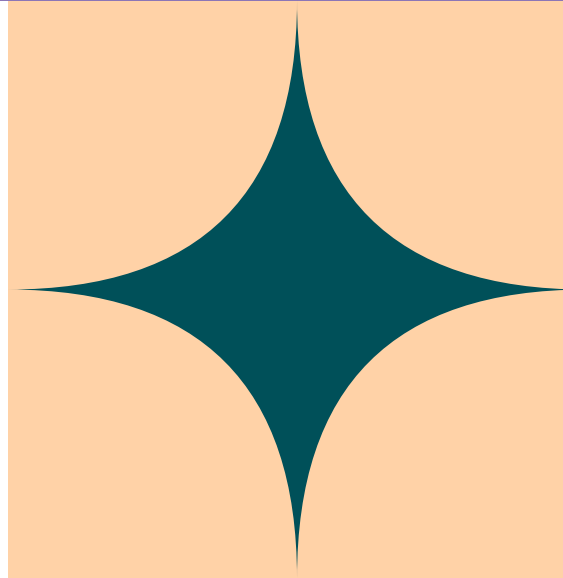


EU-Balkan Observatory
SNAPSHOTS



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EU INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND FACILITATION POSSIBILITIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to conduct a comparative and holistic study and review of the dynamics of the EU integration processes and the ensuing political, economic, social and cultural implications for the Western Balkans, as well as how the European perspective in the countries of the Western Balkans is shaped, promoted, or challenged.

Methodology

The descriptive research was conducted to make a comprehensive review of contemporary economic and political relations between Western Europe and Central and Eastern European states. In order to capture broader information from different "actors," a specifically designed electronic questionnaire was prepared using Google tools, and shared via e-mail and social media.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was published on the iASK website (<https://iask.hu/en/eu-integration-processes-in-the-western-balkans-and-facilitation-possibilities-of-central-and-eastern-european-states/>), and dissemination of a link was made through the LinkedIn social network, as well as other networks and [is1] databases of iASK, as well as personal distribution. Through LinkedIn and e-mail, around 400 people were questioned, mainly from Central European and Western Balkan countries, but also from other parts of Europe and globally with those who were familiar with the issues.

The questionnaire was divided into several topics:

- Personal information: nationality (citizenship), age, gender, marital status education, profession etc.
- Questions about the EU integration of the Western Balkans
- Questions about the closeness and the distance between EU states, Western Balkans (WB) and Central Europe (CE), Russia, and China (emotional, cultural, political, economic links)
- Questions about the experiences of CE states in the EU integration process regarding the facilitation of the integration process of the WB.
- Questions about the expectations about the upcoming EU Parliament elections and about the Hungarian presidency of the EU in the second half of 2024 regarding the enlargement process.

The survey ended in June 2024 and 80 people completed the questionnaire.

GENERAL TRENDS

Because the sample of 80 people who completed the questionnaire is small, especially considering their high level of education generally, we cannot draw definitive conclusions from the survey. However, we can identify some general trends and positions based on their responses. Briefly, these are the following:

- **A significant majority, 74%, of those surveyed think that the Western Balkan countries should become members of the EU by 2030.**
- **Only 23% of respondents had a negative opinion about Macron's proposal for the European Political Community, and 28% disagree that the inclusion of the WB countries into the EU should happen together in a "Big Package".**
- **Regarding the strict fulfillment of the "Copenhagen Criteria", only 30,8% of those surveyed reject the idea of a "fast-track" EU accession for the WB countries.**
- **More than 50% of those surveyed believe that issues such as the fight against corruption and organized crime, free competition, and the rule of law "should not be compromised."**
- **Social and Cultural distance questions show that the perceived distance between people from the Balkans and Central European (CE) countries is negligible, although 26% of those surveyed answered neutrally to the question of whether the WB countries should have veto power in decision-making once they become EU members.**
- **Responses regarding proximity indicate an overall level of trust toward people from the Balkans, though a high percentage (32,5%) gave neutral answers to the statement "the Balkans are cunning and resourceful people".**
- **The majority (over 50%) of those surveyed use internet portals and social networks to obtain information about WB countries, which increases the risk of disinformation and fake news.**
- **According to respondents, Slovenia is most likely to help the facilitation of the EU integration of the WB countries, though all other countries also have advantages in making important contributions to the processes.**

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of the EU and its development is closely related to the timely integration of the Western Balkans. However, the integration process faces many obstacles, some of which are very challenging issues, like anti-corruption measures, rule of law, free competition, environmental policies, education, science, energy, and many others.

It is crucial to research to make connections between the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe for several reasons. The first is to examine how public discourse in both Central and Western Europe reinforces the historically negative image of the Balkans. The post-Cold War image of the Balkans as a region is predominantly associated with nationalism, ethnic violence, mass murder, corruption, and underdevelopment that was greatly influenced by the wars in the 1990s. However, things began to shift at the beginning of the century. With the hostilities in the Balkans gradually coming to an end, opportunities arise to strengthen relationships between Central Europe and the Balkan region as well. Moreover, the Balkans, once constituting the traditional "Other" upon which "Europe" was constructed, have also adapted to become part of the European integration process. The opportunity to join the EU has been extended to every Balkan nation. Considering that the countries of Central Europe are among the most ardent advocates for the Western Balkan membership in the EU, it is imperative to examine the factors contributing to this support. In this context, the role of Central European states is crucial in facilitating and achieving social cohesion and EU standards in the Western Balkans states.

