

The Prospective of the Western Balkans to the EU Membership: Challenges and Possible Ways Forward

Geneva Paper 33/24

Anila Jelesijević
March 2024



GCSP
Geneva Centre for
Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation that aims to advance global cooperation, security and peace. The foundation is supported by the Swiss government and governed by 54 member states. The GCSP provides a unique 360° approach to learn about and solve global challenges. The foundation's mission is to educate leaders, facilitate dialogue, advise through in-house research, inspire new ideas and connect experts to develop sustainable solutions to build a more peaceful future.

The Geneva Papers and l'Esprit de Genève

With its vocation for peace, Geneva is the city where states, international organisations, NGOs and the academic community work together to create the essential conditions for debate and action. The Geneva Papers intend to serve this goal by promoting a platform for constructive and substantive analysis, reflection and dialogue.

Geneva Papers Research Series

The Geneva Papers Research Series is a set of publications offered by the GCSP.

The Geneva Papers Research Series seeks to analyse international security issues through an approach that combines policy analysis and academic rigour. It encourages reflection on new and traditional security issues, such as the globalisation of security, new threats to international security, conflict trends and conflict management, transatlantic and European security, the role of international institutions in security governance and human security. The Research Series offers innovative analyses, case studies, policy prescriptions and critiques, to encourage global discussion.

This series is edited by Dr. Jean-Marc Rickli, Head of Global and Emerging Risks.

All Geneva Papers are available online at:
www.gcsp.ch/publications

ISBN: 978-2-88947-121-8

© Geneva Centre for Security Policy, March 2024

The views, information and opinions expressed in this publication are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the GCSP or the members of its Foundation Council. The GCSP is not responsible for the accuracy of the information.

Cover photo: Dmitry_Rukhlenko, Envato Elements

About the author

Dr Anila Jelesijević is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Geneva Centre for Security Policy's Global Fellowship Initiative, and received her PhD in Political Sciences from the University of Belgrade, Serbia. She is also the Senior Information Management Assistant and Media Analyst at the Embassy of Switzerland in Belgrade. She has authored academic articles on Serbia's military neutrality; European integration; the Kosovo independence proclamation; and the issue of the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Geneva Centre for Security Policy team, and especially to Anne-Caroline Pissis Martel for having facilitated the communication network that added depth and resonance to this Geneva Paper.

Contents

Executive summary	4
I. Introduction	5
II. The theoretical debate between “inter-governmentalism” and “supranationalism” in understanding EU enlargement policy	7
III. The Western Balkans: geographical definition and regional relations	9
A. Serbia and Kosovo	
B. Serbia and Croatia	
C. North Macedonia and Bulgaria	
IV. Challenges of EU enlargement for the Western Balkans	14
A. The current approach of the EU and Western Balkans to the enlargement process	
B. The impact on the Western Balkans of Ukraine and Moldova being awarded EU candidate status	
C. Russian influence in the Western Balkans, the changing geopolitics of the war in Ukraine, and ongoing EU enlargement fatigue	
V. Policy recommendations and conclusions	25
Endnotes	29
Geneva Papers Research Series	37

Executive summary

The integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union (EU) remains a slow process. The EU's focus on the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia has negatively affected these countries' motivation to proceed with the reforms needed to join the EU. Their aim is to become part of the EU family, but a real commitment and productive interaction from both sides that will lead to such an integration is an essential requirement. This Geneva Paper aims to develop recommendations for what can be done to allow the Western Balkan countries to join the EU as soon as possible.

I. Introduction

The war in Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022 led the European Union (EU) to focus its attention primarily on what was happening in Ukraine and sanctioning Russia for its aggression against a European country. Such a situation has overshadowed the Western Balkans¹ attempts to join the EU, although it has not stopped the overall EU integration process. In the same year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Albania and North Macedonia managed, after several years' delay, to get the green light to open accession negotiations with the EU, while Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was awarded the much-awaited candidate status. Both Ukraine and Moldova also took a major step forward in the EU negotiations process, not only receiving candidate status in June 2022, but opening membership talks in December 2023, which was not the case for BiH. The progress of Ukraine and Moldova has in the meantime strengthened the belief that the EU is more interested in integrating these two countries into its structures than the Western Balkans. In the meantime, discussions between Serbia and Kosovo² in the long and problematic process of normalizing their relations made little if any progress, while North Macedonia's EU future is still awaiting Bulgaria's demands to be resolved.

This Geneva Paper is based on the belief that the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU will remain a slow process and that the EU's focus on the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia has increased the lack of motivation of the Western Balkans to proceed with the reforms required for EU membership.

The paper is an attempt to explain the influence of the new geopolitical situation after the start of war in Ukraine on the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries, as well as the various ongoing unresolved disputes between neighboring countries in the region and the slow implementation of the reforms that the EU has requested. It will do so by attempting to answer the following questions:

- Is the war in Ukraine encouraging the EU to end its enlargement fatigue, which has increased the Western Balkans' lack of motivation to implement the necessary reforms?
- What are the consequences for the Western Balkans of Ukraine and Moldova opening accession talks with the EU?
- How has Russian influence in the Western Balkans been demonstrated after the start of the war in Ukraine?
- How can the Western Balkans' ambitions for EU membership be achieved?

During this research, in order to achieve a more objective assessment, the author conducted exchanges of views and informal conversations with representatives of international organisations, members of academia, and experts mainly based

in Geneva, Bern, and Zurich. Their comments are given anonymously in the course of the paper.

With the intention of better understanding and analyzing the EU's enlargement policy, of the several theories that aim to explain the integration process and its results, priority is given in the paper to the theory of intergovernmentalism, which emphasizes the importance of EU member states' views in EU decision-making vis-à-vis the EU integration process.

The main period covered by this study is from the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 to the EU's decision to open talks with Ukraine and Moldova in December 2023, with complementary data about the Western Balkans and EU dating back to the 1990s.

A structural-functional analysis was also undertaken to analyse the structural factors that enable the implementation of EU policy towards the Western Balkan countries in terms of their EU integration path. In addition to this analysis, a comparison is made between the extent to which the Western Balkan countries have implemented the reforms required by the EU for their membership. Regional relations affecting individual Western Balkan countries' path towards EU membership are also analyzed. Desk research covering academic studies, reports and official documents referring to the topic was undertaken to collect data.

II. The theoretical debate between “inter-governmentalism” and “supranationalism” in understanding EU enlargement policy

With the intention of better understanding EU enlargement policy, this section analyses the theoretical debate between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism.

However, it is first necessary to understand what the enlargement of an organization like the EU embraces. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier define “the enlargement of an organization as a process of gradual and formal horizontal institutionalization of organizational rules and norms”.³ In this definition, “institutionalization means the process by which the actions and interactions of social actors come to be normatively patterned”,⁴ while “horizontal institutionalization is when institutions spread beyond the incumbent actors, that is, when the group of actors whose actions and relations are governed by the organization’s norms becomes larger”.⁵

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier embed their theoretical analysis of enlargement in the current international relations debate between rationalist and sociological or constructivist institutionalism.⁶ Rationalist institutionalism is based on the theory of intergovernmentalism while sociological or constructivist institutionalism is based on the theory of supranationalism.

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier note that “in rationalist institutionalism, the causal status of institutions generally remains secondary to that of individual, material interests”, while “in the constructivist perspective, institutions shape actors’ identities and interests”.⁷ They further explain that as in all rationalist theories, “states favor the kind and degree of horizontal institutionalization that maximizes their net benefits”.⁸ In analyzing rationalist institutionalism, Schimmelfennig also refers to the thinking of one of the prominent theorists of the related school, Andrew Moravcsik, who claims that “liberal intergovernmentalism explains the major turning points in the history of European integration more convincingly than alternative theories”.⁹ Moravcsik’s main claim is that “state preferences and international outcomes emerge from distributional conflict and reflect patterns of bargaining power at the domestic and the international level”.¹⁰ As he further notes, in the case of the EU’s eastern enlargement,¹¹ “the ‘drivers’ were in a clear minority, with only Britain, Denmark, and Germany advocating an early and firm commitment of the EU to enlargement”.¹² As Moravcsik emphasizes, “According to intergovernmentalism, this situation did not necessarily block a decision to enlarge because intergovernmental bargaining intervened between the constellation of national preferences and the international policy outcome”.¹³ Buonanno and Nugent also suggest that intergovernmentalism is state-centred.¹⁴

While further elaborating on sociological or constructivist institutionalism, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier have further stated that, according to this theory,

enlargement politics will generally be shaped by ideational, cultural factors with the most relevant of these factors being the community or cultural match, that is, the degree to which the actors inside and outside the organization share a collective identity and fundamental beliefs.¹⁵

Nuget also notes that supranationalism “takes inter-state relations beyond cooperation into integration, and involves some loss of national sovereignty”.¹⁶

Even if it cannot be strictly stated that EU enlargement is based on pure rationalist institutionalism (because ideational and, cultural factors, as emphasized by constructivists, are also important), the paper will mainly refer to rationalist institutionalism or intergovernmentalism in explaining the EU policy of enlargement with regard to the Western Balkans. EU states have not abandoned their power of independent decision-making, which remains one of their priorities vis-à-vis the EU as an institution. The paper will therefore argue that its members states and not the EU as an institution play a primary role in decision-making. In other words, the theory of rationalist institutionalism or intergovernmentalism is used in this paper because it provides a more appropriate approach to explaining the EU policy of enlargement as it affects the Western Balkans.

In the case of this region, the cost and benefit approach as anticipated in rationalist institutionalism or intergovernmentalism clearly indicates that the overall state of development of the Western Balkans, which continues to be affected by the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, is not very attractive to either EU member states or the EU as an institution. As we will see below, the EU and its members seem to be willing to financially support the Western Balkans and even to enable some of the steps required by the EU integration path, but still leave the countries of the region many steps removed from membership. Besides the necessary reforms needed to allow the Western Balkans to progress towards membership, the EU has been insisting that the problems that specific countries still have with their regional neighbors should be resolved before they can join the organization. Simultaneously, however, it has been unable to affect the policies of the countries experiencing such problems, i.e., Serbia and its relations with Kosovo, Serbia with Croatia, and North Macedonia with Bulgaria. A further complication is that the process of EU decisions-making requires that any decision on membership must be approved by every member state, which is a clear indicator that the theory of rationalist institutionalism or intergovernmentalism best explains the challenges that the Western Balkan countries face in their attempts to join the EU.

