwhile to intensify high-level bilateral contacts, which were modest until now. At this stage of the European integration in the Western Balkans, it is worth paying special attention to Serbia and Montenegro.

The dynamic and effective (considering the complex circumstances) dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, coupled with signals from Serbia that it may consider supporting Kosovo's UN membership, promise that efforts to regulate the relations will continue. This should be reflected in the progress of Serbia's integration with the EU. Poland should find itself in a group of countries actively advocating a plan to set a date for launching Serbia's EU accession negotiations, if such will be the EC's recommendation. Even if this date is set for next year and made conditional on further progress in the talks with Kosovo, it is worth making the decision on this as soon as possible, preferably when the EU Council meets in June. Moreover, this would send a positive message at the end of the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group. The group itself would support Poland's position on the issue. At the same time, this would be a signal that Poland sees the V4's interests also in South-Eastern Europe. In the case of Montenegro, in turn, Poland should (as it did in the past in relation to Croatia) share its experience in the field of internal affairs, especially in the fight against organised crime and in border protection. This is especially important because Montenegro has been obliged to reform these areas since the beginning of its membership negotiations.