

THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE IMPACT OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION ON UKRAINE

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Abstract

All countries of the Western Balkans have clearly indicated their wish to eventually join the European Union. Although the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 acknowledged the Western Balkan countries as potential EU members and reinforced the EU's commitment to the region, the accession process of these six countries has been long, slow and often frustrating. The so-called "enlargement fatigue" among member states and insufficient pace of accession reforms among Western Balkans countries have for years stalled their integration process. The war in Ukraine has dramatically reshaped geopolitical environment in Europe and renewed the EU enlargement dynamics and priorities. Due to concerns related to the European security and stability, the EU has first granted Ukraine and Moldova the candidate status in June 2023, and has then invited them to start accession negotiations in December 2023. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has also reinvigorated the EU efforts to move forward the stalled accession process of the Western Balkans countries. The European Commission has introduced innovative incentive-based frameworks, such as the New EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as well as gradual access to the EU single market. The paper aims to analyse the impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU integration process of the Western Balkans countries. It will be shown that although the war in Ukraine did create a favourable political momentum for the integration of countries of the Western Balkans, the EU conditionality related to successful domestic reforms and institution-building remained a precondition for eventual full accession.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU, Integration, Ukraine, Accession, Conditionality.

1. Introduction

Being situated at the crossroads between the 'West' and the 'East', the Western Balkans¹ (WB) countries have historically experienced major geopolitical influences. The Balkans region has in fact for centuries been at the centre of great-power competition. It is worth noting that except Albania, all other five countries were formerly part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After the fall of communism and disintegration of former Yugoslavia, all six countries of the Western Balkans have clearly indicated their wish to join the European Union. Although the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 acknowledged the Western Balkan countries as potential EU members and reinforced the EU's commitment to the region, the accession process of these six countries has been long, slow and often frustrating. For years, their integration has been stalled due to the so-called "enlargement fatigue" within the EU member states, and because of the insufficient pace of accession reforms among these countries. However, it is worth noting that during recent years, the region has been under increased engagement by the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) on the one hand, and Russia and China, on

¹ The designation 'Western Balkans' is primarily used by the European Union in the context of its enlargement policy and refers to the six countries of the region that have the prospect of joining the EU: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

the other. Moreover, these overlapping and conflicting influences of external actors have additionally amplified in the last previous years (Demjaha, 2024, p. 45).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24th of February 2022 has dramatically changed the political, security and economic paradigm in Europe, including the EU enlargement priorities. Concerns were rightfully raised about Russia's intentions to destabilize the Western Balkans region to deflect attention from its military aggression in Ukraine. It should be noted that the Western Balkans as fragile region due to the difficult transformation processes in terms of conflict resolution and democratization, was particularly affected by the war in Ukraine (Jureković, 2024, p. 5). Significant ethnic, political, and social divisions, combined with the prevailing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of Euro-Atlantic integration, have created favourable conditions for Russia's interference in the region (Demjaha, 2024, p. 46). On the other hand, the war in Ukraine has also dramatically changed the EU enlargement dynamics and priorities. Ukraine and Moldova were granted the EU candidate status in June 2023, while in December 2023 they were also invited to start accession negotiations. The urgency to accelerate the accession path of Ukraine and Moldova, together with the French initiative for a European Political Community, has raised concerns among Western Balkans countries that their accession process might lose momentum (European University Institute, 15 October 2024, p. 1). To deal with such concerns, the European Commission has in 2023 enacted the New EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, offering gradual integration with the EU single market and forming the Common Regional Market (CRM). In addition, the Commission has offered €6 billion for productivity-enhancing sectors, if there is progress with EU-related reforms. It is worth mentioning that this Growth Plan marks the first time that some of the economic benefits of EU membership have been granted to some countries before the accession process is complete (Vujanović, 30 June 2025). Thus, the war in Ukraine seems to have also reinvigorated the EU efforts to move forward the stalled accession process of the Western Balkans countries.

The main aim of the paper is to analyse the impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine on the integration process of the Western Balkan Countries in the European Union. The paper will predominantly focus on the dramatic impact that the war in Ukraine has on the EU enlargement dynamics and priorities, including the consequences for the path of the Western Balkan countries towards the European Union. In addition, it will also be shown that while the war did create a favourable political momentum for the integration of the Western Balkans, eventual full accession will certainly depend on successful domestic reforms and institution-building of each individual country. The structure of the paper consists of four sections altogether, including introduction and conclusion. After the introductory section, the second section of the paper will assess the individual response of Western Balkan countries to the war in Ukraine. The third section represents the most relevant part of the paper and will analyse the direct impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine on the integration process of the Western Balkan Countries in the European Union. The paper ends with a concluding chapter that provides a summary of the main findings of our analysis.

