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EU Reengagement in the Western Balkans: 2018 as a Missed Opportunity

Introduction

The year 2018 has been hailed as a turning point for the European Union's (EU) engagement in the Western Balkans. Fifteen years after the countries of the region received an explicit membership perspective at the Thessaloniki summit of June 2003, the European Commission and the member states chose to underline that this perspective remains both credible and realistic, provided that the Western Balkan countries meet the remaining conditions set out for their accession. This renewed involvement comes at a crucial moment, with the region at a crossroads between further progress on the path towards EU membership and the rise of authoritarian trends and multiple sources of destabilization that put some of the Union's earlier achievements at risk. This contribution provides a critical analysis of the EU's intended reengagement in the Western Balkans. It highlights the current challenges the region faces, analyses the main features and shortcomings of the European Commission's new strategy for the Western Balkans, and points to mixed signals and a lack of member state commitment as the main reasons why 2018 represents a missed opportunity for more forceful, transformative EU involvement in the region.

The Western Balkans at a Crossroads

Following a lengthy period of relative stagnation in EU membership negotiations under the oft-repeated mantra of "enlargement fatigue", the multiplication of external and internal challenges confronting the Western Balkans has put the region back in Brussels' spotlight. Upon assuming office in July 2014, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker had prominently declared that no further enlargement would take place under his mandate.¹ Despite being factually accurate – none of the Western Balkan countries could realistically expect to complete negotiations by 2019 at that point – the statement was perceived in the region as a strong sign of EU disinterest and disengagement that

1 Cf. Jean-Claude Juncker, A new start for Europe, Opening statement in the European Parliament plenary session, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014, at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-567_en.htm.

provoked a slowdown in reform efforts and the disillusionment of local populations.² Three years on, Juncker saw himself forced to depart quite decisively from the “wait-and-see” attitude towards enlargement that had prevailed since the successful completion of Croatian membership negotiations.³ In the light of the sudden re-emergence of the Western Balkans as a source of instability, the Commission realized that a more muscular involvement was needed to avoid the unravelling of the positive developments that had been achieved during the previous years of EU engagement in the region. In his 2017 State of the Union address, Juncker responded to the new situation by advocating the extension of a credible enlargement perspective towards the Western Balkan countries in order to promote stability in the EU’s neighbourhood.⁴ There are several reasons for this sudden policy shift.

In 2015, the Western Balkans became a major transit route for irregular migrants seeking to cross from Greece into EU member states located further north, principally Germany and Sweden. This situation not only placed considerable strain on the region’s weak administrations and depleted state budgets, but also highlighted the willingness of local populations to jump in and provide support to people in need, despite their own economic difficulties. The situation was particularly delicate since, in a reversal of the usual pattern of the Balkans as source of instability, the problem in this case arose from the uncoordinated handling of the sudden influx of refugees by EU member states. With Greece incapable of securing its border to Macedonia, and Hungary eager to keep migrants out of its territory, it was the Western Balkans that had to deal with the fallout.⁵

The resulting crisis was compounded by the addition of several thousand Western Balkan citizens who joined the migrants coming through Turkey and Greece on their way to more prosperous countries, swelling the numbers of incoming asylum seekers to a point where many national administrations in Western Europe were overwhelmed by the case load.⁶ According to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, initial asylum applications from Albania and Kosovo stood at around 7,000 each in 2014, but soared to

2 Cf. The western Balkans and the EU: In the queue. The door to membership remains open, but the region must do more to get it, *The Economist*, 27 September 2014, at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2014/09/27/in-the-queue>.

3 Cf. Heather Grabbe/Gerald Knaus/Daniel Korski, Beyond wait-and-see: the way forward for EU Balkan policy, in: European Council on Foreign Relations, *Policy Brief*, 27 May 2010, available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/beyond_wait_and_see_the_way_forward_for_eu_balkan_policy.

4 Cf. Zoran Radosavljević, Juncker waves “credible EU prospects” at Balkans, but no fast membership, *EURACTIV.com*, 13 September 2017 (updated 5 October 2017), at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/juncker-waves-credible-eu-prospects-at-balkans-but-no-fast-membership/>.

