



STATE OF AFFAIRS

EU accession of Western Balkans: Stale technical processes need bold political steps

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October 2024

1. The Western Balkans have demonstrated resilience to the security risks created by Russia's aggression in Ukraine. But the momentum for EU enlargement of the past two years is already starting to fade as both pull and push factors are weakening and a new stasis is visible in the horizon.

The geopolitical risks from Russia's aggression in Ukraine have so far not materialized in the region the way Russia would have wanted. For all the secessionist rhetoric in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the attempted armed insurgency in northern Kosovo, NATO's presence in the region has ensured sufficient deterrence. Moreover, Russia's actions jolted the EU out of its lethargy on enlargement by expanding the geography of candidate states towards the east (to include Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). This revived hopes in the Western Balkans that the more than decade-long stalled process would finally start to move faster. The higher prominence of enlargement on the political agenda has seemingly created an opening for at least some of the countries of the Western Balkans to accelerate their path and potentially become alongside Ukraine and Moldova in the next enlargement wave. The composition of the new EU institutions – particularly the proposed appointments of Estonia's Kaja Kallas and Slovenia's Marta Kos in key positions at EEAS and the enlargement portfolio – seem positive (at least on paper) in fulfilling the promise of a geopolitical EU that both understands the importance of the enlargement process and reinserts credibility and democratic standards at the core of it.

However, the pace of progress remains painfully slow and cautions a more skeptical outlook, cognizant of the many risks lying in the road ahead. While Albania did finally manage to start accession talks this year – 10 years after being granted candidate status - accession talks have not moved forward substantially with any of the Western Balkans' countries ever since the process was deemed revived two years ago. While the pro-EU and pro-enlargement camp did win a majority in this year's EU elections, its majority is slimmer and, because of the broad composition, its policy cohesion is lower. The rising number of far-right governments in Europe and the growing uncertainty over the stability of governments in the key countries of France and Germany presents risks to the enlargement agenda in the EU Council, where several countries have already been known to abuse the process to settle bilateral disputes with accession countries, or to allow momentary domestic political agendas to dictate their agenda. The enlargement methodology adopted in 2019 strengthened the role and power of the Council in the process and adding "landmines". [1]

Meanwhile, there is no end in sight to the war in Ukraine and there are aggressive efforts by Russia to undermine the EU path of Moldova and Georgia.[2] These dynamics may impact the ability of the candidate countries from the Black Sea region to move ahead with reforms, make credible cases for membership and sustain the political momentum for enlargement within the EU from which the Western Balkans have also benefited. Uncertainties regarding the elections results in the U.S also complicate the picture as a potential Trump Administration may lead to strategic or tactical disunity within the West on how to proceed further with the pending security issues in the Western Balkans. It may also change the political calculus of regional leaders and generate dynamics which fuel insecurity like border changes. All in all, it seems like the push and pull factors for enlargement are weakening, with the process walking on thin ice. There is a high likelihood that the region will end up in a new stasis in which security concerns retake center stage.

[1] "EU enlargement is dead. Long live EU enlargement!" Agon Maliqi, Sbunker, February 2020.

<https://remarker.media/politics/eu-enlargement-is-dead-long-live-eu-enlargement/>

[2] "Georgia and Moldova: Putin's dominoes?" Ian Bond. Center for European Reform. October 2024.

<https://www.cer.eu/insights/georgia-and-moldova-putins-dominoes>

2. The Western prioritization of security and economic issues continues to embolden authoritarian rule and to undermine the institutional reforms needed for EU accession. The EU has become less of a transformational actor and more of transactional one preserving the illiberal status-quo.

The slow pace of the last two years showed that the EU enlargement process can't work with "on and off button" – the off button was pressed for way too long and left consequences. The EU effectively pursued a policy of containment over the past decade during which the situation on the ground in the Western Balkans deteriorated in ways that will be hard to reverse. Public opinion remains largely in favor of EU accession – in some countries more than others – but there is a notable lack of enthusiasm about the process, as well as disillusionment and skepticism about the credibility of the offer.^[3] Political elites in the Western Balkans have contributed to this skepticism as they have not operated with the belief that accession was a realistic possibility within their mandates. As a result, they have not been very responsive to EU conditionality, either in relation democratic standards or Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and in some cases continue to pursue alternative sources of political and financial support, primarily from Russia and China.^[4] While in some countries limited progress has been achieved – for example, Albania's judicial reform is taking the first steps towards ending elite impunity – the end result of the past ten years of EU accession has been the deepening of the very same institutional weaknesses which make Western Balkans countries' less appealing candidates in the eyes of several member states, particularly on issues related to the rule of law. The region remains stuck in a state of "illiberal equilibrium" in which even countries which show some progress tend to regress back to the regional mean.^[5] All regional countries, even those in a positive trend, remain classified as hybrid democracies.^[6]

