

# Gradual EU Integration of the Western Balkans in Times of War in Europe: Security and the Politics of EU Enlargement in the 2020s

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**Abstract:** *This article contributes to debates on the politics of European Union (EU) enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) in the 2020s. During the 2010s, the enlargement process stalled due to a lack of progress on the EU's fundamental requirements of 'rule of law' and 'democracy'. Since 2022, Russia's protracted war against Ukraine suggests that geopolitical considerations have become more important in the politics of EU enlargement. In order to overcome the enlargement impasse, the EU has recently proposed a gradual approach to integration, particularly with regard to market integration, which is to be facilitated by a new growth plan for the Western Balkans. This article argues that this 'carrot' and greater flexibility in general are intended to re-legitimise the EU-WB relationship. The EU can demonstrate its ongoing commitment to the region in a political process that remains open-ended, while WB governments can benefit from new opportunities and new budgets. Despite the 'new momentum' in EU enlargement policies, I argue that Serbian political discourse and action have become more violent in recent years and that a negligence of the security needs of the most fragile WB states has the power to derail the enlargement process. Reinforced commitments to KFOR and EUFOR Althea as well as reinvigorated EU assistance efforts in the fundamental requirements are needed to make full WB EU membership eventually happen.*

**Keywords:** *EU enlargement, Western Balkans, Kosovo, Serbia, gradual integration*

This article first describes changes in the politics of European Union (EU) enlargement in the Western Balkans (WB) since 2022 (section one). Section two highlights key events and issues in the six candidate countries of the region in

the same period. There are signs of a 'new momentum' in the EU enlargement process. Russia's continued war against Ukraine is the reason for the new dynamic, along with Ukraine's persistent self-defence and quest for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The new dynamic makes the previous ten years of enlargement policy in the Western Balkans look pale. Given the success of earlier EU enlargements, and despite the EU's long-standing commitment to the Balkans, the failure to integrate the six Southeast European states, with a total population of 16 million, looks in retrospect like a failure of the EU as a polity. How can the EU credibly address global issues and be considered a global player if it is unable to integrate these six marginal states in its immediate neighbourhood?

The hypotheses of this article focus on the geostrategic and security aspects of the EU enlargement process, which have moved centre-stage since 2022, but also on rational cost-benefit calculations. The EU's new political will to integrate the Western Balkans has its origins in Russia's war against Ukraine and Ukraine's quest for EU integration. Since 2022, the EU has been much more willing to invest political, financial and administrative resources to speed up the integration of the six WB states. I argue that the relative cost of anchoring the six WB states in the Western and EU orbit is relatively low compared to the financial and humanitarian support required for a war-torn country like Ukraine. In terms of communication, I note that the EU is sticking to the discourse of 'tough but fair' conditionality in order to remain credible. At the level of concrete forms of cooperation, however, the EU shows flexibility and openness, particularly when a government in a candidate country considers non-EU alternatives. The 2024 Serbia-EU cooperation agreement on lithium mining gives evidence of the implementation of an option that skilfully bypasses local protests in the name of an environmentally and socially acceptable deal in the name of Serbian and European interests.

I also discuss the security dimension, arguing that European and Western partners are at risk of not taking enough measures to ensure the security of all WB states. Revisionist Serbia under President Aleksandar Vučić and the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina led by Bosnian Serb nationalist Milorad Dodik are seeking domestic and international political alliances that threaten the territorial integrity of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The role of European actors and the second Trump administration will be crucial in this regard throughout the 2020s. In these cases, fragile statehood combined with Serbian and Bosnian Serb revisionism has the power to take EU enlargement in the Western Balkans back to where the process started some twenty years ago. Section three of this article discusses the security dimension. Section four elaborates on the concepts of gradual integration and differentiated enlargement. The conclusions (section five) highlight the most pressing challenges that European actors face in the area.

