



**THE NEW REALITY:
THE RUSSIAN WAR ON UKRAINE
AND THE WESTERN BALKANS
EU ACCESSION PROCESS**

by Ivan Damjanovski, Alba Cela, Ana Nenezić, Donika Emini, Nedžma Džananović, Igor Novaković

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Introduction

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine that started in February 2022 has been described by German chancellor Scholz as a turning point (zeitenwende) in European history¹ that is posed to change the geopolitical outlook of the continent. The war in Ukraine has indeed reshuffled power relations in Europe and has provoked an unforeseen showcasing of unity and solidarity within the EU and across a majority of its member states. Another important outcome from the war in Ukraine has been the reawakening of EU's enlargement policy and its geopolitical reimagining as a key instrument for stability in the EU and its neighborhood. Although prior to the war in Ukraine, the European Commission has already acknowledged EU's enlargement policy as a "geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth in the whole of Europe"², the most challenging altercation of Europe's geopolitical

landscape since the Cold War needed to happen for its potency as a stabilising tool to become more evident.

The war in Ukraine has provoked a "geopolitical turn" in EU enlargement which has reinvigorated the stagnant accession process by delivering the "highest number of enlargement events in a single year since Eastern enlargement".³ The first events occurred within days of the Russian attack. On 28 February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership, a decision which was followed by separate applications for membership from Moldova and Georgia three days later. The Council requested the Commission to speed-up the evaluation process of the applications for membership which has resulted in the European Council decision at its meeting on 23 June to grant the status of candidates for membership to Ukraine and Moldova and to open

¹ Bundesregierung, Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022, 27.02.2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>

² European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM(2021) 644 final, 2021, p. 25

³ Schimmelfennig, Frank. "The Advent of Geopolitical Enlargement and its Credibility Dilemma", in: Džankić, Jelena, Simonida Kacarska and Soeren Keil (eds.), "A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics", Florence: European University Institute, 2023, pp. 185-193

the door for potential candidacy to Georgia.⁴ This has been an unprecedented move that seemed almost impossible even months before the war. In what is clearly a (geo)politically inspired decision, the EU has jumpstarted what has been a much longer technical period of assessments of a country's application for membership, to deliver the quickest avis in recent history. Even more, with the decision to geographically expand the reach of its enlargement policy, the EU has abandoned its stance of not expanding into the Russian sphere of influence and has fundamentally changed the outlook on its neighbourhood policy by opening the prospects for membership to partner countries from a framework which, since its inception, has been seen as an alternative platform of cooperation to the EU accession process.⁵

While these developments have significantly boosted the credibility of the EU accession perspectives of the Association trio (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), it certainly raised questions (and frustrations) over the fate of the enlargement

policy in the Western Balkans countries that have been stuck in the waiting room for almost 20 years. EU officials were quick to respond, as High Representative Borell stated in March 2022 that it was “high time to reinvigorate the enlargement process and integrate.... the whole Western Balkans in an irreversible manner into the European Union”.⁶ However, The Western Balkan leadership initially was not impressed as it raised its frustrations from the slow pace of the accession process. This became evident at the EU-Western Balkans Leader's meeting on the side of the European Council Summit in June 2022 which was sort of a fiasco, as the evident decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova was offset with complaints from virtually every Western Balkan leader over the deadlock of the accession process of their countries and the obstructionism from certain member states.⁷

However, EU's commitment towards the region did pick up quickly after the Summit with the decision to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022

⁴ European Council, Conclusions – 23 and 24 June 2022, Brussels, EUCO 24/22, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

⁵ Meister, Stefan, Milan Nič, Iskra Kirova and Steven Blockmans. “Russia's War in Ukraine: Rethinking the EU's Eastern Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy”. German Council on Foreign Relations DGAP Report, 2023

⁶ European Union External Action (EEAS). “Albania: HR/VP Borrell visited Tirana to discuss global impact of the war against Ukraine and reaffirm support for EU accession” 16.02.2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/albania-hrvp-borrell-visited-tirana-discuss-global-impact-war-against-ukraine-and-reaffirm_en

⁷ Radio Free Europe. Balkan Leaders Frustrated Over Stalled EU Membership Bids As Bloc Moves To Grant Candidate Status To Ukraine, Moldova, 23.06.2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31912243.html>

and the EU announcement at the Berlin Process Summit in November 2023 of an energy support package of 1 billion euros in EU grants for the Western Balkans.⁸ At the EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana in December 2022, the EU stated that it “reconfirms its full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans and calls for the acceleration of the accession process”.⁹ Later that month the European Council decided to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina the status of a candidate country¹⁰, almost seven years after its official application for membership. These developments were followed in the first half of 2023 by several initiatives and lobbying efforts by groups of member states for acceleration and reform of the enlargement policy with the Western Balkans.

At the first glance, the geopolitical ramifications of the war in Ukraine have significantly reshuffled the outlook of EU’s enlargement policy and have built a momentum for significant progress. However, the past experience with the slow pace of the enlargement policy

in the Western Balkans and the recent history of failed promises for acceleration of the accession process legitimately raises concerns over the long-term prospects of this reinvigorated interest in enlargement as a geopolitical and stabilizing instrument. This paper examines the potential impact of the geopolitical circumstances created by the war in Ukraine on the accession prospects of the Western Balkans. It analyses the possibilities to unlock the stagnant enlargement policy as well as the probable drawbacks from the perspective of the six Western Balkan countries. The paper starts with an overview of the EU accession process in the region and the current state of play in each Western Balkan country. It continues with analysis of the potential effects of the war in Ukraine on the enlargement perspectives of the Western Balkans by focusing on how the opportunities that have emerged from this geopolitical shift in Europe could positively impact the accession process but also on the possible impediments for accelerated enlargement. The paper ends with concluding remarks and a set of general recommendations.

⁸ European Commission. “Berlin Process Summit: EU announces €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans and welcomes new agreements to strengthen the Common Regional Market”. Press Release, 3.11.2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6478

⁹ EU-Western Balkans Summit. “Tirana Declaration, 6.12.2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60568/tirana-declaration-en.pdf>

¹⁰ European Council, European Council Meeting Conclusions, 15.12.2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60872/2022-12-15-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

RETROSPECTIVE OF THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki and the Thessaloniki Declaration which opened the door for EU accession of the Western Balkans by unequivocally declaring that the future of the region is within the framework of “ultimate membership” into the EU.¹¹ At the time, at least among the enthusiastic Western Balkan public, nobody expected that two decades after, only one Western Balkan country (Croatia) would obtain membership, while the rest of the group would be nowhere near the completion of the accession process. However, the early developments in the new accession agenda for the Western Balkans, indicated a more stringent conditionality framework in comparison to the previous waves of enlargement. This was

already evident in the inaugural EU enlargement strategy in 2005¹² which introduced the principle of rigorous conditionality which was enhanced with the “new approach”¹³ update of the strategy that introduced a set of new conditions and mechanisms centered around compliance with rule of law conditionality. These measures did not deliver the expected outcomes, as progress in the accession process moved at a snail’s pace because of both exogenous factors such as EU’s lethargic and bureaucratic approach towards the region’s accession aspirations and endogenous factors such as the lack of reforms efforts on behalf of the Western Balkan leadership and instances of democratic backsliding in some cases. In addition, the credibility has been shattered by

¹¹ European Commission. “EU Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki Declaration”, 21.6.2003 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163

¹² European Commission. “Communication from the Commission – 2005 Enlargement Strategy Paper”, Brussels, 9.11.2005, COM (2005) 561 final

¹³ European Commission. “Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012– 2013”, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, com(2012) 600 final, 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/strategy_paper_2012_en.pdf

the growing nationalization of the EU's enlargement policy¹⁴ and member-state arbitrary use of veto-power most vividly portrayed by the Greek and Bulgarian blockades of North Macedonia's accession based on imposition of conditions which arise from bilateral disputes which are outside of the general EU conditionality framework.

