THE BALKANS AND THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Taking on the new enlargement momentum with a grain of salt: the Western Balkans' view

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European Union flags in the streets of Sarajevo during the first days of the negotiations between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the country's accession. March 21, 2024. Photo: Samir Jordamovic/Anadolu via Getty Images

The February 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has woken up the institutions and Member States of the European Union (EU) from a decade-long enlargement coma. Since then, the Union's leadership has started discussing the need to facilitate the EU enlargement process, even setting 2030 as a potential target date for welcoming new EU members. This awakening has been demonstrated by the major political decisions to grant former Eastern Partnership countries Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia candidate status and starting accession negotiations with the former two in early 2024. With these actions, the leaders of the EU have reconfigured the understanding of its potential borders.

In parallel with these key decisions, the EU leadership has engaged in internal debates on the preconditions for a future EU enlargement which had been dormant since Croatia's entry in 2013. For the first time in a decade, the European Council has commissioned internal work on the financial implications of enlargement. Prominent discussions on the needed adaptations in view of enlargement have also been supported with the tasking of an expert group by the French and German foreign ministers to examine how to move forward with EU enlargement in light of the new geopolitical circumstances.

While the Russian aggression has undoubtedly turned the attention of the EU leadership eastward, Europe's southeast corner as the home of the longest-standing candidates for EU accession is still at a midpoint. The Western Balkans region, comprising Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia and known as the Western Balkans 6 (WB6), was offered the prospect of EU membership as early as 2003 with the so-called Thessaloniki Agenda. Since then, however, their progress on this path has been painfully slow. On the positive side, the geopolitical momentum resulted in decisions to open the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022, as well as granting candidate status to Bosnia in 2023. Yet, none of the countries in the region have made significant progress on key areas of EU accession, including rule of law that has also undermined their positions as active voices in shaping the discussion on enlargement. Furthermore, the key issue of the bilateral disputes in the region remains a burden and hinders the potential for progress. This includes most prominently the Kosovo-Serbia issue as well as the Bulgarian/Greek vetoes for North Macedonia.

> The renewed interest in enlargement policy can be explained by the link between EU membership and security. Security has come to the fore

In this contribution, I examine how the political elites and experts in the Western Balkans have responded to the renewed interest in enlargement in the Union, focusing on key elements shaping EU enlargement discussions since 2022. These include the role of security in enlargement policy, debates on merit and the speed of the accession process, and gradual integration as one of the more recent developments. Lastly, I examine the regional response to the institutional reforms in the EU as a precondition for EU enlargement and offer key takeaways.

Security and foreign policy alignment with the EU as a starting point

The renewed interest in enlargement policy has been by far most evident in the discussions on the link between EU accession and security. In fact, security considerations have come to the forefront and have been considered as a primary rationale for any future enlargement of the Union. The most evident example of this approach is the requirement for candidates' full alignment early on with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which was endorsed by all countries in the region with the exception of Serbia. There is in fact a clear division between the discourse and actions of Serbia (and the Republika Srpska entity), in terms of their need to balance their positions with Russia, and the rest of the Western Balkans, which have aligned fully with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. This is not surprising as North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro are already NATO member states and Kosovo has a strong NATO presence. The rationale on the Serbian side regarding its own position has included, amongst other reasons, the

argument that the region is still very far from its accession and there is thus no need to sever the country's ties with Russia for an enlargement which may or may not happen in the distant future. [1]

At the other end of the spectrum, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has positioned himself as the key supporter of Ukraine's organising of a regional summit for this purpose in February 2024. In most of his statements during this period, he has underlined that the role of the Western Balkans is becoming even more crucial to the EU in the face of a common threat: "As much as we need you, you need us. Why? First and foremost, for what is dearest to you: security". [2] Similarly, the foreign minister of North Macedonia, Bujar Osmani, established the so-called Western Balkans Quad (WB QUAD), formed by the countries that have fully aligned with EU foreign and security policy in the region, aiming to disassociate these countries from the case of Serbia discussed above. [3]

With these initiatives, both leaders have attempted to showcase their alignment and thus create pressure on the EU for a clearer recognition of the aligned countries' commitment to bear the costs of the sanctions even though they are not members of the Union. The response from the EU in turn, however, has remained rather feeble. Due to its size and political importance, Serbia in practice has not been treated in a significantly different manner to the rest of the countries that have aligned, thus undermining the EU's credibility in this respect.



