



The European Union in the Western Balkans: It Takes Two to Tangle

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Abstract: The European Union promised the successor states of the former Yugoslavia and Albania in 2003 that their place was in the European Union. Still, 22 years later, only Slovenia and Croatia have joined, in 2004 and 2013, respectively. The European Union and the states of the Western Balkans blame each other for the sluggish progress on enlargement. The EU agenda is burdened by many other matters and moves from “crisis to crisis” (eurozone, migration, internal discord, insufficient commitment to European defense). It seems never to have time for the Western Balkans, a geographical exclave of the European Union. Being the region’s leading trade partner and investor, the European Union does not feel an urgent need to connect the states with the bond of membership. Nor does it view the creeping presence of various other actors (China, Russia, Türkiye, the Gulf states) as a major challenge. The European Union considers the Western Balkans to have reached negative peace, at least, and thus to be sufficiently stable. The Western Balkan states, with their often sluggish development, backsliding on democracy (Serbia), separatism (Bosnia and Herzegovina), high levels of corruption (Serbia), governmental instability (North Macedonia), public dissent, and absence of comprehensive international recognition (Kosovo), provide the European Union with convenient excuses. However, the European Union is also cautious about repeating past mistakes – integrating states that promise everything during the accession process but deliver very little afterward, thereby eroding cohesion. Such countries cause severe damage to the enlargement process even as they loudly proclaim their support for it.

Keywords: conditionality-socialization paradigm, European Union, EU enlargement, Western Balkans.

Introduction

The European Union has been present in the Balkans since the 1990s and in the area of the former Yugoslavia and Albania in a more pronounced manner since the end of the 20th century. This immediately points to a terminological issue. Namely, the Western Balkans is identified with six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Slovenia and Croatia have been members of the European Union since 2004 and 2013 and of NATO since 2004 and 2007, respectively, and do not belong to the Western Balkans, even though they are successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Throughout the article, the author distinguishes between the two categories.

There are different aspects of the EU's engagement in this part of the world. One state adjacent to this area, Greece, has been an EU member state since 1981. With the end of the East-West conflict, Southeastern Europe would have been a logical continuation of the EU engagement. However, there were reasons why this area remained somewhat sidelined on the EU agenda. The war and instability in the former Yugoslavia, which continued throughout the 1990s, was the primary reason that also tarnished the reputation of the neighborhood beyond the immediate developments there. Secondly, the two former Warsaw Pact and Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) member states, Bulgaria and Romania, were poorer, less clearly committed to transition, and did not have a similarly strong political profile as countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Thirdly, the EU focus was far more on East-Central Europe than Southeastern Europe, partly due to Germany's centrality in EU affairs and its geographic proximity to these three (later four) states. For these reasons, Southeastern Europe followed East-Central Europe on the EU agenda with some delay. However, the EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania was realized in 2007, less than three years after the major East-central European EU enlargement.

This article will present the historical zigzags in the relations between the European Union and the Western Balkans, the political and economic fundamentals of future engagement, the positions of various actors on both sides—the European Union and the states of the Western Balkan—and also the changing public opinion.

Phasing-in: A Step-by-Step Process

The breakthrough in EU-Western Balkans relations occurred in June 2003, when a somewhat vague but firm promise was made at the Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans summit: "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union."¹ The further elaboration of the text left no doubt that the participating states envi-

¹ "EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, Declaration," C/03/163 10229/03 (Presse 163), point 2, June 21, 2003, accessed February 27, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/pres_03_163/PRES_03_163_EN.pdf.

sioned a membership perspective. This marked the highest point of expectations in the history of enlargement in the Western Balkans.

At the time of the document's adoption, Slovenia had already concluded its accession negotiations, and Croatia's application was under consideration by the European Commission. With the decision taken in Thessaloniki, Albania and four states of the former Yugoslavia, including Croatia, became potential candidates for EU membership. Two entities did not qualify at the time: Kosovo, which had not yet declared its independence (doing so in February 2008), and Montenegro, which was still part of the "remainder" of Yugoslavia (*Rest-Jugoslawien*, as the German *terminus technicus* became widely used internationally) until its 2006 referendum opting for independence.

The Thessaloniki declaration generated high expectations and hopes that the road to membership would be fast and smooth. Despite these high hopes, twenty-one years later, neither any other successor state of the former Yugoslavia nor Albania has joined the European Union.

If twenty years is a long time in politics, the question arises: Why has EU enlargement stalled for such an extended period? What are the reasons and consequences of this stalemate situation? What arguments do the European Union and the candidate countries of the Western Balkans put forward to justify their positions and foster change in the course of enlargement in the Western Balkans? Have the states of the Western Balkans demonstrated that they are ready for membership, including concrete steps to transform their political systems and make sacrifices to align with EU standards across a broad range of matters, or are they merely providing the European Union with excuses not to continue the enlargement process toward completion?

If one takes a closer look at the historical process, the slow movement—if not an outright stalemate—in EU-Western Balkans relations can be attributed to various factors. Some originate primarily within the European Union, some within the Western Balkans countries, while others stem from global events that affect one, the other, or both. It is a widespread view that the development of the European Union was curtailed when the global financial crisis reached Europe in 2008, followed by several further challenges, including the eurozone crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, the challenge posed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the necessary responses the European Union had to develop. It must be acknowledged that no political entity, whether a state or an international organization, can simultaneously cope with an unlimited number of challenges. It must determine priorities and allocate human and financial resources accordingly. Other issues are de facto deprioritized or temporarily pushed to the back burner.

In the author's view, a few problems are absent from that list. The rejection of the so-called Constitutional Treaty by two founding members of the Union in 2005² is certainly among them, which also had implications for the continuation

² Sara Binzer Hobolt and Sylvain Brouard, "Contesting the European Union? Why the Dutch and the French Rejected the European Constitution," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 2011): 309-322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912909355713>.

of enlargement just a year after the big eastern expansion of the European Union in 2004. France considered introducing a referendum on further enlargements, and Dutch voters were concerned about Turkey's eventual accession. Even though the French voted against the Constitutional Treaty for reasons only partly related to EU affairs,³ it demonstrated that many EU citizens were reluctant to support the further rapid expansion of the organization.

