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A Changing Europe and the Security of the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The current global context, particularly in Europe, has heightened the importance of security concerns, as the significant changes that have occurred and are anticipated pose a considerable threat to peace and stability. The Western Balkans has identified European integration as a fundamental strategy for achieving lasting peace and stability. In light of the recent escalation of security threats in Eastern Europe, particularly the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the urgency of addressing these risks has intensified. Effective protection against such threats necessitates a unified European policy that encompasses both the EU member states and the countries of the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans is a political notion with multiple geographical definitions. The Western Balkans, a region that includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo, was the area where East and West were divided throughout the Cold War. Today, the countries of the Western Balkans that have passed the transition period still face the difficulties of their consolidation or the stability of bilateral agreements. Although they are located on the European continent with cultural diversity in a narrow space, they still need to be put in the European integration and security process.

In this context, the Western Balkans remains a critical region within the broader European framework, where stability, peace, and security require both internal reforms and external support. The integration of these countries into the EU is not only vital for regional peace but also for the collective security of Europe as a whole. This paper examines the dynamics of Western Balkan integration, the security challenges the region faces, and potential pathways toward a more stable and secure European future.

Keywords: Europe, security, peace, conflicts, Western Balkans, stability.

Introduction

Following the end of communist regimes in the early 1990s, the Western Balkans became a site of severe political turmoil, exposing the fragility of democratic structures. The events that unfolded after 1989 suggested not the conclusion of history, as commonly believed, but rather the collapse of efforts to establish and sustain peace in the region.

With the end of the communist regime in the Western Balkan region, it seems that only the hope for a close integration of the Western Balkans in the EU can end the ongoing political and economic instability. The socio-political phenomena of nationalism and integration in the Western Balkan region are especially interconnected. A central dimension of this paper provides the areas of interaction between democracy, the rule of law, nationalism, and integration.

Starting from the basic hypothesis that integration in the EU represents an instrument of conflict resolution and ensuring peace, in which case it seems necessary to identify in a differentiated manner the preconditions and conditions under which integration in the EU, in a truly sustainable way, it can create peace in the Western Balkans, especially in the case of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. This paper aims to contribute to a more peaceful and stable future in the Western Balkans, with the expectation that the tragic events of the 21st century mark the end of a turbulent period rather than the beginning of future instability.

The main integration tasks can be summarized in four points:

- Keeping the peace;
- Achieving a greater multipurpose potential;
- Solving a specific task; and
- Gaining a new self-understanding and role identity.[1]

The EU's support for the Western Balkans' European integration is evident. A clear perspective on membership is essential for the stability of the region. Enlargement should remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the many challenges it is currently facing. The accession process must be pursued with vigor and rigor as one of the

1 Karl W. Deutsch: Frieden und die Problematik politischer Gemeinschaftsbildung auf internationaler Ebene [Peace and the problem of the creation of political communities on the international plane], in: Dieter Senghaas (ed.): Den Frieden denken, Frankfurt 1995, p. 363.

EU's top priorities, according to the clear and strict conditions that are the basis of all accession processes - nothing more, nothing less.

It would be advisable for all countries in the Western Balkans region to set up national councils on European integration or other similar bodies that would bring together high-level political authorities and key civil society organizations regularly, to make the EU integration process more transparent and publish it more widely.

Enlargement Policy

The EU's main enlargement strategy, from the beginning, has been based on the policy of conditionality. In 1993, the European Council meeting in Copenhagen proposed the Copenhagen Criteria, the successful completion of which would determine the level of success in terms of integration for all countries aspiring to join the EU. The criteria aim at the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities, the existence of a functional market economy, as well as the capacity to withstand competitive pressure and market forces within the European Union; as well as the ability to undertake the obligations of membership, including the realization of the goals of the political, economic and monetary union. In 1995, the Madrid European Council added two more conditions: the regulation of administrative structures and the transposition of EU legislation into national legislation.

In addition to these general conditions which determine and evaluate the individual merits of the candidate countries, the EU offers the "regional approach", with political and economic conditions for the Western Balkans as a basis for a coherent and transparent policy in terms of developing relations in the field of trade, financial assistance, and economic cooperation, as well as contractual relations, allowing a necessary degree of flexibility. This EU strategy is intended to serve as an incentive, not a deterrent, for countries aspiring to membership.