The arguments in this article profit from three theoretical concepts that help understand the actors involved. The long-dominant concept is liberal intergovernmentalism. Driven by rational considerations weighing the costs and benefits of enlargement, the WB area seemed negligible from the EU's perspective in terms of being fully integrated into the EU. However, the war in Europe has changed these calculations. Social constructivism provides insights into the debate of EU enlargement, a crucial variable in times of rising nationalisms. Finally, differentiated integration – a concept rather than a theory – can improve our understanding of the process. Differentiation is a useful tool that outlines options for association with the EU that can or should eventually lead to full integration. This study will use a qualitative method based on analysing primary documents and reviewing the research literature on the subject.

## **'New momentum' in EU enlargement policy since 2022**

This section captures the 'new momentum' (European Commission 2023: 4) in EU enlargement policy.<sup>1</sup> It examines the reasons for the impasse in the 2010s. It then points to one internal and one external factor that triggered the new momentum and provides more detail about the changes. The EU's enlargement policy scored low in the 2010s. The EU's main argument was that WB candidate countries were not making progress in fulfilling basic conditionalities on the rule of law and human rights. They lacked reforms in the independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. With the rise of populist and anti-European parties, public opinion and governments in EU member states have become more sceptical about enlargement. The management of the financial and sovereign debt crisis led to inward-looking policies, contributing to enlargement fatigue. The process almost came to a halt. The culmination of the non-enlargement rhetoric was the announcement by the then newly elected president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, that there would be 'no' enlargement during his term of office, 2014–2019.

Two factors have contributed to a new dynamic in the early 2020s. The first is internal to the EU. In response to the near standstill of the enlargement agenda and to criticism from WB actors, the new European Commission presented a 'revised' methodology that allowed for more flexibility. The 33 negotiating chapters were reorganised into six thematic clusters. The focus on 'fundamentals' remains, as all negotiations must still be opened and closed with 'fundamentals' chapters (now to be in the cluster of that name). What is new is that the fundamentals, whose standards and benchmarks the EU could define exclusively, no longer function as exclusive gatekeepers. The five clusters

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1 From the perspective of EU member states, the analysis of Buras & Engjellushe 2023 provides an overview. For tactical EU enlargement strategies, see Radić Milosavljević and Petrović 2024.

on the single market, inclusive growth, green transformation, agriculture and cohesion, and external relations can be opened and worked on in parallel. Progress in each specific area (i.e. each 'chapter' within each cluster) can lead to accelerated integration and funding. The second factor is external: Russia's war against Ukraine since February 2022 (for an overview of the war's impact on the geopolitics of the Western Balkans, see Džankić, Kacarska & Keil 2023). This led to the EU's decision to accept Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as new candidates. The EU is providing substantial financial assistance and has opened negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in 2024.

The new dynamic is visible in the debates, issues, budgets and recent achievements (see 2023 and 2024 European Commission reports). Academics made suggestions for how flexibility can be translated into concrete policies, recommending a gradual approach to membership. An influential early contribution referred to this as 'staged' accession (Emerson & Lazarević 2021). A staged approach involves the candidate's greater involvement in the relevant EU policy area prior to formal membership. Gradualism means that the candidate is willing to reform legislation and policies in order to be able to participate in, for example, the internal market. In return the EU is willing to reward the candidate's efforts immediately through involvement and subsequent integration into that policy area and polity. This new pragmatic approach focuses mainly on integrating the economies of the Western Balkans into the EU's internal market.<sup>2</sup>

The latest achievement is that the EU has created a budget for this purpose, mobilising within a short time-frame (roughly one year) six billion euro for the period 2024–2027. The 'New growth plan for the Western Balkans' is to act as an incentive for 'countries to accelerate the adoption and implementation of the *acquis*' (European Commission, New growth plan 2023: 3). The plan includes support for seven priority actions for integration into the EU single market: free movement of goods, free movement of services and workers, access to the Single Euro Payments Area, facilitation of road transport, integration and decarbonisation of energy markets, integration into the Digital Single Market, and integration into industrial supply chains (ibid: 3–5). Alongside this new facility, the established Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III, 2021–27, budget 14 billion euro) is also in operation. Both the New growth plan and the third version of IPA are organised around the six thematic clusters (fundamentals plus the five clusters mentioned two paragraphs above).

