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The EU's geopolitical turn towards the Western Balkans: myth or reality?

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the Balkan region experienced a period of serious destabilization and disintegration, exemplified by numerous crises and wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The process of disintegration of the Balkans occurred at the same time as some European states decided to deepen their integration, with the creation of the European Union.

Despite the passage of more than two decades since these turbulent and tragic times, as well as the visible progress in institution- and democracy-building, Western Balkan states still face systemic problems of “unfinished” modernization and democratization – at least by Western standards. Consequently, the Western Balkan region continues to be characterized by challenges to its stability and development. These include, among others, weak state institutions, political stagnation and polarization, pessimism and socio-political dissatisfaction of the citizens, limited regional cooperation and integration, “frozen” territorial disputes, tendencies toward disintegration, ethnic conflicts, and nationalist,

revisionist and secessionist sentiments. In addition to the dominant internal and regional factors, the situation in the Western Balkans is definitely not immune to broader international circumstances, such as foreign encouragement and influence, the ongoing ambiguity of the EU enlargement policy, as well as the intensifying *great power rivalry*. Fears about the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine and its impact on the stability of the Western Balkans have also been raised for some time now.

The lack of tangible progress toward EU membership represents one of the challenges faced by the countries and societies of the Western Balkans. The reasons for this delay appear to be both domestic and European in nature. In the first case, it is difficult not to notice a number of imperfections in the process of adaptation of the Western Balkan countries to EU requirements. Although there are certainly many reasons for this situation, some Balkan citizens believe that the responsibility for this stagnation lies with the Balkan political elites. They claim that although local elites are declaratively pro-European, they are not genuinely interested in serious internal reforms in areas such as public administration, the rule of law, media freedom, and democracy.

However, it also seems fair to say that the accession process has been further slowed down by enlargement fatigue experienced by some EU member states, which have been reluctant for years to support another enlargement. In effect, the unclear and fading prospects of EU membership have weakened – and continue to weaken – the determination of regional decision-makers to implement reforms postulated by European institutions. The protracted accession to the EU

has also diluted the credibility of the EU among the inhabitants of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, it has contributed to growing disappointment with the EU enlargement policy and has led to a decline in support for European integration. This disillusionment and criticism are already visible among the citizens of the Western Balkans. A slow integration process also poses a serious risk that the European integration of the six Western Balkan countries would remain stuck for a long time in a midway formula of economic cooperation, combined with the expansion of communication and transport routes, but without formal EU membership. Last but not least, the protracted uncertainty over EU accession contributes to the maintenance of non-transparent and malign Russian influence in the Western Balkans and helps to strengthen China's growing regional economic presence.

To sum up, there are still internal and international challenges that could have potentially dangerous consequences for the regional integration and political stability of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, there are many arguments to suggest that the main factor that could prevent the most unfavourable regional scenarios is the completion of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. This would symbolically end the era of tragic and long-term post-Cold War disintegration of the Balkan region. It would also substantially contribute to the political stabilization, regional integration, and economic development of the Western Balkans, which is particularly important in the context of the renewed geopolitical confrontation.

The Balkans have certainly come a long way since the tragic wars of the 1990s. But where is the region now, thirty years later? This question, posed in the context of the

European integration process, inspired us to prepare this publication. We decided that this should not be another traditional policy paper about the EU and the Western Balkans. For this reason, we have invited well-known experts from the Western Balkans to contribute to this project and present a “voice from the region” more distinctly and clearly. As a result, this publication is above all a voice of reason about the importance and necessity of continuing the European integration of the Western Balkans. This conclusion is particularly relevant today, in times of uncertainty, resulting from Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ongoing changes at the global level. To put it simply, the EU has wasted too much time discussing the integration of the Western Balkans. We should end this process in a definable time frame and complete the post-Cold War integration of Europe. In other words, it is time to pursue the European integration of the Western Balkans much faster and more effectively.

Balkan Team of the Institute of Central Europe,
May 2024



Endrita Shehu

Albania

Introduction

Following the fall of communism, Albania held its first elections in 1992 and strived to create a new political identity shifting towards democratic values. It aimed to establish a firm foundation for a functional system and often found itself at a crossroads choosing the right alliances in the realm of foreign affairs. After a prolonged period of isolation, Albanian citizens nurtured a sense of belonging to the EU, which has only grown stronger since then. The whole process has been tangled, as lessons learned from previous waves of accession have made the EU more cautious and prone to ensure the transformation of the candidate countries before they join. Albania worked to meet the criteria for accession and remained hopeful, even in times where the integration process became stagnant. After a prolonged period of lethargy, the EU's political decision to support Ukraine as well as prevent other foreign influences that were gaining momentum in the Western Balkan countries, coerced a geopolitical

turn. It was necessary to prove to Albania and other countries that there was no need to knock on other doors as the EU continued to believe in the enlargement process.

Relations with the EU

Albania began developing diplomatic relations with the European Community in 1991, and until 2003, there was a fluctuating pattern between internal political developments and efforts to find the right path to enter discussions concerning the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Albania waited on the bench for three years until this agreement was finally signed in 2006, and three more years until the official application to join European Union was formally submitted in April 2009. Subsequently, the European Commission outlined key priorities that the country needed to meet related to the rule of law, human rights, the fight against corruption, and other relevant topics. EU candidate status was recommended in 2012 and granted in 2014. Candidly, the EU paved the road for Albania since 2018, with the opening of accession negotiations despite a few cases where member states created roadblocks to condemn the lack of progress in domestic political and economic matters.

The Union was also cautious to turn its gaze inwards and make adjustments to the Enlargement Methodology, dividing the Acquis Chapters into six Thematic Clusters (EC, 2020). France was the driving force behind these changes, claiming the need for internal reforms within the EU to improve its functionality as well as the predictability and pace of the enlargement process. Moreover, the approval of the negotiating framework along North Macedonia resulted in an inconvenient position for Albania, as it was eventually

forced to face the aftermath of Bulgaria's decision to block North Macedonia (Euronews, 2019). Following this chain of events, France was again involved as a mediator and secured the agreement in which North Macedonia consented to implement constitutional changes while Bulgaria agreed not to impede the course of actions for both aspiring countries. The overall process leading up to this settlement was perceived as demanding, with the EU doubting the readiness of the aspiring countries while brushing aside its own internal struggles.

The context of integration shifted fundamentally with the global threat of COVID-19. As expected, the EU showed solidarity with Albania by providing 90 million EUR in Macro-Financial Assistance intended for recovery. This was in addition to the 115 million EUR in earthquake aid sent in 2019 (EC, 2021). These actions served as clues, indicating that even when the EU may seem withdrawn, it shows up in time of crisis reaffirming the endorsement of membership.

The geopolitical turn

In 2022, the geopolitical circumstances changed as Russia attacked Ukraine and created uncertainty regarding human security and territorial integrity (HRW, 2022). This action was a game changer in diplomacy, as the adopted *modus operandi* of the key players in global affairs would determine the flow of events. Ukraine, along with vulnerable neighbouring countries, rapidly shifted its attention towards the Union as the main source of stability. The hibernating period of the European Council was left behind, as it rushed to organize meetings and grant the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. This was the moment where prompt decisions

were legitimized, driven by regional security challenges and a willingness to bypass detailed bureaucratic processes. The Western Balkan countries were considerate of the fact that “desperate times call for desperate measures” but still voiced their discontent regarding the EU’s procrastination with them. This frustration and disappointment were expressed by the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, when he made a joke during the Bled Strategic Forum 2023, reminding everyone that Balkan countries have swept many disputes under the rug for the *summum bonum* of a peaceful coexistence, and that continuing the ill-considered enlargement policy could indirectly increase tensions in the Balkan region.

This served as a wake-up call for EU representatives to emphasize in official statements that the accelerated enlargement process would also be the way to go for the aspiring Western Balkan countries. Prior to these developments, the EU had held the First Intergovernmental Conference with Albania in July 2022, marking one of the most relevant milestones in the accession negotiation process. The bilateral and explanatory meetings followed as part of the screening the analytical evaluation of the harmonization of the national legislation with the EU Acquis was conducted. In this context, the European Commission prepared the screening report on the Fundamentals’ cluster, which opens first and closes last. This report was the stepping stone to the commitment of Albania to prepare roadmaps for Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), and lastly, the Public Administration Reform & the Functioning of Democratic Institutions.

The 2023 Enlargement Package strengthened the notion that Albania had made progress for the chapters of Cluster One, but there were still some areas that needed work, including rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as the strengthening of democratic institutions. Relations with the EU intensified as the number of formal interactions increased and Albania gained relevance as one of the main political players in the Western Balkan region. Tirana was also selected as the first non-member state to host the Berlin Process Summit in 2023, drawing attention from relevant media platforms and making headlines. Another achievement, this time in the field of education, was the inauguration of the College of Europe campus in Tirana.

Since the context of EU enlargement changed due to Russian aggression, Albania had the opportunity to chair the UN Security Council Presidency and lead a high-level debate on Ukraine (Euractiv, 2023). Moreover, the country has used the EU Common Foreign Security Policy through the years as a reference for its own priorities at the international level, showing its full alignment with the EU stance against Russia. The intensification of bilateral relations was further amplified with the introduction of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. As it is widely known, the accession negotiations take time and require financial means for undertaking reforms. In this sense, the EU has been the main contributor in Albania providing financial assistance through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), Regional Energy Efficiency Program (REEP), etc. The fear from external influences aiming to destabilize the region impacted the

EU decision to pay more attention to the acceleration of reforms, therefore to increase funding. This Growth Plan, valued at 6 billion EUR in grants and loans will be available during 2024–2027. It will promote reforms related to the rule of law and fundamentals, human capital, digitalization, energy and green transition, as well as governance, public administration, public financial management and lastly the private sector and business environment. It was approved in February 2024 and Albania, along with other countries, needs to prepare an agenda with reforms serving as the basis for fund absorption (Mihajlović, M. & Macek, L. 2024). It seems like this investment aiming towards EU single market integration overlooks the political dimension and creates a perception that Albanian citizens qualify better as good consumers in the EU than citizens.

Domestic debate

For a long time, political polarization has been a cardinal part of Albania's decisions regarding EU integration. The two main political parties engage in public debates and deepen the division between their supporters, accusing one another of the country's economic and political stagnation. Taking into consideration the pro-European views of Albanian society, it is not surprising that there are no political parties that openly oppose the European integration process. The longstanding belief that EU integration is the only way for Albania to consolidate democracy and achieve prosperity has been cultivated as the main political narrative by the ruling political party in Albania, the Socialist Party, led by Prime Minister Edi Rama. Rama secured a third consecutive mandate in 2021 and gained the reputation of a charismatic

leader. Despite the party's declaratively leftist identity, its position regarding the economic aspects of integration aligns with the mainstream European agenda. On the other hand, the Democratic Party has been fragmented into two halves, with a power dispute between Sali Berisha and Lulzim Basha. This political infighting within the largest opposition party led to reduced monitoring of governmental actions and weakened the position of the Democratic Party.

