

# **Geopolitical Momentum for the Western Balkans – EU Relations: Risks and Opportunities**

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**Prague, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2022**

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## Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brings a new sense of urgency to the EU-WB relations but also stresses the EU's reduced credibility in region. This paper argues that the war has changed the geopolitical context for the enlargement process and has brought increased chances for rethinking the future EU–WB relations. If the EU does not appreciate the ‘momentum’, its stagnant approach toward the region risks magnifying existing threats to regional stability. We suggest three possible pathways for the EU – Western Balkans relations: 1) Geopolitics and security; 2) Fast track for the accession process; 3) Enhancing the EU enlargement policy with new means. We see a version the first pathway as the most probable. While the EU is developing a geopolitical approach following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this pathway addresses ineffectively the risks induced by the war in Ukraine and leaves all the other structural risks in place. EU representatives have legitimized autocrats at the expense of institutions without encouraging any reforms in the Western Balkans. Thus, the past six months have brought new blunders and inconsistencies regarding the enlargement process. If the EU seeks to preserve its image of a valued-based project, it should find the means to do it in the changed geopolitical context.

## I. Rationale

Will the geopolitical upheaval in Ukraine and in Europe spill over to the Balkans? Or will it bring some progress for the aspiring EU members? Are the Western Balkans (WB) at risk as well? Will the concerted EU policy towards Ukraine have a positive impact on the Balkans?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine already has direct implications for the WB: it sends shivers throughout the region, reviving wounds from the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1999),<sup>1</sup> raises fears of destabilization, and affects its economies.

The reasons lie not only in the unhealed traumas, but also in the political fragility of the region. Russia has had the space to build a strong presence in the Balkans and has become one of the influential foreign policy players whose actions have become increasingly interventionist in recent years. While Russia has lost its bid to control energy supplies through the South Stream project, it has resorted to more direct efforts to influence public opinion across the region and to build alliances with some political elites, most noticeably in Serbia and in Bosnia–Herzegovina. Russia’s network of dependent political and economic clients has recently contributed to political destabilization efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro, as well as in the new wave of anti-EU sentiments in Serbia. The risk of spillover of the war in Ukraine on the WB has been a concern since the first days of the invasion.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the strong Ukrainian resistance, the united response of the West, and the largely unprepared Russian army has prevented the Kremlin from focusing on the WB at the moment. The EU’s unity<sup>3</sup> regarding the war in Ukraine has created space for bringing back, even

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<sup>1</sup> [www.economist.com/europe/2022/10/06/the-war-in-ukraine-has-awakened-memories-in-the-balkans](http://www.economist.com/europe/2022/10/06/the-war-in-ukraine-has-awakened-memories-in-the-balkans)

<sup>2</sup> [www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans](http://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans)

<sup>3</sup> [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion)

symbolically, the enlargement policy to the agenda. The expectation for Ukraine's future in the EU was formalized by giving the country a candidate status.<sup>4</sup> For the WB countries that have been waiting for years to start negotiations or obtain candidate status, this renewed interest in the enlargement of the EU raises hopes that the process will be given more importance in the coming years.

**Nine months into the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine**, none of the grim forecasts<sup>5</sup> about Russia seeking to open a 'second front in the Balkans' has materialized. But, as this paper will argue, most threats are linked only indirectly to Russia's influence and many are structural. There are specific risks related directly to the effects of the war, but also to intensified structural risks and unresolved bilateral and internal issues that have hampered the WB's progress and risks inherent to recent 'stabilocratic' EU policy towards the WB. The invasion came at a moment when nationalist rhetoric reached levels unprecedented since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

One consequence, among others, is the EU's difficulty aligning all aspiring and candidate states behind its foreign policy towards Ukraine. The war highlights the EU's lack of clout in the WB and brings a new sense of urgency. The EU has been losing credibility for several years in the row, and its enlargement policies have been increasingly ineffective. If the EU does not appreciate the 'momentum' brought about by the Russo-Ukrainian War, its stagnant approach toward the WB risks magnifying existing threats to regional stability.

We argue that the war has utterly changed the geopolitical context for the enlargement process and has brought increased chances for rethinking the future EU–WB relations. The war has created a sense of urgency regarding wider European security. Moreover, the formulation of 'Europe' as both a symbolic space and a democratic and peace project under threat allows for defense and political mobilization that could lead to the recognition of the enlargement policy as a tool of EU's political legitimacy. Keeping the status-quo approach would lead to increased political and security risks for both the EU and the WB. On the other hand, focusing on the geopolitical momentum should mean neither a shortcut to membership nor baseless political support from EU politicians for local governments. This approach may bring some short-term political gains but risks undermining the EU reform drive in the region. We argue that the enlargement process needs to combine new political and procedural means that would put pressure on local governments to speed up reforms, which would increase the EU's legitimacy across the region. While the six WB states are at different states of their paths to EU accession,<sup>7</sup> we assert that both the EU and the region would benefit from a more coherent team-based approach.

