

What is to be done? The war, the Western Balkans and the EU

Six fixes for the Western Balkan Six

Co-authors:

Nikola Dimitrov, Srdjan Cvijić, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev,
Ioannis Armakolas, Oana Popescu Zamfir, Valbona Zeneli, Stefan Lehne and
Rosa Balfour

Edited by:

Zoran Nechev and Tim Judah

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Russia's war against Ukraine changes everything.

It means an end to all the certainties and assumptions of the recent past. The security and stability of all Europe is threatened.

Military action against Georgia and Moldova, two EU associated countries, cannot be excluded and Vladimir Putin has projected his malign influence from Paris to Budapest and Belgrade.ⁱ

Unlike in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has prompted a historic, robust and wide-ranging response from the EU.

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.

For years Russia has been lurking in the shadows. It preys on unresolved conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and even North Macedonia. Vladimir Putin maintains a strong relationship with Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia's president, while the actions of Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev are conducive to Russia's interests in the region.

Continuing with business as usual would be a strategic mistake. It would mean sleepwalking to disaster.

EU leaders need to seize the watershed moment and think big. In the Western Balkans that means taking swift and decisive action to relaunch the enlargement process. It needs to do this not just for the sake of the six non-EU Balkan states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) but in order to boost the security of Europe as a whole.

The EU integration of the Western Balkans needs to be understood as a win-win for all and this paper seeks to explain why it is crucial to restore lost momentum in the enlargement process.

To many it is clear why EU membership would be good for the Western Balkan Six (WB6) but unclear why it would be good for the EU and its member states. The answers are simple:

First, the process of membership can resolve once and for all chronic, instability-causing issues that the Kremlin can and does encourage for its own purposes and which, if not solved, will create new problems for the EU in a region that it entirely surrounds.

Secondly, the process can be leveraged to find solutions as the EU seeks to reform itself and make itself fit for purpose post-Ukraine, post-Brexit, post-Covid and so on.

The EU also needs to restore political will with regard to the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as a self-defence mechanism. By making concrete steps to show these countries that they are as much part of the common European home as Portugal and Poland it can help avert anti-EU counter-narratives, disillusionment and future frustrations.

Our proposals should serve as a basis for further discussion. This paper builds on ideas made by a number of think tanks to reinvigorate the enlargement process.ⁱⁱ

The accession process is bust...

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The credibility of the current EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans is at an historic low.

Its theoretical merit-based process no longer rewards reformers. Serious EU action against the backsliding of democracy in the Balkans is lacking because of political considerations.

Instead, the accession process is often kept hostage by the vetoes of individual member states which are utterly unrelated to the economic and democratic conditions that supposedly govern the process. This in turn means it is becoming almost impossible to reach a consensus among the EU-27. The blocking of North Macedonia starting accession talks by Bulgaria is a case in point.

Precisely in the name of those democratic conditions, urged by French President Emmanuel Macron, the EU modified its accession methodology to make the process more credible, more dynamic and predictable. Three years later however, President Macron's vision for the Western Balkans operationalized in the new methodology, is yet to be put in motion and the EU's power of attraction is in freefall.

The EU and its member states need to focus on a visionary and pragmatic cost-benefit analysis as a rational basis for the revitalisation of the enlargement process.

For years European Commission reports monitoring the progress of reforms in the Western Balkan have made clear that Albania and North Macedonia are ready to open accession negotiations. Continuous delays risk creating competing visions for the future. The EU's competitors in the region provide alternative sources of financing and with them come alternative geopolitical visions.

The EU's lost credibility in the Western Balkans has ramifications for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The credibility of the EU's commitment to the European aspirations of these new applicants will depend entirely on the ability of the enlargement process to deliver tangible results for those who have already been working towards it for years.

Indeed, the Western Balkan countries were promised a “European perspective” as far back as 2000.ⁱⁱⁱ “Do your reforms and you will join” was the deal.

So, Ukrainians, Georgians and Moldovans face disappointment and disillusion with the EU unless it quickly breathes life back into the process for the Western Balkans.