Opposition supporters wave a European Union flag and join Serbian students in blocking a key intersection in the city, in a protest against alleged electoral fraud in Belgrade, Serbia, on December 29, 2023. This is one of the mass mobilizations after the parliamentary and

local elections of December 17, 2023 in Serbia, in which the victory of President Aleksandar Vučić's party was questioned by opposition groups. Photo: Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images

Speed/geopolitics vs. merit

The example of the EU's swift response in granting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia EU candidate status has been discussed in the region through several narratives. Voices at the critical end of the spectrum have interpreted the speed of current EU decision-making as an illustration of the lack of genuine will in the EU to move in the Southeast in the last decade. At the other end, EU supporters in the Western Balkans use the newly assigned importance to security to buttress their expectations that in response the EU would facilitate what has become a painfully slow process of accession. These two narratives have largely shaped at different times and in various national contexts the post-2022 response in the Western Balkans. While the former line of thought has been mostly used in Serbia and, to a certain extent, Bosnia, the latter argumentation supporting a potential facilitation of the process has dominated in the rest of the region.

The most direct message criticising any potential speeding up has come from the political leadership of Serbia. The Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić has argued that although the EU is announcing a "Big Bang" regarding enlargement that would include the Western Balkans region, this is not very likely, as Ukraine is ultimately the most important for the entire Union. [4] While the rationale for this position is closely linked to Serbia's failure to align with the EU foreign policy discussed above, the lack of trust in a potential speeding up of the process is also present among other actors and countries in the region. Not surprisingly, the perceived appeasement and lack of reaction to the overall positioning of Serbia post-2022 on the part of the EU has been perceived as an informal way of supporting this disconcerting argumentation for the European future of the region.

The latter arguments that these geopolitical circumstances can realistically speed up the enlargement process have been used extensively in Montenegro, with its advocacy for membership in the EU before the end of the decade as the most advanced country in the negotiations. A more cautious and balanced approach was present in the case of the leadership of North Macedonia, which has been a candidate for EU membership for almost 20 years but is formally at the start of its accession negotiations. Although a country highly aligned with EU rules and regulations, it has experienced decades of stagnation due to bilateral issues with its EU neighbours. Responding to debates over speed and merit, its former foreign minister Bujar Osmani has oftentimes argued that there is no 'fast' or 'service track' to EU membership. In his words: "we should concentrate now on seizing the opportunity which will be an individual and merit-based task. The restoration of credibility and conditionality will come from the immediate steps both we and the EU undertake in terms of infusing dynamism" [5] The approach of the new government in North Macedonia that took office in June 2024, however, is likely to be more critical of the Union's actions,

resembling the critical position discussed above.

> Speeding up the accession process is necessary, but it could undermine the transformative power of the European Union by overlooking important systemic problems in candidate countries

In these contextual circumstances, the debate of geopolitics vs. merit has significant implications in understanding the EU accession process overall and requires significant caution. On the one hand, speeding up the accession process is surely necessary keeping in mind that the decade-long enlargement limbo has contributed to the deterioration of the situation on the ground in the Western Balkans. On the other hand, such an approach could undermine the transformative power of the EU by overlooking major systemic issues in the candidate countries. At the same time, overlooking the geopolitical importance and its potential for facilitating the EU accession process would also feed into the arguments of those in the region that claim accession would never happen and would also impact the already wavering public support for EU membership.

Making the best of what's on offer: gradual integration

Much of the enlargement-related discussions that have taken place since 2020 in regard to revisions to the accession methodology have been centred around how to get the candidates closer to the EU in a gradual manner. The work on this issue was facilitated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and in June 2022 the European Council conclusions and the 2023 Czech presidency discussed how to move forward the sectoral integration of the region in various policy areas. These discussions have culminated with the adoption of the so-called Reform and Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in the spring of 2024 and the inclusion of the term 'gradual integration' in the Strategic Agenda of the EU for the 2025-2029 period.

The Western Balkans region has followed closely the gradual integration agenda from the various perspectives of the candidate countries. While on the one hand commendable, the key concern in the region has been whether the discussions on gradual integration are slowly replacing the probability of full membership for these countries. Some experts have voiced concerns, stating that going back to issues of methodology 20 years after the Thessaloniki summit is not good news for the accession process due to a lack of clarity as to the meaning of this approach. [6] Similar concerns have been voiced at the EU level, underlining that "the sectoral approach to gradual integration is politically attractive and can be helpful in speeding up the formal membership negotiation process. However, it does not of itself advance the formal accession process in legal terms. It focuses on looser cooperation and lacks predictability overall". [7] At the other end of the spectrum, expert supporters of this approach have considered that gradual integration may act as a catalyst and unlock the political will in the region which has been missing for many years due to the

unfortunate premise that membership will never happen. If this understanding can be changed and if we work to grab this political momentum, we can hope for a new dynamism in the process. [8]