Considering the crisis in the international system, namely the war, also as an opportunity for the enlargement process, we suggest three pathways in which we imagine EU–WB relations on the horizon of the next five to ten years:

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<sup>4</sup> [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/ukraine](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/ukraine)

<sup>5</sup> [www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-new-front-west-bosnia](http://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-new-front-west-bosnia),  
[www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220921-if-the-west-is-not-careful-russia-will-make-the-balkans-a-second-front/](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220921-if-the-west-is-not-careful-russia-will-make-the-balkans-a-second-front/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-says-ukraine-war-has-delayed-secession-plan-2022-06-06/](http://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-says-ukraine-war-has-delayed-secession-plan-2022-06-06/),  
<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/08/25/latest-kosovo-serbia-tensions-reveal-eu-s-diplomatic-limits-pub-87755>

<sup>7</sup> [www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/10/05/eu-facing-crisis-of-credibility-in-western-balkans-as-leaders-meet-for-regional-summit](http://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/10/05/eu-facing-crisis-of-credibility-in-western-balkans-as-leaders-meet-for-regional-summit)

**1) Geopolitics and security; 2) Fast track for the accession process; 3) Enhancing the EU enlargement policy with new means.**

The pathways are not meant as realistic scenarios with assignable probability but rather as directions in which EU–WB relations move given one controlling perspective: geopolitics, enlargement, or reform. This exercise leads us to bring certain directions – whether taken intentionally or by inertia – toward their conclusion. It relies on a categorization of risks and threats. The current geopolitical upheaval is a response to actual violence, and preventing crises and further upheavals in Southern Europe will and should also motivate the policy toward the WB. It is nevertheless important to prioritize reactions to threats too. That is why we start with a short overview of risks, some of which are exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, while others are structural, and some are related to inefficient EU policies.

## 2. Risks and chances of the new geopolitical context

The upheaval produced by the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022 has come at a time of long-lasting stagnation of EU–WB relations.<sup>8</sup> It created additional risks for a region on a downward spiral, but most are not related to the war. On the other hand, the war has brought unexpected possibilities for the region.

### Risks

**a) War-related risks** encompass threats of intentional political destabilization but also an array of secondary negative consequences.

**Political Destabilization.** Since February 2022, analysts have pointed to the possibility of the activation of Russian proxy actors in the region that could destabilize the region.<sup>9</sup> Milorad Dodik's secessionist threats,<sup>10</sup> as well as the tension in North Kosovo,<sup>11</sup> create risks to established state structures and stability. While Dodik has softened his secession narrative due to the war in Ukraine,<sup>12</sup> tension between Kosovo and Serbia over vehicle registration plates and Serbian participation in Kosovo institutions continue to highlight risks of escalation. Facing deliberate power games, the EU mediation is inefficient.<sup>13</sup> Russia's tactical losses in Ukraine, as well as its rhetoric on Kosovo as a precedent for Donbas,<sup>14</sup> largely discouraged secessionist ideas across the region. Nevertheless, there are still risks of escalation of the Ukrainian war, e.g., by nuclear attack or disaster, the involvement of Belarus or Poland, the extensive degradation of Ukrainian infrastructure, a major refugee crisis and ensuing EU disunity, etc. Such scenarios are not unlikely, and they would create a negative momentum for European efforts and vindicate those in the Balkans waiting to capitalize on the weakness of the West.

**Social crisis.** War-related inflation, food and/or energy shortages, and worsening economic conditions are already affecting the WB as a result of the war.<sup>15</sup> The intensity of a social crisis will depend on the war's length, local responses, and also on the EU reaction.

