EUI GLOBAL GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME

ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE

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

Editors

Jelena Džankić,

Simonida Kacarska

Soeren Keil

Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2
doi:10.2870/275946
QM-03-23-131-EN-N

With the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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

Editors: Jelena Džankić,
Simonida Kacarska,
and Soeren Keil

European University Institute, Florence, Italy

Table of contents

Introduction
A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo) Politics 1
Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil, and Jelena Džankić

Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know It 6
Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones

The Ukraine War: Response in the Western Balkans 15
Dimitar Bechev

The War in Ukraine: Europe's Geopolitical Momentum. Will the Western Balkans Take Advantage of It? 23
Klodiana Beshku

A "Zeitenwende" in the Balkans after the Russian Attack on Ukraine? 30
Florian Bieber

Back on Track? The Impact of War in Ukraine on EU Integration of the Western Balkans 39
Matteo Bonomi

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 46
Davide Denti

The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement 55
Antoaneta L. Dimitrova

The Ukraine War and the Western Balkans: Fault Lines Uncovered 65
Jelena Džankić

The Narrow Corridor Towards Democracy: EU Enlargement as an Opportunity to Establish Democratic States and Tackle State Capture in the Western Balkans 75
Nisida Gjoksi

Stabilising the Western Balkans through a Common Market: Opportunities and Challenges 86
Andi Hoxhaj

Russia Needs the Unstable Balkans 98
Matea Jerković

The Impact of Geopolitics following the War in Ukraine on Autocratisation in the Western Balkans 108
Damir Kapidžić

Enlargement Politics Based on Geopolitics? A Proposal for a Geopolitics-Driven Enlargement Policy 117
Soeren Keil

A Push in EU Integration as a Silver Lining of the Ukraine Tragedy? Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia 125
Keiichi Kubo

The Western Balkans' EU Odyssey: Charting a Course through Geopolitical Winds in the Quest for Accession 134
Milena Lazarević and Strahinja Subotić

Enlargement Back on the EU's Agenda: Western Balkans Moving Slowly Nowhere? 147
Jovana Marović

Ukraine War: A Push towards Differentiated Integration for the Western Balkans? 155
Marko Milenković

The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: What is at Stake? 165
Ritsa Panagiotou

Missed Opportunities: Reheating Stale Policies in the Western Balkans after a Year of War in Ukraine 176
Valery Perry

The Advent of Geopolitical Enlargement and its Credibility Dilemma 185
Frank Schimmelfennig

The EU's Geopolitical Test: Western Balkans Amidst Global Security Challenges 194
Senada Šelo-Šabić

Russia's War in Ukraine – An Imagination Challenge for the EU 201
Corina Stratulat

The uncertain impact of the Russian–Ukraine war on the Western Balkans 210
Milica Uvalić

Contributors

Veronica Anghel is Lecturer at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. She is also a *Europe's Futures* Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences of Vienna and a Visiting Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute in Florence.

Klodiana Beshku is Lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences, University of Tirana. She was a Jean Monnet Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and a visiting scholar at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute. She has a PhD in Geopolitics from the University of Pisa. She has taught, among others, at the University of Florence, University of Catania, University of Palermo, Institute for Women in National and International Policies in Tirana, and Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade. She has also held advisory positions for the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania.

Dimitar Bechev is a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, where he focuses on Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. He is also a lecturer at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford. Bechev is the author of *Turkey under Erdogan* (Yale University Press, 2022), *Historical Dictionary of North Macedonia* (Rowman, 2019), and *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (Yale UP, 2017) as well as co-editor of *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomsbury, 2021). He has also published numerous academic articles and policy reports.

Florian Bieber is Professor of Southeast European History and Politics and Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. He is the coordinator of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group **(**BiEPAG). He has taught at Kent University (UK), Cornell University, as well as the Universities of Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Bologna. Recent publications include *Debating Nationalism* (Bloomsbury 2020), *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave 2020), *Negotiating Unity and Diversity in the European Union* (Palgrave 2021, with Roland Bieber).

Matteo Bonomi is Senior Fellow at Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome. His work focuses on European integration and EU enlargement policy. He has been an expert or consultant for numerous institutes, think tanks, foundations, and public agencies across Europe. He has published academic and policy papers on EU differentiated integration, Western Balkan-EU relations, and the political economy of EU enlargement. He is member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) and of the Editorial Committee of *The International Spectator*. He holds a PhD in Politics, Human Rights and Sustainability from the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa.

Davide Denti holds a master in European Studies from the College of Europe (2011) and a PhD in International Studies from the University of Trento (2018). He works at the European Commission, DG NEAR since 2016.

Antoaneta L. Dimitrova is Professor at the Institute for Security and Global Affairs, the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs at Leiden University. An enduring theme in her work has been the effect of the European Union on the democratic and market transformations of the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Other key themes are EU enlargement, currently focusing on the EU's strategy towards the Western Balkan candidates. Another important theme she explores are the causes of democratic backsliding and especially the role of state capture. With various colleagues, she has been investigating the European Union's Neighbourhood policy towards its Eastern neighbours – Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, in particular.

Jelena Džankić is Part-Time Professor in the Global Governance Programme at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. She is Director of GGP Southeastern Europe and Co-Director of the Global Citizenship Observatory (GLOBALCIT). She holds a PhD in International Studies from the University of Cambridge. She is the author of the *Global Market for Investor Citizenship* (Palgrave 2019), *Citizenship in Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro. Effects of Statehood and Identity Challenges* (Routledge, 2015), and the editor of *Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A failure of EU Conditionality* (2018, with S. Keil and M. Kmezić), and *The Europeanisation of Citizenship Governance in South-East Europe* (2016, with S. Kacarska and N. Pantić).

Nisida Gjoksi holds a MRes degree in Economics from Vienna University of Economics (2010) and a PhD in social and political science at the European University Institute (2018). Her thesis analysed why politicians restrain political appointments differently over time and across countries, by focusing on Southeastern Europe. Currently she works for the European Commission, DG NEAR, as a desk officer for public administration and is affiliated as guest researcher to Leiden University. She was a Fellow in Public Policy and Public Administration at the London School of Economics.

Andi Hoxhaj is Lecturer in Law at the University College London, Faculty of Laws. He previously taught at the University of Warwick Law School and was awarded his PhD in 2017 at the University of Warwick. He is the author of the book titled *The EU Anti-Corruption Policy: A Reflexive Governance Approach* (Routledge, 2020) and a recipient of the Warwick Award for Teaching Excellence for the 2020/21 academic year and the British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award in 2018. His research interests and publications are on the rule of law, corruption, and EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans.

Erik Jones is Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. He is also Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) – on extended leave. Professor Jones is author of *The Politics of Economic and Monetary Union* (2002), *Economic Adjustment and Political Transformation in Small States* (2008), *Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity* (2012, with Dana H. Allin), and *The Year the European Crisis Ended* (2014).

Simonida Kacarska is Director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje, North Macedonia. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies from the University of Leeds (UK) and a MA in European Politics from the Sussex European Institute (UK). She was a research fellow at the Central European University, University of Oxford, the College of Europe, and the European Research Council project *The Europeanisation of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia* based at the University of Edinburgh School of Law. Simonida provided expert and consultancy services to international organisations (CoE and OSCE). She has both practitioner and research experience related to the political transformation and European integration of the Balkans with a focus on national minority policies.

Damir Kapidžić is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo. His research examines how democratic and authoritarian politics are institutionalised in the context of ethnic conflict, power-sharing, and democratic innovations. He focuses on processes in Southeast European countries with comparative perspectives from Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. As a consultant, he designed several deliberative democracy processes and citizens' assemblies. He is a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, principal investigator of the EU Horizon CONNEKT project, and editor of *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe* (Routledge, 2022).

Soeren Keil is Academic Head of the International Research and Consulting Centre at the Institute of Federalism. Previously, he was Director of the Politics and International Relations programme at Canterbury Christ Church University in the United Kingdom. Keil is an internationally recognised scholar in the areas of federalism and decentralisation, conflict resolution and democratisation. He has worked as an expert for several international organisations, governments, and civil society organisations. He has authored and edited 11 books.

Keiichi Kubo is Professor of Comparative Politics at the Faculty of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University in Tokyo. His research interests include democratisation, elections and party systems, ethnic politics, civil war, transitional justice, and reconciliation, with special emphasis on the ex-Yugoslav countries. He has published two monographs on the former Yugoslavia (in Japanese). He has contributed articles to numerous peer-reviewed journals, chapters to books and has co-edited several books (in Japanese and English). In 2021, together with Prof. Goran Šimić, he launched the novel War Crimes Trials Database covering the ex-Yugoslav region and beyond.

Milena Lazarević is one of the founders and Programme Director of European Policy Centre (CEP), an independent, non-governmental, think tank based in Belgrade, Serbia. A proven expert in the field of public administration reform and European affairs, in 2014-2015 Milena acted as the Special Advisor to the Serbian Deputy Prime Minister. She started her career as a civil servant in the EU Integration Office of the Serbian Government. She is one of the authors of the *Template for a Staged Accession to the European Union* , a comprehensive proposal for reforming and reinvigorating the EU's enlargement policy. Milena obtained her MA at the College of Europe, on a King Baudouin Foundation scholarship.

Jovana Marović is the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of European Affairs of the Government of Montenegro. She holds a PhD from the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science. She has also worked as an advisor for the EU in the multilateral department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, advisor for international relations and European integration in the Cabinet of the Mayor of Budva Municipality, research coordinator at the Institute Alternative, special advisor to the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare (2016), executive director of the Politikon Network, and vice president of the Civic Movement URA. Jovana has been a member of BiEPAG since 2015.

Marko Milenković is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences (Belgrade) and Affiliated Research Fellow at the Center for Constitutional Studies and Democratic Development at Johns Hopkins University School of Advance International Studies (Bologna). He has a PhD from the University of Belgrade and LL.M. from the University of Cambridge. Marko has a ample experience in the field of legal transformation and the rule of law. He has published in areas of European integration, administrative law, public law reforms and institutional change, environmental law, health law and state aid.

Ritsa Panagiotou is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre of Planning and Economic Research (KEPE) in Athens. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and Russian from Wellesley College, and an M.Phil and a D.Phil in International Relations from Oxford University. For several years she worked as a Research Associate at the European Business School (INSEAD) in Fontainebleau, France. She has been an Adjunct Professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business, the University of Athens Postgraduate Programme in Southeast European Studies, the College Year in Athens Study Abroad Programme, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence.

Valery Perry has worked in the Western Balkans since the late 1990s, conducting research and working for organisations including the Democratisation Policy Council, the Public International Law, and Policy Group, the European Centre for Minority Issues, the OSCE, the NATO Stabilisation Force (SFOR), and several NGOs. She has consulted for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN Development Program, the Regional Cooperation Council, USAID, IMPAQ International, and other organisations. She has a PhD from George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, has published, and edited numerous articles, chapters, and books. Her first documentary film, *Looking for Dayton*, was screened at the 26th Sarajevo Film Festival in 2020.

Frank Schimmelfennig is Professor of European Politics at ETH Zurich. He is also a member of the Swiss National Research Council, an Associate of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, and Chairman of the Scientific Board of *Institut* für *Europäische Politik* Berlin. His most recent books are *Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration* (Oxford University Press, 2020, with Thomas Winzen) and *Integration and Differentiation in the European Union. Theory and Policies* (Palgrave, 2022, with Dirk Leuffen and Berthold Rittberger).

Corina Stratulat is Senior Policy Analyst and the Head of the European Politics and Institutions Programme at the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels. Her work at the EPC focuses on EU institutional developments and enlargement towards the Balkans. She holds an MPhil in Contemporary European Studies from the University of Cambridge, UK and a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute, Italy. Her main research interests include comparative Central and East European politics, parties and party systems, elections, democracy, populism, EU institutions and enlargement policy.

Strahinja Subotić is Programme Manager and Senior Researcher at the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade. His key fields of expertise include the enlargement policy and EU affairs more generally, as well as geopolitics and the involvement of external actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey in the Western Balkans. He is one of the co-authors of the Template on the Staged Accession to the EU. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the University of Belgrade.

Senada Šelo Šabić is Senior Research Associate in the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb, Croatia. She holds Ph.D. in political and social sciences from the European University Institute in Florence and has earned two Masters' degrees – in international relations from the University of Zagreb and in peace studies from the University of Notre Dame, USA. Her research interests include European affairs, Balkans, migration, and international security. She publishes academic and policy papers, coordinates research projects and works as a consultant in areas of her expertise.

Milica Uvalić is Professor in Economics at the Department of Political Science, University of Perugia (Italy), where she has worked since 1992. She has taught courses on European economic integration, economic development and global governance, transition economics, macroeconomics, and international economics. She holds a PhD from the European University Institute (1988). Formerly she was member of the UN Committee for Development Policy, Public Policy Scholar at Woodrow Wilson Centre (Washington DC), and Assistant Minister in the first post-Milošević government in FR Yugoslavia. An expert on the Western Balkans and wider East European region, she has published extensively on economic development in the Western Balkans, privatisation, trade, FDI, labour markets, higher education, EU-Western Balkan integration.

Abbreviations

BIA	*Bezbednosno-informativna agencija* [The Security and Intelligence Agency of Serbia]
BiEPAG	The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CoE	Council of Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EEA	European Economic Area
EPC	European Political Community
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina
EUMAM	European Union Assistance Mission Ukraine
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KFOR	Kosovo Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NIS	*Naftna industrija Srbije* [the Petroleum Industry of Serbia]
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OHR	Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina
RTS	*Radio-televizija Srbije* [Public Broadcasting Service of Serbia]

SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SELDI	Southeast Europe Leadership for Development and Integrity
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
UK	United Kingdom
WB	Western Balkans

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

Simonida Kacarska , Soeren Keil*** , and Jelena Džankić******

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, caused a major shift in global geopolitics. The invasion has brought back war at European soil and posed a challenge to the European Union as the key regional organisation. It has led to a rethinking of the Union's role in its neighbourhood and on a global level. In these circumstances, the European Union (EU) was quick to respond in a unison manner in sanctioning Russia and expressing and delivering its support to Ukraine, thus overcoming internal disagreements between its Member States. It has also made a significant shift in its external and enlargement policy of the last three decades by responding positively to the membership applications of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia filed immediately after the invasion.

The war has also put into the limelight the need for rethinking the Union's own immediate weaknesses such as its engagement with the Western Balkans in the last two decades. The six states in the Southeastern corners of Europe

* The editors of this symposium and the book thank all the authors for their insightful contributions. We also thank Vuk Uskoković for research support.

** European Policy Institute, Skopje.

*** University of Fribourg, International Research and Consulting Centre at the Institute of Federalism.

**** European University Institute, Florence.

(Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), which are not members of the Union, have become a symbol of the EU's never-ending accession policy. Progress towards membership in these countries has been by all standards slow and plagued by disputes and conflicts, within the region and with the neighbouring EU Member States. Partly due to this stagnation, over time, the region has become more vulnerable to external influences, including that of Russia (and other actors such as China, the Gulf countries, and Turkey). Whereas this vulnerability has been tolerated for a long time by the Union, in part due to its own divisions, the invasion has created a time pressure to deal with it, as has been pointed out by several authors in this symposium.

The immediate response of the EU has been to place increased attention on the region to align with its sanctions policy, followed by an internal reflection on the Union's enlargement policy. As to the former, with the exception of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, all of the governments in the region were quick to side with the Union's stance on Ukraine, thus frontloading the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) alignment as part of their accession process. As a result, these countries, which are economically much weaker than the EU, have exposed themselves significantly to the external shocks of the energy crisis, and have become vulnerable to the economic consequences of sanctions to Russia. To compensate, the EU has included the Western Balkan region in its procurement for gas and has redirected some of its aid to assist the energy and price shocks that are a consequence of the alignment with the sanctions to Russia. In addition to the increased economic alignment and involvement, we can also observe a substantial increase in political alignment and a renewed focus on the enlargement process in the region.

In this regard, the rhetorical shift in terms of overall discussions on enlargement policy at the EU level has been evident. In addition to granting the candidate status to Moldova, Ukraine and potentially Georgia, the Union has made attempts at quick fixes by starting the long-delayed accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, albeit with caveats in the latter case. The EU has also granted candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and agreed for the long-awaited visa liberalisation for Kosovo. With these moves, it has politically revived its enlargement agenda, but its transformative power has shown significant shortcomings compared to the previous enlargement rounds. In fact, many authors in this symposium question the role and commitment of the

EU in the Western Balkans – beyond the symbolic meaning of the above-mentioned changes. There is, so far, little evidence that the substance of the enlargement has changed and that there is real willingness in Brussels, and particularly in the EU Member State capitals, to seriously consider enlarging the Union further anytime soon.

In addition, the EU Member States have put forward several proposals for potential revisions of the enlargement policy ranging from ideas on differentiated/sectoral integration, partly with a focus on the internal market, on top of the 2020 revised enlargement methodology. Yet, it is clear that on this front, progress has been much slower. The regaining of the transformative power of the EU carries significance for the Union, for the region, but also for the EU's global geopolitical role. The normative power Europe has largely been built upon the premise of the attraction of its model and transformative effects. The revival of this transformative power will also be key as to the long-term outcome of the aspirations for membership not only in the Western Balkans, but also in the currently more salient cases of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, potentially others as well. There lies the unique chance for the EU in the current situation – a window of opportunity has opened to integrate new countries into European structures; countries, which have previously seen increased Euroscepticism, and where local populations have become ever-more frustrated with the slow progress of EU integration. In this regard, closer EU integration and a membership perspective that is credible might allow for a push on much-needed reforms in the Balkans and beyond, as well as a revival of the democratization and Europeanization agenda.

However, while there is broad political recognition of the need to move forward with the enlargement policy, it is often coupled with mixed messages from the EU institutions and Member States to the Western Balkan leaders. One year after the invasion, in this symposium, we reflect on these challenges by gathering insight from 25 scholars, policy makers and civil society representatives to address the same question: ***Has the war in Ukraine profoundly reshaped Western Balkan (geo)politics?***. The essays look at the impact of the war in the region, specific case studies, but also at the European Union's response to the war and the influence of the war on the Union's policies towards the region. The combination of submissions includes authors from the region, the EU, and across the Atlantic with diverse backgrounds. The submissions in this volume were completed at the end of February 2023.

The contributors in the symposium underline the need to rethink and reimagine the EU enlargement process both from the perspective of the Union as well as from that of the Western Balkans. Denti and Dimitrova view the war in Ukraine as a critical juncture, both for the Eastern trio as well as for the Western Balkans, but also as a possibility for the EU to reinvigorate its accession process. For Kubo, the silver lining of the war has been the push of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans forward. The need to rethink enlargement and to reposition the Union in the new world is also underlined in the contributions of Keil and Stratulat. In a similar vein, Lazarević and Subotić call for a vision of EU integration by 2030 which would cement the EU's sphere of influence in the region.

The joint call for reimagining enlargement policy stands in contrast with the sobering assessments of the state of play in the region. The authors highlight the persisting major challenges for the region in terms of good governance as one of the reasons for the enlargement stalemate. Gjoksi illustrates the enduring problem of state capture, and highlights the avenues that the new EU methodology provides in terms of the way forward. While supportive of the possibility to reinvigorate enlargement, Schimmelfennig underlines that such a move must not come at the expense of good governance. Džankić emphasizes a variety of fault lines that have been created or exacerbated in the region, and calls for an approach that would create more resilient societies, whereas Marović argues for strengthening of the EU's own democracy promotion mechanisms. Using illiberal politics and democratic backsliding as examples, Kapidžić has shown why the EU should not ignore how geopolitics overlap and interact with democracy in the region. Last, as to the internal challenges Uvalić and Perry looking at the cases of Serbia and Bosnia, respectively, underline the need for social reforms in addition to the dominant focus on the political transformation.

Several authors zoom in on the role that external actors have played in the last year, with a strong focus on Russia. Looking at the cases of Bosnia and Serbia each, Jerković and Bechev show the operation of Russia in the Western Balkans as an actor that thrives on instability in the region to pursue its own interests. Bieber, on the other hand, illustrates the counterintuitive argument as to how the strengthening of European integration has come from outside of the region, rather than from within it. For Panagiotou, enlargement has heightened the presence and influence of foreign actors in the region, and the EU accession track as the road to stability must be accelerated.

Last, the authors deal with the shortcomings of the current enlargement process in view of the call for its re-imagination and amidst the challenges on the ground. Bonomi emphasizes the missing resources for economic convergence of the region, mechanisms to strengthen democratic participation, and the need to reform the decision-making rules on EU accession. The acceleration of accession is not seen as the most viable option, so many of our authors look at interim steps or alternatives. For Milenković, differentiated integration is the way forward as an interim strategy for governing EU-WB relations. Similarly for Anghel and Jones, the EU will not go ahead with enlargement at all costs, as both the EU and the WB are unprepared; they consider phasing in to individual policies as a plausible approach. Hoxhaj zooms in on regional initiatives, such as the Berlin process, and underlines the crucial role of stability of institutions are for the common regional market and a closer integration with the EU.

While one year after the invasion does not provide sufficient time for an assessment of long-term shifts, the contributions in this volume nevertheless provide a timely assessment of the (changed?) geopolitical environment in the region in view of the Russian invasion on Ukraine, and many make predictions about the effects of these changes for the future engagement of the EU with the region. The authors offer new insights into the impact of the war on almost all of the countries in the region, highlighting variations in view of individual countries' relationship with the EU and Russia. The contributions also highlight that the response of the political elites in the region to the invasion has varied as a result of the specific country and political circumstances, focusing particularly on the reactions in countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the support for the EU and siding with Ukraine in the war has been much more contested than in other cases. Finally, the chapters also reflect on the multiple proposals mentioned above as to the potential reform of the enlargement framework. While many of them pose forward different and sometimes conflicting ideas, all of them underline the pressing need for meaningful action on the side of the EU in the Western Balkans and on the need to rethink, reframe and refocus the overall EU enlargement policy.

Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know It

Veronica Anghel* and Erik Jones**

Among its many other tragic effects, the Russia-Ukraine war has complicated life for the countries of the Western Balkans. The European Union's reaction to the war included the revival of a rhetoric supportive of enlargement to the Western Balkans, in addition to financial aid to weather the energy crisis. The European Council has even granted candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which opens possibilities for that country to receive additional support. But the EU stopped short of filling that conversation with political or technical content that takes into account the years of "broken promises diplomacy" that led to the loss of credibility in the enlargement process. Instead of reconsidering what enlargement means in this context, both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans ended up reengaging in the same kind of slow-burning formal accession negotiations they conducted in the past, expecting a different result. This absence of adaptability is likely to cause more damage than good to a region that is already struggling to fight off anti-European and anti-democratic forces from inside and out.

* Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Bologna.

** European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre, Florence.

Observing how the EU is using enlargement as part of its wartime policy kit redefines how we should understand the main goal it associates with this process. The 2022 EU's re-activation of enlargement reconfirms its main utility as a border stabilisation and peacebuilding mechanism (Anghel & Džankić 2023). Ascribing security goals to the process of enlargement changes its original design as an obstacle course towards full EU membership. In so doing, it makes the perspective of EU membership less sincere, despite the EU's enlargement rhetoric being built around credibility.

Once we accept security goals as the main priority of the enlargement process, an important question follows: is extending actual membership to the countries of the Western Balkans necessary to achieve these goals? Whichever the answer to that question, the EU needs to go through important structural transformations and relinquish its own damaging populist rhetoric. A realistic pathway for EU-Western Balkans relations requires the development of tailor-made relationships with candidate countries that would not subsume all progress to the idea of member status. Otherwise, any progress reported by candidate states would end up in frustration.

In this short essay, we present that line of argument in a three-stage progression. First, we show that while most EU leaders have proven a firm commitment to democracy promotion against the rise of imperialist authoritarianism in Russia (Snyder 2022) and recommitted to giving a more credible perspective of EU membership to the countries of the Western Balkans (European Council 2022), the European Union as a whole is still considering how best to adapt its institutions to the long term economic and security threat created by the war. This indecision raises questions about the EU's resilience (Anghel & Jones 2022) and its capacity-building (Genschel 2022). Second, we suggest that this absence of substantive adaptation follows a familiar failing-forward logic that is risky and may eventually prove unsustainable (Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier 2016). Finally, we suggest that a policy of realistic phasing-in for the countries of the Western Balkans would bridge the EU's current double-minded approach. In so doing, the EU would continue its process of adaptation and resilience building and increase its chances to meet its security goals.

No enlargement at all costs

EU membership has not always been a reward for good behaviour. In the case of the 2004/2007/2013 Eastern enlargement, the EU has expanded to include democratising states despite the many ways in which these diverged from core EU principles (Anghel & Jones 2021). European Union leaders considered the risks associated with this decision acceptable. To accommodate those consequences deriving from the 2004/2007/2013 enlargement, the EU has also shown that it has the ability to adapt. Not least, it showed a willingness to maintain a fragile democratic equilibrium by not triggering important punitive mechanisms against countries that challenged core EU principles (Kelemen 2020; 2022). In both situations, EU decision-makers decided that the costs associated with enlargement (and later to maintaining unity) are worth paying.

To be given EU membership, the Western Balkans would need the EU to adopt a strategy of enlargement at all costs. The difference is that this time round, the EU is convinced that those costs would be too high: for the EU, for Member States, and for the local authorities in candidate states charged with capacity building. This becomes evident once we review some of the alternative options laid out by EU Member States such as the French initiative for a European Political Community (EPC) or the 2022 Austrian non-paper on gradual integration. Enlargement, understood in traditional terms, does not rank highly on a unified EU policy agenda. However, the security of its borders does. This dilemma is now a constitutive part of the EU's core security and defence strategies. It is also the source of much confusion in its strategy towards aspiring members.

The EU has acknowledged its credibility problem in several documents, from its 2018 enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, to its 2020 "new enlargement methodology", to the latest EU-Western Balkans Summit that took place in Tirana in 2022. In 2018, the EU considered the prospect of the region's accession to be 'in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe based on common values'. In the same document, EU enlargement is further described as 'an investment in the EU's security, economic growth and influence and in its ability to protect its citizens' (European Commission 2018). Security needs drive the EU to become a geopolitical actor. Such documents show that having the Western Balkans "in" would strengthen the EU's security.

Not all EU documents share the same vision. In the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Western Balkans are defined as outside partners, with whom tailored partnerships should be developed, alongside 'our eastern and southern neighbourhood, Africa, Asia and Latin America' (Diplomatic Service of the European Union 2022). Can the EU simultaneously build a security strategy around having the Western Balkans in and having them out? While the EU could end up deciding that extending actual membership may not be necessary to achieve its security goals, improving its standing in the Western Balkans and increasing its political and economic ties with the countries of the region is. The current strategic confusion is not likely to help define meaningful relationships.

The evolution of the EU through enlargement

The study of European Union enlargement typically focuses on the success or failure of candidate countries to adapt to the challenge of membership. What is less understood is how the European Union – meaning the institutions, policies, and the underlying notion of membership – changed through the enlargement process as well. The EU is hardly a fixed actor in the context of enlargement. Politically, economically, and institutionally, the EU today is different from the Union that managed the Eastern enlargement process in 2004/2007/2013. That Union, in turn, was different from the one that concluded negotiations with Austria, Sweden and Finland in 1994.

This difference might sound trivial, but the implications of thinking of the EU in these terms are not. Resistance to change is high when European Union leaders are faced with the prospect of enlargement, even if continuous change is something the EU has always done. Each time the European Union expanded, its institutions, policies, and membership evolved – both in formal terms, and more informally in terms of how the Member States, new and old, perceived their roles, rights, and obligations. This evolution has had profound consequences for the stability of the organisation that are not captured by the most prominent theories of European integration – neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, and post-functionalist. Tracing the evolution of the EU through the lens of the enlargement process is important not only for identifying the hidden fragility of the European Union, but also for highlighting the dynamics that have weakened many of the pillars of the international economic system from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), to

the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the G20, and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Consider some of the effects of the EU's 2004/2007/2013 enlargement. That decision was crucial to reshaping the EU. The accession of eleven new post-communist members, accompanied by Cyprus and Malta, increased fractionalisation within the institutions of the Union, the complexity of internal decision-making, tested the EU's governance mechanisms, required greater economic creativity and solidarity, and stressed the EU's commitment to core principles. It also complicated the relations between the EU and some of its closest neighbours, Russia and Turkey foremost.

These added layers of complexity define the EU's ambiguous approach to candidate states and its own geopolitical role. Once more, the EU seems to follow a failing-forward pattern in which it only half-heartedly commits to necessary internal reforms, if any. Under the pressure of the Russia-Ukraine war, it activated the same instruments of pre-accession conditionality it has used in the past, expecting different results. The main difference is in the speed with which it reacted initially, only to then reduce activity to its more usual slow-burning style of decision-making. This pattern contrasts sharply with the European Union's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where Member States showed a greater willingness to cross previous red lines through the creation of the recovery and resilience facility embedded in Next Generation EU (Anghel & Jones 2022).

Five months after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, the EU opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, eight and 17 years, respectively, since the moment when the two Western Balkan states were granted candidate status. These decisions were taken after the Western Balkan countries themselves voiced their frustration over the fact that war torn Ukraine and military threatened Moldova had been granted the status of EU candidate countries before they were, only three weeks after the 24 February 2022 invasion. So too was the decision to give candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. How long it will take for that decision to translate into meaningful accession talks remains to be seen. Momentum may continue to build. But in the meantime, the symbolic commitment of the European Council is more prominent than any practical advantages of the decisions that have been taken.

At best, this overreliance on the beneficial effects of the process of enlargement shows the EU's confidence in its own strengths as a block. Certainly, that was true in June 1999, when the European Council instructed the European

Commission to come up with a formula to make the prospect of membership "real" for all candidate countries from Central and Easter Europe. It was also the case in 2002 when the European Council finally agreed to the big-bang enlargement (Anghel & Jones 2021). But this time around it is more likely that the joint offering of a European perspective to aspiring members who are at different stages of peace-building says much more about the institutional limitations of the EU. Those limitations are in no small measure also the result of incompletely adapting to previous rounds of enlargement.

Phasing-in

EU policy-makers know that the offer for full membership is not something that can be achieved in the near term. Unless policy-makers design a meaningful way to reward progress, they will fall into the same patterns of inaction that previously characterised their relationship with candidate states. Only providing money is not enough, as years of already provided (insufficient) aid to Moldova, Ukraine or the Western Balkans have shown. It can look too much like charity, a transactional approach that does not bring the citizens of these countries closer to the EU's core principles.

Candidate countries need to be involved in EU decision-making already through their accession negotiations. This is the phasing-in approach, a term borrowed from developmental studies that suggests that the functionalities of a new system are introduced in a particular sequence, replacing old systems and methodologies only gradually.

This new "phasing-in" approach to candidate countries should include the prospect of their participation in shaping EU legislation. In this alternative world, a country like North Macedonia would not need to get over the last hurdles of full membership to participate in EU decision-making in all other "provisionally closed" chapters. Having the candidate countries already involved in restructuring different policy areas in the EU before an uncertain inclusion with full voting rights would regain some of the credibility this process lost.

A dense involvement of candidate countries in the process of accession is unavoidable for the EU to achieve its security goals. But accession is not necessarily a goal, it is a process – not just for the candidate countries but for the EU as well. The form of what "being in" looks like has continuously changed. What remains constant is that in security terms, the Western Balkan states have to be on the inside for the EU to meet its goals.

Conclusion

The EU will not pursue a strategy of enlargement at all costs. EU policy-makers consider those costs would be too high. However well intentioned, an ideological commitment to the process of EU enlargement as an obstacle course towards full membership obscures the limitations of this process. At best the EU is using enlargement as a peace and stability building mechanism.

The EU is unlikely to extend full membership to states that fall short of anything less than an ideal of political and economic stability and who cannot show the credentials of a near perfect democracy and stable economy. Norway, Switzerland, Iceland would be welcomed, the countries of the Western Balkans not so much. This is not to deny the pressing nature of the security imperative or to suggest that the candidate countries themselves cannot change. Rather, the point is that the impact of another large-scale enlargement on the European Union itself is too costly for the European Council easily to embrace. Absent the credibility of membership as an end goal, this is not a sustainable equilibrium. The costs of a phasing-in approach of candidate states are worth considering.

References

Anghel, Veronica, & Jelena Džankić. 'Wartime EU: Consequences of the Russia-Ukraine War on the Enlargement Process'. *Journal of European Integration* (2023) (forthcoming). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2190106.

Anghel, Veronica, & Erik Jones. 'Failing Forward in Eastern Enlargement: Problem Solving through Problem Making'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 29, no. 7 (2021): 1092-1111. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1927155.

Anghel, Veronica, & Erik Jones. 'Is Europe Really Forged through Crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia – Ukraine War'. *Journal of European Public Policy* (2022). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140820.

Diplomatic Service of the European Union. 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence | EEAS Website'. 2022. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en.

European Commission. *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*, 2018. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0065.

European Council. *Tirana Declaration,* 6 December 2022. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/06/tirana-declaration-6-december-2022/.

Genschel, Philipp. 'Bellicist Integration? The War in Ukraine, the European Union and Core State Powers'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 29, no. 12 (2022): 1885–1900. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141823.

Jones, Erik, R. Daniel Kelemen, & Sophie Meunier. 'Failing Forward? The Euro Crisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration'. *Comparative Political Studies* vol. 49, no. 7 (2016): 1010–34. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015617966.

Kelemen, R. Daniel. 'The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 27, no. 3 (2020): 481–99. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1712455.

Kelemen, R. Daniel. 'The European Union's Failure to Address the Autocracy Crisis: MacGyver, Rube Goldberg, and Europe's Unused Tools'. *Journal of European Integration* (2022). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2022.2152447.

Snyder, Timothy. 'The War in Ukraine is a colonial war'. *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war.

The Ukraine War: Response in the Western Balkans

Dimitar Bechev*

On 7 October 2022, Belgrade awoke to the sight of billboards showing a portrait of a smirking Putin. The conservative movement Our People *(Naši),* whose name is a nod to Russia's war in Ukraine and evokes Slavic brotherhood, was using the billboards to convey to Putin the good wishes of his Serbian brethren on his seventieth birthday. Weeks earlier, on 28 August 2022, thousands of right-wing protesters had marched through Belgrade in protest against EuroPride, a pan-European LGBTQ event taking place in Serbia; they carried outsize images of Putin and General Dragoljub "Draža" Mihailović, the controversial leader of the anticommunist Chetnik movement during World War II. Putin has been invited to join the Serbian nationalist pantheon, and his appeal goes well beyond the far-right fringe.

Such popular attitudes are in sync with Serbian foreign policy. Thus far, President Aleksandar Vučić has resisted pressure to join Western sanctions against Russia and sever its long-standing ties to the country. Flights from Moscow and Saint Petersburg land daily at Belgrade airport. The city brims with middle-class Russians taking advantage of Serbia's visa-free regime and lax residence rules to move their businesses closer to the European Union (EU) and avoid being mobilised and sent to the front in Ukraine. The Serbian-Russian connection appears as strong as ever.

Those in the region who remember the horrors and the suffering of the

* Carnegie Europe, and Oxford School on Global and Area Studies (OSGA).

1990s have rightfully been concerned. As early as March 2022, the Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said the Balkans were 'in even greater danger than the Baltic countries and Moldova' (Isaac, 2022). Officials in Prishtina blamed Serbia and Russia of preparing a war to take over the Serb-populated northern municipalities. Escalation in December, the worst for the past ten years, put local actors on the edge as Vučić put forces across the border on high alert.

Are the Western Balkans at the risk of a new conflict? How has the war in Ukraine affected international politics of the region?

Serbia's affair with Russia

Vučić presents ties to Russia as a matter of necessity. In May 2022, Serbia concluded a new three-year supply contract with Russian energy giant Gazprom, securing deliveries through the winter of 2022–2023 at advantageous prices because of a formula linked to the price of crude oil rather than to the spot market.

He leveraged the war in domestic politics too. "Peace. Stability. Vučić."was the slogan that won him another term as president and enabled the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to retain control over parliament following the elections of 3 April 2022.

Other Serbian officials have gone much further. In August 2022, Aleksandar Vulin, a longtime minister of the interior and defence and currently head of Serbia's intelligence agency, traveled to Moscow, where he met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and was decorated by the Russian Ministry of Defence. 'Serbia led by President Aleksandar Vučić does not forget [the] centuries-old brotherhood [with Russia],' Vulin proudly announced (Carrano 2022). Then, on 24 September, during the annual session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in New York, then Serbian foreign minister Nikola Selaković signed a memorandum with Lavrov on coordinating their two countries' foreign policies.

The President has to reckon the popular response in Serbia to the war in Ukraine. A New Third Way poll found in July 2022 that 59 per cent of Serbia's citizens blamed the West for the bloodshed, compared with 23 per cent who fault Russia and 18 per cent who believed that Moscow and Western powers share responsibility (Tanjug & Euronews Srbija 2022). According to another survey, conducted in June 2022 by the Centre for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA), a human rights organisation, 72 per cent of Serbians

believe that Russia was forced to start the war because of NATO's intentions to enlarge (Ilić & Stojilović 2022).

Yet these attitudes do not exist in a vacuum. Russia benefits handsomely from favourable media coverage in Serbia. As a whole, popular TV stations and print outlets paint the war as a clash between Russia and the United States, rather than an act of aggression against a sovereign state. Their message is amplified by Kremlin-sponsored outlets, such as the Sputnik news agency's Serbian service, which is soon to be complemented by an online Serbian-language TV news channel as part of the RT franchise. Russia is commonly portrayed as a victim of the West, much as Serbia was during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. To Serbian nationalists, the war in Ukraine is therefore payback for the West's imperial arrogance and heavy-handedness. This view resonates strongly with the Kremlin elites' deeply held conviction that the 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia showed NATO's true colours as a vehicle of United States' hegemony rather than a defensive alliance (more in Bechev 2017).

Western pressure

In responding to Ukraine, Belgrade has pursued its habitual "multi-vector policy". As senior US diplomat Brian Hoyt Yee once remarked, Serbia has been sitting on two chairs (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017).

However, Vučić has come under considerable pressure to impose sanctions on Russia. The US Ambassador to Serbia Christopher Hill arrived in Belgrade in late March 2022 with an explicit mission to talk Vučić into joining the Western coalition. Hill has been vocal in local media, stressing the fact that Serbia has no reasons to support an attack against a sovereign country. Speaking to the national broadcaster Radio Television Serbia on 19 October 2022, Hill said Serbia had to think hard about where its interests lie and recognise they lie with the West.

The EU is doing its share, too. In early October 2022, the EU imposed a full embargo on seaborne Russian crude oil, starting in December. That move cut supplies to Serbia, which depends on the Adria pipeline, linked to terminals on Croatia's Adriatic coast. The same month, the European Commission's regular report on Serbia's progress toward EU membership highlighted nonalignment with sanctions as a chief obstacle to Belgrade's ambitions to make headway in the accession talks. At the same time, Serbia has faced criticism from the Commission over the liberal visa regime it applies to citizens of

third countries, which allows Serbia to be used as a conduit for illegal migration to the EU. The Serbian government has also reintroduced visas for Burundians and Tunisians in order not to have its own nationals' visa-free access to the EU's passport-free Schengen zone removed. It is not inconceivable that the EU could use the same leverage to demand the termination of Serbia's visa-free regime with Russia, too.

Serbia has already taken some minor steps to align with the EU: it joined sanctions against Belarus and against Ukraine's former president Viktor Yanukovych, and it has not taken part in any military exercises with Russia or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) since February 2022. In the UN General Assembly, Serbia voted on several occasions in support of declarations condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Such minor concessions to the West however are only intended to win Belgrade time. Vučić is unlikely to align Serbia in full with the sanctions, risking a nationalist backlash at home – thanks to the demons he himself and the loyalist media have unleashed. Amongst other things, the stand-off over Kosovo, peaking thanks the dispute over licence plates in the autumn of 2022, diverted attention away from Serbia's policy on the sanctions and gave the president more wiggle room.

Other "external powers"

Serbia is not exclusively focused on Russia and the EU (Bieber & Tzifakis 2019). Despite the war, other strands of its foreign policy have remained important. Belgrade is procuring Chinese surface-to-air missiles. Long-standing plans for the purchase of Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicle were on the agenda during Erdoğan's September 2022 visit to Belgrade (Reuters 2022). Serbia has likewise signalled its interest in alternative gas supplies. Vučić attended the inauguration of works for a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal off the Greek coast near the port city of Alexandroupolis on 9 May 2022, as well as the launch of the Greece–Bulgaria interconnector pipeline on 1 October 2022 (Filipova 2022). Once its current three-year deal with Gazprom expires, Serbia will be negotiating imports with Azerbaijan and LNG producers, to be delivered through another interconnector across the border with Bulgaria.

Regional repercussions

Thanks to the war and its connection to Serbia, Russia has again become prominent in the Western Balkan politics.

Moscow intervened in an escalation in northern Kosovo. The Russian ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, blamed the EU and the US for the crisis. On 26 September 2022, the ambassador joined Serbian Defence Minister Nebojša Stefanović and Chief of Staff Milan Mojsilović to inspect a Serbian army base in direct proximity to Kosovo's border. As ever, context matters: the visit came after weeks of media speculation about a possible Serbian military intervention in northern Kosovo to prevent what Vučić described as a concerted plan to cleanse Kosovo of Serbs. Naturally, the Serbian military and political leadership had publicly ruled out an invasion (Betabriefing & EurActiv 2022). Yet troops at the border, including the unit inspected by the Russian ambassador, were put on high alert – both then and in December when Vučić requested the Kosovo Force (KFOR) to deploy up to 1,000 security personnel in northern Kosovo (Taylor 2022).

In the longer term, Russia is in a position to throw a wrench into the works of the EU effort to restart talks between Belgrade and Prishtina, too. Moscow is sure to oppose any agreement in the UN Security Council and bar Kosovo from joining the UN and has a lot of scope to continue playing a spoiler role.

The same applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina. On 20 September 2022, the president of the Republika Srpska (RS) Milorad Dodik met Putin in Moscow, to secure the Russian leader's endorsement ahead of Bosnian general election that took place in October. Having won the RS presidency, Dodik could revive plans to repatriate powers away from Sarajevo and set up a parallel judicial council. In early January 2023, the RS awarded Putin (in absentia) with a medal of honour. Even though Russia did not veto the extension of the EU-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR), at the UN Security Council in November, the Kremlin retains that option in the future. Either way, Moscow holds substantial diplomatic and political leverage over the fragmented country.

At the same time, the war has stirred the EU into action. Brussels has revived the so-called Berlin Process and pressed forward with plans for a common regional market. It has allocated additional 1 billion euros to help the Western Balkans cope with the energy crisis exacerbated by the war – on top of the EUR 9 bn in post-COVID-19 recovery assistance pledged back in October 2020. The

EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana (6 December 2022) was the first time the Union held a high-profile meeting outside of its territory, signalling commitment to the region. Albania and (conditionally) North Macedonia have been given green light to start membership talks. In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status (as a consequence of Moldova and Ukraine having been proclaimed candidates) and Kosovo formally applied for membership. Though accession remains a long shot, EU policymakers are keener than ever to integrate the Western Balkan countries into specific policy areas such as the Green Transition.

Conclusion

The Ukraine war has not spilled into the Western Balkans and chances that it will do so are slim. However, that should not give the West a false sense of complacency. The conflict feeds the narrative battles that have never really ceased since the 1990s. Tabloid readers and TV viewers have grown accustomed to stories painting minorities and neighbouring countries as enemies, glorifying past wars, and sowing fear. As a result, local political entrepreneurs as well as malign foreign powers have much to work with.

Russia will continue to foment trouble in the region, using its habitual disruptive tactics: sponsoring anti-Western groups, carrying out information and propaganda campaigns, mounting cyber attacks, and using its diplomatic leverage to make life difficult for NATO and the European Union. In the worst case, it could stir trouble in northern Kosovo in case another escalation happens – e.g., by facilitating the transfer of arms to local Serbs. However, Moscow cannot do so without Belgrade, not least because of Vučić's extensive influence over Srpska Lista, the foremost Kosovo Serb political force, and informal networks operating in the area.

References

Bechev, Dimitar. *Rival Power*: *Russian in Southeast Europe.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2017.

Betabriefing & EurActiv. 'Northern Kosovo situation sparks international response'. *Euractiv,* 27 September 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/northern-kosovo-situation-sparks-international-response/.

Bieber, Florian, & Nikolaos Tzifakis. *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries.* London: Routledge, 2019.