However, on a formal basis, the region has taken a pragmatic approach towards gradual integration as the only offer currently on the table. As before, one can note that the leadership of North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro in this period has been positive in this regard. Yet, there remains the sense that the concept of gradual integration seems to be undeveloped and a work in progress. The foreign minister of North Macedonia provided the most elaborate proposal through the concept of 'more integration before membership' with five components. These included participation of the Western Balkans 6 (WB6), without voting rights, in the Council working groups; facilitated inclusion in the rule of law instruments of the EU; joining the single market supported by a separate scheme like the cohesion and structural funds, as well as further inclusion in other EU bodies. [9] The leadership of Albania in its capacity as chair of the Berlin process or the Western Balkans summit in 2023 has been a vocal supporter of this approach, providing proposals on how this can be taken further. Montenegrin Prime Minister Milojko Spajić has on several occasions highlighted that we highly appreciate the various aspects of gradual integration in order to prepare for enlargement, pointing out that the Reform and Growth Plan could be a game changer in this respect, bringing benefits to these countries before membership. [10]



The Old Bridge in the city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, illuminated in the colours of the European flag on 12 October 2022, following the European Commission's proposal to grant Bosnia the status of candidate country for membership. Photography: X/Johann

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The elephant in the room: internal reforms in the EU as a (pre)condition for enlargement?

The refocusing of the EU on the enlargement process took place hand in hand with the discussions on the internal reforms in the Union mostly championed by France and Germany. The common dilemma in the region has been whether the discussion on internal reforms in the Union will lead to deadlock and potentially hijack the likelihood of any future enlargement. This logic largely underpins the position of Montenegro, as formally the most advanced country in the accession process, which is advocating for its inclusion in a Union of 28 without any institutional reform and thus hopefully avoiding the foreseen procedure in the French Constitution.

Beyond the significant concerns on a potential deadlock in the EU, not much substantive discussion has occurred in the region on institutional reforms in the EU as a precondition for enlargement. In his capacity as a chairperson of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2023, with a strong focus on foreign policy, the former foreign minister of North Macedonia, Bujar Osmani, commented on a few occasions that the discussions on internal reform and enlargement "represent two sides of the same coin. I don't see them as excluding but closely complementing each other and best if executed in parallel. The depth of the current debates in different configurations – from heads of state and government to ministers and experts – encourages us that these processes will meet each other in the near future. Until we finish our homework there is plenty of time for the EU to prepare itself". [11]

> Supporters of gradual integration into the EU believe that this approach can act as a catalyst in the region. If we work to grab the political momentum, we can hope for a new dynamism in the process

Scratching the surface of the political statements, as far as the discussions on internal reforms in the EU are concerned, most attention has been given to the potential shift to a system of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the intermediate steps of the EU accession negotiations. This is not surprising keeping in mind that the region is rife with multiple vetoes and bilateral disputes. From the perspective of the region, use of QMV in the accession negotiations would be a much welcome change, as it is seen as protecting the candidates in these uneven battles with Member States when in a bilateral dispute.

Where do we stand and what lies ahead?

Zooming in on the response from the Western Balkans two years after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine we see a mixed record. First, with the exception of Serbia, the region has almost immediately aligned with the EU's sanctions on Russia, immediately showcasing their solidarity and geopolitical orientation without significant opposition amongst their populations. For the aligned countries, the support for Ukraine continues not only based on value orientation, NATO membership, but also because of the region's intrinsic ties with the EU.

Second, the region is engulfed in a debate over balancing the role of geopolitics and merit in the process of enlargement and accession. While the last two years have shown us the significant role of geopolitics, the region needs a significant focus on reforms and adjustments in view of EU membership. The EU and the candidates should need to find a common formula to use the geopolitical argumentation whilst maintaining the merit of the process in order to safeguard the future Union as a legal order.

Third, responding to the support of the EU institutions and members for gradual integration, the regional leadership actively contributed to the discussion on how to foster stronger policy ties with the region through some forms of sectoral integration. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to get the EU closer to the citizens of the region and to facilitate a much-needed economic convergence. While the development of these approaches is still ongoing, the big concern in the Western Balkans remains whether the offer of accession is still credible and on the table.

Last, the post-2022 discussions on enlargement have put the focus back on institutional reform in the EU as a precondition for enlargement. As far as the discussions on the internal reforms in the EU are concerned, in the Western Balkans there is a common concern that the inability of Member States to decide on such big steps could block any enlargement in the foreseeable future. Beyond this general concern, when discussing reforms to internal decision-making processes, not surprisingly, the Western Balkans' concerns lie mostly with the potential to introduce looser decision-making into the intermediate steps of accession as a way of dealing with the perpetual threat of vetoes.

> The EU and the candidates should need to find a common formula to use the geopolitical argumentation whilst maintaining the merit of the process in order to safeguard the legal order

Overall, almost three years after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the renewed interest in an upcoming EU enlargement, the Western Balkans maintain an attitude of realism in terms of the prospect of their own accession. The new enlargement momentum has been taken with a grain of salt and due to the reasons discussed above has not provided

a comparable push to the one seen in Ukraine and Moldova, at least not until the summer of 2024. The Western Balkans 6 (WB6) have also maintained a slow record of their own progress and transformation. It seems that many in the region are waiting on the new Commission and the commissioner in charge of the candidate countries to see where the enlargement policy is headed in the future.

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