III. The Western Balkans: geographical definition and regional relations

"This is the hour of Europe If one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem."¹⁷

Jacques Poos, Luxembourg foreign minister and European Commission chairperson, 1991

The "Yugoslav problem" took on a new and more ominous meaning with the disintegration of the then-Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) caused by the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, what was then Macedonia, and BiH. This led to the creation of the mentioned states in the Western Balkans currently consisting of Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.

Slovenia's and Croatia's declarations of independence on 25 June 1991 effectively ended the SFRY's existence. By April 1992 the further declarations of independence by two other republics, the then-Macedonia and BiH, left only Serbia and Montenegro within the federation, which was called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Following the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, BiH, while still defined as one state, was subdivided into two entities, i.e., Republika Srpska and the Federation of BiH, together with the autonomous District of Brčko (which technically "belongs" to both entities).

The disintegration of the SFRY led to a series of wars. Croatia experienced war in 1991, while BiH was devastated by several years of war from 1992 to 1995. Four years later clashes started in Kosovo after it attempted to secede from Serbia, which resulted in the 1999 NATO bombing of the FRY. Macedonia experienced armed conflict in 2001 between its security forces and the Albanian National Liberation Army militant group. In 2003 the FRY became the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, but ceased to exist in 2006 with Montenegro's declaration of independence, a split that occurred without any violence or clashes.¹⁸ Albania did not belong to either the SFRY or the FRY.

Because the aim of this paper is to analyse the state of Western Balkan countries' paths to EU integration, it will focus on relations within the Western Balkans that hinder specific countries' progress towards EU membership. The primary focus will be on relations between Serbia and Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, and North Macedonia and Bulgaria. In all three cases, when their progress towards EU membership is at issue, the theory of intergovernmentalism applies.

A. Serbia and Kosovo

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 deepened the long-lasting crises that had arisen between the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians.¹⁹ Since then, Serbia has refused to recognise the independence of Kosovo and considers it to be part of its territory, as was stated for the first time in the preamble to the 2006 Constitution of Serbia.²⁰

A crisis occurred in July 2011, when Kosovo police attempted to seize control of two border crossings in the Serb-run north Kosovo at Jarinje and Brnjak, which led to the murder a policeman in clashes with local Serbs.²¹ This showed the necessity for Belgrade and Pristina to focus on seeking a solution that would allow the normalisation of their relations. With the support of the EU, two years later the Belgrade–Pristina Agreement on the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo was signed in Brussels in April 2013.²²

The agreement was not implemented, especially the first six items of the total of 15, which refer to the establishment of an association or community of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo,²³ and the process of normalisation was further hindered by the lack of mutual understanding between Belgrade and Pristina.

Subsequent years saw additional tensions arising between Serbia and Kosovo, but some attempts were made to find a solution such as a land swap defined as a “border correction or demarcation”, which was “shyly pushed both by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his Kosovo counterpart, Hashim Thaci”.²⁴ The most commonly discussed scenario was that north Kosovo would be recognised as part of Serbia and the mainly ethnic-Albanian-populated part of southern Serbia would join Kosovo.²⁵ The idea did not survive, receiving only formal US support, a categorical rejection from Germany and scepticism from the EU.²⁶

The situation almost resulted in direct conflict between Belgrade and Pristina in January 2017, when Belgrade attempted to send a train bearing on its sides the inscription “Kosovo is Serbia” into Kosovo and stated that it intended to establish a regular railway line from Serbia to the Serbian enclave in Kosovska Mitrovica.²⁷ Feelings provoked by the inscription and the Serbian Orthodox Church icons in the train's interior done by Russian artists caused Kosovo to deploy police forces along the border to prevent the train from crossing into Kosovo, which forced the then-Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić, to order a halt to the service.²⁸ One year later, the arrest in Kosovo of the then-director of Serbia's Government Office for Kosovo, Marko Djurić, in March 2018 resulted in a further escalation of violence. Djurić had entered Kosovo to attend a meeting in north Mitrovica, defying a ban from the Kosovo authorities prohibiting him from doing so.²⁹ More than 30 people were injured in clashes with police when they were protesting Djurić's arrest, who was immediately deported.³⁰

In 2020 the then-US president, Donald Trump, increased the focus on Belgrade–Pristina negotiations via the signing in Washington on 4 September of two documents on the normalisation of economic relations between the parties.³¹

The major parts of the documents dealt with the implementation of US foreign policy towards Israel. Pristina and Belgrade did not sign these documents with each other, but each bilaterally with Washington. The related agreements did not have the support of the EU and became almost irrelevant when Trump lost the 2020 presidential elections. These agreements stated that Serbia had to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, where there would also be a Kosovo diplomatic mission, and Israel would recognise Kosovo as an independent country. Israel recognised Kosovo officially by establishing diplomatic relations in February 2021, while Serbia, instead of moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, opened a chamber of commerce in Jerusalem in November 2021. The EU stated that many of the projects included in the Washington deals were already being developed under the EU's Investment Framework in the Western Balkans,³² such as the construction of a Nis-Pristina highway funded in part by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the EU.³³

In February 2023, in Ohrid, North Macedonia, Belgrade and Pristina verbally agreed³⁴ to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia³⁵ and the annex referring to the implementation of the agreement.³⁶ It has been reported that relevant amendments to these documents will be included in the Chapter 35 negotiation dealing with Kosovo's³⁷ and Serbia's EU negotiation framework, and in the agenda of Kosovo's Special Group on Normalisation as foreseen in item 3 of the annex.³⁸ The agreement anticipated the development of good-neighbourly relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and among other things included the following article: "Neither Party will block, nor encourage others to block, the other Party's progress in their respective EU path".³⁹ It is also relevant to note that the agreement anticipates that the EU-led dialogue process should lead to a legally binding agreement on the comprehensive normalisation of relations.⁴⁰ The agreement and the related annex do not refer to the 2013 Brussels Agreement.

How far Belgrade is willing to go with the implementation of verbal agreement has been recently clarified by Serbia's outgoing first deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Ivica Dačić, who stated that Serbia will accept neither Kosovo's independence nor its membership of the UN.⁴¹ So far, Pristina has avoided establishing the agreed Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities, with the Kosovo prime minister, Albin Kurti, conditioning it on Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence.⁴²

In the meantime, Belgrade's influence over the north Kosovo Serbs⁴³ remains high both politically and economically. The Serbian government's Office for Kosovo said in November 2022 that it was signing contracts to pay the 3,500 police officers, judges, and other public servants in four Kosovo municipalities who had resigned over their claims "that EU-mediated agreements between Serbia and Kosovo in Brussels [we]re being breached".⁴⁴ These payments are estimated to cost Serbian taxpayers up to EUR 60 million.⁴⁵ Those who had resigned emphasized that "Kosovo must withdraw a decision to make Serb drivers with Serbia's vehicle plates exchange them for Kosovo plates, and finally

establish the long-awaited Association of Serbian Municipalities”.⁴⁶ Tensions in the city and across north Kosovo escalated in December 2022 when ethnic Serbs erected barricades and blocked major roads and border crossings to protest against Pristina’s decision to mandate the replacement of Serbia-issued identity documents and vehicle number plates.⁴⁷ Serbia and Kosovo then agreed that the deadline for the change of number plates would be postponed, while Serbia would stop issuing number plates to north Kosovo Serbs.⁴⁸

The continuous escalation then de-escalation of the various crises in north Kosovo has transformed the ongoing and seemingly never-ending talks between Belgrade and Pristina into something more like crisis management meetings than discussions on the implementation of the deals that have been reached. On 29 May 2023, 30 NATO troops from the KFOR peacekeeping mission were injured in violent clashes with protesting Serbs in Zvečan, Leposavić and Zubin Potok that started one day after the newly elected mayors of these Serb-majority municipalities whom Pristina had acknowledged as legitimately elected took their oaths of office following elections that Serbs boycotted.⁴⁹

In such a pessimistic situation, the clashes in Banjska, north Kosovo in September 2023, during which one Kosovo policemen and three Serb gunmen lost their lives, constituted the worst escalation of violence in north Kosovo since the July 2011 crises. The clashes in Banjska occurred at a time when the last round of EU-mediated Belgrade-Pristina talks had ended unsuccessfully and while Kosovo was still subject to the conditions the EU had imposed on Pristina in June 2023.⁵⁰

The Serbian president accused Kosovo of terrorising north Kosovo Serbs, which in the Banjska case had rebelled,⁵¹ while the Kosovo prime minister accused Serbia of trying to annex the country’s Serb-majority north and that the deadly clashes in Banjska were part of this plan.⁵²

Basically, Belgrade and Pristina still remain far from reaching a mutual agreement on the normalisation of their relations. As long as Serbia continues to insist on and prioritise its refusal to recognise Kosovo’s independence and Kosovo continues to claim the opposite, it will be almost impossible to find a common language between them. The parliamentary elections held in Serbia in December 2023 that led to another four-year term in power for the Serbian Progressive Party of President Vučić are not expected to lead to a change in Serbian policy towards Kosovo.

B. Serbia and Croatia

With regard to relations between Serbia and EU member Croatia, in early June 2016 Croatia blocked the opening of Chapter 23 of Serbia’s EU entry negotiations dealing with the judiciary and human rights in Serbia, in terms of which EU membership negotiations require “Serbia to abolish the regional jurisdiction of Serbian courts in war crimes cases and to reserve seats for the Croatian

minority in the Parliament”.⁵³ The majority of EU countries noted that these were bilateral issues that had not been set as conditions for the opening of negotiations.⁵⁴ Lacking the support of the other 27 EU member states, all of which had approved the opening of Chapter 23, Croatia withdrew its objections and gave the green light for opening the chapter.⁵⁵

Despite Zagreb and Belgrade having promised to work together on minority rights, border issues and searches for missing persons from the war in the 1990s,⁵⁶ much still needs to be done in these areas, with Zagreb always having the power to either hinder Serbia’s EU path or assist in the process if it wishes to do so.

C. North Macedonia and Bulgaria

North Macedonia’s path to the EU was first challenged by Greece and currently by Bulgaria, both of which are EU members.