Carrano, Biagio. 'Lavrov's unpleasant message for Vučić'. *Serbian Monitor,* 23 August 2022. Available at: https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/lavrovs-unpleasant-message-for-Vučić/.

Filipova, Nadezhda. 'Serbian president Vučić: This project turned out to be more important than we had expected'. *Bulgarian News Ageny*, 1 October 2022. Available at: https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/336885-serbian-president-Vučić-this-project-turned-out-to-be-more-important-than-we-ha.

Ilić, Vujo, & Darko Stojilović. *Democracy on the Margin of the War.* Opinion poll, May 2022. Belgrade: CRTA, 2022. Available at: https://crta.rs/en/survey-democracy-on-the-margin-of-the-war/.

Isaac, Anna. 'Russia shows "genocidal intent" in Ukraine War, Kosovo's PM warns'. *Independent,* 2 March 2022. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/world/russia-ukraine-serbia-kosovo-balkans-b2026565.html.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Balkan Service, Associated Press, Balkan Insight. 'Serbian defense minister denounces U.S. official's "unfriendly" remarks'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,* 24 October 2017. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-minister-vulin-attacks-us-official-remarks-unfriendly/28812967.html.

Reuters. 'Turkey's Erdogan says West's "provocative" policies towards Russia not correct'. *Reuters*, 7 September 2022. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-says-wests-provocative-policies-towards-russia-not-correct-2022-09-07/.

Tanjug & Euronews Srbija. 'Novi treći put: Većina građana Srbije protiv uvođenja sankcija Rusiji, 40 odsto za rat u Ukrajini krivi NATO'. *Euronews Srbija,* 26 July 2022. Available at: https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/57015/novi-treci-put-vecina-gradana-srbije-protiv-uvodenja-sankcija-rusiji-40-odsto-za-rat-u-ukrajini-krivi-nato/vest.

Taylor, Alice. 'EU and US Urge dialogue to ease tensions at Serbia-Kosovo border'. *Euractiv,* 28 December 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-us-nato-urge-dialogue-to-ease-tensions-at-serbia-kosovo-border/.

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 relate 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 ground-ed 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.

References

Anastasakis, Othon. 'The Russo-Ukrainan Crisis and the Western Balkans. Associations and knock-on effects'. *ACM Briefs*, January 2022.

Beshku, Klodiana. 'The EU as a Geopolitical Power. The Case of the Western Balkans Region as the Periphery to the Core', *Working Paper*, RSC Working Paper 2021/70, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, 2021. Available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/72461.

Bushati, Ditmir (ed.). *Make-or-Break Moment: EU Enlargement in Sotheast Europe in Pandemic Times*, Policy Paper, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020.

Cristea, Oana. 'The Western Balkans: An area of Geopolitical Competition'. *The Romanian Journal of Society and Politics* vol. 16, no. 1 (2022): 19-46.

Dokos, Thanos. 'Conclusion: The Eu and The Western Balkans as a Single Security Space'. In *Resilience in the Western Balkans,* edited by Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, Florian Trauner, Report, EUISS, 2017.

Rama, Edi. *Speech of welcome to the Summit*, 7 December 2022. Available at: https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/fjala-e-miresardhjes-ne-samit/.

Elise, Bernard. 'Geopolitics of the European Rule of Law: Lessons from Ukraine and the Western Balkans'. *Intereconomics* vol. 57, no. 4 (2022): pp. 229-231.

European Commission. *Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective 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, CoM (2020) 57 final, 5 February 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf.

European Union Global Strategy. 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A shared Europe'. In *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

Freudlsperger, Christian, & Frank Schimmelfennig. 'Rebordering Europe in the Ukraine War: community building without capacity building'. *West European Politics* (2022). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2145542.

Jano, Dorian. 'Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider'. In *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*, edited by Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová. London and New York: Routledge, 2023.

Koseva, Denitsa. 'Bulgaria's parliament approves French compromise to lift veto on the opening of North Macedonia's EU talks'. *Intellinews*, 24 June 2022. Available at: https://www.intellinews.com/bulgaria-s-parliament-approves-french-compromise-to-lift-veto-on-opening-of-north-macedonia-s-eu-talks-248602/?source=bulgaria.

Milosavljević, Ivana Radić, & Spasimir Domaradzki. 'The EU's *Raison d'État* in the Western Balkans: Can the New Enlargement Methodology Help?' *International Problems* vol. LXXIV, no. 3 (2022): 391–410.

Stratulat, Corinna. 'The beginning of the European Political Community'. *Discussion Paper*, EPC, 3 October 2022.

Von der Leyen, Ursula. *Statement by President von der Leyen on the occasion of her official visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 30 September 2021. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-occasion-her-official-visit-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2021-09-30_en.

A "Zeitenwende" in the Balkans after the Russian Attack on Ukraine?

Florian Bieber*

The Russian aggression against Ukraine was in many ways a crucial geopolitical rupture on the European continent. While Russia had waged war against Ukraine since 2014 and in Georgia in 2008, the scale and undisguised nature of the attack added a new dimension. Numerous Western commentators described the war as the first war in Europe since 1945, ignoring not just Russia's earlier wars, but also numerous others in the Caucasus as well as in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001. Just three days after the beginning of the Russian invasion, the still relatively new German chancellor Olaf Scholtz described the events, correctly, as a "Zeitenwende", a historical turning point. Has the war been such a turning point in the Balkans, however?

At first glance, there is little evidence that much has changed since February 2022. The regional positions towards Russia did not shift in any significant way. The region has the most substantial Russian political, intellectual, and social support in Europe. While far-right and far-left parties and their electorate across the continent either support or more often add ambiguity in their views of the war, these voices might be loud but are rarely dominant. In the Western Balkans, some government ministers, media, and also citizens in surveys openly support Putin, Russia and its policies, including the war (i.e., Demostat 2022). However, this support is largely restricted to Serbs, no matter whether they live in Montenegro, Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such pro-Russian views are

* University of Graz, Austria, Centre for Southeast European Studies.

rare among other citizens in the Western Balkans, including those who share the Orthodox bonds that might serve as links to Russia. As a result, pro-Russian remained prevalent only among many Serbs in the region.

Continued pro-Russian positions

When examining the geopolitical orientations in the Western Balkans, one cannot detect a discernible shift as a result of the war. Pro-Russian politicians have continued to maintain their position, rather unaffected by the war. Serbia is often seen as being pro-Russian, and this is true in so far as it failed to support the EU sanctions against Russia. However, the policies of Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia are distinctly more complex. While not participating in the sanctions, Serbia has condemned the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty in two United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolutions in 2022. These were certainly votes that did not cost Serbia much, as they did not entail any specific measures against Russia. Yet, Serbia has been careful not to openly endorse Russian policies, including the conduct of the war (Bieber 2022). Some members of the governing coalition hold more open pro-Russian views, such as the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia, Ivica Dačić and the head of the minor party and close associate of Vučić, Aleksandar Vulin. Following elections in April 2022, both re-joined the government, with Dačić as Foreign Minister, a post he held between 2014 and 2020. Vulin became head of BIA (*Bezbedonosno-informativna agencija)*, the national intelligence agency. These appointments suggest that Vučić and his ruling SNS did not attempt to put greater distance between themselves and Putin after the beginning of the war. Similarly, the Serbian tabloids retained an overall strongly pro-Russian line, including the claim by the tabloid *Informer* on 22 February 2022 that Ukraine had attacked Russia. Again, this does not translate into unconditional support for Russian policies. Sometimes, Ukrainian suffering did become news and Russian army was termed an occupier (Ivković 2022). Furthermore, statements by Putin which sought to create an analogy between Kosovo and the two "people's republics in Ukraine' caused a backlash, with suggestions that Putin was stabbing Serbia in the back (European Western Balkans 2022). Such claims were curious, as Putin has been arguing since Kosovo's independence that it would serve as a precedent for other breakaway territories, signalling a potential quid pro quo with the West that if it were to recognise territories de-facto annexed by Russia like Abkhazia, Ossetia, or Crimea, that he would be willing to recognise Kosovo

(Bieber 2022). Yet, despite the brief outrage, this criticism did not translate into a sustained distancing. Overall, the main media narratives maintain prime responsibility with the West, in particular NATO and Ukraine. However, the government has been careful not to endorse Russian positions outright. Instead, the main arguments of Serbian authorities have focused on protecting Serbian interests. Thus, focusing on neutrality and remaining outside of larger geopolitical struggles was the main message, which allowed the government to pander to pro-Russian public opinion without openly breaking with the EU and the west. In practice, it meant a continuation of the geopolitical ambivalence perfected by Vučić.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, the dominant figure in the Republika Srpska (RS) since 2005, has long been courting Putin to pursue his policy of gradually eroding the Bosnian state. For years, he has been visiting Moscow or Belgrade to get a chance to have his picture taken with Putin. In the past, Putin sometimes kept him waiting, signalling that he was too busy for Dodik, after all a second-rank leader, but Dodik's still helped to boost his anti-Western credentials. The Russian attack did not shift this affiliation and Dodik once more used his close Russian connections to campaign for Bosnian elections in October 2022. Much of this alliance is performative, just like the participation of the local chapters of the Russian "Night Wolves" (*Notschnije Volki*) in the annual parade to commemorate the founding of the Republika Srpska. This event has become an annual ritual of anti-Western defiance, as the holiday was deemed unconstitutional by the Bosnian Constitutional Court and thus its celebration has been beefed up to a militarised parade with police officers, special police units, other entity officials—down to the post office—marching in front of the leadership of the RS and foreign dignitaries, mostly from Serbia, Russia, and a few European far right politicians (Galijaš 2022). The real security threat posed by Russia is limited, yet it is useful to be played up by both the RS leadership to overstate the significance of one of its few foreign supporters and also by critics of the RS, as it frames the ethnonational claims by Dodik and the RS leadership in the larger geopolitical context.

Russian bogeyman

Russia has also been a useful bogeyman in the Balkans. Of course, Russia has been meddling in the region over the years, trying to prevent Montenegro and North Macedonia joining NATO, spreading pro-Russian propaganda, and otherwise attempting to throw a wrench in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Yet, Russia's role is often deliberately overstated. When barricades were put up by Serbs in northern Kosovo in late 2022 as part of an escalation between Serbia and Kosovo, formally triggered by Kosovo introducing uniform license plates throughout the country, some saw Russia's hand in the escalation. Kosovo's minister of interior Xhelal Svecla, for example, accused Serbia of escalating the tension while being 'under the influence of Russia' (Al Jazeera 2022). While Russia certainly supports Serbian claims to Kosovo, there is no tangible evidence that Russia has helped spiral the tensions in the Kosovo. Considering the strong influence of Serbia in the majority-Serb municipalities in northern Kosovo, including through informal power-structures, Serbia does not need Russia to seek confrontation. Similarly, elsewhere, including in Montenegro, the use of the Russian threat is a useful tool in the domestic political confrontation to discredit Serbian nationalist parties, who hold very public pro-Russian sympathies. Again, the Russian threat is mostly instrumentalised as tool to mobilise external support and legitimacy. In practice this is similar to the use of Russia by political actors in the region who seek political proximity to Russia to legitimise the policies. Thus, the conflict did not change positions towards Russia in the Western Balkans, but rather reinforced pre-existing alignments, which have primarily symbolic significance.

Declining Russian influence

The actual influence of Russia in the region has been declining. To begin with, its political and symbolic capital has been greater than its economic or military ability or engagement. The economic, political, and economic importance is consistently overestimated in Serbia, largely as a result of the strong promotion of Russia in media and speeches and statements by politicians of the ruling parties. Economically, the war has hurt Russian influence. For example, the Russian Sberbank had a significant presence in Bosnia, but was taken over by the entities' banking agencies in February 2022 once sanctions were imposed and quickly sold to two local banks, ASA in the Federation and Nova Banka in the

Republika Srpska (Petrushevska 2022). Otherwise, the sanctions and economic uncertainty reduce Russia's ability to increase its economic role in the region, other than in terms of energy supply. Here, its position has also become precarious. As Gazprom is the majority owner of the main oil company of Serbia, NIS (*Naftna industrija Srbije)*, Serbia has worried that sanctions might effect its operation and require either a sale or nationalisation, thus making Russian ownership seem like a burden (Dragaš 2022).

Russian propaganda is another source of concern for many observers. For years, it has set up Sputnik, a website and radio that presents new stories with a pro-Russian spin that are widely reproduced in Serbian and other regional media (Metodieva 2019). In November 2022, RT, the Russian propaganda channel also launched RT Balkans, a service based in Serbia, featuring prominent journalists, such as Ljiljana Smajlović, former editor in chief of the most prominent Serbian daily *Politika* or Muharem Bazdulj, a controversial Bosnian journalist. Thus, the efforts of Russia to shape the media narratives in Serbia intensified since the beginning of the war.

Despite these Russian efforts to shape the narrative in the region, they are hardly the main sources of propaganda. Serbian TV and newspapers have been pursuing a pro-Russian and pro-government line for a decade, independently of Russian disinformation (Radeljić 2020). Putin features regularly on the headlines of the main mud-racking government tabloid *Informer* and he is consistently portrayed as a staunch and loyal ally of Serbia. Not much changed to that image after February 2022. Even though the Serbian tabloids rarely copy Russian propaganda narratives of the war, the key messages focus on shifting the blame to NATO and promoting the narrative that Ukraine is to blame for the conflict as well as Putin's claim about the need to "denazify" Ukraine. While Sputnik provides content for the tabloids, they have been able to fill their stories without the input from Russian propaganda sources.

The war in Ukraine has thus overall had two regional effects. First, it reinforced rather than reconfigured the regional alignments against and for Russia. Second, it overall weakened the Russian presence in the Balkans, which had already by often overstated by both its supporters and its detractors. This is not to ignore the Russian presence in the region, yet, that influence tends to be exaggerated and somewhat decreased due to the war.

European shifts and regional implications

If the war has had an impact, it has rather been through the reconfiguration of the larger European geopolitical dynamics. In response to the Russian attack, the EU and the United States have sought to ensure the regional security to both prevent Russia creating a distraction in the region and to exclude Russia's ability to disrupt regional security arrangements. An important gesture was the reinforcement of the EUFOR Mission Althea in Bosnia, immediately after the beginning of the Russian attack, increasing the mission from 600 to 1,100 troops on the ground, signalling that any attempt to destabilise Bosnia would not be accepted (Shannon 2022). Furthermore, the mission was extended in the UN Security Council despite fears of a Russian veto. Russian support for the mandate was a surprise, but became likely once the US and the EU signalled that they would maintain a military presence even without a UN mandate, *de facto* further marginalising Russia (Kurtić 2022).

The second larger shift occurred with the expansion and reinforcement of the Euro-Atlantic integration in Europe. One aspect included the expansion of NATO through the membership application of Finland and Sweden. While not directly impacting the Balkans, it reduced the number of neutral countries in Europe and highlighted the desirability of NATO membership, leaving only Malta, Ireland, Austria, Serbia, and Switzerland as neutral countries in Europe. In addition, the EU membership application by Ukraine, followed by Moldova and Georgia and the granting of candidate status to the former two at the EU summit in Brussels in June 2022, also signal that EU enlargement and the European integration would not stop within the current framework. The quick progress of the two countries, even if mostly symbolic, stood in sharp contrast with the lack of progress experienced in the Western Balkans. It triggered greater political weight given to enlargement in the EU itself and some, all be it mostly symbolic movement in the region, such as granting candidate status for Bosnia in late 2022. The EU has, despite a demonstrable shift in terms of supplying weapons and assistance to Ukraine, not yet found a structural answer how to anchor the countries of the Western Balkans and the three applicants from the European neighbourhood credibly and swiftly in the Union. This should not undermine the main success, namely the ability to find a largely coherent and substantial level of support for Ukraine and a clear condemnation of Russian aggression, despite some Member States, in particular Hungary, attempting to sabotage these policies. While external actors, such as

Russia, remain relevant in the Western Balkans, their space decreased as a result of the war. Thus, the "Zeitenwende" in terms of a shift away from Russian influence and towards strengthening Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans has come more from outside the region than from within.

References

Al Jazeera. 'Kosovo minister sees Russian influence in growing Serbian tension'. *Al Jazeera,* 28 December 2022. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/28/kosovo-minister-sees-russian-influence-in-growing-serbian-tension.

Bieber, Florian. 'The Long Shadow of the 1999 Kosovo War'. *Comparative Southeast European Studies* vol. 70, no. 2 (2022): 181-188. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0025

Bieber, Florian. 'La Serbie, équilibriste entre Russie et Occident'. *Politique étrangère* no. 4 (2022): 41-49.

Demostat 2022. 'Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije'. Available at: https://demostat.rs/upload/Prezentacija%2029062022%20Demostat.pdf.

Dragaš, Orhan. 'Removing the Russian burden from Serbia's back'. *Euroactiv*, 28 December 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/removing-the-russian-burden-from-serbias-back/.

Europe Western Balkans. '"Putin stabbed a knife into Serbia's back": Tabloids turn against Russian President for the first time'. *Europe Western Balkans,* 28 April 2022. Available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/04/28/putin-stabbed-a-knife-into-serbias-back-tabloids-turn-against-russian-president-for-the-first-time/.

Galijaš, Armina. '"Putin empfing mich nach Mitternacht." Russische Soft Power in der Republika Srpska'. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* vol. 62, no. 5-6 (2022): 57-67.

Ivković, Aleksandar. 'Rooting for Russia, then blaming the West: Evolution of Serbian tabloids' reporting on the war in Ukraine'. *Europe Western Balkans*, 23 March 2022. Available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/03/23/rooting-for-russia-then-blaming-the-west-evolution-of-serbian-tabloids-reporting-on-the-war-in-ukraine/.

Kurtić, Azem. 'UN Extends EU Peacekeeping Force's Mandate in Bosnia'. *Balkan Insight*, 3 November 2022. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/03/un-extends-eu-peacekeeping-forces-mandate-in-bosnia/.

Metodieva, Asya. 'Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans'. *German Marshall Fund Policy Paper* no. 16 (June 2019).

Petrushevska, Dragana. 'Bosnia's *Nova Banka* finalises acquisition of Sberbank Banja Luka'. *SEENews*, 11 May 2022. Available at: https://seenews.com/news/bosnias-nova-banka-finalises-acquisition-of-sberbank-banja-luka-784166.

Radeljić, Branislav. 'In Favour of Censorship and Propaganda: Elites, Media Capture and the Journalistic Profession in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* vol. 28, no. 2-3 (2020): 155-173.

Shannon, Seamus. 'EUFOR Reserve Activation 2022'. *EUFOR*, 24 February 2022. Available at: https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/latest-news/2951-eufor-reserve-activation-2022.

Back on Track? The Impact of War in Ukraine on EU Integration of the Western Balkans

Matteo Bonomi*

The return of war to Europe and the ensuing offer of European Union (EU) candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (and potentially Georgia) represent dramatic turning points of recent European history, which have upset consolidated expectations on the future of Europe. In particular, one can observe an almost complete revolution in the prospects for EU relations with third countries in its immediate surroundings, including far-reaching consequences for the Western Balkans.

Indeed, Brexit together with rising Euroscepticism and perduring of the so-called "enlargement fatigue" had stimulated, in recent years, the search for manifold modes of differentiated integration and cooperation to accommodate the EU's variegated relations with third countries. Today, as a direct consequence of the war, Europeans are confronted with a completely new reality. In this new world – which appears dominated by the basic political dichotomy between friends and foes – a much smaller space seems to be left for ambiguous stances in the EU relations with countries in its proximity (and vice versa). In particular, war has triggered strong demands across Europe for de-differentiation in the EU's external dimension and has provided a new impetus to the EU's enlargement policy. As a result, EU enlargement as a formal process of accession to the Union as a full member, seems to be back on track.

* Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

Against this background, the central issue for the Western Balkans is, however, not simply to establish for how long this momentum could last, but whether EU enlargement as a formal process of accession to the Union could remain on track beyond the current exceptional conditions. The crucial question here is about what kind of an enlargement policy might come out of war and which characteristics it ought to have in order to overcome the significant shortcomings that emerged in the EU accession of the Western Balkans; a region that has been on the path from post-conflict reconstruction to EU membership for more than 20 years already.

Off-track: EU integration of the Western Balkans

There is a widespread misperception that associates the continuous stalemates in the formal process of EU enlargement to an effective suspension of the Western Balkans' integration into the EU. Indeed, after the successful closure of accession negotiations with Croatia in 2011 (formally a member since 2013), the EU enlargement process went into crisis due to scepticism towards the entry of new members in some European capitals. This situation was certified by the keynote speech at the European Parliament of the then new president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, who – according to many observers – seemed to have suspended the enlargement process in 2014 (Juncker 2014). Yet, this has not stopped the process of integration between the EU and the Western Balkans; in its substance, this process has continued beyond the formal track of EU accession.

Indeed, if we look at the Western Balkans today, they appear much more integrated with the EU than ten years ago. This applies to all sectors of their economies – goods, services, investments and people – but it goes far beyond the integration of markets. After more than a decade of multiple crises involving the entire European continent, the Western Balkans and the EU appear strongly linked not only economically but also in the coordination of those policies that have guided the European responses to the crises of these years. The response to the global financial and economic crisis (2007-13) saw a joint adjustment of fiscal policies and public finances in the name of austerity and the reconquest of external competitiveness, then being followed by joint investment plans (the so-called "Connectivity Agenda" for the Western Balkans). The response to

the crisis of migration governance (2015-16) led to strong coordination among interior ministries and accelerated the integration of the Balkan countries into the EU's security agencies, such as Frontex and Europol. The response to the health crisis (2020-ongoing), after some initial hesitation and delays in the distribution of vaccines and medical equipment, has led to the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the European response to the pandemic.

Today, the EU-Western Balkan cooperation is put to a test once again by the current energy crisis related to Russia's war in Ukraine, which risks to further delay the implementation of the new-born Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (Regional Cooperation Council 2020). Although Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are largely dependent on Russia for natural gas (and Belgrade even recently renewed its gas supply contracts with Moscow), this represents only a small part of their energy mix. Rather, the crisis is affecting the region through rising prices for electricity imports and risks. On the one hand, these jeopardise the adequacy of domestic energy supply and, on the other hand, aggravate the already precarious situation regarding the environment of these countries, pushing them even further towards the use of coal-fired power plants (almost all countries derive a large part of their energy needs from such plants to this date). Defusing this complex situation and reconciling the current price increase, energy security and environmental protection is thinkable and feasible only through an even stronger and more coordinated action by the governments of the region and the EU. Promoting energy efficiency and accelerating the green transition will require, in the coming years, to move towards an even greater integration of energy networks and strengthening the coordination of integrated policies for all Southeaster Europe.

In other words, what one can observe is how, during recent years, the loss of immediate prospects of membership has been matched by a substantial reorientation of EU enlargement policy towards a less teleological framework which, instead of aiming at full Union membership, is more open and pragmatic, aimed at fostering cooperation in many key areas. Building on the pre-accession framework and through new governance practices that are often informal and predominantly intergovernmental, the EU has developed models of differentiated external cooperation aimed at transferring its practices and policies to candidate countries and potential candidates for accession to the EU.

"New intergovernmentalism" reaches EU enlargement policy

Today EU enlargement policy appears populated by variegated practices of external cooperation, which present an exceptional, probably unique, degree of intensity, and these take place in an unprecedented number of policy areas. These are examples of EU external cooperation, often informal and differentiated, built on the formal framework of the EU's enlargement policy and aimed at involving the Western Balkan countries in the management of most EU policies, which go well beyond market integration and touch upon more crucial aspects of national sovereignty.

However, this type of integration is taking place in a very different way from what we read in textbooks on the history of European integration. We can notice at least three differences. This type of integration is not taking place through laws and a common legal order (the so-called "integration through law"), but predominantly through forms of coordination of national policies and intergovernmental cooperation, whereas the adoption (and implementation) of the EU acquis has proceeded extremely slowly. Furthermore, it has not had a teleological focus towards accession to the EU (and on the urgency of fulfilling the Copenhagen accession criteria), but has been driven primarily by a pragmatic spirit and aimed at the need to find immediate answers to the challenges posed by interdependence. Finally, coordination took place above all in those areas affected by the crises of recent years; therefore in areas that are not traditionally associated with EU integration, such as security and the use of coercive force, public finance and public administration (the so-called "core state powers").

Furthermore, one should notice that this type of phenomenon is not unique to the Balkans, but has also been observed within the EU, where it has been described by some political scientists as 'integration without supranationalisation' (Fabbrini & Puetter 2016). It is a new intergovernmental form of integration (according to the dictates of the so-called "new intergovernmentalism") that has characterised the EU internal responses to the crises of recent years, born from the failure to meet the (functional) demand for greater integration, triggered by the crises, and the scarcity of the political offer for it. The crisis management methods that have ensued have therefore seen the predominance of national political executives who have made it possible to save the most important results of integration (such as the freedom of movement of people

or the single currency), while nonetheless demonstrating at least three important limitations of the process. Above all, these crisis management methods have proven to be inefficient, giving rise to suboptimal responses, such as in the management of the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone. They have also shown that they lack accountability, being policies decided behind closed doors by the heads of states and governments. Finally, they have triggered a crisis of democratic legitimacy in the Union, having been perceived by large segments of the European populations as forms of domination of one nation over another.

All these limits of an integration through policy coordination not only persist in the EU external dimension, but appear to be particularly aggravated in this context. Indeed, this type of integration with the Western Balkans has proved to be inefficient, as it has not stimulated an adequate distribution of resources and therefore a process of economic convergence (Bonomi & Reljić 2017; Bartlett, Bonomi, & Uvalić 2022). It has failed to foster accountability, reinforcing the role and powers of national executive vis-à-vis all other domestic actors (Richter & Wunsch 2020) – something particularly problematic in the context of fragile democracies in search of consolidation such as the Balkan ones. And finally, it has proved to be illegitimate to the extent that it has placed the countries of the region on a level of inequality with respect to neighbouring countries already belonging to the Union. This has favoured, on the one hand, the interference of third parties in the affairs of the region, well-illustrated by the case of Chinese mask diplomacy (Schmidt & Džihić 2021). On the other hand, it has allowed for abusees of the European framework by the Member States themselves, apparent in the more frequent imposition of arbitrary preferences on the candidate countries. The latest example of this was Bulgaria's refusal to approve the adoption of an EU negotiating framework for North Macedonia on grounds of different interpretation of the origins of the Macedonian language and questions about shared history.

Back on track?

Against this backdrop, the opening of an accession perspective for the "Associated Trio represents good news for the Western Balkans as well, since it testifies not simply a new momentum for EU enlargement but the fact that enlargement policy might be back on track as a formal process of accession to the EU. It is not a coincidence that the offer of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 has been followed by the opening of accession nego-

tiations with Albania and North Macedonia and the unanimous decision by the EU leaders to grant EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina on 15 December 2022. In one year of war, the European Council has affirmatively replied to third countries' demands for integration, and has supplied the EU's enlargement policy with positive decisions in a way that is unprecedented in the recent history. And yet, these exceptional conditions cannot be expected to last indefinitely, and the question of how to make this new process of accession work in the long run still remains open.

In this respect, the recent experience of EU integration of the Western Balkans offers both a warning and a guide for action. Indeed, the recent years' experiments in EU external differentiation with the Western Balkans, with its achievements and clear limits, can be precious for designing a more effective, sustainable and legitimate enlargement process. In particular, if properly devised, forms of external differentiation could be key tools of a reformed enlargement policy as far as they could guide this process of external de-differentiation rather than offering alternatives to accession.

To this end, it seems pivotal to correct some of the shortcomings of the current enlargement policy toward the Western Balkans and offer candidate countries several elements even before formal accession. These include: (1) provision of enough resources to strengthen economic convergence, for instance through the gradual access to EU structural funds; (2) bring them closer to EU decision-making structures and institutions early on, in order to strengthen their institutional participation and their citizens' involvement; and (3) find ways to raise peer pressure among EU Member States to keep everyone in line, eventually even considering the possibility to reform the decision making rules, in order to limit the possibilities for vetoes and abuses of the enlargement process through bilateral issues or other domestic problems.

References

Bartlett, Will, Matteo Bonomi, & Milica Uvalić. 'Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans: Assessing the possible economic, social and environmental impact of the proposed flagship projects'. *Study requested by the AFET committee*, European Parliament, May 2022. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2022)702561.

Bonomi, Matteo, & Dušan Reljić. 'The EU and the Western Balkans: So Near and Yet So Far. Why the Region Needs Fast-Track Socio-Economic Convergence with the EU'. *SWP Comment* 2017/C 53, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-so-near-and-yet-so-far/.

Fabbrini, Sergio, & Uwe Puetter. 'Integration without Supranationalisation: Studying the Lead Roles of the European Council and the Council in Post-Lisbon EU politics'. *Journal of European Integration* vol. 38, no. 5 (2016): 481-495. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07036337.2016.1178254.

Juncker, Jean-Claude. 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission'. *Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session*, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014, p.11. Available at: https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/d/political%20guidelines%20-%20juncker%20commission.pdf.

Regional Cooperation Council. *Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans*, 10 November 2020. Availablet at: https://www.rcc.int/docs/546/sofia-declaration-.

Richter, Solveig, & Wunsch, Natasha. 'Money, Power, Glory: the Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 27, no. 1 (2020): 41-62. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2019.1578815.

Schmidt, Paul, & Vedran Džihić. 'Vaccine Diplomacy and Enlargement Fatigue: Why the EU Must Rethink Its Approach to the Western Balkans'. *EUROPP (blog)*, 28 April 2021. Available at: https://wp.me/p2MmSR-dvO.

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

Davide Denti*

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine deeply shook the security structure and the geopolitical realities of Europe. Yet, this critical juncture also led to a "Thessaloniki moment" for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, creating the conditions for them move from neighbourhood to enlargement, and expand-

* EU Commission, DG NEAR. The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of the author and cannot in any way be attributed to the European Union institutions.

ing the geographical scope of the latter EU policy. In the Western Balkans, Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a net loss of bargaining power of local elites towards EU and Western actors, but this did not lead to a full alignment with EU foreign policy. The present situation carries the risk to further divide the Western Balkans region along ideological/geopolitical lines, but also has the potential to call the bluff of those ruling elites who claim to wish to join the EU without then acting accordingly. Finally, as a new "big project" of European integration, providing the EU with a common sense of purpose, the challenge of supporting Ukraine's victory and EU accession has the potential to trigger a reform of the EU treaties that may also benefit the accession perspective of the Western Balkans.

A critical juncture

Since Lipset and Rokkan (1967), the notion of "critical juncture" has been used to highlight the long-term effects of large and rapid changes. Putin's decision to wage war on Ukraine qualifies as a critical juncture, throwing Europe in a different geopolitical reality, with the return to a large-scale conventional war between two major European states.

Unlike in case of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution in the early 1990s, when the EU and its foreign policy were just established, this time the EU reacted to crisis quickly and cohesively. It provided a multi-dimensional support to Ukraine (financial, military, political, diplomatic, energy, trade) on a scale never seen before. Most importantly, this aid is now being couched in terms of EU pre-accession, as the geopolitical change created the change for neighbourhood countries to cross the *passerelle* towards enlargement policy.

A "Thessaloniki moment" for the Eastern trio

Barely days after the invasion, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia applied for EU membership, expressing a clear political choice. Their choice was reciprocated by the 27 EU Member States. This had not been the case in the past, when EU Member States had been reluctant to go any step beyond 'acknowledg[ing] the European aspirations and European choice' of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, as stated at the 2011 Warsaw summit of the Eastern Partner-

ship. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia had repeatedly been disappointed in their appeals for a more forthcoming language on potential future EU accession at the 2013 summit in Vilnius, and at the 2015 one in Riga after Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Donbas. In 2022, the new geopolitical reality had created the conditions for such a step to be possible, leading the Versailles summit to be a veritable "Thessaloniki moment" for the Eastern trio.

Following a request by the Council, the Commission accelerated its procedures and, within three months, presented its Opinions on the three membership applications, which the European Council of June 2022 endorsed by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and setting conditions for Georgia to achieve the same. As a result, enlargement policy expanded its scope to three more countries and a new geopolitical region.

After over a decade, the debate on the porosity between enlargement policy and neighbourhood policy could thus find a solution: it would indeed be possible for associated neighbour to cross the *passerelle* and become potential candidate countries, in line with what was envisaged by Commission president Romano Prodi at the very start of the discussion on neighbourhood policy: 'We have to be prepared to offer more than partnership and less than membership, without precluding the latter' (Prodi 2002). Thanks to the progressive association to the EU via the Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA), the EU's neighbourhood policy could prove it is not just a waiting room but also a training ground for pre-accession for those European states, neighbours of the EU, whose European perspective had remained implicit so far (Denti 2010). The future of the Eastern Partnership will also need to be re-evaluated, given the diverging paths of each partner country, likely with a stronger differentiation and focus on tailored bilateral relations with the EU, although a regional framework is likely to persist in parallel to the EU accession process.

A new "big project" for Europe

The EU's response to Russia's invasion was spearheaded by those central and eastern Member States often in the crosshairs in Brussels (like Poland) or whose foreign policy is often deemed ideologically anti-Russian (like the Baltics). As had been the case in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the previous two years, this provided a common sense of purpose to a Union which had

found itself engulfed in over 15 years of continued poly-crisis, with the constitutional crisis following the 2005 referendums in France and Netherlands, the eurozone crisis, the rule-of-law crisis in Poland and Hungary, and the reception crisis when faced with refugees from Syria.

The EU response to Russia's invasion, including Ukraine's membership perspective, can be understood as a new "big project" of European integration. Previous such projects catalysed efforts and reforms and led to deeper and wider integration of the continent: the Single Market (Maastricht 1992), Schengen (1995), the monetary union (2002) and the eastern enlargement (2004/2007). This time, the challenge entails literally winning a war, supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy, and extending the EU's legal order to the eastern third of the continent. Not by chance, this challenge is being addressed within the realm of EU enlargement policy.

The long enlargement process to the Western Balkans

Twenty years since the 2003 Thessaloniki declaration, only Croatia has joined the Union. Internal and external factors are behind the deceleration of enlargement. In EU Member States, the end of the 'permissive consensus' and the toxic conflation of enlargement with immigration led to a 'creeping nationalisation' of the process (Hillion 2010), with a growing chance of bilateral vetoes. In the Western Balkans, the entrenched elites which rule thanks to patronage and clientelism had little to gain from the sweeping reforms required for EU integration: '*La conditionnalité n'est rien sans la volonté politique de celui qui l'accepte*' ['Conditionality is nothing without the political will of those who accept it'] (Mirel 2022, 13).

Transnational linkages via European party groups between EU and local elites led the former to be seen as privileging "stabilitocracy" (Pavlović 2017; Bieber 2018) over democratisation, while sheltering democratic backsliding (Richter & Wunsch 2020). This perception was only partly mitigated by a stronger technical emphasis by the Commission on the "fundamentals" of EU accession, including by frontloading negotiations on chapters 23 and 24 on justice and home affairs.

As a consequence, in the past decade the Western Balkans increasingly turned into a competitive arena in which the EU – instead of being "the

only game in town" – has to vie for influence and visibility with other powers (Russia, China, but also Gulf countries, the United States, and even the post-brexit United Kingdom), which local elites are keen on playing off against each other to diversify and maximise support, as seen in the early months of the pandemic.

A new geopolitics for the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans, Russia's main interest continues to be to maintain leverage by impeding the resolution of bilateral disputes, and to sabotage the region's accession to NATO (Ruge 2022) and slow down its EU accession. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU immediately extended its full support to the Western Balkans – e.g., via an energy support package worth one billion euro, adopted already in late 2022. As earlier, local elites approached the EU to extract advantages by leveraging their diplomatic support. Yet, this time the issue at stake was different, and EU's expectations too. For the Western Balkan political elites, Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a net loss of bargaining power towards the EU, by making any alternative relation with Russia politically toxic. North Macedonia and Kosovo swiftly raised their foreign policy alignment to 100 per cent, joining Albania and Montenegro, also facilitated by their NATO membership or aspirations. Full alignment confirmed to EU Member States that these countries share the same values and geopolitical orientation, strengthening their EU accession bid.

Serbia, a negotiating country, refused so far to join sanctions against Russia, ostensibly with the aim to preserve Russian goodwill on Kosovo at the UN. This raised frustrations and impatience among Member States and influential MEPs (EP 2022). Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia also flared up around seemingly banal issues like numberplates. In September, Serbia signed a biannual plan of political consultations with Russia which sent a 'completely opposite message' to the EU expectations that Serbia stands 'in defence of European values and international law', as stated by the EU Ambassador in Belgrade (RFE/RL 2022).

While Bosnia and Herzegovina did align with EU statements and restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus, certain ministries hindered the enforcement of sanctions. The Bosnian Serb leader Dodik visited Russia twice over

summer to meet with President Putin and foreign minister Lavrov. During the unconstitutional celebration of the "Day of Republika Srpska" on 9 January 2023, Dodik awarded Putin with the highest medal of honour of the entity, a decision that the Commission spokesperson condemned as "deplorable" and "misguided" (Stano 2023).

Serbia's and the Bosnian Serb ruling elite seem not to have realised the critical juncture and long-term legacy of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They seem to believe that they can yet again sit out, resist and renegotiate the EU requests. Yet, Member States increasingly expect full alignment with EU foreign policy as a concrete sign of the unequivocal European choice of the candidate countries. For instance, in 2022, the EU Council did not agree to open Cluster Three with Serbia, despite the Commission's recommendation the previous year (EWB 2022). Several Member States have called for foreign policy alignment to be emphasised and for it to also determine the pace of EU accession, although this is not formally included in the negotiating frameworks. Such a political condition would make it harder for Serbia and the Bosnian Serb leadership to maintain their warm relations with Russia, which are deemed unacceptable while the war rages on, without risking a backslash on their EU path.

A more competitive enlargement regatta

The arrival of three more countries in the process, as well as the long-awaited start of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, also created an increasingly competitive dynamic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, fears of having been left behind after the March European Council were mitigated by the status of candidate country granted in December, which Russia denounced as part of 'a task of the total geopolitical conquering of the region' (Reuters 2022). The same month, Kosovo also formally applied for EU membership – the last of the "Western Balkans Six" to do so, and despite the ongoing non-recognition by five Member States.

From 2023, the Commission's enlargement package includes ten countries, which have applied for EU membership; of those, four are already negotiating. While their accession negotiations have only started, Albania and North Macedonia have already advanced in aligning with the *acquis* over the past decade. This has been highlighted in the annual Commission reports and may help them to proceed faster in the accession talks. Likewise, for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the implementation of the DCFTA has supported im-

portant sectoral regulatory convergence in the past decade, which may facilitate further alignment (Cenusa 2022). It remains to be seen which boat will prove the fastest in the new enlargement "regatta".

Towards treaty reforms for a new Union

Once the war ends and reconstruction starts, European integration is likely to remain the polar star of Ukraine's governments, as a vision of a modern and prosperous future, as had been the case in the past thirty years (see also Denti 2022). After obtaining the status of candidate country in 2022, the goal will be the opening of accession negotiations.

It is impossible to say today when Ukraine will join the EU. The unknowns include not only the war events, but also future domestic developments in democracy and the rule of law, and progress in sectoral reforms. It is plausible to think that, with a strong political will and strong public support, Ukraine will not risk seeing negotiations slow down and stall.

It will also be important to follow closely the EU's internal reform process. As France has often stressed, future accessions will have to go hand in hand with internal reforms to ensure effective governance in a Union of 30 or more member countries – the EU's "absorption capacity". This was echoed in August by the German chancellor in Prague, when he stated that 'even the European Treaties aren't set in stone' (Scholz 2022).

The clear prospect of a future accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, along with the Western Balkans, has the potential to trigger an internal reflection on European governance leading to a reform of the EU treaties, over 15 years after Lisbon. This has already been the case in the past: the prospect of eastward enlargement prompted the treaty reforms of Amsterdam 1999, Nice 2001 and Lisbon 2007. And it will once more illustrate that enlargement is not an alternative to deepening the European construction, but rather that it is its necessary counterpart, like the two wheels of a bike.

If Member States' governments respond with foresight, the European Union that Ukraine and the Western Balkans will join will be a more functional one, with fewer vetoes and more competences; a Union better able to act both internally and internationally. It will be a new Union in which today's candidate countries will undoubtedly have every right to claim their place at the table, in sovereign equality.

References

Bieber, Florian. 'Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans'. *East European Politics* vol. 34, no. 3 (2018): 337–354.

Cenusa, Denis. *The EU membership for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia: Enlargement from the Western Balkans to the Eastern Partnership*. Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC), August 2022. Available at: https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/v04_EU-candidacy-Trio_Policy-paper_EN_A4-su-foto.pdf.

Denti, Davide. 'Dans quelle mesure peut-on considérer que la Politique Européenne de Voisinage est une alternative à l'adhésion?' Essai sur la Politique de voisinage, 2010–2011. Natolin/Bruges: College d'Europe. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/815515/Dans_quelle_mesure__peut_on_consid%C3%A9rer_que_la_Politique_Europ%C3%A9enne_de_Voisinage_est_une_alternative_%C3%A0_l_adh%C3%A9sion.

Denti, Davide. 'Verso l'Europa? Il percorso di avvicinamento all'UE'. In *Ucraina, alle radici della guerra*, edited by Matteo Zola, 178–188. Roma: Paesi, 2022.

EU Council. Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw, 29-30 September 2011, 14983/11. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31798/2011_eap_warsaw_summit___declaration_en.pdf.

European Council. Conclusions of the meeting of 23 and 24 June 2022. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf.

European Parliament (EP). 'Serbia: Leading MEPs Regret Serbia's Non-Alignment with EU Sanctions against Russia'. Press release, 1 March 2022. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/ serbia-leading-meps-regret-serbia-s-non-/product-details/20220301DPU32283.

European Western Balkans (EWB). 'Slim Chances for Serbia's Progress towards the EU by Year's End, Relationship with Russia the Biggest Problem'. 26 September 2022. Available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/09/26/slim-chance-for-serbias-progress-towards-the-eu-by-the-end-of-the-year-relationship-with-russia-remains-the-biggest-problem/.

Hillion, Christophe. *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy*. Stockholm: Svenska institutet för europapolitiska studier (SIEPS), no. 6 (2010).

Lipset, Seymour M., & Stein Rokkan (eds.). *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives.* New York: Free Press, 1967.

Mirel, Pierre. 'Union européenne – Balkans occidentaux : les illusions perdues?' *Politique étrangère* no. 4 (2022): 11–25.

Pavlović, Srđa. 'West is Best: How "Stabilitocracy" Undermines Democracy Building in the Balkans'. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*, 5 May 2017.

Prodi, Romano (President of the European Commission). 'A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability'. *Speech at the Sixth ECSA-World Conference on Peace, Security And Stability International Dialogue and the Role of the EU*. Brussels, 5-6 December 2002. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). 'EU, U.S. Expect Serbia To "Clarify" Its New Consultation Deal With Russia'. 26 September 2022. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-rssia-consultation-deal-eu-us-clarification/32052962.html.

Reuters. 'Russia Denounces EU for Granting Bosnia Candidacy Status'. 23 December 2022. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-denounces-eu-granting-bosnia-candidacy-status-2022-12-23/.

Richter, Solveig, & Natasha Wunsch. 'Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 27, no. 1 (2020).

Ruge, Majda. 'The Past and the Furious: How Russia's Revisionism Threatens Bosnia'. ECFR policy brief, 13 September 2022. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/.

Scholz, Olaf. 'Europe is Our Future'. Speech at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022. Available at: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/scholz-speech-prague-charles-university-2080752.

Stano, Peter. Foreign Affairs – Bosnia and Herzegovina: Q&A, Midday press briefing from 09 January 2023, *European Commission Audiovisual Service.* Available at: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-235764.

The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement

Antoaneta L. Dimitrova*

Has the Russian war against Ukraine re-shaped Balkan (geo-) politics?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the continuing war against Ukraine have profoundly affected politics in Europe and in the Balkans. After a year of war on the European continent, it becomes increasingly evident that the war creates conditions for a critical juncture,[1] whereby power relations on the continent, countries' interests and their understanding of geopolitical relations and security, individually and for the EU as a whole, are redefined by the war and the subsequent series of key decisions by European and world leaders. The scope of change initiated during this critical juncture is yet unclear, but with respect to EU enlargement, for example, we can identify the

* Leiden University, Institute of Security and Global Affairs and the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs.