2. Alignment of the Western Balkan Countries with the European Union

Immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European Union, the US and other Western countries have introduced sanctions against the Russian president Vladimir Putin, other government members as well as Russian citizens in general. With time, these sanctions have significantly expanded, seriously impacting Russian economy in many ways. The EU has clearly stated that genuine progress towards the full membership depends on full alignment with its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). If according to the EU full alignment with its policies is a prerequisite for meaningful progress towards EU membership, then one would expect that all potential members would align their policies with CSFP. Moreover, since

three of the Western Balkans countries are members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia) and five of them have the status of the EU candidate country (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), it was expected that all WB6 countries would fully align their position with the EU and US. As expected, NATO members Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia have fully aligned their position with the EU and US, and have also imposed sanctions against Russia. However, unlike Albania, the situation in Montenegro and North Macedonia was not as straightforward as it may seem, since there were considerable pro-Russian elements in both countries.

Albania has immediately condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and called it a flagrant violation of international law, sovereignty, and the UN Charter. It has also fully aligned its foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy by imposing economic and other sanctions on Russia (Foreign Affairs of Albania, 22 August 2024). In addition, it has banned Russian aircraft from its airspace, and has voted at the UN General Assembly to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council. Because of Albania's position, Russia has added Albania to its 'enemy list' (Dauti, 2025, p. 89). The situation with Montenegro was somewhat different since there "Russia exercises a pronounced 'soft power' due to its shared religious (Christian Orthodox), cultural and historical ties. In September 2022, "US intelligence agencies presented a report claiming that the Democratic Front of Montenegro (DF), which supported the government between 2020 and 2022, [...] [is] secretly funded by Russia" (Vulović, 2023, p. 3). The Democratic Front is a right-wing populist pro-Serb and socially conservative political alliance in Montenegro that is notorious for its alleged role in the failed October 2016 coup plot. The plotters, who included Serbian paramilitaries and two suspected members of the Russian secret services, were believed to have planned to kill Djukanović and install the Democratic Front in power (Demjaha, 2024, p. 58). Support to Russia was also shown in February 2022 when thousands of supporters of the pro-Russian Democratic Front blocked 17 key roads across Montenegro. A number of the protesters hailed the Russian invasion of Ukraine and carried flags of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk within Ukraine that was recently recognised by Russia as independent (IntelliNews, 24 February 2022).

In North Macedonia also, all mainstream political parties have since the early stages aligned with the official NATO and EU positions with regards to the war in Ukraine. However, the political party 'Levica' (The Left) has heavily criticized the government's "subservience" to NATO and the EU and opposed the sanctions on economic and anti-imperialist grounds. Moreover, the Left's two members of parliament, party leader Dimitar Apasiev and Borislav Krmov, distanced themselves from "the latest controversial actions of the Macedonian diplomacy" and stated that "these uncivilized anti-Russian steps in no way express the will of the majority of Macedonian citizens". In addition, they met the Russian ambassador in North Macedonia Sergey Bazdnikin and clearly expressed their position (Antropol, 16 March 2022). That the views of the public in North Macedonia are different from the positions espoused by their political parties was confirmed by President Pendarovski, who also expressed his concern that many ethnic Macedonians are sympathetic to Russia's political views. According to him, it is especially worrisome that over 40 percent of the public thinks that the Eurasian Union is an alternative to the EU (Nezavisen, 25 February 2022). In such circumstances, the war in Ukraine might create another form of division between different ethnic groups, since many ethnic-Macedonians clearly demonstrate sympathies for a neutral or pro-Russian position, while almost all ethnic-Albanians are more inclined to favour the official NATO line.

Kosovo is the only state in the region that is neither a NATO member nor an EU candidate country. Nevertheless, as a strongly pro-Western and anti-Russian country, Kosovo has from the beginning of the conflict fully aligned its position with the EU and US, and was the first country in the Western Balkans to adopt sanctions on Russia (Saric and Morcos, 2022). Moreover, Kosovo has immediately condemned Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion,

and expressed full solidarity for the people of Ukraine. In addition, Kosovo has also demonstrated its generosity and commitment to democratic values by welcoming Ukrainian individuals and journalists seeking refuge (Hovenier, 24 August 2022). Throughout this period, Kosovo has demonstrated continued alignment with the EU approach and has approved all new consecutive sanction packages introduced by the EU (Hodo, 19 September 2025).

