

ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: LESSONS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine created a new momentum for the European Union to review its political and security strategy for the neighborhood. Its enlargement policy – which has become yet another divisive issue in Europe over the past years – is now forced back into the EU's foreign policy priorities. With Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova officially requesting membership in the EU, deciding how to go about it has become an even greater challenge. Over the past 20 years, we have evidenced a failure of the EU to show results in the Western Balkans – both in terms of driving democratic reforms and the rule of law, as well as in delivering on its promises in the accession process. The war in Ukraine might be the EU's last chance to reinvigorate its enlargement policy and reposition itself geopolitically in eastern and southeastern Europe.

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fter the dark years marked by horrible wars in the 90s, the Western Balkan countries came out all fragile and vulnerable to superpower competition. The western alliance led by the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and United Kingdom, by intervening diplomatically and militarily through NATO to stop the wars and human atrocities in Bosnia and Kosovo, secured a privileged geopolitical status for the years to come. During all this time, Russia was equally involved diplomatically and with peacekeeping missions, making sure it played a role in European security issues. Even if it disagreed with NATO's military intervention in the Kosovo war and failed to stop the bombing of Serbia, Russia maintained a presence and continued to play a role in the security and political developments in the region ever since – at the UN by often abusing its veto power, and through close bilateral relations with Serbia.

By the time the Balkan wars of the 90s came to an end, the European Union was expanding its borders towards the east, and it was in its interest to ensure the stability of the region and help shape the ideological and political trajectory of these states. While back in the early 2000s, there was no doubt that western ideology was the way forward for the Balkans, these states lacked the tools to build democracies and engage in fundamental institutional reforms. For some of them, their main reference to freedom and equality was the one they lived in the great old days when they were still part of socialist Yugoslavia. However, the real sense of freedom for the societies in the Balkans came with the end of Milosevic's brutal wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo and the death of the infamous Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha. Freedom led to a strong enthusiasm that translated into a firm commitment for all these countries to work towards European Union integration. To respond to their demand, in 2003, the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki established a perspective for the region to join the EU, the progress of which was set to depend on their ability to undertake massive reforms in the rule of law, the economy, the functioning of democratic institutions, as well as harmonization of legislation with that of the EU. The enlargement process for the Western Balkans was designed to equally serve as a stabilization policy, which was intended to go hand in hand with the mandatory reforms that would permit them to one day join the Union.

However, twenty years later, among the six Western Balkans states, only Serbia and Montenegro have formally started accession talks but have stagnated in the past few years. North Macedonia and Albania are candidate countries, but the opening of negotiations is currently blocked politically over a bilateral dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, and Bosnia & Hercegovina and Kosovo remain potential candidate countries but due to internal developments and deteriorating security situations, have drifted further away from their EU accession perspective.

Meanwhile, the recent war in Ukraine created momentum for the Ukrainians to demand accession to the European Union, which President Volodymyr Zelenski has officially done on 28 February 2022, only four days after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. Moldova and Georgia followed the same steps by depositing formal applications for EU membership a week after Ukraine due to growing security concerns that the war raises for both countries. While Russia continues its brutal war in Ukraine with a possible escalation in neighboring countries, the EU should view this as an opportunity to reassert further its power in the region by coming up with a united and strong position towards Ukraine's request, and in parallel find a solution to the impasse of the EU accession progress for countries of the Western Balkans.

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Divided Europe And The Role Of Outside Powers In The Western Balkans

Europe's multiple crises between 2010 and 2020 have certainly caused great disagreements and divisions between member states on many issues – including on EU's enlargement policy. Terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Austria, Italy, UK strengthened the extreme right-wing groups, networks, and political parties and contributed to growing anti-immigrant and anti-Islam sentiments in Europe. These sentiments were further intensified with the migrant wave of 2015 in Europe, which included asylum seekers from the Balkan countries. Moreover, Brexit caused a great shock for liberal societies who never imagined that a big European member such as the UK would one day choose to leave the Union. France experienced one of the largest street protests in its modern times, and then the world was hit by a pandemic that killed 6 million people. These consecutive crises divided Europeans and hindered their functioning as a union, with some members deciding to block decisions that they viewed as potentially threatening their countries' national interests. This created an argument for some member states not to support enlargement, under the assumption that more members will necessarily lead to more difficulties in finding unanimity on certain important issues. While priorities changed within Europe - focusing more on saving the Union and reducing the effects of these multiple crises - in its eastern and southeastern neighborhood, outside powers such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia took advantage to raise their profile in these regions with the aim of spreading ideologies and expanding their interests.