**Information divide.** The coexistence of opposing narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War is cementing the political divide of the WB into disconnected information and moral worlds. Polarization has been in place regarding topics such as the pandemic, the EU, and Russia, and divisions have increased since the war due to propaganda efforts of Russian proxies in the region and also to the growing role of social media. Such trends are likely to negatively affect attitudes regarding EU integration and can only be countered by smart and targeted strategic communication by the EU and NATO.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_balkans\\_on\\_track\\_for\\_eu\\_membership\\_or\\_stagnation/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_balkans_on_track_for_eu_membership_or_stagnation/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-new-front-west-bosnia](http://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-new-front-west-bosnia)

<sup>10</sup> [www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/](http://www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/)

<sup>11</sup> <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/08/25/latest-kosovo-serbia-tensions-reveal-eu-s-diplomatic-limits-pub-87755>

<sup>12</sup> [www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-says-ukraine-war-has-delayed-secession-plan-2022-06-06/](http://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-says-ukraine-war-has-delayed-secession-plan-2022-06-06/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63711841](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63711841)

<sup>14</sup> [www.europeanforum.net/headlines/putins-comments-on-kosovo-spark-unrest-in-serbia](http://www.europeanforum.net/headlines/putins-comments-on-kosovo-spark-unrest-in-serbia)

<sup>15</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/europeandcentralasia/western-balkans-heading-towards-another-storm>

**b) Structural risks exacerbated by the war.** The WB faces increasingly severe socio-economic stagnation, demographic decline, infrastructural inefficiency, and authoritarian consolidation in some of the countries. The lack of perspective creates a generally negative outlook and motivates an ethnonationalist reaction. Due to their geographical position and gray economy logistics established in the past, the WB countries are a route for migration from the Middle East that is expected to grow with continuing wars and climate change. Organized crime thrives on general economic decline, corruption, rule of law gaps, and systemic crises. These tendencies are likely to grow under the broader impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

**c) Internal and bilateral disputes** about contested statehood between Serbia and Kosovo, between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, and between Bosnia and Herzegovina's entities continue to hamper progress and periodically create instability. EU efforts to mediate or intervene have been unsuccessful more often than not. They have also exposed the limitations of EU diplomacy to notorious manipulation by local strongmen that the EU bureaucratic approach cannot handle with usual tools.<sup>16</sup>

**d) Risks inherent to the EU approach to the region.** Rewarding governments for 'stability' and even non-existent EU accession progress has undermined EU reform efforts.<sup>17</sup> The EU technocratic approach itself has proven self-defeating. The EU integration process in the present context is a necessary and legitimate political horizon, but its reality is that of a hollow face-saving act in which EU and WB states participate for reasons that should be viewed as incompatible: the EU maintains a fiction of reform and formal conditionality for the sake of stability and influence in the immediate neighborhood, while most local elites draw legitimacy and resources to foster state capture and autocratic governing style. Those who have engaged in reforms more seriously (North Macedonia after recent electoral changes) are not rewarded.

## Chances

The Russo-Ukrainian war represents a serious crisis of the international system with an open-ended outcome, but at the same time it has already brought chances for reviving the EU enlargement process. The need for geopolitical alignment and security cooperation in and around the EU has created a momentum for EU–WB relations. Unlike during the 2015 refugee crisis and the 2020 pandemic, the EU is more open to include WB in its energy and security cooperation, and most WB countries have shown interest and support for these developments.

The EU has framed the **enlargement process as a political tool** intended to exercise influence beyond technocratic procedures. By giving membership status to Ukraine and Moldova and starting negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, the EU sends a signal that the enlargement as will be revived.

There are also chances **linked to a particular momentum in the war** that so far favor

<sup>16</sup> [www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/](http://www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/)

<sup>17</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-revisits-balkans-win-friends-see-influence-92272879>

Ukrainian defense and make major offensive Russian campaigns less likely. As a result, destabilizing elements (such as Moscow's clients, narratives, and symbols) are weakened for the moment and are on the defensive across the WB, which in turn leads to a weakening of nationalist narratives.<sup>18</sup>

There are also chances linked to current WB processes. After a long inertia, there are countries in dynamic development (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and partly Albania) that subscribe to the EU (and NATO) perspectives and reform visions.

But these chances represent a **window of opportunity that will not last long**. The chance to engage with the political momentum secured by the war may be short. Winter energy scarcity, war escalation, EU disunity, or some of the above-sketches turns of the war may change current favorable political conditions. This is why we are not witnessing a geopolitical change but **just a geopolitical momentum** that needs to be used in order to prevent risks from outweighing the chances.

EU states have reacted by starting the European Political Community in Prague,<sup>19</sup> reviving the Berlin process, advancing North Macedonia and Albania on their EU path, and working on energy supplies. These moves are motivated by geopolitics and security. Questions that need responses are: Can a geopolitical response deliver a change, or will it reinforce existing negative developments? How much should EU states focus on newer threats related to war and how much on structural problems and its own counterproductive policies? How can we imagine the WB in the EU five to ten years from now?