1 The definition of a critical juncture, as Capoccia and Kelemen have helpfully clarified it, is a relatively short period in which the structural constraints on political action are significantly relaxed and the range of plausible choices for policy makers expands while the impact of these choices is momentous and long lasting (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007, 343).

Ukrainian (and Georgian and Moldovan) applications for membership and the granting of candidate status to Ukraine as critical decisions, setting the EU on a new path. The EU's decision, in late 2022, to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status, using a similar approach of attaching conditions to the decision, is the first observable step on this new path.

Understanding the last year as a year of momentous decisions taken under uncertainty and with contingent outcomes that shape the path for future decisions (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007) is also helpful to understand political dynamics in the Western Balkans that are characterised, on the one hand, by destabilisation and uncertainty and on the other, by steps towards clearer choices towards more European integration. In the following paragraphs, I will address briefly both trends.

Destabilisation

For the Western Balkans, the strong winds of geopolitical change have brought, in the first instance, further destabilisation and escalation, by exacerbating existing divisions and underlying tensions; for example, in domestic politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina or relations between Serbia and Kosovo (Mirel 2022). An illustrative example would be Serbia, arguably the most important player affecting stability in the Western Balkans. Despite being a candidate for accession to the EU, Serbia has developed close ties to Russia (and China), signing a free trade agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2019 (RFE Balkan Service 2019). Serbia has so far refused to join the sanctions that the EU and its allies imposed on Russia following the invasion. As a result, not only is Belgrade the only European capital accepting Aeroflot planes, but the number of Russian owned companies founded in Serbia in 2022 has exceeded 1,000, as reported by the Serbian Business Register agency (RFE Balkan Service 2023). At the same time, for Serbia, trade with Russia is still much less significant than trade with the EU, accounting for barely more than 3 per cent of Serbia's foreign trade, in contrast to the 30 per cent volume of trade with the EU (Savić & Dudik 2023).

In terms of geopolitics, Serbia has had strong support from Russia regarding its stance towards Kosovo and its refusal to recognise Kosovo. Russian political narratives have actively drawn parallels between the unresolved conflict over Kosovo with the situation in the Donbass, as Russia presented it. However, Russia's weakened position in the international arena because of the war and

the changing security landscape in Europe are arguably also weakening Serbia's position and creating an opening for a possible compromise with Kosovo (Jozwiak 2023).

At the same time, destabilisation has been most pronounced in Kosovo itself, leading to fears of further escalation and an open conflict with Serbia, mirroring the conflict between Russia and the EU. In 2022, following the decision by Kosovar authorities to change identity cards and car number plates, protests erupted in the northern part of Kosovo, leading to the erection of barricades and roadblocks by the Serb minority. Further protests erupted in January 2023, sparked by the arrest of a former Serbian police officer.

Similarly, long lasting internal tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been exacerbated by the war and the emergence of sharper dividing lines between Russia on the one hand and EU, US and western allies on the other. While instability has been an inherent feature of BiH's Dayton-based constitutional design, increased support from Russia for the leader of Respublika Srpska (RS) has contributed to further tensions. For example, in 2021, support from Russia empowered RS leader Milorad Dodik to refuse to acknowledge the appointment of the new High Representative in BiH. Yet, instability cannot be exclusively attributed to Russian support for Serbs, before or after the start of the war. Political actions that destabilise the federation and resist reforms to lessen the importance of ethnicity as an organising principle have also come from the Croat leader Dragan Čović, among others (Mirel 2022, 3). In other words, the emergence of sharper dividing lines between the EU (and other Western actors) and Russia is also affecting political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina's unstable environment in an unpredictable way that increases uncertainty in the short term.

Real choices are on the table

One year into Russia's war, Ukraine's heroic resistance, with support from Western allies, halted Russia's offensive. As European allies – EU Member States, the UK, and beyond Europe, the US stayed united and consolidated their position of support for Ukraine, this turn has also brought a shift in political calculations in Western Balkan capitals. The position of European states, such as Belarus and Serbia, aiming to maintain close economic and political links with both EU and Russia has come under pressure.

The most instructive example is Belarus, a member of both the Eurasian

Economic Union and the EU's Eastern Partnership that played a game of rapprochement with the EU for many years while being allied with Russia. Belarus' president Alyaksandr Lukashenka was forced to take further steps towards the so-called Union State with Russia already in 2021, after receiving Russian assistance to finance the violent suppression of protests following the stolen election in 2020 (RFE 2021). Despite Belarus' continued dependence on Russia for subsidised energy and for funding its large repressive apparatus, Belarus has so far resisted joining the war against Ukraine on Russia's side. The forced shift closer to Russia's side is, however, evident in multiple meetings, joint military exercises and the fact that Russian troops were able to invade Ukrainian territory from Belarus.

While Serbia's location and closer links with the EU do not put it under similar amount of pressure, the window of opportunity for its leadership to keep multiple alliances may be becoming smaller. The country's ambivalent stance that played with the idea of neutrality while aiming to benefit from EU and Russian economic support, not to mention Chinese investment, is becoming more difficult to sustain. Serbia's leadership is pushed – to make choices. In a statement that surprised many in January 2023, the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić stated that the Donbass and Crimea are Ukrainian. 'For us, Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine – and it will remain so', Vučić said in an interview for Bloomberg (Savić & Dudić 2023).

Despite the severity of tensions between Serbia and Kosovo in the last year, the interventions by EU (and US) officials to diffuse tensions and broker compromise can also be interpreted as somewhat successful. Further escalation of protests has been so far diffused, creating hopes of a Serbia - Kosovo deal, following a Franco-German blueprint for an agreement. Kosovo, in its turn, is also has experienced more pressure to reach compromise, given the generalised instability in the region. In a clear move for further rapprochement to the EU, Kosovo has officially handed in its EU membership application in 2022. This will likely take a long time to be assessed by the European Commission, in anticipation of a political deal with Serbia.

EU prospects for the region: fitting in the bigger picture

One important effect of the geopolitical earthquake that Russia's war has triggered is the shift of EU priorities in terms of enlargement. Ukraine's application for EU membership and the decision of the European Council in June 2022 to grant the country candidate status mark the start of a period of considerable changes to the EU's enlargement policy. To start with, the acceptance of Ukraine's candidate status by the European Council in June 2022 has led to fears – in the Western Balkans and in some EU Member States such as Austria - that Ukraine would "jump the queue" of current candidates. The EU has to be seen to treat all enlargement candidates equally.

Recognising the potential for the EU's enlargement policy to take a different path, however, means that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's applications and the geopolitical context in which they were submitted have the potential to break open the EU's approach to enlargement. It has been no secret that the EU's enlargement policy has not delivered on its promises, despite the decision, already 20 years ago, to give Western Balkan countries a European perspective (Mirel 2022). The EU will be forced to innovate, as it has done before in its relations with Ukraine (Dimitrova & Dragneva 2022).

Enlargement policy as it has worked up to now, or maybe we should say, how it has not worked, cannot continue unchanged. Implicitly, the EU had put enlargement on a slow track already a decade ago, following Croatia's accession. Negative public opinion provided no incentives for political leaders in the EU to take a pro-active role in enlargement negotiations with Western Balkan candidates (Börzel, Dimitrova, & Schimmelfennig. 2017). Disappointing progress in the opened negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, mirrored deadlock in reform areas relevant for the EU such as rule of law or media freedom.

Several upgrades in the EU enlargement strategy, prioritised reform of the fundamentals of governance in the candidate states but did not manage to overcome democratic backsliding or economic stagnation (Dimitrova 2016; Dimitrova & Kortenska 2016). Strengthened conditionality, for example in the form of opening and closing benchmarks, left candidates feeling that they were subjected to more stringent conditions than previously used. It did not fundamentally change the domestic political dynamics in Serbia, Montenegro, or Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reasons for the ineffectiveness of conditionality and enlargement policy are complex and puzzling, given the huge role the EU

plays as a trade partner for all countries in the region. Among them, analysts have identified the EU's emphasis on stability – "EU stabilitocracy" has not conveyed the message that integration will progress only when real reforms have taken place (BiEPAG 2017). Domestically, given the central role that rent-seeking, authoritarian elites play in political systems in the region, there has been little interest in engaging in reforms that would constrain rent-seeking and strengthen checks and balances (Dimitrova 2016). Finally, "the spectacular rise" of China's economic profile in the region has offered an alternative source of investment with no conditionality attached in Serbia and somewhat less successfully, in Montenegro (Mirel 2022, 2).

In North Macedonia, where reform coalitions have come to power through free and fair elections, the process of accession ran into problems with EU member state veto. Both North Macedonia and Albania have been making substantial progress in reforms despite serious challenges. Albania, despite being disappointed by a Dutch veto on its start of negotiations in 2019, has made serious steps in reforming its judiciary, under the leadership of prime minister Edi Rama.

North Macedonia has been ready to start negotiations with the EU for a decade. After a decade of being blocked by Greece it seemed that the EU played a positive role in the successful resolution of the name dispute in the Prespa agreement (Bechev 2022). French and Dutch objections to the start of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, however, were followed by a surprise Bulgarian veto in the autumn of 2020. The move by the Borisov government to prevent in European Council in October 2020 from taking a decision to start negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania was met with indignation by most EU Member States and seen as evidence that the enlargement process had lost credibility and objectivity.

Russian political influence – overt and covert – has played some role in exacerbating more recent tensions linked to the Bulgarian veto, maintained despite EU and US pressure to open the way to the EU for North Macedonia and Albania. The Borissov government's decision to veto was a surprise negative turn after being strongest proponent of Western Balkan enlargement for some years. Subsequently, following a change of government, Bulgaria quickly lost its short-lived pro-reform government. Relations with North Macedonia were used to inflame political tensions and promises by the former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov to lift the veto on North Macedonia's were the ostensible reason

why a coalition member withdrew its support for the Petkov government.[2] Pro-Russian parties and various political actors combined forces to bring the Petkov government down. Besides highlighting, again, the deficiency of unanimity-based decision making in enlargement, the much-criticised Bulgarian veto shows that Russian influence – via media, politicians or influence campaigns – destabilises both candidate and EU Member States in the Balkans.

The EU enlargement process still presents multiple opportunities for Member States to externalise their bilateral issues to the Union level. Geopolitical shifts, however, are affecting the Union's understanding of how long it can afford to keep countries in its waiting room. The European Council's decision, in December 2022 to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status, suggests that geopolitical and political considerations are gaining more weight in the logic of EU enlargement decision making, as opposed to the conditionality driven approach emphasising reforms.

It is also likely that Ukraine's proactive campaign and reforms and the EU's determination to treat all candidates equally, will provide a new impulse to negotiations with all Western Balkans candidates. As argued by Olha Stefanyshina, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration in December 2022, Ukraine adopted all relevant laws and had shown that it can engage in reforms even in times of war (Brzozowski 2022). The EU institutions have struggled with the Ukrainian request, but ultimately agreed to an early preliminary assessment of progress in the spring of 2023. In a potential optimistic scenario, the Ukrainian push may start a competition to book progress in reforms, a race to the top with Western Balkan candidates, also given the pressure to make geopolitical choices, discussed above.

In terms of EU decision making, we see some opening for enlargement policy also given evidence that Member States sceptical of enlargement may be shifting positions. In the Netherlands, for example, a recent study combining polls and elite interviews found that while enlargement remains of low salience for the Dutch public, shifts towards a more positive position to enlargement are prompted by the war in Ukraine (BiEPAG 2022, 2).

Such shifts will not entirely remove existing constraints and especially the need for all candidates to make significant steps improving judicial independence and rule of law. Proceeding with enlargement within the constraints of the policy imposed by politicisation and rule of law problems inside the Union

2 Ultimately, having lost the chance to re-start reforms, Petkov still managed to win a vote in the Bulgarian parliament to lift the veto on North Macedonia's start of negotiations (Dimitrova 2022).

itself, will continue to present challenges for the EU in many ways. First and foremost, getting more serious about potentially admitting new Member States, especially large ones such as Ukraine, will reopen the debate on EU institutional reform and reform of unanimity decision making in foreign policy, taxation, and enlargement.

In conclusion, it is evident that the continuation of Russia's destructive war is pushing the Union towards a more political and geopolitical position towards enlargement. The joint up approach to security and foreign policy which the EU has tried to flesh out since the Global Strategy of 2016 and the Strategic Compass of 2022 requires that the EU integrate its enlargement tools to strengthen security in an unstable geopolitical context. Countering Russia's interference and use of regional conflicts and unresolved issues in the Balkans, or further east, in Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh, requires bold and forward-looking responses from the EU. Candidate countries, in their turn, may be driven to match Ukraine's pace of reform. Despite continuing uncertainty and the contingent character of key decisions, characterising a period of critical juncture, a potential path to faster enlargement of the EU may be starting to emerge.

References

Bechev, Dimitar. 'The EU and Dispute Settlement: The Case of the Macedonian Name Issue'. *East European Politics and Societies*, (2022). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254221101905.

Börzel, Tanja A., Antoaneta Dimitrova, & Frank Schimmelfennig. 'European Union Enlargement and Integration Capacity: Concepts, Findings, and Policy Implications'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 24, no. 2 (2017): 157-176.

Brzozowski, Aleksander. 'Ukraine Rushing to Show Progress on EU-Bound Reforms'. Euractiv, 21 December 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/ukraine-rushing-to-show-progress-on-eu-bound-reforms/?utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=9721&pnespid=6rI5VTlaOKVKw6bGtizqTsOFtku0Up5vNLDhwvI1pUVm7AzdhTNtfegtLRShPdrnOtMwkh3l_Q.

Capoccia, Giovanni, & R. Daniel Kelemen. 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism'. *World politics* vol. 59, no. 3 (2007): 341-369.

Dimitrova, Antoaneta L. 'The EU's Evolving Enlargement Strategies: Does Tougher Conditionality Open the Door for Further Enlargement?' Maxcap working paper, no. 25, July 2016. Available at: http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/kfgeu/maxcap/system/files/maxcap_wp_30.pdf.

Dimitrova, Antoaneta L. 'Battered by Geopolitical Winds, Bulgaria Struggles to Restart Much Needed Reforms'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* vol. 60 (2022): 88-100.

Dimitrova, Antoaneta L., & Elitsa Kortenska 'Enlargement as Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans: Has it reached its limits?' In *Fit for the future: Reflections from Leiden on the Functioning of the EU*, edited by Bernard Steunenberg, Wim Voermans and Stefaan van den Bogaert, 265-290. The Hague: Eleven, 2016.

Dimitrova, Antoaneta L., & Rilka Dragneva. 'How the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement and its Consequences Necessitated Adaptation and Drove Innovation in the EU'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2022).

Jozwiak, Robert. 'Wider Europe Briefing: Will Kosovo And Serbia Finally Make A Deal? Plus, The Nitty-Gritty Of EU Enlargement'. Radio Free

Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 January 2023. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/wider-europe-briefing-jozwiak-kosovo-serbia-ukraine-moldova-georgia/32215076.html.

Mirel, Pierre. 'In Support of a New Approach with the Western Balkans: Staged Accession with a Consolidation Phase'. *Foundation Robert Schuman Policy Paper*: *European issues* no. 633, 24 May 2022. Available at: https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0633-in-support-of-a-new-approach-to-the-western-balkans-step-by-step-membership-with-a-consolidation.

RFE Balkan Service. 'Serbia Signs Trade Agreement with Russia-Led Eurasian Economic Union'. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 October 2019. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-to-ink-trade-agreement-with-russia-led-eurasian-economic-union/30235917.html.

RFE Balkan Service. 'Serbia Records Big Year For Foreign Direct Investment, Despite Ukraine War'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,* 11 January 2023. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-fdi-russia-ukraine-war/32218795.html.

RFE Belarus Service. 'Putin, Lukashenka Agree to 28 Union State Programmes'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,* 4 November 2021. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-lukashenka-union-state/31546225.html.

Savic, Misha, & Andrea Dudik. 'War in Ukraine Strains Ties Between Putin and his Old Serb Ally'. *Bloomberg News,* 18 January 2023. Available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-18/war-in-ukraine-strains-ties-between-putin-and-his-ally-Vučić-in-serbia.

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG). 'Strict, Fair and More Open Towards EU Enlargement: Dutch Public Opinion on EU Membership in the Western Balkans' Policy paper (November 2022). Available at: https://biepag.eu/publication/strict-fair-and-more-open-towards-eu-enlargement/.

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG). 'The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy'. Biepag Policy paper (March 2017). Available at https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-paper-the-crisis-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-authoritarianism-and-eu-stabilitocracy/.

The Ukraine War and the Western Balkans: Fault Lines Uncovered

Jelena Džankić*

The Russian aggression on Ukraine of 24 February 2022 has shifted the tectonic plates of politics, geopolitics, and security. "War has returned to Europe", but not only. Fear has returned to Europe: fear of violence, instability, fear of scarcity. The European Union (EU) deployed its enlargement policy as a geopolitical tool. It granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, and confirmed the "European perspective" of Georgia by listing it as a "potential candidate". A formal push has also been given to the accession of the Western Balkan states by means of the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in June 2022, and - most recently - by granting official candidacy to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December the same year. The Council of the EU (2022) has adopted a new approach to the region, complementing traditional enlargement with "phasing in" - or strategic alignment with specific policy areas. In principle, this approach is intended to compensate for the weak effects of the "conditionality" mechanism (Džankić, Keil, & Kmezić 2019), and provides forums for faster alignment with the acquis and institutional "socialisation" of aspiring members (e.g., observer status in the Council).

Despite these seemingly giant leaps forward, the reality of politics and geopolitics in the Western Balkans has not changed substantively. The "Zeitenwende" has at best reinforced three major fault lines. The first fault line are

* European University Institute.

the increasingly weak and contested institutions of governance in most of the region's countries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, the conflict in Ukraine has deepened several aspects of political polarisation; in the north of Kosovo, an administrative issue fuelled an ethno-political standoff. The second fault line are the political and economic dependencies, especially the one on Russia, which has become more pronounced and exploited since the onset of the conflict. The final one is the future of the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans, and the extent to which it rests on the uneven democratic terrain fertilised by domestic and foreign undemocratic forces. In the context of broader geopolitical instability, a combination of these fault lines might drive the region backwards, unless the EU's renewed interest in enlargement is coupled with a sustainable strategy on how to address the key challenges to democracy in its neighbourhood.

The ease of destabilising unhealthy democracies

Countries in the Western Balkans have long been considered 'democracies with adjectives' (Collier & Levitsky 1997). While this label could really fit any democratic country in the world, for the post-Yugoslav states and Albania, it refers to the fragile institutional balances, strongholds of power of ethnic and political elites, and weak participatory culture. Under such precarious democratic conditions, contested borders and governance structures - along with the memory of war - have made several countries in the region particularly vulnerable to knock-on effects of the Russian aggression on Ukraine. This vulnerability has not been caused by the war itself, but rather by the amplification of already existing instability and contestation lines. This has been the case especially in countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, where there exist ethnic grievances by the Serb population that is culturally and politically connected to Russia.

A significant deal of Bosnia and Herzegovina's predicament is rooted in its institutional setup. Designed as an annex to a 1995 peace treaty, the "Dayton constitution" devised a complex mechanism of governance of cohabitation between the self-governing entities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (RS), the latter increasingly threatening breakaway. The war in Ukraine has led to gradual radicalisation of the RS

politics. In Spring 2023, the secessionist aspirations of the leader of Bosnian Serbs – Milorad Dodik had seemingly been relented and he had distanced himself from Moscow. In a speech to the European Parliament in March 2022, he condemned the Russian aggression, supported Ukrainian territorial integrity (European Parliament 2022). Yet, this temporary deferment of Dodik's plans picked up pace, not the least with the veto on sanctions on Russia, but also with overt actions harvesting Putin's support for the secession of the Republika Srpska. The frequency and intensity of the bilateral contacts between Dodik and Putin intensified since September 2022, culminating in the award of honours to Putin in January 2023 'especially for his patriotic concern and love for Republika Srpska' (Politico 2023). The symbolism of this award, which took place during the celebration of the controversial RS "Republic Day", is an indicator of Dodik's future political course: strengthened ties with Russia will be used to fuel ethnic divisions and secessionism. Vetoes at the level of central institutions and misalignments with the EU and Western political compass, are likely to keep the country in a political and institutional deadlock, preventing it from using the momentum for change caused by the grant of candidate country for EU accession in December 2022.

Further to Bosnia and Herzegovina, instability and tensions have increased in the north of Kosovo, inhabited by ethnic Serb population over the use of licence plates. Denying the independent statehood of Kosovo, the ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo continue to use the Serbian-issued plates. The agreement that regulated the matter expired in late 2021, making the Serbian-issued plates invalid in Kosovo, and their holders subject to a fine. As a result, a number of Serb officials, including judges, mayors, parliamentarians, and executives resigned from Kosovo institutions, causing a major political crisis. In November 2022, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti reached an agreement. The agreement, mediated by the EU, foresees that Serbia stops issuing licence plates for Kosovo cities, and that Kosovo no longer requires the re-registration of vehicles (Politico 2022). Yet, this agreement did not mark the end of the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. In December 2022, the Serbian Defence Minister Miloš Vučević claimed that the police forces of Kosovo had attacked ethnic Serbs; an episode denied by the Kosovo government. While these lines of contestation had existed in Kosovo since the early 1990s, Russia's support to Serbia has provided additional fuel to the tensions (Le Figaro 2022).

Finally, the strong influence of Russia on different political factions in Montenegro, has led to perhaps the most visible instability in the country since the late 1990s. In August 2020, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), led by the current president of Montenegro Milo Đukanović, lost the elections after over three decades of rule. Đukanović's downfall was brought about by protests over the controversial law on the Freedom of Religion. In 2020, the DPS had changed the law requesting religious communities to provide evidence of ownership prior to 1918 to be able to retain their properties; a provision that would affect mostly the Serbian Orthodox Church. The government that ensued after the 2020 elections fell after a no-confidence vote in March 2022, giving way to a new government composed of a wide range of parties, including the pro-European, and pro-Russian ones. In August 2022, that new government received a no confidence vote, leaving the country in situation where key reforms and processes are in a deadlock. Yet Montenegro's instability has further been exacerbated by the different dynamics of the country's relationship with Russia. On the one hand, the cyberattacks that brought down the government's entire IT infrastructure in the summer of 2022 have been attributed to Russia, which allegedly retaliated over Montenegro's sanctions to it. On the other hand, the current caretaker government seems to have close ties to Serbia and Russia, attested to by attendance of two ministers of the controversial RS "Republic Day" (The Geopost 2023). The unclear political line towards Russia renders this divided country susceptible to influences that could aggravate internal divisions, which would inevitably raise tensions with the neighbouring countries.

"There ain't no such thing as a free lunch"

The Western Balkan states' dependencies on third countries have not emerged overnight. These have built up in the course of defective transitions, which opened up different spaces for the growth of political, economic, or even cultural influence of third countries. While such influences are neither new nor have they ever been fully dormant, the new geopolitical environment has revealed their potential for exploiting the region's vulnerabilities. Obviously, the different dependencies on third-country actors have evolved through different trajectories, reaching critical security and foreign policy issues, especially in the case of Russia.

Russia has been linked to the various national Christian Orthodox churches throughout history, and this influence has been revived with the post-communist return to religion. Russian Orthodox charity organisations, the largest of which is run by Vladimir Putin's affiliate oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, have become increasingly active in promoting pan-Slavism. Numerous narratives of "Slavic superiority" have taken a particular foothold in the region flooded with ethno-territorial grievances, especially with the support of hundreds of Moscow-backed media outlets (FNS 2022). These narratives have proven particularly harmful to stability of several of the region's countries, especially since February 2022. In March 2023, a pro-Russian protest took place, with militant messages comparing the Serbs in Montenegro to Russians in Ukraine (VoA 2023). Further to such societal resonance, the growth of economic and political influence of Russia has had implications on foreign policy priorities. Russia's economic influence has increased in the course of privatisation in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, when a number of Russian oligarchs purchased raw material-related industries across the region or obtained extraction concessions. Examples include the concession for Rashid Serdarov's company to exploit coal in the Republika Srpska, the sale of Montenegro's (now defunct) Aluminium Plant to Oleg Deripaska, alongside a number of public procurement contracts won by Europe-based subsidiaries of firms connected to Russian billionaires (Žurnal 2020). In the last year, these dependencies have played well into the discussions on energy security in the region, allowing leaders such as Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić and Republika Srpska's Milorad Dodik, to "sit on two chairs" (EU/US and Russia) even if these chairs are far apart (Bechev 2023). The two countries remain declaratively pro-European, and consistently vote in favour of United Nations' resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, they have not enacted sanctions against Russia. As a result, unlike the other Western Balkan but EU candidate countries whose external affairs are fully aligned with the EU's common foreign and security policy, Bosnia and Herzegovina's alignment rate stands at 81 per cent, and Serbia's has dropped from 64 to 45 per cent between June 2021 and August 2022 (European Commission 2022). Dynamics of such kind, and the resonance of various types of dependencies, will also be reflected in fault lines that have emerged as regards the relationship between the EU and the region's countries.

Between a rock and a hard place

For over a decade now, the EU has been criticised for its limited transformative role in the Western Balkans, to whom the promise of membership had been made at the 2003 Thessalonica European Council. Scholars and policymakers claim that EU's democratisation efforts failed because the Union has prioritised stability over democracy, which left enough margin for ethno-populist and authoritarian forces to disrupt political transitions. Systematic preference for stability to democracy, has substantively diminished the Union's transformative power over the region and undermined the credibility of the EU's approach to the Western Balkans (Börzel 2011; Börzel & Schimmelfennig 2017). Even within an area where the EU was most invested and insistent on far-reaching reform—the rule of law and independence of the judiciary—the reform process 'still suffers from instability and incoherence' (Kmezić 2017, 148). Regimes born within this vicious cycle of the stability–democracy dilemma have been referred to as "stabilocracy" or "stabilitocracy" (Deimel & Primatarova 2012; Pavlović 2016; Smith, Marković-Khaze, & Kovačević 2020). The war in Ukraine has not dismantled this approach; rather, it complicated the equation by adding the element of geopolitics thus turning the stability–democracy dilemma into a stability-democracy-security trilemma.

The candidacy for Ukraine and Moldova and the "European perspective" for Georgia has seemingly given a push to the European paths of the Western Balkan region, too. At the same time, it has raised questions as to the future of the EU enlargement process at multiple levels. First, the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia was conditioned by Bulgaria's request for constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian people as a minority in the country. While this has not been the first time a bilateral matter has played into the accession process (e.g. in 2008, Slovenia had blocked Croatia's accession negotiation over a border dispute), there is far more scope for the use of veto over matters of territory, people, and reparation in the Western Balkans than in the earlier enlargement rounds. This might cause further delays in the process, which are not necessarily related to the country's preparedness to enter the EU, and thus further reduce the Union's credibility in the region. Second, the recognition of candidacy to Bosnia and Herzegovina sent a strong symbolic message about the eligibility for membership of a divided post-conflict society. Even so, very few of the substantive requirements stipulated in an earlier Opinion of the Commission (2022) have been implemented. Priorities requiring constitution-

al changes – such as those related to equality and non-discrimination that have been lingering since the 2009 European Court of Human Rights judgment in Sejdić-Finci vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina – have not been addressed. These subtleties behind certain decisions imply trade-offs between enlargement as a technical exercise and enlargement as a political tool for maintaining the security at the EU's borders and stabilising its immediate neighbours. The technical and the political aspects of the process are often asymmetrical and out of sync with each other. This might have contradictory outcomes; and such contradictory outcomes further reduce the viability of a European future for these countries, making them vulnerable to destabilisation by both domestic elites and malign external influences.

The Russian aggression has also brought into the limelight a range of policy options applicable to the Western Balkans and three Eastern Partnership countries with an EU perspective. Alternatives and complementary options include the French initiative for a European Political Community (EPC), the Austrian non-paper on gradual accession, or the different templates for 'staged accession' and 'phasing in' (Emerson et al. 2021; Mirel 2022), or strategic participation to selected policy domains through 'external differentiated integration' (Chiocchetti 2022). Each of these approaches has its merits, but also its limitations. Yet the fact that they are assessed as possibilities suggests that full EU membership of contested and democratically unconsolidated states is a controversial issue for the Union, whose democratic capacity has been severely damaged by the rise of illiberal politics in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the search for models that would accelerate or complement traditional enlargement, or serve as viable alternatives to it, point to the security imperative for the EU to keep its neighbourhood on a stable and democratic course.

In lieu of conclusion: working across fault lines

24 February 2023 marked a year of Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the end of hostilities seems nowhere in sight. Wars do not end in a day, and those initiated by autocratic leaders with manpower and military arsenal at hand may last for years, as much as we hope for the opposite. As the Western Balkan experience has shown, wars leave scars on societies and the institutions that govern them. These scars take some time to heal. And just as scars on our

bodies, which hurt when it rains, memories, narratives, institutional and political consequences of conflict can be triggered by geopolitics to reveal or even reinforce different fault lines. The latter can prove to be particularly damaging when they lead to instability, or make a country vulnerable to exploitation by a harmful foreign influence. While conflict and geopolitical concerns seem to have invigorated the creeping enlargement process, full EU membership for the Western Balkan states is unlikely to happen any time soon. With that in mind, working across the existing fault lines to create stable and democratic societies in the Western Balkans could eventually lead to more secure, resilient, and prosperous societies in the EU's neighbourhood. For everyone with stakes in the region, that should be an end in itself.

References

Bechev, Dimitar. 'Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU'. Carnegie Europe, 2023. Available at: https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819.

Chiocchetti, Paolo. *Models of differentiated integration: past, present, and proposed.* Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper, September 2022.

Collier, David, & Steven Levitsky. 'Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research'. *World Politics* vol. 49, no. 3 (1997): 430-451.

Council of the EU. Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process, 13 December 2023. Available at: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15935-2022-INIT/en/pdf.

Džankić, Jelena, Soeren Keil, & Marko Kmezić (eds.). *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A failure of EU conditionality?* London: Palgrave, 2019.

Emerson, Michael, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans, & Strahinja Subotić. *A Template for Staged Accession to the EU.* CEPS and European Policy Center, October 2021.

European Commission. 'Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report'. European Commission, 12 October 2022. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202022.pdf.

European Parliament. *China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans.* European Parliament Research Service, 2022a. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558

European Parliament. *Russia's war on Ukraine: The Kremlin's use of religion as a foreign policy instrument.* European Parliament Research Service, 2022b. Available at: *https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729430/EPRS_ATA(2022)729430_EN.pdf.*

Le Figaro. 'Tensions au Kosovo: la Russie apporte son soutien à la Serbie'. *Le Figaro*, 28 December 2022. Available at: https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/tensions-au-kosovo-la-russie-apporte-son-soutien-a-la-serbie-20221228.

Mirel, Pierre. 'In support of a new approach with the Western Balkans: Staged accession with a consolidation phase'. *European Issue* N° 633, 24 May 2022, Fondation Robert Schuman.

Politico. 'Europe keeps a wary eye on Kosovo, Serbia'. *Politico,* 9 August 2023. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-keep-anxious-eye-kosovo-serbia/.

Primatarova, Antoinette, & Johanna Deimel. *Bridge over Troubled Waters. The Role of Internationales in Albania*, Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2012.

Smith, Nicholas R., Nina Marković-Khaze, & Maja Kovačević. 'The EU's Stability-Democracy Dilemma in the Context of the Problematic Accession of the Western Balkan States'. *Journal of contemporary European studies* vol. 29, no. 2 (2021): 169-183.

The Geopost. 'Is Montenegro entering the order of those who destabilize the Balkans?' *The Geopost*, 17 January 2022. Available at: https://thegeopost.com/en/analysis/is-montenegro-entering-the-order-of-those-who-destabilize-the-balkans/.

VoA. 'Proruski protest u Podgorici'. *Voice of* America, 2 March 2023. Available at: https://www.glasamerike.net/a/proruski-protest-u-podgorici/6467326.html.

Žurnal. 'Russian Oligarchs in BIH: Takeover of the energy sector and destruction of Aluminum'. *Žurnal,* 18 July 2020. Available at: https://zurnal.info/clanak/takeover-of-the-energy-sector-and-destruction-of-aluminum/23253.

The Narrow Corridor Towards Democracy: EU Enlargement as an Opportunity to Establish Democratic States and Tackle State Capture in the Western Balkans

Nisida Gjoksi*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has refocused the European Union's attention on its enlargement policy, but also made democracy's defence a priority of the highest geopolitical as well as normative order. The direct threat to Ukraine's fledgling democracy is framed as well as an attack on the idea of democracy itself. The European Union (EU) has stepped up its efforts to support Ukraine and granted it candidate status for membership. Beyond Ukraine, the war has also rebooted the EU's perspective on the Western Balkan accession. However, this renewed perspective must contend with declining regional democratic standards, despite the need of EU's foreign policy to deliver better on democracy promotion in the aftermath of the war. Notwithstanding 20 years of reform attempts through political conditionality on the accession process, the region

* EU Commission, DG NEAR. The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of the author and cannot in any way be attributed to the European Union institutions.

– and particularly former front-runners – has backslid. Countries are classified as "partly free" (Freedom House 2022).

This decline is due to state capture by political parties during the countries' democratisation in the 1990s and 2000s. Such state capture is continuing, every time a party comes to government (Innes 2013), further delaying democratic consolidation. Political parties played a much stronger role than expected at the time in shaping institutions in the interest of their party patronage (Grzymala Busse 2002; Innes 2013). Data from Freedom House on democracy, Transparency International on corruption, and World Bank data on government effectiveness all confirm these trends.

The EU enlargement perspective was first granted to the Western Balkan region 20 years ago at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 (EU Council 2003). In the context of the war in Ukraine, the first intergovernmental conference opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia took place in July 2022. Later the same year, the EU reaffirmed this commitment by granting Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status and visa liberalisation to Kosovo from (possibly) 1 January 2024 (EU Council 2022). Given the changed geopolitical realities, the EU seized the moment. However, such renewed vigour contrasts with at best stagnation and at worst decline of democracy in the region.

In the new geopolitical context, effective democracy promotion has been propelled to make it a top-priority in foreign and security policy. With so much at stake for democracy, and in a new enlarging context that goes beyond the Western Balkans, effective implementation of the EU's new "enlargement methodology" is particularly important in order to build a strong impartial state - from judiciary to public administration - and tackle state capture. If applied firmly, it is important to strengthen political conditionality for several reasons (EU COM 2020). First, failing to build a democratic state and tackle state capture will leave the door open to third party influence from authoritarian states like Russia, which can capitalise on this governance gap. Second, despite the EU's indisputable influence as an economic and global actor, ethno-nationalist parties have solidified power through state capture in the recent years in defiance of the EU's democracy-membership requirements (Keil 2018; Bechev 2017; 2022; Richter & Wunsch 2019; Bieber 2017; Smith et al. 2020), and can use Russia's influence for their own political interests. Finally, EU enlargement policy itself becomes unviable, as it increases the risk of EU Member States vetoing accession of countries subject to state capture and/or Russian influence.

State of democracy in the Western Balkans: stagnation and democratic decline on the road to the EU

The war prompted European governments to increase their commitments to democracy externally and internally. This commitment stands with 20 years of EU enlargement, showing that democratisation and EU integration have not gone hand in hand. The opposite may even be the case: it seems that EU enlargement could not prevent a democratic decline over time (see Figure 1).

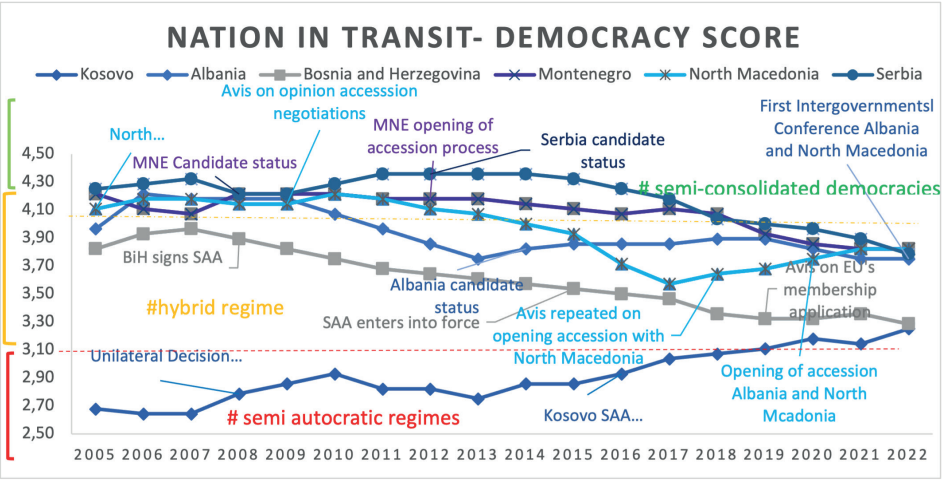

Figure 1 — Democracy score 2005-2022 and EU-Western Balkans relations.[1]

The following observations deserve attention. As the graph above shows, some countries have deteriorated from *semi-consolidated democracies* to *hybrid democratic regimes*. Others never improved from "hybrid regime" status at all.

1 Source: Own data collection: Freedom House, Democracy score, EU-Western Balkans relations, DG NEAR website. Note on scoring: Consolidated Democracies (5.01-7.00); Semi-Consolidated Democracies (4.01-5.00): Countries receiving this score are electoral democracies that meet relatively high standards for the selection of national leaders but exhibit weaknesses in their defence of political rights and civil liberties .Transitional or Hybrid Regimes (3.01-4.00): Countries receiving this score are typically electoral democracies where democratic institutions are fragile, and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist. Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (2.01-3.00): Countries receiving this score attempt to mask authoritarianism or rely on informal power structures with limited respect for the institutions and practices of democracy. They typically fail to meet even the minimum standards of electoral democracy.

Additionally, the apparent "better performers" such as the negotiating countries - Serbia and Montenegro – have *backslid* by 2018 to "partly free" and converged with those countries that are only now about to open negotiations, like Albania and North Macedonia. On the other hand, there is a group of *democratic laggards* such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where the first has further declined over time, and the latter has slightly improved their democratic governance.

Building a strong democratic state that can resist and tackle state capture at the core of democracy through EU enlargement policy in the region

As the EU is trying to make a difference to democracy in the context of the region and of the enlargement, it will not be able to effectively do so if state capture prevails, as the data shows. This is understood as the use of state resources for political purposes by a small elite: in this region that includes both the national leadership and the ruling parties (Bieber 2018; Fazekas & Toth 2016; Gjoksi 2018; Keil 2018). State capture is synonymous with politicisation of state institutions – judiciary and civil service – and understood as the conscious choice of politicians, and not only parties, to strategically influence the hiring and firing of officials in all senior positions and those covered by the scope of civil service, based on both political loyalty and party loyalty criteria in exchange for political services (Gjoksi 2018). Evidence on state capture is shown in various diagnostic reports of Transparency International and other thinks tanks through data on politicised judiciary and civil service, with the law-making process and public procurement subservient to narrow and vested political interests (Zúñiga 2020, SELDI 2022).

In the Western Balkans, and generally post-communist context, political parties remained unconstrained in using the state for their own electoral and organisational interests. The politicisation of the state institutions by the party in power was neither impeded by the rule of law, nor by socio-economic groups with an interest in effective governance (Gjoksi 2018). Overcoming so-called "partitocracy" over the state, has proven difficult notwithstanding EU-driven state-building in the region. While security concerns have been more dominant

in the first years, the EU enlargement policy has shifted towards increased importance of building a democratic state. Despite this, the data on state capture presented below - using as proxies levels of corruption (Figure 2) and government effectiveness (the latter entailing levels of politicisation of the civil service) (Figure 3) - confirm that democratic decline has gone hand in hand with higher levels of state capture across countries and over time.

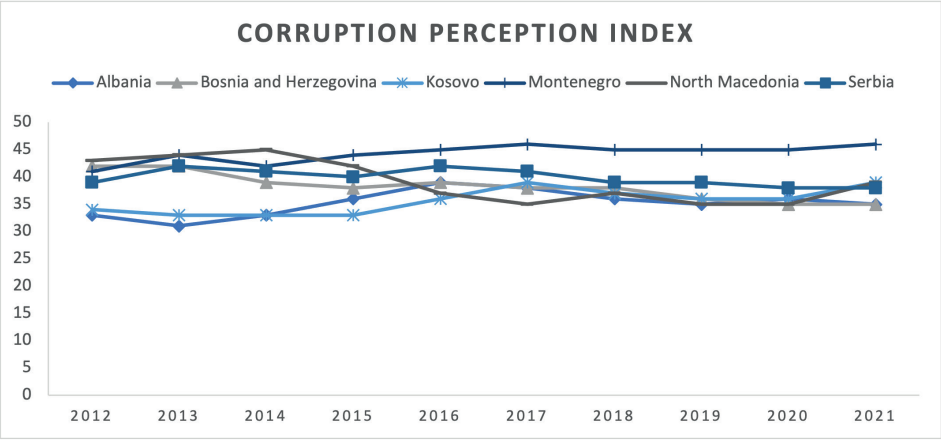

Figure 2 — Corruption performance 2012-2021[2]

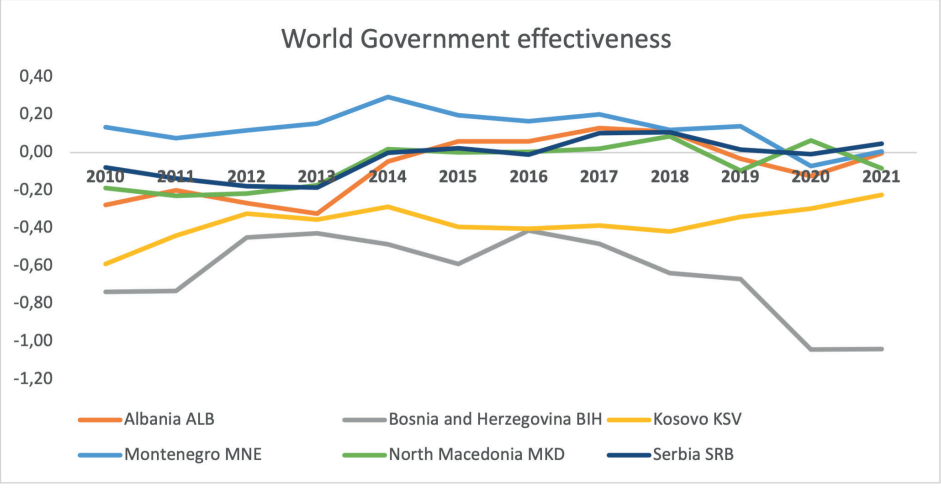

Figure 3 — Government effectiveness 2010-2021 – proxy on politicisation of civil service[3]

2 Source: Own calculation, Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index data set. Higher score means better performance.

4 Source: Own calculations, World Government effectiveness. Government effectiveness captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. This table lists the individual variables from each data source used to construct this measure in the Worldwide Governance Indicator.

If we compare corruption levels and government effectiveness between 2012 and 2021, most show worsening corruption over the nine years (except North Macedonia and Montenegro). This suggests that state capture has remained a constant problem for governance (Bieber 2017; 2020). Additionally, these figures show that corruption and the politicisation of the civil service have not been curbed effectively despite formal rule compliance. One exception to this trend have been the critical junctures of the EU accession candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations. The fluctuations coincide with changes of the party in power, showing that some of the parties in government have done worse than others on indicators of state capture.

Implications for EU enlargement policy if it does not support the building of a strong state by tackling state capture

Particularly in the aftermath of the war, if EU enlargement policy is to be credible in the region and be a geostrategic investment in Europe's peace and stability, it needs to become more effective not only in security matters but also in democracy promotion. This can only be done by putting an even greater focus on building strong institutions that can eradicate state capture and by working more on reforming political parties to adopt democratic values.

First, the ineffectiveness in combatting state capture in EU accession increases opportunities for third party influence. Even before launching the war on Ukraine, Russia engaged in subversion in the region (Gadzo 2019). The prevalence of state capture in the region allows Russia to exploit its influence economically and politically (Prelec 2020; Secrieru 2019). Despite not being the Western Balkans' main trading partner or investor, Russia has made significant acquisitions in strategic sectors such as energy, heavy industry, mining, and banking (CSD 2018). Additionally, before the war Russia already had made use of weak governance in the region to conclude non-transparent deals; to provide soft diplomatic support to nationalistic and populist parties; to stir further disputes and shapes people's opinions through Russian-sponsored mass media outlets (Prelec 2020; Secrieru 2019). Politically, after the war, Russia will have an even stronger interest in being a destabilising actor and throwing sand in the gears of Euro Atlantic relations. Weak governance structure will be an indirect open door for its influence.

