

## The Geopolitisation of Enlargement and the role of the EU values in the transformation of the Western Balkans

*Klodiana Beshku*

---

*Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2024 brought a total transformation in the EU Enlargement policy. It was finally linked to the geopolitical interests of the Union, bringing added attention to the region of the Western Balkans.*

*The European Union has launched a Growth Plan, very similar to the Marshall Plan, aiming at the economic convergence of this area with the rest of the Union.*

*Still, this plan only mentions the importance of adapting the EU norms by these countries' societies, without going into details. The social absorption of EU values -often neglected in scholarship dealing with the European integration of a country or a region- appears as a crucial element in the elevation of the candidate country in the EU standards. The assumption in the basis of this article is that despite the implementation of the entire body of EU legislation (acquis communautaire) before they can join and an institutional and economic revamping of the WB, the social absorption of the EU norms by their societies is of major importance to the WB for them to become an effective part of the EU club and*

*to counter corruption, strengthen rule of law and refrain political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries.*

## Introduction

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine of 24th of February 2022 brought a major shift in global geopolitics<sup>57</sup> which was reflected in the revival of the rhetoric in support of the enlargement to the WB<sup>58</sup>. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine created a critical juncture<sup>59</sup> and an abrupt geopolitical momentum able to "define a new path for the EU Enlargement"<sup>60</sup>. The immediate response of the EU after this war was to place enhanced attention on its spheres of

---

<sup>57</sup> Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, „Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute.

<sup>59</sup> Davide Denti, “A New Geopolitics for the Western Balkans, a Thessaloniki Moment for the Eastern Partners, and a New Big Project for Europe. The Effects of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the EU's Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policies” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p.46.

<sup>60</sup> Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, “The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture. Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 56.

influence, therefore, speeding up integration in the Western Balkans granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 and a year later to Georgia. What was achieved between 2022 and 2024 in terms of Enlargement was far more than a decade before when Enlargement was put in standby mode. Negotiations were opened with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership in December 2022, access negotiations were opened with Ukraine and Moldova in December 2023, visa-liberalization with Kosovo occurred in January 2024 and access negotiations were opened with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024, as well.

In the immediate aftermath of this war, there was little hope that the substance of the Enlargement would have changed and that there was a real willingness in Brussels to consider enlarging the Union seriously.<sup>61</sup>

Although declarations of High representatives of the EU institutions were in favor of the EU accession of the Western Balkans and something started to move positively in this regard starting from 2023, doubts about actions besides the symbolic meaning of these changes remained. There was a rational concern that both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans would end up re-engaging in the same kind of slow-burning formal accession negotiations they

---

<sup>61</sup>Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 3.

conducted in the past, expecting a different result.<sup>62</sup> A low capacity of adaptation from both sides was likely to make things change only in their appearance, not in their essence in a region challenged all the time by illiberal domestic forces. To prove concerns wrong, the European Union adopted a 6-billion-euro Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in December 2023<sup>63</sup>, like a Marshall Plan for the region which has imposed an ambitious plan for the Western Balkans: To accelerate the socio-economic convergence of the Western Balkans to the EU with the aim to make these countries ready for a new sort of membership within 2030.

The Growth plan is based on the “reform to invest” principle. It has four main pillars - Enhancing economic integration, boosting of Common Regional Market, accelerating fundamental reforms, and increasing financial assistance to support the reforms.<sup>64</sup> - where the Western Balkan countries should base their reform Agenda Plans and seven priority areas of action the EU offers to these countries. The facility

---

<sup>62</sup> Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> European Commission, *2023 Communication new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, 7 November 2023 at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en) accessed in December 2024.

<sup>64</sup> European Commission, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, Brussels, 8.11.2023 at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03\\_en?filename=COM\\_2023\\_691\\_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf) accessed in December 2024.

is the financial pillar of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans that is going to cover the period from 2024 to 2027 and is expected to provide up to €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans to the EU's six Western Balkan partners.<sup>65</sup> after delivering effective reforms. Although the EU through the facility states that the main aim of the facility is to “support Western Balkan partners’ alignment with the EU’s values, laws, rules, standards, policies and practices, with a view to future EU membership, as well as their progressive integration into the EU single market and socio-economic convergence with the EU”<sup>66</sup>, there is no precise road map for how the alignment with the EU norms can be achieved. The only element where this alignment is based is the request for the implementation of effective reforms by the Western Balkan countries. Thus, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans proposed by the EU aims at the Western Balkans countries and their societies to align with the EU values through reforming their institutional and market capacities. It does not delve into the question of how the EU values should be adopted, absorbed and interiorized by these societies. This article deals with the importance of the social absorption of EU values as an instrument in addition to the

---

<sup>65</sup> Council of the EU, *Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans adopted* Press release, 7 May 2024, at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/07/reform-and-growth-facility-for-the-western-balkans-adopted/> accessed in December 2024.

