

Nordic Views of the Balkan Enlargement

A balkáni bővítés kérdése skandináv szemszögből

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KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

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ISSN 2416-0148

<https://doi.org/10.47683/KKIElemzesek.KE-2022.15>



Abstract: While EU policy towards the Western Balkans has been scrutinized intensely, the position of the Nordic EU member states has been more obscure. While all three countries were once quite involved in the peacekeeping and rebuilding efforts, a closer examination shows that while Denmark and Finland have largely withdrawn from the region, Sweden continues an active policy across several fields. Public debate on future EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans is largely absent in all three countries, and public opinion, although far from solid, is not very enthusiastic, either. However, there is also little to suggest any active hostility in the three Nordic states. Instead, in the absence of strong, direct interests – whether in terms of the economy or hard security – the Nordic countries seem content to let EU institutions and other member states push the integration of the region forward. Most initiatives are, by and large, passively supported, while close attention is paid to the formal criteria for membership.

Keywords: Western Balkans; Sweden; Denmark; Finland; EU enlargement; conditionality; governance.

Összefoglalás: Amíg az EU Nyugat-Balkán politikáját jelentős figyelem övezi, addig az északi tagállamok álláspontja kevésbé ismert. Ugyanmindhárom ország részt vett békefenntartói missziókban és újjáépítési törekvésekben, a kutatások azt mutatják, hogy Dánia és Finnország nagyrészt kivonult a régióból, egyedül Svédország folytat több területen aktív politikát. Az EU nyugat-balkáni bővítéséről szóló vita nagyrészt hiányzik mindhárom vizsgált tagállamból, és a közvélemény sem mutat aziránt nagy lelkesedést. Nincsen azonban olyan tényező, amely a három északi tagállam aktív ellenállására utalna. Az erős és közvetlen érdekek – legyen az gazdasági vagy biztonsági – hiányában az északi tagállamok az uniós intézményekre és más tagállamokra „bízzák” a régió integrációjáért történő erőfeszítéseket. A legtöbb ilyen kezdeményezés passzív támogatásukat élvezzi, miközben a tagság elnyeréséhez szükséges kritériumok teljesítésére szigorú figyelmet fordítanak.

Kulcsszavak: Nyugat-Balkán, Svédország, Dánia, Finnország, EU bővítés, kondicionalitás, kormányzás.

INTRODUCTION

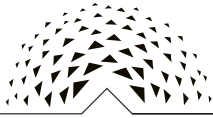
Enlargement has stood as one of the unquestionable achievements of the European Union (EU); starting with six members, seven enlargements (and one departure) have taken the bloc to its current membership of 27 states. Looking forward, the EU has repeatedly pledged itself to further enlargement, if and when

candidate countries meet the criteria. The [Thessaloniki Summit in 2003](#) made this commitment explicit for the countries of the Western Balkan region – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, all of whom have signed and ratified Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU. Of these six countries, four are officially recognized as candidate countries, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are still only ‘potential candidates’. Although the progress of the region towards membership has been patchy to say the least, the EU unequivocally re-stated the promise of eventual membership at the [2021 summit in Brdo](#). Yet different countries take differing views on the issue. This brief will discuss the views of the Nordic bloc countries – Denmark, Finland, and Sweden – and how they position themselves on the question of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Nordic countries were not themselves founding members of the EU. Denmark was the first to join, in 1973, following the lead of the United Kingdom. The Danish priorities were to safeguard agricultural exports to the UK, while joining Germany in a common market would be beneficial to the industrial economic sector. Norway negotiated its membership terms at the same time but rejected membership in a referendum in 1972, the fisheries policy and regional cohesion being particularly salient issues in rallying the ‘no’ side. Finland and Sweden both pursued policies of neutrality during the Cold War, which effectively ruled out membership of what was then the European Community. After the end of the Cold War, both reconsidered and joined the EU in 1995 alongside Austria, while Norway, having negotiated accession terms for a second time, once more rejected membership in a referendum, in a remarkably similar way to what had happened in 1972. Norway has not revisited the EU issue in earnest since 1994, but it maintains close relations with the EU through the European Economic Area, membership in the Schengen area, and frequent participation in the Common Defence and Security Policy missions.