The Freedom House Nations in Transit 2024 report has once again classified Albania as a hybrid regime, characterized by clientelism, a fragile democracy, and a lack of social cohesion. In the last several years, even the EU Commission's report has not received the attention it deserves from the Albanian political class and society. When it comes to the EU integration process, the Socialist Party has selected straightforward language to explain to the public that Albania has taken all necessary measures to move closer to the EU, but new requirements have emerged. Even the concept of the Open Balkans initiative led to a heated discussion between main political leaders. Prime Minister Rama was then accused of participating in initiatives that distance the country from the Berlin Process and the EU. Moreover, the exclusion of Kosovo from this initiative enabled the opposition to play the patriotism card and to accuse Edi Rama of working against his own people.

Another crucial actor that empowers political parties and amplifies conflicts is the Albanian media. Party representatives are given enough space to express their thoughts and accuse each other on certain media platforms, undermining the credibility of the political class in the eyes of society. Moreover, the Special Structure Against Corruption

and Organized Crime (SPAK) has opened a Pandora's Box in domestic politics in several cases, resulting in the Prime Minister's decision to reorganize the cabinet and establish a new anti-corruption ministry. The order to arrest former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, a relevant figure in the Democratic Party accused of abuse of power, heated up the political atmosphere in December 2023. The political situation in Albania was further aggravated by the arrest of the Greek minority mayor-elect of the municipality of Himara, who was arrested in May 2023 on charges of vote-buying (Balkan Insight 2024). This decision worsened relations with Greece and raised the question whether Greece could use its EU membership to exert pressure on the Albanian authorities in this case.

To sum up, the functioning of the political scene in Albania is characterized by back-and-forth accusations between the opposition and the government, as exemplified by the recurring chaos in the Assembly (one of the most heated parliamentary sessions took place during the 2024 budget debate). It is therefore not surprising that the EU screening report calls for special attention to ethical standards, urging both parties to invest in fostering a constructive dialogue.

Conclusions

Discussions on the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans intensified due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The fear of external influence aimed at destabilizing the Balkan region prompted the EU to pay greater attention to the Western Balkans. In effect, the EU placed new diplomatic pressure on the acceleration of internal reforms by candidate countries, intensified its engagement in

the mitigation of regional disputes, and increased European funds aimed at stabilizing the region. Despite a notable decrease in the citizen enthusiasm and ongoing fatigue with the process, EU integration remains the engine that keeps the political agendas running in the domestic and international arena. Another prevailing view is that the EU uses the political polarization or domestic problems in aspiring countries as an excuse to cover its own incapability to take in new members. The Prime Minister Rama, even called Albania “collateral damage” in the relations between Member States. As the geopolitical circumstances change, Albania needs to understand if it is becoming a scapegoat for the political interests of major international actors, or if a seat at the EU table has truly been reserved for a long time.



Nedžma Džananović

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

On 15 December 2022, the European Council decided to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than six years after the country formally applied to join the EU. This decision was rightfully interpreted as part of the EU's geopolitical awakening after the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its attempt to revive the process of enlargement. Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova shortly after their membership applications increased pressure to respond positively to Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2016 membership application, even though the set of 14 priorities defined by European Commission in 2019 – originally set as prerequisites for Bosnia's candidate status – are yet to be met.

EU officials made it very clear that their decision was intended to address the needs of citizens and encourage politicians to intensify their efforts to implement needed reforms. While Bosnian politicians appeared triumphant

and promising, many stakeholders doubted whether this “undue reward” would actually boost the reform process.

A reflection on the current state of affairs in the accession process

The European Commission’s Progress Report on BiH in 2023 did not identify significant progress. In March 2024, the EC recommended opening membership negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The decision came only after the EC’s recommendation of granting candidate status to Georgia in December 2023. Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, has found a strong ally and advocate in EC President Ursula von der Leyen, who simultaneously launched her re-election campaign featuring as the “Spitzenkandidatin” on behalf of the European People’s Party. In contrast to the rather bleak descriptions in the Progress Report, the President of the European Commission commended the Bosnian authorities by saying that “More progress has been achieved in just over a year than in over a decade”¹.

In reality, Bosnia has achieved full alignment with the EU Foreign and Security Policy, in addition to passing long-delayed laws to combat money laundering, stop terrorism financing, and prevent conflicts of interest. It has also taken steps to improve migration management, including approving negotiations on an agreement with the EU border agency Frontex. Other important laws, including those reforming the courts and the election process, remained on hold. This progress hardly matches the reforms and activities of the

¹ D. Sito-Sucic, *European Commission recommends opening EU membership talks with Bosnia*, Reuters, 12 March 2024.

previous decade, during which BiH began implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2015), submitted its membership application (2016), adopted a decision on the so-called “coordination mechanism” regarding cooperation of the different levels of government in the EU accession process (2016), and provided answers to the EC’s Questionnaire (3,242 questions) and 655 follow-up questions.

The European Union has a very complex and strong presence in BiH that is not only related to the accession process. The EU’s role is twofold, as it also participates in the post-conflict stabilization processes in BiH. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the actual subject of the implementation of the European Common Foreign and Security Policy since its establishment. This is very much reflected in the double-hatted mandate of the Head of the EU Delegation in BiH, who also serves as the EU Special Representative.

While the scope and shape of the EU’s exceptionally strong presence have been reduced and significantly changed over the years, it still maintains military forces in BiH engaged in the ALTHEA mission, mandated by the UN Security Council since 2004. The EUFOR Althea military operation assists in capacity building and training of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s armed forces, helping to develop its operational capabilities in many areas, including the removal of physical remnants of war, disaster relief, and participation in multinational peace support operations. Simultaneously, EUFOR retains its deterrence capacity to support a safe and secure environment in BiH. Regarding the latter, it is important to note that, following yet another internal political crisis caused by Milorad Dodik’s separatist

campaign in December 2021 and January 2022², as well as the deterioration of the security context internationally, the EU increased its peacekeeping forces in BiH from 600 to 1,100 troops. The decision was made ahead of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and was not directly related to it. EU officials made it clear at the time that EUFOR could easily bring in another 2,000 or more troops, if needed. The number of troops has been reduced over time, and then increased again in light of the latest activities of RS President Dodik. Many in BiH publicly call for a renewed NATO presence, especially in the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Meanwhile, some countries are recommitting their troops to the enhanced EUFOR mission.

Another source of concern is the recent change in the command structure of EUFOR – for the first time in 15 years, Austria, a non-NATO nation, handed over command of the EUFOR mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina to Hungary on 31 January 2024. Austrian newspaper “Der Standard” voiced fears of political influence from Budapest, known for its illiberal and autocratic government, as well as its pro-Putin sentiments and support for Dodik. “Der Standard” also added that American representatives recently tried to persuade Italy to secure its EUFOR commander instead of Hungary.

² Formally, the crisis in 2021 began when the former High Representative, Valentin Inzko, just before leaving the office imposed a law prohibiting the denial of genocide and war crimes. Dodik, then part of the three-member state-level Presidency, decided for himself and all the politicians from the Republic of Srpska not to participate in the work of the state-level institutions. The decision on the blockade of the state institutions was further strengthened after announcements made by the international community that Inzko would be succeeded by Christian Schmidt. Not only that, he claimed not to recognize Schmidt, but renewed his calls for creation of an independent Serb state. At times, he would soften the rhetoric and advocate for a peaceful spilt, while simultaneously administering a series of blows to the constitutional and legal order.

The commander of EUFOR is in a position to offer his own assessment of the security situation in BiH and the need for additional troops. Many worry that the danger of further escalation and violence outbreaks may thus be deliberately downplayed. This would bear a strong resemblance to the international community's failure in BiH the 1990s. Past Islamophobic statements by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; the refusal of Hungary to support a UNGA Resolution on Srebrenica (Lederer 2024); as well as a hideous statement made by the EC's, apparently independent, Hungarian Commissioner on Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi in Belgrade³ regarding the UN resolution opposing the EU's longstanding stance on the issue of Srebrenica and reconciliation in the region, further eroded trust in the Hungarian general and his mandate, as well as in the overall credibility of the EU.

EU net contributions and financial support to BiH

The EU is Bosnia and Herzegovina's main trading partner, accounting for 63% of the country's trade in goods (74% of exports and 57% of imports), for a total trade volume of 15.1 billion EUR in 2022. Despite this high level of economic integration with the EU, the country's overall economic performance is underwhelming.

The EU's financial support to BiH is unparalleled. The EU is the main provider of financial assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina, notably under the Instrument for

³ The Commissioner's Várhelyi *faux pas* was seemingly resolved after the stern response from the Bosnian Foreign Minister. The two have issued a joint statement, reiterating the position of the EU against genocide denial, historical revisionism, and glorification of war criminals. Várhelyi, however, neither apologized nor clarified his criticism of the UN resolution.

Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), with a total allocation of 565.77 million EUR under IPA II (2014–2020) and 188 million EUR under IPA III (2021–2023). Additionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina benefits from 70 million EUR (IPA 2023) for a State and Resilience Building Contract, which is part of the 1 billion EUR Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans, aimed to help mitigate the increase of energy prices for vulnerable households and businesses in the short term, and support energy transition and security in the region.

Under the EIP, Bosnia and Herzegovina benefits from a portfolio of 934 million EUR of IPA funds, mobilizing additional funding of 2.595 billion EUR. The EU provides support via IPA and the Foreign Policy Instruments to strengthen the resilience of its Western Balkans partners against hybrid threats including cyberattacks and foreign information manipulation and interference.

Bosnia and Herzegovina also benefits from investments through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). The WBIF has provided approx. 717 million EUR in grants for investment and technical assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2009. The current WBIF portfolio amounts to 640 million EUR in grants, leveraging investments estimated at 2 billion EUR. Bosnia and Herzegovina participates in three cross-border cooperation programmes, as well as in transnational cooperation programmes.

The Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina benefit from 20 million EUR in assistance from the European Peace Facility (EPF), which enhances their capacity to participate in CSDP military missions and operations. The Bosnian demining battalion is essential for achieving a mine-free Bosnia and Herzegovina and benefits from EPF support in

purchasing vehicles and metal detectors. The Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina received EPF support in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) protection. They also received 6 million EUR in EPF support for the Balkan Medical Task Force.

To facilitate the development of public procurement in the country, Bosnia and Herzegovina is participating as an observer in a pilot project under the Technical Support Instrument. Bosnia and Herzegovina also participates in EU programs such as Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, Fiscalis 2020, Erasmus+ (international dimension), the Civil Protection Mechanism of the Union (as of 2023), and the Single Market Programme. Bosnia and Herzegovina has expressed interest in or is considering joining several more programs: Customs, Health, Justice, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), as well as the Digital Europe Programme.