The latest attempt to reinvigorate EU's enlargement policy has been the 2020 New Methodology for Accession Negotiations¹⁵, led by the French president Macron which introduced a robust framework of new mechanisms aiming at more clarity and a stronger political steer of the accession process, including accelerated phasing-in to individual EU policies and reversibility in the accession process for non-complying candidates. The New Methodology has been already formalized in the negotiating frameworks for North Macedonia and Albania, as it will be the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo when they will potentially start the accession negotiations.

Although not obliged, Serbia and Montenegro eventually decided to opt-in and potentially encompass the new elements of the new methodology into their existing negotiation frameworks.¹⁶

The New Methodology has provoked mixed reactions in the Western Balkan countries, ranging from welcoming remarks from the political elites and a more critical response from the expert and civil society community in the (then) four candidate countries, to almost no response in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In North Macedonia and Albania which at the time were the most concerned stakeholders, the new methodology has been positively accepted by the political leadership. In contrast, the expert community has been more reserved. In Albania experts expressed some reservations on the element of reversibility of the process arguing that bilateral tensions and issues could become obstacles in the process.¹⁷ Now that sufficient time has elapsed experts believe that the new methodology was mostly

¹⁴ Hillion, Christophe. "The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy", SIEPS, 6, 2010, http://sieps.hemsida.eu/sites/default/files/2010_6_.pdf

¹⁵ European Commission. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans", Brussels, 5.2.2020 COM(2020) 57 final

¹⁶ Council of the European Union. "Application of the Revised Enlargement Methodology to the Accession Negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia.", 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8536-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁷ Kamberi, Geron, Nga historia tek metodologjia e re e zgjerimit të BE: Një metodologji më e "zgjuar" apo më e "zgjatur", Europa Magazine, 18.3.2022, <https://europa.com.al/index.php/2022/03/18/nga-historia-tek-metodologjia-e-re-e-zgjerimit-te-be-nje-metodologji-me-e-zgjuar-apo-me-e-zgjatur/>

an exercise of postponement rather than a real change in the content of the process.¹⁸ In North Macedonia, the New Methodology has also been criticized for further complicating the accession process and the introduction of even more rigorous conditionality.¹⁹

Serbia, on the other hand, did not rush to accept the New Methodology. The expert community has advocated accepting the New Methodology, as it offers more possibilities for Serbia.²⁰ In February 2020, then Minister for European Integration, Jadranka Joksimovic, said that the new methodology fits Serbia and will “speed up the integration process.”²¹ The acceptance came in an unusual fashion, with the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, informing his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, during his visit to France in July that Serbia would accept it. This is an unusual, although a legal (according to the Vienna

Convention) method of acceptance, and Serbia’s Ministry of European Integration treated it as valid.²²

The response in Montenegro has also been rather ambivalent. While the government and political elites have generally welcomed the new approach²³, several concerns have been raised. On the side of political elites, the government initially expressed cautious optimism. The Montenegrin government saw the New Methodology as a potential opportunity to accelerate the negotiation process given its provisions for clustering of chapters and the “more for more” principle, which implies that more reforms could lead to more benefits and quicker progress. In contrast, the expert community’s response was more analytical and generally more critical.²⁴ Experts pointed out that the new methodology, while offering more political engagement and clearer rewards for reforms, also

¹⁸ Gjergji Vurmo, “A credible new accession methodology or just a face-saving exercise?”, CEPS, 2020, <https://www.ceps.eu/a-credible-new-accession-methodology-or-just-a-face-saving-exercise/>

¹⁹ Радио Слободна Еевропа. “Нова методологија за потешок пат кон ЕУ”, 22.2.2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/30447124.html>, European Policy Institute. “Предлогот на ЕК за нова методологија на пристапувањето – повеќе условеност и ново групирање во регионот”, 5.2.2020, <https://epi.org.mk/post/14509>,

²⁰ Javna medijska ustanova JMU Radio-televizija Vojvodine, “Srbija ima više razloga da prihvati novu metodologiju eu,” JMU Radio-televizija Vojvodine, 26.04.2020

²¹ European Western Balkans “Joksimović: uskoro mapa puta za otvaranje pregovora po klasterima”, 3.02. 2021

²² European Western Balkans “Srbija i nova metodologija: umesto vlade, prihvatio predsednik”, 5.02.2021

²³ Vlada Crne Gore. “Crna Gora prihvatila novu metodologiju, dobra platforma za intenziviranje reformi”, 15.05.2020, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/224479-crna-gora-prihvatila-novu-metodologiju-dobra-platforma-za-intenziviranje-reformi>

²⁴ Pobjeda. “Đurović: Revidirana metodologija otežava poziciju Crne Gore”, 10.05.2021, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/durovic-revidirana-metodologija-otezava-poziciju-crne-gore>

introduced more uncertainty into the process.²⁵

In hindsight, many of the initial concerns around the New Methodology are still valid today. The New Methodology is yet to be put into practice in its entirety and there are still many unknowns around its implementation. For example, three years after its inception, the EU has not been able to provide a more detailed explanation of the substantive and operational properties of the envisaged instruments in the revised methodology.

State of play and public support for membership

The EU accession of the Western Balkans has been placed in a much less favorable setting in comparison to previous enlargement rounds. The region has been faced with much stricter and ever-growing conditionality and 'enlargement fatigue' that has significantly lowered the credibility of the accession perspective. At the same time, the Western Balkan applicants suffer from low economic growth, weak capacity of the public administration, and high domestic costs induced by

corruption and illiberal tendencies.²⁶ These factors have contributed towards the very slow progress in the accession process, where out of the six applicants, only four have started, or are starting accession negotiations and not a single country is near the prospect of membership.

Although on paper, *Montenegro* is the most advanced Western Balkan country in the accession process, the current status of the country as per the 2022 European Commission report²⁷, presents a complex picture of limited progress and many challenges. Montenegro officially applied for EU membership in December 2008 and initiated accession negotiations in June 2012. Over the past 11 years, Montenegro has opened all 33 negotiating chapters. However, only three chapters have been provisionally closed: Chapter 25 - Science and Research, Chapter 26 - Education and Culture, and Chapter 31 - Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy. The overall accession progress is largely dependent on the implementation of rule of law reforms. However, this has proven challenging due to persistent issues within the nation's political and judicial structures. The latest

²⁵ Aktuelno. "Marović: Nova metodologija ne uvodi bitne novine, fokus ostaje na vladavini prava", 18.03.2021, <https://www.aktuelno.me/politika/marovic-nova-metodologija-ne-uvodi-bitne-novine-fokus-ostaje-na-vladavini-prava/>

²⁶ Zhelyazkova, Asia, Ivan Damjanovski, Zoran Nechev and Frank Schimmelfennig. "European Union Conditionality in the Western Balkans: External Incentives and Europeanization", in: Dzankić, Jelena, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić (eds.), "The Europeanization of the Western Balkans: a Failure of EU Conditionality?", Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp.15–37

²⁷ European Commission. "Commission Staff Working Document – Montenegro 2022 Report.", 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022_en

European Commission Rule of Law non-paper regarding Chapters 23 and 24 for Montenegro, published as a working document in May 2023²⁸ pointed out that the country had lost focus on key EU reforms. Moreover, Montenegro currently lacks a Minister for European Integration and a Chief Negotiator with the EU, after the previous one resigned in 2022.