After having resolved in 2018 the issue of the country’s use of the name “Macedonia”, which was disputed by Greece,⁵⁷ North Macedonia found itself facing a new challenge from Bulgaria. In 2020 Bulgaria blocked EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia by accusing⁵⁸ it of not having implemented the provisions of the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation signed in 2017 between the two countries.⁵⁹ This document aimed to develop the overall bilateral relations between the two countries, including committing Bulgaria to support North Macedonia’s path to EU and NATO membership.⁶⁰ Even if it is not clear which part of the agreement North Macedonia is accused of failing to implement, it can be assumed that the disagreement is more about historical facts referring to Bulgarian and Macedonian identities that are still matter of debate.⁶¹ In June 2022, under EU pressure, Bulgaria lifted its veto on North Macedonia joining the EU, which awarded the latter candidate status in the same month, while noting that it expected “North Macedonia must include Bulgarians in its constitution ‘on an equal footing with other people’”⁶² The failure to reach the necessary support to amend the constitution to fulfil this requirement means that North Macedonia is heading for presidential and parliamentary elections in April and May 2024, respectively, with the likelihood of no green light being given by Bulgaria for North Macedonia’s further progress on the EU path.

In the meantime, the war in Ukraine has not affected relations between the countries in the region in terms of further challenges to their path to EU membership, with the exception of Kosovo-Serbia relations. Kosovo officials have apparently found similarities⁶³ between Russian annexations of territories in Ukraine and Serbia’s policy towards Kosovo, especially after the Banjska clashes in north Kosovo in September 2023.⁶⁴

However, seen from the perspective of the Western Balkans, the war in Ukraine has resulted in the EU placing a higher focus on this country (and, for that matter, on its EU integration process) than on the Western Balkan accession process.

IV. Challenges of EU enlargement for the Western Balkans

A. The current approach of the EU and Western Balkans to the enlargement process

“The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”⁶⁵

Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit,
Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003

“Promises must be kept towards the Balkan countries, to which we have been promising [EU] membership for 20 years.”⁶⁶

German chancellor Olaf Scholz, May 2023

Various European countries first started cooperating in an economic plan back in 1951 by forming the European Coal and Steel Community, and then, in 1957, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. Only six countries were members of these communities (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). The current manifestation of this European desire for greater unity, the EU, has 27 member states that joined it during several stages of enlargements, with the only country ever having withdrawn from EU being Britain in 2020.⁶⁷ The integration of the Western Balkans has been a factor of EU enlargement policy for at least 20 years, but with no end currently in sight.

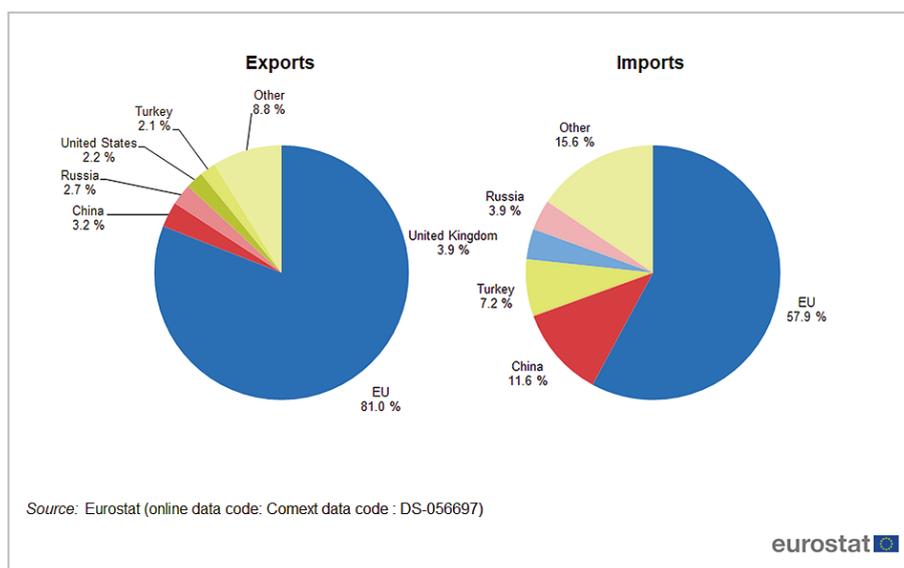
Figure 1: The Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans⁶⁸

	Serbia EU: 2012 - candidate; 2014 - opened talks NATO: PFP-2006; military neutrality - 2007
	Bosnia and Herzegovina EU: Dec. 2022 - candidate; NATO: PFP-2006; military neutrality of RS - 2017
	North Macedonia EU: 2005 - candidate; July 2022 - opened talks to NATO: 2019
	Montenegro EU: 2010 - candidate; 2012 - opened talks to NATO: 2017
	Albania EU: 2014 - candidate; July 2022 - opened talks to NATO: 2009
	Kosovo EU: not recognised by 5 members; applied for membership in Dec. 2022 NATO - KFOR since 1999

From 2005 (when the first state from the Western Balkans, North Macedonia, achieved candidate status) to 2023, none of the Western Balkan states has joined the EU, including the two front runners, Serbia and Montenegro, which respectively opened talks on EU membership in 2014 and 2012 (see Figure 2).

The EU has continued to economically support and develop the region, but the EU accession process remains complicated. The EU is the Western Balkans' leading trading partner, with EU-Western Balkans trade constituting almost 70% of the region's total trade⁶⁹ (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Western Balkan countries main trading partners, 2021⁷⁰



Furthermore, the ongoing EU-led Berlin Process, launched in 2014, aims to improve the regional integration of the Western Balkans as part of a process designed to accelerate the entire region's closer alignment with the EU.⁷¹ The November 2022 Berlin Process summit also clearly demonstrated the EU policy of providing financial support to the region by announcing a EUR 1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans.⁷² The new EU growth plan for the region was elaborated at the Berlin Process leaders' summit held in Tirana, Albania, in October 2023, involving a "6 billion Euro (\$6.3 billion) investment package, 2 billion euros (\$2.1 billion) of grants and 4 billion Euros (\$4.2 billion) of loans".⁷³ However, the EU made clear the necessity of the required reforms being implemented in the Western Balkans in order for the financial support package to become active. The European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, was quoted as saying that "Funds will be relieved upon delivery of reforms".⁷⁴

The EU is expecting the Western Balkans to make reforms in the areas of fundamentals,⁷⁵ the economy and democratic institutions. It is also expecting the Western Balkan countries to resolve their bilateral problems before joining the Union (see above).⁷⁶ No Western Balkan country has so far implemented all the related reforms, with some moving faster than others.

Serbia has been an EU candidate country since 2012. Since the opening of Serbia's accession negotiations in January 2014, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, two of which (Chapter 25 on science and research and Chapter 26 on education and culture) have been provisionally closed.⁷⁷ The overall pace of negotiations is reported to "depend in particular on the pace of rule of law reforms and on the normalization of Serbia's relations with Kosovo".⁷⁸

As described in section 3.2, Serbia's path to the EU was halted in early June 2016, when Croatia blocked the opening of Chapter 23 on the judiciary and human rights in EU-Serbia membership negotiations. As further noted above, the majority of EU countries shared the opinion that these were bilateral issues not related to the EU negotiation process. In this case, the theory of intergovernmentalism can be used to explain Serbia's progress on the EU integration path in terms of its being hindered by the decision of one EU member, Croatia, and also by the fact that EU member states did not support Croatia's attempts to hinder Serbia's progress, because it was not in their interests to do so.

A very important factor in EU-Serbia relations is the requirement for Serbia's foreign policy to align with that of the EU, which is currently not the case. In 2021 Serbia's alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) positions was assessed at 64%,⁷⁹ while in 2022 it dropped to some 44%.⁸⁰ Following the Russia invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Serbia did not support the sanctions the EU imposed on the Russian Federation.⁸¹ Serbia has also not only failed to align its foreign policy with the CFSP's position on Russia, but also on China. This can be explained by the fact that, like Russia, China, which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has not recognised the independence of Kosovo. In March 2020 the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, in a letter sent to the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, emphasised that "his country firmly supports China in safeguarding national sovereignty and security on Hong Kong affairs".⁸² In the same year, Belgrade did not support the EU's condemnation of China's treatment of the Uyghur people in its Xinjiang province. Instead Serbia had supported China's declaration describing its violation of the human and minority rights of the Uyghur people as a part of the "fight against terrorism and extremism".⁸³ Belgrade's support for China is not surprising, at least partly because China has rapidly become one of the largest investors in Serbia. While from 2010 to 2015 its "investment in Serbia amounted to a mere €189 million, palling in comparison to the robust inflow of [foreign direct investment] from EU countries, which exceeded €7.2 billion during the same period",⁸⁴ by 2022 "Chinese investment in the country had reached the level of the combined investment of all 27 European Union member states".⁸⁵

Serbia has made some progress in implementing the reforms required by the EU in terms of its judicial system, and fighting corruption and organised crime, but still needs to improve its laws on freedom of expression.⁸⁶ In terms of the economic criteria for EU entry, Serbia is evaluated as having achieved “between a good and moderate level of preparation and has made some progress in developing a functioning market economy”.⁸⁷

Despite these limited gains, the EU has continued to financially help Serbia. Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), a first financing decision of EUR 122.14 million was adopted for Serbia at the end of 2021 to support the EU accession process.⁸⁸

Montenegro has been an EU candidate country since 2010, and opened accession negotiations in 2012. Thirty-three negotiating chapters have been opened, three of which (Chapter 25 on science and research, Chapter 26 on education and culture, and Chapter 30 on external relations) have been provisionally closed.⁸⁹ In terms of foreign relations, Montenegro is fully aligned with the EU sanctions imposed on Russia.⁹⁰

With regard to reforms that have been archived thus far, Montenegro’s judicial system is moderately prepared, and the country has reached some level of preparation in the areas of dealing with corruption and organised crime, and of freedom of expression.⁹¹ In terms of economic criteria, Montenegro has made moderate progress in developing a functioning market economy.⁹² Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), a first financing decision of EUR 32.41 million was adopted at the end of 2021 to support Montenegro’s EU accession process.⁹³

Even if though it was one of the first EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans, **North Macedonia**, which was awarded this status in 2005, could only open accession talks in 2022. As mentioned above, under EU pressure, Bulgaria gave the EU the green light to open accession talks with North Macedonia in 2022, but only on condition that the Macedonian constitution should be changed to include the Bulgarian minority on an equal footing as the other peoples inhabiting the country. As in case of Croatia’s blocking of Serbia’s accession progress (section 3.2), Bulgaria is also creating barriers to North Macedonia’s progress to EU integration out of a desire to protect its national interests, which is another example of the relevance of the theory of intergovernmentalism. North Macedonia cannot proceed on the EU path without the consent of Bulgaria, and in this case the EU as an institution apparently cannot force Bulgaria to change its position, but rather only influence it to do so, and then only partially.