5 Cf. Natasha Wunsch, Doppelt unter Druck: Der Westbalkan als Transitroute und Herkunftregion [Doubly under Pressure: the Western Balkans as a Transit Route and a Region of Origin], *Internationale Politik* 1, January/February 2016, pp. 50-54.

6 Cf. Nikola Dimitrov/Natasha Wunsch, The migrant crisis: a catalyst for EU enlargement? Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Policy Brief*, June 2016, at: <http://www.balkanfund.org/publib/biepag/The-migrant-crisis-a-catalyst-for-EU-enlargement-web.pdf>.

more than 53,000 and over 33,000, respectively, over the course of 2015.⁷ This peak in asylum seekers represents only the visible tip of the iceberg of a far greater brain drain phenomenon depriving the Western Balkans of ever larger numbers of citizens seeking a better life outside the region. In view of this dramatic demonstration of the consequences of stagnating or even deteriorating living standards in the Balkans and the resulting disillusionment of local populations, the EU was forced to acknowledge not only the need to co-operate with the region when it comes to managing external migration, but also with regard to ensuring reasonable living conditions on the ground.

Besides outside challenges, the persistence of numerous bilateral disputes in the region has given the EU cause for concern.⁸ Despite rhetorical commitments by all parties to resolve outstanding disputes peacefully and swiftly, tensions regularly flare up over specific issues, threatening regional stability and a still only fragile and partial reconciliation. The extensive direct involvement of the European External Action Service and High Representative Federica Mogherini in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has so far only yielded a limited number of technical agreements, while a more comprehensive solution to the former province's contested statehood remains elusive. Even seemingly minor disagreements about the precise drawing of borders hold potential for escalation, as demonstrated by the process of border demarcation between Kosovo and Montenegro only recently concluded.⁹

Finally, the Western Balkans have faced a mounting domestic challenge of creeping authoritarianism.¹⁰ Freedom House scores for 2016 show a regional average decline in democratic performance back to the levels initially achieved in 2004.¹¹ After Macedonia initially stood out for its surprisingly smooth democratic transition despite the complex ethnic make-up of the country – around a quarter of the population are ethnic Albanians, resulting in frequent tensions over possible irredentist ambitions under the label “Greater Albania” – the country experienced a full-fledged government crisis in 2015/16. Following the release of wiretaps by opposition leader Zoran Zaev

7 Cf. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [Federal Office for Migration and Refugees], 476.649 Asylanträge im Jahr 2015 [476,649 asylum applications in 2015], 6 January 2016, at: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/DE/2016/201610106-asylgeschaeftsstatistik-dezember.html>.

8 Cf. Marika Djolai/Zoran Nechev, *Bilateral Disputes Conundrum: Accepting the Past and Finding Solutions for the Western Balkans*, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Policy Brief*, 5 April 2018, at: <http://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Bilateral-Disputes-Conundrum-Accepting-the-Past-and-Finding-Solutions-for-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>.

9 Cf. Die Morina, *Kosovo Parliament Approves Montenegro Border Deal*, *BalkanInsight*, 21 March 2018, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/xx-kosovo-parliament-approves-montenegro-border-deal-03-21-2018>.

10 Cf. Marko Kmezić/Florian Bieber (eds.), *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion*, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, March 2017, at: <http://www.biepag.eu/publications/the-crisis-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-authoritarianism-and-eu-stabilitocracy/>.

11 Cf. Nate Schenkkan, *Europe and Eurasia Brace for Impact*, Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2016*, at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2016>.

and the ensuing mass demonstrations against his government, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski attempted to ethnicize the political conflict by stoking nationalism among his supporters.¹² In the wake of contested elections brokered by the EU, the Macedonian parliament was stormed by a horde of thugs in April 2017 who, apparently encouraged by the former governing party, attacked and injured several MPs.¹³ This scene served as a painful reminder of the fragile state of democracy in the region and, in the light of the stagnation of Macedonia's membership negotiations over the unresolved name dispute with Greece, highlighted the broader destabilizing potential of frustrated expectations once the accession process becomes derailed.