Irrespective of third-country influence, ineffectiveness in combatting and conditioning state capture through EU accession is problematic also because it provides more room for ethno-nationalist parties to solidify their power. Evidence shows that when identity politics drives state capture, it becomes much harder to eradicate it, when compared to in contexts where incumbents and opposition do not mobilise identity issues. This was evident in the period of VRMO-DPMNE rule in North Macedonia, or currently in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Figure 1 in combination with Figures 2 and 3): the state's score rises and falls with the political party in power and uses Russia's soft diplomatic power for self-serving interests.

Finally, EU enlargement policy that is not effective in combatting state capture becomes unviable in practice, as it increases the risk of EU Member States vetoing the accession of countries subject to state capture or under Russian influence.

New enlargement methodology: looking forward to a new opportunity to build a state free of political influence that supports democracy in an enlargement context

In light of the new and changed geopolitical order, the pressure on the EU to come to better terms in tackling democratic decline internally and externally has increased since the war started. Hence, the new EU enlargement methodology is an opportunity and needs to be implemented even more effectively in trying to build a strong democratic state. The new methodology has the following elements that can strategically deliver in building democratic and strong legal states, if used in its full potential.

The "fundamental cluster" of negotiating chapters provides both an opportunity to assess progress on building a "democratic state", but also its backsliding to the extent to which judiciary and administrations might become more politicised. The novelty is that this will be the first cluster to be opened and the last to be closed. Therefore, backsliding in this cluster can prevent the process advancing even if the rest of the clusters have been completed. This has the potential to address the problem identified in Figure 1, where countries

would improve at key junctures in the accession process but backslide between them.

The second change lies in developing roadmaps for public administration and democratic institutions and rule of law. It places early attention on certain areas outside the EU Acquis, including public administration and democratic institutions, and allows the EU to become more rigorous (i.e., functioning of parliament and internal democracy of political parties) and to keep them under review throughout the negotiation process.

Finally, the link between clusters of stringent conditions and tangible rewards for the Balkan countries is one of the interesting innovations. The credibility of performance on this cluster will affect the whole negotiation process and will put the effort of building a democratic state at the centre. Interim benchmarks on rule of law will also serve that purpose.

A successful application of this methodology will not only help protect the Western Balkans from third country interference, it will also help prepare the countries of the region for a realistic EU accession process; a process sufficiently credible regarding democracy promotion and able to overcome the reservations of the EU Member States most concerned about corruption. The EU's new enlargement methodology provides the means to make that difference.

References

Bechev, Dimitar. *Rival Power*: *Russian in Southeast Europe.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2017.

Bechev, Dimitar. *What Has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?* Carnegie Europe, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 June 2022. Available at: https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/20/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-western-balkans-pub-87348.

Bieber, Florian. 'Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans'. *Political Science East European Politics* vol. 34, no. 3 (2018): 337-354.

Bieber, Florian. *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy.* Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, March 2017.

Bieber, Florian. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 (New Perspectives on South-East Europe).

CSD. *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans.* Center for the Study of Democracy, 25 July 2018. Available at https://www.csd.bg/publications/publication/russian-economic-footprint-in-the-western-balkans-corruption-and-state-capture-risks/.

EU Commision. *Serbia 2022 Report.* Brussels, 2022. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Serbia%20Report%202022.pdf.

EU Commission. *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkan.* Brussels, 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.

EU COM. *Enhancing the Accession Process: A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans.* EU commission, Brussels, 2020. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf.

EU Council Brussels, Visa 192, Coweb. 30 November 2022. Available at: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15462-2022-INIT/en/pdf.

EU Council. *Declaration EU-Western Balkan Summit.* Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/misc/76291.pdf.

Fazekas, Mihály, & István János Tóth. 'From Corruption to State Capture: A New Analytical Framework with Empirical Applications from Hungary'. *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 69, no. 2 (June 2016): 320-334.

Freedom House. *Nation in Transit 2022.* Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf.

Gadzo, Mersiha. 'All you need to know about Kosovo's snap parliamentary elections'. *Al Jazeera,* 3 October 2019. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/3/all-you-need-to-know-about-kosovos-snap-parliamentary-elections.

Gjoksi, Nisida. 'Development of the Administrative State through the Logic of Political Parties in PhD'. In 'Weber in the Balkans: Contested Party State Relations in Reforming the Civil Service and FYR Macedonia 2000-2013', PhD Thesis at European University Institute, Florence, May 2018.

Gjoksi, Nisida. 'Serving the Citizens or the Political Wlite: Assessing Bureaucratic Structures between Political Loyalty and Competence in New Democracies'. International Political Science Association 2016; Panel: Politics and Bureaucratic Structures. Poznan, Poland.

Grzymala Busse, Anna. 'Reconceptualising the State: Lesson from Post-Communism'. *Politics & Society* vol. 30, no. 4 (2002): 529-554.

Innes, Abby. 'The Political Economy of State Capture in Central Europe'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* vol. 52, no. 1 (2013): 88-104.

Keil, Soeren. 'The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia'. *Southeastern Europe* vol. 38, no. 1 (2018): 59-82.

Prelec, Tena. 'The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of Regional Security* vol. 15, no. 2 (2020): 167-198.

Richter, Solveig, & Natasha Wunsch. 'Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 27, no. 1 (2020): 41-62.

Secrieru, Stanislav. *Russia in the Western Balkans.* European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2019. Available at: https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/EUISS_Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf.

SELDI. *Media Capture in the Western Balkans: From captured states to captured media*. Policy Brief 18 December 2022. Available at: https://seldi.net/publications/seldi-policy-brief-18-media-capture-in-the-western-balkans-from-captured-states-to-captured-media/.

Smith, Nicolass Ross, Nina Marković Khaze, & Maja Kovačević. 'The EU's Stability-Democracy Dilemma in the Context of the Problematic Accession of the Western Balkan States'. *Political Science Journal of Contemporary European Studies* vol. 29, no. 29 (2020): 169-183.

Zúñiga, Nieves. *Examining State Capture: Undue Influence on Law-Making and the Judiciary in the Western Balkans and Turkey.* Transparency International, 2020. Available at: https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2020_Report_ExaminingStateCapture_English.pdf.

Stabilising the Western Balkans through a Common Market: Opportunities and Challenges

Andi Hoxhaj*

The European Union (EU) enlargement policy for the Western Balkans was at a standstill over the last decade, in part due to various crises within the EU, including the global financial crisis, the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, and the migration crisis. During this time, it had allowed other powers, such as Russia, Turkey, and China, to invest both economically and politically in the Western Balkans. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014, and especially its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, have prompted the EU to reconsider its enlargement policy approach to the Western Balkans, largely in response to the fear of further Russian influence in some Western Balkan countries. Thus, in July 2022, the EU started accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, authorised visa liberalisation with Kosovo in November 2022 (to take effect in January 2024), and granted Bosnia and Herzegovina EU candidate status in December 2022.

In countering some of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, as well as that of other third powers such as China, Turkey, and the Middle Eastern States, the German government in November 2022 took the initiative to revive

* University College London, Faculty of Laws.

the "Berlin Process". The Berlin Process is an EU-Western Balkans Summit, that began in 2014 under former Chancellor Merkel's foreign policy goals to explore new ways of cooperation that could go beyond the technical and legal process of the EU accession framework – establishing a new type of forum to increase political and economic cooperation (Bundesregierung 2014). The need for revision was seen as essential to maintaining engagement with the Western Balkans on both a political and an economic level. The invitation, however, did not quite take off because the Western Balkans were hesitant since there was no clear timeline for when accession might take place. Furthermore, the Western Balkan countries still do not have bilateral relations and, in some cases, do not recognise each other as states.

The EU's foreign policy goal is to bring the Western Balkans into the EU orbit by first establishing a common regional market, and Russia's invasion on Ukraine has made both the EU and the Western Balkans more aware that economic integration is just as important as political integration. The first-ever summit between the leaders of the EU and the Western Balkans was held in 2022 in Albania as a symbol of the EU's commitment to the region (European Council 2022). Part of this was done to send a message to Russia that the EU will assist the Western Balkans in addressing the negative effects of war on their economies and societies, and the common regional market could act as a catalyst in this context . The Western Balkan countries agreed in November 2022, under the "Berlin Process" frameworks (European Commission 2022b), to pave the way for implementing some of the structural elements of the Western Balkans Common Regional Market based on the EU Single Market. This was initially suggested by the European Commission in February 2018 (COM (2018) 65) and adopted by the Western Balkans in November 2020 (Regional Cooperation Council 2020).

The Berlin Process

The Berlin Process was introduced to inject new momentum into the EU enlargement policy agenda, to improve political cooperation, and to promote market integration within the Western Balkans (Griessler 2020, 20). Moreover, it was a direct response to growing political and economic investments by Russia, China, and Turkey, which exploited the EU disengagement with the Western Balkans to enhance their presence in the region (GIZ 2018). The Berlin Process is designed to be complementary to the overall EU enlargement

process, focusing on market integration, and on mapping out the issues that are holding back the Western Balkans' economies from becoming more competitive.

The Berlin Process can be characterised as an *ad hoc* and flexible EU enlargement instrument that is based more upon a soft law approach to allow the Western Balkans to make more collaborative and joint commitments towards EU integration (Griessler 2020). It is also in full synergy with the EU accession conditions. But unlike the EU accession framework, the main objective of the Berlin Process is to improve the dialogue between the six Western Balkans countries by bringing together the leaders of the Western Balkans annually to promote more market integration and to create a common regional market (Marciacq 2017).

The underlying goal of the Berlin Process is to establish a common market based on EU Single Market rules, and it has become central to the new EU engagement with the Western Balkans since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is because, first and foremost, the EU seeks to counteract Chinese, Russian, and Turkish investments in the region and ensure that any future investments in the Western Balkans are evaluated under EU rules similar to those of the EU Single Market (Chrzová 2019). Second, it is geared to break up monopolies and anti-competitive practices in critical sectors where Russia has a strong foothold, such as energy and telecommunications, and to ensure that antitrust rules are applied in accordance with EU Single Market rules (Savićević & Kostić 2020). Third, the objective of the Berlin Process is to provide a new pool of labour as well as a safer area for EU companies to invest in, which can be protected under EU Single Market rules (Dienelt 2020).

In conceptualising the Berlin Process common market initiative for the Western Balkans, the EU was guided by the idea that that regional market integration is the best avenue to overcome bilateral and ethnic disputes (Djolai & Nechev 2018). This is based upon the Plutarchian idea that countries which are more economically and socially integrated are less likely to go to war (Stader 1988, 280). In addition to often being related to the origins of the EU this idea has shaped European policy-makers' thoughts about the new EU engagement with the Western Balkans (Harste 2009). As a result, the leaders of the Western Balkan countries endorsed a proposal at the 2020 Berlin Process summit to start adopting new policies to create the conditions for establishing a Common Regional Market (European Commission 2020b).

The idea of increasing market integration and regional cooperation with the

Western Balkans has framed much of the thinking around the new EU-Western Balkans enlargement strategy adopted in February 2018. Furthermore, the establishment of a common regional market based on EU Single Market rules is suggested as the best path to successful integration into the EU. This way of thinking has so far influenced the EU's enlargement policy with the goal of promoting socioeconomic integration among Western Balkan countries to overcome the legacies of Yugoslav disintegration, in the vein of what post-war Europe achieved through the European Union.

The Western Balkans Common Market 2025

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that the 'Western Balkans are of great strategic importance to the European Union' and that the EU planned to introduce a long-term economic and connectivity plan to link 'the Western Balkans as closely as possible to EU' (European Commission 2020a). Thereafter, the Commission presented an economic and sustainable development package called the "Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans", which is a 10-year plan to support socio-economic development. Furthermore, it has re-oriented the "Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance" funding by assigning 9 billion euros to boost economic convergence with the Western Balkans for the period 2021-2027 (COM (2020) 641). This is directly aimed at promoting the establishment of the Common Regional Market for the Western Balkans. Furthermore, during the EU-Western Balkans Summit under the Berlin Process framework in November 2022, the Commission announced a substantial energy support package of 1 billion euros in EU grants to help the Western Balkans address the immediate consequences of the energy crisis and build resilience in the short and medium term, to move away from depending on Russia oil and gas (European Commission 2022).

As a result, an action plan to create the "Western Balkans Common Regional Market" by 2025 was adopted. The Commission, as well as the main EU leaders behind the Berlin Process, Chancellor of Germany and President France, welcomed this decision and reiterated that, if the Common Regional Market was successfully implemented, based upon the four freedoms, and followed the rules of the EU Single Market, then the Western Balkans could par-

ticipate in the EU Single Market in the future (European Commission 2020b; Bundesregierung 2020; Élysée 2020). In other words, the Common Regional Market can be viewed as a springboard for the Western Balkans to harmonise their laws and policies, should their economies become more competitive, and they are able to show a good track record – the award is participating in the EU Single Market.

The Common Regional Market action plan gives more in-depth guidelines about the laws and policies that must adopt by 2025 (Regional Cooperation Council 2020) and the action plan is divided into four policy blocks and offers guidelines on the legal and policy areas that must be aligned with the EU Single Market rules, which can be summarised as follows (Balkans Group 2020):

1. Regional trade area: free movement of goods, services, capital, and people;
2. Regional investment area: aligning investment laws and policies with the EU Single Market standards and promoting the region to foreign investors;
3. Regional digital area: integrating the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market and following the EU rules; and
4. Regional industrial and innovation area: developing a joint EU-Western Balkans strategy to transform the industrial sectors and following the EU Single Market rules.

However, it is unclear whether the Western Balkans will be able to launch the Western Balkans Common Regional Market by 2025 due to several bilateral disputes. For example, Serbia does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state and continues to refer to it as the "Autonomous Province of Kosovo". Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina's central government refuses to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, due in large part to the veto of the Bosnian Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. There appears to be a renewed political will to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU, both politically and economically, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since the EU and US are more engaged with Serbia and Kosovo (Stojanović 2023), it could be possible to find a long-term and/or permanent solution through economic integration.

Challenges and opportunities for the Western Balkans Common Regional Market

The Western Balkan states do not have an independent justice system as a result of undue influence and high levels of corruption, which could become a major hurdle to ensuring that countries abide by the EU Single Market rules. The EU-Western Balkans enlargement strategy of 2018, highlighted that 'the Western Balkans countries show clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests' (COM (2018) 65, 3). However, given Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, as well as heavy investment from China and Turkey, the EU has overlooked the issue of state capture and corruption, which could become a major barrier to the Common Regional Market's successful operation.

With the persisting issue of state capture in the Western Balkans, the EU faces a significant challenge to making the Common Regional Market functional. A study by Southeast Europe Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI 2020) on "anti-competitive laws", and one by Transparency International (TI 2020) on "tailor-made laws", present alarming findings on the complex nature of state capture in the Western Balkans, which can impede the function of the Common Regional Market for the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the TI and SELDI impact assessment on the effect that "anti-competitive laws" and "tailor-made laws" indicate that these can jeopardise the operation of the functioning of the Common Regional Market. As a result of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, the EU should not weaken the rule of law, as the European Court of Auditors has indicated that a lack of the rule of law poses a serious threat to the Western Balkans' ability to uphold market economic rules.

SELDI finds that there is a high degree of monopolisation in key sectors of the economy, such as energy, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and construction, and it is concentrated close to companies that have close ties with the government (SELDI 2020). Furthermore, these sectors are also prone to external pressure through foreign investments, such as Russia in energy, or Turkey. For example, in Serbia, Russia controls revenues of close to 5 billion euros generated by the national economy in the energy sector, as *Gazprom* and *Lukoil* dominate the oil and fuels markets (Kovačević 2017). Serbia is almost

fully dependent on gas imports from Russia and the two companies have a total monopoly on its energy market. According to Prelec (2020), local political leaders facilitated this monopoly through intermediaries in the central government in exchange for a stake in the company or bribery. Similar trends can also be observed in Albania where Turkish foreign direct investments have strong stakes in the banking sector (Demirtaş 2015). Turkish investors own 60 per cent of Albania's major commercial bank (*Banka Kombetare Tregtare* (BKT)). Furthermore, Turkey also has a large stake in the telecommunication sector, as the Albanian government sold 76 per cent of its shares in the biggest-state owned company, known as *Albanian Telecom* (*Telekomi Shqiptar*) to two Turkish companies in 2007 (EBRD 2008).

Hence, what the Common Regional Market and the EU policymakers that are behind this regional economic integration initiative must understand is that the Western Balkans have legal barriers in place for entering their market (Lemstra 2020) and administrative requirements to obtain service licences (Perry & Keil 2018). The examples of Turkish and Russian companies having a strong foothold in the Western Balkans above suggest that EU companies may be skewed in favour of companies close to the government, and due to the weak judicial system and ineffective antitrust laws (SELDI 2020), the Common Regional Market may still be insufficient to offer fair competition insofar as there is a lack of the rule of law. Due to this, nations like Russia and Turkey have had much more success to gain access to the Western Balkans through bribery or personalist links with the leaders of the region. In addition to the high degree of monopolisation and anti-competitive practices, state capture is also utilised by the governments to pass "tailor-made laws" for individual companies, effectively legalising state capture and monopolisation of the market, and makes any corrupt practice impossible to prosecute (TI 2020).

The study of such tailor-made laws is relatively new in the Western Balkans (Vurmo 2020), but research in the field indicates that tailor-made laws are possibly the highest expression of state capture because they allow for monopolisation. Simultaneously, it makes it difficult for judicial and law enforcement institutions to investigate and prosecute any of the cases. Furthermore, the lack of enforcement of the anti-monopoly laws reduces the monitoring capacity of auditing agencies and thereby preventing accountability and scrutiny and weakening the credibility of the media and civil society organisations in reporting such cases.

More research is needed to fully understand the scope and impact of undue influence in law-making and the phenomenon of tailor-made laws. Even so, while there may be more favourable political conditions following Russia's investment of Ukraine in deeper economic and political integration with the Western Balkans (Kmezić 2020), the Common Regional Market for the Western Balkans will be very difficult to implement in contexts of extensive state capture (Hoxhaj 2021).

Conclusion

The Russian attack on Ukraine has pushed the EU to re-engage with the Western Balkans by means of the Common Regional Market. In pursuing closer political and economic cooperation based on EU Single Market rules, with a view to possible future EU membership for the Western Balkans, the Union also seeks to counter Russia's influence and investments in the region. Simultaneously, supporting the Western Balkans' socioeconomic and socio-legal development by focusing on areas of mutual interest, is also intended to provide EU investors with a new market and economic areas based on EU Single Market rules. This will ensure that the supply chain can move back closer to the European continent, rather than China, post-COVID-19, and become less dependent on Russia.

If properly implemented, the Common Regional Market for the Western Balkans may accelerate their future accession into the EU. However, for the Common Regional Market to work, the rule of law must be strengthened. Although some encouraging EU-led reforms have been implemented as part of the accession process, such as when the Western Balkan states agreed on visa-free travel among the six countries and mutual recognition of university diplomas and professional qualifications based on the four EU freedoms at the end of 2022. However, these steps toward EU membership are largely symbolic and insufficient, given that judicial systems throughout the region are prone to corruption and state capture, undermining the function of the four freedoms. In environments where the EU has to balance between pushing for reform and local leaders are entrenched in foreign dependencies, the key challenge for the EU is to not lower the rule of law standards and conditions for accession. Especially in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is essential for the EU to develop strategies for strengthening the rule of law and independent institutions in the Western Balkans and create stable and prosperous societies in its neighbourhood.

References

Balkans Group. 'Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – An Overview of the Regional Economic Area and the Mini-Schengen'. November 2020. Available at: https://balkansgroup.org/en/regional-cooperation-in-the-western-balkans-an-overview-of-the-regional-economic-area-and-the-mini-schengen/.

Bartlett Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. 'The Berlin Process in a Nutshell'. Novermber 2018. Available at: https://www.giz.de/en/downloads_els/The_Berlin_Process.pdf.

Bundesregierung. 'Chancellor Angela Merkel following the Western Balkan Summit: Making Progress with Reconciliation in the Balkans'. November 2020. Available at: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/chancellor-western-balkan-summit-1810244.

Bundesregierung. 'Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans'. August 2014. Available at: https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634.

Chrzová, Barbora. 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads. Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors'. *Prague Security Studies Institute*, May 2019. Available at: http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/682_final-publication.pdf.

Communication from European Commission. 'An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans'. COM (2020) 641 final.

Communication from the Commission. 'A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans'. COM (2018) 65 final.

Demirtaş, Birgül. 'Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: A Europeanized Foreign Policy in a De-europeanized National Context?' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no 2 (2015): 123-140.

Dienelt, Klaus. 'Easier Access to the Labor Market for Citizens from the Western Balkans is Extended'. *Migrationsrecht.eu*, September 2020. Available at: https://www.migrationsrecht.eu/german-legislation/easier-access-to-the-labor-market-for-citizens-from-the-western-balkans-is-extended.

Djolai, Marika, & Zoran Nechev. 'Bilateral Disputes Conundrum'. *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, Policy Brief*, April 2018. Available at: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ Bilateral-Disputes-Conundrum-Accepting-the-Past-and-Finding-Solutions-for-the-Western-Balkans.pdf.

EBRD. 'Albanian Telecom Privatisation'. 2008. Available at: https://www.ebrd.com/work-with-us/projects/psd/albanian-telecom-privatisation.html.

Élysée. 'EU-Western Balkans summit'. November 2020. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/11/10/eu-western-balkans-summit.en.

European Commission. 'Berlin Process Summit: EU announces €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans and welcomes new agreements to strengthen the Common Regional Market'. Press Release, Brussels, November 2022. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6478.

European Commission. 'President von der Leyen's State of the Union Address: charting the course out of the coronavirus crisis and into the future, press release'. Brussels, September 2020a. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1657.

European Commission. 'The Western Balkans Common Regional Market—a catalyst for deeper regional economic integration and a stepping stone towards EU Single Market'. November 2020b. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/common-regional-market_en.

European Council. 'EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana'. Tirana, December 2022. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/12/06/.

Griessler, Christina. 'The Berlin Process. Bringing the Western Balkan Region Closer to the European Union'. *Südosteuropa* vol. 68, no. 1 (2020): 1-24.

Harste, Gorm. 'Kant's Theory of European Integration: Kant's "Toward Perpetual Peace" and Changing Forms of Separated Powers in the Evolution of Military and Politics'. *Annual Review of Law and Ethics* vol. 17, no. 25, (2009): 53-84.

Hoxhaj, Andi. 'The EU Rule of Law Initiative Towards the Western Balkans'. *Hague J Rule Law* vol. 13, no. 1, (2021): 143–172.

Kmezić, Marko. 'Recalibrating the EU's Approach to the Western Balkans'. *European View* vol. 19, no. 1 (2020): 54-61.

Kovačević, Aleksandar. 'Towards a Balkan Gas Hub: The Interplay between Pipeline Gas, LNG and Renewable Energy in South East Europe'. *The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, February 2017. Available at: https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Towards-a-Balkan-gas-hub-NG-115-press-copy.pdf.

Lemstra, Maarten. 'The Destructive Effects of State Capture in the Western Balkans: EU Enlargement Undermined'. *Clingendael Institute*, December 2020. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26429.

Marciacq, Florent. 'The European Union and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflections on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty'. *Dialogue Southeast Europe, Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, no. 5, Sarajevo, 2017. Available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf.

Perry, Valery, & Soeren Keil. 'The Business of State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Southeastern Europe* vol. 42, no. 1 (2018): 1-14.

Prelec, Tena. 'The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of Regional Security* vol. 15, no. 2 (2020): 167-198.

Regional Cooperation Council. 'Common Regional Market Action Plan'. November 2020. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/docs/543/common-regional-market-action-plan.

Savićević, Marko, & Milan Kostić. 'The Impact Analysis of Foreign Direct Investment on Export: The Case of the Western Balkan Countries'. *Economic Themes* vol. 58, no. 2 (2020): 171-186.

SELDI. 'State Capture Assessment Diagnostics in the Western Balkans 2020: Risks and Policy Options'. Policy Brief 10, October 2020. Available at: https://seldi.net/publications/policy-briefs/seldi-policy-brief-10-state-capture-assessment-diagnostics-in-the-western-balkans-2020-risks-and-policy-options.

Stader, Philip A. 'The Proems of Plutarch's *Lives*'. *Illinois Classical Studies* vol. 13, no. 22 (1988): 275-95. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/23064242.

Stojanović, Milica. 'EU, US Piling Pressure on Serbia to Accept Kosovo Plan, Vučić Says'. *Balkan Insight*, January 2023. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/24/eu-us-piling-pressure-on-serbia-to-accept-kosovo-plan-Vučić-says/ .

Transparency International (TI). 'Examining State Capture: Undue Influence on Law-Making and the Judiciary in the Western Balkans and Turkey'. December 2020. Available at: https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/examining-state-capture.

Vurmo, Gjergji. 'Tailor-made Laws in the Western Balkans: State Capture in Disguise'. *CEPS Policy Insights*, No 2020-12, May 2020. Available at: https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/tailor-made-laws-in-the-western-balkans.

Russia Needs the Unstable Balkans

Matea Jerković*

In 2016, the news that the "Night Wolves", the notorious protectors of Russian patriotism and Orthodoxy, were arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina came out of the blue. Fear and unrest had taken over this country.

In 2016, the "Night Wolves" passed through Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the delight of the leadership of Republika Srpska. Two years later, as part of the "Russian Balkan" action, they entered Bosnia and Herzegovina again in order to spread "Serbian-Russian friendship" (Veselinović 2018). Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata,* SNSD), that year awarded the Order of Honour with golden rays to the founder and president of the "Night Wolves" Alexander Sergeyevich Zaldastanov known as "the Surgeon" (*Hirurg*).

Hirurg is a close friend and associate of Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation. The "Night Wolves" were also present in Bosnia at the beginning of 2023 - in East Sarajevo, at the parade marking 9 January as the day of Republika Srpska, which was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Hague experiences

It is no secret that Russian influence is shaking the Western Balkans. Under the cover of false love and care, the Russian Federation has been taking roots in the entire region for decades. During the Yugoslav successor wars in the 1990s, many Russian volunteers joined Serb troops and paramilitary organisa-

* Journalist, *Oslobodjenje* daily newspaper, Bosnia and Herzegovina

tions in Bosnia, Croatia and later in Kosovo. This did not prevent Russia from being one of the witnesses to the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. The Russian Federation was also one of the greatest opponents to the military interventions of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces, but that is not the only reason why the Russian Federation in the eyes of the Orthodox believers in the Western Balkans, returned to the title of "mother protector" during the 1990s.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague confirmed the presence of Serb volunteers during the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo – and also documented their involvement in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Russian mercenaries mostly entered Bosnia and Herzegovina via Belgrade and redeployed to the battlefields. They were recruited in Moscow. According to the records, a group of twenty-seven Russian and Romanian mercenaries arrived in Višegrad already in March 1992 (Subašić 2019). Perhaps that is why, every year on 12 April, the day of Russian volunteers is celebrated in Višegrad. In the city where citizens experienced the worst during the war. The fact that a certain number of Russian volunteers participated in the UN mission in these areas, and then returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina as volunteers in the ranks of the aggressors, is also noteworthy.

Analysts from the Western Balkans interpret such actions as Moscow's ambitions to remain an important regional power, especially in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, even after the end of the Cold War. The area of the Western Balkans might therefore serve as a kind of training ground for a clash with the powers of the West. A complete loss of influence in the region, for the Russian Federation would mean the final recognition of defeat in this part of Europe. The concept of the "Russian world" served Serbia as a determinant for strengthening the "Serbian world". These "worlds" are actually closely connected, almost woven into each other. 'Muslims themselves killed civilians in Sarajevo in order to arouse the sympathy of the international community, and the massacre in Srebrenica is a myth', Radovan Karadžić has repeated in 2010 at the trial in The Hague Tribunal this thesis, which Slobodan Milošević, Ratko Mladić, and Radovan Karadžić put forward during the war (ICTY 2010). Since February 2022, we have been hearing the similar messages from Moscow 'The Ukrainians are killing themselves' (United Nations 2022). The concept of the "Serbian world" might as well sound like a continuation, a modernisation, of the idea of a "Greater Serbia"; a notion under whose guise the genocide in Srebrenica and the most brutal war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been committed.

On 24 February 2022, the face of Europe, but also of the whole world, took on a completely different shape. The Russian Federation, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, launched an aggression against sovereign and independent Ukraine. However, Russian tendencies for supremacy and annexation of the territories of Ukraine were visible even in earlier years, and the conflict has been ongoing since 2014. Today, we can see this earlier aggression as a prelude to the war that we have been observing for the past year. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 took place after a referendum that was never recognised by international actors. During the same period, the Russian Federation strongly supported and advocated for separatist forces in the Donbass region. In the same year, pro-Russian separatists proclaimed the independence of two parastates, the Lugansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic. These two Ukrainian areas would serve as a warning, but also a justification for Putin to start his brutal aggression against the rest of Ukraine.

During 2021 and early 2022, Putin deployed the Russian military along the border with Ukraine. On 21 February 2022, he signed a document recognising the self-proclaimed parastates as independent. He sent the message that he should have done it earlier and accused NATO and the United States of turning Ukraine into a war zone. Thundering that 'Ukraine's membership in the NATO alliance would threaten the security of the Russian Federation' (President of Russia 2022a), he sought justification to send soldiers to the territories of these parastatals. Three days later, the Russian Federation began its aggression against Ukraine.

Lessons from the past

Europe seemed surprised at that moment. Meetings of European Union leaders were held almost daily. All the focus of activity was directed to the East of Europe, and the geopolitical European puzzle was shaken by a great earthquake. European leaders learned something from the wars of the nineties: if they did not know who was shooting at whom back then, they had no dilemma in Ukraine.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian aggression against Ukraine awakened memories of the period 1992-1995 among the local people. This did not apply to the political leaders though. While the head of Republika Srpska defended the positions of the Russian Federation, the rest showed sympathy for the Ukrainians, but everything remained in words. Even the EU did not

initially recognise the possible repercussions of the Ukrainian war on the Western Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia's activities in the region are widely known and have been discussed extensively both in policy- and in academic circles. However, both remained silent on several matters: the influx of Russian capital into Croatia, already a member of the European Union, the proverbial "sitting on two chairs" of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, as well as the long blockade of Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the extremely opposing positions of its strongest nationalist parties, SNSD, Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, *HDZ*), and Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije,* SDA). The region also had its own Russian experiences, such as the attempted *coup d'état* in Montenegro. It is not unimportant to mention that the Balkans started to openly talk about a possible new war in the region.

On the eve of aggression, in 2021, the Russian Federation opposed the appointment of Christian Schmidt as the new High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tension in the country was growing anyway. Milorad Dodik, then a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, today the president of Republika Srpska, insisted on a secessionist policy. Dragan Čović, the HDZ leader, increased his ambitions for a third entity, and the public witnessed a rapprochement between the two leaders. At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, at the session of the state House of People, Dragan Čović voted against the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation. He justified this choice by saying that he had been voting against all the extraordinary initiatives of the opposition. After pressure from the neighbouring Republic of Croatia, he emphasised that the parties he represents 'fully follow the policies of the EU, the Republic of Croatia headed by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, and condemn the aggression against Ukraine' (HINA 2022)

Regarding the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation, there were constantly conflicting claims. Milorad Dodik has not not given up on the thesis that Bosnia and Herzegovina never imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation. On the official website of the EU institutions, it is stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina and other 'align themselves with this Council Decision' (Council of the EU 2022), regarding sanctions for several dozens of individuals and companies from Russia. Earlier, in May 2022, the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, stated that 'Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced sanctions against Russia, giving a positive opinion on all 23 declarations' (Al Jazeera Balkans 2022). A month later, Milorad Dodik met

with Vladimir Putin. According to the Russian media, in the statement published after the meeting, Vladimir Putin said that 'regrettably, in the current environment, relations between our two countries have been complicated due to Bosnia and Herzegovina's support of the anti-Russia sanctions' (President of Russia 2022b). At the end of January of 2023, Milorad Dodik said again that 'the right policy today is to remain neutral in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, not to impose sanctions on Russia and not to side with the West against anyone' (SRNA 2023). Politicians from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the opposition in the Republika Srpska state that sanctions have already been introduced. On the other hand, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Serbia voted before the UN General Assembly in March last year for a Resolution condemning the Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine.

We witnessed the close ties between Milorad Dodik and his allies with Vladimir Putin recently. At the ceremony held on 9 January 2023, Milorad Dodik awarded Vladimir Putin with the highest medal of the Republika Sprska. Vladimir Putin has received the Order of this entity on a necklace, for "patriotic concern and love for Republika Srpska" in Banja Luka. Condemnations came from the EU. But such reaction was of little concern to Milorad Dodik does not care too much about the opinion of the EU, at the commemoration of 9 January in East Sarajevo. On that occasion there were numerous reactions, condemnations, calls for the introduction of sanctions. Milorad Dodik did not give in.

Influence through the media

On the other side of the Drina river, there are the problems with Kosovo: the non-introduction of sanctions against Russia and the strengthening of Russian influence put Aleksandar Vučić in an unenviable position. Because of this, he distanced himself from Milorad Dodik, again repeating how much Serbia respects the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the temperature was rising in the North of Kosovo. Kosovo is Serbia's greatest excuse for ties with Russia. The influence of Russian media and Russian propaganda certainly does not falter. In the midst of the aggression against Ukraine, RT Balkan, which is banned in the EU, started broadcasting in Serbia. Russian Sputnik has had a branch in Belgrade for years.

Many analysts warn that the Russian Federation has been expanding its

network for years, not only in Serbia, but also in Montenegro and part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska. Satellites of the Russian Federation regularly sow fear and concern among citizens. 'Wagner Group published an ad for volunteers, more conditions rather tempting' is the title of the article published by RT Balkan at the beginning of January 2023 (the first text was published on 5 January, deleted and published as changed under the old date (RT Balkan 2023). The first text also mentioned an announcement from the Фотозарисовки Telegram channel, which states that 'the military company Wagner continues to recruit volunteers' (TGStat 2023). It is a notorious private unit owned by a Russian oligarch close to Vladimir Putin.

Although both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina prohibit warfare in private and other armies by law, military and political analysts believe that citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Serbia have been going to foreign battlefields for years, fighting for Russian interests. The media and analysts recently warned about the activities of Russian spies in Serbia. The continuous presence and entry of Vladimir Putin's "Night Wolves" into Bosnia and Herzegovina is also part of that package, and the Russian Federation was behind the *coup d'état* attempt in Montenegro in 2016. Riots on the streets of Montenegro lasted for days. The goal was, to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. Russian citizens Eduard Shirokov (known as Eduard Shismakov) and Vladimir Popov, were convicted in absentia for the crime of terrorism and creation of a criminal organisation. They were sentenced to 15 and 12 years respectively, but the first-instance verdict was overturned and a retrial is underway.

The engagement of the Russian Federation in the destabilisation of this region was also confirmed by a report of a high-ranking official of the United States administration. According to an unnamed Administration source, the Russian Federation gave about $500,000 to the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania in 2017. Russian satellites in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro were also financed. It is actually about funds given to Milorad Dodik's campaigns for the 2018 elections and funds for the pro-Russian Democratic Front (DF) party in Montenegro. Since 2014, it has been estimated that Russian Federation has secretly given more than $300 million to political parties and candidates in 24 countries around the world (RSE 2022).

The United States has invested significant resources in Bosnia and Herzegovina in recent years to engage in the fight against Russian influence. A special review was also made in the field of cyber security.

New threats

Whether due to dissatisfaction with the situation on the Ukrainian front or for some other reasons, Russia has been increasing its threats in these areas in recent years. In May 2022, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina said that 'the membership of any country in the Alliance implies absolute support for NATO's military and political goals, i.e. anti-Russian steps, which means that the actions of each member state within the Alliance are considered directed against of Russia' (RTRS 2022).

When in June 2022 Ukraine, together with Moldova, received the status of a candidate for the EU there was no such news for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The decision caused a storm of reactions. With numerous messages that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a place in the EU, but that it is not time for candidate status, many remained confused. Especially since the EU also realised how much the Russian Federation is investing in starting a new conflict in the Balkans. The European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, even before granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, said that the Western Balkans is a strategic priority for the EU, just as the EU is for the Western Balkans. He wrote on his Twitter account on 16 May that 'EU enlargement policy is the only guarantee of peace, stability and prosperity of the region. It is necessary to make progress in the accession processes of the Western Balkans. All EU decisions in that direction they should be made urgently' (Várhelyi 2022).

In August 2022, after the participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Crimea Platform, where full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine was confirmed, new Russian threats followed. The Embassy of the Russian Federation invited partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina 'to be reasonable and balanced' with the remark that otherwise they will bear responsibility for all the consequences of worsening bilateral relations (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022). It was a time when the UN was waiting for a decision on the extension of EUFOR's Althea Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For months, there has been speculation about a Russian veto in the UN Security Council. There was no veto, the Althea Mission was extended, and the EU granted Bosnia and Herzegovina the status of a candidate country in mid-December in 2022. Although the door to the European future of Bosnia and Herzegovina is open, the question remains whether political leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina will go through them with full swing or else lock the door due to Russian influence.

Old fear in a new guise

With the aim of destabilising the Western Balkans, RIA Novosti recently published its geostrategic horoscope for 2023. The text states that in 2023, 'besides Kosovo, Bosnia could also explode' (Akopov 2023). The message is clear as day, not only as a threat to the Balkans but also to Europe. At the beginning of 2023, Bosnia is still in the process of forming a new government after the elections in autumn 2022. At the same time, there seems to be visible progress and commitment to a new push for Euro-Atlantic integration, even without the largest Bosniak party involved in current coalition negotiations. It seems that the commitment of the EU, the USA and the UK towards Bosnia and its future EU membership is vital for progress and committing elites to move forward with the agenda towards EU membership. It is unquestionable that the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in membership in the EU and the NATO. This is exactly why the Russian Federation is not giving up. The question above all questions is the seriousness of the local authorities, but also the strength of the public, and the media to show the citizens where repeating the scenario from the nineties could lead. It is beyond doubt that many have an interest in destroying Bosnia and Herzegovina in the shadow of other wars.

References

Al Jazeera Balkans. 'Vučić: BiH uvela sankcije Rusiji, a Republiku Srpsku nije pitala'. *Al Jazeera Balkans,* 21 May 2022. Available at: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/5/21/Vučić-bih-uvela-sankcije-rusiji-dodika-i-rs-nisu-pitali.

Akopov, Petr. 'Европа стала самой горячей точкой мира'. *RIA Novosti,* 2 January 2023. Available at: https://ria.ru/20230102/evropa-1842741314.html.

Council of the EU. 'Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine'. 13 October 2022. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/13/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-respect-of-actions-undermining-or-threatening-the-territorial-integrity-sovereignty-and-independence-of-ukraine/.

Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. 'Izjava Ambasade Ruske Federacije u Bosni i Hercegovini'. *Facebook*, 24 August 2022. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/rusembbih/posts/pfb.

HINA. 'Čović s ukrajinskom zastavom osudio rusku agresiju i pohvalio Plenkovića: "Učinio je nešto što nitko nije već 20 godina"'. *Jutarnji list*, 25 March 2022. Available at: https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/covic-s-ukrajinskom-zastavom-osudio-rusku-agresiju-i-pohvalio-plenkovica-ucinio-je-nesto-sto-nitko-nije-vec-20-godina-15175218.

ICTY. 'Uvodne riječi odbrane Karadžić (Deo 2/3)'. 2 March 2010. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djDRllqZtgQ.

President of Russia. 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation'. *The Kremlin,* 21 February 2022a. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828.

President of Russia. 'Meeting with Member of Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency Milorad Dodik'. *The Kremlin,* 18 June 2022b. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68672.

RSE. 'Rusija potrošila 300 miliona dolara da utiče na izbore u desetinama

zemalja, kaže SAD'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* 13 September 2022. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-izbori-sjedinjene-drzave-uticaj/32032267.html.

RT Balkan. 'Prva grupa zatvorenika odslužila vojni rok: Idu kući sa odlikovanjima' (changed text). *RT Balkan,* 5 January 2023. Available at: https://lat.rt.rs/news/14049-zatvorenici-rusija-rat-u-ukrajini-vagnerovci-dobrovoljci-prigozin/.

RTRS. 'Ruska Ambasada za RTRS: Pojedini političari u BiH neosnovano napadaju Rusiju'. *RTRS,* 26 May 2022. Available at: https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=474711&fbclid=IwAR0KtTkpvo3zVN1XNrA-CLFxnseGeKpJ-1TPDhNQhjoIk98Ahh25qcZ8pfz8.

SRNA. 'Dodik: Prava politika ostati neutralan u rusko-ukrajinskom sukobu i ne uvoditi sankcije Rusiji'. *Frontal,* 25 January 2023. Available at: https://www.frontal.ba/novost/109534/-dodik-prava-politika-ostati-neutralan-u-rusko-ukrajinskom-sukobu-i-ne-uvoditi-sankcije-rusiji.

Subašić, Edin. 'Ko su bili "ruski psi" rata u BiH'. *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 15 April 2019. Available at: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2019/4/15/ko-su-bili-ruski-psi-rata-u-bih.

TGStat. 'В ЧВК «Вагнер» продолжается набор добровольцев! Работы много, работа сложная!' Фотозарисовки, 5 January 2023. Available at: https://tgstat.ru/en/channel/@photopmc.

United Nations. 'Ukraine - Security Council | Humanitarian Situation | Official'. 21 March 2022. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hd7dRQhqYFI.

Várhelyi, Olivér. Twitter, 16 May 2022. Available at: https://twitter.com/OliverVarhelyi/status/1526152116770832385/photo/2.

Veselinović, Gojko. 'Bajkeri bez motora obilaze Banjaluku'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 21 March 2018. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/nocni-vukovi-banjaluka/29113719.html.

The Impact of Geopolitics following the War in Ukraine on Autocratisation in the Western Balkans

Damir Kapidžić*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shocked people living in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). It brought back memories of the war in BiH three decades ago, reminding them of the instability and violence that had so recently affected them personally. A new war in Europe and the shelling of Kyiv, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities led to a resurgence of past unprocessed trauma and a drawing of parallels to the Bosnian War of the 1990s. Remembering conflict was no longer just an issue connected with the past, as it took on a new form in reliving memories in the present through daily images from Ukraine. The prevailing question throughout BiH was 'Could this happen to us again?' However, within the country, not all ethnic groups have the same compassion and solidarity for what is going on in Ukraine. Not all parts of the country and not all communities were equally affected, both by the violence in the 1990s, and this more recent resurgence of memory. While Bosniaks and citizens of besieged cities that experienced urban violence grieved the most, many Serbs living in the Republika Srpska (RS) did not connect the war in Ukraine with personal experience. This contrast is telling of geopolitical fault lines still present in the region.

* University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Science.

The wars of Yugoslav dissolution profoundly affected all countries of the Western Balkans. They shaped the politics in the region for decades to come, and still exert strong influence on societies and politics. Especially geopolitical allegiances, established through support for, or resistance to, international intervention that ended most conflicts, are again being emphasised. Croatia is now firmly rooted in the "West", Serbia attempts to remain neutral between increasing Western and Eastern influence, while all other countries have a general Western outlook, most of them even being NATO members. BiH with its complex political system is internally divided between pro-Western support and neutrality. All Western Balkan countries are currently witnessing democratic decline (Kapidžić & Stojarova 2022), and the question arises if it is possible to identify a connection between autocratisation and geopolitics? In some cases, this has led to a slide back into authoritarianism reminiscent of the 1990s, along with an increase in nationalist narratives. These new competitive authoritarianisms align with a stronger foreign influence of Russia and other non-democratic actors, and support for policies that are in line with a Russian world view aimed at limiting Western liberal democratic reach and that of NATO. The impact this influence has on electoral contest in the region is not negligible (Conley et al. 2019).

This contribution aims to explore the impact of new geopolitical realities that crystalised through the war in Ukraine on autocratisation and electoral support for leaders with authoritarian tendencies in the Western Balkans. The first section gives an overview of geopolitical (re)alignment in the wake of the war in Ukraine and how this affected relations with Russia. The second section explores the resurgence of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans focusing on foreign influence, illiberal politics and elections. The contribution concludes with a reflection on whether emerging geopolitical fault lines can lead to further autocratisation.