In terms of the reforms that North Macedonia has implemented, its judicial system has reached a moderate level of preparation, and has achieved moderate progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime, and some level of preparation in the area of freedom of expression.⁹⁴ In terms of the economic

criteria for entry, North Macedonia has made some progress and has achieved a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy.⁹⁵ In terms of foreign policy, it has reached 100% alignment with EU CFSP positions.⁹⁶

Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), a first financing decision of EUR 90.45 million was adopted at the end of 2021 to support North Macedonia's EU accession process.⁹⁷

Albania has been an EU candidate country since 2014, but took a further eight years to open accession negotiations with the EU.

Like that of North Macedonia, Albania's foreign policy is fully aligned with the EU's CFSP, including in terms of sanctions on Russia.⁹⁸ Albania's judicial system has reached a moderate level of preparation for EU integration, and has reached some level of preparation in terms of corruption, organised crime, and freedom of expression.⁹⁹ Regarding the economic criteria for EU entry, Albania has made good progress and has been moderately successful in developing a functioning market economy.¹⁰⁰ It is also being helped financially by the EU. Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), a first financing decision of EUR 64.9 million was adopted at the end of 2021 to support Albania's EU accession process.¹⁰¹

Kosovo applied for EU membership in December 2022, but is expected to face stiff challenges, because it is still not recognised as an independent state by five EU members (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). These countries' refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence is based on their national interests, because each of them deals with similar cases to that of Kosovo,¹⁰² thus confirming that the theory of integovernmentalism can be also used to explain Kosovo's lack of progress towards EU accession, because these states' approach to the issue is primarily determined by their self-interest.

The EU-Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) has been in force since April 2016, while a second phase of the European Reform Agenda was adopted in October 2021 to further guide the implementation of EU-related reforms under the SAA framework.¹⁰³ Kosovo has aligned its foreign policy with that of the EU, including sanctions on Russia.¹⁰⁴

In terms of the reforms that it has committed to, Kosovo is currently still at an early stage, with some level of preparation in the fight against corruption and organised crime, and in developing a functioning market economy.¹⁰⁵

An amount of EUR 63.96 million was allocated to Kosovo by the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) 2021 for the first year of implementation of required EU reforms, while for 2022 the IPA allocation was fixed at EUR 62.25 million to support overall reforms in Kosovo.¹⁰⁶

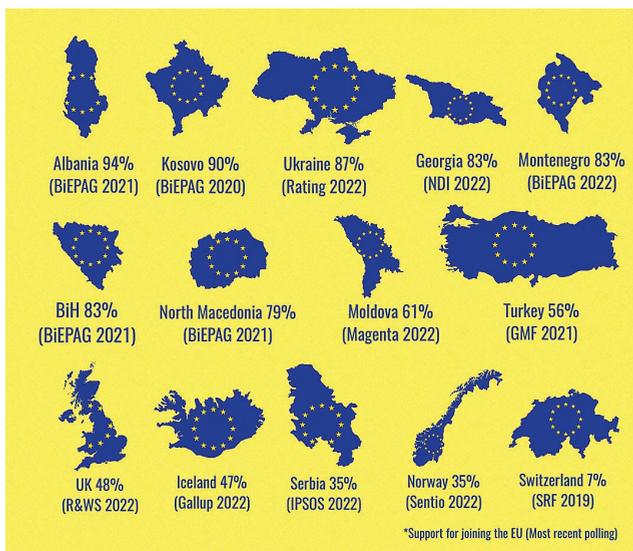
Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in 2022. Following its application for EU membership in February 2016, BiH was required to

undertake key reforms set out in the Commission Opinion of May 2019, which covers democracy/functionality, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform.¹⁰⁷

BiH is at an early stage of preparation as regards its judiciary, fight against corruption and organised crime, and the establishment of a functioning market economy, while no progress has been made in the areas of guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the media.¹⁰⁸ In addition, difficulties in BiH's ability to function as an integrated state are caused by one of the entities into which the country is divided, i.e. the Republika Srpska entity. As of spring 2022, Republika Srpska political parties had blocked the establishment of the required legislative and executive institutions at the state level, and had also obstructed the implementation of EU sanctions on Russia, with which BiH had formally aligned.¹⁰⁹

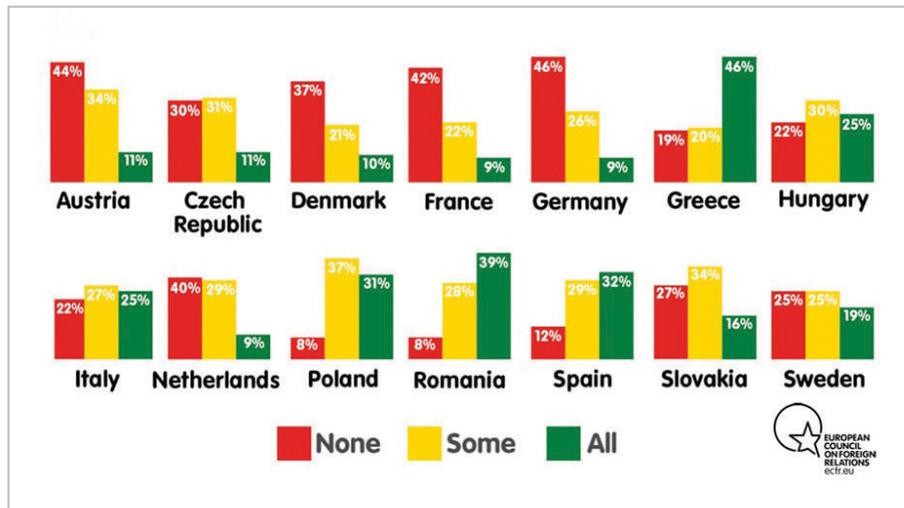
BiH is also benefitting from EU financial assistance. In 2021 it was awarded EUR 73 million under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III).¹¹⁰

Figure 3: Which non-EU states most want to join the EU?¹¹¹



While among other European non-EU member states the citizens of Western Balkan countries most strongly support EU membership (see Figure 3), the share of survey respondents who expect EU integration has further declined.¹¹² The path to EU integration seems to be a very long one, which has led to Western Balkan accession fatigue.

Figure 4: National opinions of selected EU members on how many Western Balkan countries should join the EU in the next decade¹¹³



Equally, in 2019, 40% of the citizens of Germany, Austria, France and the Netherlands said they were unwilling to see the Western Balkans joining the EU in the next ten years (Figure 4). This affects EU member states’ decisions about EU enlargement, because the process lacks the support of a large proportion of their respective electorates.

In light of all that has been said thus far, it is clear that the Western Balkans’ path to full EU membership is a long one. The region’s countries still need to complete reforms, but the progress of some of them towards the EU will continue to be hindered or blocked by bilateral issues that the countries in question lack the political will to resolve.

B. The impact on the Western Balkans of Ukraine and Moldova being awarded EU candidate status

About Ukraine: *“They are one of us and we want them in.”*¹¹⁴

Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission president,
February 2022

*“Ukraine is progressing. The [Western Balkan countries also] have to follow this path at the same pace.”*¹¹⁵

Josep Borrell, EU foreign policy chief, May 2023

The war in Ukraine has motivated the EU to express its intention to speed up Ukraine’s accession to the EU. Similarly, due to the geopolitical changes caused by the war, it can be assumed that Georgia’s and Moldova’s applications were also speeded up.

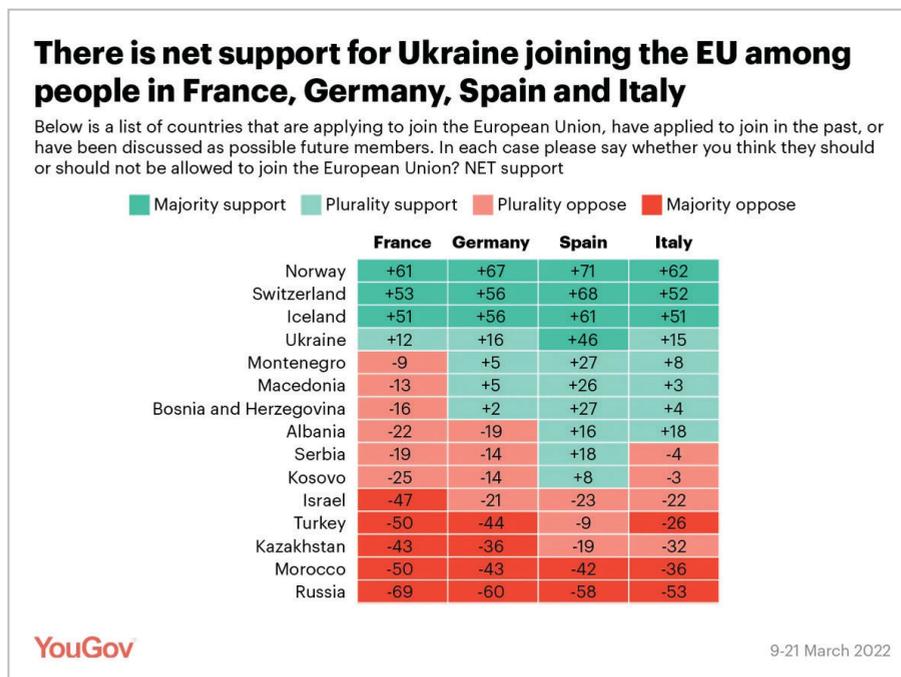
Therefore, in June 2022 the European Council granted the status of candidate country to Ukraine (which had applied for it in February of that year) and Moldova (which had applied for candidate status in March the same year), while it also recognised Georgia’s EU membership aspirations (the country also applied for candidate status in March 2022).¹¹⁶ In December 2023 the EU opened accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova (but not BiH) and granted candidate status to Georgia.¹¹⁷ The three candidate countries’ EU integration processes had started several years earlier. In February 2014 the European Parliament passed a resolution referring to the three countries, noting that “the EU Treaty allows any European country to apply to become a member of the EU provided that it adheres to the principles of democracy, respects fundamental freedoms and human and minority rights, and ensures the rule of law”.¹¹⁸ However, former European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker had criticised the possibility of Ukraine joining the EU, lambasting the country as massively “corrupt”,¹¹⁹

June 2023 marked 20 years since the Western Balkan countries were declared to be prospective EU members at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, while EU officials have reportedly stated recently that

Ukraine is rapidly implementing reforms leading it to membership in the European Union ... while the Western Balkan candidates are lagging behind instead of moving at the same speed, and if they do not catch up, Ukraine and Moldova could overtake them.¹²⁰

A public opinion survey carried out a month after the start of the war in Ukraine showed that there is a high support for Ukraine (but not the Western Balkans) joining the EU among the public in Germany, France, Italy and Spain (respectively, 46%, 42%, 45% and 60%). As can be seen in Figure 5, average support for the Western Balkans joining the EU is 15% lower than that for Ukraine.¹²¹

Figure 5: Support for Ukraine joining the EU in selected European countries, March 2022¹²²



When speaking about membership prospects, the EU has apparently decided to refer at the same time to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. But the Western Balkan countries are dissatisfied with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia being apparently more privileged on the EU membership path, even though, like the Western Balkans, they are still far from actual membership.

