

## **THE CHALLENGES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS WITH THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY**

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### **Abstract**

By defining the research problems and issues in the paper, through quantitative and qualitative methods, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of negotiations with the EU on stable institutions, dispute resolution, and developing a common European identity. The methods chosen are designed to capture the complexity of the topic and provide insight into both major trends and the specific nuances of individual country experiences.

The questions that this research should answer are as follows:

1. How do negotiations with the EU affect the evolution of national institutions?
2. To what extent are bilateral disputes resolved through negotiations with the EU?
3. In what ways do negotiations with the EU contribute to the formation of a common European identity?
4. What challenges and opportunities arise during negotiations with the EU regarding stable institutions, bilateral dispute resolution, and identity formation?

The general objective of the research is to comprehensively investigate and analyze the impact of the negotiations with the European Union on the participating countries in terms of stable institutions, bilateral dispute resolution, and the formation of a common European identity. This research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the EU negotiations and their subsequent effects on the participating nations' political, economic, and cultural dimensions.

The aim is to conduct a comprehensive and methodologically diverse research study that not only contributes to academic knowledge but also has practical implications for policymakers, improves public understanding, and adds valuable perspectives to the wider discourse on regional cooperation and integration.

*Keywords:* EU enlargement, Western Balkans, politics, geostrategic, institutions, negotiations.

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### **Introduction**

The EU enlargement policy has been considered a success thanks to the integration of many Southeastern European countries that managed to break away from communism and Eastern influence.

The enlargement model that the EU has followed in the Western Balkans is assessing the progress made and the individual merits of implementing reforms in each country. Given that the conditionality policy followed by the EU in the Western Balkans had not yielded the desired results, the EU initiated a new methodology in 2020 during the Zagreb Summit. The new methodology aims to strengthen mutual trust and make the enlargement policy more credible and dynamic. Even though this policy has been considered a success, in fact the enlargement of the EU is seen more as a political issue than as the fulfillment of the technical criteria for memberships, it is enough to compare the enlargements made in 1980 and those of 2004/2007 to prove in fact that the enlargement policy was more related to geopolitics than to the respect of the Copenhagen criteria.

Today, we are witnessing an evolution of this process which has become more technical, more rigorous and conditioned by the respect of all the criteria set for the candidate countries, which have been added over the years. Considering all the problems faced by the member states, such as the rise of populism, internal nationalism and disagreements on the nature of European integration, in recent years no significant progress has been made in the integration process of the Western Balkans in general, this is due to the numerous blockages throughout this process, which are also symptoms of enlargement fatigue. Evidence of this new hesitant attitude towards future enlargements is evident, from the EU institutions themselves, from the member states, as well as from the European public at large as shown by Eurobarometer opinion polls, where only 45% have a positive image of the EU.

There are various reasons for the non-enlargement of the Western Balkans towards the EU, but in this paper I will mention only four of them:

1. The EU has had to deal with several internal problems related to the many crises that have affected the institutions and EU countries in recent years, such as the eurozone crisis, the refugee/migration crisis, Brexit, and the COVID-19 health crisis. All these crises have led to the growth of right-wing extremism and thus European leaders are concerned about preserving the integrity and future of the EU<sup>1</sup>;
2. The EU faces a lack of unanimity in decision-making regarding the integration process. In recent years, the interest of member states in new enlargements has decreased and this is reflected in a slower process, with more rigorous conditions and the use of the veto right which led to various blockages, as we can mention the example of France, Germany, the Netherlands and recently Bulgaria;<sup>2</sup>
3. In recent years, enlargement has not been a priority on the EU agenda due to the challenges that EU countries have faced, such as climate problems, relegating the enlargement policy to the background;
4. The failure to implement reforms in the Western Balkan countries has led to increased hesitation and skepticism of the EU, as the greatest responsibility falls on countries wishing to join the European family that have not yet met the EU criteria, with the biggest problems related to Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security).

### **The challenges facing the Western Balkans towards EU Enlargement**

Corruption, political polarization, political clientelism and the “captured state” are phenomena that the Western Balkan countries have faced over the years and that continue to pose a challenge for the future of the entire region. Various clientelistic networks have “captured” state institutions using official channels to protect their interests.<sup>3</sup>

Corruption continues to be a major problem for the region, where often the aid from EU institutions, which should be used to implement reforms, ends up in the hands of corrupt elites. This also explains the effective lack of aid coming from the EU. According to a report published by the European Court of Auditors in early 2022, it is stated: “despite the EU's efforts to enable the rule of law in the Western Balkan countries, fundamental problems persist”. This report

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<sup>1</sup> Devrim, D., and Schulz, E., 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Keil, S., and Arkan, Z., 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Lemstra, M., 2020.

assesses that EU investments of 2014-2020 funds allocated under IPA II did not produce significant effects in the Western Balkans region.<sup>4</sup>

IPA was created to prepare candidate and potential candidate countries on their path towards EU membership, by supporting these countries in the implementation of political, economic, institutional, social, legal and administrative reforms. Taking into account the problems that were present in IPA I and II, the EU is now applying an approach based on the performance of the candidate countries, for them to be beneficiaries of IPA III. Therefore, this assistance will be conditional on respect for democracy and the rule of law, otherwise the EU will take measures up to the suspension of assistance. The purpose of the conditionality is to increase the efficiency of the IPA III Fund in the Western Balkans, as well as reduce abuses by these countries.