Serbia obtained EU candidate status in 2012 and opened accession negotiations with the EU in 2014 after accepting the First Normalization Agreement with Kosovo in 2013 (i.e. 2013 Brussels Agreement). So far, the negotiations have progressed very slowly, with Serbia opening 21 chapters out of 35 until now and temporarily closing only two chapters (Chapter 25 and Chapter 26). The primary reason for this was the slow pace of the normalization process with Kosovo, but also the problems regarding rule of law fundamentals (Chapters 23 and 24), and since recently, the alignment of Serbia with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFPS). At certain periods, (2019-2021 for example), no chapters have been opened. However, as Serbia has accepted the New Methodology, it has managed to open Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity) in December 2021. As noted above, the major stumbling

blocks in the process are Chapters 35 (other issues, Kosovo), 23 and 24 (fundamentals), and recently Chapter 31 (Common Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy). Regarding Chapter 35, the scope of the Chapter is not fully defined as it depends on the process of the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina negotiations and the overall pace of the normalization process (namely, the negotiated agreements and their implementation are the EU conditions as they become content of the Chapter). Despite the recent breakthroughs with the 2023 Agreement accepted in February in Brussels and the subsequent Implementation plan accepted in March 2023, the escalation in the north of Kosovo since the end of 2022 and the protracted conflict make the implementation uncertain.

North Macedonia's accession to the EU has been an epitome of the complexities of the Western Balkan EU enlargement process. Together with Croatia, the country was once considered to be a frontrunner in the accession process, as it became a candidate country already in 2005 and got its first recommendation from the European Commission to start accession negotiations in 2009. However, this impetus was offset by a decade long blockade of the start of the accession negotiations by Greece grounded on the name dispute between the two countries.

²⁸ Council of the European Union. 2023. "Working Document WK 8534/2023 INIT. Rule of Law Non-Paper Regarding Chapters 23 and 24 for Montenegro."

The lifting of this blockade which came as a result of the ratification of the Prespa Agreement in 2019 was short-lived as the country's EU accession progress was blocked once again, initially by the French demands for revision of the accession methodology this time and then by the Bulgarian blockade of the adoption of the EU negotiation framework with North Macedonia, due to a new bilateral dispute based on questions of national identity, history and language. A way out of the deadlock was presented in June 2022 by the French Presidency of the EU Council in a controversial document, dubbed the French proposal. The document envisaged the lifting of the Bulgarian blockade conditioned with several concessions in regard to Bulgarian demands, most notably the inclusion of a Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian Constitution and the adoption of hate-speech legislation related to the treatment of this minority group. The Macedonian government decided to accept the French proposal which has temporarily put the accession process back on track, as this enabled the start of the accession negotiations with the inaugural Intergovernmental conference in July 2022 and the

initiation of the screening process. However, progress in the accession negotiations in the short term is now conditioned with amendments of the Constitution vis-à-vis the recognition of Bulgarian minority, which at the moment does not have the support of the opposition parties whose votes are necessary to meet the threshold for Constitutional changes.

Albania became a candidate country in June 2014, five years after its application for membership. After a long process of judicial reform compliance with EU conditionality, on March 2020 the General Affairs Council of the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Albania and the following day the Council of the European Union approved this decision. The first intergovernmental conference with Albania was held on 19 July 2022.²⁹ Albania has completed the screening process for the first, second and most recently the third cluster as envisaged in the New Methodology.³⁰ However, a new possible stumbling block in Albania's progress could be the ongoing dispute with Greece which worsened since the arrest of the candidate Fredi Bejleri a few days before being elected mayor under charges of vote buying. The reaction from the

²⁹ European Commission. "First Intergovernmental Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia to kick-start the accession negotiation", 19.07.2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/first-intergovernmental-conferences-albania-and-north-macedonia-kick-start-accession-negotiation-2022-07-19_en

European Commission. "Closing the screening meetings of Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth cluster with Albania and North Macedonia, 16.6.2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/closing-screening-meetings-competitiveness-and-inclusive-growth-cluster-albania-and-north-macedonia-2023-06-16_en

Greek Prime Minister and the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs has been very negative for Albania, calling the arrest politically motivated. They have also been clear and constituent in their statements that they have already addressed their complaints to Brussels indicating potential consequences for Albania's integration progress.³¹

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is the latest country to obtain the status of a candidate country. More than six years after the country formally applied to join the EU, the candidacy status was granted by the European Council's decision on December 15, 2022. The decision clearly came as a part of the EU's geopolitical awakening after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Granting the candidacy status for Ukraine and Moldova shortly after their membership applications has raised pressures to respond positively to the membership application of Bosnia and Herzegovina from

2016, even though the set of 14 priorities defined in the European Commission's 2019 Opinion³²—originally meant as a prerequisite for Bosnia's candidacy status— is yet to be fulfilled. Bosnia's slow progress in the accession process has been continuously marred by the complexities of its political system based on ineffective inter-ethnic cohabitation. The calculations of political elites and their attempts to make the process serve their political interests have been the main reason for BiH to lag behind the rest of the region. The pro-Russian Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, is the most illustrative of this trend as the momentum created by the candidacy and creation of the new state-level government has significantly melted due to his activities. As the rest of the ruling coalition has desperately tried to hang on to their EU agenda, Dodik has undertaken acts that undermine the constitutional order of BiH and the Dayton Peace Accords³³ and has drawn heavy criticism from

³¹ Vox. "Greek Foreign Minister: We have informed Brussels about the arrest of Fredi Beleri", 12.05.2023, <https://www.voxnews.al/english/politike/ministri-i-jashem-grek-kemi-njofuar-brukselin-per-arrestimin-e-fredi-i39538>; Oculus News. "The candidate of Berisha-Meta for Himara is arrested, Fredi Beleri was caught buying 8 votes for 40 thousand leks", 12.05.2023, <https://www.ocnal.com/2023/05/the-candidate-of-berisha-meta-for.html>

³² European Commission. "Key Findings of the Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Membership Application and Analytical Report." Brussels: European Commission, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/COUNTRY_19_2778.

³³ Milorad Dodik, the president of Republic Srpska entity, signed into law controversial changes approved by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska that effectively allow it to disregard decisions made by the country's international envoy. He did it six days after High Representative Christian Schmidt had canceled several controversial rulings that defy the country's constitution and the peace accords. Under the 1995 Dayton accords, Schmidt has the power to impose laws as the final interpreter of the state constitution, though his decisions can be reviewed and questioned by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia, if the Office of the High Representative (OHR) approves. After claims that BiH does not have a High Representative appointed by a competent body (UN Security Council according to Dodik), Dodik filed criminal charges against Christian Schmidt to the District Public Prosecutor's Office in Banja Luka.