...why bother?

It is in the EU’s self-interest to revitalise the enlargement process because the Western Balkans are a crucial element of Europe’s security.

Thanks to geography, the stability, security and democratic resilience of the Western Balkans are inextricably linked to the EU’s own stability, security and democratic resilience.

Faced with an ongoing war of territorial conquest in Ukraine and hence an all-out assault against the European security order, it is in the EU’s strategic interest to anchor all like-minded countries by having them adhere to its vision of a rules-based system.

The EU can do this only by jump-starting the stalled accession process of like-minded Western Balkan countries. If the EU cannot secure the countries that it entirely surrounds it will never achieve either strategic autonomy or manage to play a global role.

The Western Balkans is the missing puzzle in Europe’s jigsaw for creating an integrated and coherent geopolitical space.

The coming energy, food and trade crises cannot be solved by the EU in isolation from its regional partners. Boosting interconnectedness in every way, from building pipelines to improving transport infrastructure has become vital, not just for the aspiring countries, but for the EU.

The importance of Adriatic ports is being underscored by the blockade of Odessa and other ports in the Black Sea, as we all scramble to identify alternative export routes through the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Adriatic. The potential for LNG imports via the same entry points is equally significant in view of imminent diversification away from Russia.

As EU member states weigh these options, they cannot afford to yield control of strategic infrastructure to China, Russia or the Gulf states, nor should they allow Turkey a free hand in large infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans.

Simply put, any vision and planning for the EU's strategic autonomy and European sovereignty will be seriously undermined if that crucial for European security space of the Western Balkans remains up for geopolitical grabs. It is essential for the EU to keep geopolitical competitors or adversaries out of the region that is, to quote president Macron, "in the heart of Europe".

But EU-Western Balkan integration can act as a catalyst for the Union's own internal reforms too.

The popular-in-the-past idea that the EU's widening prevented deepening and reform is obsolete. Successive crises have pushed the agenda of EU deepening far beyond what was imaginable only a few years ago.

Examples include the economic union following the 2008 global financial crisis, diversifying types of CSDP missions deployed following the explosion of conflicts and instability in its southern neighbourhood, and the strengthening of migration and security policy tools and institutions following the 2015 migration crisis. Back in the 1990s and 2000s, the EU always made serious steps in deepening and reform in parallel with enlargement.

Thus, enlargement is no longer the challenge to EU reform that it was once portrayed as. Instead revitalising the enlargement process will present member states with an unprecedented opportunity for far-reaching reforms within the EU.

France, Germany and other pro-reform EU member states are right to want to turn the perceived "threat from enlargement" into an "opportunity for reform". They can use the issue of membership perspectives to counter illiberal and anti-reform forces within the EU.

The leaders of EU member states are certainly conscious of the link between the war in Ukraine and the imperative to geopolitically secure the Western Balkans.

But the reform and institutional upgrading of the Union will not happen despite enlargement, but also because of it.

A realistic accession scenario for the WB6 offers unparalleled opportunities for pro-reform member states to curb intra-EU resistance to major institutional and policy shake-up. The proposal to grant new member states qualified majority voting rights but no veto powers upon accession in anticipation of and conditioned upon streamlining the whole decision-making of the Union is a point in question.^{iv} The dichotomy between the pro-enlargement and pro-EU reform camps is false and should be rejected.

Planning for energy sovereignty requires regional stability and reliable partnerships based on common rules and values between the EU and its neighbours. The same goes for alternative trade routes and comprehensive arrangements for dealing with irregular migration and environmental threats, all aggravated these days by Russia's attack on Ukraine. When it comes to Russia, let us not lose sight of one thing: The stakes for Russia are not to destabilise the EU's neighbourhood, but to thwart the interests of the EU and ultimately its own stability.

The long-held idea that the EU should not "import problems" into the Union via enlargement should also be seen as obsolete.

Illiberal client states in the Western Balkans will undermine European security even if left outside the EU. Simply put, good neighbours make good neighbourhoods. If left outside the EU, Western Balkan countries influenced by illiberal ideas and by friends of the EU's opponents, both within the EU and outside it, will make Europe a less safe and less progressive place.