Regional integration is a necessary process as it encourages peace and stability in the region, through the encouragement of reconciliation, good neighborliness, and good political relations, helps to overcome nationalism and tolerance, and promotes mutual understanding and political dialogue in the region. Such treatment was considered useful to be institutionalized, especially after the end of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. For this purpose, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe was created, which aimed to create and strengthen peace and security in Southeastern Europe, to restore stability and prevent conflict.

EU institutions and EU Member States should regularly include representatives from Western Balkan countries in EU summits, as proof that the EU considers this region as part of its future and to encourage an informed debate about the political, economic, and social impact of enlargement policy.

The Western Balkans have undeniably been shaped by the profound transformations that occurred across Europe. However, unlike the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the region did not transition peacefully toward European integration but was instead engulfed by the tragic wars of the 1990s. It was only after prolonged conflict and hardship that a regional system of states was established. Since then, these states have collectively pursued the only viable path for ensuring stability and prosperity for their citizens: the path toward European integration. The Western Balkan states are now facing similar challenges, as other European states have in the past. The first and foremost task is to create the conditions for lasting peace. This is possible only through dialogue and the creation of trust, building the way for partnership and eventual friendship among the people in the Balkans.

The challenge of European integration can stimulate the advancement and functioning of democratic institutions, capable of managing and progressing in the cultural, economic, institutional, and political fields. The efforts made in the direction of integration in the EU will create the conditions of a modern market economy and increase the country's capacity to compete within the EU and on world markets.

The EU should develop specific policies for countries with high ethnic tensions. Given the unresolved status of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which may impact regional stability, the Union's relations with the countries of the Western Balkans should adopt a more regional approach. This would include applying uniform accession criteria and assessing achievements through the Stabilization and Association Process, as well as emphasizing regional cooperation.

The Security Threat from Russian Influence in The Western Balkans

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, concerns were raised about the impact on stability in the Western Balkans. So, senior EU officials immediately expressed the need to support non-NATO countries that could be the next target of Putin's aggression, including the Western Balkans. Even the High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, after having emphasized that Russia will not stop in Ukraine, said that the level of security

in the Western Balkans should be increased, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can face destabilization from Russia.

Russia has maintained and continues to maintain close relations with Serbia and the Bosnian Serb leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under the leadership of Milorad Dodik, Bosnian Serbs have adopted an increasingly assertive separatist stance in recent years. This led to warnings that the peace accords that ended the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s could fall apart.

In June 2022, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that Bosnian Serb secession in BiH was supported by Moscow as part of Putin's attempt to undermine Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic integration and its stability and that the Western Balkans could not be allowed to be another playground for Putin's pernicious pursuits.

Although Serbia is a candidate for EU membership, it has not joined the EU sanctions against Russia. Russia has supported Serbia's position towards Kosovo, where neither Serbia nor Russia has recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. The EU has mediated talks between Kosovo and Serbia, leading to a series of agreements aimed at normalizing relationships. However, these have not been fully implemented, and tensions have escalated again since 2021, with Russia and Serbia accusing the Kosovo government of provocations.

The Western Balkans have consistently been classified as a particular target of Russian disinformation, with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia the most affected. Frequent themes of disinformation operations include demonizing the US and NATO, portraying the EU as weak and divided, advertising Russian military power, and reinforcing threat perceptions, myths, and ethnic tensions. The Western Balkans region is strategically important for NATO and the EU, but there are reasons for concern, and great caution is needed against any eventual escalation of Russian destabilization. The EU has repeatedly called for the importance of dialogue in the region, as well as for an end to the secessionist movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the re-engagement of Serbia and Kosovo in the talks mediated by the EU.

Progress in EU Accession

In June 2003, the Thessaloniki EU summit declared for the first time that Western Balkan countries were eligible to become EU members in the future (Council of the EU, 2003). Since then, only Croatia has completed the accession process, becoming an EU member on 1st July 2013.

The most advanced EU candidate in the region (Montenegro) is still far from the end of the negotiation process. Serbia is less advanced than Montenegro, and the other three countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) are at the beginning of membership negotiations. Kosovo is a potential candidate but must wait for official candidate status and formal recognition of its independence from all EU member states.

In the table below, I have presented the main stages and the timeline of the accession process of the six countries of the Western Balkans and Croatia.