Unfortunately, some of these dynamics enabling authoritarian rule are reinforced by leading EU member states themselves. Serbia's recent agreement with France on weapons' supplies and the agreement mediated by Germany for new lithium mines to supply EU industries may help bring the country closer to Western security and economic frameworks and they may also support Europe's energy transition from fossil fuels. But they do so at the cost of legitimizing and emboldening an authoritarian regime that has eroded democracy in the largest country of the region, and which undermines the EU path of several of its neighbors. Not to mention the environmental risks for Serbia that are created due to its weak oversight mechanisms for mining. Some new practices by regional governments - such as Albania's agreement with Italy to host migrant camps, or Kosovo's agreement with Denmark to host non-citizen prisoners – may seem politically transactional and beneficial to secure the political and financial support of EU states worried about migration. But they do so at the cost of human rights abuses and may leaving candidate countries with legal liabilities.

There is a real risk that the Western Balkans – already a security gray zone vulnerable to Russian destabilization – may be turning into a convenient dumping ground for the EU's unwanted problems with human and environmental rights. This kind of transactional Western Balkans' contribution to EU political and economic security is coming without the usual perks of burden sharing like fiscal transfers. Regional leaders with authoritarian instinct would be more than willing to accommodate such requests in exchange for Western silence on illiberal governance. The EU is therefore becoming more of an enabler of the status-quo than the transformational actor it has been in the previous accession waves. The fact on the ground is that the Western Balkans have stagnated in terms of democracy while the economic gap between the countries of the region with their EU neighbors is also widening due to much lower EU transfers. The much-promoted EU Growth Plan adds to only about 0.3-0.4% of the region's GDP and the size of the financial envelope is 12 times less per capita than the transfers received by EU member state Croatia.^[7]

[3] "The Western Balkans are stuck, yet resilient." Agon Maliqi, Sbunker, May 2024. <https://sbunker.org/en/analize/balkani-perendimor-eshte-i-gendrueshem-por-i-ngujuar/>

[4] "All is not well with EU enlargement to the Western Balkans." Dimitar Bechev and Iliriana Gjoni. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/10/all-is-not-well-with-eu-enlargement-to-the-western-balkans>

[5] "Transition to what? Western Balkans democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium." Sbunker. 2020 <https://sbunker.org/en/publikimet/transition-to-what-western-balkans-democracies-in-a-state-of-illiberal-equilibrium/>

[6] "A region reordered by autocracy and democracy." Freedom House. 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>

[7] "New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Solid Foundations, Shaky Extensions." European Policy Institute (EPI) Skopje, 2024. https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/New-Growth-Plan-for-the-Western-Balkans_Solid-Foundations-Shaky-Extensions.pdf

3. The West has prioritized security over democracy but failed to fully achieve either. The unresolved web of bilateral/ethnic disputes is keeping security issues at the forefront of the agenda and remains a key obstacle for democratic reforms, regional integration and, ultimately, EU accession.

The path of several regional countries towards the EU is blocked for reasons that have nothing to do with objective membership criteria and for which domestic consensus is improbable to obtain. After two decades of blockades by Greece over its name, North Macedonia is currently unable to start accession talks because it is being blocked by Bulgaria over a dispute related to identity and history. Kosovo cannot even get candidate status because it is not recognized by five member states. The EU path of regional countries is also blocked by disputes between the countries of the region, or domestic/internal ethnic disputes, most of which fueled by Serbia's hegemonic regional policy. The later under Vucic has pursued a revisionist agenda of using ethnic Serbs in Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to sustain its leverage and veto power over the EU path of regional countries. Montenegro – which is considered a frontrunner and is the most advanced in EU accession talks – has for the past few years been mired in political instability and fragile governments. A key challenge is presented by the fact that parties with strong ties to Serbia and Russia have decisive leverage and will very likely present obstacles to current and future governing majorities. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains in a permanent state of paralysis of strategic decision-making due to secessionism in Republika Srpska and the difficulty of its three constituent peoples to agree on power sharing.