Political realities of the war in Ukraine in the Western Balkans

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The political system of BiH is built on principles of consociational power-sharing. Introduced through the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, the power-shar-

ing arrangement requires consensus on all major foreign-policy issues. There is no consensus among political elites in BiH on whether there is an invasion and war in Ukraine, or if it is just an armed conflict. Positions on this issue very much align with geopolitical allegiances of different ethnic groups. The Bosnian Serb leadership identifies with Russia and has frequently voiced its opposition to calling out or sanctioning the Russian regime (Milojević 2022). Even though BiH has repeatedly voted to condemn Russian aggression in the United Nations, this was always followed by a statement from Bosnian Serb leadership under Milorad Dodik that such vote does not reflect the official and consensual position of BiH leadership (RFE 2022a). When BiH imposed limited sanctions on Russia, usually following European and US pressure, these were followed by statements from Serb officials that their effect on relations with Russia is negligible. BiH still maintains a visa-free regime with Russia. On the other hand, Bosniak and Croat leaders, as well as politicians from multi-ethnic parties, have aligned with the West and in support of Ukraine. These differences within the country reflect alliances formed between ethnic groups and countries they have close ties with. But their consequence is a geopolitical fault line running through BiH and its institutions.

The Russian regime has strongly supported the current Bosnian Serb leadership and is especially fond of Dodik. They have supported his antagonism towards the Office of the High Representative, an international oversight body with extensive executive power tasked with implementing the peace agreement. Russia has voted against the appointment of the current High Representative, Christian Schmidt, and considers him illegitimate and his decisions void (Huseinović 2021). The Russian embassy in Sarajevo has repeatedly issued threatening statements, warning BiH not to pursue NATO membership. This support and admiration have been equally reciprocal. Bosnian Serb officials held several official state visits to Moscow during 2022, even as the West increased international sanctions. On the Day of RS in early 2023, a holiday considered unconstitutional by the BiH Constitutional Court, Dodik awarded Vladimir Putin the highest ceremonial honour, the Orden of RS (Zvijerac 2023). This loyalty of Serb political leadership to Russia can only partially be explained by a perceived shared culture and religion. It is more likely the result of unequivocal and authoritarian Russian support for Dodik, a likeminded authoritarian they can rely on to safeguard their geopolitical interests in the Balkans.

Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia

Russia had friends in the Western Balkans before it started the war in Ukraine, the majority of which remained true to the regime even after the invasion. A case in point is Croatia's President Zoran Milanović, a social democrat whom the Russian media consider one of its main advocates in the West. As the president of a European Union (EU) and NATO country, Milanović became infamous for raging against Western leadership while touting the invincible Russian army (Vurušić 2022). His statements were as much out of conviction as they were political manoeuvring against the pro-Ukrainian government in Croatia headed by his political rivals. He is not alone in (mis)using geopolitics for political gain. In Montenegro one of the major coalitions, Democratic Front (DF), is vehemently pro-Russian (RFE 2022b). Its voter base are Montenegrin Serbs, and their geopolitical stance is echoed in electoral messaging, leading to similar divisions as in BiH. In 2016, Russia was accused of meddling by supporting a terrorist group that unsuccessfully planned to overthrow the government and kill President Milo Đukanović (Hunt 2019). With Montenegrin presidential elections scheduled for Spring 2023, a possible win of a pro-Russian candidate might shift the country's geopolitical orientation.

Serbia is widely considered Russia's main ally in the Western Balkans, with claimed cultural ties, but more practically because of a staunch anti-NATO position. President Aleksandar Vučić has adopted a friendly stance towards Russia as this serves him politically. Russian support has been particularly important for Vučić on the unresolved status of Kosovo, which Serbia considers a part of its territory. This support comes with conditions and wavers in reaction to Serbian statements and policies that the Russian leadership perceives as problematic (Luković 2022). At the same time Serbia has strong linkages to the EU and is a candidate country that has opened accession negotiations. Vučić seeks to maintain Serbia's neutrality in the Ukraine conflict, while also attempting to protect Serbia's close relations with both Russia and the West. This balancing act is reminiscent of Yugoslav non-alignment in the Cold War and has large support of Serbia's population (Rujević 2022). The reactions of political leaders in BiH, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro to the war in Ukraine can be linked to geopolitical divisions in the region. These divisions, and leaders' attempts to protect their own interests, have shaped the course of their actions, as well as those of opposition parties. The war in Ukraine has sharpened geopolitical allegiances that existed in the Western Balkans, some of which are closely linked to rising authoritarianism.

The rise of competitive authoritarianism

Illiberal politics and the importance of elections in the Western Balkans

Elections are still the main way how governments come to power and gain legitimacy in Western Balkan countries. But elections are compromised by illiberal politics. These are sets of policies adopted by ruling parties that incrementally tilt the electoral playing field to their advantage, with the aim to remain in power indefinitely (Kapidžić 2020). Their main targets are independent media, the judiciary, and oversight institutions that ensure public accountability. As a result in the region, we can see gradations of deficient democracies and several competitive authoritarian regimes (Bieber 2020). This is not just an issue for countries of the Western Balkans as political parties with noticeable authoritarian tendencies have geopolitical support from likeminded countries abroad.

Authoritarian leaders support each other by forming alliances, strengthening linkages such as trade, providing financial assistance, and offering each other political support and external legitimacy. The most significant support comes from strong authoritarian states like Russia and China, both of which have become increasingly assertive in the past decade. To support its allies abroad, Russia utilises a variety of tactics, including the manipulation of the media, spreading of disinformation, interference in elections, and instrumentalisation of international organisations (Conley et al. 2019). Through these means, Russia both supports its allies and protects its own interests. Before the war in Ukraine, leaders with authoritarian tendencies could rely on support from Russia without risking their good relations with Western countries. China has strengthened ties to the likeminded authoritarian leaders with strong political support, backed up by infrastructure investments and access to advanced security technology. As geopolitics shifted, it has become even more difficult for the Balkan autocrats to maintain good relations with both the East and West.

Two-level game in Balkan geopolitics

The current geopolitical moment in the Western Balkans can best be viewed as a two-level-game (Putnam 1988). This means that domestic politics and international politics are intertwined, and the two have become inseparable. In the

Western Balkans, the conflict between the East and the West is also a domestic one, played out through party politics, in the electoral arena, and through individual governments' foreign policies. It becomes especially evident in the runup to elections and during campaigning. For example, during election campaigning for the BiH elections in October 2022, Dodik met with Putin in Moscow to emphasise his closeness to Russia (RFE 2022c). He followed this up with a plan for a football match between Russia and BiH to help the Russian team regain international integrity after suspension from the World Cup in Qatar. However, as popular attitudes in the Western Balkans dominantly align with a Western geopolitical view, except for a part of the Serb electorate, the focus of the two-level-game shifts to emphasise interactions with the West. Ultimately, elections are one of the key arenas where this geopolitical contest will be fought out. The intersection between geopolitics and electoral calculations will likely play a role in the 2023 Montenegrin presidential elections, and the elections in Serbia a few months later, where threatened autocrats might try to reignite good relations with Russia.

Are we heading towards a new normal?

Is a new struggle emerging between a liberal West and an authoritarian East with a fault line through the Balkans? This is rather unlikely. Russia-friendly competitive authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans are not up for an easy time. The leadership in Serbia, and Vučić in particular, are torn in between EU demands to align their foreign policy as a negotiating candidate country and remaining on good terms with Russia. While the approval of Russia remains high among Serbs, it is largely cultural and historic, and much less political. The Serbian government's support for Russia's political actions is likewise performative and discursive, but not followed up by policy alignment. To put it bluntly, when forced to choose, retaining the economic and political benefits associated with the EU are too significant to ignore.

One year after the invasion of Ukraine, societies in the Western Balkans have largely forgotten the war which had a limited impact on their lives. Ukrainian refugees and Russians fleeing oppression and mobilisation are becoming more visible in some countries, especially Serbia and Montenegro. In other places, the effects are limited or are intertwined with global impacts and inflation. Utilising the two-level-game model, combined with the Western imperative exclusivity against neutrality for candidate countries, can help us explain the geopo-

litical realignment of all Western Balkans away from Russia. Domestic popular pressure in most countries to maintain good relations with the West is translated into policy priorities that have geopolitical implications. Geopolitical realities shaped by linkages and leverage to the EU still hold strong. The European Union retains an overwhelming leverage over politics in the Western Balkans and can strengthen this further by using all available policy instruments to pursue its foreign policy goals in the region, including its economic power. There is evidently a geopolitical power play in the Balkans that overlaps with democratisation in the region, a fact that the EU should not ignore.

References

Bieber, Florian. *The rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Conley, Heather A., Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, & Martin Vladimirov. *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*. Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019.

Hunt, Jeremy. 'Attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016: Foreign Secretary's statement'. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 9 May 2019. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-attempted-coup-in-montenegro-in-2016.

Huseinović, Samir. 'Rusija ušutkala Christana Schmidta'. *Deutsche Welle,* 3 November 2021. Available at: https://www.dw.com/hr/rusija-ušutkala-christana-schmidta/a-59708701.

Kapidžić, Damir. 'The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe'. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* vol. 20, no. 1 (January 2020): 1–17.

Kapidžić, Damir, & Věra Stojarová. *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe: How Ruling Elites Undermine Democracy*. London: Routledge, 2022.

Luković, Danijela. 'Izgleda da za Rusiju Kosovo više nije "takozvano"'. *Blic,* 20 October 2022. Available at: https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/rusija-i-dalje-brani-srbiju-ali-je-ublazila-stav-prema-kosovu-u-un/b9xcyqv.

Milojević, Milorad. 'Republika Srpska ignoriše sankcije i otvoreno privlači ruske investicije'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* September 6, 2022. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-rusija-republika-srpska-investicije-sankcije/32018762.html.

Putnam, Robert. 'Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games'. *International Organisation* vol. 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 427–460.

RFE. 'Dodik kaže da BiH nema stav o suspendovanju Rusije iz Savjeta za ljudska prava UN'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* 7 April 2022a. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dodik-bih-nema-stav-rusija-savjet-za-ljudska-prava-un/31791249.html.

RFE. 'Vlada i Demokratski front različito o sankcijama koje Crna Gora sprovodi prema Rusiji'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* 26 December 2022b. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vlada-crne-gore--sankcije--rusiji--demokratski-front/32194397.html.

RFE. 'Dodik Travels to Moscow for Meeting with Putin ahead of Elections'. *Radio Free Europe,* 21 September 2022c. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/32043995.html.

Rujević, Nemanja. 'Vučić pokušava imitirati Jugoslaviju iz doba nesvrstanih'. *Deutsche Welle,* 10 March 2022. Available at: https://www.dw.com/hr/vučić-pokušava-imitirati-jugoslaviju-iz-doba-nesvrstanih/a-61077570.

Vurušić, Vlado. 'Milanović zbog svojih izjava postao heroj Putinovih medija'. *Jutarnji list,* 19 October 2022. Available at: https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/milanovic-zbog-svojih-izjava-postao-heroj-putinovih-medija-pogledajte-kako-rusi-slave-hrvatskog-predsjednika-15263833.

Zvijerac, Predrag. 'Ordenje RS Putinu, Vučiću, patrijarsima i ratnim zločincima'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* 10 Janaury 2023. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dodik-putin-odlikovanje-bih-rusija-srbija/32217480.html.

Enlargement Politics Based on Geopolitics? A Proposal for a Geopolitics-Driven Enlargement Policy

Soeren Keil*

Much has been said about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022 and is continuing as of this writing. The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz used the term "Zeitenwende", referring to a distinct change in the political and geopolitical landscape in post-Second World War Europe.

This "Zeitenwende" has resulted in a reset of Germany's defence policy, and has given new energy to many other policies across Europe as well. In vital areas such as energy security and investment in renewable energy production and diversification of oil and gas sources, economic changes as a result of a global recession and growing inflation have all been addressed as a result of the war in Ukraine. Moreover, a renewed focus on European Union enlargement – both towards the Western Balkans, where countries have been promised over 20 years ago that they would be future members of the EU, but also towards Ukraine and Moldova (and Georgia).

There is little doubt amongst academics and policy-makers that EU enlargement requires a reset after decades of stagnation that has resulted in frustration on all sides. It empowered authoritarian leaders in the Western Balkan region

* University of Fribourg, International Research and Consulting Centre at the Institute of Federalism.

and opened the door for foreign influences from countries such as Russia, China and Turkey. Yet, what this reset will look-like has been the subject of heated debates with suggestions ranging from a pause on enlargement (as pointed out by the French president Emmanuel Macron) to ideas of "staged accession" (as proposed by Austrian elites in the past) (see also: Emerson et al. 2021). While there is consensus on the problems of the current enlargement framework across key stakeholders, the question on how to overcome them, however, remains highly contested. It is the aim of this contribution to explore one option to overcome the current enlargement fatigue (Economides 2020), by developing an enlargement framework that focuses primarily on geopolitics. The first part of this short contribution will highlight what such a framework would look like, while the following two sections will look at the opportunities and challenges of such an approach.

EU enlargement geopolitics

It would be incorrect to say that EU enlargement has never taken geopolitical considerations into account. Even with the Big Bang enlargement of 2004 (and 2007), and the narrative of a "Uniting of the East and the West", there was a distinct geopolitical aspect to Eastern enlargement. The expansion of the European Single Market to turn into the largest single market in the world, as well as an expansion of the EU as a political and security Union right next to the borders of Russia were important considerations. For countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia membership in the EU provided numerous economic and political advantages (plus a high degree of prestige), but security considerations, a fear of the old "Big Brother" Russia, as well as the double-integration into NATO and EU were vitally important for their own economic and security concerns (O'Brennan 2006). EU enlargement and geopolitics are therefore not mutually exclusive but connected by default.

However, as regularly referred to by European elites and emphasised in the Copenhagen criteria, the EU of course is more than a union of partners created out of geopolitical necessity. The EU is an economic union – a large common market with its own rules and procedures; it is a legal union with its own constitutional framework through the EU treaties, and it is a security community – where conflicts are solved through the courts, through negotiations and diplomacy. Focusing exclusively on the security and geopolitical aspects of enlargement, would fundamentally shift the very basis of the EU – away from the

legal and value union towards one focused on security and peace. This raises the question of what such a union of geopolitical partners of necessity would look like in the European context.[1]

At the heart of such a geopolitical enlargement policy would be a commitment to the interests of the Union. These, in turn, would have to be defined and specified in detail. While different versions of European Security Strategies exist,[2] geopolitical interests would not anymore, as was the case during the Cold War, be defined in terms of security. Instead, a geopolitical enlargement policy would offer the EU the chance to think its own priorities in its near neighbourhood, and beyond that in the wider world. This would require a focus not just on political and security challenges, but also on geo-economics, energy security, access to valuable natural resources and ensuring key trading partnerships beyond geographical Europe and its near neighbourhood. An enlargement policy based on geopolitics would furthermore need to recognise that the EU is in competition with other powers in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood. Indeed, a "New Eastern Question" is emerging – highlighting the struggle for influence and power in the Balkans and Eastern Europe between different regional and global actors, including the EU, the USA, Russia, China and Turkey (Keil & Stahl 2022). In this struggle over hegemony, energy supply, access to ports and infrastructure projects are even more important than the presence of military troops and alliances.

However, this focus on geo-economics is also a great opportunity for the EU – as it is its trump card. EU membership means membership in the largest single market in the world, it means access to substantial investment, to highly skilled labour, to specialised technologies and to some of the largest research funding worldwide. In other words, the EU's focus on geopolitical competition opens the opportunity for the EU and its Member States to use enlargement as an incentive, which neither Russia nor China (or anyone else) can compete with. Quick accession of the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia would be beneficial for the existing Member States as well. The EU's market would expand, giving investment opportu-

1 For a similar, but slightly more theoretical discussion on this issue, see Frank Schimmelfennig's contribution in this volume.

2 The first European Security Strategy was passed in 2003 and has since been revised. It is available at: Council of the European Union. *A Secure Europe in a Better World,* 2003, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/publications/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world/.

nities to German and French industries. Access to labour at a lower cost and internal labour migration might close some of the gaps in the labour markets in Western Europe, which have emerged in recent years as a result of fast-changing technological requirements and an aging population. Moreover, EU integration would bring stability to countries that still face a lot of fragility and risk of conflict. While the EU has, for example, been unable to solve the Cyprus conflict before Cyprus became a Member State in 2004, the need for a diplomatic solution has led to a neglectable risk of conflict escalation on the divided island. The same might be true for Bosnia and Herzegovina and, possibly, for Serbia and Kosovo. One could even argue that a speedy integration of Ukraine into the EU, and connected security guarantees for the country, would contribute to a quicker end of the current war, with Russia risking an extension of the conflict to the whole of the EU – and NATO. This certainly has the potential to force Russia to the negotiation table. Fundamental problems might not be solved, but the stability of EU membership offers incentives for a peaceful conflict resolution. Hence, there are numerous good reasons for existing EU Member States to focus on a geopolitical enlargement policy to enhance their own security, increase economic competitiveness and ensure the EU's market expansion.

The advantages of geopolitical enlargement

In addition to the described advantages for EU Member States, geopolitical enlargement policy offers numerous other advantages. First, and foremost, it would revive the enlargement process as a whole. It is generally accepted that the current process is stuck, with the EU still rhetorically and formally committed to enlargement, but most EU Member States now sceptical of any further enlargement in light of the ongoing economic, social and political challenges the EU faces (Džankić, Keil, & Kmezić 2019). Offering a fast perspective for membership would lead to new political dynamics in the Western Balkan and near neighbourhood countries. If the EU was seen as being serious about integration, reform processes and pro-EU voices would be strengthened, even if the focus was on security and economic alignment and not necessarily on values, norms, and full legal alignment with the EU's Acquis Communautaire. The EU's own credibility would substantially increase as well, and conditionality

– if targeted and limited to achieve quick accession in light of geopolitical considerations – would be strengthened. Moreover, directly addressing Russian, Chinese, and Turkish engagement in the region, especially when it counters or contradicts EU priorities would allow for the EU to promote its own interests more directly, thereby strengthening local voices aligned with the EU. Giving direct benefits for reform efforts would make EU resistance and scepticism difficult and costly in the candidate and potential candidate countries. The EU would immediately become a serious actor again in the region. This would also increase the Union's potential for meaningful engagement beyond the region, therefore increasing EU actorness on a global level.

It is easy to see how an enlargement policy focused on geopolitical considerations would be beneficial for the EU, as well as for its Member States. It would also be very beneficial for the candidate and potential candidate countries as conditionality would become more focused and a clear and credible membership perspective would emerge if reforms are implemented. The limitation of reforms to security and economic areas in line with geopolitical interests also limits their domestic costs, making their implementation through domestic elites more likely. Imagining a Union not focused primarily on common norms and values might be challenging – but, as will be outlined below, this is partly already the case in the EU. There has been an increasing norm and value divergence amongst existing Member States, and liberal democracy has become a symbolically contested example. An interesting question would be the functionality of such a Union – though other areas that ensure free trade, such as the various trading blocks in Africa demonstrate that these Unions can function without a commitment to democratic governance.

Challenges of geopolitical enlargement

The first challenge of enlargement policies driven by geopolitical concerns is legal and political divergence. In other words, future EU members would not be required to implement the whole acquis anymore, as well as demonstrating norm compliance and absorption capacity. Instead, they would have to demonstrate security alignment and economic capacity to participate competitively in the single market. This would mean a de facto end not only to the EU as a legal union but also as a union based on specific norms and values, as enshrined

in the Copenhagen criteria and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.[3] This divergence of the security and economic union from the legal and normative union also affects existing Member States. It would make any criticism of rule of law and fundamental rights challenges in Poland and Hungary by the EU's institutions and other Member States a lot more difficult, if not impossible. In reality, what this would mean is that an enlargement policy that is exclusively focused on geopolitical issues, would fundamentally change the nature of the EU. The EU, as an economic, political, normative and legal union would change to become a large common market with common security interests in geopolitics and geo-economics. This would be a substantial divergence from the "ever-closer union" foreseen in the Treaty of Rome and the commitment to liberty, democracy, respect for human and fundamental rights, and the rule of law as centrally referred to in the Preamble of the Maastricht Treaty. It would be a union which prioritises security and economic interests and ensures common rules, procedures and a joint institutional framework for these areas.

Conclusion

Based on the substantial change of the nature of the EU if a geopolitical enlargement policy was to be promoted, it is worth asking if this is a bad thing? The EU would move away from normative and institutional requirements such as the rule of law, democratic decision-making and the protection of human- and fundamental rights. However, it is important to highlight that normative question aside, an internal divergence from these principles can already be observed within the EU. Democratic standards have been substantially undermined in Poland, and the rule of law has been attacked through several rounds of judicial reforms in Hungary. Democratic backsliding has also been observed in other EU Member States (Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley 2018). The EU, while trying to address these challenges through new sanctions and procedures, is already drifting away substantially from a normative and legal union. Furthermore, legal opt-outs from the Schengen Agreement and the common Euro-currency for some Member States have further undermined the common legal framework of the EU.

3 The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is available at: https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter#:~:text=The%20Charter%20of%20Fundamental%20Rights%20of%20the%20European,the%20Treaty%20of%20Lisbon%20on%201%20December%202009.

There can no doubt that enlargement as it is today is in crisis. Stagnation, frustration, and disappointment have characterised the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans, but also with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Thinking about a clear path to EU membership, which would also promote EU interests and offer a timely and focused enlargement strategy, is therefore essential. Geopolitical enlargement policy is one such option. It would change the nature of the EU but offer a clear path to membership and tackle the challenges to EU interests in the region by Russia, China and Turkey. However, it will fundamentally raise the question what the EU wants to be in the future – what kind of Union does the EU want to be and can it be with an increased membership well over 30 members? A second question then is what role the Western Balkan countries as well as Moldova, Ukraine and potentially also Georgia would play in this "new" European Union?

References

Cianetti, Licia, James Dawson, & Seán Hanley. 'Rethinking "democratic backsliding" in Central and Eastern Europe – looking beyond Hungary and Poland'. *East European Politics* vol. 34, no. 3, (2018): 243-256.

Džankić, Jelena, Soeren Keil, & Marko Kmezić. 'Introduction: The Europeanisation in the Western Balkans'. In *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans – A Failure of Conditionality?* Edited by Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, and Marko Kmezić, 1-15. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Economides, Spyros. 'From fatigue to resistance: EU enlargement and the Western Balkans'. *Working Paper (17) The Dahrendorf Forum*, Berlin, 2020. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104393/1/Economides_from_fatigue_to_resistance_published.pdf.

Emerson, Michael, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans, & Strahinja Subotić. *A Template for Staged Accession to the EU*. Brussels: CEPS, October 2021, available at: https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=34206&pdf=A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf.

Keil, Soeren, and Bernhard Stahl: 'Introduction'. In *A New Eastern Question? Great Powers and the Post-Yugoslav States*, edited by Soeren Keil and Bernhard Stahl, 27-56. Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2022.

O'Brennan, John. '"Bringing Geopolitics Back In": Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union'. *Cambridge Review of International Study* vol. 19, no. 1 (2006): 155-169.

A Push in EU Integration as a Silver Lining of the Ukraine Tragedy? Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia

Keiichi Kubo*

What was the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkan countries? The most visible change was the swift policy change of the European Union, which demonstrated new commitment to the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. For the Western Balkan countries, it was paradoxically a positive by-product of a tragic event. This policy change means that the EU has more leverage on the domestic politics in the Western Balkan countries, as the benefits of compliance and the cost of non-compliance with the EU requirements are greater than before. However, it does not necessarily mean that the EU's new policy course had the same effect on all of the Western Balkan countries, as the examined cases of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia hereafter) demonstrate. It is particularly interesting to compare these two cases because they are the only two countries in the region that have not introduced the sanctions to Russia. The analysis developed below demonstrates that the EU's new policy course had a significant impact on Serbia because of the geopolitical change caused by the Ukraine war, while it only had a limited impact on Bosnia because of the highly divided nature of the Bosnian state: in Bosnia,

* Waseda University, Tokyo, Faculty of Political Science and Economics.

the EU faces a dilemma between its support for the Bosnian sovereignty and its usage of accession conditionality as a policy tool to put pressure, which makes it far more difficult for the EU to put pressure effectively and consistently on the local politicians in Bosnia.

Silver lining of a tragedy: a push for EU enlargement

Before the war in Ukraine, the commitment to the enlargement process on the EU side was becoming weak and inconsistent. It would suffice to recall the French refusal to let North Macedonia and Albania to start accession talks with the EU in 2019. At that time, the French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted the need for: 'a reformed European Union and a reformed enlargement process, a real credibility and a strategic vision of who we are and our role' (Emmott, Guarascio, & Pennetier 2019). Macron practically said that he was not ready to consider the accession of new Member States from Western Balkans regardless of the reforms made by those states. The EU was not ready to further enlarge. On the eve of the EU summit, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev warned that China and Russia would 'fill in the vacuum' left by the Europeans (Emmott, Guarascio, & Pennetier 2019). This warning did not quite resonate across the European capitals, which discouraged the Western Balkan countries from further reforms domestically and from building good neighbourly relations across the region.

Clearly, the war in Ukraine led to the policy change on the EU's side. EU Member States, such as Austria and Slovenia, argued that there was 'an urgent need to give impetus to the integration of the Balkans' (Mirel 2022), to which the EU responded quickly. This policy was evident in a series of concrete initiatives, including the start of the accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022; the Berlin Process Summit in November with the EU pledge of €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans (EC 2022a); the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana in December with the reaffirmation of the 'full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans' (EC 2022b). These commitments were followed by various economic incentives for the region, as well as the European Council's decision to grant EU candidate status to Bosnia on 15 December 2022. For the Western Balkan countries, the EU's new commitment

to the accession process was certainly a silver lining of a tragedy. Even though it is yet to be seen whether or to what extent this policy change leads to a faster EU accession for the Western Balkan countries, the commitment of the EU appears more credible and the prospect of eventual accession to the EU more realistic, at least compared to the period right before the war in Ukraine.

Pressure on the "friends of Russia": a new direction for the Serbia-Kosovo relationship

The shift of enlargement policy direction means that the EU has more leverage on the domestic politics in the Western Balkan countries, as the benefits of compliance and the cost of non-compliance with the EU requirements are greater than before. The EU has attempted to use its leverage to put pressure on the "friends of Russia", most notably the Serbian government. While the Union's efforts to push Serbia to introduce sanctions to Putin's Russia were unsuccessful so far, the engagement of the EU and its Member States opened up new avenues for resolving one of the most sensitive and thorny issues in the region: the Serbia-Kosovo relationship.

After the victory of *Vetëvendosje* in the 2021 parliamentary elections in Kosovo and the subsequent formation of the second government led by Albin Kurti, one witnessed the rising tensions between the Serb population in Kosovo and the Serbian government on the one side and the Albanian population and the Kosovar government on the other side. Contentious issues included license plates, the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities, the arrest of the Serb figures by the Kosovar authorities, and many others. Before the Berlin Process Summit in November 2022, France and Germany presented a new proposal to achieve normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relationship (Isufi & Dragojlo 2022). Even so, the so-called "Franco-German plan" could not stop the escalation of tensions that culminated in the mass protest and the setup of barricades in Northern Kosovo a month after the summit.

However, after the December crisis was finally over with the removal of barricades, the delegation of five key figures from the EU and the US visited Belgrade in January 2023 to put pressure on the Serbian government again to accept the Franco-German plan. After the meeting with the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina

Dialogue Miroslav Lajčak stated that Vučić showed 'a responsible approach and willingness to make difficult decisions in the interest of peace and the European perspective' (Öztürk 2023). In a televised address on 23 January 2023, Vučić admitted that the Franco-German plan became a 'de facto negotiation framework for the Republic of Serbia' and warned of serious negative consequences in the case of its rejection (PRS 2023). These consequences would include the suspension of the European integration process, the withdrawal of European investments from Serbia, and the abolition of the visa-free regime with the EU (PRS 2023). Thus, Vučić practically signalled his readiness to accept the Franco-German plan and make a deal with Kosovo. This was a significant shift of the policy course for the Serbian government, because the Franco-German plan requires the Serbian government not to oppose Kosovo's entry into any international organisation (RTS 2023).

The Ukraine war gave a significant push to this change of the policy of Serbian government towards Kosovo. Before the war, the Serbian government pursued a foreign policy of military neutrality and tried to maintain good relations with both the West and Russia for different purposes. The relationship with the West, especially the EU, was necessary for the economic development and thus the delivery of tangible benefits for the Serbian people; the relationship with Russia was important to block Kosovo's entry to the United Nations, which could satisfy the nationalistic and Russophile voters, who are the main support base of the current ruling parties (Ejdus 2014; Kubo 2022). The EU tolerated such a policy because the key countries in the EU, especially Germany, also pursued good relations with Russia for their own economic interest. With the war in Ukraine, however, such tolerance towards the Serbian foreign policy significantly diminished, and the attitude of the West became harsher to Serbia. In the televised address to the nation, Vučić told how he saw the determination in the talks of the delegation from the West, stating as follows: 'they have their own agenda, which is the defeat of Russia, and everything that stands in the way of that agenda will be crushed – no one should have an illusion on this question' (PRS 2023). In the Q&A session after the televised address, Vučić openly told as follows: 'there is no doubt that the war in Ukraine brought us a big misfortune in every sense' (PRS 2023). These remarks can be interpreted as Vučić's message to the Serbian people that it became difficult for the Serbian government to maintain a balancing act between the West and Russia, that it would be too costly for Serbia to stay with Russia under the current geopolitical circumstances, and that Serbia must make a compromise on the issue of Serbia-Kosovo relationship if she wants to stay with the West.

Although it remains uncertain, at the time of writing this text, whether the agreement will be made between Serbia and Kosovo, there are positive signs for that. First, in a two-day special parliamentary session on the Franco-German plan held on 2 and 3 February, the Serbian parliament approved the report of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija. The approval stood against the fierce criticism from the opposition parties holding up banners reading "No to capitulation", "Treason", and "Vučić, you betrayed Kosovo" during Vučić's speech (Radovanović 2023; Stojanović 2023). The report of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija was on the regular update of its activities for the period from 1 September 2022 until 15 January 2023 and did not include the details of the Franco-German plan (Milenković 2023). However, Vučić orally explained the main points of the Franco-German plan during the special session on this report. The approval of the report at the end of the special session can be interpreted as a de facto green-light of the Serbian parliament for Vučić's position on the Franco-German plan.

Second, due to strong pressures from the EU and the US, the Kosovo PM Albin Kurti changed his attitudes towards creating an association of the Serb municipalities. As an opposition activist, Kurti had previously been harshly critical of the 2013 Brussels Agreement on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. After he assumed the position of prime minister, he kept his critical attitudes towards the idea of creating a mono-ethnic association of the Serb municipalities as an attempt at the "Bosnisation" of Kosovo, i.e., an attempt to create a parallel state controlled by Serbia, which is detrimentally harmful to the sovereignty of Kosovo in his view (Kuka 2022). Just one day before the abovementioned parliamentary session in Serbia, Kurti reiterated his belief that a 'monoethnic association in a multiethnic Kosovo is not possible' (Bajrami & Semini 2023). However, the following day, Kurti softened his position and told that 'the association can only be formed as part of an overall agreement on normalisation of relations' (Gec 2023). In so doing, he signalled his readiness to accept the idea of creating an association of the Serb municipalities if the overall agreement is signed. This is a significant change on the Kosovar side, which contributes to the prospect of normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Certainly, one should not be too optimistic about the policy change of the Serbian government, because no concrete action has been taken yet on the Serbia-Kosovo relationship. Furthermore, as noted above, the Serbian government has not yet aligned with the EU sanctions on Russia despite the pressure

repeatedly exerted by the EU. It is unrealistic to expect that the Serbian government will adopt the demands made by the EU and the US all at once. It is more likely that the Serbian government would make concessions only gradually, step by step, with the realisation of the promised rewards for the concessions each time, as it did for the issue of transfer of the war crimes suspects to the Hague. Even so, the apparent policy change of the Serbian government on the issue of Serbia-Kosovo relationship is a remarkable success for the diplomacy of the EU and the US, which was made possible by the geopolitical change caused by the Ukraine war.

The EU's Bosnia and Herzegovina dilemma

In contrast to the case of Serbia, the EU has not been equally successful in inducing a major policy change in Bosnia. Despite the strong pressure from the EU to take a clear stand against aggression, Bosnia has not implemented the sanctions against Russia and has maintained a visa-free regime with Russia due to the opposition from the Republika Srpska (RFE/RL 2023). In October 2022, Milorad Dodik won the Republika Srpska presidential elections (amid allegations of serious electoral fraud). In January 2023, Dodik awarded the Medal of Honour to the Russian president Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the contested "Republika Srpska Day".

One should notice the EU's dilemma in the case of Bosnia, especially in view of the fact that the EU granted the candidate country status to Bosnia despite such pro-Russian attitudes of the Serb politicians. Bosnia is a deeply divided country, divided institutionally between two entities and ethnically among three constituent nations. One of the key foreign policy objectives of the Western countries is to protect the sovereignty of Bosnia. Therefore, the EU attempts to use the accession process to strengthen the country's statehood. For this reason, the EU has been reluctant to punish the entire state of Bosnia with a majority of the pro-West population (mainly Bosniaks and Croats) simply because of the pro-Russian attitudes taken by the Serb leaders in the Republika Srpska. Therefore, even when the EU wants to put pressure on the Serb leadership in Bosnia, it cannot use the same leverage of the accession process as it does for Serbia. The EU and the US make some efforts to put pressure selectively on the Serb leaders in Bosnia such as sanctions imposed on

Dodik. However, they have always proceeded with caution, as such measures may strengthen the centrifugal tendencies of the Serbs and thus weaken the Bosnian statehood.

Dodik clearly understands this dilemma and capitalises on it. Put differently, he can continue his pro-Russian attitudes and actions to please his Russophile and nationalistic supporters in the Republika Srpska because he knows that they are not likely to jeopardise the prospect of the European integration for the people in Bosnia. This is why the EU's new commitment and the pressure on the friends of Russia have a very limited impact on the domestic politics in Bosnia, especially in the Republika Srpska.

From this perspective, the EU's decision to grant the candidate status to Bosnia has a duality to it. On the one hand, it can send a positive signal to the pro-Western population in Bosnia that the prospect of European integration is real. This signal is particularly important when Ukraine was granted the same status quickly in June 2022, only four months after Ukraine made an application for the EU membership in February 2022. On the other hand, it can also send a wrong signal to the pro-Russian leaders in Bosnia that their pro-Russian attitudes and actions are de facto tolerated, and they do not have to bear the negative consequences of such attitudes or actions. It is yet to be seen whether or how the EU can overcome its "Bosnia dilemma".

In lieu of conclusion

The war in Ukraine is a tragic event, causing indescribable grief and unbearable pain to the country's population. Yet it had a silver lining for the Western Balkans as it led to the swift policy change of the EU regarding the enlargement process. In Serbia, such a policy change on behalf of the EU had a visible impact on the domestic politics. The Serbian government demonstrates its readiness to accept the Franco-German plan that requires the Serbia not to oppose Kosovo's entrance into any international organisation. In Bosnia, however, it did not have an equal impact on the domestic politics, and has rather exacerbated Milorad Dodik's pro-Russian attitudes and actions. One cannot expect that the EU's "Bosnia dilemma" can easily be overcome.

References

Bajrami, Florent, & Llazar Semini. 'Kosovo leader says ethnic Serb association isn't a priority'. *AP,* 2 February 2023.

EC (European Commission). 'Berlin Process Summit: EU announces €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans and welcomes new agreements to strengthen the Common Regional Market'. *Press Release*, 2 November 2022.

EC. 'EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana reaffirms the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and EU's strategic partnership with the region'. *Press Release,* 6 December 2022.

Ejdus, Filip. 'Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, Effects and Challenges'. *Croatian International Relations Review* vol. 20, no. 71 (2014): 43–69.

Emmott, Robin, Francesco Guarascio, & Marine Pennetier. 'France under fire for "historic error" of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls'. *Reuters*, 18 October 2019.

Gec, Jovana. 'Serbia could become "pariah" over Kosovo, president warns'. *Washington Post*, 2 February 2023.

Ilić, Saša. 'Russia Today, Europe never'. *Peščanik.net*, 29 November 2022.

Isufi, Perparim, & Saša Dragojlo. 'Belgrade, Pristina Confirm German-French Proposal for Kosovo Deal'. *Balkan Insight*, 10 October 2022.

Kubo, Keiichi. 'Serbia: Origins and Impacts of the Military Neutrality Policy'. In *Neutral Beyond the Cold: Neutral States and the Post-Cold War International System*, edited by Pascal Lottaz, Heinz Gärtner, & Herbert R. Rebinbogin, 217-232. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022.

Kuka, Glada. 'What is the Association of Serb-majority Communes?' *Euronews,* 31 January 2022.

Milenković, M. R. 'Ne žele da slušaju prepeve: Opozicija poručuje Vučiću da u parlament ne dolazi bez francusko-nemačkog plana za KiM'. *Danas*, 31 January 2023.

Mirel, Pierre. 'In support of a new approach to the Western Balkans: step-by-step membership with a consolidation phase'. *European Issue n° 633*, *Robert Schuman Foundation*, 23 May 2022.

Öztürk, Mustafa Talha. 'Serbian president signals possible agreement with Kosovo: Serbia ready to accept concept, work on implementation of proposal to normalize ties with Kosovo, says Aleksandar Vučić'. Anadolu Agency, 21 January 2023.

PRS (Predsednik Republike Srbije). 'Obraćanje predsednika Republike Srbije'. 23 January 2022, video available at: https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti/obracanje-predsednika-republike-srbije-31694.

Radovanović, Vojin. 'Skupština usvojila Izveštaj Kancelarije za KiM, Aleksandar Vučić poručio da Srbiji predstoji borba za ZSO i teška vremena'. *Danas*, 3 February 2023.

RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty). 'EU tražila da BiH uvede vize državljanima Ruske Federacije'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 January 2023.

RTS (Radio Televizija Srbije). 'Vučić: Najteži deo evropskog plana predviđa da se ne protivimo članstvu Kosova u međunarodnim organizacijama'. *Radio Televizija Srbije*, 2 February 2023.

Stojanović, Milica. 'Serbian Parliamentarians Clash in Tense Debate on Kosovo'. *Balkan Insight*, 2 February 2023.

The Western Balkans' EU Odyssey: Charting a Course through Geopolitical Winds in the Quest for Accession

Milena Lazarević and Strahinja Subotić*

Russia has long sought to export its influence and solidify its dominance in the Western Balkans as part of its larger power struggle with the West. The start of Kremlin's 2022 aggression on Ukraine has added a new layer of complexity and uncertainty to the already intricate situation in the region, marked by weak democratic institutions, political instability and sluggish reforms. In light of the ongoing geopolitical shifts, it is important to evaluate their effects on Russia's leverage, domestic political party landscapes, as well as the region's European Union(EU) membership prospects. The analysis predominantly focuses on Serbia, as a unique case study, whose longstanding efforts to balance between the West and the East have been put to the test since the start of the war. The central argument is that although the EU has taken steps to reaffirm the Western Balkans' geopolitical importance, its success so far in countering Russia's influence, notably in Serbia, has been mixed. The EU's attempts to increase its geopolitical leverage at the expense of Russia's can become more effective by tackling the sources of Russia's influence in Serbia, and by providing a credible membership perspective to the entire Western Balkan region.

* European Policy Centre, Belgrade.

Impact of the war on Russia's leverage in the region

Although Russia has managed to sustain some level of political leverage in parts of the Western Balkans, its overall ability to do so across the region has witnessed notable limitations since the onset of its aggression on Ukraine. Its impact is mostly concentrated in Serbia, which has so far refused to impose sanctions, while the entity of the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), by extension, obstructs the BiH state's efforts to implement the formally adopted sanctions. Nevertheless, Russia's power has been insufficient to convince any of the countries of the region – Serbia included – to stand by its *casus belli* in the international fora. In fact, all of these countries have repeatedly voted against Russia in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, openly condemning its aggression, opposing the staged referenda in the breakaway regions of Ukraine, and expressing dismay at Russia's decision to incorporate new territories into its borders. The war in Ukraine has, therefore, revealed that Russia's influence in the region is more limited than often presumed, providing an opportunity for the EU to effectively constrain and counter it by focusing its efforts on Serbia.

Serbia's unwillingness to align with the EU's sanctions packages, in contrast to other countries of the region, stems primarily from fear of losing what it sees as its main ally in the dispute over the status of its runaway autonomous province of Kosovo. The Kosovo legacy is the key determinant of Serbia's contemporary foreign policy (Visković et al. 2018, 21) and is regarded as the essence of Serbia's identity and statehood by 60-70 per cent of the population (CDDRI 2021, 15). Using its veto power in the UN Security Council to support Serbia's interests in the Kosovo dispute has earned Russia areputation as Serbia's major ally, making it difficult for political actors in Serbia to denounce Russia in international relations. Russia's opposition to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, which still evokes painful feelings in the Serbian collective memory, also plays into Russia's success in building its soft power and projecting itself as an alleged protector of Serbian national interests. Therefore, for as long as this frozen conflict persists and remains a source of perpetual tension in the region, Russia is likely to sustain its leverage over Serbia.

Another issue that notably contributes to Serbia's "locked-in" position and overall vulnerability to Russia's influence is its energy dependence on Russia. In fact, Russia's supply accounts for nearly 100 per cent of Serbia's gas needs

(Stanicek 2022), and has been imported since 2011 at a "discounted price" (Radio slobodna Evropa 2021), a regime that has been renewed for three more years in 2022. Although most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were similarly dependent on Russian gas before the war (Statista 2022), Serbia's position was especially vulnerable due to Russian majority ownership of the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (*Naftna industrija Srbije*, NIS). The sale of NIS to Gazprom Neft at a cost significantly below the market price appeared as a clear token of gratitude for Russia's support in the wake of Kosovo's self-proclaimed independence in 2008. With a contribution to the national GDP of approximately 5 per cent (NIS 2021, 27), NIS plays an important role in Serbia's economy. In short, Serbia's overall gas dependency, coupled with the complex relationship with Russia's energy magnate Gazprom, makes it difficult for political actors to align with any sanctioning packages that could target Russia's energy sector, which in turn allows Russia to turn energy into an important political tool.

Notwithstanding, despite its refusal so far to impose sanctions, since the onset of the war on Ukraine, Serbia's position of balancing between the EU – its main strategic, trade and investment partner – and Russia as its main foreign policy ally has become increasingly unsustainable. Serbia's actions have already led to a visible deterioration of the once very warm political relations. Admittedly, there had been hiccups in the Serbo-Russian relationship even before the aggression, such as the 2019 "Spy scandal",[1] the signing of the 2020 Washington agreement,[2][3] or aligning with sanctions against Belarus.[3] Even so, before 24 February 2022, it would have been difficult to imagine Serbia voting to denounce Russia in the UN General Assembly, or expel it from the UN Human

1 In 2019 a video from 2018 surfaced in which the deputy military attaché at Russia's embassy in Belgrade can be seen bribing a former Serbian military officer. In the media, this affair became known as the "spy scandal". To make the matters worse, it appeared that the Serbian security services had obtained evidence of the same Russian diplomat contacting other members of the Serbian army. The Russian intelligence officer has also since been removed from Serbia.

2 Considering that Belgrade was at first sceptical regarding Pristina's calls for the US to get involved, the US administration surprisingly found a common ground with Belgrade. Not only did the signing of the 2020 Washington Agreement show that Serbia was ready to make concessions in order to strike points with the US, but it also called on Serbia to diversify its energy supplies (cutting away some of Russia's influence).

3 In August 2020 Serbia backed an EU declaration saying that the presidential elections in Belarus were "neither free nor fair" and criticising the crackdown on post-electoral protests. It has also Serbia has aligned itself with the EU sanctions on Minsk, imposed after the Belarus authorities hijacked a Ryanair plane and boarded it to arrest an opposition activist.

Rights Council. In the early days of the aggression, Serbia had also aligned with the EU declaration sanctioning the pro-Russian former President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych and his close associates. Recognising the backsliding in the relationship, the Russian ambassador to Belgrade warned Serbia that introducing sanctions would result in 'socio-economic consequences' (Danas 2022a) and even requested Serbia not to participate in international conferences held without the presence of Russia (N1 2023), while its deputy minister of foreign affairs described the potential drifting away from Russia as 'political suicide' for Serbia (Deutsche Welle 2022). The developments since the start of the war, therefore, indicate that Russia's leverage in Serbia is not static and that diplomatic efforts by its Western partners, who bear greater economic power, can indeed yield results.