<sup>66</sup> European Council, European Parliament, Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 25 April 2024, article 3, p. 32 at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-80-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

institutional and democratic consolidation of an EU candidate country.

The social absorption of EU values -often neglected in scholarship dealing with the European integration of a country or a region- appears as a crucial element in the elevation of the candidate country in the EU standards. The assumption in the basis of this article is that despite the implementation of the entire body of EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*) before they can join and an institutional and economic revamping of the WB, the social absorption of the EU norms by their societies is of major importance to the WB for them to become an effective part of the EU club and to counter corruption, strengthen rule of law and refrain political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries. Basing all the hopes on the reforms will not be enough, since reforms alone will not do the rest. According to Welzel's human emancipation theory, socio economic development, urbanization, mass education, a rising sense of existential security, and promising life prospects, all foster emancipative values<sup>67</sup>.

These values closely resemble several domains of the EU values. Of course, economic development and democratic consolidation through reforms bring more opportunities in terms of self-realization and post-material values, but if

---

<sup>67</sup> Christian Welzel, (2013). *Freedom Rising: Human empowerment and the quest for emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

adapting to the EU values is left in its natural flow, entering the EU could take ages before applying.

## Enlargement policy after the War in Ukraine

The Enlargement policy of the EU has profoundly changed after Russia's aggression war in Ukraine. Official sources confirm that the enlargement process gained new momentum throughout 2023 and 2024<sup>68</sup>. The EU now uses Enlargement as a part of the wartime policy kit<sup>69</sup> which has security goals as its main priority serving the geopolitical agenda of the European Union. Western Balkan countries experienced a revival of the EU attention in their direction, nevertheless, same as before the war, the EU does not seem ready to engage in further enlargement judging by its multiple crises and the high inflation it is going through due to the war in Ukraine.

Consequently, among others, the Head of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, has been three times on a diplomatic visit in the Western Balkans since the war has sprouted until 2024. On 24-25 March 2022, the European

---

<sup>68</sup> European Commission, 'Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package' at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en). Accessed 20 December 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it" in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 7.

Council adopted conclusions on the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, security and defence, energy, economic issues, COVID-19, external relations and the election of the President of the European Council. “The European Union reiterates its commitment to the European perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans”<sup>70</sup> and in August 2023, Charles Michel, proposed 2030 as the year when the EU and its candidates should be ready for enlargement<sup>71</sup>.

In November 2023, the European Commission adopted a New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans with its €6 billion Reform & Growth Facility (2 billion grants and 4 billion cheap loans) to narrow the socio-economic divergence of the countries of this region to the EU member states for the period 2024-2027. Later on, the President of the European Commission, Von der Leyen, embodied both Enlargement and Geopolitics in her speech at the end of 2024 by stating that “the tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law”<sup>72</sup>. It was the crystal-clear moment when

---

<sup>70</sup><https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/25/european-council-conclusions-24-25-march-2022/>

<sup>71</sup> European Council, “Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum”, 28 August 2023.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charlesmichel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>

<sup>72</sup> European Commission, ‘Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package’ (Press Release, 30 October 2024) <https://neighbourhood->

Enlargement met Geopolitics and Geopolitics met alignment with the EU values officially and in practice. By the end of 2024, the Fundamentals cluster and the External Relations one were opened with Albania between October and December 2024. Having met the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, Montenegro is on the way to provisionally closing further negotiating chapters and Serbia fulfilled the benchmarks to open the cluster on Competitiveness and inclusive growth. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this context, it has become very important for the Western Balkan countries to keep the pace of becoming such an important geopolitical area for the EU. They have committed to going through important structural transformations and reforms to take real advantage of the Growth Plan.<sup>73</sup> The Western Balkan countries complete the European Union once they become its members, but membership will never happen if the standard of living and democratization will not be levelled up in these countries if

---

[enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en)

Accessed 20 December 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Commission approves Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, paving way for payments under the Reform and Growth Facility, News article, 23 October 2024 at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-approves-reform-agendas-albania-kosovo-montenegro-north-macedonia-and-serbia-paving-way-2024-10-23\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-approves-reform-agendas-albania-kosovo-montenegro-north-macedonia-and-serbia-paving-way-2024-10-23_en) accessed in December 2024.

the countries will not be part of the club geographically, institutionally and in their mindset and system of values.