Once inside the Union, the Nordic states were actively promoting the enlargement agenda towards Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1990s. Although the Nordic states were broadly supportive of all candidates then making their way towards accession, their primary focus was, not surprisingly, the countries around the Baltic Sea – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – whose cause was championed by the Nordics, and who received significant bilateral reform support. This geographical emphasis was hardly surprising, as it has been a general pattern for existing member states to favour enlargement with their immediate neighbours, with whom one can naturally expect the greatest increases in trade and economic benefit. The political aspects should also not be overlooked: the Nordic states never formally recognized the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, and Denmark was the first country to appoint



an ambassador in 1991, when the three countries declared their independence. Denmark also championed the three countries' candidacy for NATO membership during the 1990s. In the EU, the Swedish presidency of the European Council in the spring of 2001 pushed the accession talks with the dozen candidates forward. For Denmark, holding the presidency in the second half of 2002, it was a particular source of pride that the final Council, at which the accession agreements were formally initialled, took place in Copenhagen, thus closing the circle that had started at the formulation of the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993.

At the time, the 'Big Bang' enlargement of 2004 was well-received in all three countries, in as much as it enjoyed significant popular support and aroused fairly little political controversy. It was notable even at the time, however, that in all three countries the enlargement was considered more in the [economic interest of the new members](#) than that of the older member states. As all three Nordic countries are [net contributors](#) to the budget, and have been for years, their concern was never so much whether regional spending or other structural/cohesion funds were reallocated to newer members, but rather to keep limits on the size of the overall EU budget. Most serious, however, was the issue of free movement, on which the three states took rather different stands. Sweden imposed no restrictions, Finland imposed a two-year delay on full implementation, while Denmark opted for the maximum of five years. Nonetheless, all three countries saw significant [net inflows of migration](#) from newer member states: Finland has had migration from the newer member states in the order of [79,000 since 2004](#), Estonians accounting for the largest number of immigrants; Sweden has had [136,000 since 2000](#); Denmark has had [90,000 since 2008](#), Poland having been the single largest country of origin in both cases. This migration proved more politically divisive and was something frequently invoked by EU-sceptical populist parties like the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, or the Sweden Democrats, although also at times from labour movements fearing their members would be squeezed by competition from foreign workers. On the whole, the Nordic states remain satisfied with the enlargements since 2000. [When asked in 2018](#) if it was right to have allowed specific countries to join, the answer was positive by wide margins in all three Nordic states. The only exceptions were Romania (which had net negative scores of -14 in Denmark, -11 in Finland, and -20 in Sweden) and Bulgaria, which only barely scored positive. Both countries have frequently been cited as the worst-performing EU members on tackling corruption.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

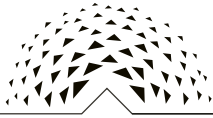
Overall EU sentiment is often taken to be cool towards future enlargement. Indeed, 'enlargement fatigue' is the word most often used to describe the general view. In October 2019, [a minority in the Council](#), consisting of France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, blocked the start of accession talks with Albania, while France alone

blocked North Macedonia. This was reversed six months later, as all three EU members relented on both countries, but then Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia, with little reproach from its EU partners.

The Nordic states are all broadly supportive of the EU's overall efforts in the Western Balkan region. All three countries contributed extensively to the various UN missions in the region during the armed conflicts of the 1990s and beyond; Denmark also participated in the NATO KFOR mission in Kosovo. Finland and Sweden both contributed to the [EUFOR Althea mission](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina for some years, but as of 2022 have ceased their involvement. All three states recognised Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence almost immediately and established diplomatic relations, contributing to the EULEX mission in the country. All three have also supported visa liberalization for Kosovo in the Council. The EU's efforts at mediating talks between Pristina and Belgrade with the aim of an eventual normalization of relations between the two are also met with support in the Nordic capitals. All three also signed on to the 2021 Brdo Summit Declaration, although, similarly to Germany, they remain firmly non-committal on any specific target dates for the candidates' accession.

Active interest in the Western Balkans is not seen across the board, however. In the negative sense, Denmark has led the way. Having been prominently present in the region at the turn of the millennium, today it maintains only two embassies in the former Yugoslavia: one in EU member Croatia, while Kosovo and Albania are covered from Vienna, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are covered from Belgrade. For years Danish diplomacy has been guided by a pursuit of export earning, and in that perspective, the Western Balkan states are just not that important. [Finland has a greater presence](#), although relations with Montenegro and North Macedonia are also handled remotely from Belgrade. With reduced presence and activity, however, also comes a gradual withering of regional knowledge and competence, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy for both Denmark and Finland of turning the Western Balkans into a low-interest region.