It is important to raise the question of whether the European Union has retained its ambition to enlarge or if it has dissipated. The European Union maintains its open door policy based on conditionality – that is, states that meet the accession criteria originally codified in Copenhagen in June 1993 may join. However, since these conditions are formulated laconically, they are subject to interpretation. This extends to every condition, including the requirement that the EU itself must meet: developing the “capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration.”⁴

Not to mention that, due to the extensive nature of the *acquis communautaire*, no state can fully exhaust the requirements. This leaves leeway for those who decide on the various phases of enlargement, whether the European institutions or the member states. That is why it is essential to sustain the EU's resolve based on the shared political will of its member states.

It was not the most helpful demonstration when the then-incoming President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced before the European Parliament in 2014:

In the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the European Union. As things now stand, it is inconceivable that any of the candidate countries with whom we are now negotiating will be able to meet all the membership criteria down to every detail by 2019. However, the negotiations will be continued and other European nations and European countries need a credible and honest European perspective. This applies especially to the Western Balkans.⁵

If the Juncker Commission had lived up to any promise during its five years in office (2014–2019), this was it. It was to the detriment of the enlargement process as the Commission and the member states deprioritized the matter on the

³ For an insightful account on the French rejection of the Constitutional Treaty see Bruno Jérôme and Nicolas G. Vaillant, “The French Rejection of the European Constitution: An Empirical Analysis,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 21, no. 4 (2005): 1085-1092, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2005.09.005>.

⁴ “European Council in Copenhagen, 21–22 June 1993, Conclusions of the Presidency: 7. Relations with the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” accessed February 25, 2024, www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/ec/cop_en.htm, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf>.

⁵ Jean-Claude Juncker, “A New Start for Europe: Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session,” Strasbourg, July 15, 2014, accessed February 23, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567.

EU agenda. Although some verbal reassessment took place, first in 2017 when President Juncker stated in his State of the (European) Union address:

If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must also maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready. But thereafter the European Union will be greater than 27 in number. In case of all accession candidates, rule of law, justice and fundamental rights are the highest priority of the negotiations.⁶

This was almost certainly in preparation for a more thorough reassessment in 2018 when the European Union concluded that Montenegro and Serbia might be ready for membership by 2025.⁷ During the office term of the European Commission between 2019 and 2024, similar speeches by President Ursula von der Leyen focused on other priorities on the agenda. The comments on the Western Balkans can be characterized as extremely brief and hollow.⁸ It is clear that the ambiguous commitment to enlargement will not be realized soon, whereas the long-held, inconclusive EU policy continues.

Performance of the “New” Members: Expectations Towards the Applicants

An issue that is not often discussed in the context of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is the performance of member states that joined since 2004. Some, both old and new members, are understandably disappointed with the

⁶ “President Jean-Claude Juncker’s State of the Union Address 2017,” European Commission, Brussels, September 13, 2017, accessed February 21, 2024, 22-23, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/854659/EN-FR-DE-Speech.pdf>.

⁷ “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans,” Strasbourg, June 2, 2018, COM (2018) 65 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0065>.

⁸ In 2022, President von der Leyen stated: “So I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!” See “2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen: A Union that Stands Strong Together,” European Commission, September 14, 2022, accessed February 16, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493. In 2023, the President of the Commission proclaimed: “The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union.” “2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen: Answering the Call of History,” European Commission, September 13, 2023, accessed February 16, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426. It is even more intriguing that the sentence was inserted between a sentence on Ukraine and Moldova somewhat similarly to 2022.

record of certain new members, particularly regarding their adherence to political conditions. Hungary has stood out in this regard, occasionally and temporarily, followed by Poland and Slovenia. However, the European Union has never officially addressed this issue. Over time, some newer members have gradually delivered less on the conditions they promised during their accession process and later formally accepted upon joining. Moreover, some of these states seek to reap the benefits of membership exclusively, particularly by gaining access to various EU funds, while failing to show solidarity with the majority of member states, often citing state sovereignty as justification.

Since no member state can be expelled from the European Union, it is understandable that the Union exercises extreme caution regarding further enlargement. This has led to increased scrutiny of any potential new member. Additionally, it is important to note that there is no mechanism to remove a member state from the European Union against its will. As a result, the EU finds itself locked in with certain new members whose leadership raises concerns among other member states about the future of the Union in light of recent developments.

Furthermore, the enforcement of the rule allowing a member state to face severe consequences for non-compliance—potentially including the suspension of voting rights in the Council and the European Council—is subject to a “consensus minus one” requirement. This means that all member states, except the one facing consequences, must agree to the sanction, making it largely unenforceable. The state facing the consequences can usually find at least one other member state to object to the suspension of voting rights.⁹ Memorably, during its tenure (2015–2023), Poland’s Law and Justice Party-led government pledged such support to Hungary.¹⁰

When examining the historical evolution of the states of the Western Balkans over the past more than twenty years, it is clear that the European Union has not had to work hard to find reasons or excuses for not continuing the enlargement process. In the six countries, political developments have been marked by sudden changes, persistent unfavorable tendencies, and acute problems that affect individual states in the region.

A close look at the EU’s annual reports over the years reveals a systematic and impartial assessment of the candidates’ performance.¹¹ These analyses are

⁹ See “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” Article 7, point 2, *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, C326/20, 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

¹⁰ Andrew Rettman, “Poland to Veto EU Sanctions on Hungary,” *EUobserver*, September 13, 2018, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://euobserver.com/rule-of-law/142825>.

¹¹ Rather than presenting a litany of annual reports on the six states, I call the attention to two official EU Commission documents that provide excellent overview on the topic: “2022 Enlargement Package: European Commission Assesses Reforms in the Western Balkans and Türkiye and Recommends Candidate Status for Bosnia and Herzegovina,” European Commission, Brussels, October 12, 2022, accessed February 5, 2024,

comprehensive and dynamically indicate strengths and weaknesses in comparison with previous years. There is a strong general emphasis on criteria that would slow down, if not outright prevent, a candidate country from joining the European Union and, once a member, from gradually deepening its integration. These criteria most often concern governmental capacity, corruption, judicial independence, and certain human rights issues, with particular attention to media freedom. The conclusions of these reports typically indicate moderate preparation or progress, reflecting diplomatic ambiguity. It is rare for a report to bluntly state “no progress” at all.¹²

It seems there is no need for a stronger push, as enlargement is far from imminent. Even in the case of Montenegro, which currently leads the way, only four chapters have been provisionally closed. While during the years of intense enlargement process in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the European Union focused on pre-accession conditionality, pressing candidate countries to meet as many conditions as possible before accession, the emphasis has shifted since then. A few years later, the landscape moved from pre-accession to post-accession conditionality to ensure that new members adhered to their commitments soon after joining.