In sum, the Western Balkan states find themselves at a critical juncture. The countries of the region are simultaneously confronted with major external and regional challenges as well as deteriorating domestic governance. Against this backdrop, the Commission, in consultation with the member states, decided to renew its commitment to the region's EU accession.

Towards EU Reengagement: A New Western Balkans Strategy

In February 2018, the Commission adopted a new strategy offering "a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans".¹⁴ In the light of the obvious threats to the EU's achievements in the region so far, the strategy represents an attempt to balance a renewed commitment to EU membership for the Western Balkans with an ongoing emphasis on the remaining reforms. Its opening paragraphs confirm that the region is "part of Europe" and that an eventual EU accession is "in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest".¹⁵ For the first time offering a concrete, if conditional, timescale to the current frontrunners in the negotiation process, it opens a cautious perspective for a further round of enlargement as early as 2025. At the same time, it underlines that this perspective is "extremely ambitious" and that EU accession will always be based on the objective merits of each individual country. The opening section ends with a confirmation of the EU's willingness to increase its support to the Western Balkans.

The two main parts of the strategy deal with the remaining challenges to be tackled by the Western Balkans, and the ways in which the EU endeavours to support these efforts. Four main challenges are singled out: the weak rule of

12 Cf. Besir Ceka, Macedonia: A New Beginning? *Journal of Democracy*, 2/2018, pp. 143-157.

13 Cf. Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Macedonia Shaken by Violence in Parliament, *BalkanInsight*, 28 April 2017, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-calms-down-after-parliament-violence-04-27-2017>.

14 European Commission, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018, at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

law, uncompetitive economies, the persistence of bilateral disputes, and the ambiguous political and societal commitment to EU membership among candidate countries. In unusually explicit terms, the strategy condemns the fact that “the countries show clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests”.¹⁶ Whereas the term state capture had previously been used only with regard to Macedonia in the 2016 country report, it is now applied to the entire region.

Regarding bilateral relations, the strategy emphasizes the need for leaders in the Western Balkans to take full ownership of regional co-operation and work towards reconciliation with their neighbours. It suggests that border disputes that cannot be resolved bilaterally should be submitted to “binding, final international arbitration”.¹⁷ This reference clarifies that the EU sees unresolved bilateral issues as an insurmountable obstacle to accession, but prefers to delegate the arbitration of such disputes to international courts, rather than involving itself directly in such negotiations. Earlier efforts at direct EU mediation, for instance around the disputes between Slovenia and Croatia regarding the status of Piran Bay, had been of limited effectiveness. Given a lack of progress in the EU-facilitated talks, the dispute was eventually taken to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and remains partially unresolved due to Croatia’s refusal to accept the ruling in Slovenia’s favour.¹⁸ Moreover, EU involvement becomes particularly sensitive once a dispute involves a member state, which can abuse its asymmetrical power to oppose the other party’s progress in the accession talks, as seen in the case of the name dispute between Greece and Macedonia.¹⁹ By underscoring the need for all outstanding disputes to be settled prior to EU accession, the Commission places the burden on the opposing parties to find a permanent solution or seek international arbitration.

Highlighting the need for broader ownership of the accession process, the strategy underlines that “joining the EU is a choice”²⁰ that must be pursued without ambiguity in order to meet the ambitious timeline set out for the current frontrunners. This puts the ball back in the candidate countries’ court and is a barely veiled allusion in particular to Serbia’s frequent oscillations between a decisive commitment to EU accession and the maintenance of strong ties to Russia. Besides, it stresses the responsibility of the region’s citizens to hold

16 Ibid., p. 3.

17 Ibid., p. 7.

18 Cf. Kait Bolongaro, Slovenia ups stakes in Adriatic border dispute, *Politico*, 19 February 2018 (updated 21 February 2018), at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovenia-croatia-border-piran-ups-stakes-in-adriatic-fishing-dispute/>.