The EU's new growth plan has already entered the implementation phase. Five beneficiary countries have submitted their reform agendas, which were approved by the Commission in October 2024. In addition, the four most

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2 For a debate on the difficulties of integrating WB economies into the highly regulated EU Single Market, see the contribution 'Acceding Countries' Gradual Integration into the EU Single Market' (Becker & Lipert 2024).

advanced candidate countries were included in the EU's annual 'Rule of Law Report' in 2024, also to underline the 'fundamentals' as the most important cluster. Summits and high-level meetings have become more frequent. The WB-6 is also present in the European Political Community format, which holds summits twice a year. The sixth summit, which was held in Tirana in May 2025, was hosted by Albania. Co-operation in the Berlin Process format is intensifying and aligning with the agendas of the growth plan. The content of the tenth anniversary meeting of the Berlin Process in 2024 gave evidence of the revitalisation process. The regular annual EU-WB summit at the December European Council produced more substantial results than previous meetings: never as detailed as in the form of the 'Brussels Declaration' of December 2024 (European Council 2024). It is important that the new president of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and the re-elected president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, are committed to enlargement. In the Commission, the questionable Orbán appointee Olivér Várhelyi is no longer in charge of enlargement and has been replaced by the centrist and pragmatic Marta Kos (on Várhelyi, see López Domènech 2024). The main novelty of the 2024–29 Commission, however, is that all commissioners and – subsequently in terms of administration – the Commission directorates consider the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU as a central goal of the entire European Commission College and the 2024–29 work agenda (Baccini & Wölfl 2024).

## **European politics in the six Western Balkans candidate states**

This section provides an overview of recent European policy developments in the six Western Balkans candidate countries. The annual assessments focus on each country's performance in meeting the EU's conditionalities in all 33 negotiating chapters. Recently, the EU has introduced a scoreboard of readiness in five categories. Preparedness ranges from 'early stage' (zero points), 'some preparation' (one point) and 'moderately prepared' (two points) to 'good preparation' (three points) and 'well advanced' (four points). According to this scale, a candidate meets EU standards once it has reached the level of 'good preparation' in all chapters, i.e. to reach an overall score of at least 99 points (33 chapters multiplied by three; the maximum that can be reached on the scoreboard is 132, i.e. 33 chapters multiplied by four). Upon reaching level three, accession negotiations can be provisionally closed. As of October 2024, Montenegro leads all candidate countries with 73 points, followed by Serbia (70), North Macedonia (69), Turkey (63), Albania (60), Ukraine (43), Georgia (38), Moldova (33), Kosovo (32) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (22) (European Stability Initiative, Scorecard 2024).

The best performer in the WB is currently Montenegro, where presidential and parliamentary elections in recent years have ended the rule of the

long-dominant political actor Milo Djukanović and his party. An important achievement of the current Montenegrin government coalition under Prime Minister Milojko Spajić is Montenegro's fulfilment of the interim benchmarks of the rule of law chapters, as assessed by the European Commission in June 2024. Montenegro could meet 83 interim benchmarks. Critical voices see this assessment only as a political signal and point to reforms that were still being implemented throughout 2024 (Muharemović & Usvatov 2024: 4–6). Montenegro has been capable of opening all negotiation chapters. Three chapters (Science and Research, Education and Culture, External Relations) were provisionally closed long ago. In 2024, the new efforts proved successful with the provisional closure of another three chapters: Intellectual Property Rights, Information Society and Media, Enterprise and Industrial Policy. In terms of scores this means that Montenegro has provisionally closed six chapters (score three, 'good preparation'). The country is 'moderately prepared' (score in the range of two) in some 20 chapters. The seven chapters where Montenegro has only 'some level of preparation' (score in the area of one or one and a half) are 'Fight against corruption' and 'Freedom of expression' (these two are in the important 'fundamentals' category), as well as 'Free movement of workers', 'Fisheries', 'Social policy and employment', 'Environment and climate change' and 'Financial and budgetary provisions'.