On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are the only two countries in the region that have refused to join sanctions against Russia, although they have supported the UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion. As such, these are the only two countries in Europe that were not included into Russia's list of "hostile" states (Saric and Morcos, 2022). Both Serbia and BIH use strong ties and special relationship with Russia to achieve their own political goals. Serbia mainly seeks Russia's support for its Kosovo policy, while Republika Srpska is trying to get Russia's backing for its separatist tendencies (Demjaha, 2024, p. 59). Bosnia and Herzegovina was unable to come to a uniform position and condemn Russia's aggression because of Dodik - the Serb member of the country's tripartite presidency - who has advocated a pro-Russian position (Saric and Morcos, 2022). It should be noted that Bosnia and Herzegovina has later fully aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including its support for Ukraine, but this alignment was not uniform across all political factions within the country. Bosniak and Croat leaders have in general supported Western policies, while Bosnian Serb leadership has openly supported Russia, especially when it comes to EU sanctions against Russia (European Western Balkans, 19 September 2024). Serbia, on the other hand, has compared to 2024 in the first half of 2025, slightly increased its alignment rate with CFSP from 47 percent to 52 percent. Still, it should be mentioned that such alignment rates is the lowest among all EU candidate countries. More importantly, the remaining nonalignment of 48 percent are directly linked with Serbia's rejection to align with declarations and measures directed against Russia and China, including those targeting their nationals, entities, or interests (Novaković, Savković and Stanojević, July 2025).

3. Despite the Enlargement Momentum, EU Conditionality Remains

Clearly, the war in Ukraine has dramatically changed the EU enlargement priorities and created a favourable political momentum for the integration of the Western Balkans. However, the European Union conditionality is still in place and the full accession will depend on successful domestic reforms and institution-building of each individual country. It should be noted that the European Commission each year adopts its "Enlargement Package" which contains a set of documents explaining its policy on EU enlargement. The most important part of this package is a Communication on enlargement, which provides an overview of the developments over the last year by examining the progress of each candidate and potential candidate countries. The Communication on enlargement also lists the challenges encountered and reforms to be addressed by each individual country, while at the same time setting out proposals for the way forward. In addition to the main Communication, the "Enlargement Package" also contains the Commission's Progress Reports which provide a detailed annual assessment of the state of play of the reform progress in each candidate country and potential candidate over the last year. The 2025 Enlargement Package which has confirmed that the accession of new Member States is increasingly within reach was adopted by the European Commission on 4th of November 2025. The package also has reaffirmed that the momentum for enlargement stands high on the priority agenda of the EU (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 04 November 2025).

As such, this year's Communication on enlargement represents a useful tool to assess which of the Western Balkan countries have best utilized the EU Enlargement momentum after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to this document, the enlargement process has been moving faster than in the last 15 years. Nevertheless, the document underlines that the pace of reforms

of each country, especially in the areas of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, will directly impact the speed of their accession. (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 2). Accordingly, it states that “the continued political commitment of the Montenegrin authorities to the strategic goal of European integration has produced tangible results in accomplishing required reforms and moving the country forward on its EU accession path,” As a result, Montenegro has opened all 33 screened negotiating chapters, while at the same time provisionally closing seven of them. Consequently, the Commission concludes that out of all six Western Balkans countries, Montenegro and Albania are the most advanced in the EU accession process, and have already declared their ambition to close accession negotiations by 2026 and 2027 respectively (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 3). Similarly, the document states that Albania has also made significant progress, by opening five out of six EU accession clusters, which encompass 28 of the 33 total negotiating chapters. Furthermore, the Commission underlines that preparations for the opening of the last cluster this year are also well advanced. In terms of specific fields, Albania has achieved progress on the fundamentals, particularly on justice reform and in the fight against organised crime and corruption (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 3).

Unfortunately, according to this year’s Communication on enlargement, the other four Western Balkans countries are facing challenges on their integration path due to insufficient reforms and political tensions. In Serbia the reforms have significantly slowed down due to the overall polarisation of the society because of mass protests taking place across the country since November 2024. Disappointment among Citizens is high due to increased corruption, lack of accountability and transparency. According to the Commission, “Serbia needs to deliver on credible reforms across the board, most importantly in the area of the fundamentals of the accession process as well as in accelerating *acquis* alignment, including progressive and stronger alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. It should also urgently reverse the deterioration of the freedom of expression and the erosion of academic freedom (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 4). In addition, under the EU-facilitated Dialogue, both Serbia and Kosovo are expected to implement all of their respective obligations stemming from the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation” and its Implementation Annex, as well as all past Dialogue agreements.

Kosovo, on the other hand, as the only one in the region that is not an EU candidate country is lagging behind other Western Balkans countries in terms of the EU integration. Not only is the country under the EU “restrictive measures” since 2023, but similarly to Serbia, its accession is preconditioned with normalisation of relations with Serbia and implementation of Dialogue commitments. Moreover, the delay in forming the institutions after the February parliamentary elections has additionally slowed down the progress of EU-related reforms (European Commission, 4 November 2025). While Kosovo has a high level of public support and remains committed to its European path, in order to foster its integration process, the country needs to accelerate its reforms and reengage in finding long-term solutions for the access to basic public services for all communities (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 5).