High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell who recently referred to the Republika Srpska entity authorities' actions, initiatives and laws, as contrary to Bosnia's aspirations towards the EU and thereby only serve to isolate that entity.³⁴

Kosovo remains the only Western Balkan country that has not obtained the status of a candidate country. In the case of Kosovo, the practical implementation of the enlargement process has not been put into test yet, primarily because political challenges hinder Kosovo's progress due to its lack of recognition by five EU member states. Ukraine receiving the candidate status in the midst of a war and the new geopolitical political impetus in EU enlargement, have provided Kosovo with the unique opportunity to extend its ambitions and submit an application for EU membership in December 2022.³⁵ This step has placed Kosovo in

the process, albeit with an unclear perspective and without any formal follow up from the EU or the member states holding the EU presidency. Sweden has not yet responded, and the current presidency led by Spain provides no hope for Kosovo due to Spain's strong resistance toward Kosovo status and lack of political will to progress Kosovo in the EU membership application.³⁶ Kosovo's accession process is extensively intertwined with the EU facilitated Dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. The war in Ukraine has heightened the security concerns about the escalation of the situation between Kosovo and Serbia. This led to increased diplomatic efforts of the EU to solve the Kosovo – Serbia issue. Regardless of the shuttle diplomacy efforts invested by the EU and the U.S. which resulted in the Brussels Arrangement signed in February 2023³⁷ followed by the Ohrid Agreement in March 2023³⁸, series of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have hindered the already

³⁴ N1. "EU's Borrell Criticizes Bosnia's Republika Srpska Entity Threatening Isolation", 19.07.2023, <https://n1info.ba/english/news/eus-borrell-criticizes-republika-srpska-entity-threatening-it-with-isolation/>

³⁵ Isufi, Perparim. "Kosovo Leaders Sign EU Candidacy Application." Balkan Insight, 14.12.2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/14/kosovo-leaders-sign-eu-candidacy-application/>.

³⁶ Taylor, Alice. "Swedish Presidency Gets to Work on Kosovo EU Membership Application." Euractiv, 10.01. 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/swedish-presidency-gets-to-work-on-kosovo-eu-membership-application/>.

³⁷ European Union External Action (EEAS). "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Eu Proposal - Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia.", 27.02.2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en.

³⁸ European Union External Action (EEAS). "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia", 18.03.2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.

limited progress made by the EU to solve the dispute. Tensions in the northern part of Kosovo, especially those triggered after the local elections in the four municipalities in the north, have led to immense fissures between Kosovo and the EU. The EU efforts to manage the crisis between Kosovo and Serbia mainly focused on pressure toward the Kosovo Government to deescalate the situation and pave the way for new elections and return to the negotiation table. The refusal of the Government of Kosovo to comply with the EU demands in the Brussels Dialogue led to the introduction of sanctions by the EU.³⁹

The low credibility of the accession process in the Western Balkans coupled with more strict political conditionality that has been often centered around sensitive questions of national identity have contributed towards a more evident variation in recent trends of support for EU membership across the Western Balkan countries. On one hand, public opinion in Albania and Kosovo has maintained extremely high levels of support for EU membership. In

Albania, support for the country's accession to the European Union has reached peak percentages of above 95%.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, despite the complex relations between the EU and Kosovo and the country's unclear membership path, the public opinion in Kosovo remains predominantly pro EU and largely supports the EU integration of the country. The trend of public opinion perceptions toward the EU has been predominantly positive by maintaining a 90 per cent of approval, with the latest polls indicating that 94% of the population supports EU membership.⁴¹ The pro-EU sentiment is also indicative for Montenegro, as roughly 80% of the population supports EU membership, while 76% of citizens believe that Montenegro will become a member of the EU. In BiH, the general public support for EU membership has been constantly high, mostly in the range above 70%. However, there is a significant inter-ethnic gap in the distribution of attitudes. In the Bosniak-Croat Federation of BiH, 86% of respondents are supportive of EU accession. In contrast, the support in Republic Srpska is slightly above 50%.⁴²

³⁹ Dunai, Marton. "EU Hits Kosovo with Sanctions after Serb Tensions Flare up Again". Financial Times, 14.06.2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/99a65be0-6af6-41f5-8de2-71f6e078568a>.

⁴⁰ Western Balkans Security Barometer. "Public Perceptions Towards European Integration, Influence Of External Actors And Government Performance", Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2023, <https://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barometer-2023-Albania-4-Eng.pdf>

⁴¹ Fetiù, Dea, and Gramos Sejdiu. "Citizens' Perceptions on Foreign Actors Influence in Kosovo and Regional Cooperation (Trends 2020-2022)", Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, July 2023. https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Barometer_2023_Kosovo_3_Eng_%281%29.pdf.

⁴² Direkcija za evropske integracije BiH. "Istraživanja Javnog Mnijenja 2023." Direkcija za evropske integracije BiH, 2023. <https://www.dei.gov.ba/bs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnijenja>.

On the other hand, North Macedonia and Serbia have been witnessing considerable declining trends of support for EU membership. In North Macedonia, the support for membership has been significantly correlated to the credibility of the accession process. More than a decade of blockades of the start of the accession negotiations have influenced a significant drop in the level of support for EU membership, from peak support of 90+% in the early 2000s to 64% in late 2022.⁴³ Although these dynamics did not have serious effects on the Eurosceptic energy in the country as only 11% of the population is openly Eurosceptic, there is a considerable (and rising) gap between the two largest ethnic communities in the country, as the ethnic Macedonians tend to be more Eurosceptic than the ethnic Albanians. The low levels of support for EU membership is most evident in Serbia. According to several public opinion polls, despite the stop-and-go process of the EU integration of Serbia, more than half of the population of Serbia have recently supported the

process and Serbia's membership in the EU. However, the support started to fall after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU response resulting in new, punitive, restrictive measures against Russia. According to the latest opinion polls performed in Serbia in 2023, only 45.4% of respondents would vote for Serbia's EU membership, while 43% were against.⁴⁴ In addition, 44% of respondents believe that Serbia would have more damage from entering the EU than benefits.⁴⁵

Finally, there is a growing trend of pessimism across the region on the willingness of the EU to enlarge with the Western Balkan countries. For example, more than 40% of respondents in Serbia⁴⁶ and one third of respondents in North Macedonia⁴⁷ believe that their country will never become a member of the EU. In BiH, almost 40% of the population does not trust the intentions of the EU in regard to enlargement⁴⁸, while in both Albania⁴⁹ and Kosovo⁵⁰, majority of the population is not optimistic about the willingness of the EU to enlarge in the near future.

⁴³ Damjanovski, Ivan. "Analysis of Public Opinion on North Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2014-2022)". Skopje: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung/Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje, 2023.

⁴⁴ Westminster Foundation for Democracy. "Izveštaj sa istraživanja javnog mnjenja: Društveno-politički stavovi građana Srbije 2023. godine", Belgrade: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, April 2023, p. 13

⁴⁵ Crta. "Istraživanje: Politički stavovi građana -februar 2023", Crta, March 30, 2023

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Damjanovski, Ivan. "Analysis of Public Opinion on North Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2014-2022)". Skopje: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung/Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje, 2023,

⁴⁸ Direkcija za evropske integracije BiH. "Istraživanja Javnog Mnjenja 2023", Direkcija za evropske integracije BiH, 2023, <https://www.dei.gov.ba/bs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja>

⁴⁹ Western Balkans Security Barometer. "Public Perceptions Towards European Integration, Influence Of External Actors And Government Performance", Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2023, <https://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barometer-2023-Albania-4-Eng.pdf>

⁵⁰ Fetiü, Dea, and Gramos Sejdiu. "Citizens' Perceptions on Foreign Actors Influence in Kosovo and Regional Cooperation (Trends 2020-2022)." Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, July 2023. https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Barometer_2023_Kosovo_3_Eng_%281%29.pdf

In summary, the current enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans appears to have reached its limits. Twenty years after the first promise of membership, none of the Western Balkan candidates is nowhere near the completion of the much-desired goal. Unwillingness of the EU and its member states to engage with the accession process in a meaningful way, coupled with explicit obstructions from some member states has shattered the credibility of EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans and has led

to disappointment of the reformist elites and the general public in the region while empowering anti-western and Eurosceptic forces. The new methodology so far has not achieved any meaningful outcomes and has further complicated the already complex conditionality framework. Paradoxically, it took another war in Europe, for the EU to reconsider its enlargement policy towards the region and, at least on a short-term basis, to revive the hopes of breaking the deadlock in the accession process.