In the Western Balkans, the rise of China's footprint was so rapid that today it is considered one of the most impressive geopolitical developments in Europe.¹ Beijing interacts with these countries through economic, political, and cultural activities. It targets key infrastructure investments and has recently expanded its interaction with non-state actors such as media and civil society.²

On the other hand, Russia maintained regular and close relations with Serbia and Bosnia's Serbian leaders. A particular increased interaction was noticed with the rise in power of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, where economic, political and military cooperation increased substantially. Between 2018 and 2022, Serbia purchased Russian tanks, armored vehicles, Pantsir S1 air defense systems, and anti-tank Kornet guided missiles.³ In recent years, Russia used its propaganda machinery to spread disinformation throughout the Western Balkans, mostly attacking the EU for its weak policies in the region but also inciting separatist movements and reviving ethnic conflicts.

Turkey has sought to grow its influence in the region while supporting the region's European perspective. Turkey's role has particularly increased with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who personally engaged in expressing support for the Muslim populations in the Western Balkans - through investments for the reconstruction and maintenance of cultural and religious sights inherited from the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, the role of Saudi Arabia is more specifically focused on spreading religious ideology and using it as soft power to promote their version of Islam in Europe. This influence poses a particular threat to the region's specific multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity. It equally contradicts the cultural and religious heritage of the Muslim populations in the Western Balkans, who have traditionally exercised a Sunni-moderate Islam. In the past decade, there has been a considerable increase in youngsters from economically disadvantaged groups who adhere to Wahhabism by attending institutes and mosques directly financed by Gulf countries.

The sudden rise of outside powers in the Western Balkans constitutes a threat to the region, which has direct implications for European security as well. In the current context where Europe is facing another war in its eastern neighborhood, it becomes urgent for the EU to reposition itself as a security actor in the Western Balkans and defend its partners and its own interests.

¹ Vladimir Shopov. "Mapping China's rise in the Western Balkans", *ECFR* (March 2022). <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/>

² Vladimir Shopov. "A decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans", *ECFR* (2 February 2021). <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>

³ Tefta Kelmendi. "Past talker: How the EU should respond to the Serbian president's re-election", *ECFR* (6 April 2022). <https://ecfr.eu/article/past-talker-how-the-eu-should-respond-to-the-serbian-presidents-re-election/>

What Went Wrong? Lessons from the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans – especially among the young populations - European Union remains the only perspective for the future of their countries. However, the EU’s informal retreat from the region in the past decade - by slowing down the integration process and not delivering on its promises - has also caused great frustration. The western Balkan partners knew that the accession to the EU was going to be a lengthy and heavy technical process. Still, they overestimated the political support needed within the EU for this process to achieve its end. At first, the advancement in the process was meant to depend primarily on how effectively and rapidly these states reformed their institutions and legislations as well as how steadily they manage to maintain a political commitment. However, later on, it became clear that regardless of the advancements in reforms and their commitment – each step towards accession ultimately depends on the political support of all EU member states. And this support faded off over the years, with some member states explicitly blocking the opening of accession negotiations with candidate countries regardless of the readiness of the country in question for achieving that milestone.

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Moreover, the stabilization policy of the EU is often criticized for the lack of progress in the Balkans, holding it partially responsible for supporting ‘*stabilocrats*’ which have hampered democratic development and crashed down on fundamental freedoms and the rule of law reforms. Serbia’s President Alexander Vucic is the perfect example of a stabilocrat. Ever since his rise in power, he has wisely played a double game – that of the “constructive” Western Balkans partner that engages with the EU and commits to delivering on reforms while keeping strong ties with Russia and inciting conflict and supporting secessionist projects in Bosnia and Kosovo. But for Serbia and the region, Vucic poses a serious threat to Serbia’s democracy and the region’s peace and stability.

In other countries, one can also refer to North Macedonia’s former prime minister Nikola Gruevski who dangerously played with the ethnic card in a multi-ethnic country, Milorad Dodik – the President of the Serbian entity of Bosnia and

Hercegovina, an ultra-nationalist who led dangerous secessionist projects in Bosnia, and Montenegro's President and former prime minister, Milo Djukanović who still enjoy the privilege as the country's strongman since 1989, even if recently challenged by the rising figure of opposition leader, Dritan Abazovic. These leaders managed to gain external support – especially from the EU - by positioning themselves as the only legitimate leaders capable of maintaining peace and stability in their countries. The EU, on the other hand, supported them mainly because it didn't see any legitimate alternative forces capable of both maintaining stability and engaging in reforms. Yet while these stabilocrats officially did commit to undertake reforms, their ultimate goal was and remained that of holding on to power. Their ruling caused backsliding in reforms and plunged their countries into deep corruptive affairs and clientelism.