Commissioner Von der Leyen stated that Enlargement is a top priority in Tirana in October 2024. Enlargement is now linked to the security of EU borders and the completion of its territory – its territorialization. “Once skeptical capitals like Paris or the Hague, which had put obstacles in place that contributed to an enlargement “stalemate” form for the 2018-2022 period, seem now to embrace the view that the Union’s expansion is a geopolitical imperative”<sup>74</sup>. The geopolitical importance of the region is even more prominent since the EU is not enlarging to the WB, but it encapsulates them. <sup>75</sup>. Nevertheless, this kind of geographical union is not enough. On the EU’s side, bilateral problems, democratic backsliding, socioeconomic malaise, the strengthening of far-right parties, and the insecurity related to the block's ability to function with more than 30 members are only some of the fears from the EU side.<sup>76</sup>. On

---

<sup>74</sup> Ioannis Armakolas, Alexandra Voudouri (2024). *Relaunching Enlargement: How Will it Affect the Western Balkans? Evolution and Prospects of European Policy*, European Institute of the Mediterranean Publications.

<sup>75</sup> Klodiana Beshku, “The War in Ukraine: Europe’s Geopolitical Momentum. Will the Western Balkans Take Advantage of It?” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute (EUI). ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2, pg. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Ioannis Armakolas, Alexandra Voudouri (2024). *Relaunching Enlargement: How Will it Affect the Western Balkans? Evolution and*

the Western Balkans side, the fight against corruption, political clientelism and containment of state capture is such an emergency. In this direction, adaptation with the EU values will help in the fight against these phenomena and in the consolidation of the rule of law in these societies.

### **The Western Balkans and the EU: Making both ends meet through the absorption of EU values**

The EU is not only a security provider or a security seeker but also an economic union and a community of values. According to Habermas' theory going through one of his books on the EU, a large consensus on the set of fundamental values is crucial for the sustainability of the EU as a democratic community and may provide democratic legitimacy in the absence of a shared demos. Furthermore, the EU “has framed itself as a global actor by exporting norms not soldiers...and by not imposing this consent”<sup>77</sup>. To be part of the European Community, the Western Balkans need to internalize the EU values together with their gradual economic and institutional integration into the club since “the more states reject EU values, the more their otherness is reified as geographical remoteness”<sup>78</sup>. Accession

---

*Prospects of the European Policy*, European Institute of the Mediterranean Publications.

<sup>77</sup> Jan Zielonka, (2008). “Europe as a global actor: Empire by example?”, *International Affairs*, 84 (3):471–84. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00718.x.

<sup>78</sup> Cristian Nitoiu and Monika Sus (2019). “Introduction: The Rise of Geopolitics” in “The EU’s Approach in its Eastern Neighbourhood”, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2019.1544396.

candidates need not only to implement the entire body of EU legislation (Acquis Communautaire') before they can join but also to effectively internalize and absorb the EU values to be able to strengthen the rule of law and counter corruption, strengthen the rule of law and refrain from political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries. If not aligned with the EU values, future membership of a state in the EU is not denied but postponed for an unknown period. "Europe thereby becomes a temporal as opposed to a spatial category – everyone can be European at some later stage of development. This later stage is crucial, as becoming European always happens at a later stage"<sup>79</sup> and it may take too long before the EU membership happens, even if the country is in place with the formal accomplishments. By doing so, instead of Enlargement being "part of an ongoing process of constituting Europe as a place of attraction rather than conflict, as centred on its soft security values rather than a hard security enemy template" (O'Brennan 2006: 162), Enlargement risks being transformed into a tool to serve the populism or politics of member countries, transforming the whole stabilization and association process in a simple way to keep the western Balkans on track but with no advancement on the European path and serving the authoritarian regimes.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ole Wæver (2000). "The EU as Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders" in Kelstrup M. and Williams M. C. (Eds.), 2000. *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, London and New York: Routledge.

The legal basis for EU enlargement is Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union which states that “any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union”. In 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty introduced the requirement for applicant countries to respect EU values, outlined in Article 2 TEU. The values on which the EU is founded, according to the Treaty on the European Union, include “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities [. . .] pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity”. Values, as stated in Article 2, are not just lofty ideals but have the status of legally binding principles and the EU has put the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in charge of monitoring the infringements of Article 2 values in member states, but the Union does not have certain leverage in promoting and enforcing these values in its candidate states. The sanctions, in this case, have to do with a halt in financial aid and programs by the EU side or sanctions for non-alignment with these values, but there is not a clear road map of how to make these values intrinsic in the candidate countries' societies.