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<sup>18</sup> Such as Putin's recognition of DLR and LLR that is incoherent with the earlier Kosovo narrative.

<sup>19</sup> [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/)

### 3. Stalled enlargement process

Seemingly, the war has already pushed the EU–WB relations forward. In fact, they are stalled and fraught with mutual frustration. Without the impetus of some unexpected change, all the above risks are real threats.

In October 2022, the European Commission provided an assessment of the progress made by the WB and recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) be granted candidate status by the council.<sup>20</sup> The start of the accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania (July 2022) was described as a ‘historic moment’.<sup>21</sup> Despite being repeatedly expressed in official EU documents, the commitment to the EU perspective of the WB remains lukewarm at best. This is evident from most member states’ reluctance to engage with issues in the region, largely reflecting negative public opinion in some of those countries over any future enlargement of the EU.<sup>22</sup> The French proposal was an attempt to show engagement with bilateral problems in the region that, however, faced serious criticisms.<sup>23</sup>

For a decade before the war, the EU political signaling was not in favor of a new EU accession in the near future. Thus, the enlargement process has been slow and without any significant progress on the path of internal reforms due to both administrative inertia and lack of political will. In fact, the very process – rule of law reforms and accession to IPA funds – has led to the opposite effect, undermining judiciary independence<sup>24</sup> and empowering autocrats engaged in clientelist politics.<sup>25</sup> State capture has been recognized as a problem affecting the whole region.<sup>26</sup> Together with illiberal authoritarianism, it has taken hold of several countries and represents an effective blockage to democratization, not to say EU accession, for years to come.

The lack of a more assertive political presence of the EU in the WB has created opportunities for other big powers, such as Russia, Turkey, China. This development has reaffirmed the image of the Balkans as a region for geopolitical games that the EU has monitored but largely tolerated for its lack of clout. The geopolitical clash between the West and Russia on the battlefield of Ukraine has brought the Balkans back into the immediate geopolitical horizon of the EU. The EU has created unity around shared political values and cultural communalities, in which the Ukrainian resistance is framed as a ‘fight for Europe’. It further mobilized unprecedented resources by applying the most comprehensive sanction regime against Russia in the entire history of the EU<sup>27</sup> and providing large-scale financial assistance to Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> In previous crises, such as the so-called migration crisis in 2015, the EU did not manage to

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<sup>20</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_6082](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6082)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/07/19/historic-moment-eu-opens-accession-negotiations-with-albania-and-north-macedonia>

<sup>22</sup> [www.ceps.eu/the-eus-enlargement-agenda-is-no-longer-fit-for-purpose/](http://www.ceps.eu/the-eus-enlargement-agenda-is-no-longer-fit-for-purpose/)

<sup>23</sup> <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/08/22/frances-eu-proposal-for-north-macedonia-teaches-us-that-nationalism-shall-prevail/>

<sup>24</sup> [bezbednost.org/en/publication/reclaiming-the-fundamentals-unleashing-reform-potential-of-the-eu-enlargement-process/](http://bezbednost.org/en/publication/reclaiming-the-fundamentals-unleashing-reform-potential-of-the-eu-enlargement-process/)

<sup>25</sup> [democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Enlargement-A-Missed-Opportunity\\_BDaily\\_Febr-10-2020.pdf](http://democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Enlargement-A-Missed-Opportunity_BDaily_Febr-10-2020.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/02/08/priebe-report-state-capture-western-balkans/>

<sup>27</sup> [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/)

<sup>28</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_4264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4264)



mobilize its potential based on political unity. The EU managed to demonstrate better cooperation in the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic yet limited to the core member states.

This at least seems to have changed now, unlike the much deeper problem of WB democratic backsliding. The Russo-Ukrainian War brought out the security dimension of EU–WB relations: the concern that the EU does not want to and cannot afford to deal with another military, political, or migration crisis at its inner doorstep. Yet the influence of Russia’s proxies<sup>29</sup> in the politically and socially volatile Balkan region points to the EU’s credibility failures: most Balkan countries have aligned with the EU sanctions, with the exception of Serbia and (formally, as of now) Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>30</sup> Serbia’s foreign policy since February 2022 has been a mix between recognizing Ukraine’s territorial integrity, not recognizing the annexation of the separatist Donbas regions by Russia, but also not joining the sanctions against Russia despite the EU’s expectation that the country will comply with the foreign policy of the bloc. If official Belgrade, driven by mostly economic concerns, echoes some of the EU’s rhetoric, it plays with popular sentiment – Russia seems to hold a more affective place in Serbian politics, often treated as an old friendship.