Serbia is next, with 22 chapters open. Unlike Montenegro, eleven chapters could not be opened. Like Montenegro, Serbia managed to close the two chapters of 'Science and Research' and 'Education and Culture' long ago. The dominant political party SNS manoeuvred Serbia into a difficult situation. Democratic deficits and a backsliding in the rule of law led to an almost total state capture of the country. The most appalling corruption scandal, caused by a collapsing canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024, killed sixteen people. This sparked widespread protests which have been ongoing ever since and which may lead to President Aleksandar Vučić's eventual downfall. Earlier in 2024, Serbia undertook some pragmatic steps towards economic integration. In a later section I will argue that it is only the relative size and political and economic importance of the country in the region that keeps Serbia in the EU enlargement process at all (on Serbia's options see Dimitrov 2024 & Bechev 2025). Albania and North Macedonia come in third and fourth. In 2023 and 2024, the European Commission screened their preparedness. The two candidates have responded by submitting their roadmaps on the fundamentals cluster. Albania was able to start negotiations in October 2024. North Macedonia could not because of Bulgaria's insistence on the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia's constitution (a condition that Bulgaria invented in 2020), or, in the words of the European Commission's 2024 annual progress report: 'The adoption of the action plan on the protection of minorities is still pending' (European Commission 2024: 5). The outgoing centre-left government failed



to secure a two-thirds majority for the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in the constitution, while the incoming nationalist VMRO-DPMNE-led government (as well as the country's president from the same party) hardened North Macedonia's position in this regard.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the two laggards of the six countries in the region. With some political goodwill, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations in December 2023. The screening process started in Spring 2024, but is currently stalled due to numerous legislative acts in the Republika Srpska entity that undermine the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. The enforcement of an arrest warrant against Milorad Dodik failed in East Sarajevo in April 2025. The incident proved that the special police forces of the Republika Srpska entity remained superior to Bosnia's regular state police. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only one of the six WB countries that has not yet submitted a reform agenda that could activate funds from the EU's New growth plan. Kosovo is the most fragile state in the WB region. An important symbolic step was the submission of its EU application in December 2022. Kosovars have enjoyed free travel to the EU since 2024. The Kosovar government was able to present a reform agenda in the framework of the WB growth plan, but the activation of the growth plan budgets depends on the success of the 'Normalisation' dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Due to uncompromising positions, Kosovo is trapped in tensions with autocratic and revisionist Serbia over the administration of the Serb-majority north of the country. Since June 2023, Kosovo's EU policy has been dominated by the EU's measures against the Kosovar government, the violent actions of Serbian nationalists in the Banjska/Banjskë incident of 24 September 2023 and its aftermath, and the postponement of Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe in May 2024. The impasse is ongoing, not least because a government could not yet be formed following the parliamentary elections of February 2025.

## **Territorial integrity and possible violent alternatives in the context of the *Serbian World* concept**

In this section, I argue that the territorial integrity of the fragile states of Kosovo and of Bosnia and Herzegovina is under threat. These states are in danger of falling victim to violent Serb nationalism or even to Trump-Vučić deals that could revive the idea of territorial exchange. For over a decade, the EU has tried to be an impartial actor in the intended 'Normalisation' process between Serbia and Kosovo. However, the EU's role as a neutral interlocutor and mediator has only very limited influence because it is based on the false assumption of symmetry between Serbia and Kosovo. This symmetry exists in the narrow frame of the EU-led 'Normalisation' process. Outside that format, however, the reality is highly asymmetrical. Serbia is a fully recognised state

within the international system. As a recognised member, Serbia is doing everything it can to block Kosovo's accession to international institutions. However, as a non-member, Kosovo has no choice but to seek support from like-minded states in multilateral organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Kosovo is therefore completely dependent on external support to eventually achieve the same status as Serbia and the 27 EU member states.<sup>3</sup>