One of the countries that has been positioned at a low level for generating ideas compared to neighboring countries has been Albania, moreover, these funds do not seem to have brought about major changes and their effectiveness seems low given that the official progress of Tirana on the path of integration is slow. According to Eurobarometer, Albania has implemented only 45% of IPA II projects.

### **Is the Enlargement Policy primary for the EU with the Western Balkans?**

October 2019 was set to be the next step in the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans. Albania and North Macedonia had hoped to advance to the next level of the European Union membership process after the summit on 17 October. But France and the Netherlands vetoed the next phase of talks with Albania, and France also vetoed North Macedonia's progress. The consequences have been far-reaching, with discussions not only about the future of these two countries, but also about EU enlargement in general.<sup>5</sup>

A poll conducted in December 2018 revealed strong opposition to Albania and Kosovo's EU membership (with 56% opposed), and only slightly less opposition to other Western Balkan countries (52% against Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership, and 44 and 43% respectively against North Macedonia and Montenegro).

So, in general, surveys in Europe show skepticism about EU Enlargement towards the Western Balkans due to some of the negative factors I mentioned above and not only, but such skepticism can weaken the EU and increase the level of risk in terms of the influences of other powers, specifically the Russian and Chinese ones.

The emergence of rising powers is increasingly shaking the balance of power in the world, including the Western Balkans. As for Russia, it continues to promote its political, economic and traditional ties with certain countries in the region, presenting itself as a closer ally than the EU. Russia claims a special relationship with the Slavic and Orthodox communities of the Western Balkans, mainly in Serbia. Official Russian doctrine opposes the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU into the Western Balkan countries. For the governments of Albania and Kosovo, their countries' membership in Euro-Atlantic structures is a strategic priority. For example, the 2018 Balkan Barometer survey shows that 83% of Albanian citizens and 84% of Kosovo citizens consider EU membership a good thing. Therefore, Albania and Kosovo have no alternative but to implement reforms to join the EU.

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<sup>4</sup> The European Court of Auditors, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Nielsen, N. (2019). "EU fails to deliver on promise for Albania and North Macedonia." EU Observer, 10 March 2025. Available at <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/146329>.

Due to bilateral disputes between the Western Balkan countries, as well as the circumstances of the expansion of Russian and Chinese influence in the region, some member states are pushing European institutions to accelerate the EU accession mechanism to counter and deter the influences of rising powers. Thus, in the face of changes in this international context, the EU and some of its member states (e.g. Germany, Austria) have expressed a new awareness by taking several initiatives that promote enlargement. These initiatives include the Berlin Process, the new Enlargement Strategy of the European Commission and the holding of EU-Western Balkans summits.

The complicated administrative and bureaucratic procedures of accession and European reluctance have favored the penetration of rising powers in the Western Balkans: Russia opposes the enlargement of the EU and NATO; China offers models of society based on non-democratic principles. The EU is increasingly conditioned by the decentralization of world power in the face of which it is readjusting its strategy to remain the main actor in the Western Balkans. As for Albania and Kosovo, EU membership is the only alternative.

The new momentum must be maximized and all necessary conditions must be created for EU enlargement, because there is no doubt that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union. In recent years, the enlargement process has gained new vitality. Unprecedented challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, have accelerated the pace not only of history but also of advancing the accession process, and this shows that we need to rise to a new reality. The new reality is that it is not enough to simply "leave the door" open for EU aspirants, but we need to be proactive and actively bring them closer. Therefore, the EU will need to continue to work hard on two priorities with its Western Balkan partners: EU accession and gradual integration into the single market.

Each wave of enlargement makes the EU stronger, but to succeed in this process requires commitment from both sides – future member states must prepare for the responsibilities of membership and the Union must adapt to accept a larger family. – That is why, at the beginning of this mandate, the Commission will review its main sectoral policies. They want to ensure that candidate countries adapt to an enlarged Union. The accession process is rigorous and merit-based, and it will remain so. But, given the geopolitical situation, the EU is redoubling its efforts to support its partners who want to make progress.