The Growth Plan sets the stage for the Western Balkans in a designed roadmap on which the region could move on to approach the EU by doubling its economy in the next five years. However, the economic and societal convergence with the EU is not enough for the WB part. The countries of

the region have to, in parallel, change the political style of the ruling parties by staying away from old habits like the practices of corruption and political clientelism to gain and retain power for themselves, and, on the other hand, the civil society within these countries has to move forward in changing the society's mindset to not follow these practices. There should be a triple strategy for encountering these phenomena based on a gradual taking part in the decision-making bodies of the EU, an institutional and economic revamping of the WB and a totalization of the social absorption of the EU norms by the WB Countries' societies. The staged accession model: By breaking the accession process into four distinct stages, this model offers candidate countries a series of achievable goals that should help drive reforms and align their legislation, policies and institutions with EU legislation, standards and policies. Each stage is designed to reward progress along 33 chapters, with increased funding and access to EU institutions, creating an incentive for candidate countries to continue their reforms, but it does not give any indicator of how these reforms stick with the society nor any guarantee if the reforms are going to work in the long term.

In the European Commission's Reports on Albania and Serbia, we can read: "The EU's founding values include the rule of law and respect for human rights. An effective (independent, high-quality and efficient) judicial system and an effective fight against corruption are of paramount importance, as is the respect for fundamental rights in law

and practice”<sup>80</sup>. Rule of law is one of the Growth Plan's seven initial priority areas.<sup>81</sup>, but the Plan perceives its accomplishment in terms of reforms. “Accelerating fundamental reforms, including on the fundamentals cluster, supporting the Western Balkans' path towards EU membership” is one of the Growth Plan's four pillars.<sup>82</sup>. The approach is clear: The absorption of EU values will become natural once the right reforms are implemented, and the rule of law will be on the right track. Thus, the focus has shifted to timely, efficient and inclusive implementation of these reforms, not to how much they will stick within the Western Balkans’ societies.

Enlargement is not officially considered to be linked to the EU’s strategy and interests but whenever it suits a member

---

<sup>80</sup> European Commission, Albania 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024, p.28, at:[https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-87489058854dbc68\\_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-87489058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf) accessed in December 2024.

European Commission, Serbia 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024, p.28, at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902\\_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf)

<sup>81</sup> European Commission, New growth plan for the Western Balkans, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 8.11.2023 at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM\\_2023\\_691\\_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

state its activation suddenly becomes exclusively linked with European values and the lack of advancement in this regard becomes a reason for halting the enlargement process to a certain country, as in the case of Albania and North Macedonia throughout 2018-2022<sup>83</sup>. Political changes in eastern and central Europe before and in the Balkans now are “a learning process in which the locals come into contact with Western norms and thereby learn to behave in a more European manner. Within this process, accession countries are taught the community values and norms and must prove their willingness and ability to internalize them”<sup>84</sup>.

However, we must keep in mind that member nations internalize EU values at different speeds. According to a study in this direction, internalization of EU values is linked with traditional religious fault lines that continue to differentiate Europe, thus in the following order from fastest to slowest:

(1) Protestant, (2) Catholic, (3) Ex-communist and (4) Orthodox countries. Western Balkans belong, for sure to the third group, not including the religious debate and the cultural superiority debate here, thus, the internalization

---

<sup>83</sup> Klodiana Beshku, “The accession impasses for Albania and North Macedonia and their effects on the European Integration of the Western Balkans” in *Memories, Identities and Current Conflicts – Mapping Challenges of EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans*, (Eds.) Irena Ristić and Marko Milenković, Milan: Wolters Kluwer CEDAM, 2024.

<sup>84</sup> Noel Parker, “A theoretical introduction; Spaces, centres and margins” in Parker N. (Ed.). (2008). *The Geopolitics of Europe's Identity: centres, boundaries and margins*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

of the EU norms tends to be portrayed in time if specific measures will not be taken into account through education platforms and national policies.

## Conclusions

In the last decade, the EU has been facing the politicization of Enlargement, nationalization of Enlargement, nationalization of decisions within the European Council, EU fatigue, low capacity of absorption of Enlargement etc. In 2019, Mark Rhinard wrote about “A classification of policy making in the European Union” which meant “crisis-oriented methods for arriving at collective decisions. These methods prioritize the early identification of the next crisis, specific kinds of actors and technologies, abbreviated decision-making procedures and new narratives on the *raison d’etre* of European integration”<sup>85</sup>.

Nevertheless, crises only challenge the self-portrayal of the European Union as a community of shared values since the debate on this issue keeps revolving.