Raised prospects for the Western Balkan EU Accession?

For the past several years many experts have argued that a significant overhaul of EU enlargement is needed in order to overcome the extremely low credibility of the accession perspective in the Western Balkans, prevent further democratic backsliding and insulate the region from malign and corrosive influences from authoritarian states like Russia and China as it became evident that the longer the Western Balkan accession progress is deliberately slowed down by the EU and skeptical member states, it gives more leeway to these competing powers.⁵¹ After several years of virtual stalemate in the accession process, it seems that the political and economic earthquake that was caused by the war in Ukraine has, at least in short term, urged the EU to rethink the consequences of the “enlargement fatigue” in this new geopolitical reality. Recently, authors have argued that, considering the new circumstances on the European continent, the EU simply cannot

afford to evade the question of enlargement anymore as it seems to be the most effective instrument to block Russian expansionism and safeguard democracy in the candidate countries.⁵² This strengthened geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans can be seen as a great opportunity to revitalize EU’s influence in the region as the external incentives (reward of EU membership) that the EU can put on the table cannot be matched by neither of its geopolitical rivals.⁵³ This is also evident from an economic standpoint as well. Despite the growing economic presence in the Western Balkans, the EU is the most dominant exporter and importer of goods, the principal partner in the financial and technological sectors of the economy and leader in foreign direct investments in the region. However, as a recent report has stated, “at present, the EU’s strong economic, financial, technological, infrastructural and labour-mobility links with its neighbouring regions

⁵¹ Keil, Soeren, and Bernhard Stahl. “Introduction”, in: “A New Eastern Question? Great Powers and the Post-Yugoslav States”, Keil, Soeren and Bernhard Stahl (eds.), Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2022, pp. 27-56

⁵² Maillard, Sébastien. “How enlargement accomplishes European unity while changing its nature”, Jacques Delors Institute Policy paper No. 287, 2023

⁵³ Keil, Soeren. “Enlargement Politics Based on Geopolitics? A Proposal for a Geopolitics-Driven Enlargement Policy”, in: Džankić, Jelena, Simonida Kacarska and Soeren Keil (eds.), “A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics”, Florence: European University Institute, 2023, pp. 117-124

are not accompanied by comparable political influence”, which is problematic in this era of geopolitical competition.⁵⁴

Another key segment in the recent developments in EU enlargement policy that cannot easily withstand the new geopolitical change in Europe is the growing nationalization of the accession process and the rise of veto-culture among certain member states who impose their bilateral problems with candidate countries as extra conditions in the accession process. The new circumstances legitimately raise the question on how long the EU can allow to tolerate gatekeepers of enlargement among its ranks.⁵⁵ The gravity of the situation should put extra pressure on political elites in the enlargement-sceptic member states and might sway public opinion. For example, a recent study of public opinion in one of the most skeptical countries about enlargement, the Netherlands, has shown the Dutch have become more open towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.⁵⁶

In sum, the new geopolitical turn in the EU enlargement, complemented with a more decisive political steer

on behalf of the EU, would produce positive outcomes for both the candidate countries and the EU as a whole. Previous research on EU enlargement has shown that the credibility of the process is the most important factor for progress and compliance in the accession process. A new commitment towards an accelerated accession would seriously increase the shattered EU leverage in the region, provide a key impetus for reform among the Western Balkan political elites, effectively limit the malign influence from third parties and increase security on the European continent.

Judging from the initial EU response in the Western Balkans after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, it seems that most stakeholders in the EU have realized the geopolitical importance of a revitalized enlargement strategy. As previously noted, 2022 ended with the opening of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and promoting BiH into a candidate country. These political decisions have been complemented with a 1-billion-euro package of subsidies for the energy sector and a plan to reduce roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkan states in

⁵⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, “Keeping friends closer: why the EU should address new geoeconomics realities and get its neighbours back in the fold”, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023

⁵⁵ Dimitrova, Antoaneta. “The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement”, in: Džankić, Jelena, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil (eds.), “A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics”, Florence: European University Institute, 2023, pp. 55-64

⁵⁶ Spöri, Tobias, Neele Eilers, Jan Eichhorn, Srdjan Cvijić, Donika Emiri and Milena Stefanović. “Strict, Fair and More Open Towards EU Enlargement! Dutch Public Opinion on EU Membership of the Western Balkans”, The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BIEPAG), 2023, <https://biepag.eu/publication/strict-fair-and-more-open-towards-eu-enlargement/>

2023, with a final deadline of 2027 for a complete phasing out.⁵⁷

Another important aspect concerns the increasing salience of EU enlargement in the EU's institutional structure. Since the war in Ukraine, there has been a more prominent role of DG NEAR in the inter-institutional communication within the European Commission.⁵⁸ The past two years have also witnessed a more substantive engagement of the Foreign Affairs Council which has held continuous discussions on the modalities of enhanced cooperation with the Western Balkan countries both on ministerial level and within the framework of the Working Party on the Western Balkan Region (COWEB) and the Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU (COELA).

The formal enlargement events in 2022, have also been complemented with several high-level political initiatives for accelerated accession of the Western Balkan countries led by various member states. Already in 2022, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis advocated for

accession of the Western Balkan states by 2033.⁵⁹ In June 2023, the Austrian led initiative called "Friends of the Western Balkans" (which also includes Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic) was initiated with the goal to achieve "gradual and accelerated integration" of the Western Balkans before full EU accession.⁶⁰ However, the most prominent initiatives came in the form of the European Political Community and the EU Commission growth plan for the Western Balkans.

The European Political Community, the brainchild of French president Macron was initiated in 2022 during the French presidency of the European Council. The initiative has been envisioned as a pan-European "forum for coordination, decision-making and cooperative projects to respond in a concrete way to the challenges facing all countries on the European continent", aiming to offset the slow pace of EU enlargement by establishing a "necessary political framework to respond to the urgent historical and geopolitical needs arising from the war against Ukraine and to develop the political structuring of

⁵⁷ Euractiv, "Western Balkans welcome EU's geo-strategic enlargement shift amid Ukraine war", 6.12.2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/western-balkans-welcome-eus-geo-strategic-enlargement-shift-amid-ukraine-war/>

⁵⁸ Interview with an European Commission official, May 2023

⁵⁹ Mitsotakis, Kyriakos, "It's time to get European enlargement back on track", Politico, 10.06.2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-europe-enlargement-track/>