Enlargement is a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity. Since the last EU-Western Balkans Summit, there has been a new dynamic in the enlargement process and tangible progress. Accelerating the accession process, based on credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of individual merit, is in the common interest. Reconciliation, comprehensive regional cooperation and good neighborly relations are the essence of the European Union, therefore international agreements must be implemented in good faith and with visible results, specifically including the case of North Macedonia in relation to the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Agreement of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria.

The increasingly complex geostrategic environment, dominated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and deeply marked by the crisis in the Middle East, continues to put European and global security at risk. This demonstrates the importance of unity and purpose within the European family and of the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans region to bring ever closer ties and deeper cooperation with the EU, based on shared principles

and values. The reason for the Western Balkans' insistence on accelerating the accession process and the practical functioning of the EU Enlargement Policy is inevitably linked to the fact that a new security dimension has been put on the table. While we discuss prosperity and convergence at the economic level, enlargement in the region is also a security requirement, to guarantee that the region is in peace and stability.

### **The Western Balkans – an important puzzle of geopolitical developments**

The Dayton Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO's military intervention in Kosovo stopped the bloody repressive war in the region and entered a process of normalizing coexistence, but reconciliation is still far away. However, faced with new geopolitical challenges, the Western Balkans seem to be one of the first stones to be affected by geopolitical tectonic changes. Today, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are facing the threat of a new conflict with Serbia. While in North Macedonia and Albania, the internal political crisis is perhaps the greatest threat emanating from the political parties themselves, mainly from the governments in power through rampant corruption.

Regarding geopolitical challenges, today the vast majority of Western Balkan countries are members of NATO, and all countries are involved in the European integration process, however, on the European horizon since 2022, a war has been taking place that has shaken the foundations of European security, but its echoes are particularly felt in the Western Balkans. Regarding the external challenges facing the Western Balkans, it is very important to carefully follow and analyze in detail the dynamics of major regional and international developments, as the world changed with the Russian invasion and aggression against Ukraine and this extraordinary international earthquake will be followed by aftershocks in the Western Balkans region.

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is not yet clearly defined, but its capabilities and actions in larger, more democratic countries suggest that it could grow in Albania, North Macedonia, and beyond, over time. China and Russia are the most aggressive players seeking influence in the Western Balkans, but other regional and international states are also trying to exert influence through their allies and financial means. The biggest problem with this influence is its harsh nature, as it does not contribute to economic development, but creates new imbalances and destabilization in the region.

Russia has strong ties specifically to North Macedonia, both at the Balkan and ethnic levels, with evidence of financial and political support from Moscow. There are indications that Macedonian and Albanian individuals and institutions are involved in these developments, including economic and political activities, secret services, crime and international corruption. Western strategies have aimed to heal the Western Balkans through EU integration, but the process has been delayed and undermined by crises, and the failures of the Western Balkans' EU integration process can be attributed to both the region's shortcomings and the Western approach. The region's democratic deficits and the Western preference for stability have hindered progress. Autocratic leaders in the region have benefited from Western support and geopolitical favors, undermining democracy and the rule of law. This has contributed to the instability of the region.

The lack of political alternatives in the Western Balkans, combined with punitive measures against opposition leaders, has weakened democracy and hindered progress towards EU membership. Western support has prevented the region from becoming a perennial source of crises and instability.

However, both the Western Balkan countries and Western policies bear responsibility for the lack of progress in the region. A more transparent and collaborative approach is needed to address the socio-political and cultural dynamics in the region.

### **Conclusion**

The Western Balkans face multiple security challenges, including ethnic and political tensions, integration challenges, conflicts, diplomacy and international cooperation, interethnic relations, economic challenges, religious radicalism, etc. Specifically, countries such as Albania and North Macedonia are facing internal challenges such as corruption, organized crime, institutional and political weaknesses, as well as external challenges such as the influence of Russia, China and other geopolitical actors in the region. The full integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU and NATO remains essential to ensure the stability and sustainable development of the region. Euro-Atlantic attention and engagement in the Eastern European space and the South-Eastern flank of trans-Atlantic security remain vital and irreplaceable.

The integration process has stalled and the European Union has been criticized for supporting “stabilocracies” instead of full democracies. To address the challenges, a renewed and structured commitment of international actors is needed, as well as concrete actions by the countries of the region to fight corruption, strengthen institutions and promote regional cooperation. The immediate future of our region and the peace of the Western Balkans is dictated by and closely linked to international geopolitical dynamics which have consistently shown that after every "earthquake" and shift of the tectonic plates of the game of nations, they have produced with their aftershocks great dynamics and challenges for the inhabitants of the region with fragile democracies.

Recognizing Kosovo's independence, addressing past crimes, and seeking reconciliation are essential steps toward peace in the region. Genuine and comprehensive economic integration can contribute to peace, but full integration of the Western Balkans into the EU is necessary for long-term stability. The Western Balkans Peace and Dialogue Project should become a European and Western geopolitical emergency.

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