As described above, the Western Balkan region should take advantage of this geopolitical momentum by strengthening its resilience capacities and by building a sustainable democratic environment for its citizens so that the end of the war in Ukraine -hopefully, will end soon for the best of

---

<sup>85</sup> Mark Rhinard, (2019). “The classification of Policy Making in the European Union”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 57, Issue 3.

humanity- could not provide a scapegoat for the lowering of its geopolitical importance towards the European Union. To do so, the WB countries need the EU to be harsher to their political elites -since the EU is an elitist project- and this is where the EU-WB play roles intertwined.

Here we have a classical vicious circle: If the EU is not very demanding to the WB countries' political elites, these countries will not do good on their European integration path, if they do not do well on this path, the region becomes of less security provider and community member and the EU loses its interest in having these countries into the club -apart from a war momentum or third country aggression that could jump in. But this momentum can be over in some years. Is the EU-WB relationship going to go back to its premises?

The geopolitical momentum could be over from one moment to the other, but what will remain if not for the society's desire of these countries to live in a European standard country in terms of politics, economy and community values?

That is the only real engine of European Integration and these countries must make every effort to keep it switched on and working.

This could be achieved only if importance is given to the European Integration of the Western Balkans not only as a political achievement but as a crucial process of capacity building and transformation by the Western Balkans' side. In this regard, not only strengthening the rule of law and

opening and closing of chapters is important, but the social absorption of EU values and their internalization become of crucial importance. The EU is a very complex entity multilayered by national interest and embracing the Western Balkans as member states would be of particular and strong challenge for the EU. This implies that the full membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU may not be underway in a short-term perspective. The good news is that they are back on track in this process, but without credible promises of membership in a reasonable timeframe, the future of the accession process will likely continue for a very long time, surely after 2030.

## References

1. Anghel, V., & Jones, E. (2023). Broken promises diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine war and the end of enlargement as we know it. In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (Eds.), *A year later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (pp. 6-7). Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
2. Armakolas, I., & Voudouri, A. (2024). *Relaunching enlargement: How will it affect the Western Balkans? Evolution and prospects of European policy*. European Institute of the Mediterranean Publications.
3. Beshku, K. (2023). The war in Ukraine: Europe's geopolitical momentum. Will the Western Balkans take advantage of it? In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (Eds.), *A year later: War in Ukraine and*

- Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (pp. 26). Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
4. Council of the EU. (2024, May 7). *Reform and growth facility for the Western Balkans adopted*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/07/reform-and-growth-facility-for-the-western-balkans-adopted/>
  5. Council of the EU. (2024, April 25). *Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-80-2024-INIT/en/pdf>
  6. Denti, D. (2023). A new geopolitics for the Western Balkans, a Thessaloniki moment for the Eastern partners, and a new big project for Europe: The effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policies. In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (Eds.), *A year later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (p. 46). Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
  7. Dimitrova, A. L. (2023). The Russian war against Ukraine as a critical juncture: Defining a new path for EU enlargement. In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (Eds.), *A year later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (p. 56). Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
  8. European Commission. (2023, November 7). *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*.

- [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en)
9. European Commission. (2023, November 8). *New growth plan for the Western Balkans*. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03\\_en?filename=COM\\_2023\\_691\\_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf)
  10. European Commission. (2023, October 30). *Commission adopts 2024 enlargement package*. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en)
  11. European Council. (2023, August 28). *Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charlesmichel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>
  12. European Parliament & European Council. (2024, April 25). *Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-80-2024-INIT/en/pdf>
  13. European Union. (2023). *The seven priority areas where cooperation is offered by the EU to the WB*. European Commission, New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Brussels.

14. Jones, E., & Anghel, V. (2023). Broken promises diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine war and the end of enlargement as we know it. In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (Eds.), *A year later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (pp. 6-7). Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
15. Kacarska, S., Džankić, J., & Keil, S. (Eds.). (2023). *A year later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*. Global Governance Program, European University Institute.
16. Nitoiu, C., & Sus, M. (2019). Introduction: The rise of geopolitics. In *The EU's approach in its Eastern neighbourhood*. *Geopolitics*, 24(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1544396>
17. Parker, N. (Ed.). (2008). *The geopolitics of Europe's identity: Centres, boundaries and margins*. Palgrave Macmillan.
18. Rhinard, M. (2019). The crisisification of policy making in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57(3), 471-484.
19. Wæver, O. (2000). The EU as security actor: Reflections from a pessimistic constructivist on post-sovereign security orders. In M. Kelstrup & M. C. Williams (Eds.), *International relations theory and the politics of European integration: Power, security and community* (pp. 131-151). Routledge.
20. Zielonka, J. (2008). Europe as a global actor: Empire by example? *International Affairs*, 84(3), 471-484. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00718.x>