Although North Macedonia was the first country in the region to sign the Stabilisation Association Agreement in 2001, its accession process has been blocked in recent years. The country has not fulfilled its commitment to include Bulgarian citizens in the Constitution, as referred in the Council Conclusions of July 2022. While the country continued its work on the roadmaps for the rule of law, public administration reform, and the functioning of democratic institutions, the Commission considers that “further swift and decisive action is needed on the opening benchmarks, in line with the negotiating framework.” In addition, according to the Communication on enlargement, North Macedonia should also intensify efforts to uphold the

rule of law, to safeguard judicial independence and integrity, and to strengthen the fight against corruption (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 4).

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina did not fully align its position with the EU and US and refused to join sanctions against Russia, in a way, its accession process towards the EU has benefited due to the war in Ukraine. Namely, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU had 14 conditions for granting the candidate status for EU membership to BiH and for its further accession. However, once the war in Ukraine started, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted a candidate status having met only 1 out of these 14 conditions. Clearly, the EU candidate status was granted to BiH mainly as a result of the rising security concerns due to the war in Ukraine, and not because of the merit-based process of EU accession (Sarajlić. January 2024, pp. 34-35). Nevertheless, according to the Commission, the political crisis in Republika Srpska and the end of the ruling coalition have undermined EU accession progress in BiH. This has resulted in limited reforms related to data protection and border control, as well as the signature of the Frontex status agreement. The Communication on enlargement states that to effectively start accession negotiations, the country must first finalise and adopt judicial reform laws, in full alignment with European standards, appoint a chief negotiator, and urgently finalise the pending constitutional and electoral reforms (2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 4 November 2025, p. 5).

4. Conclusion

The paper has examined the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the European Union integration process of the Western Balkan countries. The analysis has demonstrated that the war has acted as a critical geopolitical turning point, dramatically reshaping the geopolitical environment in Europe and the EU enlargement dynamics and priorities. The paper concludes that the war in Ukraine has reinvigorated EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Due to increased security concerns and the risk of external destabilization, the EU has increasingly framed enlargement as a geopolitical necessity rather than simply a technocratic process. As a result, the EU has introduced innovative incentive-based frameworks, such as the New EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as well as gradual access to the EU single market. Nevertheless, although the conflict has generated renewed political momentum for enlargement, the conditionality and domestic reform performance have remained important drivers of the accession process.

Although the EU has clearly stated that genuine progress towards the full membership depends on full alignment with its CFSP, the paper has shown that the Western Balkan countries have differently responded to the war in Ukraine. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia as NATO members have demonstrated strong alignment with EU foreign policy, including the adoption of sanctions against Russia. Kosovo, although not yet an EU candidate country, has consistently aligned itself with EU positions, underscoring its strong pro-European orientation. In contrast, Serbia and, to a lesser extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina have pursued more ambivalent positions, reflecting domestic political divisions, strategic calculations, and enduring ties with Russia. Due to their full alignment with CFSP, and strong commitment to domestic reforms and full alignment with EU foreign policy, Montenegro and Albania have greatly progressed towards the EU membership and intend to close accession negotiations by 2026 and 2027 respectively. On the other hand, Serbia's strategic ambiguity towards Russia, political polarization, and democratic backsliding have significantly constrained its progress. Similarly, progress of EU-related reforms has seriously slowed down in Kosovo because of the delay in forming the institutions after the February 2025 parliamentary elections. North Macedonia, once a frontrunner, has experienced unprecedented stagnation after failing to make constitutional amendments that include Bulgarian citizens in the Constitution. In addition, the

country should intensify efforts to uphold the rule of law, to safeguard judicial independence and integrity, and to strengthen the fight against corruption. While Bosnia and Herzegovina did benefit due to the war in Ukraine by receiving a candidate status without fulfilling the necessary conditions, its persistent institutional fragility has greatly constrained its progress towards the EU.

It may be concluded that the war in Ukraine has created a window of opportunity for accelerating the EU integration of the Western Balkans, but this opportunity is neither automatic nor guaranteed. While external geopolitical pressures have increased the strategic importance of the region, the ultimate trajectory of accession will continue to depend on the credibility of EU commitments and the capacity and willingness of domestic actors to implement reforms. Though the 2025 Enlargement Package has confirmed that the accession of new Member States is increasingly within reach, it has also underlined that the pace of reforms of each country, especially in the areas of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, will directly impact the speed of their accession. This principle was clearly illustrated by divergent paths of Western Balkans countries.

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