⁶⁰ Euractiv, "Austria unveils 'Friends of the Western Balkans' group, wants speedy EU accession", 22.06.2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austria-unveils-friends-of-the-western-balkans-group-wants-speedy-eu-accession/>

our European continent”.⁶¹ Although the original non-paper of the French presidency explicitly states that the EPC “would not be an alternative to EU membership and would not be a substitute to the enlargement process”, but rather can be used as a platform for “strengthening of links with EU member states prior to accession, both politically and in terms of accompanying participation in certain EU policies”⁶², the initial response from the expert community and media in some of the candidate countries raised fears that the EPC could be a substitute for EU membership, with many stakeholders being suspicious of Macron’s intentions given his poor record in support of EU enlargement.⁶³ Nonetheless, the start of the EPC was relatively successful, as both inaugural meetings in Prague in 2022 and Chisinau in 2023 were attended by virtually every European state with the exception of Russia and Belarus. It has been positively accepted by the leadership in every Western Balkan state and is seen as an opportunity for further networking with EU member states. For example, BiH leadership utilized the first meeting in Prague to

advocate for membership candidacy. In Kosovo this initiative has been seen as a solid political opportunity to engage on multilateral level with the five non-recognizers. The EPC meeting in Moldova has been perceived mainly positively due to the fact that it created an opportunity to, albeit informally, have a meeting in Chisinau – a stark non-recognizer of Kosovo’s independence and it will follow up in Spain which lists as one of the hard non-recognizers of Kosovo.⁶⁴ However, while the EPC does provide a solid ground for pan-European dialogue, its utility for the EU accession process has been criticized for taking away “too much political and diplomatic energy at the expense of EU enlargement and upgrading the Eastern Partnership”.⁶⁵

On the other hand, on 31 May 2023, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen presented the latest initiative that carries great potential for accelerated integration of the Western Balkans. In her keynote speech at the GLOBSEC 2023 Forum in Bratislava she indicated the necessity of a new awareness in the EU that it has to take

⁶¹ French Non-paper, “European Political Community”, 17 June 2022, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-0eb63766fdcefc637c835705765fd68d67d3d7f2/pdf>

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Bushati, Ditmir. “Zgjimi Evropian”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/19275.pdf>; Latković, Nataša. “Rampa ili prečica za Srbiju u EU: Šta je makronova Evropska Politička Zajednica”. NOVA portal, 16.06.2022, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/rampa-ili-precica-za-srbiju-u-eu-sta-je-makronova-evropska-politicka-zajednica/>

⁶⁴ Vasolli, Besnik. “EPC – It Gives Us a Sense of Belonging.” The Balkan Forum, 25.10.2023, <https://thebalkanforum.org/en/epc-it-gives-us-a-sense-of-belonging>.

⁶⁵ Meister, Stefan , Milan Nič, Iskra Kirova and Steven Blockmans. “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Rethinking the EU’s Eastern Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy”, German Council on Foreign Relations DGAP Report, 2023

responsibility for bringing aspiring members much closer to the EU. In this direction, she presented a so-called new growth plan for the Western Balkans that would “bring some of the benefits of EU membership to the people of the Western Balkans already today”. The growth plan is centered around four pillars: to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market; to deepen regional economic integration; to accelerate fundamental reforms; and to increase pre-accession funds.⁶⁶ On the first glance, this initiative seems to be building up on the positive momentum for EU enlargement created by the war in Ukraine by relying on the key elements of “accelerated integration” and “phasing-in” as envisaged in the New Methodology. It potentially reveals a new strategic culture of the Commission in regard to curbing

the Russian influence in the Western Balkans and the determination for swift actions aimed at tangible economic results. At least on paper, the new growth plan for the Western Balkans, appears to be a turning point for the accession process that offers credible incentives and a way out of the stagnating enlargement process in the Western Balkans. However, despite the plan's strategic and political importance and its potential to provide a new impetus for progress in the Western Balkans, there was an evident absence of notable reactions from state authorities, political parties or civil society throughout the region. In a way, this lukewarm reception of the initiative is a telling indicator of the low confidence in the enlargement agenda which is somewhat driven by the recent experiences of failed promises.

⁶⁶ European Commission. Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum, Bratislava, 31 May 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_23_2993



Too soon to be optimistic on EU enlargement?

While the initial EU reactions in regard to EU enlargement policy after the start of the war in Ukraine can be interpreted as a promising ground for a concrete shift in the accession process, there are several observations that might put a challenge to this newly found optimism.

First, despite the outpouring of political support for accelerated EU accession, there is still not much concrete evidence that the most prominent obstacles to enlargement have been properly addressed. As it has been argued, the reaction mimics the EU response that was used following the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, whereby the EU used the promise of enlargement as a securitizing factor without a clear guarantee of membership.⁶⁷ Although the EU decision to acknowledge Ukraine and Moldova as candidate countries and Georgia as a potential candidate country have been positively accepted in

the Western Balkans, they also left a bitter taste in the mouth of many stakeholders that have been invested in Western Balkan accession in the past decades. Accepting that those were (geo) political decisions taken in a very sensitive moment for European security, still the fast-track push forward in the accession process of the Association trio exposed the inconsistency of EU enlargement policy, especially in the light of its previous insistence on rigorous conditionality that has been imposed on the Western Balkan candidates. Simply put, it took some Western Balkan countries years of compliance with tough and politically sensitive EU conditions to achieve the status that was given to Ukraine and Moldova in less than half a year. There is little evidence that the current enlargement strategy has moved from status quo. More than three years have passed since the launching of the New Methodology and yet there are many open-ended questions on the mechanisms that

⁶⁷ Anghel, Veronica and Jelena Džankić. "Wartime EU: Consequences of the Rus-sia-Ukraine War on the Enlargement Process", *Journal of European Integra-tion*, 45:3, 2023, pp. 487-501

would operationalize the key novelties such as phasing-in and reversibility. In a similar vein, the ambitious new growth plan for the Western Balkans is yet to be addressed in any capacity three months after it was briefly introduced by President von der Leyen. In addition, neither the New Methodology, nor the latest initiatives for accelerated accession provide a tangible perspective for membership. The reluctance of the EU and its member states to provide a viable framework, i.e. a provisional time frame for membership to the Western Balkan candidates has a devastating effect on the credibility of the process as the key incentive for reforms. It has created an atmosphere of being stuck in a Kafkaesque never-ending process that has significantly raised domestic costs of the political elites and served as a de-motivating factor for the bureaucracy. This approach has been clearly ineffective, as it limits the potential for (often very costly) reforms and empowers quasi-authoritarian and Eurosceptic social groups in the Western Balkans. Second, none of the new ideas around EU enlargement policy has addressed probably the biggest elephant in the room, i.e. the rise of veto-culture among the member states and the proliferation of the unanimity principle in almost every

aspect of the accession process. Since the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process in the early 2000s, there have been several instances of member states utilizing the power to block the progress of a candidate country as a means to impose bilateral disputes as conditions which are outside of EU's conditionality framework. The biggest culprit of these developments has been North Macedonia whose progress in the accession process has been stuck by a decade long blockade from Greece over a dispute over the country's name. The veto was lifted after the country agreed to change its name under the promise of accelerated accession into the EU, which was almost immediately stopped by another blockade from Bulgaria based on its (non) recognition of Macedonian ethnic identity and language. This decision has shattered the credibility of the accession process in the region and has send the message that even the most difficult and sensitive reforms would not be necessarily met with the promised reward.