19 Nikola Dimitrov/Marika Djolai/Natasha Wunsch, Removing obstacles to EU accession: Bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Policy brief*, September 2015, at: <http://www.balkanfund.org/publib/biepag/BIEPAG-Policy-brief-web.pdf>.

20 A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, cited above (Note 14), p. 3.

their leaders accountable and to “judge their own governments on whether or not they are willing and able to deliver on their European ambitions”.²¹

With regards to increased support for the countries of the Western Balkans, the strategy promises a “significant enhancement of the EU’s engagement”.²² This is to be embodied by six flagship initiatives: strengthened support for the rule of law, reinforced engagement on security and migration, support for socio-economic development, increasing transport and energy connectivity, launching a digital agenda for the Western Balkans, as well as supporting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. These flagship initiatives pick up on many of the core objectives of the Berlin Process, not least when it comes to connectivity, bilateral disputes, and regional youth co-operation (mentioned under the broader realm of reconciliation). The Berlin Process, initially started as a German diplomatic initiative and supported by several other member states, aimed to complement the fledgling enlargement process by bringing several visible improvements to the Western Balkans. In a sense, the incorporation of these items into the EU’s new strategy brings the Berlin Process back into the broader EU fold, thus ending speculation that this parallel track served to replace, rather than support, the Western Balkan countries’ membership perspectives. Finally, the strategy mentions the necessary institutional adjustments and financial means required to prepare for the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries, with further details regarding the flagship initiatives outlined in an annexed “Action Plan in Support of the Transformation of the Western Balkans”.²³

Overall, the new strategy is both comprehensive in its reach and rather detailed when it comes to the instruments with which positive changes in key areas should be achieved. It signals a credible desire on the part of the European Commission to reengage in the region and contains specific measures to tackle the remaining challenges and ensure the credible enlargement perspective that the document promises. Nonetheless, it falls behind the expectations triggered in the run-up to its publication, with shortcomings present both in the strategy itself and in the way both the Commission and member states have followed up after its adoption.

The Challenge of Balance: Shortcomings of the Commission’s Approach

The Commission’s Western Balkans strategy represents an ambitious attempt to upgrade the EU’s relations with a difficult region. However, in its efforts to

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 9.

23 European Commission, Annex to A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018, at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

reconcile an encouraging message towards the Western Balkans with a continued emphasis on the remaining challenges in meeting membership requirements, a number of crucial elements are missing or remain underdeveloped, weakening its clout.

First, the strategy remains too cautious about calling out the widespread tendencies towards democratic backsliding in the region. While the reference to state capture as a region-wide challenge is an important signal to authoritarian-leaning leaders across the region, it remains the only mention of such tendencies. This underplays the extent to which democratic backsliding has become an obstacle to the further transformation of the region. The strategy merely laments a lack of progress on the rule of law, fundamental rights and good governance, when the real concern is the actual rollback of political and civil rights, including open attacks on independent media and the work of NGOs as well as the strategic manipulation of elections. Failing to call out these tendencies confirms regional leaders in their expectation that the EU will be willing to tolerate and overlook trends towards “stabilitocracy”²⁴ as long as the countries maintain relative peace and a semblance of commitment to democratic governance.

The moderate criticism contained in the detailed country reports published by the Commission in April confirms the general reluctance to call out trends towards democratic erosion more forcefully. In the case of Serbia, for instance, the country report highlights concerns raised by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) regarding a tilted playing field during the 2017 elections, and requests that the Serbian government address the recommendations formulated in the OSCE/ODIHR report.²⁵ However, it omits mentioning the term “state capture” and formulates criticism in mostly technocratic language that makes it amenable to varying interpretations.²⁶

Second, the strategy reproduces the conditionality paradigm that has characterized the EU’s enlargement policy to date and that has fallen short of fostering the sustainable transformation of candidate countries. In essence, the EU’s enlargement policy has been based on the premise that external incentives and the ultimate prospect of EU accession act as a sufficient motivation to foster lasting reforms.²⁷ In a nutshell, the EU spells out membership conditions, candidate countries adapt their legislation and institutions ac-

24 Srđa Pavlović, West is best: How “stabilitocracy” undermines democracy building in the Balkans, *LSE EUROPP*, 5 May 2017, at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/>.