Still, the largely stalled relations have registered some movement in the past months, allowing us to project their various trajectories well beyond the horizon of (most of) today’s political mandates.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russian-narrative-proxies-western-balkans>

<sup>30</sup> The Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik has openly expressed support for Russia <https://n1info.hr/english/news/serb-member-of-bosnias-presidency-russias-activities-in-ukraine-are-justified/>

## 4. Three pathways: Geopolitics, Accession Fast Track, Reform

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War has highlighted the risks-fraught status quo in the Balkans, defined by stabilocracy, endemic corruption, state capture, and ethnonationalist politics. To assess these risks in the mid-term, we develop three possible pathways for EU–WB relations. They are not meant as realistic suggestions for policy decisions. Speculating about possible outcomes, they are meant to lead us to think where various options can lead us. The war makes it urgent to think beyond the immediate political concerns of the EU and its member states. The following pathways outline possible scenarios that may develop out of our today’s decisions: Should we focus primarily on geopolitical realignment? Should future EU leadership open up possibilities for WB nations to quickly become members? Or should the EU recognize the need to double down on the reform potential of the accession process?

### Pathway I: Geopolitical realignment: The new stalling game

**Description:** In response to increased threats, EU states prioritize the goal of geopolitical realignment and security cooperation with the WB. They develop the European Political Community (EPC) into a standing platform that allows the inclusion of the WB into a strategic dialogue and facilitates a progressive energy and security cooperation.<sup>31</sup> The Western Balkans become part of major continental projects aimed at enhancing security, energy diversification, and infrastructural development. Overall, the EPC opens space for political consensus concerning ongoing crises and risks related to the war in Ukraine, including political instability across Europe, inflation, and energy dependence. WB countries gradually realign themselves to EU positions. The Berlin process succeeds in creating a working common market and also various regional initiatives deal with the past, support scores of regional civil society initiatives, and mitigate the humanitarian costs of migration.

The stabilocracy continues or takes a new form of ‘geopolitics first’. All countries are making symbolic progress toward membership, but it is merely technical, without any realistic prospect for membership in the near future. The countries that have advanced the furthest in the negotiation process, Montenegro and Serbia, get to open new or close previously opened clusters. For North Macedonia and Albania, the accession talks officially begin on a technical, not only a political, level. The candidate status is confirmed for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the citizens of Kosovo gain access to visa-free travel.

The geopolitical alignment is firmly put on top of the EU’s agenda in the region. The EPC gradually replaces the enlargement policy as the central mechanism for EU–WB relations and provides some benefits for countries that are in line with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). No new memberships are realized in the long run, as recurring bilateral disputes block the process. While Ukraine and Moldova remain mired in post-war crises, the EU struggles to reform itself internally, making the enlargement an increasingly unrealistic prospect. Nevertheless, the official EU narrative remains the same: the EU’s doors remain open to new members from the WB.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2022/10/05/what-can-the-european-political-community-achieve/>

Democratic backsliding and authoritarianism continue to be tolerated and even used by the EU as a means of maintaining relative stability in the region. The EU used the WB as an effective buffer zone for dealing with migration in ways that would not be legal in the EU itself. The region achieves modest economic growth.

**I. a. Best-case scenario:** The overall stability of the region is preserved. The geopolitical approach allows the EU to eventually facilitate the agreement on normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. BiH gets through a serious institutional transformation based on compromise between all three sides as a price for preserving stability at any cost. Montenegro and North Macedonia remain under Western influence, with the US and NATO in the driver's seat as the main political force. The influence of third actors such as Russia and China in the region continues to decline. The region takes the role of a buffer zone for recurring waves of migrants from the Middle East, but also an important source of minerals and green energy projects for the EU. The fact that the admission of new members is off the table makes EU–WB policy uncontroversial in some more cautious member states.

**I. b. Worst-case scenario:** The alignment of WB countries is slow in coming, dependent geopolitical (in)stability and remains fragile to various more or less consequential provocations. One of the reasons is increasing inner polarization of WB countries. With the lack of a credible membership perspective and effective end of reform efforts, and due to the EU's open support for autocrats and their services, the EU loses the rest of its credibility as a value-driven political actor. Its relations with the WB are purely transactional, making the WB into the EU's neglected backyard. It faces dramatic demographic losses and the rise of ultra-nationalist forces. The EU increasingly relies on local strongmen to keep the ultra-nationalists and their foreign backers under control. The EU is no longer the key stakeholder in major regional stability issues. This role is instead assumed by the US and NATO, weakening the EU's geopolitical stance.