Domestic debate

The slow pace of BiH's overall accession process (BiH has been a part of EU enlargement considerations since the EC's 1997 first Regional Approach, 2000's Zagreb Summit, and the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit) is a clear indication of the lack of political will to prioritize the EU accession process, as well as the fear felt by political elites regarding intense engagement in this process, which may ultimately erode their political power. Their calculations and attempts to manipulate the process to serve their political interests have significantly contributed to BiH's lag behind the rest of the region.

The firm pro-Russian Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, exemplifies this trend. Shortly after agreeing on the new state-level government, of which his Alliance of Independent Social-Democrats (SNSD) is a member, in December 2022, Dodik expressed a willingness to work with the EU on necessary reforms in return for the EU's adequate financial support. However, he has continued his ultranationalist and offensive rhetoric, deepened the quarrel with the international community's representatives on many different issues, and even intensified his campaign to separate Bosnia's ethnic Serb-dominated entity (the Republic of Srpska) from the rest of the country⁴. The momentum created by the candidate status and the appointment of the new state-level government has significantly melted due to his separatist rhetoric and activities, resulting in a standstill at this time. As the rest of the ruling coalition desperately struggled to maintain focus on their EU agenda, Dodik carried on with his unlawful acts, undermining the constitutional order of BiH and the Dayton Peace Accords⁵. The High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and

⁴ Currently, he claims to be provoked by the technical amendments to the election law introduced by the High Representative in order to enhance the credibility of the election process. Dodik has also confronted the West due to diplomatic efforts at the UNGA regarding the resolution commemorating the victims of the Srebrenica Genocide.

⁵ Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republic of Srpska entity, initiated controversial legal changes approved by the National Assembly of RS that effectively allow it to disregard decisions made by the country's international envoy. He did this six days after High Representative Christian Schmidt cancelled several controversial rulings defying the country's Constitution and the Dayton Peace Agreement. Under the 1995 Dayton Accords, Schmidt has the power to impose laws as the final interpreter of the state constitution, though his decisions can be reviewed and questioned by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia. After claims that BiH does not have a High Representative appointed by a competent body (UN Security Council according to Dodik), the RS President filed criminal charges against Christian Schmidt at the District Public Prosecutor's Office in Banja Luka.

Security Policy, Josep Borrell, referred to the actions, initiatives, and laws of the authorities of the Republic of Srpska entity, saying that they are contrary to Bosnia's aspirations towards the EU and thereby only serve to isolate.

While it does not seem possible for the EU to introduce sanctions against Dodik due to opposition from Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who supports Dodik and continues to oppose any kind of restrictions, it is clear that the EU's patience is running out. The possibility of imposing massive bilateral sanctions against Dodik and other politicians close to him has been discussed, and so far, they have been introduced by the US and UK. Dodik continues to defy the international community, does not shy away from expressing openly pro-Russian positions, and has repeatedly visited Russia (5 times since the Russian aggression against Ukraine began), ensuring that he met with Putin while there.

The ruling state-level coalition and the international community face a dilemma over whether to continue the "carrot-without-a-stick" approach and further accommodate Dodik's demands while maintaining the pretence of "EU-related reforms and momentum", or to focus time and energy on removing him from political power and allowing both the RS entity and the entire country to "breathe". Public pressure on Dodik's coalition partners is growing as well, as citizens begin to ridicule the promise of reforms amid worsening crises. In such an atmosphere, the actual debate on the EU process is lacking, and the EU is losing credibility due to its indecisiveness. Also, many believe that the possible acceleration of this process depends solely on the EU, regardless of the political developments on the ground. After more than a decade of strict insistence

on very complex conditions for BiH coupled with the EU's political decision to change its course, the previous notion now appears to be true. What is, sadly, also not discussed is the future of the so-called "coordination mechanism", an ill-designed and EU-imposed coordination instrument that introduced a plethora of veto players, created additional layers of decision-making gridlocks, and cemented the inability of already weak institutions to make headway in the EU integration process.

Overview of public opinion support for EU membership

In BiH, both citizens and politicians support the country's EU perspective. Though slightly fluctuating, public support is always very high, mostly above 70%. The latest survey by the Directorate for European Integration (DEI BiH) shows robust support at 73.3% for EU accession. However, this is a decrease of 4.1% compared to 2022. There is a difference between entities as well. In the Bosniak-Croat Federation of BiH, 86% of respondents expressed a positive opinion about the accession to the EU. In the Republic of Srpska, support is slightly above 50%. In the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina, support is 71.5%. According to the same survey, the three main reasons why citizens support Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into the EU are the guarantee of lasting peace and political stability; the freedom of movement of people, goods, and capital; and the respect for laws and regulations. After Bosnia and Herzegovina received the status of an EU candidate state, one-third of its citizens expressed that they expect improvements in political and economic

stability. At the same time, almost one-quarter believe that nothing will change.

There is no openly Eurosceptic or anti-EU political party in BiH. The President of the RS entity, Milorad Dodik, and some of his party representatives are often heard criticizing, even ridiculing, “EU values”, especially when they interpret them as a threat to traditional family values. However, they have not given up on the idea of EU membership just yet.

The 2024 Western Balkan Regional Poll by the International Republican Institute offers an extraordinary insight into public perception. EU membership is supported by 76% of respondents in BiH, but only 44% believe the EU truly intends to offer membership to the countries in this region. Additionally, only 39% would support a country’s foreign policy course exclusively oriented towards the EU and the West. When asked about particular states, the respondents highly favor Germany (74%) and Turkey (69%), while the USA and China share the sixth and seventh positions, respectively (53%), and Russia the eleventh (40%). Responses have changed since the 2022 survey with regard to perceived threats – Russia is no longer in first place but in third with only 15%, the USA remained in second place but has dropped from 29% to 20%, while Serbia, with 27%, has emerged as the top threat.

From the point of view of BiH’s expert community, the overall approach of the EU itself has not changed much as the two EU decisions (granting candidate status for BiH and its recommendation for opening negotiations) were long anticipated. While the “geopolitical turn” represented by EU decisions regarding Ukraine, Moldova and now Georgia is not much criticized and well understood, it also feeds the

narrative regarding the dubious nature of EU's conditionality in the past. Many argue that the EU conditions were too harsh in the first place, and thus futile. This is particularly evident in the case of the condition to implement the Sejdić-Finci Group of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights, which requires the elimination of ethnic-based discrimination, introduced as a general rule by the Dayton Peace Accords and promoted by the EU for almost an entire decade as a *sine qua non* condition for advancing in the accession process. The expert community today is divided between those more concerned with the state of international and regional affairs, where the EU appears not to bear much gravitas, and pragmatics, who focus on what can be achieved through, for example, the Stability and Growth Pact. The concerns of the latter are reduced to three specific features and their possible developments, i.e., the role of EU member states in vetting the accession, the pace of reforms, and the acceleration of the EU accession process in general.

Conclusions

The current state of affairs in the “WB waiting room” speaks loudly to BiH, highlighting the fact that it was almost the last Western Balkan state to join it. It also shows the limited impact of the accession process in its current shape, as well as the EU's own limitations in dealing with enlargement and deeper structural challenges.

While there have never been any serious indications that neighbouring Croatia⁶, a member state since 2013, would

⁶ Croatia has actually blocked the opening of a negotiating Chapter 26 in accession talks with Serbia in December 2016. The chapter covers education and culture, and Croatia,

use its veto power against BiH's accession, several existing bilateral issues, including the latest tensions between the two countries regarding Croatia's efforts to influence the process of electoral reforms in BiH, might eventually result in such an action. The same scenario is possible in the case of Serbia's earlier EU membership. Given these long-term challenges, BiH would benefit from the application of QMV in the EU's decision-making process on enlargement.

among other issues, used this opportunity to express its concern over the lack of progress in publishing textbooks for pupils from Croat minority in Serbia.



Judita Krasniqi, Labinot Hajdari

Kosovo

Introduction

Although most of Kosovo's population shares European values and supports Kosovo's accession to the EU, it seems that Kosovo's European identity is sometimes disputed or even contested at the European level. The same harmful stereotypes and simplifications are experienced by all Western Balkans countries, which are European geographically but, for many reasons, are still not members of the EU. Nevertheless, the EU and other Euro-Atlantic structures have consistently paid attention to Kosovo and the Balkan region, engaging in its stabilization, democratization, economic development, and integration. The ongoing conflict between Prishtina and Belgrade remains at the doorstep of Europe. For this reason, the EU and its member states could not resign from the responsibility of providing solutions that would guarantee peace between Serbia and Kosovo and eventually allow both countries to join the EU.

Relations with the EU

The relationship between the EU and Kosovo has varied over the years. Initially, during the 1990s, the EU's role was primarily focused on war diplomacy, attempting to find a peaceful resolution for Albanians in Kosovo. This policy revealed the limited military capacities of the EU and the lack of sufficient influence on other member states regarding issues of regional security. Second, the EU took the leading role during the post-conflict reconstruction of Kosovo, which encompassed both infrastructural and social aspects, including human and administrative capacities, building democratic institutions, and the rule of law, particularly through the EULEX. Third, the EU is committed to transforming Kosovo through the Stabilization and Association Process, and facilitating the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as a precondition to EU accession.

The EU recognized the European perspective of all Western Balkan states in 2003 at the Thessaloniki Conference and evaluated a path for each country, providing them with numerous conditions and criteria to fulfill. After Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the country's intention to join the EU became a foreign policy priority, although it repeatedly failed to receive the recognition of 5 EU member states who still do not recognize its sovereignty. From Kosovo's perspective, this stance represents another sign of the EU's limited influence over its members in relation to the process of enlargement. Nevertheless, the EU continued to be a significant supporter of Kosovo in the institutional and economic dimensions, and as its largest financial supporter through the IPA. Only in 2021–2023,

IPA III funding for Kosovo amounted to 231 million EUR, including 75 million EUR for Energy Support. The EU is Kosovo's biggest trading partner: 12% of Kosovo's exports are to the EU, while 88% of its imports come from the EU. In 2022, the total trade volume in goods was 2.7 billion EUR. The EU plays a crucial role as a facilitator in the negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, supporting the process of the normalization of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade. However, the EU has not been particularly successful and effective in "motivating" both Kosovo and Serbia to implement the agreements that were signed under EU facilitation. Kosovo and Serbia continue to repeatedly accuse each other of violating these treaties. Kosovo has also criticized the EU for rewarding Serbia during the dialogue, while simultaneously asking Kosovo to "wait more and give up more". This is perceived in Kosovo as an inconsistent approach. Kosovo has also criticized the EU for lacking of advancement in the integration process. This is because Kosovo remains the last Western Balkan country with potential candidate status, after a lengthy nine-year process of talks and reforms that took place between the signing of SAA and visa liberalization in 2024.

Although Kosovo's stance towards the EU has no room for skepticism, as was mentioned, bilateral relations between Kosovo and the EU have experienced significant fluctuations. In particular, the prolonged process of Kosovo's accession represents one of the weakest points in the relationship between Prishtina and Brussels. Kosovo declared independence in 2008; however, it took 5 years before SAA negotiations (European Policy Institute of Kosovo, 2020) could commence. In March 2011, the EU began facilitating

dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade¹, which started with telecommunications and expanded to other technical topics. Due to the EU's mediation and engagement, both sides signed 38 agreements, approximately 80% of which were implemented.