The war and party politics in the region

The war in Ukraine has served as a litmus test of Western Balkan political parties' genuine commitment to EU values and foreign policy direction, with most of the region's parties fully backing them. In Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, alignment with EU's foreign policy decisions targeting Russia enjoyed wide political consensus. Although some level of contestation had existed in Montenegro (by a pro-Serb party), and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (by parties from the Republika Srpska), the former nevertheless fully aligned with the EU stance, whereas the latter has shown significant improvement, with alignment jumping from per cent in 2021 to 81 per cent in 2022 (European Commission 2022a). Such a track record illustrates that the EU has largely been successful in fostering a culture of commitment and alignment among Western Balkan political parties even when sanctions are directed against a powerful country such as Russia.

Serbia, however, has been an exception, as the main ruling parties – the Serbian Progressive Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia – have not perceived either a tangible incentive or an imminent cost of non-compliance with the EU's position. Contrary to that, they have assessed the costs of possible alignment with the sanctions as too high. In terms of incentives, the EU's "credible membership perspective" has over the years become vague and widely doubted across the region. Moreover, as cases of Serbia's neighbours demonstrate – Montenegro being the strongest example – foreign policy alignment does not guarantee the unclogging of the accession path. When it comes to costs of non-align-

ment, despite calls by the European Parliament and individual Member States, to date, there has been no explicit threat of reversal of the benefits that Serbia already enjoys in its relationship with the EU. On the other hand, the leading parties fear possible loss of Russia's support in the UNSC and of the favourable energy arrangements. They fear the loss of popular support even more, considering the extremely high levels of opposition of the Serbian public to the sanctions (in part related to the hardship experienced under the sanctions imposed on former Yugoslavia in the 1990s) (Serbian Monitor 2022). In such an environment, Serbia's ruling parties have opted to deter the deliberations regarding alignment with the sanctions for as long as possible. Arguably, they might prolong such a status quo for as long as there is no credible EU promise (or alternatively a threat) in sight.

Despite high political polarisation in Serbia, the question of alignment with sanctions remains a largely uncontentious issue with none of the larger opposition parties advocating for full and swift alignment demanded by the EU. The most rigid opposition to alignment is shared by the anti-EU parties – such as the Testifiers (*Zavetnici)* and the Gates (*Dveri*) (RTS 2022) – as well as the EU-sceptic parties – such as the People's Party (*Narodna stranka) (Danas 2022b)* and the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*) (Danas 2022c). A more supportive approach is advocated by the leading opposition and pro-EU Party of Freedom and Justice (*Stranka slobode i pravde*). Nevertheless, its proposal for a gradual and small-stepped approach, calling for the imposition of 'some sanctions that will not affect the people, but only individuals and companies' (Beta 2022), also falls short of EU's expectations. In contrast, full and swift alignment is supported only by minor pro-EU parties – the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*) (Danas 2022d), the Movement of Free Citizens (*Pokret slobodnih građana*) (Danas 2022e), Do not let Belgrade drown (*Ne davimo Beograd*) and Together (*Zajedno*) (N1 2022). Considering the disunity among the opposition, but also the small number and size of pro-EU parties that support sanctions, it is unlikely that foreign policy orientation will change as a result of internal political pressure and power struggles. Instead, external incentives have a greater potential to lead to such a change.

The EU perspective in war times

While advancing the European future of the Eastern Partnership trio in 2022, the EU rightly recognised the need to enhance the enlargement policy as a whole, making sure not to leave the Western Balkans behind, as the region has been in the process for two decades.[4] Yet, among all the countries of the region, Serbia is the only one whose EU perspective was negatively impacted by the war. Although the March 2022 European Council Conclusions strongly emphasised the need for all countries to align with sanctions, Serbia's alignment rate witnessed a significant drop to only 45 per cent, compared to 64 per cent the year before, marking the first instance of "backsliding" reported in any chapter in Serbia's EU accession process (European Commission 2022 b). The EU's decision to elevate the status of foreign policy alignment in accession negotiations by *de facto* turning it into a "blocking chapter" – alongside the traditional issues such as the rule of law and the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue – has made Serbia's membership perspective unthinkable for as long as the country maintains its current position.[5] Thus, Serbia's already sluggish EU accession process – due to declining quality of democracy and rule of law standards – has come to a standstill.

Despite the complexity of its relationship with Serbia, the EU has been making efforts to lift the main factors standing in the way of Serbia's alignment with its position towards Russia – by forcefully leading the resolution of the Kosovo issue and supporting the diversification of energy supply. The so-called "Franco-German Plan", which has been endorsed by all Member States (including the five non-recognisers of Kosovo's independence), has become a viable platform for the normalisation of relations. Both Belgrade (Danas 2023a) and Pristina (Danas 2023b) have signalled willingness to support it, despite initial reluctance. Recognising that the dialogue is entering a new gear, the Russian ambassador to Serbia has accused the EU and the US of "adding fuel to the fire" with the Plan, thus publicly indicating Russia's direct and full opposition to it (Politika 2022). If this proposal is accepted, it might pave the

4 Accession talks were opened with Albania and North Macedonia (the latter only conditionally); Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status; while Kosovo was given green light for visa liberalisation, starting no later than 1 January 2024.

5 Serbia's refusal to align with any of the sanctioning packages led the European Parliament to go as far as to invite the EU institutions to continue accession talks with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia.

way for the final resolution of this longstanding conflict as well as for Russia's loss of a key lever over Serbia. Simultaneously, it would crucially assist Serbia in getting back on its course towards EU membership.

At the same time, the EU has intensified its efforts to assist Serbia in diversifying its energy supply, as another way to undermine Russia's position. Prior to the war, the emphasis was on facilitating the technical preparations of the Serbia-North Macedonia gas interconnector, and on funding the construction of the Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector (EU in Serbia 2022). As the war has further increased the importance of energy security, the EU has decided to make three steps forward in terms of its assistance to Serbia. As the President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted during her visit to Serbia in October 2022, the EU has decided to invite Serbia to join its platform for joint procurement of gas, provide 165 million euros in grants for immediate budget support to households most affected by rising energy prices, and has pledged additional 500 million euros in grants as investment in the regional energy infrastructure (Von der Leyen 2022). However, considering that Serbia consumes more gas than all the other Western Balkan countries combined (Index Mundi 2020), and currently relies solely on Russian gas, while waiting for the completion of other interconnectors, it will take some time before the effects of EU's support can fully be realised. Nevertheless, tackling this issue in parallel with the resolution of the Kosovo dispute paves the way for liberating Serbia from the Russian grip.

Even though the EU has made notable efforts to tackle Russia's points of leverage in Serbia since the start of the war, the lack of a believable EU membership perspective for the entire Western Balkan region hinders the EU's ability to influence Serbia's decision-makers and citizens to turn away from Russia. The EU integration process has spanned over two decades, with little commitment both on the side of the EU and on that of the Serbian authorities to push through towards its final outcome; instead, it turned into an open-ended exercise.[6] As a result, EU integration ceased to feature as a major driving force behind reforms and political compromise, having rather lost its transformative power (Zweers et al. 2022, 11-12). Consequently, today's polls warn that people

6 The pre-war disunity in the EU led to North Macedonia being unfairly blocked several times in its EU integration endeavour, despite its leadership making hard political sacrifices to secure progress. This sent a discouraging message to other political actors in the region, signalling that governments risking their popular support to satisfy EU conditionalities may well remain without the reward they can use in the next election.

have become tired and disillusioned, increasingly believing that EU membership will never happen (Danas 2022f). Such views of the public, accompanied by fears of economic hardship that would ensue if Serbia aligned with sanctions (Novi treći put 2022, 18), make it unlikely for any of the major politically inconvenient decisions to spur from within the society. At times of war and increased European vigilance, the EU now appears to have the major responsibility to restore credibility to its enlargement policy by decisively showing that accession is indeed on the table and that the Union itself is preparing for an increased membership.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine has brought the question of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans back to the forefront of European politics, as it is a region where Russia has traditionally sought to exert influence. The EU was quick to act, which is why it has made steps to abandon the passive approach to enlargement. In just a year, steps forward were made with most of the countries of the region to ensure that they remain encouraged and committed to the EU accession process, and to make sure that Russia's influence in those countries remains limited. Serbia in that regard stands out as an outlier, as it has traditionally nurtured a close partnership with Russia primarily due to the unresolved status of Kosovo. This partnership has contributed to Russia's high levels of soft power in Serbia and solidification of its energy dominance. Yet, the start of Russia's aggression on Ukraine has caused increased efforts by the EU to target Russia's key leverage points directly, swiftly, and effectively. As a result, the latest developments suggest that even Serbia seems to be on a path of gradually distancing from Russia. However, as Russia's presence in Serbia was not built over night, it will take more patience, time, and efforts for the distancing to be completed.

Although the Russian aggression has prompted the EU to advance enlargement on its political agenda, this policy is yet to witness a full reinvigoration that would transform the candidates into viable members and minimise Russia's presence. Alongside the described diplomatic attempts to undermine its key point of influence by normalising Belgrade-Pristina relations and diversifying energy supply, the EU should invest more effort into adapting its enlargement policy to the challenges posed by the Western Balkan states' long EU journey. The most elaborate proposal has been made in the Template for staged acces-

sion to the EU, which suggests a four-staged accession process, with pre-accession benefits in the form of increased funding and institutional socialisation (Emerson et al. 2021). To that extent, it is encouraging that the European Council, the EU Council, and the European Parliament have already recognised the importance of introducing a more structured, gradual, and reversable approach to enlargement. To breathe new life into enlargement, policy improvements should go hand-in-hand with a strong political pledge between the aspiring members and the existing EU members, possibly through a "Joint European Integration Plan 2030" (Majstorović 2022). On the one hand, such a shared plan would express the commitment of Member States to make the EU fit for an increased membership; on the other hand, it would mark the pledge of (willing) candidates to prepare for membership by the end of the decade. Therefore, a smoother and accelerated accession process and eventual enlargement by 2030 would logically lead to the containment of the influence of external actors, such as Russia, and to the solidification of the EU's sphere of influence in the Western Balkans.

References

Beta. 'Djilas: Da Srbija Rusiji uvede sankcije koje neće pogoditi narod već pojedince'. *Beta,* 16 October 2022. Available at: https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/170204-djilas-da-srbija-rusiji-uvede-sankcije-koje-nece-pogoditi-narod-vec-pojedince.

Bloomberg. 'Transcript: Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine'. *Bloomberg,* 24 February 2022. Available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24.

CDDRI. 'Stavovi građana Srbije o Kosovu'. Belgrade: *Centar za društveni dijalog i regionalne inicijative*, 2021. Available at: https://cddri.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CDDRI-RESEARCH-KOSOVO-2021-FINAL02.pdf.

Danas. 'Bocan Harčenko: Uvođenje sankcija Rusiji naškodilo bi ekonomiji i socijalnoj sferi Srbije – Politika'. *Danas.rs*, 6 July 2022a. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/bocan-harcenko-uvodjenje-sankcija-rusiji-naskodilo-bi-ekonomiji-i-socijalnoj-sferi-srbije/.

Danas. 'Vuk Jeremić: Ne može se istovremeno biti za sankcije Rusiji i protiv članstva Kosova u UN'. *Danas.rs,* 13 October 2022b. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vuk-jeremic-ne-moze-se-istovremeno-biti-za-sankcije-rusiji-i-protiv-clanstva-kosova-u-un/.

Danas. 'Jovanović: Kada bi se uvele sankcije Rusiji investitori bi pobegli iz Srbije'. *Danas.rs*, 17 Octobr 2022c. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/jovanovic-kada-bi-se-uvele-sankcije-rusiji-investitori-bi-pobegli-iz-srbije/.

Danas. 'Lutovac: Podržavamo sankcije protiv agresora na Ukrajinu, spoljnopolitički prioritet je EU'. *Danas.rs,* 6 June 2022d. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/lutovac-podrzavamo-sankcije-protiv-agresora-na-ukrajinu-spoljnopoliticki-prioritet-je-eu/.

Danas. 'Grbović: Više nije pitanje da li Srbija mora da uvede sankcije Rusiji, već kada će se to desiti'. *Danas.rs,* 9 October 2022e. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/grbovic-vise-nije-pitanje-da-li-srbija-mora-da-uvede-sankcije-rusiji-vec-kada-ce-se-to-desiti/.

Danas. 'Bogosavljević: Za članstvo u EU 46 odsto građana Srbije, pozitivan stav ima 21 odsto'. *Danas.rs*, 8 April 2022f. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/bogosavljevic-za-clanstvo-u-eu-46-odsto-gradjana-srbije-pozitivan-stav-ima-21-odsto/.

Danas. 'Vučić posle sastanka sa petorkom: Srbija je spremna da prihvati francusko-nemački plan uz jednu rezervu'. *Danas.rs*, 20 January 2023a. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-je-spremna-da-prihvati-francusko-nemacki-plan-uz-jednu-rezervu-Vučić-posle-sastanka-sa-petorkom/.

Danas. 'Kurtijeva poruka iz Beča: U potpunosti prihvatamo francusko-nemački plan'. *Danas.rs,* 12 January 2023b. Available at: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/kurtijeva-poruka-iz-beca-u-potpunosti-prihvatamo-francusko-nemacki-plan/.

Deutsche Welle. 'Švajcarski List: "Vučić, izgleda, priprema promenu kursa"'. *Nedeljnik*, 2022. Available at: https://www.nedeljnik.rs/svajcarski-list-Vučić-izgleda-priprema-promenu-kursa/.

Emerson, Michael, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans, & Strahinja Subotić. 'A Template for Staged Accession to the EU'. Belgrade: *European Policy Centre*, 2021. Available at: https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/.

EU in Serbia. 'Together for the Energy Security of Serbia'. *EU u Srbiji*, 8 November 2022. Available at: https://europa.rs/together-for-the-energy-security-of-serbia/?lang=en.

European Commission. 'Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2022'. *Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations*, 2022a. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2022_en.

European Commission. 'Serbia Report 2022'. *Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations*, 2022b. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en.

Index mundi. 'Natural Gas - Consumption by Country'. 2020. Available at: https://www.indexmundi.com/map/?t=0&v=137&r=eu&l=en.

Institut za evropske poslove. 'Stavovi Građana Srbije Prema Rusiji'. *Institut za evropske poslove,* 2022. Available at: https://iea.rs/wp-content/

uploads/2022/04/Stav-gradjana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-2022.pdf.

Majstorović, Srđan. 2022. 'Joint European Integration Plan 2030'. Belgrade: *European Policy Centre*, 2022. Available at: https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/joint-european-integration-plan-2030/.

NIS. 'Annual Report 2021'. *Naftna industrija Srbije, 2021.* Available at: https://ir.nis.rs/fileadmin/template/nis/pdf/Reporting/BusinessReports/English/AR_2021_eng.pdf

Novi treći put. 'Energetska i politička Kriza u Evropi i javno mnjenje u Srbiji'. 2022. Available at: https://novitreciput.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Energetska-i-politicka-kriza-u-Evropi-i-javno-mnjenje-u-Srbiji-jul-oktobar-2022.pdf.

N1. '"Zajedno" traži da Srbija hitno uvede sankcije Rusiji'. *N1 Beograd*, 14 October 2022. Available at: https://n1info.rs/vesti/zajedno-trazi-da-srbija-hitno-uvede-sankcije-rusiji/.

N1. 'Moskva traži da Beograd izbegava pojedine međunarodne skupove'. *N1 Beograd*, 5 January 2023. Available at: https://n1info.rs/vesti/n1-saznaje-moskva-trazi-da-beograd-izbegava-pojedine-medjunarodne-skupove/.

Politika. 'Bocan-Harčenko: Zapad doliva ulje na vatru nemačko-francuskim predlogom za rešavanje kosovskog pitanja'. *Politika Online*, 29 November 2022. Available at: https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/526949/Bocan-Harcenko-Zapad-doliva-ulje-na-vatru-nemacko-francuskim-predlogom-ya-resavanje-kosovskog-pitanja.

Radio Slobodna Evropa. 'Četvrt veka zavisnosti Srbije od ruskog gasa'. 2021. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-gas-zavisnost-Vučić-putin/31578795.html.

RTS. 'Zavetnici i Dveri formirali blok protiv sankcija Rusiji'. *Radio televizija Srbije*, 2022. Available at: http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/4776874/dveri-zavetnici-blok-sankcije-rusija.html.

Serbian Monitor. 'Demostat Survey: "80% of People in Serbia against Sanctions Imposed to Russia"'. *Serbian Monitor*, 30 June 2022. Available at: https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/demostat-survey-80-of-people-in-serbia-against-sanctions-imposed-to-russia/.

Stanicek, Branislav. 'Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans'. *European*

Parliamentary Research Service, 2022. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATA(2022)733523_EN.pdf.

Statista. 'Infographic: Which European Countries Depend on Russian Gas?' 2022. Available at: https://www.statista.com/chart/26768/dependence-on-russian-gas-by-european-country/.

Visković, Ivo. *Međunarodna Politika*. Vol. 1169. LXIX. Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, 2018.

Von der Leyen, Ursula. 'Statement by the President on Her Visit to Serbia'. *European Commission*, 2022. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_6470.

Zweers, Wouter, et al. 'The EU as a promoter of democracy or "stabilitocracy" in the Western Balkans?' Clingendael Report, 2022.

Enlargement Back on the EU's Agenda: Western Balkans Moving Slowly Nowhere?

Jovana Marović*

Awakened Union

The war in Ukraine is understood by many as a wake-up call for the European Union in light of the enlargement policy mainly. It has shown that Russia's growing influence in the Western Balkans is not just a dead letter on the paper, and short-term entertainment for analysts and scholars, but a real threat. It has long been known how much potential Russia has in the Western Balkans with its traditional allies and proxies, so the need for a concrete action from the European Union (EU), beyond the messages of encouragement, has become urgent. The EU's "new approach" foreseen in the revised enlargement methodology from February 2020 was manifest during 2022 in changes on both the administrative and political level. On the one hand, it was accompanied by greater involvement of EU Member States on the ground in each of the Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, important decisions were made on their European path. The opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (albeit with additional and extremely complicated con-

* Executive Director of Politikon Network and a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG). Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of European Affairs of the Government of Montenegro

ditions), the grant of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (and also to Ukraine and Moldova), the approval of the agreement reached between the Council of the EU and the European Parliament on the visa liberalisation for Kosovo, are important, stimulating, and long-awaited EU decisions on the Western Balkans (WB).

During 2022, two EU-Western Balkan summits were held, one of which for the first time took place in the region, in Tirana, in December (European Council 2022b). In July, the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Council was held in Podgorica, for the first time (for WB) outside the EU. Bringing the Western Balkans back into focus and prioritising it on the agenda was followed by regional visits of the EU and its Member States' officials, including the President of the European Commission, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as the German Chancellor. The renewed interest for the region was followed by the relaunch of the Berlin Process, which had slowed down in the last couple of years. In November 2022, at the summit in Berlin, three agreements were signed (on travel with identity cards, recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications) as further steps in establishing a Common Regional Market (RCC 2022). Also, a declaration on the decrease of roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans was signed at the Western Balkans Summit in Tirana. In this way, together with the latter agreements, concrete benefits for the citizens are about to be provided. In light of the increased engagement of the EU Member States in the Western Balkans, in addition to regular activities and provision of sectoral support to institutions, the signing of a letter of intent to establish a Center for Cybersecurity Capacity Building in the Western Balkans is of particular importance.[1] The Center will start operating in the spring of 2023 with a base in Montenegro (France Diplomatie 2022). Although efforts have been made to suppress cyber threats and other means of hybrid warfare in the past, the establishment of a regional center is a step forward in strengthening regional capacities and their resistance to malign foreign influences. In this sense, the multi-month blockade of the work of the government server in Montenegro after the fall of the government in August 2022 showed how unprepared and vulnerable the region is to attacks (Euractiv 2022).

1 By France, Slovenia, and Montenegro in November 2022.

It's all good, BUT

The consensus among the EU Member States on important decisions and steps regarding the Western Balkans, which was impossible to reach on several occasions in the past, proves at least two things. On the one hand, it shows how ignorant the Union has been of the necessity of the necessity of spreading Western values and its responsibility for it; and for guaranteeing human rights in this part of Europe. On the other hand, it reveals how costly a single late decision can prove to be. The latter is especially necessary to emphasise in the light of sanctions against Russia, as well as in relation to the decline of democracy in some Western Balkan states – in part due to the EU's "business as usual" policy. Despite the war in Europe and the need for solidarity and unity, and having in mind the limited instruments available to the EU to influence the outcome, the EU has not taken any concrete action against countries which have not aligned with its common foreign and security policy (CFSP). Limiting reaction to the criticism and lowering Serbia's assessment in the negotiating Chapter 31 "Foreign policy", due to the non-introduction of sanctions against Russia in full, is one of the indicators that the EU policy towards the region could remain the same for some time. It would remain without concrete instruments that would clearly provide rewards for progress and sanctioning in case of backsliding. This is, after all, the most important element of the revised enlargement methodology, albeit still undeveloped and resting at the level of opportunity.

Mixed messages

Many times in the past, the EU chose to remain silent on important matters or failed to achieve a unitary response due to its the inability to control undemocratic tendencies in its own Member States, and even at the EU level if the officials are coming from those states. This can also be interpreted as a failure to help the democratic forces in the region to deal with growing nationalism, right-wing parties, and internal negative "developments". Such practices are still visible. Recent statements of the President of the European Council and the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy in support of the Open Balkans initiative stand in contrast to positions of a large number of EU Member States and the European Commission who support only those in-

itiatives that are inclusive.[2] The same can be applied to stances regarding some burning issues, which are polarising the societies of the Western Balkans. The European Commission, for example, stated in its latest Montenegro Report that the contract with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) contributed to tensions in the country (European Commission 2022). However, the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy believes that this was not the case, and that the contract has not affected the reforms in the country at all (Vijesti 2022). The signing of the contract brought about the downfall of the 43rd Montenegrin government, which at the very beginning of its mandate enjoyed wide international support and was formed to speed up the European integration process (RFE/RL 2022). These are the issues that must be taken into account, especially because of the role of the church in the past and its close ties with the official Russia.

Too many frameworks for cooperation - too little integration

Regional cooperation is one of the pillars of integration and networking of the Western Balkan countries and the "WB6" participate in dozens of regional initiatives. With the launch of the Berlin Process in 2014, an umbrella initiative was created for the channeling and coordinating regional cooperation. In the last two years, the initiative came to a standstill, only to be restarted in 2022. Despite the fact that the developments within the framework of the Berlin Process are more than welcome, concrete and useful for the citizens of the region, the dynamics of fulfilling the obligations are not encouraging so far. The idea of a Common Regional Market, introduced at the summit in Trieste in 2017 as a regional economic area, regardless of a handful of previously signed agreements, only took shape with three agreements signed in Berlin 2022. However, these are still just the initial steps, and some of the agreements do not mean anything new for individual countries of the Western Balkans.[3]

2 Launched as a mini-Schengen initiative by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia in December 2019, the Open Balkans initiative overlaps to a large extent with the initiative on the Common Regional Market within the Berlin process. This is not desirable due to the lack of capacity of local administrations. Also, the initiative lacks inclusivity for the time being, since not all the states in the region are interested in joining it.

3 Citizens of Montenegro, for example, already travel to all states of the region with the identity cards, based on bilateral agreements.

However, on a symbolic level, they are a step towards deeper regional integration. For Kosovo, for instance, these agreements introduce important novelties, especially taking into account the challenges that this country has faced so far. In addition, the three agreements foresee a ratification, which should have been limited and shortened at the start to achieve concrete results as soon as possible.[4] Although these agreements were signed at the highest level and were preceded by several months of coordination at the level of the competent ministries, a delay in ratification is possible. Another dilemma that arises is whether the Berlin Process leads the Western Balkans to a deeper integration on the way to the EU, or at some point this form will prove to be sufficient due to the lack of progress and slow democratisation pace. This question has been lingering since the launch of the Berlin Process in 2014, when much of the controversy was about whether this is a replacement for the EU membership or a complementary initiative. The reason for the dissatisfaction from the point of view of the citizens of the region is that since 2014, none of the countries of the Western Balkans has made significant progress in getting closer to the EU, nor in achieving full democratisation. Additionally, a similar question arises when it comes to last year's launch (in May 2022) of the European Political Community (EPC) by French President Macron as a new platform for cooperation. It is still not clear who this platform is intended for and what its role is in the EU accession process (European Council 2022a).

Over the line to the waiting line

The decision to grant EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine sent a strong message about expanding the Western and liberal values, but it also cast a shadow on the merit-based principle in the enlargement policy. It is especially discouraging for these two countries when they see that the Western Balkans may have been closer to the European Union in Thessaloniki in 2003 when their European perspective was promised than today (European Commission 2003). This is, of course, mostly due to the lack of results in the European integration process of the countries of the Western Balkans and therefore the responsibility of local politicians. Even so, a part of the responsibility also lies with the EU for all the above-mentioned reasons.

4 At the end of February 2023, Albania has already approved these agreements on the Government, which ended the ratification procedure, while in Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, the governments approved them but a parliamentary vote is also required.

The EU & the Balkans - Where is this ship sailing to?

Russia's potential to take advantage of the open bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans and its traditional allies in the region is enormous. Meanwhile, the EU is more active, but such engagement is not underpinned by the desire to strengthen the quality of (local) democracy, offer more tangible benefits for citizens or clear roadmaps for the WB countries towards the EU membership.

The concept of "multi speed Europe", with different parts of the European Union integrating where and how much they want (at different levels and pace) was used in certain reactions related to the Western Balkans. Yet , it once again proved to be, on the one hand, a brake on the Union's positioning as a global player, and on the other hand, a sign of its inability to control the state of democracy even in its own backyard. The same applies to the limited mechanisms available to the Union in the Treaty on European Union to prevent undemocratic practices in the Member States (not even in the Western Balkans).

The war in Ukraine put the focus on unity, solidarity, the necessity of strengthening Western and liberal values, suppression of undemocratic practices, and malign foreign influences. All this has been clear for quite a long time, but the reaction so far did not follow the significance of the situation: neither in the EU when it comes to the EU enlargement nor in the Western Balkans.[5]

As many times before, it has shown that the EU must strengthen mechanisms at the supranational level to safeguard democracy at all levels in the EU, and beyond it - including in the Western Balkans. This might as well be a long process, but it can be rewarded by stepwise progress: especially if a unified approach is adopted to solve the problem, with deeper integration, and not with multi-speed Europe and democracy.

6 This does not refer to the regular provision of funds that were redirected in 2022 to repair the economic damage caused by the war in Ukraine.

References

Euractiv. 'Cyberattack hits Montenegro government, defense minister points at Russia'. *Euractiv,* 28 August 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/cyberattack-hits-montenegro-government-defence-minister-points-at-russia/.

European Commission. 'Montenegro 2022 Report'. European Commission, 12 October 2022. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Montenegro%20Report%202022.pdf.

European Commission. EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki. European Commission, 21 June 2003. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163.

European Council. Meeting of the European Political Community. Council of the European Union, 6 October 2022a. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/.

European Council. 'EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana'. Council of the European Union, 6 December 2022b. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/12/06/.

France Diplomatie. 'Montenegro – Center for Cybersecurity Capacity Building in the Western Balkans'. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères de France, 16 November 2022. Available at: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/montenegro/news/article/montenegro-center-for-cybersecurity-capacity-building-in-the-western-balkans-16.

RCC. 'Agreements on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects'. Regional Cooperation Council, 21 October 2022. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/docs/635/fact-sheet-agreements-on-freedom-of-movement-with-identity-cards-recognition-of-higher-education-qualifications-recognition-of-professional-qualifications-for-doctors-of-medicine-dentists-and-architects.

RFE/RL. 'Montenegro Government Signs Controversial Agreement with Serbian Orthodox Church'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,* 3 August 2022. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-signs-agreement-serbian-orthodox-church/31972198.html.

Vijesti. 'Varhelji: Ne mislim da je potpisivanje Temeljnog ugovora sa SPC negativno uticalo na izvještaj EK'. *Vijesti,* 12 October 2022. Available at: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/625698/varhelji-ne-mislim-da-je-potpisivanje-temeljnog-ugovora-sa-spc-negativno-uticalo-na-izvjestaj-ek.

Ukraine War: A Push towards Differentiated Integration for the Western Balkans?

Marko Milenković*

The process of European Union (EU) enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) is entering its third decade. The six (potential) candidates were first offered a membership prospect back in 2003. The Russian aggression against Ukraine brought a completely new political context in which enlargement is taking place. With two new EU candidates – Ukraine and Moldova, and Georgia as a potential candidate – the process of enlargement is gaining new impetus. However, it is also becoming more complex as the EU will have to work simultaneously on integrating two rather different parts of the continent: the Balkans and a part of the Eastern Partnership. Both the EU and the candidate countries are reiterating their commitment to EU membership for the Western Balkans and are formally taking some steps in the accession process. However, there are many factors both on the EU side and among candidates that make such a perspective untenable in the short-term. These include enlargement fatigue, unwillingness of candidates' government to implement crucial reforms needed for EU membership, as well as multiple influences of non-Western powers. In the absence of membership prospects in the near future, might differentiated integration - widely used by the Union internally

* Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade. This chapter was written as part of the 2023 Research Program of the Institute of Social Sciences with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

and externally - serve as the framework for the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans (Milenković 2022; Milenković 2023)? The following analysis calls just for that. It aims to contribute, from the legal perspective, to the debate on the future of WB enlargement in the context of the war in Ukraine in this volume.

For decades, the EU integration process has been built upon the conditionality approach (Džankić, Keil, & Kmezić 2019). For the Western Balkans, the process has been lengthy and hampered by a variety of factors on both the EU and the prospective members' sides (Belloni & Brunazzo 2014; Economides 2020). Many of the Member States' attitudes towards enlargement have changed in comparison to the CEE countries and their accession in 2004/2007, as has been recognised by scholarship for over a decade (Milenković & Milenković 2013; O'Brennan 2014). Enlargement fatigue within the Union is, albeit to the lesser extent, complemented by the accession fatigue within candidates (European Parliamentary Research Service 2016). The new negotiation methodology aimed at more political control of the process and a gradual integration of candidates in EU policies was introduced in 2020 (European Commission 2020). Even so, the mainly technical negotiation process is progressing slowly, mostly due to political constraints. An important aspect of the new methodology is the firm insistence on the so-called "Fundamentals" cluster aimed at the advancement of the rule of law, human rights and institution-building. Gradual progress in integration, but also rolling back in the whole process, is envisaged to be based on the progress of the reforms in the "Fundamentals" cluster (Milenković 2020). The EU's enlargement fatigue, the strict conditionality requirements, the EU's internal political crisis, and the current resistance to enlargement in various Member States all contribute to the need for a tangible new approach to EU membership, both in theory and in practice (Milenković 2023). The pivotal political moment is calling for swift action in terms of negotiating and for creating new solutions that would enable all or most candidates to integrate in the EU as soon as possible. There are even calls for immediate accession of Ukraine to the EU with a variety of legal arguments offered on how this could be done (Kochenov 2022). 'But the war must not distract EU from the Western Balkans. In fact, because of the war, the focus also needs to be on the Western Balkans' (Dimitrov et. al 2022). Taking everything into consideration, it is essential that concrete measures are offered to the Western Balkans and legal steps are taken in order to keep the region safe, stable and adherent to European values.

Current state of (differentiated) integration for the Balkans and possible options to move the region closer to membership

In this part, trajectories of cooperation between the Western Balkans and the EU are studied through the optics of differentiated integration (Milenković 2022). We do so by examining both current integration paths and by looking into legal options available in the short and midterm under the present EU founding treaties. Differentiated integration can be described as the approach/possibility on the legal/political front for EU Member States and non-Member States to engage in or not to be involved in specific areas of the integration. It has been a long-standing strategy for the EU's internal operations but also for its relationship with neighbouring countries (see Stubb 1996; Leruth, Gänzle & Trondal 2022a). It has made it possible for integration to advance over the past few decades, while allowing some states to take or not take part in certain policies (such as the Schengen Area or Eurozone) even without EU membership.

Existing modes of integration of the Western Balkans

There are numerous avenues of integration of the Western Balkans with the European Union that we observe as differentiation for the region (Milenković 2022). Foremost, the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) concluded between the EU, its Member States, and prospective candidates, set a stage for a comprehensive transformation of the aspiring members, govern reforms in a number of areas (such as environmental protection or competition), and create the grounds for the gradual inclusion in the internal market. Concluded for an unlimited period of time they do present a basis for relations until a country progresses to membership status. However, association agreements as stipulated by founding treaties could be used for revamping relations and bring the region closer to the EU even without membership. The Energy Community Treaty (ECT) founded in 2006 presents another important building block in the transformation of the region. It integrates, on a sectoral

level, ECT members into the European energy market and facilitates the framework for alignment with the relevant acquis on energy, environment and renewables (see further Milenković & Pešterić 2021). Cooperation and sectoral alignment are also present in the transportation sector (Transport Community, Open Skies Agreement), as well as extensive participation in the EU programs in the areas of science, education, youth, civil society development, and health. Finally, over the past two and the half decades, the EU has involved candidate countries in over 20 decentralised EU agencies following a different logic of cooperation (Kaeding and Milenković 2023). As of 2020, with the changes of the EU accession negotiation methodology, it is also envisaged that the acceding countries should be gradually included in various EU policies as their negotiations progress (EU Commission 2020). However, although from a legal standpoint undeniably possible, a particular differentiation approach for WB is yet to be operationalised. In sum, the region has already gone through a variety of patterns of integration into the EU, numerous aspects of differentiated integration have been examined, and their potential has already been identified (Milenković 2022; Milenković 2023) – notably, if we concentrate on sectoral integration. However, 'Confronted with a new war in its direct neighbourhood, the EU was suddenly forced to question its "sit and wait" attitude towards the Western Balkans and to start thinking about the region in a geostrategic context' (Ristić 2022). The question arises whether this differentiation for the Balkans should be extended to include more membership benefits or should it resemble the level of integration among members of the European Economic Area (EEA)? And if so, what is the value added for the European Union to pursue this path? The answer to this is not straightforward, but it is certain that if the EU does not firmly involve and incorporate the Balkans, the region will remain vulnerable to foreign influences (Vuksanović 2022), as well as to democratic and rule of law backsliding. The very fact that war is raging in Europe signals that now is the time to act on the Western Balkan enlargement (Dimitrov et al. 2022). Therefore, it is prudent to keep extending the membership benefits to the region, while insisting on fundamentals in the accession process. This complex task can be achieved if the existing legal avenues are utilised and upgraded.

Future possibilities for differentiation

From a legal perspective, the crucial question is how to devise a new short to midterm framework accommodating integration of the Western Balkans before full membership. To this end, we study the possibilities under current Treaties for extending association. It is also worth considering whether the WB region, which will need the EU's ongoing support in order to develop economically and undergo legal and political change, could benefit from the model set for countries belonging to the EEA, i.e., non-members who choose to participate in the internal market while not pursuing full membership (Leruth, Gänzle, & Trondal 2022b). The EEA states are a part of both the Schengen Zone and the internal market of the European Union. However, there are also warnings that the EEA model may not be appropriate for the Western Balkan region, as the wealthy EEA countries have opted out of the EU and do not need the EU's stabilising or transformative power (Raik & Tamminen 2014, 48). Instead, they contribute funds to the EU in order to participate in the internal market, rather than receiving benefits from the Union.

According to article 8 of the Treaty on European Union, the Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation. For this purpose, the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. Article 8 also permits such agreements to include reciprocal rights and obligations, as well as the possibility of joint activities. In addition, article 217 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that the Union may conclude agreements establishing an association involving reciprocal rights and obligations, common action, and special procedures with one or more third countries or international organisations. In essence, these brief provisions open a wide range of possibilities to (re)imagine relationships with Western Balkan candidates; possibilities that could be realised in a relatively short period of time. It has already been suggested that this could be accomplished by giving the Western Balkan candidates access to the Union's structural funds and by allowing them to take part in the Union's financial stability mechanisms. In other words, it could be accomplished by treating them 'in all other respects as part of the European integration project' (Flessenkemper & Reljić 2017). The main challenge is to determine how to expand an association to provide few or many membership benefits. Considering the limited

scale of the region's economy and populations, as well as the limitations on the free movement of people that will be similar to the past enlargement rounds, gradual integration into the internal market does not appear to pose a significant challenge to the Union. The opening of structural and agricultural funds, the creation of new pre-accession aid to match funds available to less developed Member States, as well as the expansion of the WB candidates' already substantial participation in various programs and activities, could also be included in this new approach. A commendable project advocating for "staged membership" to the EU in four phases was launched in 2021 (Emerson et al. 2021). The EU treaties would need to be amended significantly as to accommodate this model, but all parties involved should give it further thought. Another viable option for the Western Balkans that merits consideration by both academics and policymakers is to reinvent and expand the cooperation and verification mechanisms that were put in place when Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2008 (European Commission 2022). Furthermore, the use of post-accession conditionality tying discharge of the funds with upholding crucial EU norms and values in areas such as rule of law can also be considered a plausible option. Already put in place in recent year as a response to democratic and the rule of law backsliding of some of 2004 EU entrants (Baraggia & Bonelli 2022), it can be replicated, extended and made hard law through the accession treaties for the Western Balkan countries.

Concluding remarks

The search for more effective ways for the EU to engage with the region has been given a crucial impetus with the geopolitical context of the recent Russian aggression against Ukraine. The countries in the Western Balkan region have largely failed to make significant EU accession progress after two decades for a variety of reasons. These include the enlargement fatigue on the side of the Union that has faced multiple crises, the unpreparedness of local elites in the Western Balkans to transform their societies, as well as the mounting influence of non-Western powers. The war context and growing influence of outside actors necessitate concrete proposals and actions by both the EU and the candidate countries. To this matter, the greater engagement (and creativity) of the Commission in proposing new ways of engagement are necessary. While the swift inclusion of the entire region is the politically most prudent move in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the best-case scenario for the region's

stability, it is extremely unlikely in the short term perspective. However, if done gradually, with extensive cooperation and verification mechanisms, and under the assumption of a post-accession conditionality that had not previously been in place, it might become acceptable. Both the Treaty on the European Union (article 8) and Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (article 217) offer plenty of room for the inclusion of candidates in various Union policies, as was analysed in this chapter. This inclusion has indeed already happened in a few areas such as energy, transport, research, and beyond. It is certain that there is room for far greater involvement in the EU bodies (such as EU decentralised agencies) as well as inclusion in sectoral policies and regulatory processes even without revising the current treaties. This quest for alternative integration solutions should also be considered for Eastern Partnership (potential) candidates, but with significant differences between two candidate regions in mind. Constructing future ties between the EU and all or the majority of Western Balkan candidates may benefit from the differentiation model(s) similar to those currently in place for EEA states, at least in the medium term. This new model would need to be modified to account for the region's unique characteristics and its current development levels, in order to firmly tie the Western Balkans to the European Union.

References

Baraggia, Antonia, & Matteo Bonelli. 'Linking Money to Values: The New Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation and Its Constitutional Challenges'. *German Law Journal* vol. 23, no. 2 (March 2022): 131-156. DOI: 10.1017/glj.2022.17

Belloni, Roberto, & Marco Brunazzo. 'After 'Brexit:' The Western Balkans in the European Waiting Room'. *European Review of International Studies* vol. 4, no. 4 (December 2017), 21-38.

Dimitrov, Nikola, Cvijić Srđan, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev, Ioannis Armakolas, Oana Popescu-Zamfir, Valbona Zeneli, Stefan Lehne, & Rosa Balfour. 'What Is to Be Done? The War, the Western Balkans and the EU'. *IWM Blog*, 2022. Available at: https://www.iwm.at/blog/what-is-to-be-done-the-war-the-western-balkans-and-the-eu.

Džankić, Jelena, Soeren Keil, & Marko Kmezić. 'Introduction: The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans'. In *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans - A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, edited by Džankić, Jelena, Keil Soren and Kmezić Marko, 1-18. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Economides, Spyros. 'From Fatigue to Resistance: EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans'. *Dahrendorf Forum IV,* Working Paper, no. 17, March 2020, 1-17.

Emerson, Michael, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blochamans, and Strahinja Subotić. 'A template for Staged Accession to the EU'. *CEPS*, October 1, 2021. Available at: www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu.

European Commission (2020), *Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans,* COM (2020) 57 final, Brussels, 5 February 2020.

European Parliamentary Research Service. *The Western Balkans and the EU Enlargement and Challenges,* Brussels, 26 September, 2016. Available at: www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/589791/EPRS_BRI(2016)589791_EN.pdf.

Flessenkemper, Tobias, & Dušan Reljić. 'EU Enlargement: A Six Per cent Target for the Western Balkans'. *Swp-Berlin*, June 27, 2017. Available at:

https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eu-enlargement-a-six-per cent-target-for-the-western-balkans.

Kochenov, Dimitry Vladimirovich. 'Take Down the Wall. And Make Russia Pay for It: The Case for the Immediate Accession of Ukraine to the European Union'. *VerfBlog, 21 March, 2022.* https://verfassungsblog.de/take-down-the-wall-and-make-russia-pay-for-it/. DOI: 10.17176/20220322-001323-0.

Leruth, Benjamin, Stefan Gänzle, & Jarle Trondal. 'Introduction: Differentiation in the European Union as a Field of Study'. In *Routledge Handbook of Differentiation in the European Union*, edited by Leruth, Benjamin, Gänzle Stefan, and Trondal Jarle, 1-17. London and New York: Routledge, 2022a.

Leruth Benjamin, Stefan Gänzle, & Jarle Trondal. 'The Nordic Countries as Pioneers of Differentiation'. In *Routledge Handbook of Differentiation in the European Union*, edited by Leruth, Benjamin, Gänzle Stefan, and Trondal Jarle, 449-463. London and New York: Routledge, 2022b.

Milenković, Miloš, & Marko Milenković. 'Serbia and the European Union: Is "Culturalisation" of Accession Criteria on the Way'. In *EU Enlargement: Current Challenges and Strategic Choices*, edited by Laursen Finn, 153-172. P.I.E. Lang: Brussels, 2013.

Milenković, Marko. *EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the Way for Differentiated Integration?* 2020. Available at: https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/.files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440

Milenković, Marko, & Milica Pešterić. 'Transition to Electricity from Renewables in Line with the EU Standards in Serbia – Integration with(out) Membership and Incosistent Implementation'. In *Transition in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Matúš Mišík, and Veronica Oravcinova, 515-543. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Milenković, Marko. 'Trajectories of Differentiation Integration for the Western Balkans'. In *Routledge Handbook of Differentiation in the European Union*, edited by Benjamin Leruth, Stefan Gänzle, and Jarle Trondal, 551-564. London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

Milenković, Marko. 'The Western Balkans and European Union enlargement – exploring possibilities of differentiated integration'. In *(Re-)defining Membership: Differentiation in and outside the European Union*, edited by

Diane Fromage. OUP, 2023 (forthcoming).

O'Brennan, John. 'On the Slow Train to Nowhere. The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans'. *European Foreign Affairs Review* vol. 19, no. 2 (May 2014): 221-241.

Raik, Kristi, & Tanja Tamminen. 'Inclusive and Exclusive Differentiated Integration: Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy'. In *Multi-Speed Europe? Differentiated Integration in the External Relation of the European Union*, edited by Jokela Juha, 45-59. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2014.

Ristić, Irena. 'The War in Ukraine: An Additional Obstacle or a New Chance for the EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?' In *We the People of United Europe: Reflections on the European State of Mind*, edited by Laura Montanari. Editoriale Scientifica, 2022.

Stubb, Alexander C-G. 'A Categorisation of Differentiated Integration'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* vol. 34, no. 2 (1996): 283-295.

Vuksanović, Vuk. 'Russia and China in the Western Balkans: The Spoiler Power and the Unexpected Power'. In *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans*, edited by Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová, 234-254. New York: Routledge, 2023.

The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: What is at Stake?

Ritsa Panagiotou*

The war in Ukraine, which began a year ago, has provoked deep-reaching and enduring global repercussions. From the very beginning it was clear that this was not to be a "local" conflict between two states but would spill over to encompass several actors (Lachert 2022, 2). Moreover, there was a justified concern that while the Western Balkans are not frontline states in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, they would acutely feel the reverberations and risk becoming a "proxy hybrid battlefield" in the antagonism between Russia and the West (Anastasakis 2022, 1). This paper will address the impact of the war on the Western Balkan region by analysing its repercussions on three core parameters: domestic politics, EU accession prospects and the role of third actors in the region.

