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What do the Balkans expect of the European Union?

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The question of what the [Western Balkans](#) want from the European Union is currently addressed in two different ways[1]. The Western Balkans comprise Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro[2], Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Albania, six states that have made European integration a major national objective and are therefore at varying stages of progress towards this goal.

The first approach comes from the political elites in power. They are trying to strip negotiations for European integration of their political and moral essence, by reducing them to a purely technical process. In December 2023, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama declared that his country would be ready to join the European Union... in 2026! The rapprochement would be achieved rapidly by translating the national legal *corpus* and comparing it with European legislation using artificial intelligence. He made no mention of the reforms that the country would have to undertake to meet the conditions for admission to the European family. In his eyes the process would simply consist of an automated translation of laws, i.e. doing the work on paper, which Edi Rama knows how to do well. Not a single voice was heard in Brussels, not even through the EU delegation in Tirana, to remind him that the real content of the accession process would involve a profound transformation of Albania. In October 2024, [negotiations](#) got underway with the opening of the first round, on fundamental issues, including chapters on the foundations of democracy and the rule of law. The suave speeches that graced the day only confirmed the impression that all Albania really had to do was transpose a few laws.

The leaders of the Balkans, with a few exceptions, would like 'Brussels' - understood as the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament - to assess their countries' progress towards European integration only in a technical

and formal way, i.e. with just what is presented on paper. These leaders are masters in the art of drafting and approving laws that comply with European standards. At a time when his country was preparing a fundamental reform of the judicial system, the Albanian Prime Minister publicly addressed the US ambassador: *'Write the law as you wish, and we will approve it in Parliament'*. In fact, he was merely expressing a common practice within his government, by which written and applied law are, more often than not, two incompatible realities.

But in the absence of any response from Brussels, this kind of government acquires the necessary legitimacy to pursue a custom: the abuse of power. Over the course of 2024, this attitude on the part of the European Union became increasingly visible, which means that the state of democracy in the Balkan countries has deteriorated even further.

Public opinion in these countries, however, has a very different view of the question of what the Balkans expect from the European Union. Taking it for granted that the enlargement process remains open, as reiterated at the [last summit](#), a large proportion of Balkan public opinion expects the European Union to strictly and openly supervise the construction of democracy and the rule of law in each of these countries. More than the pace of negotiations, what is crucial for the present and future of these peoples is to build robust, solid foundations for these precepts. This fact must be clearly

[1] This study was originally published in the « [Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2025](#) », Editions Hémisphères, Paris, May 2025

[2] Montenegro is the Balkan country that has made the most progress in accession negotiations. [Montenegro](#) has opened all 33 chapters of the negotiations. Last April, the creation of a [group](#) tasked with drafting the country's accession treaty.

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understood in Brussels. In this part of Europe, democracy and the rule of law have no tradition. This means therefore that an entirely new political, legal and institutional system has to be built.

As a result of the history and immaturity of the political culture of Balkan societies, public opinion feels powerless to decisively influence current political developments by democratic means. Moreover, in some of these countries, such as [Serbia](#) and Albania, and partly in [Bosnia & Herzegovina](#), due to the growing authoritarianism of President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister Edi Rama and President Milorad Dodik^[3] in the entity of Republika Srpska (BiH), who increasingly control all powers, public opinion has also lost confidence in change through voting. For example, municipal elections were held in Serbia in 2024. According to the Serbian opposition, but also to reports from international observers, the elections for mayor of Belgrade were marked by serious irregularities that led to a distortion of the results. As a result, major demonstrations led by students broke out in December. President Vučić accused the 'Western powers' of being behind these demonstrations with the aim of overthrowing him so that Serbia would recognise Kosovo's independence. The truth is, however, that not a single 'Western power' said one word in support of these demonstrations, leaving the students and citizens of Belgrade alone in this battle, which is fully in line with the values of Western democracies, where the free vote of the citizen is a fundamental value. This is a symptomatic example that shows what the peoples of the Balkans essentially expect, again and again, from the European Union... and whose response all too often fails to meet their expectations.

If this gap between expectations and responses widens, it is likely to lead to a weakening of the population's aspiration for European integration. This would not only bode ill for the future of these peoples, it would also be bad news for the European Union. In fact, this weakening of European aspiration has begun to emerge in all six Balkan countries. In Serbia, support for the integration process was never very high, but it has now fallen below 50%. A similar

decline can also be seen in Albania, where until recently support was close to 100%; now it is more like 80%. This decrease merits particular analysis in Brussels. One thing is certain: there has been no reduction in the European Union's financial support to any of these countries. On the contrary, there has been an increase. Despite a certain stalemate in the negotiation of the chapters of the accession agreement with the European Union, Serbia remains the largest beneficiary in the region of pre-accession funds (IPA). Similarly, over the period 2023-2024, Albania, like the other Balkan candidate countries, has also seen a significant increase in financial support through these funds.