25 Cf. European Commission, Serbia 2018 Report, SWD(2018) 152 final, Strasbourg, 17 April 2018, pp. 5-6.

26 Cf. Srđan Majstorović, Is Serbia ready to read Progress Report 2018 correctly? *European Policy Centre*, 1 May 2018, at: <http://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/is-serbia-ready-to-read-progress-report-2018-correctly/>.

27 Cf. Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Basingstoke 2006.

cordingly, and the EU limits its role to monitoring the adoption and implementation of accession requirements. The strategy reproduces this approach by emphasizing a credible membership perspective and immediately following up with a detailed list of the remaining reforms countries need to undertake. Most visibly, the flagship initiative on the rule of law highlights the role of existing negotiation tools, such as action plans outlining governments' reform commitments, and emphasizes that the EU will make use of the leverage provided by the negotiating frameworks with Serbia and Montenegro.

Yet, as recent developments in Hungary and Poland signal, conditionality-driven transformation is not sufficient to trigger deep and lasting transformation. Where governments comply with democratic requirements in exchange for progress in membership negotiations, there is a high risk that sustainable conditions for democratic consolidation will not be created. Instead, reforms become a technocratic endeavour and public consultation as well as broader societal dialogue on the political direction of the country are sidelined or fully undercut for the benefit of swift progress on the path towards EU accession.²⁸

Finally, the strategy remains overly intergovernmental and fails to reach out to civil society actors and other domestic players in enlargement countries that could supplement the EU's efforts to foster positive changes from below. In this sense, the suggested flagship initiatives represent an upgrade in the degree, but not in the nature of the EU's engagement. Instead, they largely outline measures that target candidate country governments or aim for technical co-operation with executive bodies. While the strategy highlights that EU accession is a "generational choice", it also emphasizes that communication with citizens is "primarily the responsibility of governments".²⁹ Civil society is mentioned only in the margins, and the strategy signals no intention to expand the EU's co-operation with reform-minded domestic actors inside candidate countries. In doing so, it misses the opportunity to build a bridge between EU institutions and what will eventually become EU citizens. Instead, it leaves the door open to executive-led transformation – or in a pessimistic scenario, the marginalization of societal concerns by ruling elites eager to cement their own benefits rather than to improve their societies for all citizens.

From Strategy to Implementation: Mixed Signals and a Lack of Commitment

The shortcomings of the new strategy itself are problematic enough when it comes to ensuring its coherent and successful implementation. More worrying still are the mixed signals that have prevailed in the aftermath of its publication,

28 Cf. Anna Grzymala-Busse/Abby Innes, Great Expectations: The EU and Domestic Political Competition in East Central Europe, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 1/2003, pp. 64–73.

29 A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, cited above (Note 14), pp. 2 and 17.

in particular the lack of enthusiasm with which EU member states have backed the strategy's key message. This reluctant endorsement by member states weakens the strategy's transformative potential by casting doubt on the EU's commitment to renewed involvement in the Western Balkans.

The initial plan had been for the Commission to set out the cornerstones for EU reengagement in the region at the beginning of 2018, which member states would confirm and cement by adopting a series of concrete steps towards future enlargements at a dedicated EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia in May. As a recent EU entrant, Bulgaria seemed particularly well-suited to host this event, and the sequence of events had been adapted to coincide with the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. The summit itself, however, fell short of the grand symbolic event that had been envisaged.³⁰ In the context of the ongoing Catalan crisis, the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy decided to attend only the informal dinner before the summit to demonstrate Spanish opposition to Kosovo statehood, which is seen as setting a potential precedent for Spain's own breakaway region.³¹ While Rajoy's absence dealt a symbolic blow to the show of EU unity behind a renewed engagement in the Western Balkans, it was France's enlargement-sceptic stance that undermined the substantive message the EU had hoped to send at the summit. Reiterating the traditional French emphasis on "deepening before widening",³² President Emmanuel Macron suggested that over the past 15 years, enlargement had contributed to weakening Europe, and advocated that any new steps in this direction should be examined with "a lot of prudence and rigor".³³