The progress of these negotiations intensified with the Brussels Agreement of 2013, came to a halt in 2018 when Kosovo imposed tariffs on Serbian products in response to Serbia's continuous campaign to block Kosovo's recognition and membership in Interpol, which was a violation of the article 4 of the Brussels Agreement. The EU conditioned Kosovo's decision on tariffs with the implementation of the SAA agreement, even though in July 2018, the European Commission confirmed that Kosovo had fulfilled the Visa Liberalization Roadmap of 2016. In addition to this prolonged process, Kosovo had country-specific criteria to meet, focused more on political conditionality, reflecting the state of affairs in individual member states concerning specific issues such as corruption and migration. This situation particularly raised concerns about the EU's double standards towards Kosovo, after granting visa liberalization to Ukraine in 2017, which was at the time not particularly effective in the fight against corruption. Even the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrel, declared that visa

¹ The EU's role of facilitator is based on the UN General Assembly Resolution 64/298 (2010). As it states: "[The General Assembly] welcomes the readiness of the European Union to facilitate a process of dialogue between the parties; the process of dialogue in itself would be a factor for peace, security and stability in the region, and that dialogue would be to promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to the European Union and improve the lives of the people". See European Union External Action, *Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue, The European Union facilitates the Dialogue on the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia*, 16 March 2022.

liberalization for Kosovo was a long overdue process. The hope of Kosovars for visa liberalization during 2019 started to fade, while the feeling of “betrayal” was increasing among its population and political elites.

In the February 2021 Parliamentary elections, Kosovo experienced drastic political change as the Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) political party won 49.95% of the votes. The new government led by Albin Kurti would be marked by nuanced changes in the country’s relationship with the EU, after the unsuccessful efforts of previous governments. Moreover, the new government’s campaign was based on the promise that Kosovo would alter its position in the region as well as in relation to the EU, become more active and participatory at the international level, and transform the country’s image of corruption. Vetëvendosje also represented a long-standing approach that Kosovo had an unequal position at the negotiating table with Serbia, and that the EU’s policy of rewarding Belgrade was not based on merit.

Global developments and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have had a profound impact on the EU’s approach towards the Western Balkans and on relations between the EU and Kosovo. After the first set of EU sanctions against Russia, which would actually verify the position of the Balkan states regarding the European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy and the West, the EU changed its rhetoric surrounding the enlargement process with regard to the Balkans. Nevertheless, Kosovo still remains at the beginning of the accession process, and is the only state among the Western Balkans with the status of a potential candidate. The EU maintains that Kosovo faces significant challenges in terms of reforms and improvements, while its dialogue

with Serbia remains the determining factor. In December 2022, Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership, becoming the last country in this process, which could take decades. Meanwhile, with the shift in the EU's approach towards enlargement in the Western Balkans, in March–April 2023, the Council and the European Parliament adopted the regulation that paved the way for visa liberalization with Kosovo, which eventually started on 1 January 2024. Overall, it seems justifiable to claim that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly changed the relationship between the EU and Kosovo, as well as Kosovo's position at the negotiating table. This is mainly because Kosovo has become more vulnerable to Russian and Serbian threats. Serbia has also positioned its armed forces across the Kosovo border and, despite criticism from the EU, has maintained its strong relations with Russia.

The challenging factors of Kosovo – EU relations

The European perspective is one of the most important and top priorities of Kosovo's foreign policy. Moreover, all of its internal policies, laws, and regulations are harmonized with EU laws and directives to reflect Kosovo's willingness to join the EU and reaffirm its European identity. As Kosovo is the youngest state in the Balkans, it differs from some of its neighbouring countries in political, economic, and geostrategic power. However, in terms of geostrategic and geopolitical importance, Kosovo undoubtedly plays a major role, especially in relation to the security and stability of the Balkans. Kosovo however is often criticized about a weak track record in the fight against high-level corruption and organized crime, shortcomings in the rule of law,

lack of progress in the dialogue and normalization of relations with Serbia, and insufficient political will to accelerate internal reforms. The 2023 European Commission Report on Kosovo summarizes that Kosovo “needs to demonstrate more serious commitment, invest more efforts and make compromises to take the process of normalization of relations with Serbia forward”, referring to the Agreement on Normalization of Relations of April 2013.

The First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations of April 2013, known as the Brussels Agreement, stipulates the creation of the Association/Community of the ten Serbian-Majority municipalities in Kosovo. This solution originally aimed to help Serbs in Kosovo transition from Serbia’s institutional and legal system into that of Kosovo. It regulated the integration of parallel institutions, including those related to health and education. Nevertheless, the differences between Pristina and Belgrade regarding the organizational structure of this Association and its competencies became the main obstacles to its formation, which has been blocked by the Kosovar side.

According to the initial agreement on the main principles signed between Kosovo and Serbia, the Association was to have an Assembly, a President, a Council, and other dedicated organs. It was also supposed to have executive competencies, which, according to Kosovo’s current government, would lead to the creation of a parallel state in Kosovo, similar to the territorially defined division of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a model often described as entirely dysfunctional. Due to the mass protests of Kosovo Albanians organized by the opposition in 2015 and the collection of 200,000 signatures under the petition against

the creation of the Association, the President of Kosovo requested a legal interpretation from the Constitutional Court on the compatibility of the Brussels Agreement with the Constitution. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo found that the rules of the Brussels Agreement regarding the creation of the Association are not entirely in compliance with the Constitution of Kosovo. Since then, despite repeated diplomatic criticism from the EU, the implementation of the agreement has become impossible.

The prolonged and unsatisfactory status quo concerning Kosovo's EU integration has been testing both the resilience and dedication of Kosovo citizens towards the EU. This is exemplified by the change in Kosovo's politics and taking up the reins of government by Albin Kurti, a leftist politician who won almost 50% of the popular vote in 2021. The changing and more assertive attitude towards the EU represented by the new Kosovo authorities was expressed at the first meeting in June 2021. They were also highly critical of the progress of Serbia towards EU membership, emphasizing the close ties between Serbia and Russia and the fact that Belgrade refused to join the international sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and its allies following the invasion of Ukraine.

Kosovo authorities also maintained that the ties between Belgrade and Moscow represent a great risk to regional stability and Kosovo's security. Kosovo leaders accused Serbia of becoming a Russian "tool" in an effort to open parallel battlegrounds with the West and create instability in the Western Balkans following the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, it was pointed out that NATO is the key factor in preserving peace in the region and guaranteeing Kosovo's

security and integrity. It was argued that as a small state, Kosovo is unable to depend on its defense capacities alone and must rely entirely on its allies to protect itself from possible threats. Kosovo authorities also rejected alleged parallels between Kosovo and Donbas, created by Russian propaganda and repeated by some political circles in Serbia. Kosovo authorities also accused Serbia of preparing military aggression in north Kosovo.

In 2022, due to the decision by Kosovo authorities to ban illegal Serbian license plates, that pointed the Serbia's violation of the agreement on car license plates and continuation to issue illegal license plates with city abbreviations, mass violent tensions erupted in the north of Kosovo, continuing into January 2023. In September 2023, the US called on Serbia to withdraw its large military deployment and advanced artillery along the border with Kosovo. The crisis over northern Kosovo worsened after a heavily armed group of Serbian paramilitaries blocked a bridge in a village in northern Kosovo and opened fire on the Kosovo Police. According to the White House, the type of weapons represented a threat to Kosovo's security and also to international NATO personnel. The military confrontation in north Kosovo in September 2023 was the most serious incident in the last two decades. Kosovo authorities condemned the shooting in northern Kosovo and accused Serbia of carrying out the terrorist attack. They also appealed to the international community, claiming that the incident in the north represents a warning about what could happen in the Balkans if the region fell under Russian influence. Finally, the need for a more dynamic EU enlargement policy was also pointed out.

On the other hand, some experts claimed that Serbia's alignment with Russia would weaken Serbia's position towards the EU and negatively influence the dialogue with Kosovo. Moreover, the EU's repeated hesitation to impose measures against Serbia on several occasions has created mistrust and anxiety among the Kosovo political elite and citizens regarding the position of the EU towards Serbia. It was also considered wrong and incomprehensible that the EU imposed "reversible temporary measures" against Kosovo over the unrest in the northern part of Kosovo due to the local elections dispute, which were entirely boycotted by Serbs while, according to Peter Stano, Kosovo needed to ensure their participation in the elections Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, publicly called for the lifting of EU restrictions imposed on Kosovo, while simultaneously accusing Brussels of turning a blind eye to Belgrade's regional activity and lenient policy towards Serbia. As Kurti said, "We were criticized for the violence in the north last year – unjustly – and the EU imposed measures against Kosovo. On the other hand, Serbia is aligning with the Russian Federation regarding the aggression in Ukraine, and there are no sanctions for Serbia"².

Domestic debate

According to Eurostat, Kosovo's population is the youngest in Europe. Its citizens face continuous struggle due to high unemployment rates and low economic development. Kosovo is the poorest country in Europe, with the lowest GDP per capita. The recent global inflation has hit the country

² S. Lynch, *EU to get tougher on Kosovo as tensions flare*, POLITICO, 14 June 2023.

hard due to the already high poverty rates. Kosovo's international position is complicated by its ongoing dispute with Serbia. As a consequence, 5 EU countries do not recognize the independence of Kosovo, which is blocking and slowing Kosovo's path towards the EU.

The integration into Euro-Atlantic structures remains a key national priority for Kosovo. According to the survey conducted by IRI, 90% of Kosovo's citizens see the EU integration process as a positive factor for Kosovo. Additionally, 87% of citizens declare that Kosovo's foreign policy should be exclusively pro-European and Western-oriented, while 88% think that the relationship with NATO should eventually lead to full membership. Kosovo's Prime Minister declared that Kosovo wants to join NATO by first becoming part of the Partnership for Peace, a program that allows cooperation between NATO and non-member states. Kurti's government has increased military spending due to the "increased Serbian aggressiveness". Although this is a tough rhetoric, it is also a fact that NATO increased the number of troops in Kosovo after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Although the population in Kosovo was the only society not allowed to travel to the Schengen zone until 1 January 2024, public opinion polls in Kosovo show that 89% of the population would vote for Kosovo's accession to the EU. 62% of the population continues to believe that the EU is serious about offering full membership to Western Balkan states.

Conclusions

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had a substantial impact on the relationship between Kosovo and the EU. It has also influenced the EU's path to the EU continues to face challenges.

Nevertheless, Kosovo has aligned its foreign policy closely with the EU and imposed sanctions against Russia.