C. Russian influence in the Western Balkans, the changing geopolitics of the war in Ukraine, and ongoing EU enlargement fatigue

“The Western Balkans are part of Europe. And they are certainly not a chip to be used by Putin.”¹²³

Josep Borrell, EU foreign policy chief, March 2023

The slow progress towards EU accession, which reflects several years of so-called “enlargement fatigue” (the last country to join the EU was Croatia in 2013), has left an open space in the Western Balkans for other geopolitical actors to enter and exert influence. Because this section is focused on Russian

influence in the Western Balkans after the start of the war in Ukraine, other geopolitical players present in this region will not be taken into consideration.¹²⁴

Russia seems to be more focused on preserving the status quo in the Western Balkans, retaining its presence there and blocking further NATO expansion.

The EU Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators data for 2023 shows that Russia's energy-related influence is greatest in Serbia, North Macedonia, and BiH, where it supplies close to 100% of gas needs and owns several assets, while Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania currently consume little or no Russian gas, and future supplies are likely to come from Azerbaijan rather than Russia.¹²⁵

Russia is apparently more interested in political connections and foreign policy support in Serbia and Republika Srpska (the Serbian entity of BiH), and less so in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. Russian connections with Serbia and Republika Srpska remain positively affected by the belonging to the same religion, i.e. Orthodoxy, which is not the case in Montenegro and North Macedonia, which have been claiming that Russia is negatively interfering in their internal affairs.¹²⁶

Russia firmly opposes Kosovo independence.¹²⁷ Also, Russia has been using its status as a permanent UN Security Council member to support Serbia, including in 1994 and 2015, when Moscow vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs (the latter resolution labelled the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide).¹²⁸ In return for Russian support, two months after the start of the war in Ukraine, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić was quoted as saying that his country has reached a favourable three-year deal with Russia for supplies of natural gas at a price three times lower than what Europe is paying.¹²⁹

Both Serbia and Republika Srpska have refused to impose sanctions on Moscow,¹³⁰ despite Belgrade officially affirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine.¹³¹ The war in Ukraine has nevertheless led to complete interruption of traditional military exercises between Serbia and Russia.¹³² Equally, Serbia has imposed a moratorium on its holding military exercises with foreign partners since February 2022.¹³³ The only exemption has been an exercise with NATO held in Serbia in June 2023.¹³⁴

Unlike the official Belgrade approach, which due to the war in Ukraine has tried to restrict cooperation with and official visits to Russia, the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has visited Moscow and met Vladimir Putin in September 2022 and May 2023.¹³⁵ In January 2023 Dodik even awarded Putin the Medal of Honour of Republika Srpska, the entity's highest honour, for his "patriotic concern and love",¹³⁶ a gesture that did not go unappreciated by Moscow. Six months later, in June, the Putin awarded Dodik the Order of Alexander Nevsky, an award that the Serbian president had received in 2019.¹³⁷

The Serbian population's support for Russia remains high, despite the war in Ukraine. A survey conducted recently by the London-based Henry Jackson Society has shown that 66.3% of Serbian respondents blame Ukraine for the conflict and see the US government and NATO as the main culprits behind the war (82.4% and 84.8%, respectively), while 78.7% are against imposing sanctions on Russia.¹³⁸

V. Policy recommendations and conclusions

“EU members never had any intention of enlarging the union and ... neither Bosnia and Herzegovina nor Serbia ever had any interest in joining.”¹³⁹

John C. Kornblum, former US ambassador to Germany,
October 2021

“It is time to move forward. ... I believe we must be ready - on both sides - by 2030 to enlarge.”¹⁴⁰

Charles Michel, European Council president,
September 2023

Despite the EU's promised commitment to enlargement and belief that this can be achieved by 2030, as well as the significant financial help that it has given to the region's countries, the accession of the Western Balkans remains a highly complicated process that, if it continues to be blocked by unresolved bilateral issues, might be realistically unfeasible. The process is without doubt characterised by intergovernmentalism, because the accession process of one country to the EU depends primarily on the decisions of all the member states.

The accession of new member states to the EU is possible if the state in question fulfils two conditions: “1. it must be a European state; 2. it must respect the common values of the Member States and undertake to promote them”.¹⁴¹ Even if it might look easy to fulfil these two conditions, accession is not granted automatically, but rather depends on “the adequate preparation of the applicant country concerned and on the EU's capacity to integrate the new member”.¹⁴² Both these requirements are subjected to the evaluation of the EU itself, i.e. its existing member states.¹⁴³

This fact alone makes Western Balkan countries' accession to the EU almost a mission impossible, because the probability of all member states agreeing to the Western Balkans joining the Union remains low (see Figure 4).

Bearing all these complicated processes of EU membership in mind, and after analysing the current geopolitical situation causing the EU to focus on the war in Ukraine and not on the Western Balkans, which is still struggling to make the necessary reforms and normalise neighbourly relations, the author found it useful to exchange opinions with about 15 representatives of the international community on the issue of the possible EU membership of the Western Balkans.¹⁴⁴

It became evident during these discussions that all of them were in favour of the Western Balkans joining the EU, but did not when and how it would happen. They all also agreed that Russia is not interested in seeing this region join the EU, because this would reduce Russia's influence in the region. What differed were the experts' reasons and suggestions for why and how the Western Balkans could or could not become a part of the EU family. The author classified these suggestions and elaborations into seven groups:

Group 1 was sceptical about the chances of the Western Balkans achieving EU membership any time soon. Its members noted that the region has become a theatre for great-power rivalry, and also emphasised that the end of the war in Ukraine will define the future of European security and that there will likely be no clear winner.¹⁴⁵

Group 2 did not see an EU membership future for the Western Balkans, and felt that the region would end up forming part of the EU's neighbourhood policy and not its enlargement policy. Some members of the group also claimed that EU accession is not possible, because the process is too complicated.¹⁴⁶ However, they agreed that the EU will still have to support the Western Balkans, because the region is part of Europe.

Group 3 perceived the situation in Ukraine as a priority for the EU, which has therefore put the accession of the Western Balkans on the back burner. Some members of the group had no idea when the Western Balkans would join the EU.¹⁴⁷

Group 4 (with more supporters) could also not determine when membership might occur, but noted that before they could become part of the EU, the countries of the Western Balkans needed to implement the required reforms, including those dealing with the rule of law, corruption and human rights, and resolve their bilateral political issues.¹⁴⁸ This group strongly believed that when the reforms had been implemented, accession would be feasible.

Group 5 was of the opinion that enlargement cannot take place without the EU first being restructured and becoming stronger. Its members suggested, however, that both sides must seriously engage in the enlargement process, with the EU supporting energy financing, steps to fight inflation and reconstruction in the region.¹⁴⁹

Group 6 saw no appetite for enlargement among current EU members, but suggested that the Western Balkans should not wait for Brussels, but rather engage in building links between academic institutions and civil society that could strengthen the pathway to the EU.¹⁵⁰

Group 7 doubted that a path would be found that would allow the Western Balkans to become part of the EU, and felt that the region might remain a secondary group.¹⁵¹

Taking all the above into account, this paper makes the following recommendations for how the EU and the Western Balkans could become engaged in an accelerated EU accession path.

- Both sides must be wholeheartedly committed to the process to make the Western Balkans part of the EU.
- The Western Balkans must fulfil all the reforms required by the EU to accelerate the region's overall development and enhance regional cooperation. The more developed the entire region becomes, the easier it will be for its constituent countries to meet and even compete with the standards the EU has set. The Western Balkan countries need to understand that reform should be undertaken not because of the EU, but because of the region's people.
- The EU must regain its credibility in the Western Balkans, which must not stay in the accession waiting room for decades or be allowed to become a background issue because of unclear proposals or accession models characterised by multiple complex stages.
- The EU must not condition the speed of the Western Balkan accession process on the resolution of the region's bilateral problems, especially if an EU member is involved, and the Union should use its influence so that bilateral problems do not prevent the progress of the candidate country. The delayed green light for Albania and North Macedonia due to the latter's dispute with the EU state Bulgaria is a negative example in this regard, while the exercising of EU influence to encourage its member Croatia to give the green light for Serbia's accession talks is a positive example. Serbia-Kosovo relations must not prevent each side's path to the EU, since it is well known that both Serbia and Kosovo have completely different opinions on the status of Kosovo statehood. More creative solutions need to be found to resolve this dilemma.
- Non-EU players will continue to exert their influence in the region for as long as EU membership does not become a reality. Having great and regional powers investing and being present in this region is useful only as long as the region's countries also have a chance of joining the EU.
- The situation in Ukraine must not be allowed to be the EU's prime focus, and the Western Balkans' accession process should be given equal levels of effort and attention, otherwise the impression will continue to be given that the EU is prioritising the accession paths of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The wars in the Western Balkans in the 1990s must not be forgotten, as well as the long years of the stabilisation process that followed. EU membership will continue and strengthen that process, while delayed or denied EU accession will only undermine it.
- The EU must communicate with the Western Balkans as a unified institution.

- The EU must create an efficient mechanism that motivates reforms in the Western Balkans and aligns financial incentives with the reform process.