The first phase – the negotiation, signing, and ratification of Stabilization Association Agreements (SAAs) between the EU and individual countries – was completed by North Macedonia and Croatia early, but took longer for other countries. Usually, the free trade chapters of the SAA, which did not require the completion of a long ratification process in all EU member states (because only approval by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU), were entered into force earlier (sometimes much earlier, as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Table 1: Western Balkan countries, EU accession progress

Country	**SAA: entry into force**	**Membership application**	**EU candidate status**	**Decision to open accession negotiation**	**Status of accession process, April 2024**
Albania	2009	2009	2014	2020/2022	Initial phase
BiH	2015	2016	2022	2024	Preparatory stage
Kosovo	2016	2022			
Montenegro	2010	2008	2010	2012	Advanced
North Macedonia	2004	2004	2005	2020/2022	Initial phase
Serbia	2013	2009	2012	2013	Partly advanced
Croatia	2005	2003	2004	2005	EU member, 1st July 2013

Source: Bruegel based on Council of the EU, European Commission, Steinbach (2024), Dabrowski (2014), Dabrowski & Myachenkova (2018).

Overall, the accession process of the Western Balkans has been slow compared to the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Although both the EU member states and the Balkan applicants share responsibility for the limited progress in the enlargement process, the narrative often

disproportionately attributes the blame to the applicants.

EU member states' political momentum and enthusiasm for further enlargement waned during the 2010s and early 2020s. As a result, they were slow to initiate accession negotiations with certain candidates, and in some cases, veto power was strategically employed. As long as all enlargement-related decisions require the unanimity of all member states, the EU's common position will be determined by the most reluctant countries.

Due to the politicization of the unanimity requirement in the EU enlargement decision-making process, some countries used their veto power to advance their national interests, subjecting North Macedonia to repeated instances of such practices. For more than a decade, Greece blocked the start of EU membership negotiations, demanding that it change its country's name (this veto also blocked North Macedonia's admission to NATO). When the then Republic of Macedonia finally accepted this request and signed the Prespa agreement in 2018, it had to wait to agree and implement the Revised Enlargement Methodology.

Bulgaria challenged North Macedonia on issues related to the claimed Bulgarian roots of the Macedonian nation and language. In June 2022, under pressure from the EU, the Bulgarian parliament waived its veto to allow the start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia. However, the conflict remains unresolved, and Bulgaria is still seeking changes to the North Macedonian constitution.

The EU also took active steps in speeding up Western Balkan accession. Bosnia and Herzegovina became an EU candidate in December 2022 and was invited to start accession negotiations in March 2024. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission announced a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for 2024-2027, worth €6 billion (of which €2 billion is grants and €4 billion concessional loans). The Council's presidency and the European Parliament provisionally approved this package on 4 April 2024.

Apart from providing additional financial assistance to the region, the EU aims to accelerate its economic convergence, set incentives to speed up governance and economic reforms, normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations, accelerate the integration of candidates into the Single European Market, and boost intra-regional integration through the Common Regional Market.

Conclusion

The Western Balkan countries were given a geopolitical chance to become EU members at the beginning of the twenty-first century after a decade of tragic intra-regional conflicts, which accompanied the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. The EU integration prospect has helped to mitigate the previous conflicts and create positive political and economic dynamics in the region, which dominated the period until the early 2010s. However, more than 20 years after the Thessaloniki summit, only Croatia has joined the EU. The remaining six countries are still stuck at various stages of the accession process, with no or little progress in recent years.

The blame for the slow pace of EU accession can be shared between EU member countries and the candidates. Some EU countries lost interest in continued enlargement and have used this process to satisfy their nationalist domestic agendas. Meanwhile, the Western Balkan candidates stopped progressing or even backtracked in the key areas of democratic institutions, the rule of law, anti-corruption, and protecting minorities. There has been no further progress in the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations.

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine has put EU enlargement back on top of the policy agenda. Three Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina have received EU candidate status, and Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been invited to start accession negotiations. However, the prospect of moving fast in accession negotiations is rather limited in most cases.

Another political incentive for the candidates would be rewarding the progress in accession negotiations with earlier access to specific EU common policies and institutions. Such a perspective was outlined in the Growth Pact for the Western Balkans.

Western Balkan countries are already closely integrated economically with the EU. Their accession to the EU will further strengthen economic links and help accelerate income per capita convergence, as happened in countries that joined the EU previously. It can both economically and politically stabilize the region, which borders several EU member states directly and serves as a land bridge between the southeast of the EU (Greece and Bulgaria) and its central European part. It can also help minimize the interference of external powers such as Russia and China.

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