Kosovo's EU perspective is severely harmed by its non-recognition by 5 EU member states, who have hindered the EU's full commitment towards Kosovo. Aside from the non-recognizing countries, the lack of consensus between member states and the EU regarding Kosovo's integration path and the SAA agreement has led to partial distrust towards the EU within Kosovo's society and a sense of unequal treatment in the dialogue with Serbia. While Kosovo has confirmed its dedication to democratic European principles and remained aligned with European foreign policy, the EU has yet to lift the sanctions ("temporary measures") against Kosovo. On the other hand, Kosovo authorities often indicate that Serbia remained the only country that did not impose sanctions on Russia, yet it still received support from the EU. The tragic war in Ukraine has also influenced public opinion in Kosovo. Most of its citizens are completely aware that there is a need for international support for Kosovo. They also support Kosovo's European path and advocate for the acceleration of the process of accession for Western Balkan countries to the EU.

Last but not least, the EU's geopolitical turn towards the Western Balkans is both a myth and reality. On one hand, the EU has a clear vision and vested interest in the Western Balkans. It also remains aware of the importance of the stability in the Balkans for the entire EU. On the other hand, EU enlargement remains a long and slow process, with numerous persistent obstacles that render membership in the EU more of a political myth rather than a foreseeable reality.



Jovana Marović

Montenegro

Introduction

Since 2012, Montenegro has been regarded as the frontrunner of the European integration process and remains in the best position to join the European Union. As a small country, it poses no risk to destabilize the European Single Market. It nurtures good neighbourly relations, it is aligned with the CFSP, and it has opened all negotiating chapters in its EU accession talks. The potential membership of Montenegro in the EU does not require any institutional and internal reforms at the supranational level.

Relations with the EU

Montenegro applied for membership in 2008, received candidate status in 2010, and formally began negotiations for full membership in the European Union in June 2012. Since the European Commission started accession talks with Montenegro with a new, stricter approach to the negotiations, the previous single chapter related to the rule of law became two

separate chapters – Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security). These chapters introduce interim benchmarks and are the first to be opened and closed during the negotiation process. Chapters 23 and 24 were opened on 18 December 2013.

Montenegro opened all negotiating chapters (33/35), and temporarily closed three (25 – Science and Research, 26 – Education and Culture, and 30 – External Relations). The last chapter (8 – Competition) was opened in June 2020. In August 2020, parliamentary elections were held, in which the long-time ruling party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which had led the process until then, was replaced. 2020 is typically considered the year when the deadlock in negotiations began, which is formally correct since the last negotiating chapter was opened during that year. However, looking at the interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24, and one of the key political benchmarks – appointments in the judiciary, which require a 2/3 or 3/5 majority in the second vote in the parliament – the negotiations have been effectively blocked since 2018/2019. This was due to the Supreme State Prosecutor remaining in an acting position, while the composition of the Judicial Council was incomplete. By 2020, out of a total of 83 benchmarks (Chapters 23 and 24), 52 were fulfilled, which reduced the work of the Government (42, 43 and 44) to 31 interim benchmarks that were either not fulfilled at all or were only partially fulfilled.

The conditions for accelerating the negotiation process were initially created by the new momentum following the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine. However, the 43rd Government led by URA and Dritan Abazovic did not take advantage of this since it was toppled in the parliament in

less than 4 months after it was appointed. An important turning point occurred with the appointment of key holders of judicial functions at the end of 2023 and at the beginning of 2024. In fact, due to all these circumstances, a new dynamic in the relations between Montenegro and the EU began with the appointment of the 44th Government at the end of October 2023.

This new dynamic was also enforced by the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, when the European Commission was almost “obliged” to offer a certain incentive to the Western Balkans and showcase progress. Accordingly, the EU Montenegro Intergovernmental Conference was held on 29 January 2024 (previously, only one had been held in a three-year period, in June 2021). Although not a single decision regarding the negotiations was made at this Intergovernmental Conference, it indicated a new dynamic in the process and a stronger engagement by the European Commission and the member states. In accordance with this, activities were intensified to complete the legislative framework (including laws on prosecution, prevention of corruption, confiscation of property acquired through criminal activity, and two anti-corruption and judicial reform strategies), as well as communication with the European Commission on these legal solutions.

In April 2024, Montenegro informed the European Commission that certain benchmarks would not be fully met by the end of May (i.e., the amendment to the Constitution, which stipulates that the Minister of Justice should not be a member of the Judicial Council; the election of the President of the Supreme Court; and amendments to the Law on the Financing of Political Parties). However, by the end of

June, many more benchmarks remained unfulfilled, which was stated by the IBAR operational conclusions.

Therefore, the next step in the negotiation process was the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), which the Government received in June and which now creates the conditions for Montenegro to close the chapters that are ready to be closed (in accordance with the new enlargement methodology that Montenegro accepted in May 2020 it is not possible to temporarily close chapters unless progress has been made in the rule of law chapters). However, the Government estimated that it could immediately close up to 10 chapters by the end of the year, the European Commission approved the road map, according to which it is possible to close 4 chapters by the end of 2024 if the conditions are met.

The present dynamics of bilateral relations

The momentum of the EU's enlargement policy was indeed amplified by the geopolitical situation, while the chance for Montenegro to receive IBAR, despite the fact that it has not met all the criteria, was facilitated by the upcoming European Elections (i.e., European Parliament elections), after which leaders of the EU institutions would be appointed. Consequently, EU institutions were under pressure to demonstrate progress in the Western Balkans during the election campaign. This pressure was intensified by the new Montenegrin Government, which managed to deliver on a political level and appointed individuals to leadership positions in the judiciary, which required a broad consensus of the political parties.

Due to the new dynamics in the country that resulted from the political changes during 2023, as well as the factors

already mentioned, it is clear why we are witnessing the intensification of EU relations with Montenegro. In addition to the already mentioned intergovernmental conferences held in January and June (where we received the IBAR) 2024, Prime Minister Milojko Spajić also had meetings with EU leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron in February 2024 and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in April 2024. Messages conveyed about Montenegro's European perspective from these meetings were extremely positive, and they were consistently repeated by officials of the European Commission and other EU institutions. Furthermore, the European Commission was helping the country to meet its interim benchmarks and was engaged in daily communication with the institutions.

Domestic debate

All political parties in Montenegro support membership in the European Union in their programs and rhetoric. However, right-wing parties (often called pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties) once united in the Democratic Front (DF) coalition, and now under the name "For the Future of Montenegro", do not share the same position on certain issues that are part of the state's international obligations and established pro-European foreign policy course. Montenegro is fully aligned with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union, but as these right-wing parties are part of the parliamentary majority, and the president of the New Serbian Democracy (NSD) heads the parliament, we have been witnessing many disagreements regarding several issues recently. Namely, as part of the vote for the admission of Kosovo to the Council of Europe (CoE),

out of the three representatives of Montenegro in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), only the representative of the opposition voted “for”, while out of the remaining two representatives of the government, one abstained and the other voted “against” (the representative of the Movement Europe Now (PES), which is seen as a pro-European party abstained, while the representative of the Democratic People’s Party (DPP) of Montenegro, which is part of the parliamentary majority and the coalition for the Future of Montenegro, was against it).

Despite the fact that Montenegro’s position has been clear thus far regarding the genocide in Srebrenica – evidenced by the adoption of the Resolution that “condemns without reservation any denial of the Srebrenica Genocide” by the Parliament of Montenegro in 2021 – there are conflicting opinions and positions whether the country should vote for the UNGA Resolution that was recently on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly, initiated by Germany and Rwanda, and adopted in May 2024. Under great pressure from the right-wing parties, and based on the Government’s decision, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) submitted two amendments to the text of the Resolution, insisting on individual guilt and avoiding collective guilt, although this was clearly stated in the UNGA Resolution, as well as in alignment with the Dayton Agreement. At least two political entities within Montenegro’s parliamentary majority deny the genocide in Srebrenica (“For the Future of Montenegro” and the Socialist People’s Party). Likewise, just two days after receiving the IBAR, and under the pressure of radical parties, the Resolution on Jasenovac was adopted in the Montenegrin parliament,

which caused a series of reactions and measures from Croatia, including the declaration of the Speaker of the Parliament, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the President of the DPP as *persona non grata*.

Apart from these issues, which have polarized the political scene and society for quite a long time, the parties were apparently focused on reforms and on efforts required to achieve IBAR. However, there are also many undemocratic practices and conflicts between political parties in power, particularly concerning the control of the security sector. Moreover, the Minister of Interior, who comes from the Democrats, sued the Government for the “illegal decision on the election of the acting director of the police”.

The reconstruction of the Government, foreseen by the coalition agreement between the ruling parties, happened in July and made the right-wing parties part of the executive branch at the ministerial positions.

According to a public opinion survey conducted in December 2023 by the DeFacto Agency in cooperation with the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, 78.5% of citizens support Montenegro’s membership in the European Union. Regardless of whether they support membership or not, 76% of citizens are convinced that Montenegro will become a member of the European Union.

Given that all parties in Montenegro, at least on paper, support EU membership, but at the same time, at least two parties currently in power have issues with certain practices, rights, attitudes, and principles, it can appear that they see only the economic benefits of EU membership while seeking to avoid certain obligations.

Conclusions

IBAR is an important step towards closing negotiations, but it still remains only a technical step. The essential aspects of the process have yet to be addressed and completed. Therefore, the most significant work is still ahead after receiving this report and the closing benchmarks for the rule of law chapters. On one hand, it is unclear whether the European Commission and the member states really have a plan for the accession of Montenegro after IBAR, although there is a roadmap approved by the European Commission. On the other hand, it remains to be seen whether Montenegro can respond to all challenges with right-wing parties as part of its executive branch.

Montenegro can become a member in 2028, as announced by the parties in power, but this would require a political decision at the EU level. In the last Government's (self) assessment on the fulfillment of benchmarks in all chapters dating from October 2023, it was stated that the last benchmark in Chapter 27 (Environment) can be fulfilled during 2028. Of course, all this can be solved with additional "road maps", where Montenegro would clearly state how it plans to address areas of capacity shortfalls, along with the possibility of transitional periods. However, for the EU to decide to accept a new member state so swiftly, many other conditions must be met, and many obstacles must be overcome.

First, the EU member states must be convinced that the new member will not destabilize the EU, neither politically nor economically, as each member can veto the decision on membership. Montenegro cannot economically destabilize the Union and the European Single Market, but putting the

veto in the hands of the right-wing Government of the new member state could present challenges.

Second, although the appointment of the 44th Government has led to a new dynamism in fulfilling the obligations on our EU path, we have not witnessed the Government's commitment to the rule of law. The Director of the Police Administration was dismissed illegally. The Director of the national public broadcaster RTCG remains in his position, and the conditions for his appointment were adapted to him in the law, with the support of the ruling majority, despite decisions of the courts that he was appointed illegally. The Government continues with party-based recruitment and struggles to maintain good relations with neighbours and a foreign policy course.