Meanwhile, EU's policymakers and security experts continue to be concerned with the seemingly resolved bilateral disputes and with continuing foreign meddling. They fear a major crisis on the EU's border while the EU is still dealing with instability in the east, climate disaster, and growing migration from Africa. The bilateral disputes and migration flows get periodically used by local stabilocrats to maintain leverage and extract resources from the EU.

## Pathway 2: Fast track for the accession process

**Description:** Geopolitical and security concerns and renewed migration waves to Europe caused by climate change bring about a new reality: national-conservative parties dominate Europe. There is a new consensus about the need for a three-speed Europe: an A-zone that is reformist and carbon neutral; a wider B-zone of European states with less demanding and less integrated policies; and a C-zone with common defense, foreign policy, common market, some privileges, and voting rights. This process is instigated by France's radical first female president, along with the like-minded V4 countries, Italy, Spain, and Germany. WB states are granted full C-zone membership in the EU around 2028. The focus on fundamental reforms is put aside as the main condition for the accession, and WB countries are accepted regardless of their level of readiness, both in terms of democratic institutions and economic capacities. The major internal or bilateral issues are at best partially resolved or remain effectively unresolved.

**2. a. Best-case scenario:** Once WB countries are granted membership, fast economic growth is unleashed. The economic development has a positive trickle-down effect on the EU's image in the region. Benefits of the membership promote a degree of democratization in the new member states. This impetus is used to resolve burning political and security disputes within or between countries in the region. The influence of big outside powers such as Russia and China are greatly reduced. The protection of external EU borders becomes easier. The EU regains its credibility as a key stakeholder with a high degree of strategic autonomy in the international arena that can solve complex issues in its neighborhood.

**2. b. Worst-case scenario:** Knowing that the EU has effectively given up on conditionality, the authoritarian regimes in the region have no incentive to undergo democratic reforms. Moreover, they gain access to much larger funds, which can effectively be misused for further strengthening political control through corruption schemes. This leaves citizens of these countries in a disadvantaged situation, practically disabling them to effectively fight state capture. The WB states lose up to 20% of their population to the outmigration of educated youth within 5 years. Consequently, the effects of EU membership on economic development are limited, and the ageing political class remains encapsulated in nationalist narratives. Key challenges to the reconciliation of communities across the region remain: politicization of ethnic and religious identities, lack of acknowledgement of past crimes committed by all sides (denial of historical facts, glorification of criminals, hate speech), segregation, and ethnicization of education.

New WB member states ally with the national conservative clique in the EU on resisting external pressure coming from Brussels. These new 'coalitions' increase the risks of new power clashes between member states, and thus weaken the EU's internal cohesion. They further deepen pre-existing cleavages on divisive issues such as migration and rule of law and jeopardize the efficiency of the decision-making process. Finally, exposing much weaker economies to the single market leads to major economic turbulence for citizens and local companies in the WB that result in political crises and increasing Euroscepticism, and potentially new backlashes against Brussels.

### Pathway 3: Reform-oriented future for the WB

**Description:** Besides its new focus on geopolitical alignment and energy and defense security, the EU firmly emphasizes rule-of-law reforms as the major condition for the accession process. At the same time, the EU demonstrates strong political will for the enlargement by putting forward a credible strategy that includes qualified majority voting for intermediate steps in the accession process to prevent blocking from individual member states similar to Bulgaria's strategy in its dispute with North Macedonia.<sup>32</sup> The technical part of the process, which so far has been flawed, is improved and introduces both tangible incentives for achieved progress and clear drawbacks and reversibility in case of a backsliding on fundamentals. The EU invests substantial funds into regional energy, security, and infrastructure projects.

The geopolitical alignment does not serve as an excuse to turn a blind eye on the lack of progress in areas such as rule of law and media freedom. The EU learns how to balance geopolitical inclusion and a firm, reform-oriented conditionality by institutionally dissociating foreign policy and enlargement process. The EPC is utilized as a primary format for discussing geopolitical issues that would otherwise overshadow the fundamentals on the accession agenda. As the new reality of wartime in Europe demands a new form of informal, cross-organizational dialogue on the most pressing questions, including security and energy, the EPC manages to provide inclusiveness without being a substitute for the enlargement.

