

PRESS RELEASE

London Western Balkans summit: 2025 EU accession target looks very challenging

Serbia and Montenegro are the frontrunners in economic terms, but the political obstacles to accession for Western Balkan states - both from within and outside the region - should not be underestimated.

The London Western Balkans summit, the fifth such gathering under the so-called “Berlin Process”, looks unlikely to deliver further concrete outcomes for the region in terms of its EU accession process. Despite a welcome attempt by the European Commission to inject new momentum into the region’s EU accession prospects, major obstacles remain. As well as economic underdevelopment, the existence of political disputes between countries in the region has the potential to slow substantially the accession process. Moreover, many EU member states, notably including France, do not share the Commission’s enthusiasm for a speedy accession.

The fifth Berlin Process summit, bringing together the six EU accession hopefuls in the Western Balkans and several EU member states, will focus on politics, economic development and security. Hosted by the UK, it will seek to achieve further progress towards accession to the bloc for countries in the region (ironically, given that the UK is on its way out). The European Commission has set a 2025 target date for the frontrunners among the Western Balkan states to accede to the EU.

A recent wiiw study argued that the 2025 accession date, even for Serbia and Montenegro, is highly ambitious. Both these countries are at or close to the level of convergence (in PPP per capita GDP terms) reached by Romania and Bulgaria at the time of their accession in 2007. However, we find that barriers continue to exist for all Western Balkan countries in terms of meeting the EU’s economic accession criteria, including infrastructure deficits (in this sense the Berlin Process is highly welcome), weak competitiveness, high unemployment and poor governance standards. In addition, we highlight that the political obstacles to accession caused by inter-regional disputes may be even more problematic. The need for a legally-binding agreement on relations between Serbia and Kosovo before accession of either is one such example.

Political obstacles on the EU side are also significant. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, is keen for the EU to solve its own internal problems before admitting new members. Domestic opinion in key EU member states is also not favourable to speedy enlargement: in the most recent Eurobarometer survey, published in June, only 31% of respondents in both France and Germany supported further enlargement of the EU in future years. Rightly or wrongly, candidate countries in the Western Balkans are seen by many in Western Europe through the prism of current fights over the EU budget and migration. The experience of Romania and Bulgaria, who ten years after accession are still under special

corruption-related monitoring procedures, could also be having an impact on the low level of support for further enlargement.

For now, the economic influence of third parties in the region is not as significant as often portrayed. However, this is not guaranteed to last, particularly in the case of China. The Western Balkans is strategically located from a Chinese perspective between the Greek port of Piraeus (now majority Chinese owned) and the major markets of Western Europe, and is set to receive a significant share of investments under China's Belt and Road Initiative. Despite the Commission's best efforts, if some major EU capitals continue to hold the Western Balkans at arm's length, the influence of third parties in the region is only likely to grow.

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wiiw studies on the topic

['Western Balkans EU Accession: Is the 2025 Target Date Realistic?'](#), wiiw Policy Note No. 22, May 2018

['Trade Policies and Integration of the Western Balkans'](#), wiiw Working Paper No. 148, May 2018

['Policy Options for Competitiveness and Economic Development in the Western Balkans: the Case for Infrastructure Investment'](#), wiiw Policy Note No. 16, June 2016

['Infrastructure Investment in the Western Balkans'](#), wiiw Research Report No. 407, September 2015

Comments, Interviews, Data

Mario Holzner, wiiw Economist and Deputy Director,
(holzner@wiiw.ac.at, +43-1-533 66 10-28)

Richard Grieveson, wiiw Economist (grieveson@wiiw.ac.at, +43-1-533 66 10-56)