The issue that has hindered Kosovo's EU integration efforts in the 2020s is the question of the legitimacy of governance in the four Serb-dominated municipalities of northern Kosovo. Following the 2013 Brussels Agreement and the Ohrid Agreement of March 2023, Kosovo is obliged to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM). This institution is intended to advocate the interests of Serbs in northern Kosovo more effectively. However, Kosovo did not comply. Consequently, the EU imposed sanctions on the country in mid-2023. These measures are still in place two years later, despite the EU's High Representative at the time, Josep Borrell, recommending that they be lightened and eventually lifted in 2024.<sup>4</sup> The decisive EU members France and Germany are insisting that Kosovo implement the Ohrid Agreement (Bechev et al. 2025). This is also why, at the request of France, Germany and Italy, Kosovo's application to the Council of Europe (COE) was removed from the agenda of the COE Committee of Ministers for the May 2024 meeting.<sup>5</sup> This is all the more regrettable given that France itself has neither signed nor ratified the highly important COE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.<sup>6</sup> French and German insistence on the implementation of ASM can also be read as fulfilling the nationalist goals of the Vučić regime, as it disproportionately highlights the interests of Serbs in northern Kosovo and implicitly tolerates a legacy of violent resistance to the state of Kosovo. This is in contrast to Serbs living in

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3 It is precisely thanks to the goodwill of like-minded partners – the approximately 100 states that have recognised Kosovo, including most European states and the US, who are its most active supporters – that Kosovo has been able to join certain international organisations. These include global and regional organisations specialising in economics and finance, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Regional Cooperation Council.

4 In June 2024, the Pristina-based think-tank Group for Legal and Political Studies concluded: 'The path forward to the withdrawal of the restrictive measures goes through more coordinated and well-explained policies by the Kosovar government and a more balanced approach by the EU vis-à-vis the parties to the dialogue. Retaining them after a full year, even after all the conditions of the Bratislava Agreement were fulfilled, is wrong and damages both the reputation of the EU and the Kosova's integration prospects. Therefore, the EC should lift the measures as soon as possible and speed up the integration process' (Group for Legal and Political Studies 2024: 5).

5 A month earlier, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had voted overwhelmingly in favour of Kosovo's membership, based on the 27-page report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy (Council of Europe 2023) and opinions (available at <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33404>) on it.

6 Aside from the ASM issue, the needs of the Serb minority are inadequately addressed by the Kosovo government in many aspects of their daily lives, particularly with regard to health, education and pensions (International Crisis Group 2024).



eastern and southern Kosovo, whose record of coexistence with non-Serbs is far more peaceful.

A specific institution of minority governance of Serbs in Northern Kosovo is a political and a legitimacy issue in Kosovo. For France and Germany, this is a reason to exclude Kosovo from the COE, the institution with the greatest leverage to handle minority rights. For Vučić's Serbia, however, tolerating, if not encouraging, violent acts is part of Serbia's strategy in handling the matter. Tensions were growing in mid-2023 between Kosovo Serb protesters, Serbian militia and Kosovo special police, which Serbian president Vučić described on Serbian public television on 6 July 2023 as follows: 'The pogroms, persecution and ethnic cleansing that the regime in Pristina is carrying out against the Serb population are well organised.' Serbian President Vučić's charges are entirely unfounded. In a February 2024 analysis entitled 'Invented pogroms. Statistics, lies and confusion in Kosovo' the European Stability Initiative think-tank rightly points out that Vučić's accusations are palpably untrue:

None of the many international observers with staff on the ground in Kosovo – from KFOR to EULEX, the EU Rule of Law Mission, from UNMIK to the OSCE – have seen or described 'ethnic cleansing of Serbs' or Albanian 'terror' in recent years in any of their copious reports. But absence of evidence has not stopped incendiary claims being made. (European Stability Initiative 2024: 3)