Concerning the reform of enlargement process, the EU heeds the many proposals for voting reform and staged accession that have been debated for the past five years (CEP in Belgrade, Pierre Mirel<sup>33</sup>, Matteo Bonomi and Dušan Reljić,<sup>34</sup> Democratization Policy Council.<sup>35</sup>) It negotiates a new staged accession program, supported by important funds for infrastructural, food, and security investments. It further integrates the potential of the Balkan countries into a development program that addresses climate change.

**3. a. Best-case scenario:** Candidate countries are strongly incentivized to undergo fundamental reforms, which leads to the reversal of democratic backsliding and the uncapturing of states. The EU creates a special institution besides DG NEAR that federates a substantial number of national experts delegated by willing member states and creates a special representative dedicated to conducting a standing commission on southward enlargement. The new organ identifies state capture, corruption, and lack of political accountancy among the obstacles and conducts yearly Priebe-like special reports on all candidates. The EU learns how to engage pro-European publics across the WB and works to create a top-down and bottom-up momentum for change.<sup>36</sup> There is a new generation of pro-European parties that are on the rise across the region. They demonstrate a willingness to cooperate and manage to achieve outcomes that are favorable for advancing the accession process.

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<sup>32</sup>[www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PI2021-08\\_EUs-enlargement-policy-towards-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](http://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PI2021-08_EUs-enlargement-policy-towards-the-Western-Balkans.pdf) , [www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-eu-bulgaria-veto/31910319.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-eu-bulgaria-veto/31910319.html)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.cespi.it/en/eventi-attualita/focus-balcani/support-new-approach-western-balkans-staged-accession-consolidation>

<sup>34</sup> [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C53\\_rlc\\_Bonomi.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C53_rlc_Bonomi.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/summary/enlargement-strategy-shift/>

<sup>36</sup> [www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DPC-Policy-Brief\\_But-Is-There-A-Strategy.pdf](http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DPC-Policy-Brief_But-Is-There-A-Strategy.pdf)

At the national level, increasingly pro-European governments conduct fundamental reforms in sensitive areas such as rule of law, corruption, organized crime, and energy security. At the regional level, new political establishments across the WB states manage to reach a dialogue on bilateral issues that have been holding back the accession process for years. There is a rise in civil-society initiatives that raise awareness of the negative effects of the slow accession process and thus create space for critical discussions on major obstacles, such as corruption and rule-of-law reforms. This transformation of political life in the countries of the WB improves their image at the EU level, thus making them much more acceptable candidates in the eyes of EU member states that have been skeptical of new enlargement. The process is long, but facing climate change and migration, the EU proves steadfast, develops a sense for strategic necessities, and manages to accompany slow WB transformation.

The EU regains its credibility across the region and reestablishes itself as a value-driven actor that can mediate bilateral political disputes and encourage their resolution. While Brussels' soft and diplomatic powers increase, WB governments improve their ability to engage with security issues in a constructive manner, meaning that they are ready to compromise, avoid the politicization of borders and identity disputes, and put genuine efforts to achieve reconciliation with communities or counties seen as an enemy in the past.

**3. b. Worst-case scenario:** The accession process is highly dependent on electoral changes in the WB and on US support: both do not materialize. New pro-European parties struggle for a long time to gain and sustain the power that is necessary to conduct major reforms. Some countries experience deep political crises, with parties failing to nominate governments for a long time. This leads to an increased public interest in the EU–WB relations and long-lasting demonstrations demanding political change. While Brussels effectively rewards North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro for their progress, it fails to defeat skepticism in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These countries go through turbulent years of resignations of governments, corruption scandals, repetitive elections, and attempts of new parties to gain power. The EU takes sides, encourages pro-European parties, and openly supports public demonstrations, thus making space for internal blockages and external meddling.

Thus, despite all the reforms, investments, and economic support, the EU does not manage to encourage a stable path to democratization and reforms in all WB countries. Resisting the increased pressure for reforms coming from the EU, some states decide to turn more openly to other geopolitical partners, such as Turkey, Russia, and China, while the US government disengages in the region. There are suspensions and reversals of the accession process by short-lived governments and parties with a populist anti-EU orientation. The geopolitical ambitions of EU rivals threaten regional stability. Russia, as well as Turkey and China, fuel unresolved disputes, seek power competition with the West, create economic and political incentives for local political elites without reconciliation leverage, and use identity politics to target the local population and thereby maintain influence without offering long-term prospects to the region. Thus, the growing influence of third actors in the region prevents WB states to achieve a level of readiness that would allow them to fulfill the accession criteria. The prolonged time for reforms undermines the EU membership prospects and has negative effects on the EU's credibility in the region. The agency of the EU as a stabilization factor diminishes and, thus, creates risks to escalating unresolved conflicts.