These inconsistencies in the accession process coupled with the slow pace of reforms in the enlargement policy not only have a delegitimizing effect on reformist

elites and give rise to populist, Eurosceptic forces, but insidiously have even more opened the door for further involvement of anti-democratic third parties. Although experts and politicians have been raising alarms for years that the void that is being created by EU's inactivity in the Balkans will be used by authoritarian states such as Russia and China to exert political and economic influence in the Western Balkans⁶⁸, this vulnerability of the region has become more emphasized in the wake of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine.⁶⁹ Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is often exaggerated, as its economic involvement in the Western Balkans is miniscule compared to the EU and politically it cannot match EU's membership carrot. Hence, Russian intervention in the Western Balkans is considered as "spoiler" or "soft" power, aiming at disrupting the Euroatlantic integration efforts of the Western Balkan states by exploiting energy dependency and cultural and historical ties with some of the Western Balkan nations.⁷⁰ However, the conflict in Ukraine

and EU's indecisive stance towards enlargement are opening more space for destabilization, as being the most vulnerable region in Europe in terms of security, the Western Balkans risks of "becoming a proxy hybrid battlefield in the increasing antagonism between Russia and the West".⁷¹

In a political sense, the response from the war in Ukraine has had polarizing effects on the political dynamics and public opinion in parts of the region. This has particularly affected the countries with significant Slavic and orthodox populations. While in all of these countries the EU has been continuously supported by the public as the preferred ally and partner, the war in Ukraine has divided public opinion on Russia and its role in the war. For example, one third of the population in Montenegro think of the war in Ukraine as Russia's defense against NATO expansion⁷², while half of the population in North Macedonia believes that the attack on Ukraine is a reaction to NATO provocations that Russia could not ignore.⁷³ In BiH, over 40% of the population has a

⁶⁸ Tzifakis, Nikolaos, Milica Delević, Marko Kmezić and Zoran Nechev. "Geopolitically irrelevant in its 'inner courtyard'?", BIEPAG Policy Brief, 2021, <https://biepag.eu/publication/geopolitically-irrelevant-in-its-inner-courtyard/>

⁶⁹ Džananović, Nedžma, Donika Emini and Ana Nenezic. "Foreign Malign Influence in the Western Balkans", Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, 2023

⁷⁰ Vulović, Marina. "Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors: An Arena of Geostrategic Rivalry for the EU or a Local Power Struggle?", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023

⁷¹ Anastasakis, Othon. "The Russo-Ukrainian Crisis and the Western Balkans: As-sociations and knock-on effects", Atlantic Council of Montenegro Briefs, 2022.

⁷² CEDEM, Political Public Opinion in Montenegro, July 2022, <https://www.cedem.me/en/publikacije/political-public-opinion/>

⁷³ Velinovska, Anamarija. "Europe in crisis: the impact on the public opinion in North Macedonia", Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia/Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, 2023

favorable opinion of Vladimir Putin.⁷⁴ However, Serbia remains the most pro-Russian country in the region and the pivotal entry point of Russian influence. More than 40% of Serbian citizens incline toward Russia in international relations, 43% justify the Russian invasion, while 74% are against the introduction of sanctions against Russia.⁷⁵

Similar sentiments have manifested on the political front, through the levels of alignment of the Western Balkan countries with EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), especially in regard to the imposition of sanctions on Russia. Despite some political tensions, North Macedonia and Montenegro quickly reacted to the EU's response over the Russian aggression in Ukraine, joining Albania and Kosovo in fully implementing EU's restrictive measures on Russia and Belarus. Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, BiH has also achieved almost complete alignment with EU foreign policy and restrictive measures,⁷⁶ despite the disruptive influence of the anti-western President of

Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik who advocates for a neutral stance on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On the other hand, Serbia has been a notable exception and the only Western Balkan country to have a negative score in aligning with EU foreign policy, the primary reason being Serbia's reluctance to align with the EU's CFSP declarations and measures related directly or indirectly to the Russian Federation, the Peoples's Republic of China, and other countries. In 2022, Serbia's alignment rate was the worst to date, with only 42% of alignment.⁷⁷ Serbia did not align with any of eleven packages of sanctions against Russia following the war in Ukraine.⁷⁸ Despite severe criticisms and political pressure from EU officials and EU institutions, to this date, Serbia remained defiant, with President Vucic claiming that he was responsible for this decision and that it was the right decision.⁷⁹ For now, the consequences of this defiance have been primarily political, with an increasing marginalization of Serbia in European circles, but there were no concrete punitive measures yet.

⁷⁴ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkan Regional Survey", International Republican Institute, 2022

⁷⁵ Westminster Foundation for Democracy. "Izveštaj sa istraživanja javnog mnjenja: Društveno-politički stavovi građana Srbije 2023. godine", Belgrade: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023

⁷⁶ European Union External Action (EEAS). "EU Candidate Status for Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Message to the People and a Tasking for Politicians." 19.12.2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-candidate-status-bosnia-and-herzegovina-message-people-and-tasking-politicians-0_en.

⁷⁷ Novakovic, Igor and Tanja Plavsic, "An Analysis of Serbia's Alignment with the European Union's Foreign Policy Declarations and Measures: Annual Review for 2022," Belgrade: International and Security Affairs Center - ISAC Fund, 2023, p. 2

⁷⁸ However, it must be stressed that Serbia did align with several political declarations (not containing restrictive measures) of the EU against Russia and aligned for the first time with some sanctions related to Russia – restrictive measures against Victor Yanukovich and members of his elite that were initially introduced in 2014. See: Ibid, p.3

⁷⁹ Klix. "Vučić: Donio sam odluku da Srbija ne uvede sankcije Rusiji zbog njenog napada na Ukrajinu," (Klix ba, 31.03. 2023, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/regija/vucic-donio-sam-odluku-da-srbija-ne-vede-sankcije-rusiji-zbog-njenog-napada-na-ukrajinu/230331171>

From an economic standpoint, the war in the Ukraine further exposed the region's dependability on Russian energy. While Russia cannot compete with the EU and the Western allies in terms of trade or investments, its involvement in key segments of the energy sector is a significant source of its influence in the Western Balkan countries, albeit with a degree of variation. On one hand, Albania and Kosovo are not directly affected by Russian energy. Albania produces most of its energy through hydropower plants and has no infrastructure to use gas and therefore it has no gas dependency from Russia. Kosovo's economic and trade partners do not include Russia due to its political constraints stemming from the lack of diplomatic relations with Kosovo. While Kosovo was severely hit by the energy crisis following the war in Ukraine, its energy production has not been immensely depending on foreign actors. Similarly, Montenegro currently does not have gas infrastructure. However, the country has been dependent on Russian investments, as Russia is one of the largest foreign investors

in Montenegro's economy. BiH on the other hand, despite being an exporter of electricity, is fully dependent on Russian gas as both the Federation and Republika Srpska have a long-term contract with Gazprom. North Macedonia's gas supplies are also overwhelmingly reliant on Russian gas. Yet again, Russian influence in the energy sector is by far most spread in Serbia. The country, which is the biggest consumer of energy in the region, is almost entirely dependent on importing natural gas from Russia. This relationship is intertwined with political dealings between the Serbian and Russian governments, as since 2011, Serbia has been importing Russian gas on reduced prices, a deal that has been renewed for three years in 2022.⁸⁰ In addition, Russia's Gazprom has been the owner of Serbia's national petroleum and gas company NIS, which was sold in 2008 for a questionable price arguably in exchange for Russian support of Serbia's position on Kosovo.⁸¹

Finally, one of the biggest stumbling blocks of the idea of accelerated accession comes from the EU itself

⁸⁰ Anadolu Ajansi. "Serbia secures new 3-year deal with Russia for gas supply", 29.05.2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-secures-new-3-year-deal-with-russia-for-gas-supply/2600651#>