These structural obstacles and the security concerns arising from them provide the main feeding ground for authoritarian leaders, allowing them to set the policy agenda along nationalist and polarizing lines. For example, tensions in Kosovo's north over the past two years, which escalated with the terrorist attack against Kosovo's police in Banjska in 2023, have served as a useful tool for the governments of Serbia and Kosovo to suppress critical voices and to shift attention away from lagging reforms and economic concerns. The bilateral disputes are also a key factor undermining the EU's conditionality policy, which relies on the EU's credibility. Accession reforms are often politically costly and are much more difficult to achieve without the incentive of credible benefits and steps forward in accession. This productive dynamic of the accession process, as the case of North Macedonia especially showed, has been lost. The bilateral disputes have also considerably slowed the process of regional integration. The Berlin Process, which celebrated its 10-th anniversary this year, is still limping towards its main objectives like the Common Regional Market (CRM) – primarily because of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia over trade and security. It remains mainly as a platform for exchange between the countries of the region without having much regional ownership and continuity of initiatives.[8] The inability of the region to develop consensus and a common agenda also hampers its ability to advocate with one voice in the EU, which is critical considering the already difficult task of keeping enlargement high in the EU agenda.

[8] "Ten Years of the Berlin Process: Stocktaking Study" Sudosteuroopa Gesellschaft and Aspen Institute Germany. 2024 https://wb-csf.eu/docs/24114_ASPEN_SOG_STUDY_GESAMT_241007.pdf.pdf

4. The citizens of the Western Balkans have shown resilience to warmongering rhetoric and – considering weak or non-credible oppositions - grassroots civil society remains a key actor challenging the status-quo. Yet civil society's role as a catalyst for change is hampered by it being disempowered and disillusioned with the EU. Many citizens prioritize economic/security concerns or to choose exit (migration) over political change.

For all the focus of political elites on security risks and nationalist rhetoric, the citizens of the Western Balkans are by and large less concerned about war and more focused on issues related to the quality of life.^[9] On the other hand, grassroots civil society movements and investigative media outlets continue to be the main disrupters of authoritarian rule, particularly in regional countries where the oppositions are seen as non-credible alternatives. Civil society for example is playing a key role in addressing issues of media capture, electoral fraud and environmental rights in Serbia. It has also played a key role in countering attempts by the government in Kosovo to stifle media freedoms. Yet the role of civil society in becoming the driver of the region's EU accession keeps being undermined by the often-unconditional political support that Western countries provide to regional governments in exchange for their compliance on security or economic priorities. This often includes the reluctance of Western donors to fund and support antagonistic civil society actors and a preference to work with those who participate in EU-related institutional reforms (but which political elites have turned into a façade). The transactional nature of the EU's relations with regional leaders, as well as the prominence of authoritarian leaders like Viktor Orban in the enlargement agenda, has also undermined the EU's image, value proposition and the element of inspiration. Unlike in Georgia, it is not common in civic protests in the Western Balkans for people to be seen waving EU flags.

Civic engagement is also being stifled by the nature of the political economy. With clientelism still the dominant form of governance, political control over the distribution of public resources and the standard practice of preferential treatments in the private sector continue to limit the ability of citizens to speak out, or leads to self-censorship. This also extends to the media sector which is also considerably prone to the clientelist model and continues to rely heavily on owners' benefits from politically controlled economic sectors. The democratic potential of the Western Balkans' countries also continues to be hampered by the continuous exodus of its middle class to EU member states which have liberal working visa programs. Those who are choosing exit over engagement are depleting the countries of the Western Balkans' from precisely the kind of voters who would be more willing to support political change. The common saying nowadays is that Western Balkans citizens are deciding to join the EU individually with their feet after failing to do so as states.

[9] The Western Balkans are stuck, yet resilient." Agon Maliqi, Sbunker, May 2024. <https://sbunker.org/en/analize/balkani-perendimor-eshte-i-gendrueshem-por-i-ngujuar/>

WHAT THE EU CAN DO TO HELP

5. The supporters of EU enlargement within key member states must invest serious political capital to remove obstacles to the process and eliminate asymmetric treatment of candidates – this is key to restoring the EU's credibility and signaling genuine interest.

Without bold political moves at the level of the EU Council, the rhetoric on enlargement and the institutional processes attached to it (including the Berlin Process) will continue to seem like meaningless empty shells and the EU Commission will continue to be undermined. The champions of EU enlargement in the Council, if they really do consider it as a priority, should elevate its importance in the usual horse-trading within the EU and not leave enlargement as an afterthought item. To this end, one of the practical reform that the EU can do in its decision-making process is to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) for the enlargement process.^[10] While the membership of Western Balkan countries will undoubtedly require consensus, allowing candidate countries to move forward with difficult reforms without the risk of the process being hijacked by bilateral disputes would be a game-changing development in accelerating the dynamics, particularly for countries like North Macedonia. Secondly, the five countries within the EU which do not recognize Kosovo (Greece, Slovakia, Spain, Romania and Cyprus) need to be swayed to no longer present an obstacle to Kosovo's candidate status. The EU considers the agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia^[11] to be legally binding for the EU. That agreement foresees that Kosovo should have an open path to membership in international organizations. The legally binding nature of this commitment should also apply to EU member states.