Democracy and European values are a threat to illiberals and autocrats. Nature abhors a vacuum; if progressive and liberal Europeans create one then governance, geopolitics, security and defence are all spaces that will be occupied by illiberal Europeans and the EU's enemies and competitors. This struggle is one that has for years already been well under way in the Western Balkans.

By reinvigorating democratic reform, by facilitating foreign and security policy alignment, by making real once more the idea that Western Balkan countries are welcome as new member states, the EU will suck the oxygen from competing and malign illiberal influences.

The time to act is now.

Six to fix: Six fixes for the Western Balkan Six

Granting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia an accession perspective will send shock waves through the existing enlargement process. But simply using an already failing template for them would only result in stagnation and frustration in both regions. In order to deliver positive outcomes, the process must become more flexible, dynamic and rewarding. Adjusting the existing methodology to the new challenges should be based on the following principles:

1. A relentless **focus on the fundamentals** – rule of law, democratic standards, and economic reforms – in order to promote progress in governance and prevent backsliding. This principle is present in the new methodology just as it was in the previous one under which Serbia and Montenegro started the negotiations. However, practice has shown that the Commission and member states often turn a blind eye with regard to implementation. The recent record of some member states in these areas also renders the focus on fundamentals even more difficult, as the perception is that countries such as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and others are worse than the candidates. ***Inclusion in the EU monitoring mechanisms*** such as the Rule of Law report, EU justice scoreboard, the European Semester and others in order to counter the perception that enlargement risks diluting democratic standards in the EU. This will allow the candidate countries the opportunity to not only compete between themselves but to compare themselves with the best performers in the EU while detecting their reforms shortcoming and pitfalls.
2. The **gradual phasing-in** of candidate countries in various sectors of EU integration would build institutional capacity and promote cooperation and trust between candidates and member states. The Commission, in coordination with member states and accession countries, should work towards bold proposals for phasing-in EU policies which would be of mutual interest to all, for example the Fit for 55 package on the energy and green transitions. While this already exists in the new methodology and draft negotiation frameworks for North Macedonia and Albania, a clearer defining of gradual phasing-in will provide timely incentives to reform. An example of this could be the ***Participation in the EU internal market*** as a priority interim objective for all

interested accession countries. Regardless of their status, once countries align with economic policies regulating the internal market cluster and the economic criteria and associated chapters within the fundamental cluster, as well as comply with the necessary economic standards, the reward should be to participate in the internal market as full members. This could be one of the phasing-in policies for those that have not started accession negotiations yet.

3. Increase socialisation (including financial) in European institutions:

Fulfilment of precise criteria and standards in specific sectors should be rewarded with targeted financial support from the funds now reserved for EU member states. Likewise, this can be enhanced with candidate country participation in the capacity of observers with a right to contribute to discussions, however, without voting rights to meetings of the Council and its bodies in specific policy areas. Greater alignment within a chapter or a cluster would translate into greater funds and a seat at the table. Foreign policy alignment is very important in the current circumstances; however, it has its costs. Moving beyond the values arguments, these actions of alignment produce a burden that should be shared in solidarity. Having a seat at the table would also help the socialisation of officials from the region into the EU's organisational culture.

4. Earlier access to structural funds to reduce the gap in financial support between candidates and member states and promote socio-economic convergence. The Western Balkans is the one of the most socio-economically underdeveloped parts of Europe. An earlier and gradual increase of financial support would lead to earlier socio-economic development benefits. This in turn would reduce the region's reliance on Chinese sources of finance that are in effect indebting the countries. In addition, improved implementation of rules and procedures regulating EU structural funds would strengthen the region's absorption capacities well in advance of their accession.