Third, membership in the European Union is not solely about meeting criteria and reaching standards, but also a question of values. The heterogeneity of Montenegro's government, which is often perceived as an advantage, is an obstacle in taking a firm and clear pro-European and civic course. The rule of law remains central to the negotiations, and it is necessary to show a proven track record.

Fourth, the last speech of the French President reiterated that the European Union could accept new member states only after it was reformed and strengthened itself. This is a rather discouraging statement as the European Union has been unsuccessfully trying to reform itself since Maastricht in 1992 and to reduce the democratic deficit at the supranational level.

Fifth, Montenegro, together with other Western Balkans countries, is included in the Growth Plan, which includes the Common Regional Market (CRM). It is necessary for

Montenegro to jump over this step, fight to be “observed” independently, and integrate into the European Single Market through membership itself rather than progressing step by step.

All these are reasons why Montenegro cannot afford to make a mistake and must demonstrate its readiness and convince the member states that it deserves to seize the 28th seat in the European Union, which became available after the exit of the United Kingdom. There is no need, both at the political and technical level, to reform the EU in order to accept Montenegro as a new member. Once again, a stable pro-European and civic government in Podgorica is what we need most at this moment.



Katerina Kolozova

North Macedonia

Introduction

In March 2004, (then) the Republic of Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), along with Croatia, was invited to submit its EU candidacy. The EU positively responded to this submission in November 2005. The foundation of this process was the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in April 2001. However, the subsequent course of the integration process has proven to be far from favourable for North Macedonia.

As I write these words in April 2024, North Macedonia is a nominally negotiating candidate country, having only completed the initial screening process. In order to resume the negotiation process and achieve effective changes in various sectors and intersectoral clusters, North Macedonia must meet certain conditions related to the accession criterion of good neighbourly relations. This time, this condition is linked with North Macedonia's neighbour and EU member State which contests some aspects of Macedonia's

nation-building narratives. Those claims are engrained in the official historiography of the country. Currently, the issue concerns Bulgaria, not Greece.

Relations with the EU

North Macedonia's progress towards the EU has been blocked for many years due to historical and cultural disputes with Greece and now with Bulgaria. Immediately following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which marked a point of reconciliation with Greece and brought about the change of the country's constitutional name (from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia), Greece lifted its decade-long veto to Macedonia's EU and NATO accession. For the first time since its candidacy was approved (2005), North Macedonia received an unconditional invitation (in June 2018 and in May 2019) to open negotiations with the EU. The Prespa Agreement is key for unfreezing what seemed to be a status of perpetual candidacy without any prospects for actual negotiations and full membership. The European Union was formally notified in February 2019 that the agreement had entered into force, and EU leaders praised the development as "historic" for the country's accession process.

In spite of this important breakthrough and the long-awaited decision of the EU to open negotiations, 2019 was marked by setbacks and what Macedonians perceive as further vetoing of North Macedonia's EU accession. On 18 October 2019 France essentially blocked the process of accession. This was justified by President Emmanuel Macron, who argued that a new accession methodology is needed. Despite the frustration this short-lived veto caused,

it seemed that a new methodology was indeed required to ensure full compliance with EU criteria and standards and to prevent a continuation of authoritarian and non-European models of governance, such as that seen in the era of Nikola Gruevski, the former illiberal Prime Minister of (then) the Republic of Macedonia. As soon as a concept of a new methodology emerged (26 March 2020), the European Council finally endorsed the decision to open negotiations with North Macedonia (alongside Albania). One would assume that this would mark the closing stage of the two-decades-long EU candidacy of North Macedonia and the commencement of the negotiation process.

However, a new, third and quite unexpected (from a Macedonian perspective) veto occurred: Bulgaria opposed the negotiating framework put forward in the form of a draft in July 2020, due to the reference to the “Macedonian language” in the draft agreement. The EU Council did not side with Bulgaria due to the *erga omnes* status of the Prespa Agreement, which recognizes the language, and is thus binding on all EU nations. In November 2020, in front of COREPER representatives, Bulgaria raised the question of “a lack of implementation” of the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation signed with North Macedonia in 2017. Therefore, Bulgaria effectively vetoed the negotiating framework (in its form and content as of that date). While the dispute with Greece was resolved by signing a treaty, allowing for a long and flexible framework for its implementation, the Treaty with Bulgaria emerged as a problem almost immediately after its signing and ratification. This is because historical and cultural disputes require time (years for that matter) to be resolved. A year after

its major achievement, a protocol regarding shared parts of medieval history, amidst a global COVID-19 crisis, North Macedonia was accused by Bulgaria of a lack of progress in the implementation of the treaty.

The guiding mechanism for the management (and de-escalation) of this historical and cultural dispute within the European accession process of North Macedonia has been included in the negotiating framework adopted on 18 July 2022 by the EU Council under the French Presidency. On 19 July 2022, North Macedonia and Albania held a joint Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) with the European Union, which marked the official date of opening the negotiating process in line with the approved negotiating framework. Unlike Albania, however, North Macedonia's continuation of the accession process is based on the fulfilment of the above-mentioned conditionality – the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in the Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia. The next IGC, again to be held jointly with Albania, was scheduled for November 2023. By this time, the constitutional changes proposed by the Government, led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) was expected to have been adopted. Even though on 18 August 2023, the National Assembly opened a session dedicated to this issue, the constitutional changes were not adopted due to the failure to secure an absolute parliamentary majority (two thirds of the MP's), which is required for a vote of this constitutional amendment. Thus, this session has been indefinitely postponed, and the second IGC has not taken place so far, keeping Albania captive in North Macedonia's parliamentary stalemate.

This state of affairs was preceded by a failed attempt to adopt the negotiating framework in June 2022, which was leaked to the Macedonian public and was met with an uproar by both the nationalist right-wing factions and the liberal mainstream of North Macedonian civil society. It was dubbed as the “French proposal”, referring to the EU’s attempt to bypass the Bulgarian veto to effectively opening negotiations that have been stalled since March 2020 when the EU Council decided to open a negotiation process with the country. To this day, most mainstream media and North Macedonian civil society argue that the negotiations have not truly started (because the opening stage is considered irrelevant, while the constitutional changes are deemed impossible), and the negotiation process is perceived as controversial, especially the modified negotiating framework, which is still referred to as the “French proposal”. This document fixates on the bilateral issue and gives it pre-eminence over the factual start of the negotiation process. This reflects the complexity of the situation and the atypical nature of the process of negotiations that North Macedonia has found itself in (dragging Albania along with it).

Domestic debate

Many intellectuals on both sides of the border – namely Bulgarian and Macedonian – opposed the Bulgarian veto blocking North Macedonia’s path to the EU, pleading for anti-nationalism among the political elites in both countries. Interestingly, reconciliation efforts were facilitated and supported through CSO funds from the V4 group (IVF in particular). On the other hand, in 2021–2022 (even

2023), the EU funds intended for North Macedonia, including IPA, were distributed in a manner that could be considered a form of classical misinformation, promoting general rules relating to the traditional notion of misinformation, detached from the context relevant to the EU itself, omitting the accession crisis, and ignoring the rising information war that affected the EU's enlargement ambitions and interests. Throughout this crisis of deteriorating relations and polarization between the EU and local CSO and other supposedly pro-EU actors, local EU funds (and US funds) were systematically awarded to the actors perpetuating the abovementioned polarization and related misinformation. EU representatives in the country remain disinterested in supporting civil society initiatives seeking to overcome the polarization between Macedonian and Bulgarian societies.

The situation has reached an absurd point, where long-time pro-EU experts and civil society representatives, who, after the so-called "French proposal" (i.e., the above-mentioned negotiating framework for North Macedonia, adopted by the EU in July 2022), now present a rather polarized stance towards the EU (and the very idea of EU accession), surprisingly express a pro-Russian mindset. I invite the reader to compare the interview with Emilija Geleva, a leading figure of United Macedonia (the party that considers itself a branch of the United Russia party), which she gave to a local outlet (2023) with the interview for Deutsche Welle (2022) featuring Nikola Dimitrov, the former minister of foreign affairs. Let me note that the robust media monitoring analysis I am currently carrying out demonstrates that Dimitrov has not changed his

position on the “French proposal” since then. To this day, Dimitrov opposes the constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian minority, which is required to continue negotiations with the EU. Most of yesterday’s “pro-European vanguard” in civil society admits to its current Euroscepticism. What is more, the allegedly pro-European NGO leaders now speak of the process of Europeanization as a process of “bulgarization”. As was previously mentioned, this critical rhetoric about the EU and its enlargement policy actually overlaps with narratives presented by openly pro-Russian commentators.

In recent years, public opinion in North Macedonia was divided over the terms of EU accession. On one hand, there was a vanguard minority in civil society, the government of the Social Democrats (SDSM), their ethnic Albanian junior partner, the Democratic Union of Integration (DUI), as well as the other ethnic Albanian parties which constitute the “European Front” in the May 2024 elections, On the other hand, there was a major opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE in conjunction with the ultra-nationalist “radical left” party, Levica, and the majority of civil society. The point of division is, as pointed out above, the negotiating framework and the xenophobic response to it.

It should come as no surprise that as soon as the Bulgarian veto was overcome through the EU negotiating framework discussed and endorsed in the period of June and July 2022, a severe backlash emerged from a segment of mainstream civil society organizations and media in opposition to the negotiating framework, dubbed as the “French proposal”. They misinformed the Macedonian society by claiming, for instance, that “the negotiating process has not

begun”, and that the negotiating framework is full of “invisible traps” that would “bulgarize the Macedonians” (sic!)¹. They also advocated against the recognition of the Bulgarian (Croatian and Montenegrin) minorities, opposing the introduction of the proposed constitutional amendments.

As previously mentioned, despite this worrisome and polarizing anti-EU discourse among established and reputable Macedonian NGOs, the EU continued to fund some NGOs responsible for exaggerated criticism, misinformation, and “EU-nihilism”. How can this EU policy be explained? My conjecture is that the reasons stem from technocratic inertia – for example, the EU might fund a project vaguely promoting “rule of law”, even if the same organization campaigns against the constitutional change that is required for moving forward with negotiations. It is also a fact that public critique represents a part of the democratic discourse, complying with EU values, standards and “democratic capacities”.

A systemic problem that has persisted into its third year now is what I term “euro-nihilism”. Most EU funds remain available to outspoken critics of the negotiating framework and constitutional amendments, who also advocate for “alternatives to the EU” (such as the “Open Balkans” initiative, which is obscure to the Western reader but deeply resonates with local ones). Thus, one could begin to wonder if my conjecture is sufficient. Perhaps it warrants an entirely new

¹ Four of the articles published by the Skopje based European Policy Institute argue against the negotiating framework as of “bulgarization” instead of “europeanization”. See Институт за европска политика, *Во медиумите*, <https://epi.org.mk/%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-2>.

study. I would simply say that the so-called “French proposal” propelled and intensified bilateral relations with the EU only to embed another setback and freeze the process due to domestic nationalism that spans the ideological spectrum. In other words, we have reached a point where we can speak of a complete stalemate, an unofficial freezing of relations rather than merely a slowdown.