6. The bilateral/ethnic disputes which hold back the resolution of the security architecture need to be resolved or tamed with a sense of urgency and resolve – the West has all the leverage to strip regional leaders from the main weapon (i.e geopolitical blackmail) through which they hold the region back.

The implementation of the agreement on the full normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia needs to be an urgent priority so that the north of Kosovo ceases to be a flashpoint of regional tensions. The implementation of the agreement will have to be associated with the faster accession path of Kosovo (but also Bosnia and Herzegovina) into NATO. The Western Balkans' path towards the EU cannot go ahead for as long as regional countries have existential security dilemmas which Russia can exploit to threaten regional stability, including in NATO member states like North Macedonia and Montenegro. The West has all the leverage (economic, military and political) to counter Aleksandar Vucic's geopolitical hedging with China and Russia as well as his hegemonic agenda over the region. The EU should use that leverage to demand Serbia's full alignment with Common Foreign Security Policy (CSFP) with greater assertiveness. The resolution of bilateral disputes and Serbia's full alignment with the EU's CSFP is also a key precondition for making sure that regional integration and the Growth Plan can succeed.

[10] "Why the EU Should Introduce Qualified Majority Voting in the Enlargement Process." German Council on Foreign Relations. 2024. <https://dgap.org/en/mediacenter/explainers/why-eu-should-introduce-qualified-majority-voting-enlargement-process>

[11] "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia." European External Action Service (EEAS) February 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en

7. The EU needs to show moral clarity regarding democratic standards and to incentivize a regional race towards accession on their basis – the financial envelope and other benefits should be substantially increased and clearly tied to performance on “fundamentals”.

If the EU removes the structural obstacles to accession through measures like QMV in decision-making and reduces the weight of security concerns / bilateral disputes, it will have more leverage and no excuses to hold back on criticism against regional governments for the deterioration in governance standards. The EU's moral clarity in the case of Georgia should serve as an example.^[12] A few leading Brussels think tanks have for a while argued that the EU can become a more geopolitical actor only if it practices Kantian idealism at home and pragmatic Machiavellism abroad.^[13] Yet the EU has to decide that if the Western Balkans are to become fully-fledged members they cannot be treated as a space in which the EU disregards its ideals, but where it puts them into practice. Beyond a shift in rhetoric, the EU also needs to incentivize a race between regional countries by clearly incentivizing performers and punishing laggards. Tangible and credible dates for accession could be provided attached with clear benefits provided during the process like the gradual integration into the EU single market.^[14] This will change the domestic dynamic in regional countries to one in which reformers have the upper hand and can have the tools to deliver to citizens and to offer a vision for the future. Greater economic transfers and access to the EU budget will also be needed to hold back the demographic hemorrhage and preserve the active involvement of reform-minded voters within the region.

8. If the region is to use the window of opportunity for EU enlargement, progressive and genuine pro-democratic civil society actors and the media will have to have to be significantly empowered to press ahead with a new vigor to disrupt the status-quo.

A potential increase in the EU's financial envelope for the Western Balkans carries with it the risk of further abuse and the capture of its benefits by authoritarian political elites. This is why any EU funding increase will have to also prioritize funding for civil society and media as the key actors preserving democratic space and having a vested interest in EU accession. EU instruments of financial support should also entail support for the institutions regulating the space for civil society and media operations, as a means of preventing the further shrinking of civic space. Most importantly, the EU should also not shy away from funding civil society actors who are seen as more antagonistic towards governments for fear of political backlash, as the EU has all the leverage in the relationship. The focus of support could be not just on traditional watchdog/advocacy groups but also new less formal and structured actors that are emerging at the grassroots level and therefore enjoy greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Some of this “venture capital” type of work for civil society has already been pioneered by EU-funded institutions like the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and should be expanded. In the case of media, the EU could particularly examine ways in which it could support regional media to produce the kind of content that remains economically non-viable, particularly analytical and investigative content, while also preserving a focus on capacity-building for information integrity and vulnerability to disinformation.

[12] “EU strips Georgia of 121 million EUR funding over ‘democratic backsliding’. Politico. October 8, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-georgia-130-million-funding-democratic-backsliding/>

[13] “Protecting Eden, or the Dark New Geopolitics of Fortress Europe”. Internationale Politik Quarterly. November 2022 <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/protecting-eden-or-dark-new-geopolitics-fortress-europe>

[14] New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Solid Foundations, Shaky Extensions.” European Policy Institute (EPI) Skopje, 2024. https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/New-Growth-Plan-for-the-Western-Balkans_Solid-Foundations-Shaky-Extensions.pdf