The shift began with Bulgaria (corruption) and Romania (judicial independence) and later extended to Hungary (a broad range of issues, including migrant rights, the rights of sexual minorities, judicial independence, and corruption), Poland (judicial independence), and Slovenia (media landscape). Most recently, former Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio summarized the experience as follows:

Hungary has clashed repeatedly with the EU over the *anti-democratic policies* pursued by its prime minister, Viktor Orbán, since he returned to power in 2010. In Poland, an Orbán-emulating right-wing government was replaced last year by a *three-party coalition* committed to shoring up democracy *but tensions persist* ... This trend has undermined EU-level decision-making, with national interests often trumping the will of the majority. For example, Orbán repeatedly *blocked* EU support for Ukraine and has cultivated *closer trade and*

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6082 and “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans,” European Commission, Brussels, November 8, 2023, COM(2023) 691 final, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf.

¹² Jelena Nikolić, “EU Commission Report Shows Serbia Has Not Regressed, Only Stagnated, Says PM,” *Euractiv*, November 9, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-commission-report-shows-serbia-has-not-regressed-only-stagnated-says-pm/.

investment ties with China, at a time when other EU members are seeking to reduce their dependence on the Chinese market.¹³

It is apparent that some of these actions, which have caused concern among the majority of EU member states, have clearly violated the *acquis communautaire*, while in other cases, they have contradicted the principles of solidarity implied in EU membership.

Another change that will eventually affect the countries of the Western Balkans is the way conditionality is approached. It was previously based on a management approach, which assumed that a member state failing to meet certain commitments did so by “mistake,” as it was presumed to be interested in following the rules.¹⁴ In such cases, drawing its attention to the issue and holding subsequent consultations were expected to help remedy the problem. However, in light of bitter experiences with some new members, this approach has given way to one that centers on enforcement as the dominant element. If a state violates the values, principles, and norms under which it joined, post-accession conditionality applies, and it should be enforced. See Table 1 for the performance of successor states of the former Yugoslavia and Albania in meeting the requirements under certain Western indices.

The accession talks have taken a new turn to avoid recurring problems, similar to those experienced with some earlier member states. Now, advancement depends on the “Fundamentals Cluster,” which includes Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) and determines the overall pace of negotiations.¹⁵ Placing these matters at the center clearly indicates that the European Commission has reflected on the bitter experiences of the recent past.

Nearly every Western Balkans candidate country faces complementary problems that must be resolved in order to move closer to, and eventually gain, EU membership. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), these problems include the constitutional arrangement under the Dayton Agreement – an agreement that served the shared interests of ending the war in 1995 but is highly questionable in its ability to serve the interests of the people in BiH in 2023. The issues involve three key elements:

1. The constitutional setup results in a massive waste of human resources and maintains a virulent bureaucracy in which the administration is politicized and ethnicized.

¹³ Ana Palacio, “Is Europe Too Big for Further Enlargement,” *Social Europe*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/is-europe-too-big-for-further-enlargement>.

¹⁴ “Enforcement: Frequently Asked Questions,” European Commission, Memo, November 28, 2022, accessed February 24, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/memo_12_12.

¹⁵ Milan Nič et al., “Montenegro’s EU Push: Imminent Opportunities and Challenges,” German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAP Memo No. 3, March 5, 2024, 1, https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-MEMO-03-2024_EN_0.pdf.

2. The veto rights held by members of the presidency appear democratic but, in practice, make major decision-making nearly impossible, reinforcing divisions among ethnic communities. This, among other factors,

Table 1. Data on the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia and Albania.

	HDI rank (2023) ¹⁶	CPI (2023) ¹⁷	Human Freedom (2023) ¹⁸	EIU Democracy Index (2023) ¹⁹	Henley Passport Index (Feb 2024) ²⁰
Albania	74	98-103	49	66 (FD)	123
BiH	80	108-114	61	94 (HR)	123
Croatia	39	57-58	34	58 (FD)	183
Kosovo	n.a.	83-86	n.a.	n.a.	80
Montenegro	50	63-66	42	52 (FD)	128
North Macedonia	83	76-82	51	72-73 (FD)	128
Serbia	65	104-107	68	64 (FD)	140
Slovenia	22-23	42-44	37	31-32 (FD)	185

results in a situation where the shortcomings of the Dayton peace agreement-based settlement remain unaddressed.

3. Internal political divisions based on ethnicity prevent BiH from becoming a state where political agendas compete for the votes of the electorate based on policy rather than identity. Members of the leadership

¹⁶ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2023-24 – Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World* (New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme, 2024), <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2023-24reporten.pdf>.

¹⁷ Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2023,” accessed May 24, 2024, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>.

¹⁸ Ian Vásquez, Fred McMahon, Ryan Murphy, and Guillermina Sutter Schneider, *The Human Freedom Index 2023: A Global Measurement of Personal, Civil, and Economic Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The CATO Institute and the Fraser Institute, 2023), 5-8, <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2023-12/human-freedom-index-2023-full-revised.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2024), 9-13, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>.

²⁰ “The Henley Passport Index – Global Passport Ranking 2024,” accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking>.

benefit from this arrangement, as they can rely on their ethnic communities for electoral support, allowing them to remain in power.

In the case of Kosovo, five EU member states have not recognized its independent statehood, and the reconciliation between Prishtina and Belgrade is insufficiently advancing. Furthermore, in recent years, the Serbian leadership has successfully created the impression that Kosovo has not contributed to resolving their decades-old dispute.