However, in order for all these recommendations to be fulfilled, two interrelated suggestions should also be considered:

- The EU needs to set a deadline (i.e. month or year) for the accession of each Western Balkan state by asking each of the candidate countries when it estimates it can join the EU after completing the required reforms. This would be a perfect motivation for the Western Balkans to progress rapidly with the reforms needed to join the EU. Public opinion, including civil society, would exert more pressure on local politicians to accelerate the reforms and keep their promises of their respective countries joining the EU. In the meantime, the EU would be relieved of the accusation that it is suffering from enlargement fatigue, because each Western Balkan state would have to state when it thinks it will be ready to join the Union. The long drawn-out accession process has lasted for years and will continue to demotivate the Western Balkans unless something is done to revitalise its countries' desire to join the EU.
- In order for the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU to become possible and not remain a long, complicated, uncertain process, the EU must restructure the ratification system and opt for a large consensus rather than requiring all member states to ratify a new member. This would be a clear indicator that the EU really wants to enlarge itself and not only offer the promise of EU membership.

The process of achieving EU membership remains a complicated one that cannot be accelerated in the near future due to the ongoing global and regional challenges Europe and the world face. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, EU enlargement will not be a central focus of the Union, but rather the issue of the alignment of candidate countries with EU foreign policy. In the meantime, with EU “enlargement fatigue” well under way, other non-EU states such as Russia and China will continue to influence the politics of the Western Balkans.

In such an atmosphere, the unresolved bilateral issues in the region remain a challenge, and will continue to prevent the states involved from progressing towards EU membership, demotivating them even further. More creative ways need to be found to resolve these issues.

EU membership is still the aim of the Western Balkans, but this will remain only a pipedream until both the EU and the Western Balkans mutually agree to make real time-defined commitments to make the enlargement path a shorter one.

Endnotes

- 1 Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo. The collective “Western Balkans” will be used throughout to refer to these countries. Kosovo’s declaration of independence is not universally recognised, nor is it a member of the United Nations, but for the practical purposes of this paper it will be referred to as a country, while acknowledging the disputed nature of this designation. For a widely used disclaimer regarding Kosovo’s status, which applies to this paper, refer to note 2, below.
- 2 When referring to Kosovo, the EU states: “This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN S[ecurity] C[ouncil] R[esolution] 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence”. See European Commission, *Kosovo* Report*, SWD (2022) 334 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022a, p.1, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Kosovo%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 3 See F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, “Theorizing EU Enlargement: Research Focus, Hypotheses, and the State of Research”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2002, p.503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760210152411>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., p.508.
- 7 Ibid., pp.509-510.
- 8 Ibid., p.510.
- 9 F. Schimmelfennig, “The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union”, *International Organization*, 2001, p.48, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/community-trap-liberal-norms-rhetorical-action-and-the-eastern-enlargement-of-the-european-union/A1543938E66C9D16A0C6A1A00337207D>.
- 10 Ibid., p.49.
- 11 That is, what is to date the largest EU enlargement of 2004, which was known as the “Big Bang”. It included the entry of ten states in mainly the eastern part of Europe: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- 12 See Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.54.
- 13 Cited in *ibid.*
- 14 L. Buonanno and N. Nugent, “Explaining the EU’s Policy Portfolio: Applying a Federal Integration Approach to EU Cohesion Policy”, Bruges Political Research Papers No. 20, December 2011, p.6, http://aei.pitt.edu/33457/1/wp20_Nugent.pdf.
- 15 Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2001, p.513.
- 16 See N. Nugent, *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p.475.
- 17 ITN News, 28 June 1991, quoted in Ž. Kovačević, *Amerika i raspad Jugoslavije* [America and the Fall of Yugoslavia], Beograd, Filip Višnjić, 2007, p.83; see also W. Drozdiak, “Europe Follows American Lead”, *Washington Post*, 26 March 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/europe032699.htm>.
- 18 The Parliament of Montenegro declared independence from the union with Serbia on 3 June 2006, with support from 55.5% of the country’s voters.
- 19 The Kosovo Albanians’ aspiration to have an independent state of their own dates back to at least the 19th century, with the 1878 demand of the Prizren League that all the countries where Albanians live should be grouped into one state. See A. Jelesijević, *Srbija i velike sile* [Serbia and the Great Powers], Beograd, Slava, 2023, pp.82-122.
- 20 The 1990 constitution made no mention of Kosovo in the preamble; see Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Serbia_const_1990.htm. The current constitution (2006) includes Kosovo in the preamble; see Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/documents/Constitution_%20of_Serbia_pdf.pdf.
- 21 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, “Kosovo Honours Killed Police Officer”, *BalkanInsight*, 25 July 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/07/25/kosovo-honors-killed-police-officer/>.
- 22 Serbia, “Brussels Agreement: First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations”,

- n.d., <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394>.
- 23 Ibid., items 1-6.
 - 24 S. Dragojlo and X. Bami, "Land Swap Idea Resurfaces to Haunt Serbia-Kosovo Talks", BalkanInsight, 16 June 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/16/land-swap-idea-resurfaces-to-haunt-serbia-kosovo-talks/>. See also A. Gray and R. Heath, "Serbia, Kosovo Presidents Broach Border Changes for Historic Deal", POLITICO, 25 August 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/aleksandar-vucic-hashim-thaci-serbia-kosovo-balkans-eu-enlargement-alpbach-forum/>.
 - 25 A. Gray, "Angela Merkel: No Balkan Border Changes", POLITICO, 13 August 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>.
 - 26 President Trump's national security advisor, John Bolton, said that the United States will not exclude or oppose territorial swaps between Serbia and Kosovo. See F. Rudic, "US Won't Oppose Serbia-Kosovo Border Changes – Bolton", BalkanInsight, 24 August 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/24/us-will-not-weigh-in-on-serbia-kosovo-partition-08-24-2018/>. See also Gray, 2018; EU in Serbia, "Hahn: Solution for Serbia and Kosovo Must Contribute to the Stability of the Region", 4 September 2018, <https://europa.rs/hahn-solution-for-serbia-and-kosovo-must-contribute-to-the-stability-of-the-region/?lang=en>.
 - 27 DW, "Serbia Sends 'provocative' Train to Kosovo", 14 January 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-sends-provocative-train-to-kosovo/a-37133573>.
 - 28 BBC, "Serbia-Kosovo Train Row Escalates to Military Threat", 15 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38630152>.
 - 29 M. Gadzo, "What's behind the Arrest of Marko Djuric in Kosovo?", Al Jazeera, 29 March 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/29/whats-behind-the-arrest-of-marko-djuric-in-kosovo>.
 - 30 Ibid.
 - 31 For the US agreement with Kosovo, see LAJMI.NET, "Kjo eshte Kosove-Serbi" [This Is the Kosovo-Serbia Agreement], 4 September 2020, <https://lajmi.net/dokument-kjo-eshte-marrevshja-kosove-serbi/>. For the US agreement with Serbia, see KURIR.RS, "Potpisivanje sporazuma u Vašingtonu izazvalo reakcije stranih i domaćih eksperata!" [The Signing of the Agreement in Washington Has Provoked Reactions of Foreign and Domestic Experts], 5 September 2020, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3525833/ceo-svet-sada-gleda-u-srbiju-potpisivanje-sporazuma-u-vasingtonu-izazvalo-reakcije-stranih-i-domacih-eksperata>.
 - 32 Radio Slobodna Evropa, "Pisonero za RSE: EU već finansira neke projekte koji se spominju u dokumentima potpisanim u Washingtonu" [Pisonero for RSE: The EU Is Already Financing Some Projects that Are Mentioned in the Documents Signed in Washington], 22 September 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30852616.html>.
 - 33 Z. Trkanjec, "Highway between Niš and Priština Funded in Part by EBRD, EU", EURACTIV, 26 November 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/highway-between-nis-and-pristina-funded-in-part-by-ebrd-eu/.
 - 34 See B. Bednar, "Vučić: Nisam ništa potpisao, jer Kosovo nije međunarodno priznata država" [Vučić: I Did Not Sign Anything, Because Kosovo Is Not an Internationally Recognised State], AA POLITIKA, 19 March 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/politika/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-nisam-ni%C5%A1ta-potpisao-jer-kosovo-nije-me%C4%91unarodno-priznata-dr%C5%BEava/2850019>.
 - 35 EU External Action, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU Proposal - Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia", 27 February 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en.
 - 36 EU External Action, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia", 18 March 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.
 - 37 The full title of the related chapter is: "Chapter 35: Other Issues: Item 1: Normalisation of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo". For more information, see Conference on Accession to the European Union – Serbia, "Accession Document", 30 November 2015, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/AD-12-2015-IN1/en/pdf>.
 - 38 EU External Action, 18 March 2023.
 - 39 EU External Action, 27 February 2023.
 - 40 Ibid., art. 6.

