



EMBRACING THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION AT PRESENT

A VITAL QUESTION MARK FOR THE EU

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the challenges and geopolitical shifts impacting the European Union (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkan (WB6) region. Concerns over democratic institutions and reluctance of some EU member countries have significantly slowed down the enlargement process. To overcome obstacles, the EU has been pushing in the region both the reforms needed but also the idea of reaching regional integration as a way to enhance welfare, growth, and stability. However, these strategies have not yet yielded the desired results.

The outbreak of Covid-19, geopolitical tensions, and an increasingly confrontational global environment might well compel the EU to reassess its regional engagement and provide a credible enlargement path for the WB6. Yet, reforms are not only needed in the WB6, but also in the EU to make its decision-making process more efficient. Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB6 inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.



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Introduction

In the pre-Covid-19 and pre-Ukraine war era, the multiple and asymmetric crises affecting Europe seemed to justify the slow EU enlargement path faced by the Western Balkan (WB6) region. Widening the EU before deepening its institutional setting was considered too politically risky. The struggle with the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law in some of the "big-bang enlargement" countries as well as the frightening idea that "smaller" or "newer" EU countries could delay or even paralyse the EU decision-making process were certainly key factors. On the other hand, having faced years of economic crises and austerity policies, fewer European citizens were keen to share with new incomers any leftover of the European welfare and benefits they could count on. Even if enlargement would not be costly for them in reality, such a perception was strong enough to convince many national policymakers not to openly support the widening of the EU.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons the WB6 enlargement path does not only involve a series of reforms that WB6's national governments have to implement but also it necessitates the promotion of regional cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere. In line with the EU liberal vision, the latter would have enhanced welfare, growth, and stability, thereby facilitating the accession process for the WB6 countries, and potentially reducing resistance from detractors within the EU member countries. Integrating a group of moderately prosperous and stable countries is considered inherently easier than the opposite scenario. Additionally, building on such a liberal perspective, economic partnerships and free market would have naturally fostered democratic institutions and rule of law within WB6 national institutions.

To date, while the above EU strategies have not been effective in securing a credible enlargement path for the WB6, the Covid-19 outbreak, geopolitical tensions, an increasingly confrontational and competitive international arena and Russian belligerent foreign policy have resulted in a shifting global order. The regionalisation of international relations has pushed the EU to become more aware of the need to protect its own borders and increase its influence in the neighbourhood. Ukraine and Moldova have recently become EU candidates, and Georgia might soon be. Yet, such a renovated EU regional engagement does not necessarily imply a more realistic accession path for the WB6. At the same time, the prospect of EU future membership for the above countries would make it difficult to justify further delays in the Western Balkans countries' enlargement process.¹ Montenegro and Serbia started membership talks respectively in 2008 and 2009, while only in March 2020 the European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Bosnia-Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022 while Kosovo is still a potential candidate. The procrastination of enlargement in the WB6 has become unsustainable even for the EU. It carries an even higher risk than possible social discontent, economic cost or delays in the decision-making process, given the external influences that countries such as Russia but also China, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia are exerting in the area in a moment of shifting global order. What is clear is that to keep the region stable, which is of strategic importance for the EU security and build a "geopolitical" Europe, there is an urgent need to include the WB6 in the EU club. Against this backdrop, the paper will provide an analysis of the WB6 EU integration process and the impact that past and present geopolitical shifts have been having on their EU journey.

The WB6 integration path

At the beginning of the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the rise of a new global order based on increasing social, institutional and economic interconnections, the EU began to actively promote its liberal model of integration based on democratic institutions and free trade to other European countries as a way to stabilise the old continent by increasing social and economic welfare.² From 1995 to 2007, the process of EU enlargement towards the northern, southern and eastern side of Europe grew, with a rather rapid inclusion of 15 countries.³ Yet, when it comes to the Western Balkans, the integration path has revealed not to be an easy one. Since the late 1990s the European Union has been assisting the region through technical and financial support to facilitate the WB6 compliance with the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, EU regulations and standards. Yet, WB6 countries are not only expected to comply individually with internal reforms, but they are also expected to boost regional cooperation.

Indeed, in a region that had to overcome many political fractures and conflicts, increasing regional cooperation in general and economic in particular, was a logical step for the EU, whose origins can be traced back to the overcoming of the Franco-German conflictual relations through economic partnerships. Hence, the 1999 Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), for instance, added to the Western Balkans' accession process several conditions in the form of common political and economic goals.⁴ Moreover, regional economic cooperation as a path for smoother integration started to be eventually promoted even by individual EU member states, through the rise of an intergovernmental approach, with the aim to stabilise the area.