North Macedonia first had a long-standing name dispute with Greece, which was resolved by the Prespa Agreement in 2018. However, this was soon followed by a rupture with Bulgaria that was eventually overcome. While this should have opened the doors to EU accession, the piecemeal nature of the accession process raises doubts about whether the European Union truly understands the strategic urgency of the matter – or, if it does, that recognition is not backed by concrete actions.

Serbia, as the largest and possibly most important state in the Western Balkans, faces not only the *challenge* of recognizing Kosovo's *independent* statehood but also several other issues. Kosovo's recognition poses a severe domestic problem for Belgrade, as it risks delegitimizing the leadership if they take the essential step of recognizing Kosovo as an independent state, a condition for EU accession. However, 25 years after Kosovo's separation from Serbia and more than 16 years after its formal declaration of independence, a key question arises: Does the Serbian political class responsibly contribute to resolving the conflict by preparing the electorate for a change in attitude, or does it instead help maintain opposition to acknowledging and ultimately recognizing Kosovo's independent statehood? Moreover, the Serbian population is not being prepared for recognition. On the contrary, many people remain mired in an alternative that apparently does not exist.

What the Serbian political class does is simply focus attention on an issue of international politics that the public cannot fully assess in its complexity, thereby diverting attention away from numerous domestic issues where Serbia lags behind. This diversion of attention toward foreign policy, aimed at maintaining an adversarial image, can be regarded as "externalization," a widely used strategy of political manipulation. Moreover, Serbia no longer appears democratic; it is backtracking in certain areas and shows no advancement in various fields. When the European Commission states that there is "no progress on freedom of expression,"²¹ it signals that the European Union is not preparing for Serbia's accession in the near future. Additionally, Serbia's international relations with other actors do little to reassure the European Union. Its close, friendly relations

²¹ "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy," European Commission, Brussels, October 12, 2022, COM(2022) 528 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0528>.

with Moscow until February 2022, and to some extent beyond, along with the extended political alignments between President Vučić and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, are significant indicators. Belgrade has refused to join EU sanctions against Russia and continues to reiterate its reluctance to change its policy regarding Russia.²²

With so many general problems compounded by a few specific ones that are extremely difficult to overcome, the Western Balkans enlargement seems to be heading into a blind alley. Furthermore, the member states apparently do not agree on which Western Balkan states should be given priority in the process. This creates an additional burden, as enlargement requires the consensus of EU member states on several occasions throughout the process. Some members cannot imagine the next enlargement without Serbia, whereas others would be tempted to move forward without it.

Montenegro, which is somewhat ahead of others in terms of various (Western) indices, does not seem to be a strong candidate on its own. The European Union has enlarged by only one state twice in its history – in 1981 with Greece and in 2013 with Croatia. The fact that no enlargement is likely to occur in the coming years helps overcome the discord among member states, as the problem is philosophical. This conclusion can be drawn easily from the pace of the accession talks and the hurdles they face. Still, if the European Union wishes to demonstrate its commitment to an open-door policy, granting membership to Montenegro would be the easiest option among the candidates.²³ Moreover, Montenegro's small size—and thus the very limited burden its membership would impose on the European Union—complements its comparatively strong performance.

If the road is long and bumpy, it is in the EU's best interest to demonstrate progress along the way. This is also in the interest of the leaders of applicant countries who aim to show to their populations signs of advancement. That is why the process is divided into stages. A country indicating its interest in EU membership first becomes a "potential candidate," then moves on to "candidate" status, and may eventually become a "negotiating candidate." Further, its progress toward EU membership is measured by the number of chapters opened for negotiation and those that are temporarily closed. Intermittent meetings, including summits, are held, which may contribute to substantive progress in relations or serve only symbolic purposes. These junctures provide visibility while

²² Reuters, "Sanctions on Russia Are Main Obstacle to Serbia's EU Bid – PM Brnabic," *Reuters*, February 10, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/europe/sanctions-russia-are-main-obstacle-serbias-eu-bid-pm-brnabic-2023-02-10/; Jelena Jevtić, "Vučić Reiterates Refusal to Sanction Russia: 'A Friend in Need Is a Friend Indeed'," *Euractiv.rs*, February 21, 2024, www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/vucic-reiterates-refusal-to-sanction-russia-a-friend-in-need-is-a-friend-indeed/.

²³ For a similar view from one of the best experts of the Balkans see Dimitar Bechev, "Montenegro's Window of Opportunity," *Carnegie Europe – Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, March 12, 2024, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/91950>.

technocrats operate behind the scenes – negotiating details and annually assessing the candidate’s advancement toward membership.

The European Union seems to have permanently lost its strategic approach to enlargement and has sunk into a technocratic-bureaucratic mindset. If enlargement is decided based on issues such as the sewage systems of cities, the number of biometric passports, or other technical matters, the prospects will appear very different than if we view enlargement as part of a geopolitical competition. Bearing in mind the volume of the *acquis communautaire*, the former approach is understandable and can complement, but must not replace, strategic considerations.

It is correct to state that “The EU has wasted valuable time and a great deal of trust in the Western Balkans over the last few years...”²⁴ It is also essential to recognize that two other major powers play peculiar roles in the region, or as it was succinctly put: “Moscow splits, Beijing builds.” In this context, the situation in the Western Balkans can be interpreted as a clash of systems between democracies and authoritarian regimes.²⁵

Since 2022, the number of candidates for EU membership has increased beyond the states of the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Two states, Ukraine and Moldova, were granted candidate status in June 2022. They advanced to the status of negotiating candidates in December 2023, while Georgia became a candidate at the same time. As Ukraine is fighting a war against Russian aggression, denying it candidate status would have been impossible for Kyiv. Meanwhile, Moldova has also taken systematic steps toward the West in recent years and was no less prepared than Ukraine. This development has complicated the situation. It is clear that accession can only take place once several basic conditions are met. The states of the Western Balkans, which have spent two decades in the waiting room, are closely monitoring the process. This might accelerate their accession, as they can argue that (1) their alignment with EU membership requirements is stronger than that of the more recent candidates and (2) they have been waiting for more than two decades.

However, it is unlikely that the two new negotiating candidates will significantly impact the process, as EU accession remains a distant goal for both Ukraine and Moldova. Demonstrating progress by moving forward from one interim step to another serves as encouragement for the countries in the EU accession pipeline. However, it does not eliminate the hurdles that become more apparent upon closer inspection. Ultimately, it is the high-level political determination of the leaders of EU institutions and member states that may help overcome the slow pace and the many detailed requirements that every candidate must meet. The next step is opening accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova through a high-profile intergovernmental conference.