## 5. Which pathway are we on – six months in

The EU has **made steps towards a formulating a geopolitical approach** following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EPC was launched, and the Berlin process revived. The enlargement process was given a stronger political steer<sup>37</sup> and Albania and North Macedonia have finally officially started the accession negotiations. The EU signals to regain some coherence by granting Kosovo visa-free travel and BiH the candidate status and by developing common energy and security projects. These have been long-awaited but symbolic steps. They are so far not accompanied by a change of policy. Without a different framing or tools for efficient conditionality, the expected BiH candidate status and the inclusion of A. Vučić in EPC will risk further awarding autocrats. The EU remains feeble in bilateral issues: it is capable of negotiating through urgent conflicts, but still lacks clout to stand up to manipulations.

The past six months have also brought **new blunders and inconsistencies**: the High Representative has imposed changes of electoral law in BiH that entrenched the political clout of ethnic parties against the position of the EU. Germany shows no signs that it would prevent Christian Schmidt from further entrenching ethnocracy by giving Republika Srpska and Milorad Dodik access to state properties.<sup>38</sup> The policy of placating the ethnocracy for a promise of ending Bosnia's institutional blockade will be inefficient because it does not address any root causes of Bosnia's institutional dysfunctionality but only entrenches them. The EU accepted Bulgaria's bullying of North Macedonia by placing most of Sofia's argument at the core of the accepted French proposal. The expediency will be costly, as it discourages and possibly limits the chances of the only Europe-oriented WB government on the next elections, since the decision to accept such an agreement was highly unpopular. The EU was unable to persuade Serbia and parts of Bosnia's nationalist elite to support its foreign policy on Ukraine.

Generally, the EU representatives have engaged in 'kebab diplomacy', which **legitimized autocrats at the expense of institutions** without getting any results. To give just one example of the EU's inconsistent and self-defeating approach: In October 2022, the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen visited Bosnia and Herzegovina and also Serbia. Her messages to official Belgrade were criticized as ill prepared.<sup>39</sup> On Twitter, von der Leyen stated that 'Serbia is well advanced on its EU path', while according to her own 2022 Country Report, the country is only 'moderately prepared' and this conclusion has not changed since 2016. The visit of the EC's president was a significant display of European solidarity in a time of war in Europe.<sup>40</sup> During her visit, von der Leyen aimed to create the sense of Serbia belonging to the EU by arguing that 'the EU is not complete without Serbia'. But by joining the EU's political gesture to Serbia with an inaccurate and careless assessment of Serbia's advance on the EU path, as seen in this case, shows that the EC does not approach WB strategically. Rather, the policy is short-sighted and incoherent with other major EU goals in the Balkans,

<sup>37</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/el/statement\\_20\\_208](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/el/statement_20_208)

<sup>38</sup> Germany has of course no formal powers over an official appointed by a UNSC related body. But it has a lot of informal influence and may be expected to use it in case of steps that are in conflict with EU values. [www.justsecurity.org/83373/us-reinvests-in-ethnic-oligarchy-in-bosnia-abandoning-support-for-integration/](http://www.justsecurity.org/83373/us-reinvests-in-ethnic-oligarchy-in-bosnia-abandoning-support-for-integration/)

<sup>39</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/01/serbia-and-eu-a-message-in-the-bottleneck/>

<sup>40</sup> She announced 165 mil EUR in budgetary support to mitigate the consequences of the energy crisis, plus an additional 500 mil EUR to support the Western Balkans to enhance energy connectivity in the region

such as facilitating enlargement as a reform process and asserting its conditionality. In conclusion, the EU finds itself on a timid geopolitical path with no reform-driven vision as of now. In the above-mentioned scenarios, this corresponds to the **worst-case of pathway one (I. b.)**. The direction toward a geopolitically oriented policy toward the WB is necessary and a good start, but this pathway **addresses ineffectively the risks induced by the Russian war in Ukraine and leaves all the other structural risks in place**. It is the most probable one, but also an undesirable one, as it continues the status quo. If the EU intends to seize the opportunity of the geopolitical momentum for headway in its policies in the WB, and **if the EU wants to be a valued based project, it needs to find means to do it.**

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*This paper was supported by the AV 21 project Global Conflicts and Local Interactions: Cultural and Social Challenges of the Czech Academy of Sciences (2016-2022) [globalnikonflikty.cz](http://globalnikonflikty.cz)*