



Press Release

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Auditors scrutinise EU support for rule of law in Western Balkans

The European Court of Auditors is currently assessing the effectiveness of EU measures to support the rule of law – a requirement for accession – in the Western Balkans. The audit is covering four candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and two potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo).

Rule of law is a fundamental European value. Although there is no formal EU definition, it is generally understood to include the following six principles: equality before the law, legal certainty, separation of powers, independent and impartial courts, transparent and democratic legislative procedures and effective judicial review. Strengthening the rule of law is therefore intrinsically linked to the fight against corruption. It is also a key condition for economic growth.

To join the EU, candidate countries must demonstrate their capacity to take on the obligations of EU membership, as set out in the 1993 'Copenhagen criteria'. The first of these criteria relates to the existence of developed, stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. The speed of accession negotiations thus largely depends on progress made in this area.

“Rule of law is a non-negotiable prerequisite for EU membership. Yet, Western Balkan countries are still facing issues concerning corruption and how their public institutions function, which hinder their accession to the EU”, said Juhan Parts, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the audit. “Our audit will examine whether the EU genuinely helps them achieve progress in these fields, so that they can soon be on their way to joining the Union.”

The EU's relations with the Western Balkan countries take place within what is known as the 'stabilisation and association process'. It provides support for the rule of law mainly through political dialogue, as well as granting financial and technical assistance to help implement the necessary reforms. Overall, for the 2014-2020 period, the EU allocated some €700 million to the Western Balkans to support the rule of law and fundamental rights, representing 16 % of EU bilateral assistance to these countries.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' audit preview. The full preview is available at eca.europa.eu in English.

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The aim of the audit, which has just started, is to determine how effective these measures have been in strengthening the rule of law in the Western Balkans. In particular, the auditors are examining whether EU support for the rule of law:

- o was appropriately designed;
- o was used well to address key issues identified; and
- o resulted in concrete and sustainable improvements, in line with EU standards.

Background information

The audit preview, published today, provides information about an ongoing audit task on strengthening the rule of law in the Western Balkans (the audit does not cover Turkey, the fifth official candidate country). The audit is scheduled for completion towards the end of 2021. Audit previews are based on preparatory work undertaken before the start of an audit and should not be regarded as audit observations, conclusions or recommendations. The full audit preview is available in English on the ECA's website (eca.europa.eu).

Meanwhile, the ECA is also conducting an audit on [EU support to fight grand corruption in Ukraine](#).

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