²⁴ Michael Roth, “Op Ed: The Future of the Western Balkans Is at Stake,” *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, September 23, 2022, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/op-ed-future-western-balkans-at-stake>.

²⁵ Roth, “Op Ed: The Future of the Western Balkans Is at Stake.”

Economic Interaction

As the European Union continues to have a heavy economic agenda and remains an economic giant, representing nearly 15 % of global GDP in PPP terms,²⁶ it is crucial for candidate countries to be able to integrate without major shocks. While most candidates undergo an extensive pre-accession preparation process, this is not expected to cause significant hurdles anymore. Market access is mutually granted, ensuring the competitiveness of the candidate countries. Still, some issues may present challenges, one of the most apparent being the level of economic development.

Although per capita GDP does not reflect this on its own, a significant gap between the per capita GDP of EU member states and candidate countries creates various problems (see data on the successor states of the former Yugoslavia and Albania in Table 2). One such issue is the potential resettlement of qualified labor to richer member states. Western Balkans have struggled in this regard, as large-scale labor migration has already been underway. As the OECD concludes, “More than one in five of the population born in the Western Balkan Six ... live abroad.” This means that 4.8 million people born in one of the six states of the Western Balkans reside abroad.²⁷ While emigration provides certain benefits for the countries from which citizens leave, such as lower unemployment rates and remittances, the overall consequences tend to be more negative. Often, young, talented, motivated, and well-educated individuals leave, weakening their home countries’ economic performance and prospects.

The European Union appears as a magnet for citizens of the Western Balkans on various levels. Partly, this results in the resettlement of cheap, less qualified labor to EU member states, and it also entails a classic brain drain – the departure of highly qualified professionals. The effects are partly positive, as they contribute to national income through remittances. During the period from 2000 to 2019, the average remittance in the Western Balkans equaled 10 % of GDP. The share of remittances varies among the six countries. Over this twenty-year period, it was the highest in Kosovo (17 %), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania (both at 15 %), 8 % in Montenegro, 6 % in Serbia, and 3 % in North Macedonia.²⁸ According to economic calculations, a 1 % increase in remittances generates 0.1–0.12 % GDP growth. On the other hand, the shortage of qualified local labor presents a severe problem, as the availability of skilled workers is a key factor for European investors when deciding where to invest capital. In summary, as is self-evident in such a case, the remittances from labor emigrants do

²⁶ IMF assessed the EU GDP in PPP terms to be 14.34 % of the global one. “World Economic Outlook (October 2023),” accessed March 5, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/EU>.

²⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Labor Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits*, Global Relations – Policy Insights (Paris: OECD, 2022), 20, 12, <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Labour-Migration-report.pdf>.

²⁸ OECD, *Labor Migration in the Western Balkans*, 90-93.

Table 2. Basic Data on the States of the Former Yugoslavia and Albania.²⁹

	Territory (km ²)	Population (2023)	GDP (2022) (billion USD)	GDP per capita (PPP) (2022) (USD)	GDP growth (2022) (%)	Armed Forces Personnel (active) (2023)
Albania	28,748	3,107,100	43.032	15,500	4.86	7,000
BiH	51,197	3,798,671	54.12	16,700	4.11	10,000
Croatia	56,594	4,150,116	132.256	34,300	6.35	15,000
Kosovo	10,887	1,977,093	22.333	12,700	5.22	3,300 (including reservists)
Montenegro	13,812	599,849	13.646	22,100	6.41	2,000
North Macedonia	25,713	2,135,622	35.245	17,100	2.15	7,000
Serbia	77,474	6,652,212	139.193	20,900	2.55	25,000
Slovenia	20,273	2,097,893	86.624	41,000	2.46	6,000

not compensate for the economic consequences of losing qualified labor in the Western Balkan states. Additionally, every country in the Western Balkans will continue to experience a shrinking population base, similar to EU member states. Emigration exacerbates this problem.

The nominal per capita GDP of the six Western Balkan states amounts to less than 15 % of that of the European Union.³⁰ Although the situation is significantly better when calculated in purchasing power parity (PPP)—where the Western Balkans reaches 37.4 % of the EU average—it is still far from reassuring. In particular, this suggests that catching up with the average EU per capita GDP would take several decades if not a century. Of course, if some larger states with lower per capita GDP join the European Union before the states of the Western Balkans, the EU average per capita GDP will drop, making it easier for the region to catch up. There are also elements of economic unpredictability. However, one must be cautious with predictions, as in such a scenario, the relatively richer current member states would benefit less from central redistribution mechanisms such as EU regional and structural funds. Consequently, this could slow down the rapid growth of some current member states.

²⁹ CIA, “The World Factbook,” accessed May 24, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>.

³⁰ Eurostat, “GDP per Capita, Consumption per Capita and Price Level Indices,” December 14, 2023, accessed March 4, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=GDP_per_capita,_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices.

It is a question of how to create economic competitiveness in such a situation. The region, similar to East-Central Europe and other Southeast European states, has a rather low level of genuine capital accumulation. Consequently, attracting foreign capital is a must for the six states of the Western Balkans. This requires creating the conditions for attracting foreign direct investment while facing fierce global competition to ensure that it contributes to genuine economic development. Creating the necessary political conditions, a transparent and investment-friendly environment, and the rule of law—including legal predictability—are key areas where states should take action. Additionally, the availability of an adequately educated labor force, healthcare, and physical infrastructure also belong to these conditions.

