

A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics

Editors

Jelena Džankić,
Simonida Kacarska
Soeren Keil



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European University Institute, Florence, Italy

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The War in Ukraine: Europe's Geopolitical Momentum. Will the Western Balkans Take Advantage of It?

Klodiana Beshku*

The conflict in Ukraine: A turning point for the EU's approach to the Western Balkans

The European Union (EU) has always been cautious about becoming a genuine global geopolitical actor. This is the case because, becoming a raw geopolitical actor would mean prioritising “interest” and “power” to “conditionality”, a principle that is the basis of the enlargement policy of the EU regarding candidate countries. Over the years, the accession process is becoming an increasingly rocky road for the countries of the Western Balkans. Simultaneously, a smoother path has been created for these countries by the third players in the region - China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries - a path that comes without conditions for reform. These foreign actors influence the region by pouring investment in different sectors in exchange for political allegiance. To

* University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Political Sciences.

distance itself from these actors, the EU has avoided the term “geopolitics” for a long time (Beshku 2021). Meanwhile, the region of the Western Balkans has evidently become contested by third powers.

The war in Ukraine made the region of the Western Balkans of heightened geopolitical importance to the EU. Paradoxically, in a weak security moment, all the countries of the region were overnight transformed from ‘security receiver to security provider’ (Jano 2023, 50). The Gordian knot of the vetoes to the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in the European Council was finally untied. After a French-brokered deal, in July 2022, Bulgaria agreed to drop the veto that prevented North Macedonia - and Albania, as the two were a part of a package deal- to finally start formal membership negotiations with the EU (Koseva 2022). It suddenly became important to tie the region closer to the EU because of the geopolitical necessity of mitigating the Russian power and influence in the Western Balkans (Milosavljević, Radić, & Domaradzki 2022). The French Presidency of the European Union ended on 30 June 2022. It was marked with not only the vote to lift the Bulgaria veto on North Macedonia but also with the recognition of the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. After all these significant events, the main question becomes: Has the war in Ukraine brought the EU to a turning point at which it would use the enlargement policy as a conduit of its strategic interest in the region?

Enlargement criteria vs. geopolitical interest: which should prevail?

The need for the EU to favour its geopolitical interest in the Western Balkans over the enlargement conditionality poses a normative question that has to do with the very existence of the European Union: Should the EU become that kind of a geopolitical actor that favours its geopolitical interest to the EU core values? It goes back to the old debate on the roots of the EU integration and is also inextricably related to the rule of law and the democratic values that stand at the Union’s core. The European Union Global Strategy has already reflected this by mentioning that ‘fragility beyond our borders threatens all our vital interests’ and emphasising that ‘a credible enlargement policy grounded on strict and fair conditionality is an irreplaceable tool to enhance resilience within the countries concerned’ (European Union Global Strategy 2016). Since then, the

political conditionality of enlargement has always come before the EU's need to follow its geopolitical interest towards the candidate countries. This was the case even though the role of third powers in the region has become more pronounced in recent years. The Strategic Compass (European Council 2022), approved as the EU was witnessing a return of war to Europe, has confirmed once more the same principle when claiming that even when the EU shall act as security provider, it should be built 'upon the Union's fundamental values as laid down in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union' (Council of the European Union 2022). The rule of law, democratic accountability, and fight against corruption have always constituted the EU's soft power, its legitimacy, and its power of attraction. Nevertheless, because the influence of Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf countries in the region had become increasingly incisive, the new methodology of February 2020 redefined the set of conditions for the Western Balkan countries to join the EU (European Commission 2020). On that occasion, the European Commission limited itself only to pointing out the importance of addressing 'malign third country influence' in the region (European Commission 2020). For scholars dealing with the Western Balkans the natural conclusion was that '[s]ince we see not only stable but even further elevation of the accession criteria, it is obvious that the policy is exposed to a complex set of interactions way beyond the primary geopolitical or geostrategic goals' (Milosavljević, Radić, & Domaradzki 2022).

Therefore, for as long as the European Union can keep its legitimacy in the global arena by imposing its core values on the candidate countries, the best way of approaching the Western Balkans would be to condition them to reform while keeping them in the EU's sphere of influence. As noted by Elise (2022), '[t]he Union can only claim to be such a global player if it resumes both its enlargement process and its constituent process – regardless of the current reluctance of Member States to do either'. But is this going to work in the long term? Are the countries in the Western Balkans going to deliver reforms, eliminate corruption, organised crime and strengthen their judicial systems if they are left for much longer in the EU's "waiting room"?