5. Elevate foreign and security conditionality to an equal footing with the current focus on the fundamentals. This would also mean applying the equilibrium principle to the external relations cluster. In the new geopolitical environment, the fundamentals and external relations should be the two pillars that determine progress and/or backsliding in the accession process or eventual closer association. Advanced and comprehensive CFSP coordination should include three inter-linked components that together converge to an elevated status in the conditionality and accession process: 1) A foreign and security policy component focusing on alignment with the EU on key foreign policy decisions. 2) Soft security and advanced cooperation in specific policy areas, such as

border security, energy, cybersecurity and, 3) a defence cooperation component focusing on implementing roadmaps for alignment and gradual inclusion of candidate states into EU defence cooperation platforms and institutions, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

6. Streamlining the decision-making process on enlargement in order to reduce the number of vetoes. Without qualified majority voting introduced in the EU enlargement process, thus in the application of the new methodology, enlargement would be endlessly blocked by a single disappointed or extortionary driven member state. Unanimity in the accession process gives an easy excuse to member states to halt enlargement because of bilateral disputes or their own domestic politics, especially when it comes from member states with disputed track records on democracy and the rule of law. The need to protect and, at the same time streamline the decision-making process against the abusive use of veto powers is imperative. Introducing qualified majority voting in the Council – 55 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU population – for all intermediary stages of EU accession negotiations to validate the progress of a candidate country would make the process fairer and more effective. A decision on admitting a candidate country into the EU would still require unanimity.

Let's all go to Paris!

President Macron's proposal for organising a Conference on the Western Balkans under the French presidency constitutes a golden opportunity for the EU to reinforce its strategic cooperation with the Western Balkans. This would consequently further enhance EU strategic autonomy.

The idea of creating a European political community responds to the wartime need to unify the continent strategically. The Conference should unequivocally affirm that this strategic circle would be fully complementary with EU enlargement. Members of the European political community can pursue their goals, which in the case of the WB means full membership of the EU.

To help foster a policy and public debate on the Western Balkans EU accession process, establish a Western Balkans hub within a Paris-based institution and create a fellowship program facilitating an exchange between Western Balkan CSOs and think tanks and French organisations.

The technicalities of the process are not decisive in determining the fate of the Western Balkan countries' accession to the EU. Process cannot be more important than results. It is the political will of EU member states to push these countries forward towards accession that is key.

Therefore, this paper provides arguments for restoring it in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It also outlines key principles on which the process would deliver results. The existing EU accession toolbox allows these principles to be incorporated with only moderate tweaking of the current rules and procedures. Incorporating these principles in the process does not require treaty change.

In politics, timing is everything. The moment is now and the circumstances are ripe. The EU was built on the ruins of a continent devastated by the Second World War. More than two decades on since the Yugoslav civil wars, the EU needs a renewed and energetic push for integration that would re-energise the enlargement process with countries of the Western Balkans. This would consequently further enhance the EU's strategic autonomy.

Endnotes

- i The same goes for EU foreign policy statement and positions on China. Serbia's overall alignment with CFSP is below 50%, by far the worst in the Western Balkans.
- ii European Stability Initiative, "Hamster in the Wheel. Credibility and EU Balkan Policy", January 2020. https://esiweb.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/ESI%20-%20Hamster%20in%20the%20Wheel%20-%2015%20January%202020_0.pdf; Michael Emerson et al., "A template for Staged Accession to the EU", Centre for European Policy Studies and European Policy Centre Belgrade, October 2021. <https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf>; Srdjan Cvijic and Adnan Cerimagic, "Rebuilding Our House Of Cards: With More Glue", Institute for Democracy and Institute for Human Sciences (Europe's Fellows programme), November 2020. https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/9_A5_REBUILDING-OUR-HOUSE-OF-CARDS_WITH-MORE-GLUEENG.pdf
- iii The first time the Balkans' European perspective was promised was at the Zagreb Summit of 2000: <https://reliefweb.int/report/albania/balkans-zagreb-summit-24-nov-2000-final-declaration>
- iv This proposal was first made by Srdjan Cvijic and Adnan Cerimagic in "Rebuilding Our House Of Cards: With More Glue" (see endnote ii) and with Zoran Nechev <https://twitter.com/srdjancvijic/status/1323547610599227392?s=20&t=zB4ttFd63QAb0EclBdRs2w>

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