The states of the region have faced various disadvantages, partly due to uneven levels of development. For example, Albania endured a particularly harsh communist regime for decades and, by the late 1980s, had become Europe's poorest country. Some former Yugoslav republics were significantly poorer than others, and several—such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and later Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo (referred to as “Rest-Jugoslawien”)—suffered from armed conflicts. Despite these challenges, some Western Balkan states have highlighted their achievements. For instance, North Macedonia gained recognition for its progress in the ease of doing business index (discontinued since 2020), reaching the 17th position globally.³¹

If the European Union does not want to burden its post-accession agenda, it must contribute to developing the Western Balkan states in preparation for membership. The scale and intensity of this effort will demonstrate how committed the European Union is to the region. However, it must be taken into account that the countries that joined between 2004 and 2013 are in a relatively advantageous position, as they are part of the EU decision-making. They are “sitting around the table” where budgetary resources are being distributed. Naturally, they are more interested in facilitating their own development than that of any other state – a decisive matter of solidarity. Not to mention the crises that have incurred huge costs for the European Union – from the Eurozone crisis to COVID-19 and, more recently, assistance to Ukraine.

If we examine the record of economic relations, the picture is mixed. The European Union is the number one trade partner of the Western Balkans, accounting for 81 % of the region's exports and 57.9 % of its imports in 2021.³² With this, the European Union significantly surpasses trade with the second-largest export

³¹ “Ease of Doing Business Ranking 2020,” accessed March 5, 2024, https://archive.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/pdf/db2020/Doing-Business-2020_rankings.pdf.

³² Eurostat, “Archive: Western Balkans-EU – International Trade in Goods Statistics,” March 2022, accessed March 4, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Western_Balkans-EU__international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=526493%5C.

partner, China, which represents only 3.2%, and the second-largest import partner, also China, with a 11.6% share. Russia lags behind, with less than 3% in exports and less than 4% in imports.³³ This means that China and Russia are gaining economic influence despite having only a minuscule share of trade in the Western Balkans. Irrespective of the often small trade volumes, the EU's overwhelming lead in external trade remains crucial. However, it is important to note that the trade balance between the two sides favors the European Union in each case. The European Union exports more than it imports, thereby contributing to the trade deficit of the Western Balkan states. Table 3 presents data on trade between the European Union and the Western Balkans.

Notably, some Western Balkan states have entered into major trade deals, such as Serbia's recent purchase of 12 French Rafale fighter jets at a cost of € 2.7 billion. This large purchase brought French President Emmanuel Macron to Belgrade.³⁴ In this case, Serbia, a friend of Russia, prioritized a French supplier. It may also be significant that Serbia has agreed with the European Union to provide access to its lithium resources as part of a broader agreement to exploit "...raw materials mined in Serbia and strengthen their ties on production of sustainable raw materials, battery manufacturing and electric vehicles (EVs)."³⁵ Such deals—far more than gestures—may play a crucial role when the European Union and some of its most influential member states reconsider their approach to EU enlargement.

The European Union is also a major investor in the region. Its investment is spread across various sectors rather than concentrated in select areas, except those financed from public sources. While this investment makes an economic impact, it does not appear to serve a strategic agenda. It is not directed toward sectors that could help the region break out of its relatively low level of development. Notably, it is not focused on developing physical infrastructure, the energy sector, or the media – areas through which other investors work to gain political influence. China is involved in infrastructure, while the Russian Federation is more active in the energy and media sectors. However, the European Union has already allocated funds to ensure that the Western Balkan countries do not lag significantly behind when EU member states realize the Green Deal.

The European Union also appears as a major donor in the Western Balkans. Funds are disbursed through various channels and serve multiple objectives. In the current budget cycle, between 2021 and 2027, the European Union will provide € 9 billion in funding, with the potential to mobilize up to € 20 billion in in-

³³ Eurostat, "Archive: Western Balkans-EU – International Trade in Goods Statistics."

³⁴ "France, Serbia Sign €2.7 billion Rafale Fighter Jet Deal during Macron Visit," *France 24*, August 29, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240829-fighter-jet-deal-at-centre-of-macron-s-serbia-trip>.

³⁵ Reuters, "Serbia, EU and Germany Sign Battery Supply Chain Deal," *Reuters*, July 19, 2024, www.reuters.com/sustainability/serbia-eu-germany-sign-battery-supply-chain-deal-2024-07-19/.

Table 3. Trade Between the EU and the States of the Western Balkans (2022).³⁶

	EU Share of Total (%)	Total Value (€ bn)	EU Share in Export (%)	Total Export (€ bn)	EU Share in Import (%)	Total Import (€ bn)
Albania	59	12.092	73.4	4.090	51.6	8.002
BiH	63	23.832	73.6	9.190	56.9	14.642
Kosovo	41.2	6.559	33.9	0.920	42.4	5.639
Montenegro	41.9	4.240	30.3	0.700	44.3	3.540
North Macedonia	58.2	20.426	78.3	8.300	46.2	12.126
Serbia	58.7	63.089	66.0	26.353	51.9	36.736

vestments through the Western Balkan Guarantee Facility.³⁷ Bearing in mind the combined size of the six countries, this amount is much smaller than the funding received by some “new” EU member states and may not be sufficient to close the development gap.

The Complementarity of Multilateral Cooperation

The cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans has traditionally been bilateral. On one side is the European Union; on the other, one of the six states. This is partly understandable but also unfortunate. It is understandable because some of these countries were engaged in wars against each other not long ago, and their relations have suffered lasting damage.³⁸ Overcoming this may take a long time, even though most people in the region share some post-Yugoslav identity. Furthermore, the entire accession process takes place

³⁶ Eurostat, “Enlargement Countries – International Trade in Goods Statistics,” May 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=627517#Value_of_exports_and_imports.

³⁷ “Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021-2027,” Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), accessed March 2, 2024, <https://www.wbif.eu/eip>.

³⁸ It is sufficient to mention the deep seated conviction of many Serbs that the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) provided Victor’s justice “Sieg-erjustiz,” when it acquitted alleged war criminals of other countries and ethnicities and gave severe sentences to Serbs (and Bosnian Serbs). In a recent example, Bosnia and Herzegovina suspended an agreement with Hungary as the latter did not join the decision in the UN General Assembly on adopting the “International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.” See Gergely Tóth and Andrea Horváth Kávai, “Hungary to Vote against UN Resolution on Srebrenica Genocide,” *Tel-ex*, May 15, 2024, <https://telex.hu/english/2024/05/15/hungary-to-vote-against-un-resolution-on-srebrenica-genocide>. The decision passed on May 23, 2024 sparked opposition and anger in Serbia and among the Bosnian Serbs.

between the European Union (collectively) and the candidate country, reinforcing the rationale for a bilateral approach.