- 41 POLITIKO, “Kosovo-Serbia Agreement, Dacic: We Agree up to the ‘Red Lines’”, 21 March 2023, <https://politiko.al/english/rajoni/marreshnja-kosove-serbi-dacic-pajtohemi-deri-te-vijat-e-kuqe-i477942>.
- 42 A. Taylor, “Kurti: Association Possible Only after Mutual Recognition from Serbia”, EURACTIV, 6 February 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kurti-association-possible-only-after-mutual-recognition-from-serbia/>.
- 43 Serbs living in the Serb-majority municipalities Zubin Potok, Leposavic, North Mitrovica and Zvecan in north Kosovo.
- 44 X. Bami and M. Stojanović, “Serbs Stage Mass Resignation from Kosovo State Institutions”, BalkanInsight, 5 November 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/05/serbs-stage-mass-resignation-from-kosovo-state-institutions/>.
- 45 For more information, see S. Cvetkovic and B. Terstena, “Serbs of Southern Kosovo See Belgrade Helping Northerners and Ask: But Who Will Take Care of Us?”, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 3 November 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbs-southern-kosovo-jobs-mitrovica-protests/32145697.html>.
- 46 Bami and Stojanović, 2022.
- 47 *Financial Times*, “‘We Need autonomy’: Kosovo Serbs Object to Western Diplomacy”, 20 January 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/9b962cb0-1eb8-4b3e-869e-fdffe5113aec>.
- 48 W. Preussen, “Kosovo, Serbia Reach Deal over Car Plate Dispute, EU Says”, POLITICO, 24 November 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-and-serbia-reach-last-minute-deal-over-car-plates-dispute-josep-borrell-aleksandar-vucic-albin-kurti/>.
- 49 X. Bami, “EU Announces Measures against Kosovo over Unrest in North”, BalkanInsight, 14 June 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/14/eu-announces-measures-against-kosovo-over-unrest-in-north/>.
- 50 Some of the EU conditions include “suspension of high-level visits, contacts and events as well as financial cooperation with Kosovo” (ibid.); Council of the EU, “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on Expectations from Serbia and Kosovo”, Press Release, 19 September 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/09/19/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-expectations-from-serbia-and-kosovo/>.
- 51 Kosovo Online, “Vucic: Serbs in Kosovo Rebelled Not Wanting to Suffer Terror Anymore; Albin Kurti Is the Only Culprit”, 24 September 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/vucic-serbs-kosovo-rebelled-not-wanting-suffer-terror-anymore-albin-kurti-only>.
- 52 ahramonline, “Kosovo Accuses Serbia of Planning to ‘Annex’ Its North”, 2 October 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/509423.aspx>.
- 53 For more information, see BETA, “Croatia Once Again Does Not Allow Opening of Chapter 23”, <https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/31549-croatia-once-again-does-not-allow-opening-of-chapter-23>.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 European Western Balkans, “Croatia Gives Green Light for Opening of Chapter 23”, 1 June 2016, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/06/01/croatia-gives-green-light-for-opening-of-chapter-23/>.
- 56 I. Ilic, “Croatia, Serbia Try to Improve Ties after Decades of Tension”, 12 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-croatia-serbia-idUSKBN1FW1N1>.
- 57 Greece has disputed the name Macedonia since the latter seceded from the FRY in 1991. For the Greeks, the word refers to ancient Macedonians who belonged to the Greek nation. See Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Issue of the Name of North Macedonia”, 23 February 2024, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/the-question-of-the-name-of-the-republic-of-north/>. For the full text of the agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, see VLADA.MK, “Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1995) and 845 (1995), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties”, 17 June 2018, <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf>.
- 58 M. Szpala and M. Seroka, “Bulgaria Blocks Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia”, 14 December 2020, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-12-14/bulgaria-blocks-accession-negotiations-north-macedonia>.
- 59 See North Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Договор за пријателство, добрососедство и соработка меѓу Република Македонија и Република Бугарија* [Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria], <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/document/1712/treaty-friendship>.

- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid, art. 8(2).
- 62 *Le Monde*, “Bulgaria Approves Lifting Veto on North Macedonia Joining EU”, 24 June 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/24/bulgarian-approves-lifting-veto-on-north-macedonia-joining-eu_5987878_4.html.
- 63 Kosovo Foreign Minister Donika Gervilla-Schwarz stated that “Serbia’s troop deployment on Kosovo’s border is similar to Russia’s behavior toward Ukraine before its full-scale invasion”. See: RFERL.ORG, *Kosovo Says Serbia’s Behavior Same As Russia’s Before Ukraine Invasion*, Accessed on November 09.2023; <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-kosovo-troops-buildup-russia-ukraine/32619334.html>.
- 64 More information about the related case is included in the next coming chapter on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo.
- 65 European Commission, “EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003”, Press Release, 21 June 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163.
- 66 A. Taylor, “Scholz Asks EU to Keep Promises to Western Balkans”, EURACTIV, 10 May 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/scholz-asks-eu-to-keep-promises-to-western-balkans/>.
- 67 1st enlargement – Denmark, Ireland and Great Britain in 1973; 2nd enlargement – Greece in 1983; 3rd enlargement – Spain and Portugal in 1986; 4th enlargement – Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995; 5th enlargement (known as “Big Bang” enlargement) – Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004; 6th enlargement – Bulgaria and Romania in 2007; 7th enlargement – Croatia in 2013; official withdrawal of the UK from the EU in 2020.
- 68 Table created by the author based on available data.
- 69 EU External Action, “The EU and the Western Balkans: Towards a Common Future”, 16 March 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-western-balkans-towards-common-future_en.
- 70 European Parliamentary Research Service, “Western Balkan Countries’ Trade with Main Partners”, 9 June 2022, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans/western-balkan-countries-trade-with-main-partners/>.
- 71 German Cooperation, “The Berlin Process Was back in Berlin in 2022”, 2022, <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-is-coming-back-to-berlin>.
- 72 European Commission, “Berlin Process Summit: EU Announces €1 Billion Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans and Welcomes New Agreements to Strengthen the Common Regional Market”, Press Release, 3 November 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6478.
- 73 L. Semini, “European Union Offers a New Growth Plan to Western Balkans that Partly Opens Access to Single Market”, Associated Press, 16 October 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/western-balkans-berlin-process-eu-membership-integration-4ffc700555c0b00962c43f67a2117ebe>.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 See EUR-Lex, “Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 26 October 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>.
- 76 European Commission, “2021 Enlargement Package: European Commission Assesses and Sets out Reform Priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey”, Press Release, 19 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_5275.
- 77 Chapters 25 and 26 were respectively opened on 13 December 2016 and 27 February 2017. Because were no opening issues referred to these chapters, both were closed on the same day on which they were opened. See European Commission, *Serbia 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 358 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022b, pp.3, 136, https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/ec-report-2022.pdf.
- 78 Ibid., p.3.
- 79 Ibid., p.136.
- 80 ISAC, “An Analysis of Serbia’s Alignment with the European Union’s Foreign Policy Declarations and Measures: Semi-annual Review for 2022”, 12 October 2022, <https://www.isac-fund.org/en/news/an-analysis-of-serbias-alignment-with-the-european-unions-foreign-policy-declarations-and-measures-semi-annual-review-for-2022>.

- 81 European Commission, 12 October 2022b, pp.3, 136.
- 82 CHINA-CEEC Cooperation, “Serbia Firmly Supports China in Safeguarding National Sovereignty, Security Regarding Hong Kong, Vucic Tells Xi in Letter”, 30 May 2022, http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zzwl/202006/t20200605_6582023.htm.
- 83 J. Mojsilovic, “Brussels to Belgrade: Adjust Policy toward Uyghur Minority to Those of EU”, 24 July 2020, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a623124-brussels-to-belgrade-adjust-policy-toward-uyghur-minority-to-those-of-eu/>.
- 84 See S. Vladislavljevic, “How Did China Become the Largest Investor in Serbia?”, CHOICE, 8 August 2023, <https://chinaobservers.eu/how-did-china-become-the-largest-investor-in-serbia/>.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 European Commission, 12 October 2022b, pp.3-6.
- 87 Ibid., p.6.
- 88 Ibid., p.136.
- 89 Chapters 25 and 26 were respectively opened on 18 December 2012 and 15 April 2013. Because there were no opening issues referring to these chapters, both were closed on the same day on which they were opened. Chapter 30 was opened in 2015 and closed two year later. For more information on Montenegro’s current path to EU integration, see European Commission, *Montenegro 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 335 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022c, p.3, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Montenegro%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 90 Ibid., p.3.
- 91 Ibid., pp.4-6.
- 92 Ibid., p.6.
- 93 Ibid., p.124.
- 94 European Commission, *North Macedonia 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 337 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022d, pp.4-6, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 95 Ibid., p.6.
- 96 Ibid., p.107.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 European Commission, *Albania 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. SWD (2022) 332 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022e, p.1, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Albania%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 99 Ibid., pp.4-5.
- 100 Ibid., p.6.
- 101 Ibid., p.126.
- 102 Greece does not recognise the independence of North Cyprus, considering it a territory with a Greek population that Turkey invaded in 1974; Romania is believed to fear the secession of the Szekely territory inhabited by Hungarians, and also the eventual recognition of Transnistria, which is internationally considered as part of Moldova; Spain did not recognise the independence referendum held in Catalonia in 2017, which is an autonomous region of Spain; and with regard to Slovakia, there is a belief that the Hungarian minority in this country could attempt to secede from Slovakia.
- 103 See European Commission, *Kosovo 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 334 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022f, p.6, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Kosovo%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 104 Ibid., p.4.

- 105 Ibid., pp.5-6.
- 106 Ibid., p.123.
- 107 European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 336 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022g, p.3, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202022.pdf>.
- 108 Ibid., pp.4-6.
- 109 Ibid., p.3.
- 110 Ibid., p.8.
- 111 reddit, "Who Wants to Join EU the Most? [Support for Joining the EU/Most Recent Polling], 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/europe/comments/xqzzmz/who_wants_to_join_eu_the_most_support_for_joining/.
- 112 ACIT Centre and EPIK Institute, *Balkan Barometer 2022: Public Opinion: Analytical Report*, Sarajevo, Regional Cooperation Council, June 2022, pp.48-49, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications>.
- 113 *CoRD*, "Europe's New Agenda in the Western Balkans", 9 August 2019, <https://cordmagazine.com/news/europes-new-agenda-in-the-western-balkans/>.
- 114 M. McMahon, "Ukraine Is One of Us and We Want Them in EU, Ursula von der Leyen Tells Euronews", 27 February 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/27/ukraine-is-one-of-us-and-we-want-them-in-eu-ursula-von-der-leyen-tells-euronews>.
- 115 Anadolu Agency, "EU Urges Western Balkan Countries to Follow Ukraine's Path for Membership Process, 23 May 2023, <https://www.anews.com.tr/world/2023/05/23/eu-urges-western-balkan-countries-to-follow-ukraines-path-for-membership-process>.
- 116 European Council, "European Council Conclusions on Ukraine, the Membership Applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and External Relations, 23 June 2022", 23 June 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/>.
- 117 A. Kurtic, "Fresh Delay to EU Talks Leaves Many Bosnians Bitter", *BalkanInsight*, 15 December 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/15/fresh-delay-to-eu-talks-leaves-many-bosnians-bitter/>.
- 118 News European Parliament, "Ukraine: MEPs Urge EU to Help Financial Rescue, but Enact Targeted Sanctions Too", 27 February 2014, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20140221IPR36637/ukraine-meps-urge-eu-to-help-financial-rescue-but-enact-targeted-sanctions-too>.
- 119 L. Hülsemann, "Juncker: Ukraine Is Totally Corrupt", *POLITICO*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-claude-juncker-ukraine-corruption-eu-accession/>.
- 120 Beta, "EU Ministers: Ukraine may Overtake Serbia, Montenegro on Membership Path", *NI*, 24 May 2023, <https://n1info.hr/english/news/eu-ministers-ukraine-may-overtake-serbia-montenegro-on-membership-path/>.
- 121 No recent public opinion poll is available to compare the support referred to.
- 122 M. Smith, "Net Support for Ukraine Joining EU in Key European Nations", *YouGov*, 29 March 2022, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/03/29/net-support-ukraine-joining-eu-key-european-nation>.
- 123 EU External Action, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Time to Take Responsibility and Move towards the EU", 16 March 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-time-take-responsibility-and-move-towards-eu_en.
- 124 This does not mean that other powers such as China are irrelevant. As previously mentioned, the political and economic links between China and Serbia are evident.
- 125 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans: Geopolitical Confrontation, Economic Influence and Political Interference", *European Parliamentary Research Service Brief*, April 2023, p.4, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).
- 126 Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord in Macedonia. See L. Harding et al., "Russia Actively Stoking Discord in Macedonia since 2008, Intel Files Say", *The Guardian*, 4 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia->