Sweden, which of the three has the most globally oriented diplomatic profile, is alone in still maintaining an embassy in all of the Western Balkan states, except for Montenegro, which is covered from Belgrade. The embassies in [Sarajevo](#) and [Pristina](#) both work actively with civil society, both for the sake of strengthening democracy, the third sector, and on initiatives to improve the position of women in society. This is in line with broader [Swedish objectives](#), as the country has worked on a range of initiatives in the region, with a particular focus on "strengthened democracy, greater respect for human rights and a more fully developed state under the rule of law". Having furthermore put its money where its mouth is, the Swedish government spent SEK 3.6 billion in the region during the period 2014-2020 and planned to spend SEK 4.9 billion during [2021-2027](#). Governance reforms for greater capacity and efficiency, as well as fighting corruption are major focus points. Reflecting Sweden's own societal values, gender equality and the



fight against gender-based violence also feature prominently. While rule of law issues are emphasized the most, market economic reforms and environmental protection are also objectives for Swedish policy, as is helping the Western Balkan states move towards EU integration.

The debate on future enlargement is largely absent, however, save for the occasional statement opposing Turkey's membership, typically from parties out of government. The mainstream media writes very little on either future enlargement or on the Western Balkans. The same goes for the major government-funded research institutes on international affairs, who have published next to nothing in recent years. In the [Danish Foreign and Security Policy Strategy](#), published in February 2022, EU enlargement was not mentioned at all, nor was the Western Balkans as a region. Even Sweden, when presenting a [formal statement on its EU policy](#) ahead of its upcoming presidency of the Council in the first half of 2023, did not mention enlargement even once. Finland's Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, does have a [small section on enlargement](#), describing it as "...a central objective of Finland's EU policy". The praise for the EU having enlarged to 28 members, however, reveals that the page has not been updated for several years. In short, indifference seems to be the prevailing mood in the North.

PUBLIC OPINION AND WESTERN BALKAN ENLARGEMENT

As for public opinion, it is generally assumed to be negative towards future enlargement, but there is little systematic data covering the whole of the EU. It is, in fact, striking that Eurobarometer, the EU's own public opinion survey, has not even asked for Europeans' views on enlargement for more than a decade, and the [last major study](#) dates all the way back to 2006. That survey, however, while presenting lukewarm overall views on enlargement, did suggest a clear differentiation in people's views on the Western Balkan states and Turkey as potential candidates. The latter has long been a controversial candidate, and the survey showed it having an actual majority opposing its membership; the Western Balkan states, meanwhile, all had at least pluralities in favour of them joining.

Public enthusiasm is not high in the Nordic countries. A [2018 YouGov survey](#) revealed that Danes and Finns were the most sceptical of Western Balkan enlargement. Danes, in fact, did not register plurality support for any of the six countries, although in the cases of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina the margin was very close. On Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia, those opposed numbered more than 40%. Finland was marginally in favour of Montenegro, while on Bosnia and Herzegovina 'yes' was the second-most popular option behind 'I don't know'. On North Macedonia, opinion was split almost evenly three ways, albeit with the affirmatives in third place. Only in Sweden was opinion mostly positive. Bosnia and Herzegovina was, in fact, the most popular country, with 45% in favour, while

Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia all had pluralities in favour as well. Only Albania was opposed by a plurality of 39% (with those in favour and the 'I don't knows' at 31% each). As significant as the lukewarm opinions, however, were the very high percentages being unsure, which suggests that public opinion is not set in stone on the issue.

At the same time, indifference, even lack of enthusiasm, is not the same as active hostility. In fact, beyond a general enlargement fatigue, which is common to the entire EU, there is little to suggest that the Nordics feel strongly about the Western Balkans, whether for good or bad. Whereas Turkey is widely opposed – by 70% in both Denmark and Finland, and 64% in Sweden – and its EU aspirations are frequently dismissed even by senior politicians, nobody is trying to make much political mileage of the Western Balkans. Denmark, it is true, did join France and the Netherlands to block opening accession talks with Albania (but not North Macedonia) in 2019 – citing concerns over lack of reforms and the rule of law – but relented just six months later. Had anything substantive changed in the meantime? Not with the candidates or with the domestic political standing of the government. Neither the initial blockage, nor the subsequent U-turn was explained in particular detail to the domestic audience, suggesting that while there may have been some genuine concerns over the rule of law, this did not amount to a principled stance against Western Balkan states moving closer to the EU, nor something the Danish government was willing to fight for in the Council.

NOT EXACTLY CHEERLEADERS

For several reasons, however, the Nordic countries would always be unlikely cheerleaders for further enlargement, not least with countries that are, on the surface, extremely different from them in important ways. Consolidated democracy and the rule of law being part of the Copenhagen Criteria, taken together with the already noted difficulty of enforcing these criteria once a country has joined the EU, it cannot be surprising that the Nordics will be advocates of taking a firm line on potential candidates' strict adherence to the criteria.