However, it must be the EU's objective to foster regionalism and achieve reconciliation among the various states in the Western Balkans. As the long-time High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown, pointed out:

The Balkans region must be treated as a whole [...] problems could be solved in a much easier way if problems are perceived and treated as regional rather than national problems. This certainly applies to crime, defence, foreign affairs, trade, economics, and on any other issues, which can be resolved in a much easier way within the Balkans regional context than within an individual country.³⁹

Regarding economic cooperation, most states have small populations and represent small markets due to the combination of population size and relatively low purchasing power. This makes the creation of a regional trade and investment area indispensable. Still, when the distinguished expert Tim Judah coined the term "Yugosphere"⁴⁰ in 2009 to highlight that these economies cannot thrive outside a regional framework, the concept was not enthusiastically received by people and leaders in the Western Balkans.

There are two frameworks worth mentioning that provide for some regional cooperation and contribute to it in the interest of reaching out to the European Union: the so-called Berlin Process and the Open Balkan project. The former was initiated by the European Union, i.e., by a non-regional player, whereas the Open Balkan is a grassroots initiative from some states in the region. The Berlin Process began in 2014 upon the initiative of Germany and, in addition to the six Western Balkan states, involves nine EU member states (and the United Kingdom). Understandably, most of these EU member states have a special interest in the region, including the two former Yugoslav republics that have joined the European Union, as well as other nearby countries such as Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy, in addition to France and Germany. The EU Presidency country always participates in the meetings, as do the leaders of various EU institutions.

The Berlin Process is not part of the Stabilization and Association Process. However, the programs discussed within it—whether among governments, at business forums or civil society and think tank conferences—provide important insights and food for thought regarding EU-Western Balkans relations. Its primary aim is to strengthen regional cooperation and facilitate the green transition in the Western Balkans. The green transition is a highly relevant topic, as it requires regional solutions in Europe and beyond. It is essential both to meet global

³⁹ "UK and the Western Balkans (IRC Report) – Motion to Take. London," The House of Lords, May 24, 2018, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2018-05-24b.1118.0>.

⁴⁰ Tim Judah, "Good News from the Western Balkans: Yugoslavia is Dead – Long Live the Yugosphere," *LSEE Papers*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/LSEE-Research-on-South-Eastern-Europe/Assets/Documents/Publications/Paper-Series-on-SEE/Yugosphere.pdf>.

objectives for mitigating global warming and to prepare for EU membership. The Berlin Process has remained complementary to the formal enlargement process, which is, understandably, bilateral. In addition to the value of this framework, it may also serve to reduce the dissatisfaction of Western Balkan states, which often feel that the enlargement process is not progressing.

The Open Balkan project was initiated by Western Balkan countries and initially consisted of three states: Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. During its four years of existence, it failed to deliver on its promises, such as economic integration or forming a single market.⁴¹ It was unable to attract additional members and was regularly criticized by other Western Balkan countries, such as Kosovo and Montenegro. The criticism addressed the lack of transparency, particularly regarding approved documents, the project's reliance on a few "strongmen" of the Western Balkans, and its potential to cement Serbian leadership in the region. Serbia's central role can hardly be denied, but its historical position and ongoing conflicts—both highly visible ones, such as with Kosovo, and less apparent, with Bosnia and Herzegovina—certainly do not make it a "natural" leader.

Finally, it was Albania that declared the project's "mission accomplished" in 2023, indicating that its objectives had been achieved. However, it seems that the original ambitions were not realized. This serves as an important lesson: for the time being, regional cooperation tends to succeed when driven by influential external actors, such as the European Union. Consequently, one may argue that multilateral regional integration has some chance of success when externally induced and fostered by influential partners in the subregion.

Public Opinion about EU Accession in the Western Balkans

Over time and without visible progress toward membership, public opinion in the Western Balkans has gradually changed. Still, in five of the six countries, the majority of people continue to be in favor of the EU perspective.⁴² According to the *Balkan Barometer*, overall support stood at 59 % in 2023 – a drop of 3 % compared to 2021 in the region. However, the spread is significant and continues to increase. While Albania, the country with the most favorable public opinion, has 92 % of its population supporting the European perspective, at the other end of the spectrum, only 34 % of Serbians do.⁴³ The remaining four countries fall in between: Kosovo (66 %), Montenegro (60 %), Bosnia and Herzegovina (52 %),

⁴¹ Alice Taylor-Brace, "Open Balkan Initiative Can Negatively Impact Region, Study Says," *Euractiv*, August 30, 2022, accessed March 2, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/open-balkan-initiative-could-negatively-impact-region-study-says/.

⁴² "Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion," Analytical Report (Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council, June 2023), 38, <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/BB%202023-PO.pdf/5495f3e223e456e99fc3bdce76054b7e.pdf>.

⁴³ "Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion, Key Findings," Regional Cooperation Council, June 2023, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/public.

and North Macedonia (50%).⁴⁴ This is not particularly reassuring, as it highlights two key factors to consider. First, if the trend does not change in the years to come, it may happen that some candidates may no longer be interested in joining by the time the European Union is ready to enlarge. And second, the messages from political leaders are decisive. Public support remains high in countries where leadership consistently communicates its determination and strong support for the EU membership perspective and portrays the European Union positively. In contrast, where leaders discuss alternative options, suggest that membership is unattainable, or claim that, even if it were, it would not result in major favorable changes, the public tends to align with these views. Over time, this sentiment is reflected in opinion polls, which reassures political leaders about the correctness of their approach, thus creating a cycle of mutual “reassurance.”

This is particularly the case in Serbia. There, President Aleksandar Vučić regularly delivers ambiguous messages. The language he uses has not changed much over the years. In 2016, he said: “Yes, we all want to join, but it is no longer the big dream it was in the past ... I have told ... openly the EU is not as attractive as it used to be, but we are rational people, and we know this is the best for our country.”⁴⁵ In February 2023, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, he said, “We are not as enthusiastic as we used to be, in a way that [the] European Union is not that enthusiastic about us as we thought it was.”⁴⁶

Later, Vučić systematically cooled expectations regarding his country’s EU accession prospects – first identified with 2025, then with 2028. He did so partly in the name of realism and partly, shrewdly, to demonstrate his success if accession happens earlier than now expected: “One of the Balkan countries can become a *member* of the EU, but it will *not* happen earlier than 2030.”⁴⁷ This indicates a downward spiral where Serbia’s number one politician places at least part of the blame on the European Union for the country’s insufficient advancement toward membership. As the country’s leadership is well aware that EU membership will not be realized soon, it shares a self-fulfilling prophecy with the population.