As a result of the lack of agreement between member states on further enlargement, the final summit declaration contains only a deliberately vague statement reaffirming the EU's "unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans".³⁴ This weak commitment contrasts with the stronger wording at the Thessaloniki summit of 2003 that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union"³⁵ as well as the hope that the Sofia gathering of 2018 would bring concrete progress for individual candidate countries. Concrete measures could have included setting a date for the

30 CF. Martin Dimitrov, Enlargement Stays off Agenda at Sofia Summit, *Balkan Insight*, 17 May 2018, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/sofia-summit-balkans-meet-europe-for-the-first-time-in-15-years-05-17-2018>.

31 Cf. Sarantis Michalopoulos, Kosovo is not Catalonia, Kosovo's Thaci tells absent Spanish PM Rajoy, *EurActiv*, 18 May 2018, at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-is-not-catalonia-kosovos-thaci-tells-absent-spanish-pm-rajoy/>.

32 Natasha Wunsch, Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans, in: *Journal of South East European and Black Sea Studies* 4/17, 541-554.

33 Andrew Gray, Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes, *Politico*, 17 May 2018, at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>.

34 Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit, 17 May 2018, p. 1, available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/05/17/sofia-declaration-of-the-eu-western-balkans-summit/>.

35 EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, Declaration, at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm.

opening of negotiations with Macedonia and Albania or opening further negotiation chapters with Serbia and Montenegro. None of this happened. The lack of tangible outcomes highlights that the commitment to EU membership for the Western Balkans is no longer shared unanimously among member states. Many leaders of EU countries now fear not only importing instability from the region, but also provoking a backlash from their voters, who have become largely enlargement-sceptic in the meantime.³⁶ A credible roadmap towards EU accession for the Western Balkans was therefore notably absent from the Sofia summit, undermining the credibility of the message sent by the Commission's new strategy.

The London summit of the Berlin Process, held two months after the Sofia gathering, failed to remedy the impression of a half-hearted commitment to the region on the part of EU member states. The core aim of the Berlin Process had initially been to provide an alternative forum for engagement with the Western Balkans that would bring visible benefits to the region's citizens, for instance in terms of improved infrastructure and an emphasis on youth cooperation. However, its added value as a parallel format complementing the institutionalized enlargement dialogue has become increasingly contested over time.³⁷ The irony of holding a summit dedicated to future EU enlargement in a country that had chosen to leave the EU did not escape observers and participants alike. It became blatantly obvious when the summit's intended host, UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, resigned during the summit itself over his disagreement regarding Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit plans, all but turning the event into a farce.³⁸

The Way Forward

What can we make of the EU's reengagement in the Western Balkans? Despite the deliberate sequencing of high-level events intended to demonstrate a shared EU commitment to further enlargement, a mismatch is obvious between the ambitious stance adopted by the European Commission and the more hesitant manner in which member states have embraced the idea of renewed involvement in the region. In this sense, 2018 represents a missed opportunity to reflect critically on the failures of the EU's approach to the Western Balkans so far, and to develop a more comprehensive, but also more locally anchored strategy to enlargement. Such a truly innovative approach would require going

36 Cf. Rosa Balfour/Corina Stratulat (eds), EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans, European Policy Centre, *Issue Paper No. 79*, July 2015, at: http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_5832_eu_balkans_issue_paper.pdf?doc_id=1654.

37 Cf. Florian Bieber, It is time to ditch the Berlin Process, European Western Balkans, 10 July 2018, at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/10/time-ditch-berlin-process/>.

38 Thanks to Boris Johnson, a farcical west-Balkan summit in London, *The Economist*, 11 July 2018, at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/07/11/thanks-to-boris-johnson-a-farcical-west-balkan-summit-in-london>.

beyond bilateral negotiations with governments to involve future EU citizens in the definition of their countries' political future from an early stage, and to build the conditions for both deep and sustainable political and economic transformation in the region.