A political community vs. a single security space

The French President Emanuel Macron has succeeded in proposing an acceptable compromise to the dilemma of imposing democratic values as conditions for accession of the Western Balkan countries and pursuing the geopolitical interest of the European Union in the region. He promoted the idea of a European Political Community, an initiative formally launched in October 2022 at the margins of the informal European Council, organised by the Czech EU Presidency. It was a mechanism to encourage dialogue and cooperation among like-minded EU and non-EU countries on matters of common interest (Stratulat 2022) with the aim of creating “a European Polity” among the EU, the Eastern Partnership countries, the Western Balkans, as well as other areas confining the EU.

Unlike other regions outside the European Union, the Western Balkan region is surrounded by EU Member States. Therefore, geopolitically, the region represents an “extension” of the EU, rather than its outside borders since the Western Balkans. The EU is not “enlarging” to the Western Balkans, it rather “encapsulates” the region. As a result of this geographic proximity and mutual interests, the Western Balkans and the European Union together have long been considered to be a single security space (Dokos 2017). As Dokos (2017) notes, ‘[f]or security purposes, the Western Balkans should be considered an integral part of core Europe. The area from the Atlantic (UK included) to the borders of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey should be treated as a single and indivisible security space because of the various socio-economic networks connecting those countries with the EU and the high permeability of the Union’s external borders with those countries. Having the Western Balkans in the EU’s zone of security has made it unavoidable to link not only the stability of this region to the security of the European Union but also the prosperity of this region to the common European future’. According to Oana Cristea (2022), a Western Balkan scholar and policymaker, ‘[p]laced in the waiting room for so much time, numerous speeches were heard about the EU’s desire for enlargement and greater integration of the Western Balkans, but concrete results have been long overdue, and the uncertainties have turned the region into an area of geopolitical competition’. Probably, if there is no a “make-or-break it” moment (Bushati 2020), the situation could go on like that forever. The Western Balkan countries might remain in the EU’s “waiting room” for long enough to will transform from an area of geopolitical competition between the EU, Russia,

China, and other actors into an area dominated by one of these actors: and certainly not by the EU. The point is that, in order to preserve its legitimacy and credibility, the EU needs to remain faithful to sharing its core values with the Western Balkan countries, despite the war menacing European borders. It is certain that 'the EU should stick to its commitment regarding the democratic transformation of the region, as well as keep the credibility of the carrot of membership for the Western Balkans' (Anastastakis 2022), while enhancing its power as a global actor. How can these two be reconciled?

The war in Ukraine and the future of the relations between the EU and the WB

Besides belonging to a common security space with the EU Member States, the Western Balkans also occupy 'an important geostrategic position on Europe's energy map' (Dokos 2017). As highlighted by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2021) during one of her visits in the region, '[t]he Western Balkans belong to the European Union. It is in our common interest, but I also believe, it is our destiny'.

Maybe it is time to think of the Western Balkan region as part of a "European polity". To achieve this, both parties would need to start to cultivate a different approach to the Western Balkans, not only at the political level but also at the level of citizens. Such an approach would account for the sense of belonging and inclusion in a wider security and political community (Dokos 2017). Even so, mere community-building is not enough in the case of the Western Balkans. These countries need strong EU support to overcome all the governance and political issues, such as state capture, political clientelism, corruption, ethnic conflicts, which present security risks for the future of Europe. In an article that explores the failures of the EU towards Ukraine, Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig (2022) highlight that the cause for such failure has been the EU's response that consisted of a regulatory process of community building without a concomitant capacity building. In this regard, a massive effort to upgrade the capacity of the region's countries would need to be made by the EU through multi-layered support for an "institutional revamping", a kind of "Marshall Plan", but to be a tangible "European renewal programme". Such a programme has already been suggested by the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama during the EU-WB Summit in December 2022. A more stable, economically

developed and prosperous Western Balkan region could make it possible for the EU to reconcile the two principles hard to cohabit: “geopolitical interest” while preserving the “value of the EU conditionality”. In that case, the EU will not have to choose “more security” and become “less democratic” for having the Western Balkans in its sphere or opt for “less security” and be “more democratic” while having them out. An “upgraded version” in terms of economic development and capacity building of the Western Balkans could be the clue for resolving this dilemma.

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