Moreover, the cognitive dissonance of the public produced by the strange overlap of pro-European and pro-Russian voices in the country has led to the penetration of pro-Russian sentiment in all spheres of society, leading to a predominantly anti-EU discourse. I have come to this conclusion based on the Western Balkans Regional Poll (February–March 2024) conducted by the International Republican Institute. The poll indicates that in North Macedonia, only 31% of respondents support a clear EU and pro-Western stance, while the rest prefer a combination of equally “good relations” with both the EU and Russia. This includes a group that aspires to maintain ties with Russia while still preserving good relations with the EU (11% of the respondents). An almost equal number of respondents (12%) favour a pro-Western policy while maintaining good relations with Russia. Finally, 23% of respondents favour an equally pro-Western and pro-Russian stance.

Conclusions

The internal dialogue in North Macedonia is marked by a cognitive dissonance between pro-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric and narratives. These surprisingly overlap, triggered by what is seen as an attack on the Macedonian ethnic, national and linguistic identity, allegedly “hidden”

in the negotiating framework or so-called “French proposal”. My research from last year demonstrated an open and pronounced polarization of the influential and presumably pro-Western mainstream sector of North Macedonian civil society. I am referring to the study cited above, namely *Restoring EU’s Credibility*, 2023. At its public presentation on the 17 May 2023, I expressed my concern that the accidental overlap with Eurasianist discourse might deepen and harden the anti-EU stance in the country. In less than a year, it appears that this fear of mine has become a reality.

The perception of North Macedonia as the perpetual victim of its more powerful neighbours, such as Greece before the Prespa Agreement and now Bulgaria, has been normalized by the longstanding pro-Western Macedonian civil society. What is more, the dominant logic of self-victimization has been adopted and generously tolerated by Western diplomats and the European Delegation in North Macedonia.

There are many surprising paradoxes. It is perfectly possible to be both pro-Western and even pro-EU, and at the same time a Macedonian nationalist. The examples from post-Yugoslav countries show that it is perfectly possible to belong to the post-communist nomenclature and yet be nationalist, to be socialist and yet nationalist (let us consider the numerous examples in Serbia), and – as in the case of North Macedonia – for the liberal and pro-Western elite to turn into autocratic populists. A similar situation is visible in Hungary. It is worth noting that VMRO-DPMNE, the political party that protested against the recognition of the Bulgarian minority and thus the continuation of the EU negotiations process, entrusted its 2024 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns to Hungarian experts close to Fidesz.

This logic permeates the entire political spectrum to such a degree that even a *Financial Times* article from 22 April 2024, covering, among other things, the elections in North Macedonia, reflects a perspective close to that of VMRO-DP-MNE. Of course, my guess is that the author absorbed the stance of the “disappointed pro-Europeans”. Still, I will reiterate that the outcome of the overlap is deepened Euro-scepticism, even Euro-nihilism, represented by a part of the Macedonian society, which, sadly, coincides with a pronounced pro-Eurasianism.

In conclusion, let me note that the main source of the high level of Euroscepticism or anti-EU sentiment nowadays in North Macedonia is media manipulation and misinformation, primarily through discursive manipulation both by the new media and experts. For example, they claim that the EU negotiating framework and the so-called “French proposal” (to lift the Bulgarian veto) were effectively imposed on North Macedonia while the “treacherous SDSM” government “accepted” the imaginary “proposal”. This hardline rhetoric contributed to the electoral victory of the VMRO-DPMNE which emerged as the landslide winner in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, due to the visible and widespread Euroscepticism among the political class and society, I expect a decade-long freezing of North Macedonia accession process, unless there is some serious, positive signal and encouragement from the EU and international community.



Ivana Radić Milosavljević

Serbia

Introduction

Serbia–EU relations have never been easy, marked by the heavy political conditionality from the EU’s side and slow progress in fulfilling these conditions on Serbia’s side. Accession negotiations have been dragging on for more than ten years now, resulting in 22 opened chapters and only two chapters provisionally closed. Up until 2019, Serbia managed to open 4–6 negotiating chapters per year (two in 2015 due to the necessary administrative and institutional setups and the screening process). However, since then, the process has visibly slowed down. In 2019, only two chapters were opened, and in 2020, none. The new negotiating methodology proposed by the Commission in 2020, along with grouping the negotiating chapters into clusters, did not change the slow dynamics of the process. As of now, accession negotiations are still ongoing.

Relations with the EU

In October 2000, following the democratic changes in Serbia (then still part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), the EU invited the president of the FRY to the summit in Biarritz, and the country joined the Stabilization and Association Process. This opened the door for the country's first official participation in an EU-WB summit in Zagreb in November 2000.

At the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the European future of the Western Balkan states was reaffirmed, based on their individual progress. In April 2005, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro received a positive Feasibility Study, indicating readiness to start the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations with the EU, which commenced in October of the same year. However, in May 2006, the Commission decided to call off negotiations on the SAA with the State Union due to a lack of cooperation with The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Shortly thereafter, Montenegro proclaimed independence following a referendum.

The EU and Serbia resumed negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement in June 2007, and in September, the Agreement on Visa Facilitation and the Agreement on Readmission were signed. In April 2008, the SAA between the European Union and Serbia was signed; however, due to Serbia's lack of cooperation with the ICTY, the EU decided to postpone the implementation of the Interim Trade Agreement (TPA), which was signed together with the SAA and is typically implemented during the SAA ratification period. Serbia decided to start implementing the TPA unilaterally to show its goodwill and administrative

capacity. In December 2009, Serbia submitted its application for EU membership. In the same month, a visa-free regime with the EU and other countries in the Schengen area came into effect. The TPA entered into force in 2010, and the EU decided to begin the ratification process of the SAA with Serbia in June 2010.

In 2011, the EU responded to Serbia's membership application by sending its questionnaire, which Serbia completed and submitted in April 2011. In October 2011, the European Commission recommended that Serbia be granted candidate status for EU membership. However, the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia only after Belgrade made further progress in normalizing relations with Pristina.

In March 2012, the Republic of Serbia was granted candidate status for EU membership after the February 2012 Belgrade-Pristina Agreement, enabling Kosovo to be represented in regional initiatives, albeit with an asterisk*. No decision was made at that time to start accession negotiations.

At the June 2013 European Council meeting, the EU decided to open negotiations with Serbia no later than January 2014 if further progress was made. This was facilitated by the signing of the Belgrade-Pristina First Agreement on the principles of normalisation of relations in April 2013.

In September 2013, the SAA entered into force after the ratification process in EU member States was completed. On 21 January 2014, the First Intergovernmental Conference was held in Brussels, formally initiating Serbia's accession negotiations.

The revised enlargement methodology, proposed by the Commission in 2020, was an attempt to reinvigorate the obviously stalled enlargement process. With this new approach, the Commission attempted to strike a balance between the geopolitical necessity of enlargement and the merit-based nature of the process. When Serbia accepted the new methodology in 2021, it already had 18 chapters open, including all those within the new Cluster I (Fundamentals). Thus, it could only be acknowledged that Cluster I could be considered open. However, since 2021, Serbia has opened only one additional cluster (Cluster IV – Green Deal and Sustainable Connectivity), which was the last group of negotiating chapters opened to date (April 2024). Although the Commission recommended opening Cluster III (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), the Council found that the fulfilment of technical conditions was not enough. Three years after the Commission’s positive assessment, the Council has not yet decided to open this cluster for Serbia due to a lack of alignment in other areas. The rule of attaining balanced progress in all areas means that no progress in opening any of the clusters can be made without visible progress in the Fundamentals. Namely, despite the constitutional reforms in 2022 to improve the independence of the judiciary, Serbia continues to struggle with issues related to the effectiveness of the rule of law system, as well as with media regulations, which belong to the “Fundamentals” of the enlargement process.

Another reason for the Council’s effective suspension of negotiations, despite no formal suspension being initiated, is Serbia’s weak alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy decisions. According to the official

procedure, this should not have been the reason for blocking the accession talks. However, since Russia's war on Ukraine and the new geopolitical situation in Europe, this area has become of special importance and a new bone of contention between Serbia and the EU. Even though Serbia has aligned with the UN's resolutions condemning Russia's aggression, it has been refusing to align with any of the EU's restrictive measures so far. Thus, the Commission noted a backsliding in the CFSP in the 2022 Serbia progress report, while in 2023, it observed "no progress".

More recently, the December 2023 parliamentary and local elections in Serbia raised additional concerns regarding the regularity of the electoral process, pushing the European Parliament to call for an independent investigation, suspecting electoral fraud that may have impacted election results and undermined their legitimacy. The EP even called for the possible suspension of EU funds to Serbia if the electoral fraud allegations were confirmed.

The major bone of contention, however, between the EU and Serbia is the status of Kosovo. So far, 5 out of 27 EU member states have not recognized Kosovo's independence, but they seem to agree on the necessity of the normalization of relations between the two sides. The EU became involved as the mediator in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, marking the comprehensive normalization of relations, which would be sealed with a legally binding agreement, a key priority for Serbia's accession process. This goal has become part of Serbia's negotiating Chapter 35, emphasized in the Council's Negotiating Framework, which serves as the overarching document for the conduct of accession negotiations. The amendment to the Framework was recently initiated

to specify Serbia's further obligations with regard to implementing the so-called Ohrid Agreement.

Over the two decades of its integration process, Serbia has been a beneficiary of various EU funds offered to (potential) candidate countries. Nowadays, it regularly benefits from the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA), with roughly 200 million EUR annually. Nevertheless, IPA III (2021–2027) has not considerably increased the available funds compared to IPA II (2014–2020), and when considering inflation rates, the real value may have even decreased. Serbia's budget, on the other hand, has almost doubled in size from 2014 (8 billion EUR) to 2024 (around 18 billion EUR). As a result, the IPA share now constitutes an even smaller contribution to the state budget.

However, the EU recently recognized the insufficiency of its financial support and, in May 2024, adopted the Reform and Growth Facility to support the reforms and socio-economic convergence of Western Balkan countries with an additional 6 billion EUR (4 billion in loans and 2 billion grants) for the period of 2024–2027. Serbia will be one of the beneficiaries of this instrument, but to be eligible for funding, Serbia had to adopt a Reform Agenda demonstrating how its reforms align with the objectives of the Facility. In addition, the Reform Agenda will have to support alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. General conditions for all the Western Balkans will be “to uphold and respect effective democratic mechanisms, including a multi-party parliamentary system, free and fair elections, pluralistic media, an independent judiciary and the rule of law, and to guarantee respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”. However,

“for Serbia and Kosovo, another precondition is that they engage constructively with measurable progress and tangible results in the normalisation of their relations with a view to fully implementing all their respective obligations...”¹.