On Transparency International's [Corruption Perception Index for 2021](#), the Nordic states are all top 10 performers, with Denmark and Finland holding the top two spots. By comparison, only Montenegro, in 64th place, performs better than the three worst EU members, Romania (66th), Hungary (73rd), and Bulgaria (78th). Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia just about crack the top 100, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina not even that. Compared to an EU average score of 64, which would place it 30th worldwide, the Western Balkans' average score is 39, putting them in 87th place collectively. Considering the difficulties experienced in tackling corruption in newer member states, that is unlikely to make the Nordics more positively disposed.



Similar patterns emerge on both the World Justice Project's [Rule of Law index](#) and [Freedom House's](#) annual report on political freedom: the Nordic states are at or very near the top, while the Western Balkan states perform significantly below the EU average. On rule of law, Denmark ranks at the very top, (with Norway in second place), and Finland and Sweden in third and fourth. EU members hold eight of the top 10 spots; the EU's average score is 0.73, which would collectively rank the members at 20th place. The Western Balkan states average 0.52, putting them in 66th place. On political freedom, Finland and Sweden score a perfect 100, taking the top two positions. Denmark, at 97, still makes the top 10, together with three other EU members. As for the Western Balkans, they are all rated as no more than 'partly free', with an average score of 61, all of them scoring less than the worst-performing EU member.

While the Swedish efforts in the region are admirable, the Danish and Finnish indifference is perhaps not all that surprising, once one considers the limited interests at stake. There are no significant bilateral issues to work through for any of the Nordic states. Nor are any of them major trading partners for the Western Balkan states, or vice-versa, or major sources of foreign direct investment. The lack of geographical proximity and the relatively small size of the Western Balkan market also means that there is little reason to expect any major trade boom as a result of enlargement. At the same time, the Nordic states do not stand to lose any pre-existing advantages due to increased competition, either. A lack of proximity also explains why the wider regional dynamics of the Western Balkans do not motivate the Nordics towards deep engagement. Absent a major political escalation or return to actual fighting, they are content to leave policy in the hands of the EU officials.

On the financial side, the Nordic perspective is quite unlike the situation inside the EU ahead of the 2004 enlargement. Back then, a number of southern and south-western EU members, net-recipients of EU funding, were understandably wary of losing out on agricultural and regional subsidies post-enlargement. The Nordic states, by contrast, are all three net contributors to the EU budget, and therefore unlikely to lose much to new members. Their primary concern has instead been overall budgetary restraint so as to limit their net contributions, and they have been relatively successful in limiting the growth of the regular EU budget. During the EU's 2020 negotiations on the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, the so-called 'frugal four' held up talks, demanding strict limits to EU spending programmes. In addition to Austria and the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden were counted in this group, with Finland being unofficially supportive. However, the main issue was not pre-accession funding, which is only a rather minor part of the [EU budget](#), but the much larger share that is re-distributed within the EU among the members. In this sense, the Western Balkans would not rock the boat to the detriment of the Nordic states; their impact would, in fact, be marginal.

CONCLUSION

The Nordics are thus not the greatest cheerleaders for the Western Balkan states, the way they were for the Baltic states in the 1990s and early 2000s. On the other hand, the issue is not one of great salience in their domestic political debates. They are pragmatically supportive of EU efforts at integrating the region in European structures, and Sweden has taken an active role in promoting reforms. While Denmark and Finland will not overly exert themselves to ensure that those efforts succeed, they will not try very hard to obstruct it, either. Someone else – whether EU institutions or other member states with closer geographical proximity – will have to do the heavy lifting.

The Nordics do have genuine and well-founded concerns about the preparedness of the Western Balkan states to be EU members. It ought, however, to be said that the promise of enlargement always envisages a long-term process of reform, and any modern accession process is a very long-term process indeed. The EU has many tools at its disposal to ensure proper compliance with its rules before the process concludes. Therefore, by engaging positively in the process, most concerns can be addressed. Naturally, just as for the rest of the EU, the Nordic states' wider geopolitical interests are best served by keeping the Western Balkan states on a reform track.

Ultimately, however, it is for the candidate countries themselves to create some positive momentum in their accession process before they can expect the Nordic states to invest greater political capital in the success of the negotiations. Until then, while it may currently be a big ask that the Nordic states should themselves become involved more deeply, they should, perhaps, press much harder for the EU actors to act with greater purpose in the region, lest others do so in their place.