Impact on domestic affairs: politics and economics

As far as domestic policies are concerned, the impact of the war is evident in both the political and economic domains.

Politically, there is an enhanced risk of increased *polarisation and frag-*

* Centre of Planning and Economic Research (KEPE) in Athens.

mentation within the region: this is manifest on several levels as the Western Balkan countries exhibit different responses to the war, different levels of allegiance and alignment with EU foreign policy, different historical relations and levels of dependence on Russia, and diverse attitudes within the population towards Russia. Another potential fissure is the existence of both NATO and non-NATO countries in the region, a reality that brings diverse perspectives to the conflict. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the cleavages between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices across the Balkans. The variety of responses show how the war is having a deep impact not only on fissures *between* states but also *within* states.

The decision to apply sanctions against Russia has not been unanimously agreed upon at the regional level. NATO members Albania, North Macedonia, and NATO aspirant Kosovo have completely aligned themselves with EU policy: they immediately condemned Russia's invasion in the United Nations Security Council and have also imposed sanctions on Russia. While these countries do not have strong political, cultural, or even trade and investment ties with Russia, they do have strong energy dependencies that cause them concern.

On the other side of the spectrum is Serbia. President Aleksandar Vučić joined in the condemnation of the invasion, declaring that Serbia supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, but that despite suffering 'unprecedented pressure' sanctions were not an option since 'Serbia must preserve its own vital national interests' (Stekić 2022). Serbia did not prohibit Russian planes from flying over its territory, making Belgrade the only air connection between Russia and Europe. Of all the Western Balkan countries, Serbia appears to be in the most "sensitive" position at the moment, trying to balance its European goals with deep historical, political, cultural, and energy ties with Russia (Novaković 2022). Russia's role over the years as the "protector" of Serbia, Slavs, and Orthodoxy, and its steadfast support of Serbia in the UN Security Council and on the Kosovo issue all resonate deeply with the Serb population. Moreover, there is a tremendous energy dependency on Russia, as Russia is both a key supplier and investor in Serbia's energy sector. Russia supplies almost 90 per cent of Serbia's natural gas needs, and major energy giants like Lukoil and Gazprom have acquired majority stakes in Serbia's energy market (Vladimirov et al. 2018, 22).

Bosnia and Herzegovina also represents a complex situation, due to its internal political and institutional situation and the different approaches of the

two entities (Vale 2022). While the federal leadership in Sarajevo supported the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion as well as the sanctions against Moscow, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, was vehemently against (Lachert 2022, 6). Dodik's threats to pull the Republika Srpska from national institutions have shaken the fragile balances and have caused the country's most serious post-war crisis in recent months. The Republika Srpska has very strong ties with Russia and has long been considered Russia's major ally on the ground. Dodik considers Putin a major partner in his quest for more self-determination of Bosnian Serbs. As with Serbia, Russia is an important partner both as a supplier and an investor in energy infrastructure. Russian firms, including energy giant Zarubezhneft, have acquired a significant stake in the energy sectors of Bosnia and Herzegovina (specifically in Republika Srpska).

Montenegro's policy response to the onset of the war was somewhere between the two camps. Although the leadership condemned the invasion and adopted sanctions in April 2022, contentious political debate ensued on whether to implement the sanctions or not, with clear indications of conflict between 'Serbian parties in favour of Russia' and 'pro-Western' parties (Kolarski 2022, 100). Montenegro is also struggling to find a balance between its EU commitments and its close ties and high degree of economic exposure to Russia. Russia is the largest foreign direct investor in Montenegro, investing heavily in the real estate market and sectors like metallurgy. Montenegro is also a top destination for Russian tourists.

As far as the impact of the war on the *economies* of the Western Balkans is concerned, this too has been deep and far-reaching. By the second half of 2022, all major macroeconomic indicators (including GDP growth, inflation, current accounts) had deteriorated, as the full repercussions of the war took hold. Concerning GDP growth, the fallout from the war reversed the short but robust recovery that had been achieved in the post-Covid phase that began in late 2021 (World Bank 2022). By the second half of 2022, the impact of sanctions, disrupted supply chains, slowdown in exports, surging prices in energy and food all contributed to the slowdown in growth. GDP decline ranged from 34 per cent (North Macedonia) to 72 per cent (Kosovo).

Perhaps the most tangible economic effect of the war throughout Europe has been growing inflation, and the Western Balkans have not been immune to this phenomenon. Most countries experienced a dramatic surge in 2022, with all countries (apart from Albania) surpassing double digit numbers. The

cost-of-living crisis has added to social turmoil, regional instability, and uncertainty. Due to the increased need for imports, all Western Balkan countries also experienced a surge in their current account deficits. Kosovo and Montenegro, already running very high current account deficits, surpassed 10 per cent in 2022 (IMF 2022).

The negative impact of the economic downturn of all important economic parameters spills over into all other areas of life: slower growth affects employment prospects; inflation and increased cost of living impacts the quality of life of citizens; slowdown of structural reforms affects EU accession prospects etc. Moreover, food shortages, empty shelves in supermarkets, price rises in energy and consumer goods, queues at petrol stations all contribute to a feeling of insecurity, unrest, and potential instability. All the above make the area more vulnerable to external interventions such as subsidised oil from Russia or opaque credit from China.

Impact on EU enlargement prospects

Not surprisingly, the war in Ukraine is causing major geopolitical shifts that reverberate in the EU enlargement landscape as well. These shifts can be interpreted both through a positive and a negative lens.

Concerning a *positive* interpretation, one could argue that the war in Ukraine could have a constructive impact on EU accession prospects, since it has highlighted the geopolitical risks of leaving these countries in a vacuum and allowing third parties to keep filling this vacuum. The swift granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 seem to support this premise of prioritising high geopolitical stakes. Thus, although the decision to grant candidate status to these two countries may have caused concern and bemusement in those Western Balkan countries that have been in the EU waiting room for almost two decades, it could bode well for the acceleration of the enlargement process. It could be interpreted as a renewed acknowledgment on behalf of the EU that it can no longer afford to leave this region on the margins of the EU and to delay the process, and that it needs to renew and accelerate its commitment (Euractiv 2022). The decision in July 2022 to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as well as the granting of candidate status to Bosnia-Herzegovina in December of the same year, could be attributed to a great extent to this recognition. As Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani declared, 'the openness the EU has shown towards Ukraine has turned the tide in a way

that finally the EU sees the enlargement process as a geostrategic process rather than a bureaucratic one' (as quoted in Tharoor, 2022).

As far as the *negative* interpretation of the impact of the war is concerned, clearly the geopolitical and economic repercussions of the war by *definition* have negative implications for the accession process as well. Any force that jeopardises stability, security, and pulls the countries off the reform path is a force against accession. In this sense, a derailment of the accession process could be collateral damage of the war.

All these factors are coming together at a particularly crucial time, when delays in the EU path have increased Euroscepticism and support for EU accession is at an all-time low throughout most of the region, even for Euro-enthusiasts like North Macedonia and Albania. It is disturbing that in North Macedonia there is a growing support on social media concerning Russia's role in Ukraine. Part of the public seems to accept the narrative of its legitimacy to intervene in the "denazification" of Ukraine (Marušić 2022). As has been discussed, the slow and tedious pace of enlargement not only allows the area to become more destabilised and adrift, it also opens the door even further for third party involvement, most likely at the detriment of the European path.

The role of third actors

The war in Ukraine has added another, urgent dimension to the ample discourse on the role of third actors in the region and the potential risks this presents to stability (Tzifakis 2021; Bieber & Tzifakis 2021).

Not surprisingly, *Russia* is at the top of the list of potentially dangerous, destabilising, and malign external actors in the region. For over a decade, Russia's policy goals in the Western Balkans have been to enhance its economic, political, and cultural presence, to counterbalance the Western powers as a source of influence, to contain NATO, and ultimately to destabilise the region in order to derail the EU accession prospects (Panagiotou 2021, 225). Russia's most important instruments of influence in the region include energy policy, investment, political pressure, and "soft power" tools such as cultural, media, and religious campaigns.

The war has given Russia an even stronger hand to pursue its goals. Not only can it use its energy connections to apply pressure on the countries of the region, but also it can invest in deepening the fissures that have emerged along the pro-Western and pro-Russia lines in order to continue destabilising

the region (Stronski 2022). Moscow's political and cultural reach is evident in the fact that while much of the world stood in solidarity with Ukrainians in March 2022, thousands of citizens in Serbia and Republika Srpska organised mass rallies in support of Russia and Vladimir Putin (Karčić 2022). While Russia cannot offer the Western Balkan countries a realistic "alternative" to EU accession, and it cannot literally block their path to the EU, it can undermine these prospects by investing in the unravelling of regional security and thus creating more obstacles to the region's EU aspirations.

China has long considered the Western Balkans as its foothold in Europe and a steppingstone for further expansion. China has built its influence in the Western Balkans through projects ranging from energy, mining, and maritime infrastructure, communication technology to culture, education, and media (Shopov 2022). Chinese FDI has grown rapidly: according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) China invested more than 32 billion euros in the region in 2009-2021 through 135 projects (Stanicek & Tarpova 2022, 2). In Serbia alone, Chinese investment reached 10.3 billion euros, making it the third largest investor in the country. Many Chinese projects have been marred by numerous controversies such as lack of transparency, direct contracts without public tenders, ambiguity regarding labour, and environmental standards and overall poor and opaque governance.

While China has cultivated an image of itself as a benign global power and a strategic investor with no political or cultural ambitions (unlike Russia), this approach has changed recently. China saw potential political and social benefits from its "mask and vaccine diplomacy" during the pandemic and wished to build upon the increasingly positive views of China in the region, especially in Serbia (Vladisavlev 2022). The establishment of seven Confucius Institutes throughout the region and cooperation in various security sectors including police cooperation, military equipment purchases, and certain telecommunications operations also show China's interest in a broader presence.

The dangers of China's policies are multiple and have increased as a result of the new geopolitical realities brought upon by the war. Since Chinese investment comes with no strings attached and no element of conditionality, it enables the Western Balkan countries to move away from EU standards and practices, and the necessary structural reforms. Dependence on Chinese capital creates dangerous dynamics, and Beijing's policy of lending money with few explicit conditions creates a "debt trap" (Stojkovski et al 2021). The ongoing economic difficulties, recession, and insecurity created by the war are likely to

exacerbate these practices. Moreover, China's ambiguous position concerning the war (refusing to condemn Russia, vaguely calling for "peace talks and restraint") creates a further precarious uncertainty concerning the allegiances of some of the region's economic "patrons".

Finally, *Turkey* is stepping up to claim a larger role and to take advantage of the geopolitical shifts that are taking place in the region. Over the past years Ankara has been expanding its economic activity and influence in the region, with a particularly dynamic investment presence in infrastructure projects, banking, energy, and manufacturing. Turkey also uses soft power instruments based on religious, cultural, and common historical heritage in areas that have a large number of Muslims, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

Turkey is maintaining a balance between Russia and Ukraine: although it is a NATO member, it has positioned itself as a neutral player in the Ukraine war but maintains close cooperation with Moscow. While Turkey voted for a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia, it has not sanctioned Russia or closed its airspace to Russian aircraft. Turkey also became a haven for Russians who were locked out of European markets. Along with Belgrade, Istanbul was the only other airport in the region to allow flights from Russia. Turkey's economy, already battered by a currency crisis and soaring inflation, relies heavily on Russian oil, gas, trade, and tourism.

At the same time the geopolitical shifts resulting from the war have given Turkey a new gravitas to pursue its desire to be a more powerful regional force and mediator. This was reflected in the increased Turkish diplomatic activity throughout 2022 with both Foreign Minister Cavusoglou and President Erdogan visiting several countries in the region (Szpala 2022).

Turkey's attempts to play the mediator and be a force of stability in the region are at odds with its other geopolitical relations, including continuous provocations towards its NATO partner Greece - with regular airspace violations and overflights - confrontational rhetoric with the EU, and playing hardball in NATO by vetoing Sweden's membership. Moreover, Ankara's ambivalent policy towards Russia's invasion is a source of concern as it weakens the confidence of Albania, Bosnian Muslims, and Kosovo, which strongly support the Western policy response. Ultimately Turkey's ambivalence is a success for Russia because it is dividing Europe, causing fissures within NATO and adding pressure to those Western Balkan states that are pro-Western but also close to Turkey.

Some concluding remarks

The war in Ukraine continues to have far reaching repercussions on the Western Balkans, and has impacted the region's domestic politics, EU accession prospects, and the role of third parties. All three categories discussed above are deeply interdependent and interconnected. The common denominator for stability and progress is the EU accession path: with stakes so high, not only must it remain on track, but it must be accelerated. The threat of instability in the region, as well as the increased presence of third parties who have much to gain by this volatility, should be the catalyst needed for this acceleration.

References

Anastasakis, Othon. 'The Russo-Ukrainian Crisis and the Western Balkans: Associations and Knock-on effects'. *ACM Briefs*, Atlantic Council of Montenegro, January 2022.

Bieber, Florian, & Nikolaos Tzifakis. *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries.* London: Routledge, 2019.

Euractiv. 'Western Balkans welcome EU's geostrategic enlargement shift amid Ukraine war'. 6 December 2022. https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/western-balkans-welcome-eus-geo-strategic-enlargement-shift-amid-ukraine-war/

International Monetary Fund. *World Economic Outlook*. October 2022.

Karčić, Harun. 'Russia's Influence in the Balkans: the Interplay of Religion, Politics and History'. *Berkley Forum*, Berkley Center, 25 July 2022. Available at: https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-s-influence-in-the-balkans-the-interplay-of-religion-politics-and-history.

Kolarski, Ljiljana. 'The impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans'. *The Policy of National Security* vol. 23, no. 2 (2022): 87-107.

Lachert, Jakub. 'Western Balkans and the War in Ukraine'. *Warsaw Institute Special Report*, 4 July 2022.

Marušić, Jakov-Siniša. 'North Macedonia's Faith in EU Influence Plummeting, Survey Shows'. *Balkans Insight*, 25 February 2023. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/25/north-macedonian-faith-in-eu-influence-plummeting-survey-shows/.

Novaković, Igor. 'Serbia's Position in the Context of the War in Ukraine: Reasons and Perspectives'. Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Belgrade, 25 March 2022. Available at: https://rs.boell.org/en/2022/03/25/serbias-position-context-war-ukraine-reasons-and-perspectives.

Panagiotou, Ritsa. 'The Western Balkans between Russia and the European: Perceptions, Reality and Impact on Enlargement'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* vol. 29, no. 2 (2021): 219-233.

Shopov, Vladimir. 'Mapping China's rise in the Western Balkans'. *European*

Council on Foreign Relations, March 2022. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/.

Stanicek, Branislav, & Simona Tarpova. 'China's Strategic Interest in the Western Balkans'. *European Parliamentary Research Service*, June 2022.

Stekić, Nenad. 'Is the Ukrainian Conflict a Pandora's Box for the Western Balkans?' *Newsletter for the European Union*, March 27, 2022. Available at: https://www.newslettereuropean.eu/ukrainian-conflict-pandoras-box-western-balkans/

Stojanović, Milica. 'Serbian pro-regime media praise Russia "over-running" Ukraine'. *BalkanInsight*, 2 February 2022. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/25/serbian-pro-regime-media-praise-russia-overrunning-ukraine/.

Stronski, Paul. 'Russia in the Balkans after Ukraine: a Troubling Actor'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20 September 2022. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959

Stojkovski, Bojan, Ivana Jeremić, Samir Kajošević, Ivana Nikolić, Ivan Angelovski, Fatjona Mejdini, & Irvin Pekmez. 'China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost'. *Balkan Insight,* 15 December 2021. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/.

Szpala, Marta. 'Bromance: Turkey's Activities in the Western Balkans'. *OSW Commentary*, 11 November 2022. Available at: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2022-11-22/bromance-turkeys-activity-western-balkans.

Tharoor, Ishaan. 'Russia's War in Ukraine finds echoes in the Balkans'. *The Washington Post*, 1 August 2022. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/01/western-balkans-kosovo-ukraine/.

Tzifakis, Nikolaos, Milica Delević, Marko Kmezić, & Zoran Nechev: 'Geopolitically Irrelevant in its "Inner Courtyard"? The EU amidst Third Actors in the Western Balkans'. Balkans Policy Advisory Group in Europe (BiEPAG), 3 December 2021. Available at: https://biepag.eu/publication/geopolitically-irrelevant-in-its-inner-courtyard/.

Vale, Giovanni. 'War in Ukraine, the Balkans hold their breath'. *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, 1 March 2022. Available at: https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/War-in-Ukraine-the-Balkans-hold-their-breath-216258.

Vladimirov, Martin, Milica Kovačević, Marija Mirjačić, Igor Novaković, Nemanja Todorović, Emira Nuredinoska, & Slagjana Dimiskva. 'Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans'. *Center for the Study of Democracy*, Sofia. 2018

Vladisavlev, Stefan. 'Chinese Influence in Serbia'. *Centre for European Policy Analysis*, 2 September 2022. Available at: https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-serbia/.

World Bank. 'Beyond the Crisis'. *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report*, No. 22, Fall 2022.

Missed Opportunities: Reheating Stale Policies in the Western Balkans after a Year of War in Ukraine

Valery Perry*

One year after the beginning of the war in Ukraine – the most significant land war in Europe since the violent destruction of Yugoslavia in the 1990s – the world has experienced some tectonic geopolitical shifts.

In many ways, the western response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been impressive, strengthening resolve and cohesion. The decision by Finland and Sweden to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) sent a clear signal of the respect for and trust in the alliance, and was a direct pushback against Vladimir Putin's aim of weakening the alliance, and the liberal West in general. Wide-ranging sanctions and financial restrictions against Russia have largely held, in spite of grumbling and exceptions made for some countries and industries to ensure support for the broader package. Fears of an energy crisis in Europe have been assuaged by both successful preparatory stockpiling, and an unseasonably warm winter. And in addition to building support for the provisions of weapons, weapons systems, and supplies to Ukraine, countries have begun to fundamentally revamp their defence preparedness, spending, and overall postures, as seen in Germany, Japan, and

* Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council.

elsewhere. There is legitimate reason to be concerned of the risk of "Ukraine fatigue" in 2023, but in the post-Brexit, post-Trump era of rising illiberalism, the "West", broadly defined here as the European Union (EU)/NATO countries, together with other liberal states such as Japan, Switzerland, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand, has responded as well as could be expected.

In contrast, policy on and engagement in the Western Balkans (here defined as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), but also EU/NATO member Croatia, which has historical and cultural ties in the region and continues to play an outsized role, particularly in BiH, has been far less impressive. Indeed, rather than building on the dynamics and opportunities catalysed by Russia's war in Ukraine to finally recalibrate a long failing strategy in the Western Balkans, the US, EU, and UK have in many ways doubled down on unsuccessful policies and programs, strengthening an unsatisfactory status quo and the local elites that perpetuate it and benefit from it (Perry 2021). This policy and engagement will not only ensure the continued decline of the regional political, social, and economic situation, through general stagnation and a haemorrhaging of human capital, but the continued embrace of anti-democratic leaders, and in turn the structures and systems they sustain, will make the region less secure. Further, Western support for illiberal ruling elites in the region will provide further opportunity for Moscow and other anti-democratic actors to destabilise the region, strengthen in-real-life and digital footholds, and encourage and embolden illiberals within the EU itself, creating space to increasingly sideline the human rights elements of the Copenhagen criteria, and leaving in its wake an increasingly values-free, economic trading zone.

Russia in the Balkans: post-February 2022

Vladimir Putin's Russia benefits from anything that sows chaos in the Western Balkans, and anything that enables conflicts among the countries in the region and clouds their future potential membership in the EU or NATO. This dynamic is most clear in and with Serbia, which continues to play an outsized role in the region, and particularly in BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

The impact of the war on Western policy on Serbia was always going to be interesting, as the country has for years managed a strategic dance in which it has sought to balance an Eastern glance towards Moscow, with its symbolic, cultural, and socio-political glosses, with its stated aspirations to join the EU

and its far better economic opportunities and outlook (Biserko 2016; Bechev 2023). Serbia has also been savvy in courting third countries from the Gulf, and of course China, to attract investment and support economic/infrastructure development, as these deals often require far less in terms of transparency and anti-graft requirements (Bassuener 2019; Prelec 2020). While Yugoslavia's Tito successfully navigated this middle ground, creating the Non-Aligned Movement for countries with no interest in being in either NATO or the Warsaw Pact, President Aleksandar Vučić has masterfully reshaped this space "in between" to his benefit, while simultaneously claiming to want to be a part of both.

This has to a large extent continued during the war. Serbia did support a March 2022 UN resolution calling on Russia to withdraw from Ukraine, and condemned Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory in the East by supporting a UN General Assembly Resolution in October. However, as of this writing it still boasts Belgrade-Moscow flights and is a popular destination for Russians with increasingly limited travel. Throughout 2022 and into 2023 there has been back and forth on whether Serbia would join sanctions against Russia, and their potential scope. The Serbian press and information space is fertile ground for Moscow's narratives, leading to far less popular condemnation of the aggression, and a far greater likelihood to frame the war as being the fault of the US and NATO.

As throughout history Moscow has been selective in its dealings with Serbia, ensuring its own self-interest transcends any sense of "Slav brotherhood". Moscow's support for Serbia's positions on Kosovo is an easy card to play, as it feeds the popular sentiment for Kosovo stoked in Serbia, allows it to be a disruptor on the UN Security Council on the issue (on its own and at times allying with China), and ensures continued disruption in the Western Balkans. Moscow also selectively references the Kosovo example for its own ends, in spite of the inherent contradictions of it doing so (Pineles 2022). Vučić and his allies shy away from such comparisons as it would not benefit from any purported similarities between its interests and actions in Kosovo and Moscow's in Ukraine. However, demonstrating his long understanding of how to use media, information, and propaganda, stretching back to his time as Slobodan Milošević's Information Minister, Vučić's language on Kosovo, grounded in grievance and victim narratives (Hronešová 2022) and often stoking fears of pogroms against Serbs, seems calculated to provoke, and if not call for, then at least enable, escalation and action (Taylor & Radosavljević 2022). This language also has clear echoes of Kremlin rhetoric.

Russkiy Mir and Srpski Svet

In its decades-long fantasy that appeasing Belgrade's worst instincts can somehow lead to a commitment to reform and a more democratic future, the West has notably failed to appreciate the cultural, social, and political parallels between Putin's war in support of his vision of "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World), and the notion of "Srpski Svet" (Serbian World). The similarities have been pointed out by analysts and observers in the region for some time, with comparisons made to their underlying expansionist, chauvinist, and illiberal ideologies (Somun 2021; Kisić 2022). It has also been noted that Srpski Svet, in particular, can be read as an updated version of the same Greater Serbia vision that fuelled the wars in the 1990s and stoked far-right wing extremism among adherents (Al Jazeera 2021). This could be chalked up to rhetoric were it not for the many examples of this policy being pursued in the region.

And yet, it is difficult to find acknowledgement of the similarities of these two ideological approaches and what they both reflect and feed in the statements of diplomats and officials working in the region. This is because acknowledging this would require open admission of the transactional and superficial nature of the deals being brokered. However, refusing to acknowledge it is the lynchpin of the West's failed policy in the region.

Some who cling to this policy will claim that things are changing. At the time of this writing, it is too soon to tell whether there will be an agreement on normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo, or whether this will be another point in a long process of stalemate. While Vučić's January 2023 statements that Belgrade cannot prevent Kosovo from joining bodies like the Council of Europe or NATO were viewed by some as ground-breaking, others noted that the proposal itself, prepared by Germany and France but presented on behalf of the EU, is unclear on key issues, including recognition of Kosovo's independence by the five EU member state holdouts, and Kosovo's recognition in the UN (Serwer 2023). Such omissions make it difficult to characterise the latest talks as truly definitive. And Vučić could always put the issue of any Kosovo deal to Parliament, which would never accept it, providing him with another means of deflecting responsibility. Or he could buy time by calling for new elections – another tried and tested tactic.

Whether or not Serbia is on a fully reformed, new, Brussels-oriented path, it is naïve to think that the ecosystem that has been created in the name of Srpski Svet can be simply turned off. The media environment in Serbia has layered

Moscow's preferred narratives on top of a media and tabloid machine dating back to the wars in the 1990s, and has fully prepared the ground for illiberalism and Euro-scepticism. Among other data points this can be seen in mid-2022 polling that showed that 44 per cent of Serbian respondents were against EU membership (Dartford 2022).

It is also reasonable to anticipate that much of Serbia's unreformed grassroots and elite-level nationalism could be increasingly offshored. In addition to Kosovo, NATO member Montenegro remains a target destination. However, BiH's Republika Srpska (RS) is the most fertile, obvious, and willing heir.

Ana Dević has explained how ultra-far right thinkers and ideologues in Russia have already been seen to tie their allegiance to the RS's Milorad Dodik, feeling that Vučić, and even ultra-nationalist Vojislav Šešelj, have "betrayed" Serbs' interests; she suggests the RS could emerge as the new Serb Piedmont in the Balkans (Dević 2019). At the most recent unconstitutional commemorations of the declaration of the existence of the RS in 1992 – marking the creation of a new historical and geographical construct which laid the groundwork for the expulsions of non-Serb populations (Donia 2014) – on 9 January 2023, in addition to the parade of armed law enforcement units and Russia's violent "Night Wolves" motorcycle gang, Dodik awarded Vladimir Putin the RS's highest honour. He noted that he looked forward to giving it to him in person on his next visit to Moscow; he had visited already in September 2022, just before the general elections in BiH. Following the elections, Dodik ended his term as the Serb member of the three-person BiH state presidency, and is now the President of the RS. Within the context of Srpski Svet, and the notion that actions taken on behalf of Serbs anywhere benefit Serbs everywhere, Belgrade enjoys a ready-made proxy, can purport deniability of such actions and happenings outside its borders, and yet can still claim to have the legal right to enjoy "special relations" within BiH's own domestic political scene as outlined in the Dayton Agreement that ended BiH's war. And it is the experience seen in the RS that has made Kosovo's leaders so opposed to the establishment of a "Community of Serb Municipalities" in Kosovo, as they have seen the Trojan Horse of disruption that such an entity can play. Recent revisionist comments by Dodik, simultaneously boastful while dripping with victim narratives, used the issue of ongoing talks on Kosovo to again call for two Serbian states (Serbia and the RS), were published on his website as if on cue (Dodik 2023).

While there has been a long and steady decline in terms of the quality of Western engagement in BiH, the past several years have been marked by evidence that Western actors are no longer pretending to be about building a functional and cohesive state. Instead, there is a new focus on tinkering with the post-war system to fully enable the tripartite internal ethno-national political partition that had been avoided at Dayton, but was never abandoned by local nationalist sympathisers and their supporters – in Serbia but also Croatia, which continues to pursue its own aims in BiH from its perch in both the EU and NATO. This pattern has been seen in Mostar in late 2020 (Weber 2020), in the push for disintegrative (con)federalising changes in the Federation entity of mid-2022, and in the imposition of election law changes by the High Representative after the polls closed on election day on October 2, criticised by some as intentionally disintegrative (Mujanović 2022). While these external actions enjoy the support of elites intent on weakening BiH as a state, they are paradoxically framed by the West as necessary to strengthen and hasten the country's European path. In reality, further ethno-political division will increase the similarities of BiH not to the oft-cited federal model of Switzerland, but to Lebanon, with all of the internal dysfunction and external meddling that has ensured that country remains mired in corruption and decay (Bassuener and Šelo Šabić 2020). While it's no secret that Russia is engaged in "active measures" in the West, ranging from social media manipulation in advance of elections in the US, or more direct involvement in letter bombs/potential terrorist attacks (Wong, Barnes, & Schmitt 2023), in the Balkans the West is helping to solidify the dysfunction and division Putin wants.

Concluding comments

In conclusion, the West may be trying to convince itself that its current policy in the Western Balkans is necessary as a small piece of a larger puzzle aimed at ensuring broader support for Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. However, by brokering support for – or even just failing to push back against – illiberal nationalist elites in the region it is not only ensuring that its own security interests are short-term at best, but that the roots of more liberal democratic government and societies are effectively smothered. With the exception of Serbia where citizens exhibit declining support for EU membership, citizens in the rest of the region want membership, and want to be a part of a new narrative for the region that stops painting them as basket cases. These are the

voices that diplomats should be amplifying and supporting if a liberal democratic future is the policy goal – not providing a financial and reputational lifeline to illiberal elites that has enabled two decades of regional dysfunction (Perry 2021).

The granting of EU candidacy status to BiH was welcomed by many, but is hard to take seriously. It is easy to discount the hollowness of this gesture following years of increasingly dismal (progress) reports by the EU itself, bringing to mind sports tournaments where everyone gets a trophy. Rather, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which EU countries would even *want* the Western Balkan countries to join. An exception would be the EU's problematic sibling Hungary, which would benefit from having more illiberals in the Union, and has not been shy in developing its relations with EU members that have an affinity to these illiberal politics – Poland and Croatia. 'Arguably, Orbán's Hungary presents an example for Serbia to emulate: a country that benefits mightily from EU membership, especially through lavish subsidies, while pursuing an illiberal political model at home and a multivector policy externally' (Bechev 2023). And a weaker and more incoherent EU is just what Putin would like to see.

There is still time for the long-overdue policy recalibration. A 360-degree security threat assessment is needed, and must be linked together with an honest appraisal of what has hampered genuine socio-economic progress in the region. Western policy ideas based on the notion of an "Open Balkans" that would further reward large country spoilers should be replaced by intensive support for advocates for change in the small countries that are always on the menu – BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Workshops and trainings and capacity building and road maps have not worked. Democratic engagement and the fight against corruption and state/party capture should be rooted in genuine support for movements that put communities, sustainable development, and environmental protection first.

The very values that Ukrainians are fighting for and dying for are the ones that Putin fears – at home in his own backyard, but also in the Western Balkans. The sooner the West stops doubling down on false friends in the region, the sooner a social environment for genuine political reformation can occur – something that is necessary if the ineffective transactionalism is to be replaced by a truly trans-Atlantic commitment to comprehensive security in the region.

References

Al Jazeera. 'Critics Condemn Minister's Call to Unite "Serb world"'. *Al Jazeera,* 19 July 2021.

Bassuener, Kurt, & Senada Šelo Šabić. 'EU Needs Alternative to Bosnia "Peace Cartel"'. *EU Observer,* 21 August 2020.

Bassuener, Kurt. 'Pushing on an Open Door: Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans'. National Endowment for Democracy Working Paper, May 2019.

Bechev, Dimitar. 'Hedging its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU'. Carnegie Europe, 19 January 2023.

Biserko, Sonja (ed.). *The Warp of the Serbian Identity: Anti-Westernism, Russophilia, Traditionalism.* Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Studies Series #17, 2016.

Dartford, Katy. 'For First Time, a Majority of Serbs Are Against Joining the EU – Poll'. *Euronews*, 22 April 2022.

Dević, Ana. 'The Eurasian Wings of Serbia: Serbian Affinities of the Russian Radical Right'. In *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21-st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, edited by Valery Perry, 109-138. Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2019.

Dodik, Milorad. 'What do the Foreigners Want?' *Dodik.net*, 30 January 2023.

Donia, Robert. *Radovan Karadžić: Architect of the Bosnian Genocide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Hronešová, Jessie Barton. 'The Uses of Victimhood as a Hegemonic Meta-narrative in Eastern Europe'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2022): 1-17.

Kisić, Izabela. 'Proruska propaganda u Srbiji'. *Atlantic Initiative*, 30 March 2022.

Mujanović, Jasmin. 'An Illiberal Putsch Attempt in Bosnia'. *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 4 October 2022.

Perry, Valery (ed.). *Sell Out, Tune Out, Get Out, or Freak Out? Understanding Corruption, State Capture, Radicalization, Pacification, Resilience, and*

Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Skopje: Eurothink, 2021.

Pineles, Dean B. 'How the "Kosovo Precedent" Shaped Putin's Plan to Invade Ukraine'. *Balkan Insight*, 9 March 2022.

Prelec, Tena. 'The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of Regional Security* vol. 15, no. 2 (2020): 167-198.

Serwer, Dan. 'Rising Hopes Can be Realized or Dashed'. *Peacefare Blog*, 24 January 2023.

Somun, Hajrudin. 'Putinov "russkij mir" i Vulinov "srpski svet". *Oslobođenje*, 30 July 2021.

Taylor, Alice, & Zoran Radosavljević. 'Serbia Boycotts EU Summit, calls Kosovo PM "Terrorist Scum"'. *Euractiv*, 2 December 2022.

Weber, Bodo. 'The West's Dirty Mostar Deal: Deliverables in the Absence of a BiH Policy'. *Democratization Policy Council Policy Note 16*, 18 December 2020.

Wong, Edward, Julian E. Barnes, & Eric Schmitt. 'Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group to Mail Bombs in Spain'. *The New York Times,* 22 January 2023.

The Advent of Geopolitical Enlargement and Its Credibility Dilemma

Frank Schimmelfennig*

A reinvigoration of EU enlargement?

For all the death and destruction that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has brought, it has breathed new life into the enlargement process of the European Union (EU). It may even usher in a new, "geopolitical" phase in the EU's eastward expansion. In this brief paper, I present evidence for a geopolitical turn in EU enlargement and discuss some of its possible strategic effects on the politics of enlargement.

On 28 February 2022, four days after the start of the Russian invasion, Ukraine applied for EU membership. Georgia and Moldova followed shortly thereafter. In June 2022, after many years of ambiguity and non-commitment, the EU not only offered the Association Trio an explicit membership perspective. It also granted Moldova and Ukraine an official candidate status, whereas Georgia will remain a potential candidate until the country meets certain conditions.

The enlargement effects of the Ukraine war were not limited to the Eastern European countries bordering on Russia. In July 2022, the EU finally opened

* ETH, Zürich.

accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which had been blocked by Bulgarian and French vetoes, even though the Commission had been recommending the start of negotiations for years and the European Council had agreed in principle in 2018. Finally, in December 2022, Kosovo filed an application for membership and the European Council granted Bosnia and Herzegovina the status of an official candidate. In sum, 2022 was an eventful year in EU enlargement.

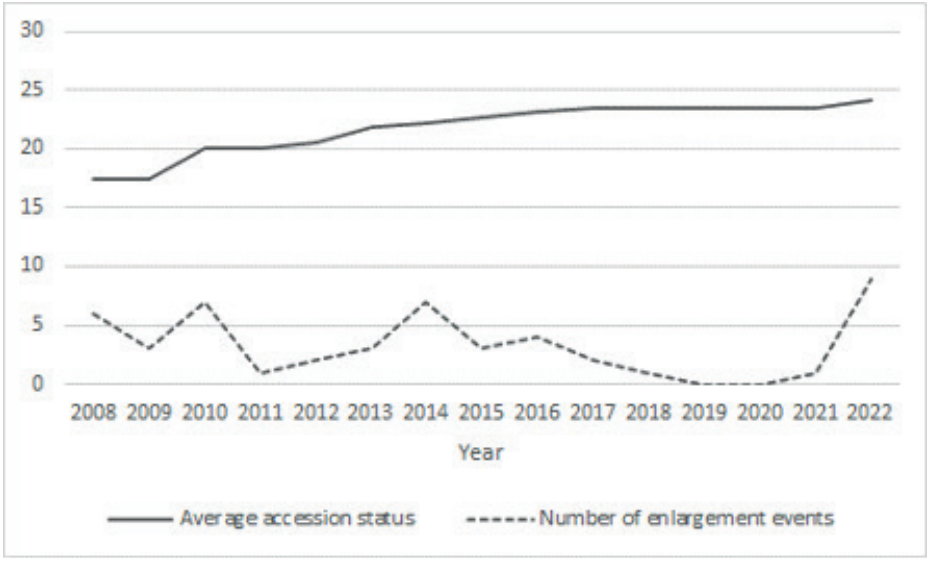

Figure 1 — EU enlargement process, 2008-2022[1]

As Figure 1 shows, the enlargement process of the EU had come to stagnate since the mid-2010s – with no progress in the average accession status of the EU's potential Member States and no or just a single enlargement-related event from 2017 to 2021. In 2022, the EU registered the highest number of enlargement events in a single year since Eastern enlargement. And even though almost half of the events consisted in mere applications for membership, they have generated the largest uptick in the average enlargement status among the EU potential members since Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

1 Note: The figure is based on data from the ENLABASE dataset (Schimmelfennig 2003; available from the author). "Average accession status" is the annual mean accession status of the 14 non-member countries of South-eastern and Eastern Europe (the seven Western Balkan countries, the six Eastern Partnership countries and Turkey) on the ENLABASE status scale from 0 to 47. "Enlargement events" is the number of positive changes in accession status for the same group of countries each year.

From Europeanisation to geopolitical enlargement

The reinvigoration of the enlargement process in the wake of the Russian invasion in Ukraine is the clearest indication so far of a geopolitical turn in EU enlargement. In a stylised way, we can distinguish between two broad phases in EU post-Cold War enlargement. From the early 1990s to the "big bang" accession of 2004, when ten new Member States entered the EU, EU enlargement was mainly conceived of as a meritocratic Europeanisation project. The EU aimed to help transform formerly Communist countries into consolidated liberal democracies and competitive market economies, and to integrate them into the institutions and policies of its regional system of multi-level governance. Accession was a gradual and conditional process, in which each step of further integration depended on the Central and Eastern European countries' progress towards liberal democratic transformation and in which the most eager and successful transformers would become EU Member States first.

While the EU has not abandoned this enlargement rationale officially after 2004, Europeanisation became increasingly undermined by domestic politicisation. "Enlargement fatigue" and concerns about "absorption capacity" were the new buzzwords (Börzel, Dimitrova, & Schimmelfennig 2017). Whereas the first phase of Eastern enlargement benefited from a permissive public consensus, the second phase was characterised by adverse public opinion, populist mobilisation, and bilateral disputes. In part, enlargement scepticism has had to do with the politics and the economy of the next wave of potential Member States in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, which were considered an additional burden on an EU that was struggling with economic crises and with democratic backsliding in several earlier accession countries. Yet, this scepticism has also been a correlate of the general increase in the cultural contestation and politicisation of European integration (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Hutter, Grande, & Kriesi 2016). Enlargement has become a profitable cause of populist mobilisation and an issue for popular referendums – see the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's association in 2016 and the Austrian and French announcements to hold a popular vote on Turkey's accession. Moreover, EU Member States neighbouring the Western Balkans have regularly used the accession process to advance their nationalist agendas and win concessions in their bilateral territorial and cultural disputes with the candidates.

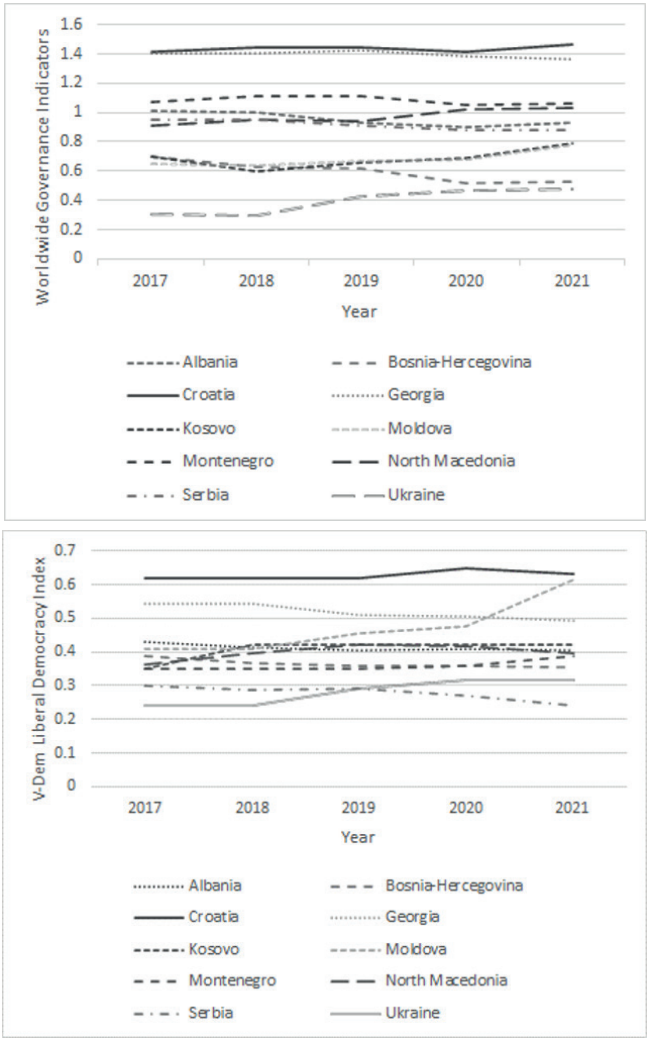

Figure 2 — Good governance in the Western Balkans and the Association Trio, 2017-2021;
Panel a: Worldwide Governance Indicators
Panel b: V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index[2]

2 Panel a: Mean of the annual estimates of the indicators (corruption, government effectiveness, political stability, regulatory quality, rule of law, and voice and accountability). To avoid negative numbers, I added 1 to each estimate. Retrieved from https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators. Panel b: Annual values of the liberal democracy index of the Varieties of Democracy project. Retrieved from: https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/country-year-v-dem-core/. Croatia added for reference.

The enlargement events of 2022 are unrelated to progress in Europeanisation, but they also managed to sideline constraints of domestic politicisation. Figure 2, depicting the recent "good governance" trajectory of the Western Balkans and the Association Trio does not leave much room for a meritocratic interpretation of the 2022 decisions. Overall, the performance of the two Southeastern and Eastern European groups of potential Member States has stagnated in the past five years and remained at a significantly lower level than that of Croatia, the most recent member state. In the Association Trio, there has been visible progress in Moldova and Ukraine (especially in Moldova according to the 2021 Liberal Democracy Index), whereas the situation in Georgia has deteriorated. This might explain why Moldova and Ukraine were awarded candidate status. Yet, Georgia has still had the highest ratings among the Eastern European associated countries, and Ukraine has remained at the bottom of the potential Member States. Bosnia and Herzegovina became an official candidate despite consistent backsliding during the past five years and the second-worst rating for the Worldwide Governance Indicators. Finally, whereas Albania has shown a slight downward movement in both measures, the direction for North Macedonia is not clear.

In sum, recent developments in the quality of democracy and governance in the region generally would not have warranted an upgrade in EU integration – even if the process had not been undermined by enlargement fatigue and resistance in the existing Member States. Rather, the Association Trio seized the opportunity to increase their pressure on the EU to make a firm commitment to their eventual membership. Under the dual impression of the Russian attack on and the heroic Ukrainian defence of the post-Cold War liberal European order, the EU could not prevaricate further. The war also created a sense of urgency to secure the common gains of Western Balkan European integration against Russian interference by starting accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Finally, the Kosovo government sought to "ride the wave" – as the last Western Balkan country that had not applied for membership and obtained candidate status.

The credibility dilemma of geopolitical enlargement

At this point, the geopolitical enlargement decisions of 2022 have mainly symbolic value. As such, the granting of candidate status and the start of acces-

sion negotiations are no reliable predictors of accession progress and eventual membership. North Macedonia has been an official candidate since 2005, and negotiations with Montenegro have been going on for more than 10 years. These decisions simply start institutional procedures of review, adaptation and negotiation that generate the potential of enlargement.

Whereas it is of utmost importance that the EU offers aspiring countries full membership, its most sizable and tangible incentive, the effect of the membership perspective on liberal democratic consolidation and regulatory alignment with the EU depends on the credibility of the conditionality attached. Both the credibility of the conditional promise of membership and the credibility of the conditional threat of non-membership are important. On the one hand, candidate countries need to be certain that they will actually be admitted to the EU if they fulfil the political, economic, institutional, and legal conditions of membership. Moreover, the candidate countries need to have a realistic chance to meet the conditions of membership in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, candidate countries need to be certain that they will not be admitted unless they fulfil the conditions. If candidate countries see a chance to be admitted "on the cheap", they are unlikely to comply with politically or economically costly EU demands.

How does geopolitical enlargement affect the credibility of the EU's enlargement process? For one, it may strengthen the credibility of the EU's promise of membership, which has suffered severely from domestic politicisation (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020). In the phase of domestic politicisation, the enlargement process has become hostage to domestic politics. Member State governments prioritised domestic support over the support of candidate countries. Under the threat of nationalist mobilisation and referendums, candidate countries could not be sure that Europeanisation progress would be rewarded with integration progress.