Sadly, the region has also experienced a degradation of the security situation and renewal of ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Hercegovina and between Kosovo and Serbia over the past decade. Milorad Dodik – President of Bosnia's Serbian entity - threatened the integrity of Bosnia and Hercegovina by taking political and legal steps to withdraw the Serb entity from the rest of the country, causing the biggest security crisis in Bosnia since the end of the war in 1995. Such a move did not go unnoticed in Europe, and harsh statements followed from EU leaders against Dodik's move. However, only the United States took concrete steps to punish such actions by imposing sanctions on Dodik for threatening the stability of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In northern Kosovo, tensions mounted in the past few years. More recently, over freedom of movement related to registration plates, and normalization talks between the two countries have been at the lowest point since their start in 2011.

The backsliding of democratic reforms and the rise of security threats in the Western Balkans worry many young people and civil society organizations whose future depends on their country's ability to maintain peace and catch back on reforms. But peace is only possible in democratic societies, which in the case of many states in the region requires renewal of political leadership. However, fighting stabilocracy is a much harder task than one can imagine. These leaders often reach great results in elections due to the important (but not transparent) financial resources they use for campaigns, their use of media channels that serve party interests, and their transactional relations with their electorates.⁴

The European Union should act carefully when assessing political developments in the region and when choosing to support certain leaders. It should concentrate its

⁴ Serbia's elections offered diverse political options, but shortcomings led to an uneven playing field, international observers say. *OSCE*. (4 April 2022). <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/515171>

immediate investments on saving democracy and political pluralism by supporting free media and fighting Russian propaganda. The EU should also act more firmly on issues that pose a security threat for the region before it becomes too late or before other outside players step in to assert their power.

Ukraine’s Request for EU Membership: Challenges and Opportunities

Before the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU had recognized its failure in achieving progress in the Western Balkans. Measures have been officially taken to review the enlargement methodology for the Western Balkans, and a “revised accession negotiations methodology” was adopted in Spring 2020 to simplify and accelerate the accession process for candidate countries who have already started accession negotiations. The revised methodology prioritizes progress on fundamental reforms – the rule of law, functioning of democratic institutions, public administration, and economy. It also aims to accelerate the accession process by giving stronger political support to the process via enhanced exchanges at the higher level between the EU, its member states, and the candidate countries. It also intends to accelerate negotiations by grouping chapters into six thematic clusters, which permits to open negotiations on a cluster as a whole and not on individual chapters.⁵

While this is positive progress, it excludes candidate countries who have not managed to start negotiations with the EU due to vetoes from certain member states – the case of North Macedonia and Albania, and it doesn’t foresee any procedure for potential candidate countries – the case of Bosnia Hercegovina and Kosovo.

Meanwhile, since January 2022, the security situation has severely degraded in Bosnia, and tensions risk mounting again between Kosovo and Serbia due to the absence of a constructive dialogue. Further east, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, alerting Europe about its own security and raising an urgent need to review its policy for the Eastern neighborhood and the Western Balkans. Ukraine took immediate steps to request membership in the EU, and parallel to fighting a war, it engaged in an impressive lobbying mission to obtain political support in Europe for its membership application. Moldova and Georgia – both countries under Russia’s orbit and who, just like Ukraine, aspire stronger ties with the EU, used the opportunity to do the same. These additional requests create an opportunity for the EU to find a solution to its enlargement policy that can apply to both regions. While the EU should continue supporting Ukraine at all levels, including by confirming its EU membership perspective, it should avoid giving a fast track to Ukraine on its accession request. Not only because this will send a

⁵ A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process- Commission lays out its proposals. *Euro-pean Commission* (5 February 2020). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181

negative signal to Western Balkan states who are already frustrated from being stuck in this process for twenty years, but it will also equally put neighboring Moldova and Georgia in difficult situations vis-à-vis Russia. Such a move will only further weaken the credibility of the enlargement policy, and EU's influence as a global actor and reliable partner.

Europeans have already taken concrete steps in the right direction, by rapidly and unanimously supporting Ukraine financially and militarily – which they continue to do. They have so far adopted unanimously five sanctions packages against Russia – some of which will come with heavy consequences for the economies of some member states. To continue on this positive path, Europeans should also use this recent strength to find unity on a constructive solution to the enlargement policy, by making it more flexible and adapting it to the current geopolitical context. Internally, they should also advocate in their respective countries in favor of EU's enlargement and help change the negative perceptions that have been attributed to this policy. Finally, in such times of war, it is more than ever relevant to frame EU's enlargement policy as a wider security policy for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.