The Berlin Process is certainly one of the most recent examples of such a trend. Launched in 2014 by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the aim of the Berlin process was twofold. On the one hand, it had to revitalise

the political discussion on the Western Balkans integration path without formally committing to it.⁵ This was considered strategic to overcome the impasse generated by the former EU Commission President Juncker's Political Guidelines, which, at the time, crashed any enlargement perspective for the WB6 in his five years mandate.⁶ On the other hand, the Berlin Process aimed at boosting regional economic cooperation among the Western Balkan countries as a way to facilitate their potential future integration within the EU.⁷ It was under such an intergovernmental format, that Western Balkan leaders agreed on the Multi-Annual Action Plan on Regional Economic Area 2017–2019 (REA) and on the following Common Regional Market 2020–2024 (CRM) to allow the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people and set their respective countries



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towards an effective regional integration. Yet, bilateral disputes, the mutual non-recognition of Serbia and Kosovo as well as of Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina and the lack of political commitment by local governments make their effective enrolment inapplicable.

To complicate such a process, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia have launched a parallel initiative named "Open Balkans" (OB) in 2019, which now co-exists in parallel to the CRM. The lack of progress in the aforementioned initiatives can be attributed to the political short-sightedness of governments in the Western Balkans, as well as to a prevailing perception that they might be primary waiting room for accession, while enlargement will never happen.⁸ This somehow corroborates with projections by the EPIK Institute in Kosovo.



WB6 governments can strategically leverage Russia as a trump card to gain political advantages vis-à-vis the EU.



The Institute estimates that the Western Balkan countries will require from 45 to 80 years, or in an optimistic scenario, between 11 and 20 years, to implement the necessary reforms for EU membership.⁹ Based on the EU progress reports, however, such projections do not consider the times of shifting global order we are living in, which might require a rapid change of the EU enlargement approach. Moreover, increasing tension in Kosovo, with the breaking out of violent protests in late May 2023, serves as a clear indication that to avoid the escalation of a long-lasting conflicts in the European doorsteps, the strategic question should not be 'if' enlargement will happen but rather 'when'.¹⁰

Enlargement status quo in a shifting global order

The Covid-19, the war in Ukraine or the energy crisis, to name a few, are just examples of the radical changes occurring in the global arena. To date, such complex geopolitical dynamics might negatively exacerbate the influence that third countries, Russia in primis, can exert in the WB6 region. While the influence of external actors is not a novelty for the WB6, that historically have been often playing the role of non-aligned countries, still the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is pushing the EU to be more aware of the risks that external actors could uptake in terms of stability and of its regional projection of power. While the majority of WB6 countries are aligned with the EU, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have not joined the EU's sanctions against Moscow. On the contrary, in May 2022, Serbia finalised a convenient energy contract with Gazprom, the unique gas dealer in the country. Although the cost of the war of invasion in Ukraine is resulting in Russia

partially losing its economic and political grips, it is still applying forms of 'sharp power' to destabilise the region. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church has strong ties with Serbia and Montenegro but also with Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia and the Christian minorities in Albania and Kosovo, often promoting a pan-Slavic Christian in contraposition to the EU.¹¹ Moreover, contents by media channels such as Sputnik or Russia Today are broadcasted in all the region, becoming powerful tools to spread disinformation or anti-EU ideas, which in turn can further delay the reforms process needed by the WB6. At the same time, WB6 governments can strategically leverage Russia as a trump card to gain political advantages vis-à-vis the EU, while concurrently ensuring Russia's continued significance as a key player in the region.¹²

Other than Russia, the economic power of China should not be underestimated. For China, the WB6 are the perfect bridge to access the EU single market. In this respect not only China is in favour of the EU enlargement in the region, but it is also willing to finance infrastructures to connect it. The problem is that many of the financial agreements between the WB6 countries and China have been secreted and are often in violation of the European rule of law principles and general EU environmental standards, competition regulations, as well as public procurement procedures.¹³ At the same time, the European Union must address the significant influence that Turkey, under Erdogan's government, and Saudi Arabia can exert on Muslim communities in the region. Turkey cannot rival the EU's economic power. Yet it



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can leverage on its cultural heritage to maintain influence in the region. For instance, through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, Turkey is financing the restoration of monuments and mosques, as well as the construction of new places of worship in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo. Furthermore, in the last years, Turkish cultural centres and Turkish language courses have been popping up throughout the region, while the Turkish media channel TRT launched a local branch in 2022, broadcasting in all local languages.