⁸¹ Forbes. "While the World Boycotts Russia, Serbia Moves To Clinch A New Gas Deal With Gazprom, 22.05.2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lidiakurasinska/2022/03/22/while-the-world-boycotts-russia-serbia-moves-to-clinch-a-new-gas-deal-with-gazprom/?sh=5b79dfde14a8>

and its capacity for institutional reform. The European Council in June 2022 reiterated the stance that progress in the accession process needs to take into consideration EU's absorption capacity.⁸² This was additionally highlighted by the Council of the EU in December 2022 which in its conclusions stressed "the importance of ensuring that the EU can maintain and deepen its own development, including its capacity to integrate new members".⁸³ In a best-case scenario for EU enlargement, the expanded Union with the countries from the Western Balkans and the Associated trio would raise the number of member states to 36 and increase EU population to over half a billion citizens. This operation would require budgetary and institutional adjustments. On one hand, all of

the projected new members would be among the poorest in the Union which means that they would put a strain on the structural funds as net beneficiaries. This would particularly concern agricultural funds, especially when Ukraine is concerned. On the other hand, an enlarged EU without institutional reform seems highly implausible. The EU's current institutional set-up is already criticized for its robust composition of the European Commission and European Parliament and the inefficient decision-making procedures. Extending EU's absorption capacity would most likely go along a substantial institutional reform and curbing of the unanimity principle in decision-making which is highly unlikely to be achieved in the near future.

⁸² European Council, Conclusions – 23 and 24 June 2022, Brussels, EUCO 24/22, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

⁸³ Council of the European Union, "Draft Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process", 13 December 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60797/st15935-en22.pdf>

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Almost 20 years after the initial promise of EU membership for the Western Balkans, the region has been stuck in an accession tunnel with no light at the end. However, at the beginning of 2022, the horror of a new war in Europe has transformed the vision of EU enlargement from a forgotten, bureaucratic stabilizing tool into a geopolitical priority to stop further fragmentation of the Continent. The initial EU decisions following the start of the military escalations in Ukraine to upgrade the accession status of several applicants for membership and initiate strategies for accelerated integration, have raised the hopes among the political elites in the Western Balkans that the stagnating accession will finally start moving in the right direction. On the other hand, many voices in the expert community have warned that there is a high probability that this newly found enthusiasm is a temporary development and that the focus on immediate security concerns could detract from the importance of strategic, long-term reforms. These views reflect broader uncertainties about the EU's commitment to enlargement and the future of EU-

Western Balkans relations, which, if not addressed, would further open the door for influence from external authoritarian actors and additionally fragment the region. EU's enlargement policy seems to be at a critical juncture which should oblige all stakeholders to seize the moment and reinvigorate the accession process in several directions.

First, the EU needs to show a concrete and credible accession perspective, including a viable provisional timeframe for membership. The low credibility of the accession perspective in the Western Balkans has had a demoralizing effect on the reform processes in the region and has covertly empowered Eurosceptic and anti-western societal and political groups. Past experiences show that there is a high correlation between the credibility of the process and increased compliance with EU conditionality. A new, credible incentive would provide a meaningful way out of the deadlock of the accession process.

Second, the EU should quickly put into practice the New Methodology and

operationalize the novel instruments designed for gradual integration. The EU should prioritize the phasing-in and reversibility principles as key mechanisms for accelerated accession and socialization. The phasing-in instrument should pursue both institutional and policy aspects.⁸⁴ This presupposes an enhanced participation of Western Balkan officials in the work of the EU institutions, from the various Commission committees and Council working groups to increased participation in the work of the EU agencies. The policy phasing-in should include modalities for gradual integration of the Western Balkan states into EU's rule of law mechanisms, environmental policies, the CFSP and the single market. In addition, a credible application of the reversibility principle would motivate reformist elites to pursue compliance with key conditions and reduce obstructions from non-complying governments.

Third, the EU should increase its focus on economic growth in the Western Balkans through gradual access of the Western Balkan states to the structural funds and extending its financial support for energy transition. The current

financial assistance for the region is incomparable to the financial aid provided by the structural funds to the less developed member states.⁸⁵ Providing a gradual access to the Western Balkan countries to the cohesion and structural funds would not significantly burden the EU budget,⁸⁶ but could provide an immense opportunity for infrastructural investments. In addition, a more robust financial support in the energy sector would significantly limit the region's dependence on Russian resources. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, all Western Balkan countries (including Serbia) have been seeking ways to diversify their energy supplies and dependence on hydrocarbons. The 1 billion euro EU package of subsidies for the energy sector is a step in the right direction that should be extended with a long-term strategy of assistance.

Finally, the EU should put extra effort to limit the negative effects from vetoes and obstructions of the accession process by member states, based on their bilateral disputes that are outside of the conditionality framework. Even the geopolitical urgency to stabilize the region after the escalation of the war in Ukraine,

⁸⁴ E. Tilev, Dragan, Ivan Damjanovski and Zoran Nechev. "A Blueprint for Phasing-in", Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis-Skopje, forthcoming, September 2023

⁸⁵ Reljić, Dušan. "The EU's quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: Why it flopped", in: Bonomi, Matteo (ed.), "In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?", Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/search-eu-strategic-autonomy-what-role-western-balkans>

⁸⁶ Juzová, Jana and Žiga Faktor. "Reinvigorating the EU enlargement policy: phasing-in as a way to overcome the enlargement impasse", EUROPEUM, 2023

did not deter Bulgaria's decision to block North Macedonia's progress in the accession process. Simply put, the enlargement process cannot progress with the desired pace without a reduction of the instances where member states could block the process. This could be pursued through a much more emphasized political pressure within the EU against non-constructive member states, but also through procedural modifications. In this sense, the

unanimity principle could be reserved for the main decisions, such as the granting of the candidate status and the opening and closing of the accession negotiations, while the remaining decisions such as the opening and closing of clusters could be transitioned to qualified majority voting.⁸⁷ This curbing of unanimous decision making could be decided by the Council and does not require treaty revisions.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Dimitrov, Nikola, Srdjan Cvijic, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev, Ioannis Armakolas, Oana Popescu Zamfir, Valbona Zeneli, Stefan Lehne and Rosa Balfour. "What is to be done? The war, the Western Balkans and the EU. Six fixes for the Western Balkan Six", Institute for Human Sciences, 2022, <https://europesfutures.eu/static/uploads/what-is-to-be-done.pdf>

⁸⁸ Emerson, Michael and Steven Blockmans. "The Impressive EU-Ukraine Summits - Alongside the Inadequate Enlargement Methodology", Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2023

Information about the International Visegrad Fund

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal

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Information about THINK BALKANS

The ‘Enhancing Think Balkans – knowledgehub for Western Balkans EU integration and regional cooperation’ project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the ‘Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project’ and the project “Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS” supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje (IDSCS)** will remain project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMINS)**, **Balkan Research Institute** from Kosovo*, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)** from Poland, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT)** from Hungary, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM) from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project’s goals.

The project duration is 12 months, that is, from October 2022 to October 2023.

Based on the lessons learned, this project proposal aims to promote active participation in policy-making and foster democratic debate based on relevant data and information by further: 1) promoting cooperation among think tanks, CSOs and experts in the WB as a successful regional model; 2) strengthening the cooperation with the WB MFAs through the establish network of contact point and include their opinions and ideas in specifying the details of the topics chosen to be analyzed through this project; 3) providing V4 expertise on security, resilience and EU enlargement in general in light of the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the expressed interest of the Associate trio countries to join the EU; 4) using the potential with the establishment of Think Balkans to strengthening people-to-people links between the WB and V4; 5) cultivating interregional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest.

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