So why has this increase in European financial support not been matched by a similar increase in support for the European perspective in the societies of these countries? In fact, the opposite has happened.

Officially, in the case of Serbia, the blocking of negotiations on the current chapters is linked to the fact that '*Belgrade's foreign policy towards Russia following the aggression in Ukraine is not in line with that of the European Union*'. This fact is true and well known to Serbian public opinion. But it has no substantial impact on Serbian citizens' perception of their government. The Serbian public, in fact, expected that the continuation of negotiations would be conditional both on account of President Vučić's authoritarianism and on account of endemic corruption and the links between politics and organised crime.

The decisions taken in 2024 to open negotiations on the first chapters with Albania were motivated - a fact half-confessed by Brussels - by the need to give a token of optimism in the circumstances created by Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Albanians welcomed the news as a 'diplomatic gift', in stark contrast to the recent warning from Italian anti-mafia prosecutor Nicola Gratteri that the Albanian mafia operates in a '*joint venture*' with the 'Ndrangheta, gaining an '*inordinate position*' through corruption and powerful political connections in the country. Similarly, the US State Department, in its

[3] Sinisa Karan succeeded him
in November 2025

latest report, writes that Albania has become an important country for drug-trafficking associated money laundering. These are well known facts and the Albanians expect that the negotiation process with the European Union would serve to change this reality.

And so, what does this discrepancy between the increase in financial support from the European Union and the decrease in public support for the European ideal in these countries tell us?

The first explanation is that money is not enough to buy the love of the people. The European Union is not expected to come to the Balkans as a bank, but as the supreme bearer and defender of the values of a civilisation that, 35 years ago, inspired the slogan '*We want an Albania like Europe*' chanted by students during the revolution that overthrew the dictatorship of Enver Hoxda.

According to the estimates of numerous international institutions, Serbia and Albania are the countries in the region where corruption is most widespread. Facts showing the involvement of senior officials in illicit affairs are published almost daily by the media. According to a report by the Albanian Court of Auditors, over the last four years more than €1 billion has been wasted due to corruption in public works tenders. The Albanian government has paid no attention to this report, even though it comes from a public institution entrusted with the task of oversight by the Constitution. According to the law, the facts uncovered by the Court of Auditors automatically oblige the Public Prosecutor to initiate public proceedings to investigate them further and bring those responsible to justice. This has not happened either.

This is just one example of why society in Serbia and Albania, but also in other Balkan countries, have lost hope that they can win the fight against corruption on their own. These societies expect the European Union not only to support them firmly, but to lead this fight in one way or another. Corruption and the underground links of those in power with organised

crime make it impossible to create strong institutions, without which there can be neither democracy nor the rule of law.

Many examples can be cited where, in practice, the European Commission should be seen as a vigilant guardian of values and ethical rules. On 23 October 2024, for example, the President of the Commission visited Tirana. Over and above the euphoric praise for the prime minister, the Albanians expected her to say a word about the fact that, for the past two years, IPARD funds (from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development) have been suspended indefinitely because of financial abuse, a fact confirmed by OLAF (the European Anti-Fraud Office). This is proof that corruption is devouring the European funds intended to support the modernisation of the Albanian economy on its path towards the Union. Such a fact, which is not confidential, should have been mentioned by Ursula von der Leyen as an example of practices that the European Commission cannot condone. This act would then have been seen as a sign of transparency indicating which side the European Union is on in the fight to root out corruption.

It is precisely because the negotiation process is long and will take many years that the exchanges between the European institutions and the national institutions of each of the Balkan countries must be absolutely transparent so as to inspire public opinion in these countries and give it confidence in the values on which a united Europe is built. Public opinion in the Balkans is therefore expecting a radical change in the European Union's method of communication.

Transparent communication on the part of the European Union regarding concrete developments in each of the six Balkan countries would make a major contribution to educating public opinion in democratic culture and would help society to free itself from the frustrations created by the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the abuse of power by their national leaders. Furthermore, it would be a sign of respect and confidence towards these societies to help them acquire a positive feeling;

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that not only are they benefiting from European funds, but they also share values.

It has to be said that over the past three and a half decades, no substantial work has been done to present European integration as a process in which the Balkan countries not only receive, but that they must also give. This is the surest way of making public opinion a solid ally of the integration processes. Otherwise, these processes turn into bureaucratic agreements between governments and

the European Commission, thus losing the capacity to make union in Europe an inspiring ideal. The peoples of the Balkans now lack a grand ideal. History has not taught them to live in such a state of emptiness. This is part of their identity, which Brussels must consider. The need for an ideal has always weakened these peoples, often exposing them to the danger of being manipulated by demagogues. It is precisely because of this manipulation, not only in the past but also more recently, that they have blindly embarked on tragic nationalist adventures.

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