However, the business sector is more favorable toward the European Union than the general population. The majority of that group in each Western Balkan state supports EU membership. Support varies from 96 % in Albania to 62 % in Serbia, with the remaining four countries all in the range of 70+ percent: North

⁴⁴ “Balkan Barometer 2023: Public Opinion,” 38.

⁴⁵ “Vucic Says EU Membership Has ‘Lost Magic Power’ for Balkans,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 23, 2016, <http://www.vucic-says-eu-membership-has-lost-magic-power-for-balkans-migrant-crisis-brexite>. Quoted by Vesna Pavičić, “Serbia’s Orientation Challenge and Ways to Overcome It,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 18, no. 1-2 (2019): 111-127, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.18.1-2.07>.

⁴⁶ Wilhelmine Preussen, “Serbia ‘Not Enthusiastic’ about EU Membership Anymore, Says President,” *Politico*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-vucic-davos-world-economic-forum-european-union-membership/>.

⁴⁷ “Vucic: Serbia Not to Be Able to Join EU until 2030,” *AzerNews*, September 1, 2024, <https://www.azernews.az/rejon/230614.html>.

Macedonia (76 %), Bosnia and Herzegovina (74 %), Kosovo (72 %), and Montenegro (71 %).⁴⁸ Given that the European Union is the number one trade partner of every Western Balkan state, it is hardly surprising that the business sector assesses the EU perspective favorably.

The doubts of the population about the prospect of EU membership are significant, although they still represent a minority in every country. However, due to its slow pace and bureaucratic approach, the European Union has contributed to 28 % of the region's population believing that their country will never become an EU member. Serbia has the highest proportion of skeptics (41 %), while the lowest is in Kosovo (8 %). The four other countries fall between 22 % and 35 %.⁴⁹

Conclusions

The European Union generated high hopes in the former Yugoslavia and Albania at the beginning of the 21st century. This was partly a reflection of the determination to move the region forward and out of the often dismal state it had been in after the wars in the 1990s. The general political atmosphere in Europe was also far more favorable at that time. However, as the European Union faced challenges in integrating the 12 countries of the 2004 and 2007 accessions and moved from crisis to crisis, the region lost priority. Meanwhile, the European Union saw various rivals emerge, increasing their influence economically, politically, and culturally. The European Union had to decide whether to respond to these developments and, if so, how.

There is every reason to conclude that the European Union and its most influential members recognized the risks posed by the emergence of rival powers seeking to gain influence in the region – albeit belatedly. Even when the European Union understood the inherent danger, it continued with its bureaucratic, step-by-step approach. This contributed to the EU's low visibility, while others made significant efforts to propagate their presence despite the disproportionately larger resources the European Union had devoted to the Western Balkans.

The states of the Western Balkans provide an easy way out for the European Union, as none of the candidate countries present a fully convincing record. Some have highly visible problems, like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Others, like Montenegro and North Macedonia, have recently failed to provide the political stability that would reassure the European Union they will not be troublemakers once they become members. Albania continues to struggle with governance issues and endemic corruption. Last but not least, Serbia may well be further from fulfilling certain membership requirements than it was two decades ago. It is pursuing a clearly visible multi-vector foreign policy and realigning its vectors as it assesses the changing international environment.

⁴⁸ "Balkan Barometer 2023 Business Opinion, Key Findings," Regional Cooperation Council, June 2023, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/1/business.

⁴⁹ "Balkan Barometer 2023 Business Opinion," 40.

The economic performance of the Western Balkan states is insufficiently convincing. The two former Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia, are significantly ahead of most others. The question arises as to whether their development was boosted in preparation for membership and after joining the European Union, and this has contributed to the widening gap between them and the other states in the region.

Based on evidence, it is clear that states approaching EU accession—and later, as members—receive a boost to their economic development. This means that those states that have not moved closer to EU membership can argue that they received insufficient support for their development, leading to endless finger-pointing between the European Union and the candidate countries. The states could claim that the European Union did not provide sufficient support for their development, whereas the European Union may argue that individual candidate countries have not met the accession criteria to the necessary extent. Politicians with a strategic vision who see their country's future in the European Union must avoid instrumentalizing the discourse and blaming Brussels for insufficient progress toward membership.

The increasingly skeptical view of the public in several Western Balkan states concerning EU enlargement also reflects the EU's piecemeal approach. This creates an opportunity for some populist leaders to present alternatives to EU accession. Leaders who seek to perpetuate their hold on power and avoid democratic oversight of their activities are reluctant to allow scrutiny regarding the rule of law, human rights, democracy, good governance, and the reduction of corruption. Even though this does not serve the interests of their people, it may benefit these leaders. External partners offering alternatives either behave neutrally on these issues or actively discourage leaders from addressing them.⁵⁰ Their corruption, nepotism, favoritism, and preference for lack of transparency help external players in the region create dependencies. There is no doubt that this has weakened the EU's influence in the Western Balkans. However, the European Union would be ill-advised to abandon its values, principles, and norms, and this presents a real dilemma between idealism and "realpolitik." The former approach would result in a slow and cautious enlargement process, while the latter would urge the European Union to complete the process before it is too late.

The above circumstances highlight a situation where the enlargement of the European Union, with justifiable reference to the uneven performance record of the Western Balkan countries (demonstrating a steady political commitment to carry out the necessary reforms, aligning the legal systems, and closing the GDP gap with at least the less affluent EU members), results in a scenario where the European Union is gradually losing its role as a decisive actor, and enlargement is no longer treated as a strategic necessity. Without a radical departure from

⁵⁰ China and Türkiye fall into the former category, while Russia belongs to the latter.

the technocratic approach and the adoption of innovative ways to move forward, the completion of EU enlargement west of the borders of the former Soviet Union cannot be achieved.

Disclaimer

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