- [actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence](#). In 2019 a “court in Montenegro sentenced alleged Russian military intelligence agents, opposition politicians and a number of associates to jail terms over an alleged 2016 attempt to organize a coup in the country”; see S. Walker, “Alleged Russian Spies Sentenced to Jail over Montenegro ‘Coup Plot,’” *The Guardian*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/09/montenegro-convicts-pro-russia-politicians-of-coup-plot>.
- 127 B. Stanicek with M. Russell, “Russia’s Influence in the Western Balkans”, European Parliamentary Research Service, 9 June 2022, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, “Vucic Says Serbia Secures Gas Deal with Russia Following Phone Talks with Putin”, 29 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-gas-deal-russia/31873908.html>.
- 130 AP, “Serbian President Rejects Calls for Sanctions against Russia”, 4 January 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-europe-serbia-european-union-6deaa57230993b02e7a67f57693bf7f2>; ATV, “Dodik na sastanku sa Putinom: Srpska nije dozvolila da se uvedu sankcije Rusiji!” [Dodik at the Meeting with Putin: Srpska Did Not Allow for Sanctions to be Imposed on Russia], 23 May 2023, <https://www.atvbl.rs/republika-srpska/dodik-na-sastanku-sa-putinom-srpska-nije-dozvolila-da-se-vedu-sankcije-rusiji-23-5-2023>.
- 131 RUTPLY, “Switzerland: ‘Donbass, Crimea Are Part of Ukraine’ - Vuic on Ties to Putin, Serbia’s Potential EU Accession”, 19 January 2023, <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20230119-037-switzerland-donbass-crimea-are-part-of-ukraine-vucic-on-ties-to-putin-serbia-s-potential-eu-accession>.
- 132 EUROACTIV, “Military Exercise with Russia Underway in Serbia”, 21 May 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/military-exercise-with-russia-underway-in-serbia/; Serbian Ministry of Defence (MoD), “Exercise ‘Slavic Brotherhood 2021’”, 9 June 2021, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/17486/vezba-slovensko-bratstvo-2021-17486>; Serbian MoD, “International Flight-Tactical Exercise ‘BARS 2021’”, 11 October 2021, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/17931/medjunarodna-letno-takticka-vezba-bars-2021-17931>.
- 133 XINHUA, “Serbia Suspends All Joint Military Exercises in Next Six Months”, 10 September 2022, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/10/c_139356594.htm.
- 134 The Serbian government’s decision on the Serbian Armed Forces taking part in the US-NATO Platinum Wolf exercise (held in south Serbia in June 2023) was described as an exception from the moratorium on holding military exercises with foreign partners. See S. Dragojlo, “Serbia to Host Western ‘Platinum Wolf’ Military Exercise Again – Research Centre”, 31 March 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/31/serbia-to-host-western-platinum-wolf-military-exercise-again-research-centre/>; N1, “Serbia Chose West, US Embassy Official Tells RFE”, 12 June 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbia-chose-west-us-embassy-official-tells-rfe/>.
- 135 Reuters, “Russia’s Putin Meets Bosnian Serb Leader Dodik, Hails Rise in Trade”, 23 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-meets-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-hails-rise-trade-2023-05-23/>; President of Russia, “Meeting with Member of Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik”, 20 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69384>.
- 136 AP, “Bosnian Serbs Award Putin with Medal of Honor”, 8 January 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-politics-government-milorad-dodik-7edc18d0133bbde4c5b84879c0d8b724>.
- 137 N1, “RT: Putin Awards Dodik with Order of Alexander Nevsky”, 6 June 2023, <https://n1info.hr/english/news/rt-putin-awards-dodik-with-order-of-alexander-nevsky/>.
- 138 H. Ivanov and M. Laruelle, *Why Still Pro-Russia? Making Sense of Hungary’s and Serbia’s Russia Stance*, January 2023, pp.28, 30, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HJS-Why-Still-Pro-Russia-Making-Sense-of-Hungarys-and-Serbias-Russia-Stance-Report-web.pdf>.
- 139 J. Dempsey, “Judy Asks: Has the EU Lost the Western Balkans?”, Carnegie Europe, 14 October 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/85563>.
- 140 European Council, “Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum”, Press Release, 28 August 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>.
- 141 European Commission, “Accession to the EU”, n.d., https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-eu_en.
- 142 Ibid.

- 143** Ibid. The Accession Treaty has to be signed and ratified by all member states and the candidate country in accordance with its constitutional rules, while the European Commission, EU Council and European Parliament also have to give their consent. See also European Commission, “Steps towards Joining”, n.d., https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining_en.
- 144** As noted earlier in the paper, the author consulted knowledgeable officials who used to or still work for international organisations, Swiss institutions, members of the academic community, and non-governmental organisations mainly based in Geneva, Bern, and Zurich.
- 145** Two experts on geopolitics made the final point.
- 146** Two experts – an academic and a journalist dealing with the EU, Russia and Western Balkan politics – expressed this opinion.
- 147** Two experts in global diplomacy made this point.
- 148** According to three international policy experts and one journalist.
- 149** According to an academic and an expert in EU policy.
- 150** Stated by two experts in global foreign policy.
- 151** Stated by an academic and an expert on the EU, Russia, Ukraine, and Western Balkan politics.

Geneva Papers Research Series

- No.1 2011 G. P. Herd, “The Global Puzzle: Order in an Age of Primacy, Power-Shifts and Interdependence”, 34p.
- No.2 2011 T. Tardy, “Cooperating to Build Peace: The UN-EU Inter-Institutional Complex”, 36p.
- No.3 2011 M.-M. Ould Mohamedou, “The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda: Lessons in Post-September 11 Transnational Terrorism”, 39p.
- No.4 2011 A. Doss, “Great Expectations: UN Peacekeeping, Civilian Protection and the Use of Force”, 43p.
- No.5 2012 P. Cornell, “Regional and International Energy Security Dynamics: Consequences for NATO’s Search for an Energy Security Role”, 43p.
- No.6 2012 M.-R. Djalili and T. Kellner, “Politique Régionale de l’Iran: Potentialités, Défis et Incertitudes”, 40p.
- No.7 2012 G. Lindstrom, “Meeting the Cyber Security Challenge”, 39p.
- No.8 2012 V. Christensen, “Virtuality, Perception and Reality in Myanmar’s Democratic Reform”, 35p.
- No.9 2012 T. Fitschen, “Taking the Rule of Law Seriously”, 30p.
- No.10 2013 E. Kienle, “The Security Implications of the Arab Spring”, 32p.
- No.11 2013 N. Melzer, “Human Rights Implications of the Usage of Drones and Unmanned Robots in Warfare”, 75p.
- No.12 2013 A. Guidetti et al., “World Views: Negotiating the North Korean Nuclear Issue”, 47p.
- No.13 2013 T. Sisk and M.-M. Ould Mohamedou, “Bringing Back Transitivity: Democratisation in the 21st Century”, 36p.
- No.14 2015 H. J. Roth, “The Dynamics of Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia”, 35p.
- No.15 2015 G. Galice, “Les Empires en Territoires et Réseaux”, 42p.
- No.16 2015 S. C. P. Hinz, “The Crisis of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty in the Global Context”, 36p.
- No.17 2015 H. J. Roth, “Culture – An Underrated Element in Security Policy”, 40p.
- No.18 2016 D. Esfandiary and M. Finaud, “The Iran Nuclear Deal: Distrust and Verify”, 44p.
- No.19 2016 S. Martin, “Spying in a Transparent World: Ethics and Intelligence in the 21st Century”, 42p.
- No.20 2016 A. Burkhalter, “Définir le Terrorisme: Défis et Pratiques”, 50p.
- No.21 2017 M. Finaud, “‘Humanitarian Disarmament’: Powerful New Paradigm or Naive Utopia?”, 48p.
- No.22 2017 S. Aboul Enein, “Cyber Challenges in the Middle East”, 49p.
- No.23 2019 Tobias Vestner, “Prohibitions and Export Assessment: Tracking Implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty”, 28p.
- No.24 2019 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilaus Tarp and Dr. Christina Schori Liang, “Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’”, 32p.

- No.25 2020 Cholpon Orozobekova and Marc Finaud, “Regulating and Limiting the Proliferation of Armed Drones: Norms and Challenges”, 47p.
- No.26 2020 Dr Gervais Rufyikiri, “Reshaping Approaches to Sustainable Peacebuilding and Development in Fragile States – Part I: Nexus between Unethical Leadership and State Fragility”, 47p.
- No.27 2020 Dr Gervais Rufyikiri, “Reshaping Approaches to Sustainable Peacebuilding and Development in Fragile States – Part II: Nexus between Unethical Leadership and State Fragility”, 44p.
- No.28 2021 Dr Gervais Rufyikiri, “Resilience in Post-civil War, Authoritarian Burundi: What Has Worked and What Has Not?”, 47p.
- No.29 2022 Kevin M. Esvelt, “Delay, Detect, Defend: Preparing for a Future in which Thousands Can Release New Pandemics”, 65p.
- No.30 2023 Stuart Casey-Maslen, “International Counterterrorism Law: Key Definitions and Core Rules”, 40p.
- No.31 2023 Anjali Gopal, William Bradshaw, Vaishnav Sunil and Kevin M. Esvelt, “Securing Civilisation Against Catastrophic Pandemics”, 50p.
- No.32 2024 Kemal Mohamedou, “The Wagner Group, Russia’s Foreign Policy and Sub-Saharan Africa”, 37p.

Building Peace Together

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Maison de la paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D
P.O. Box 1295
1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00
E-mail: info@gcsp.ch
www.gcsp.ch

ISBN: 978-2-88947-121-8



GCSP
Geneva Centre for
Security Policy