In the new phase, geopolitical pressures potentially outweigh domestic pressures. In the face of common security threats, "petty" bilateral conflicts and economic concerns lose relevance. The need to defend post-Cold War Europe against an imminent military attack provides EU enlargement with a more tangible and urgent rationale than the abstract commitment to Europeanisation.

At the same time, however, a geopolitical rationale of enlargement tends to undermine the credibility of the EU's threat of non-membership to anti-reform or backsliding candidates. The more that the EU feels the need to in-

tegrate and protect candidates to defend its international order and to deny its geopolitical rivals territorial and political gains, the less likely the EU is to insist on "good governance" as a condition and to wait until candidate countries are ready for the next step towards membership. In this sense, geopolitics has the opposite effect of domestic politicisation. Whereas domestic politicisation weakens the credibility of the conditional membership promise, but strengthens the threat of non-membership, geopolitical enlargement strengthens the membership promise but weakens the threat of non-membership for non-compliers. Yet, both domestic politicisation and geopolitical rivalry undermine the positive effects of the accession process on the improvement of governance in the candidate countries.

In a context of geopolitical rivalry, candidate country governments have in principle two strategic options: they can play the EU against its geopolitical rivals, seek to extract benefits from all sides, and, if necessary, choose the side that offers the highest political and economic gains. This is "cross-conditionality". Alternatively, candidate governments can use a "paradox of weakness" of sorts. In this case, they side with the EU unambiguously, but because they are threatened by the EU's rivals, the EU can be persuaded to provide extra support and relax the conditions of accession. The current governments of the Association Trio and the Western Balkans match these extreme types to various extents. Ukraine has most obviously shifted from a cross-conditionality strategy under Yanukovych to becoming a paradox-of-weakness candidate after 2014. By contrast, Serbia and Turkey most clearly pursue a cross-conditionality or balancing strategy.

The EU has the best chance to overcome the credibility dilemma of geopolitical enlargement, and help advance the quality of democracy and governance, in its relations with the paradox-of-weakness countries. First, these countries are under geopolitical threat not least *because* they have made a principled choice in favour of Europeanisation. Second, these countries do not have a credible exit option from EU membership. In this constellation, the geopolitical threat keeps the EU committed to assistance and integration, but also puts it in a position to insist on its political accession conditions. By contrast, in relations with the cross-conditionality countries, effective EU conditionality depends on the defeat or weakening of geopolitical rivals (which weakens the candidates' balancing opportunities) or on a change of government in the candidate countries (bringing pro-Western democratic forces to power). In a final twist of the credibility dilemma of geopolitical enlargement, however, the

weakening of geopolitical rivalry might well decrease the EU's commitment to enlargement and bring back domestic politicisation.

To conclude, we are observing the possible advent of a new, geopolitical phase in the EU's enlargement. Whereas the geopolitical threat to Europe's East has the potential to reinvigorate enlargement and strengthen the EU's commitment to integrating its Eastern and Southeastern neighbours, it brings with it the danger of undermining the EU's "good governance" promotion. The EU's 2022 signals of commitment to enlargement must not be followed by a relaxation of membership conditions as accession negotiations get underway or are revived.

References

Börzel, Tanja A., Antoaneta Dimitrova, & Frank Schimmelfennig. 'European Union enlargement and integration capacity: concepts, findings, and policy implications'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 24, no. 2 (2016): 157-76.

Hooghe, Liesbet, & Gary Marks. 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus'. *British Journal of Political Science* vol. 39, no. 1 (January 2009): 1-23.

Hutter, Swen, Edgar Grande, & Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.) *Politicising Europe: Integration and Mass Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Schimmelfennig, Frank. *The EU, NATO, and the Integration of Europe. Rules and Rhetoric.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Schimmelfennig, Frank, & Ulrich Sedelmeier. 'The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the external incentives model revisited'. *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 27, no. 6 (2020): 814-833.

The EU's Geopolitical Test: Western Balkans Amidst Global Security Challenges

Senada Šelo-Šabić*

A few words to start

The effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 are felt differently across the region of the Western Balkans (WB). Croatia left the WB when it joined the European Union (EU) in 2013. However, due to historical links, its geographical location and current regional dynamics, Croatia is often analysed in the framework of the WB group. Yet, one indirect consequence of the war in Ukraine is further decoupling of Croatia from the WB. As a member of both the EU and NATO, Croatia is embedded in the Euro-Atlantic security structures and the war in Ukraine is less destabilising for Croatia than it is for its WB neighbours. Croatia's foreign policy is aligned with the EU and the United States (US) and its citizens experience the war with less anxiety than would be the case if Croatia were not a member of the EU and NATO.

This article looks at how the war in Ukraine impacted Croatian domestic politics; how it impacts the EU's approach to the WB; and why the EU must act to counter systemic anti-EU and anti-Western tendencies in the WB, such as, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

* Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb.

Domestic skirmishes over Ukraine

The war in Ukraine fuelled political clashes in Croatia, but these clashes did not impact the country's foreign policy alignment with the West. Croatia showed solidarity with Ukraine and voted in favour of UN resolutions and EU sanctions against Russia. All along, internal debates on how to approach the war in Ukraine went on. Two key rivals are the prime minister and his government on one side, and the president on the other. The war in Ukraine has been yet another opportunity for the two hills in Zagreb to continue to fight – St. Mark's hill, the seat of the government, and Pantovčak hill, the seat of the president.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković leads a pro-European government and presents Croatia as a youngest member state that is an asset to the EU, in particular in a post-Brexit EU and amidst rule of law challengers like Hungary and Poland. His European dedication is unquestionable, driven by sincere conviction and, according to some observers, personal ambition to one day land a high-level EU job.

The president of Croatia, on the other hand, appears to be driven solely by a desire to confront the prime minister and expose faults of the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ*) - the party of the prime minister - risking even to be labelled a Russian player. His erratic public speeches and capricious policy stands have confused external observers and polarised domestic political scene.

Zoran Milanović, the president, demanded that Croatia's approval of Swedish and Finnish application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) be given on the condition that the electoral law in BiH is changed (Vanttinen & Trkanjec 2022). Changes should incorporate demands made by HDZ BiH, a sister party of Croatia's HDZ. This is not a mistake. The centre-left Croatian president, a former leader of the Croatian social democrats, is hijacking HDZ's sister party in BiH to demonstrate that he is a better defender of ethnonationalist claims than the prime minister (Hina 2022). This domestic political collision would not make it to international media headlines were it not linked to the Swedish and Finnish NATO application.

The prime minister, on his part, in October 2022 hosted the First Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform in Zagreb (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2022). This was an opportunity to demonstrate his government's support to Ukraine, alignment with the West, and to hold bilateral meetings with high level guests.

In December 2022, however, the president had his own little win when the Croatian Parliament did not vote in favour of the government's proposal that Croatia, in the framework of the European Union Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM), trains 100 Ukrainian soldiers in Croatia, and that 80 Croatian instructors would join EUMAM's training locations elsewhere in Europe (Matijević 2022). The president insisted that Croatia should not get itself entangled in a war to which it does not belong (Zebić 2022).

A shock such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a major political issue in any European state. What should be seen here is that membership pays a dividend – to citizens of Croatia in terms of their security and to the EU in terms of Croatia's foreign policy alignment. This is not much overall, but is more than both the EU and the WB can expect from each other.

The EU's geopolitical confusion

The current European Commission described itself as geopolitical, yet the EU's policy in the WB is still on autopilot. Despite the changed circumstances with a war in Europe, the EU continues to approach the WB through the enlargement framework. Although it has sharpened its diagnostic tools, its observation and detection of negative trends, the EU's overall approach has not changed. In the face of possible security disruptions in the region, in particular, in a few potentially explosive spots such as Kosovo, BiH and Montenegro, but also North Macedonia, The EU's recalibrated response is needed (Taylor 2022). However, the EU has not demonstrated genuine will nor the capacity to decisively confront Russian or any other anti-Western meddling in the WB. Counting on countertrends such as emigration of young people, potentially able to fight; overall aversion of WB societies to any new conflict due to their recent traumatic past; and general poverty and lack of funds to finance a conflict – are all not enough to exclude regional destabilisation. The EU should act with fortitude and leave hope out of a toolbox for dealing with this fragile region.

The EU seems to believe that most ailments of the WB could be resolved through the accession process. The war in Ukraine has not changed this basic premise. If there were accountable democratic leaders willing to steer their countries towards membership, the EU would engage with them as partners. Yet, even when such reform-oriented leaders appear, as was the government of Zoran Zaev in North Macedonia, the EU fails to assist them. It loses

momentum mired in internal fights, giving in to whimsical and stubborn positions of Member States whose self-interest takes precedence over common interests.

The EU's public statements note corruption and criminality as the main WB problems (European Parliament 2021). The EU wants WB states to tackle irregular migration, strengthen border controls, and build mechanisms to stem arrival of irregular migrants via the Balkan route. The EU wants better cooperation with police forces and judiciary to detect, track, and attack criminal networks at their source. In exchange for delivery, the EU seems willing to tolerate authoritarian leaders, those who have no genuine desire to democratise their societies, who silence free media, and pressure liberal civil society.

When criminality is not the main issue, but rather post-conflict reconciliation and state building, the EU freezes. In BiH, for example, the EU tolerates and even appeases ethnonationalists who tear social fabric apart and attack the state. The destruction of BiH could lead to renewed violence. Yet, this seems not to stress EU officials as long as ethnonationalist leaders say they remain on the EU path. Deeds are not a measure, words are. Words that are hollow, words that are strategically insincere.

In BiH, Croatia insists on an ethnonationalist principle in disregard of human rights for all BiH citizens, and in disregard of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights, which in several instances ruled that the BiH constitution discriminates against its own citizens. The EU seems to follow suit, giving in to demands of a Member State, clueless about its own interests, confused about where the problem lies, unwilling to challenge the existing narrative about the Dayton Peace Agreement as the cornerstone of a functional BiH, frustrated with this protracted ethnodrama, and unwilling to design an approach based on the values of human rights.

A message from Western officials that BiH needs to stick to the Dayton system to get closer to the EU is false – BiH can never become an EU Member State under the Dayton system. Blocking mechanisms entrenched in this system prevent reforms and favour those who profit from the country's dysfuntionality. The EU's tolerance for ethnonationalist claims allows stronger Russian influence at times when the EU is wrestling to counter effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Solidifying Russia's foothold in BiH, and elsewhere in the WB, runs against the interests of the EU.

What next

I suggest a few takeaways from this brief article. One is a no-brainer: Croatian membership in the EU and NATO has reduced anxiety of Croatian citizens caused by the Russian aggression, and it has strengthened the EU. The same must be a goal in the WB. The EU should get off autopilot and recognise that WB instability would affect the EU. Security problems in the WB are not just corruption and criminality. In times of war, the WB region must be brought closer to the Euro-Atlantic structures. If there are states in the WB that oppose such security convergence, the EU should send a clear message that the freedom to choose is guaranteed, but that every choice has a price. The EU should stop courting authoritarian Balkan leaders and Russian allies. To those who opt for the Euro-Atlantic framework, the EU should deliver more and should do so swiftly. The EU has to count on this region in the face of multiple crises looming ahead.

This is, of course, problematic when authoritarian leaders within the EU, such as Victor Orbán, protect their good friends, WB authoritarian leaders. It is also problematic when some Member States insist on their national positions and prevent consensus on issues related to the WB enlargement. Ultimatums and blockades against a candidate state have for long time undermined the EU's credibility. Russia and other anti-Western actors will seek to exploit the EU's weaknesses. The EU must decide how to deal with Member States that enjoy the benefits of membership but disregard common responsibility.

Another takeaway is that the EU's reframed security approach to the WB has to go hand in hand with an uncompromising value-based approach. There is no EU without its values. BiH stands as a stark example of the EU's devaluation of its core values. The EU's meek response to the politics of state destruction and to anti-Western outbursts of capricious and strategically provocative statements must be countered not with protest notes but sanctions, finance cuts, and uncompromising support to liberal democratic forces in BiH. Selling core liberal values cheaply, trading them with ethnonationalists, not only degrades the EU, but also does not even bring an illusion of stability as the sacred grail desperately sought by the EU.

Peace in Europe has lasted over 70 years since the end of the Second World War, allowing for impressive economic and social developments. Fortunately, generations were born and raised in peace. Yet, since 24 February 2022, Europe lives a different reality. A major war is taking place on its territory with no clear

indication of when or how it could end. It is a duty of European leaders to prepare their societies for harder times that may come. Europe has more resilience than its current crisis-management toolbox displays. Money is an important tool, but money cannot solve all problems. Just as EU enlargement cannot solve all WB problems. Addressing complex European challenges requires bold and visionary leadership. Such leadership would see that the WB region is just one small hurdle in broader confrontations that lie ahead. How can the EU ever have any ambition to tackle the global security challenges if it cannot resolve a pocket of instability in its own territory?

References

European Parliament. 'Cooperation in the Fight against Organised Crime in the Western Balkans'. December 2021.

Government of the Republic of Croatia. 'By Supporting Ukraine the World Did not Repeat Mistake from Croatia Case in 1990s'. Government website, News, 25 October 2022.

Hina (Croatian News Agency). 'Više je Milanović u posljednjih 15 dana uradio za hrvatsko pitanje u BiH nego HDZ u zadnjih 20 godina'. *Jutarnji list,* 16 May 2022.

Matijević, Božena. 'Nedostajala četiri glasa: Nije prošla odluka o obuci ukrajinskih vojnika'. *Večernji list,* 16 December 2022.

Taylor, Paul. 'Seize the Geopolitical Moment. The Western Balkans and European Security'. Friends of Europe. European Defence Study, Winter 2022.

Vanttinen, Pekka, & Željko Trkanjec. 'Croatian President Says Finland, Sweden Cannot Join NATO before Election Law Change in BiH'. *Euractiv,* 27 April 2022.

Zebić, Enis. 'Za sada bez obuke ukrajinskih vojnika u Hrvatskoj'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* 23 November 2022.

Russia's War in Ukraine – An Imagination Challenge for the EU

Corina Stratulat*

Oh no, he wouldn't…

Putin's fateful decision to unleash a full-scale, brutal war on Ukraine shocked the Western world, including the EU Member States. Until the unthinkable became reality on 24 February 2022, sceptical European leaders found it hard to believe that Putin would be that irrational as to end an era of peace on the continent so dramatically. Despite the US diplomatic and intelligence-sharing campaign (Harris et al. 2022), as well as plenty of historical evidence[1] about what Putin is capable of, few could imagine that the Russian leader would blunder into invading Ukraine. A potential Russian offensive defied European logic: something had to be off with the man (Marks 2022); something that made him difficult to "read" and prone to unspeakable acts. And yet, even if Putin lived in 'another world' (Krastev 2022), the EU was dragged into his surreal world too.

Putin's "special operation" to reclaim Ukraine by force found the EU unprepared to enforce the rules-based international order against a country with extraordinary nuclear capability without sparking a NATO-Russia war.

* European Policy Centre, Brussels.

1 For example, Russia's earlier brutal tactics in Chechnya and Georgia, its military propping up of an authoritarian and cruel regime in Syria, its illegal seizure of Crimea or its expanding sphere of influence in Belarus and Central Asia.

This mind-bending crisis and the atrocities unfolding daily on the ground in Ukraine elicited strong moral outrage and drove the EU into damage control mode. The natural order of priorities dictated that the EU acts fast to rally behind the long list of sanctions meant to politically isolate and economically cripple belligerent Russia; agree on massive military and other aid to support Ukraine's heroic resistance; show solidarity with the millions of Ukrainian refugees that Member States, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, took in; and start weaning itself off Russian energy. While not always easy, the EU and its allies managed so far to come together more decisively and swifter than in previous crises.

But the war is expected to be a long, costly slog (Zakaria, 2023) that is sure to test the unity and resolve of the West. Cooperation will have to stand and deepen, beyond knee-jerk reactions and firefighting. To that end, it will have to be based on a strategy that reflects fresh thinking about Europe's foreign policy approach. In the new security reality – with war on its doorsteps and a global political race (Lehne 2020) underway – the EU is hard pressed to rethink the ways in which it can restore peace in its vicinity and expand its reach. In that context, to paraphrase Einstein, logic will take the Union from A to B; imagination, on the other hand, will lead it anywhere.

The EU's imagination deficit

Until recently, enlargement has been the EU's most successful external policy. Fears that discord in one country could spread to the whole region and even the rest of Europe motivated in 2003 the Member States to offer the European perspective to the Western Balkan countries and continue to define the ways in which the accession and pre-accession agenda are articulated. Little surprise was it then that in June last year, the EU states extended the prospect of membership also to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia. Moral duty and posturing *vis-à-vis* Russia likely played a role. But this symbolic political nod also seems a reflex option that fits with the EU's long-standing perception that the best way to anchor stability and security on the Union's borders is to open the doors of the European family to new members.

It all makes sense until one remembers that twenty years after Thessaloniki, the promise of EU enlargement to the Balkans has neither materialised nor has it produced the intended results. While peace did take hold in the region, repeated flare ups in Serbia-Kosovo relations, recent tensions in Montenegro,

the chronic constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and enduring autocratic leaders in many countries suggest that stability in the Balkans remains fragile (Kmezić & Bieber 2017). Yet, not volatile enough for the Member States to feel threatened and commit to their foreign policy undertakings.

Instead of fussing over the Balkans, EU capitals have in time become more preoccupied with internal problems (e.g., the eurozone crisis in the early to mid-2010s, the refugee wave in 2015-2016, the coronavirus pandemic since 2019) and increasingly more fickle and stricter on enlargement. Their haphazard commitment often puts a spanner in the works, even when set conditions have been met by aspirant countries (Balfour & Stratulat 2015). These dynamics have long kept progress on the dossier slow, uneven, and marred by thorny issues of statehood and democratic governance – which the EU's ever-expanding box of tools and tricks seems unable to solve. They have also fostered cynicism in the Balkans about EU membership (Marušić 2023) and closer ties between countries in the region (e.g., Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) and the likes of Russia.

Moreover, the fact that the membership offer for the associated trio came at a time when EU internal politics challenges the ability of the Union to contemplate further widening in its current form further suggests that the EU's gesture – albeit well-meaning – is not embedded in a credible vision for the future of its engagement with neighbours (Zuleeg & Emmanouilidis 2002). As the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz noted in a speech to the Bundestag last June, 'We must make the European Union capable of enlargement. This requires institutional reform' (Noyan 2022). But, at present, Member States' appetite for changes to the EU's policies and governance structures is rather scant, especially when treaty reform comes up (EurActiv & AFP 2022). This attitude betrays little ambition to prepare the EU for the new era/*Zeitenwende* and deal once and for all with the Union's absorption capacity problem.

Likewise, the other key initiative in reaction to the war and aimed at reframing the EU's relationship with the wider continent – i.e., President Emmanuel Macron's idea of a European Political Community (EPC) – has fallen equally short of conveying a grand vision about Europe's role in the new world. Launched at the margins of the informal European summit in Prague, last October, EPC has not moved much beyond the initial vague intention to encourage dialogue and cooperation among like-minded EU and non-EU countries on matters of common interest. In addition, the lack of detail on its shape and substance resulted in discussions about the EPC being conflated

with proposals to re-energise the enlargement process. This mix-up raised suspicion that EPC might masquerade as an alternative to EU membership. To this day, it still looks like a half-baked idea rather than the fruit of long-term thinking.

Logic might have guided the EU's response to the war: blindsided by Putin's invasion, it seems reasonable that the Union would rush like it did to mobilise support for Ukraine and dig into its existing tool kit to shape new, bold initiatives. But pressing ahead with the same reactive, short-sighted logic will not ensure that the Union gets very far. The steps taken until now could prove a mere flash in the pan and might backfire. Whatever the outcome, they certainly do not amount to a clear strategy, underpinned by real political commitment and a workable model that contributes to shaping the new global order. Will the EU's imagination deficit prevent the Union from using the current debacle as a catalyst for renewal?

The limits of logic

Based on logic, the EU already has enough on its plate without enlargement. Although it looks like the EU will dodge recession this year, its economy remains vulnerable to the evolution of the war (Zalan 2023). Ongoing concerns about inflation, energy supplies, the rising cost-of-living, security, irregular migration, health, or climate change are likely to continue to fuel the kind of deep-seated public anxiety on which populists prey. Such risks stand to get bigger as the 2024 elections to the European Parliament draw nearer. As a result, not only that the EU might turn its attention inwards and away from enlargement, but also Member States could shift their focus away from Brussels and on domestic issues. So much then of the prospects of expansion, EPC, or the much-needed EU reform.

The situation on the ground in the Balkan countries also does not help the case of enlargement. Autocratically minded leaders in the region have shown little interest in promoting good governance and good neighbourly relations when doing so could undermine their own power position. Ethnopolitics has bred state contestation, state capture, and corruption, and has sabotaged the consolidation of democracy. Prosperity and opportunity remain a distant hope for the Balkans. So far, the EU's reform prescriptions have not managed to turn the tide. As such, Member States might well feel indisposed to continue to try helping when the countries of the region seem unwilling to help themselves.

Then comes the war, which has highlighted the many unresolved political issues and the risk of economic downturn in the Balkans. Given that the region depends on exports to and financial flows from the EU, economic troubles in the Union will have a ripple effect in the Balkan countries (Bechev 2023). Potential economic slowdown or stagnation in the region will invite assistance from actors like China, Turkey, or the Gulf states, who do not bother with reform conditions. It will also make it more difficult for the EU to extract strict concessions from the Balkan countries or reverse the increasingly lukewarm public support for European integration throughout the region. Thus, the war gives even more "hard nuts" for the EU to crack in the Balkans and plenty of logical reasons to "wait" or "go slow".

In addition, logic raises tough questions about the technical and political terms of the membership offer for the Eastern European countries. Symbolically, it seems unlikely that the Republic of Moldova or Georgia – although small but not (yet) at war with Russia – would be allowed to enter the EU before Ukraine. If so, the reality is that it will take a very long time for a still warring Ukraine to be able to complete an accession process that has become more complex and rigorous than in any previous enlargement rounds. Fulfilling conditions while fighting a war is already a tall order. But even if peace were to soon be restored, the country would have to juggle costly EU reforms with post-war reconstruction and possibly state-building. The Balkans faced a similar triple transition and they have not completed it yet.

The longer it takes for Ukraine to make headway or enter the Union, the higher the risk of frustration with the EU. To facilitate the process, it might be sensible to expect that the EU will adapt (i.e,. dilute) the membership conditionality for Ukraine. In that case, why would the bar continue to be held high for the Balkans? Will it also be lowered for Chisinau and Tbilisi? How will the EU save face if it introduces a "fast track" for all or some countries after decades of insisting on a "strict and fair" process? Thinking logically through the potential implications of the membership offer to the trio, one can reason the EU in all sorts of limitations and dilemmas along the way.

The sky is the limit?

The alternative option is for the Union to discard the straitjacket of existing principles, instruments and approaches and look for purpose far ahead in the future. The only way for the EU to think freely, big and long-term is to let its imagination run wild. Indeed, the war has made it paramount for the EU to imagine what it wants to become. Irrespective of how and when the war ends, the status quo ante no longer exists and will not return. The only question is whether this ongoing change will ultimately be defined by the EU pushing *against* others' vision of the world or working *for* its own concept of a new global order. If the Union cannot imagine the future, others will shape it instead.

Imagination combines two key ingredients: humility and courage. Humility allows one to be candid about the limits of one's expertise and knowledge. It encourages one to admit mistakes and review assumptions against new information (e.g., from crises) before taking new decisions. The humble would never claim to have a 'monopoly on what democracy is' (Krastev 2021). Humility prompts one to prepare for surprises, no matter how unlikely they might seem. The humble acknowledges that war is always possible, more and tougher sanctions might not help, a deal could fail, a nuclear attack could happen or any other undesirable eventualities. Humility facilitates engagement from the perspective of others, avoiding blackmailing and the "heads I win, tails you lose" approach in favour of a strategy of mutual backscratching if not consensus-building. The EU has many virtues, but humility is not exactly its forte. It should become though.

Courage is then the ability to drop one's rigid, ideological mind frames and engage in some serious and potentially uncomfortable soul searching to establish the robustness of one's sacred political, economic, and social models, because old concepts and deeply held assumptions might need to be revised or even abandoned to ensure progress. It takes courage to recognise that clinging to post-Cold War certainties will not help the EU navigate the present or the future. But courage is also about daring to act without taboos and to undertake whatever extraordinary changes the introspection process reveals necessary. Only the brave can take a good look in the mirror at oneself instead of simply pointing the moralising finger at others and do something instead of wishing away systemic risks. Taking unprecedented action only when the knife reaches the bone is misguided and insufficient. Today's enormous challeng-

es require reforms 'as deep as the phenomena that reveal the fragility of the existing order and as fast as the re-ordering of the geopolitical order currently underway' (Carney 2021).

Humility and self-reflection will allow the EU to imagine anything; courage will make anything seem possible and then become a reality. Doing whatever it takes to realise one's strategic, grand objectives could mean, for example, that national governments muster the political will to pursue an ambitious reform process internally. Since 'foreign policy begins at home' (Haas 2013), taking decisive steps to put its own house in order could lend credibility to the EU's global community building plans and be more likely to inspire meaningful political coordination across Europe, such as via EPC. Perhaps these far-reaching structural changes will include reform of EU decision making and the creation of a democratic *acquis*. In that case, a geopolitically minded Union could welcome new members quicker and hold a democratic leverage also post-accession. Without its own members able to transgress on democratic standards at will, critics will no longer be able to accuse the EU of double standards. All the more so if in the process the EU also discards principled realism in its relations with key global players: trying to reconcile selfish geopolitical interests with the consistency of 'European values' only made the EU look hypocritical (Beattie 2022). The wilder the imagination, the more likely for the EU to build a solid light house in the world and for its neighbours/allies instead of a house of cards dealt by others.

Of all the challenges that Russia's war posed to the EU, re-imagining itself in the new world could prove the most important.

References

Balfour, Rosa, & Corina Stratulat (eds.). 'EU Member States and enlargement towards the Balkans'. *EPC Issue Paper*. Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2015. Available: https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/EU-member-states-and-enlargeme~254ae0.

Beattie, Alan. 'The necessary hypocrisy of a geopolitical Europe'. *Financial Times*, 13 April 2022. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/158c5af4-79a0-46f2-91e5-35e4ca20abcd.

Bechev, Dimitar. 'Hedging its bets: Serbia between Russia and the EU'. Carnegie Europe, 2023.

Carney, Mark. *Value(s): Climate, Credit, Covid and How We Focus on What Matters*. London: Wiliam Collins, 2021.

EURActiv & AFT. 'A third of EU countries oppose changing bloc's treaties'. 9 May 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/a-third-of-eu-countries-oppose-changing-blocs-treaties/.

Haas, Richard N. *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Harris, Shane, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashley Parker, & Liz Sly. 'Road to war: US struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion'. *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/.

Kmezić, Marko, & Florian Bieber (eds). 'The crisis of democracy in the Western Balkans. An anatomy of stabilitocracy and the limits of EU democracy promotion'. *Biepag Policy Study*, 2017. Available at: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf.

Krastev, Ivan. 'Biden can't decide what counts as democracy'. *The New York Times*, 12 May 2021. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/opinion/biden-democracy-alliance.html.

Krastev, Ivan. 'We're all living in Putin's world now'. *The New York Times opinion*, 27 February 2022. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-europe.html.

Lehne, Stefan. 'How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age - Carnegie Europe - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace'. Carnegie Europe, 2020. Available at: https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/02/25/how-eu-can-survive-in-geopolitical-age-pub-81132.

Marks, Simon. 'Is Putin mad? US debates if there's "something off" with Russia's president and how it affects the Ukraine war'. *Inews*, 16 March 2022. Available at: https://inews.co.uk/news/world/putin-mad-us-debate-russia-president-ukraine-war-explained-1519827.

Marušić, Jakov-Siniša. 'North Macedonia's Faith in EU Influence Plummeting, Survey Shows'. *Balkans Insight*, 25 February 2023. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/25/north-macedonian-faith-in-eu-influence-plummeting-survey-shows/.

Noyan, Oliver. 'Germany pushes to tie together enlargement and EU reform'. *Euractiv*, 22 June 2022. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/news/germany-pushes-to-tie-together-enlargement-and-eu-reform/.

Stratulat, Corina. 'War has returned to Europe: three reasons why the EU did not see it coming'. *EPC Discussion Paper*. Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2022.

Zakaria, Fareed. 'After Davos, I'm optimistic about the world's future'. *The Washington Post*, 19 January 2023. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/19/davos-optimistic-world-future/.

Zalan, Eszter. 'EU escapes recession but war remains biggest risk to economy'. *EUObserver*, 13 February 2023. Available at: https://euobserver.com/green-economy/156705#:~:text=The%20EU's%20economy%20is%20expected,risk%20to%20the%20European%20economy.

Zuleeg, Fabian, & Emmanouilidis, Janis A. 'Europe's Moment of Truth: United by Adversity?' *EPC Discussion Paper*. Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2002. Available at: https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Europes-moment-of-truth-United-by-adversity~49d84c.

The uncertain impact of the Russian–Ukraine war on the Western Balkans

Milica Uvalić*

Due to the emergency created by the Russian aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the European Union (EU) has had to address a series of urgent tasks during the past year: from imposing different types of sanctions against Russia to securing future energy supplies due to the dependence on oil imports from Russia, and helping Ukraine through financial, military and other forms of assistance. The war has also led to a radical reconsideration of the EU's enlargement policy, to explicitly include countries in Union's eastern neighbourhood. As a gesture of strong support to Ukraine, in June 2022, the European Council decided to offer membership prospects to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – the "EU Associated Trio" – and, moreover, to grant Ukraine and Moldova the status of EU candidate countries.

What will be the impact of Russia's aggression on Ukraine for the Western Balkan states, particularly regarding their prospects of EU membership? There are a number of reasons for concern about the negative implications of the ongoing war for the Western Balkan countries that could also prolong the process of their entry into the EU. There are also some reasons for optimism, since the current situation could lead to new developments that could speed up the Western Balkans' accession to the EU. In any case, the future EU enlargement policy is bound to become even more complicated, requiring a thorough rethinking of its main policy instruments.

* University of Perugia, Department of Political Science.

Reasons for concern

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has significantly increased the security risks in the entire Western Balkan region. The implications of the war were immediately felt, as Russia tried to strengthen its influence in a region where several countries – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (in addition to Kosovo, already under strong United States' influence). The current strategic reflections on European security would therefore require a stronger participation of the Western Balkan countries in all EU policies. However, this is hampered by the fact that not all countries are fully aligned with EU's foreign and security policy, particularly as regards sanctions against Russia. Although Serbia has voted in favour of United Nations' Resolutions denouncing Russia over the Ukraine invasion (March 2022) and suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council (April 2022), and has also condemned Russia's annexation of the four Ukrainian regions (October 2022), it has not yet introduced sanctions against Russia. This has been unofficially justified by statements that Serbia's own experience in the 1990s has shown that international sanctions can be ineffective or even counterproductive.[1] In the meantime, Russia has been putting additional pressure on Serbia to obtain its continued political support (e.g., not to participate in international events where Russia has not been invited). Despite the risks that continue to particularly alarm Serbia's neighbouring countries, a Russian military intervention in the Western Balkans is unlikely (Bechev 2023).

The second concern regards the impact of the current energy crisis. The Western Balkans are less dependent on Russian gas compared to many other European countries, due to their still dominant reliance on coal and lignite in their energy usage (Uvalić 2023).[2] Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania currently

1 Despite very severe UN and EU sanctions from 1992 to 1995 against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, consisting of Serbia and Montenegro), Slobodan Milošević not only remained in power but was one of the signatories of the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. Similarly, the new UN sanctions introduced against FR Yugoslavia in 1998-99, due to its policies in Kosovo that led to violent clashes of the Yugoslav army and the Kosovo Liberation Army, did not lead to a normalisation of the situation. Not even did the 11-week bombing of FR Yugoslavia lead Milošević to surrender - he was forced to leave only after the October 2000 elections that brought victory of Vojislav Koštunica, the candidate of the democratic opposition, as president of FRY.

3 The share of coal in electricity generation ranges from 44 per cent in Montenegro, 60 per cent in North Macedonia, 63 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 68 per cent in Serbia, to 95 per cent in Kosovo, while Albania's electricity production relies almost entirely on hydropower (Balkan Green Foundation 2022).

consume little to no Russian gas (European Parliament, 2022), while for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, imports of natural gas from Russia represent a relatively small share of their total energy consumption. Serbia has also concluded a new three-year contract with the Russian company Gazprom in May 2022, that has secured gas supplies at a price three times lower than on the spot market (Bechev, 2023). The main reasons for concern derive primarily from the consequences of increasing energy prices. Similar to trends in the EU, the enormous increase in energy prices has strongly contributed to the rapid rise in inflation, which in most Western Balkans has also reached double-digit figures in 2022. The rise in energy and food prices is currently having a significant impact on households real disposable income, further aggravating the socio-economic situation in all Western Balkan countries. The combination of these factors – triggered by the war in Ukraine – is likely to have a further negative effect on the implementation of the Green Agenda. The Western Balkans' Green Agenda sets various climate and environment-related targets (decarbonisation, reduction of environmental degradation, mitigation of climate change impact etc.; see Bartlett, Bonomi, & Uvalić 2022; Uvalić 2023). Despite commitments undertaken by the Western Balkan governments at the Sofia Summit in November 2020, the current energy situation is likely to postpone the Green transition due to its high costs, aggravating further the already precarious environmental situation in the region.

The third concern regards the EU's enlargement policy. With three more countries knocking on the door of the EU, there is a risk that enlargement to the Western Balkans – a process that has already been extremely slow and has become increasingly uncertain during the past decade – will be postponed even further. Now that nine countries aspire to join the EU instead of six, the prospects of EU membership for the Western Balkan countries may become even less certain. Despite the EU's current strong support of Ukraine, negative attitudes of some Member States could substantially delay any future EU enlargement – both to the East and to the South. The consistency of the EU enlargement policy has also been put into question. Something that took the Western Balkan countries many years to achieve – the status of EU candidate countries – has been granted to Ukraine and Moldova in only four months. Does this mean that the EU will abandon its approach based on merit and strict conditionality, to give precedence to security-driven criteria in its future enlargement policy? The Western Balkan countries have come a long way in adopting many EU laws and standards in conformity with the Acquis, given that the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU were signed already

between 2001 and 2008 (only Kosovo's agreement was delayed until 2016). The Associated Trio started legal harmonisation primarily after signing the Association Agreements with the EU in 2014. Recent comparisons between the two groups of countries suggest that three countries - Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia – may have had a higher degree of compliance with most EU accession criteria than the countries in EU's eastern neighbourhood (Emerson 2021), but the assessment refers to the pre-war situation. Irrespective of where the three new aspiring members stand now regarding these criteria, they are very eager (quite understandably) to align with EU security and foreign policy, which is not yet the case with some Western Balkan countries.

Finally, if a negative attitude prevails among the EU Member States, leading to an indefinite postponement of EU enlargement (also to the Western Balkans), this could have negative repercussions for domestic politics. Further delays would inevitably diminish public support for the EU in the region, leading to backsliding in the reform process (for years pushed forward primarily by EU conditionality), a further consolidation of authoritarian regimes (Keil 2018) and establishment of even stronger ties with non-EU countries. Twenty years after the 2003 Thessaloniki EU – Western Balkan Summit, the EU strategy has failed to carry forward the promised EU integration of the Western Balkans (except for Croatia). In the meantime, the enthusiasm for EU membership in the region has fallen continuously and the EU's image has strongly deteriorated. We are witnessing the "three Ds" - phenomena of disappointment, disillusionment and disenchantment with the EU (Teokarević 2023). In Serbia, recent public opinion polls suggest that only 38 per cent of its citizens think that EU membership would be a good thing for Serbia, the lowest per centage registered since 2009, and as much as 41 per cent think it will never happen (Regional Cooperation Council 2022).

Reasons for optimism

There are also some reasons for optimism. Certain developments caused by the Ukraine war could act in favour of the Western Balkan countries and accelerate the process of their accession to the EU.

First, there is a growing awareness in the EU and its institutions about the strategic importance of the Western Balkans. Years of multiple crises have seriously affected EU Member States and have had a direct impact on the "enlargement fatigue", impeding further progress in EU's enlargement policy. With the war in Ukraine, the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU is increas-

ingly viewed as a geostrategic investment in a stable Union, for the sake of its own political, security and economic interests. Rising geopolitical concerns in recent years have amplified the strategic importance of the Western Balkans in various policy areas – security, migration, trade, energy, environment, transport and energy infrastructure. This has led to joint and coordinated sectoral policies and cooperation in an increasing number of policy areas. These forms of cooperation are likely to continue in the future to the benefit of both the EU and the Western Balkans. In the current emergency circumstances, the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkan region is more important than ever.

Second, the EU has adopted concrete measures to support the Western Balkans' EU perspective over the past year. There has been a renewed emphasis and confirmation of the Western Balkans' EU integration prospects in statements of high-level EU officials. There has been praise for Serbia's progress toward EU accession, expressed by Ursula von der Leyen when visiting Belgrade last autumn. European Commissioner Várhelyi in January 2023 announced that with the geopolitical an economic crisis caused by the Russian aggression of Ukraine, EU enlargement has returned to be one of the three priorities not only of the EU but also of its leaders, so today it is even more important to offer stronger support to the Union's neighbours in the Western Balkans in order to keep them on the European path and accelerate their integration with the EU.

More important than positive statements, however, are the concrete steps taken in this direction. In June 2022, after nearly two years of a deadlock, the long-awaited accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have finally been approved. In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been granted the status of EU candidate, leaving Kosovo as the only potential candidate in the region. The Berlin Process II was successfully launched in early November 2022, confirming the intentions of continued support and intensified cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans.

Third, there has been increasing economic integration of the Western Balkans with the EU economy over the last twenty years, leading to strong interdependencies (Uvalić 2019). The established economic links are unlikely to be seriously affected by the ongoing war. For the Western Balkan countries, the choice between the EU and Russia is a false dilemma, because in comparison to the EU, Russia is an insignificant economic partner. In 2021, 70 per cent of the Western Balkans' trade was with the EU (only 3 per cent with Russia), EU companies accounted for 61 per cent of FDI stock in the region, and 75-95 per cent of banking assets are owned by banks from EU Member States. The

EU has had a stable surplus in its trade with the region over the past decade. All Western Balkan countries are highly euroised economies, with savings deposits of households and enterprises held mainly in euros. Monetary policies are similar to those in the eurozone. Kosovo and Montenegro already use the euro, while most other countries link their national currencies to the euro. The introduction of the European semester in the Western Balkans has increased EU surveillance over economic policies and structural reforms. The EU and the Western Balkans are therefore closely interlinked, the EU remains the main economic partner of the Western Balkans, and this is unlikely to change in the near future.

Finally, the conditions may finally be created to move forward on Kosovo, an issue that has fundamentally blocked progress in EU enlargement policy for over 20 years (Bonomi & Uvalić 2019). On the side of the EU, five Member States have not yet recognised Kosovo's independence, which clearly poses problems for Kosovo's entry into the EU. On the side of Kosovo and Serbia, despite the "Brussels Agreement" (see Government of Serbia, 2013) signed on 19 April 2013, that should have led to the resolution of some key issues (such as the creation of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo) and paved the way towards normalisation, the dialogue has not only been stalled for long, but there has been a serious deterioration in relations over the past years. Still, the current security concerns in Europe posed by the ongoing war seem to have contributed to the "internationalisation" of an issue that until recently was primarily seen as a bilateral problem between Serbia and Kosovo. Russia's interest to maintain strong influence in the region has increased the urgency of finding a solution for the Kosovo issue acceptable to both Serbia and Kosovo. The new EU normalisation agreement drafted by France and Germany, recently presented to Serbia and Kosovo, could possibly deblock the situation, in this way contributing to the stabilisation of the Western Balkan region and enabling faster progress towards EU not only of Serbia and Kosovo, but of all countries in the region. Is this a highly unlikely scenario?

The EU's pressure on Serbia to align with the EU's foreign policy is increasing daily, through continuous diplomatic measures by EU officials, key EU Member States, the European Parliament, the US, meant to influence the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić to change his position on sanctions to Russia. Although Vučić will try to postpone taking any definite decision because of good relations that Serbia still maintains with Russia, he may not be able to do so indefinitely, especially since Russia's relevance as a guarantor

of Serbia's territorial integrity is likely to diminish further. Russia's increasing distance from the West will render Serbia's ambiguous position unsustainable, so Vučić may finally have to take sides, for the sake of his own survival as a political leader and the future of Serbia. The Ukraine war may push Vučić to unequivocally opt for the EU over Russia.

As Russia's war in Ukraine continues, there are also intensified diplomatic efforts to pressure both Vučić and Kurti to accept the new EU normalisation agreement (the text is still kept secret at the time of writing). Vučić has been fully aware for some time that Kosovo is "lost" and seems inclined to accept the new EU plan for normalising relations with Kosovo, since otherwise, as he himself claims, Serbia could face international isolation and become a "pariah" (AP News, 2023). His recent statements appear to be a shift from his previous hardline rhetoric: 'I would not agree to lead the country that is alone and isolated' (AP News, 2023). Although he is facing strong opposition by some of the extreme, but also moderate, right-wing nationalistic parties in the Parliament that continue to claim that "Kosovo is Serbia", he could possibly be supported by some pro-EU parties. However, this would probably also require a much firmer promise on Serbia's entry into the EU. Such a direction, that could accelerate the country's entry into the EU, could bring him additional domestic popularity. Although political support for Vučić of his party followers remains high, there is a part of the population in Serbia that is deeply unsatisfied and disappointed. Protests by citizens and civil society organisations due to problems that directly affect their daily lives – air and water pollution, non-respect of environmental norms and labour laws, exploitation of mines to the detriment of rural development – are on the increase. Many of these activists are aware that Serbia's entry into the EU would facilitate the resolution of some of these problems, and therefore would welcome such a change in Serbia's course.

References

Associated Press News. 'Serbia could become "pariah" over Kosovo, president warns'. 2 February 2023. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-kosovo-government-european-union-e180b7591aeeaadd8781d820c4052116.

Balkan Green Foundation. *Energy Crisis in the Western Balkans: Measures undertaken amid energy price shocks.* Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, September 2022. Available at: Energy_Crisis_in_the_Western_Balkans1664525063.pdf.

Bartlett, Will, Matteo Bonomi, & Uvalić Milica. *The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans: Assessing the Possible Economic, Social and Environmental Impact of the Proposed Flagship Projects.* Study requested by the AFET Committee, European Parliament, June 2022. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702561/EXPO_STU(2022)702561_EN.pdf.

Bechev, Dimitar. 'Hedging its Best: Serbia Between Russia and the EU'. Carnegie Europe, January 19, 2023. Available at: https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819.

Bonomi, Matteo, & Milica Uvalić. 'Serbia and the European Union'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1052.

Emerson, Michael (with Steven Blockmans, Denis Cenusa, Tamara Kovziridze, & Veronika Movchan). *Balkan and Eastern European Comparisons. Building a New Momentum for the European integration of the Balkan and Eastern European associated states.* Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2 March 2021.

European Parliament. *Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. European Parliamentary Research Service,* 2022. Available at: https://epthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans/.

Government of the Republic of Serbia. *Brussels Agreement. First agreement of principles governing the normalisation of relations,* 2013. Available at: https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394 and https://normalizacija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Први-споразум-о-принципима-који-регулишу-нормализацију-односа-ENG.pdf.

Keil, Soeren. 'The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia'. *Southeastern Europe* 42 (2018): 59-82.

Regional Cooperation Council. *Balkan Barometer 2022. Public opinion: Analytical Report.* Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/pubs/139/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2022.

Teokarević, Jovan. 'The image of the European Union in the Western Balkans'. In *Integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union. Overcoming Mutual Misperceptions,* edited by Milica Uvalić. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, 2023 (forthcoming).

Uvalić, Milica. 'Economic integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union: The role of EU policies'. In *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans - A Failure of EU Conditionality?* edited by Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, Marko Kmezić, 207-235. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Uvalić, Milica. *Implementing the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans: Just Transition and Political Barriers.* Aspen Institute Germany, Europe Program, 2023 (forthcoming).

Publications Office
of the European Union

ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2
doi:10.2870/275946
QM-03-23-131-EN-N

With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.