Also, Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in the region by investing in the construction of mosques and Islamic schools, as well as by supporting programmes aimed at combating poverty, improving access to healthcare, and enhancing educational opportunities for Muslim communities. However, the mosques and schools funded by Saudi Arabia have contributed to the dissemination of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi doctrine. In a nutshell, Turkish and Saudi efforts in the region are driven by specific political priorities, aimed at maintaining close ties with Muslim communities, which might well reignite ethnic conflicts, posing a security threat for the EU.¹⁴

EU member countries and enlargement in the WB6

Against the above forms of influences, the EU should revamp the enlargement options for the WB6 in a credible manner and highlight to its own European citizens the risks that non-integration could entail. Notwithstanding Eastern EU member countries remain supporters of the enlargement process, especially in view of Russia's aggressive foreign policy, Western European countries need to be more vocal. Italy and Germany have always been in favour of enlargement. In early November 2022, during the Berlin Process Summit, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that the Western Balkans should join the European Union "as soon as possible", while in April 2023 Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani reiterated the need to



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accelerate the enlargement process.¹⁵ Yet, their political engagement in the region has been perceived as faltering in the last years, with Italy for instance, failing to ensure a quicker opening of EU negotiations with Albania.¹⁶

At the same time, French President Emmanuel Macron's idea to build a European Political Community (EPC) as a second tier of countries outside the EU might be increasingly seen as a way to skip enlargement tout court. Yet, now that global politics has shifted to a regional order, the EU needs to avoid any further loss of relevance within its neighbourhood to face new security threats and changes in the international economic and political dynamics. These external factors can push the EU member countries to be more aligned not only on foreign policy matters but also on enlargement. Even France seems to have slightly changed its approach. President Emmanuel Macron has recently highlighted the need to not "let Europe be kidnapped a second time".¹⁷ However, failing to widen the European Union towards the WB6, while flagging an enlargement prospect for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia could not just crash the hopes of the 60%¹⁸ of the WB6 citizens who are still convinced Europhile, but it could jeopardise any further efforts by the WB6 to comply with the EU acquis. This would certainly fuel further instability and conflicts in the region. For enlargement to become a reality, the WB6 have to push the needed reforms forward. Conversely, given the time of poly-crises we are living in, geopolitical interests and regional stability should be prioritised. At the same time, reforms cannot be forced only on the WB6, but enlargement could give the EU a

chance to modernise its institutional setting. The devil stands however in the details. Eastern EU member countries, such as Poland and Hungary, which are supporting the EU enlargement toward the WB6, believe that accession should take place in a less 'federalised' EU. In other words, they do not want the EU to become a super state and they tend to believe that some competences should be given back to the member countries.¹⁹

Ironically enough, it is also because of Hungary and Poland progressive dismantlement of democratic standards, that rule of law enforcement in the WB6 is so attentively supervised by the EU institutions.²⁰ According to the V-Dem's liberal democracy index, Hungary and Poland have been the two countries standing out for the worsening of their liberal democracy index, which has decreased respectively from 0.48 to 0.43 and from 0.39 to 0.34.²¹ Both countries however are willing to keep the unanimity rule, at least on EU foreign and security policy.²² Yet, for Germany, France and Italy, among others, enlargement might happen only if the EU will adopt significant changes to its decision-making process. Qualified majority can indeed make the EU more efficient in facing external challenges but also in holding member states accountable for their breaching of standards and regulations.²³ Beyond the unanimity vote, there is also the need for all EU member countries to recognise Kosovo, in order to provide the country a clear enlargement path. These are all actions that need to be taken at member states' level. Without such an engagement, no realistic enlargement can be outlined to the WB6.

Conclusion

At a time of shifting global order, the inclusion of the WB6 should not pose a significant challenge for the EU. Considering the level of integration with the EU the WB6 have already achieved, their membership should not be a greater challenge than the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia. Moreover, even though regional cooperation has not yet delivered the expected stability and economic development and the institutional development and rule of law in individual WB6 countries is advancing slowly, any progress achieved so far could eventually be jeopardised by the influence of external actors. Finally, the enlargement approach towards the WB6 needs to seriously consider the uncomfortable geopolitical spot where the EU stands: at the centre of rising tensions between the West and the East of the global arena. To avoid proxy internal conflicts, dangerous external influence or power games in the region, the EU has to stop considering the Western Balkans' enlargement path as not an urgent matter. It is imperative to revitalise the enlargement process in a credible manner, by engaging the WB6 more closely to push the reform needed forward while also adapting the institutional setting and decision-making process within the EU to the new geopolitical dynamics. For instance, by abandoning the unanimity vote, the EU decision process could become more effective and smarter, even if its membership will be of 33 rather than 27. In other words, there is a need to throw caution to the wind and embrace the WB6 EU inclusion not in the future, but now.



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