The dynamics of bilateral relations

Based on the previous section, it can be concluded that Serbia’s path towards EU accession has been marred by numerous challenges and obstacles that have hindered its progress. The complex relationship between Serbia and the EU has been characterized by slow advancements, with the accession negotiations dragging on for more than a decade, in which only 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, and only two closed. This modest result reflects both Serbia’s difficulties (and sometimes unwillingness) in meeting the stringent conditions and the EU’s reluctance to proceed with enlargement. In addition, the EU’s focus on maintaining stability in the region led to its decade-long support for leaders who have been perceived as stabilizing figures despite their questionable democratic credentials. This approach discouraged pro-EU political voices in Serbia and pushed the country towards authoritarianism.

The introduction of a new negotiating methodology in 2020 was intended to revitalize the enlargement process, but progress has remained sluggish. Serbia’s alignment with EU policies, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, media regulation, and alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, has been a point of contention. Recent

¹ Council of the EU, Press release, *Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans adopted*, 7 May 2024.

concerns surrounding Serbia's electoral process, including suspicions of fraud impacting election results, have raised alarm within the EU institutions, leading them to question the justification of Serbia remaining a candidate country and a beneficiary of EU funds. New financial instruments, such as the Reform and Growth Facility, provide opportunities for Serbia to enact necessary reforms and promote socio-economic convergence. However, it remains to be seen whether Serbia will meet the conditions required for funding. This will be another test for the credibility of the EU's enlargement policy. The unresolved issue of Kosovo's status further complicates the accession process, with emphasis placed on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, which many perceive as Serbia's recognition of Kosovo.

Domestic debate

The internal dialogue in Serbia regarding EU integration is almost non-existent, which, over the years, has affected public attitudes towards the EU. Public opinion in Serbia regarding EU integration and membership has been analysed through a variety of sources, including public opinion polls conducted by public institutions, non-governmental organisations, higher education and research institutes, and private companies. A longitudinal comparative analysis of these surveys shows a decline in public support for Serbia's membership in the EU from 2009 to 2023, with current support falling below 50%. The loss of support for EU membership can be attributed to various factors, including the EU's role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, scepticism about Serbia's prospects of joining the EU, and the war in

Ukraine and related EU conditions regarding relations with Russia. Despite this decline, most respondents still consider EU membership as a national interest for their country, viewing it as crucial for economic growth and regional peace and stability.

However, respondents are not ready to give up Kosovo for the sake of EU membership, and most of them believe that the EU is endangering Serbia's territorial integrity and independence in foreign policy decision-making. Respondents also perceive the EU's conditionality policy as unfair, inconsistent, and thus, the main obstacle to Serbia's membership, rather than a lack of internal reforms or political leadership. Compared to other Western Balkan countries, Serbian citizens are the most pessimistic towards their EU membership prospects.

The available media clipping surveys indicate that EU integration is underrepresented and depoliticized in Serbian media. Official political communication regarding the EU is lacking in transparency and public consultation, according to EU bodies. Academic research on media reporting on the EU in Serbia reveals that the tone of the coverage has become more critical and sensational in recent years, with tabloid press and highly viewed commercial pro-regime TV stations spreading misinformation and citing unverified sources to cover issues on EU integration. Discourses on the EU are strongly influenced by the governing elites and government-controlled media, which often use mixed messages from different institutions and member states for blame-shifting on the EU for the stalled accession process.

The lack of information and dialogue prevents effective participation in the process and might impact the decision

to join the EU eventually. Current public officials' messages distributed through the media boost the idea of the incompatibility between the EU membership goal and at least a few national interests as defined in official documents. However, they do not offer a solution for the resolution of such a conflict, with the exception of recent statements by the President of Serbia on the possibility of ending Serbia's EU path if the Ohrid Agreement is included in the EU's negotiating framework with Serbia.

Conclusions

The slowdown of the enlargement process for the Western Balkans has been noticeable since Juncker's Commission, particularly following his famous announcement that there would be no enlargements during his Commission's term of office. The enlargement question has been almost absent from the EU's agenda up until 2018 when the Commission made attempts to restore the damaged credibility of the process by adopting a new enlargement strategy, emphasizing the geostrategic interest of the EU in the region. However, despite the Commission's efforts to close ranks between the EU member states on the issue and the changed geopolitical context in Europe following the start of the war in Ukraine, no dramatic progress has been made on the Western Balkans' enlargement path. In addition, there seems to be an understanding within the EU that it first needs to be internally reformed before any enlargement can take place, with the consensus on these reform still distant. In this sense, in an optimistic scenario, the EU could be ready for enlargement by 2030 unless, in the meantime, it opts for

a smaller-scale enlargement to one smaller Western Balkan country, for example.

Although Serbia has accepted the 2020 revised enlargement methodology, which should have accelerated the process, the pace of its accession negotiations has slowed down. The enlargement fatigue in the EU member states proved challenging, and the accession fatigue in Serbia has grown in the last five years. This has been especially true after the 2022 war in Ukraine, which has led to more intensive demands from the EU for Serbia to align with restrictive measures towards Russia, Serbia's long-standing ally.

Another difficult issue in Serbia-EU relations has been the status of Kosovo and the EU's conditionality towards Serbia in this regard. The EU's insistence on including more specific obligations in Serbia's negotiating Chapter 35, which is perceived as a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's independence, makes the continuation of Serbia's EU accession process very difficult and maybe even impossible, pushing the country further away from the EU.

In addition to these two challenging matters, Serbia has a modest record in fulfilling the conditions within the so-called "Fundamentals" cluster, particularly concerning the rule of law and media freedom issues, as well as problems with procedural democracy, i.e., attaining free and fair elections.

At the same time, there have recently been many voices from Europe suggesting the possibility of staged or partial integration, allowing candidates to participate in particular EU programs and processes before accession. A number of concrete steps have been taken to integrate Serbia and other WB countries into the EU's single market before

membership (e.g., the Transport and Energy communities and the New Growth plan for the Western Balkans), leaving the possibility of membership still open when the time comes and the conditions are met.

Despite these issues, Serbia is still officially committed to its goal of membership in the EU with full rights and obligations. There is no official debate and no decisions have been made on a possible change in the country's strategy and relations with the EU as an alternative to full membership. To attain this, Serbia will need to address key issues such as the rule of law, democracy, institutional reforms, foreign policy alignment and, of course, the adoption of the whole set of EU *acquis* across the negotiating chapters. The most difficult issue for Serbia remains resolving the conflict between its two national interests: the preservation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and EU integration and membership. Only after this is achieved might, the 2030 target be a realistic date of accession.



Conclusions and recommendations

Geopolitical considerations emerged in the EU's enlargement policy in the context of rising Russian and Chinese assertiveness in the Balkans. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further exacerbated the resurgence of geopolitics as a conceptual paradigm in international relations. The aim of this policy paper was to examine whether the geopolitical arguments that have become an indispensable part of the European Union representatives' rhetoric have impacted on the relations between the EU and the non-EU states of the Western Balkans.

To answer this question, we gathered contributions from recognized experts from the region, asking them to assess the dynamics of relations between their countries and the EU over the last two years in search of evidence of a changing enlargement paradigm. While reflecting on the focal points for European integration of the Western Balkan candidate countries, each author highlighted dimensions that they identified as most relevant to the task. The outcome is

a collection of country reports that presents a picture worth a second look.

On the surface, the so-called geopolitical turn has impacted formal relations between the EU and some of the candidate countries from the region. Particularly advantageous in the sense of rapprochement with the EU was the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the introduction of visa-free travel for Kosovo citizens. These changes seemed unattainable until February 2022, as they required tangible internal reforms. Furthermore, despite its unrecognized status by five EU member states, Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership in December 2022. Simultaneously, the EU has begun to exert increased pressure on Kosovo to engage in a more constructive dialogue with Serbia. This geopolitical pressure can also be considered a factor that shaped the so-called “French proposal”, practically facilitating the start of negotiations between the EU and North Macedonia and Albania. However, while all these changes represent practical advancements on the road to the EU, they are still far from securing a qualitatively new geopolitical reality in the Balkans.

What the EU leaders seem to ignore when invoking geopolitical arguments is that these arguments need to have practical implications. So far, the dominant principle of EU-Western Balkans relations has been conditionality. This principle justifies the progress (or lack thereof) in bilateral relations and brings attention to questions of reforms and alignment with EU values and norms. The geopolitical turn should have entailed abandoning or at least deprioritizing the conditionality approach in favour of swift enlargement justified by the awareness that the membership

of all the Balkan countries would eliminate hard security concerns, such as the potential destabilization of the EU's periphery, which is a matter of particular importance in the new rivalry between the West, Russia, and China. In other words, the destabilization potential of the Balkans would have been eliminated through their membership in the EU. As we see from the examined cases, this is not where the EU is heading.

Instead, EU leaders, through their claims of a “merit-based assessment”, practically confirm that enlargement will not abandon the principle of conditionality. Not only has the new enlargement methodology increased the role of values' related chapters, but the EU still considers these chapters as levers of influence in the Western Balkan region.

In the meantime, citizens of the candidate states remain hostages of internal political problems, such as attitudes towards Kosovo or Serbia, the incorporation of the Bulgarians into the Macedonian constitution, or the inability to move forward with necessary reforms. Political instability also serves as a sufficient justification for the sluggish interaction between the EU and local political elites. The consequences are evident throughout the region. Despite the alleged geopolitical turn, public support for membership among Serbs and Macedonians is declining. Even where this support remains high, as in Albania, Kosovo, or Montenegro, worrying signs of disappointment and frustration towards the EU are noticeable. The EU must take these developments seriously as it risks to further losing its allure in the region.

Recommendations

- The EU should prioritize the practical incorporation of the Western Balkans states regardless of their internal shortcomings for the sake of eliminating risks of destabilization. So far, the pace of these bilateral relations continues to be governed by conditionality and a values-based approach.
- The Western Balkans candidate states are concerned with their individual enlargement perspectives. Regardless of the fact that this is a useful tool to exert political pressure, the EU should send a clear signal of determination for enlargement. This would bring the countries closer to a shared goal, eliminate the temptation to use the prospective enlargement as a tool in bilateral relations, and send a clear signal that the EU has a vision for the region.
- The EU must separate the issue of its internal reform from the enlargement process. Even though this was the experience during the 2004–2007 enlargements, the current political reality is substantially different. Following Brexit, the EU has the institutional capacity to accept all six Western Balkan countries, as they represent less than 1/3 of the British population. Furthermore, the reform debate is perceived as another justification for the EU's unwillingness to enlarge, which discourages candidate states from pursuing substantial reforms.
- The EU should reconsider its enlargement policy and determine whether its aim is to exert influence over its neighbourhood or to complete the process of Europe's unification. If the latter is the objective, the

EU needs to provide a short, sound, and swift path to membership for the Western Balkans.



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The geopolitical turn should have entailed abandoning or at least deprioritizing the conditionality approach in favour of swift enlargement justified by the awareness that the membership of all the Balkan countries would eliminate hard security concerns, such as the potential destabilization of the EU's periphery, which is a matter of particular importance in the new rivalry between the West, Russia, and China.

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