During the same broadcast, President Vučić urged NATO and the UN to disarm the Kosovo police. He claimed that if this recommendation was ignored, 'someone else' would do it. The Serbian president was right. Two and a half months later, on 24 September 2023, a close associate of Vučić, the Kosovo Serb entrepreneur and politician Milan Radoičić, and 44 other suspects staged an attack on the Kosovo police in Banjska/Banjskë (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo 2024: 2, 5, 17; International Crisis Group 2024: 9–12). This was a violent attack on Kosovo's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, on the Serbian side of the border, 8,000 Serbian troops were waiting for instructions on how to proceed (Le Monde 2023). The swift action of the Kosovar police in Banjska/Banjskë discouraged a potential Serbian military invasion of northern Kosovo, as did the reaction of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who telephoned Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to urge 'immediate de-escalation and a return to dialogue' (Binley 2023). A press statement issued by the US secretary of state on 25 September, one day after the attack, emphasised the importance of the rules-based order by stating that 'perpetrators of this crime must be held accountable via a transparent investigative process' and calling on Serbia and Kosovo to 'refrain from any actions or rhetoric which could further inflame tensions' (Blinken 2023).

By 2024, Serbian revisionism ranked prominently in political discourse in Serbia. It was closely linked to the discourse of Milorad Dodik, the *spiritus rector* of the destructive domestic veto policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska. In early 2024, together with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, he signed the 'All-Serbian Declaration' on cooperation between the Bosnian Serb entity and Serbia (Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Joint Future of the Serb People 2024) on behalf of their governments. Seven weeks later, on 31 July 2024, the Serbian Parliament confirmed the decision and adopted the declaration by an overwhelming majority.<sup>7</sup> The 'Srpski Mir' ('Serbian World') declaration seeks to give the Serbian nation a dominant role in areas where Serbs live, which is similar to Slobodan Milošević's nationalist vision in late Yugoslavia. If realised, this would mean the end of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in their present political and territorial dimensions.<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen whether the EU is preparing a contingency plan in case 'territorial exchange' re-emerges on the agenda, as happened previously during Donald Trump's first presidency. In terms of discourse, the EU as a whole, including the new commissioner and EU member states, is committed to Kosovo's territorial integrity. Within the EU, Hungary's autocratic leader, Viktor Orbán, is currently the only figure to unanimously support the ideas and policies of Vučić and Dodik.<sup>9</sup>

## Gradual EU integration in practice

This section applies the concept of gradual integration to long-standing issues between the EU and its candidate countries. The subsequent four paragraphs focus on the following themes: 1 inclusion *versus* exclusion models of integration, 2 the recent EU-Serbia lithium deal as an important case in the EU's new pragmatic approach to enlargement, 3 the EU's handling of member state vetoes in the case of Bulgaria and North Macedonia in 2024, and 4 the concept of 'WB as a region' *versus* individual merits. Conceptually, gradual integration can be viewed as a strategy of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig & Tekin 2023: 109–113). Gradual integration also raises the question of whether a stage of integration could function as an alternative to full integration. The EU rejects this idea, claiming that gradual integration is an offer and a useful tool to bring candidate countries closer to the *acquis* in the respective policy area, thus fa-

7 A total of 139 parliamentarians voted in favour, nine voted against, and six abstained (Hungarian Human Rights Foundation 2024).

8 Srpski Mir is modelled on the anti-Western, anti-liberal and imperialist concept of 'Russki Mir' (Russian World). There are also Serbs living in Croatia and Montenegro. The territorial integrity of the two states is much more secure because they are NATO members.

9 Orbán's Hungary supports Serbia's authoritarian leader, Aleksandar Vučić. This support extends to the anti-Kosovo policies. In April 2024, Orbán's Fidesz party voted against Kosovo's prospective membership of the Council of Europe.

cilitating full integration. On the other hand, given that candidates have been struggling for decades to meet the basic criteria, it could also be argued that the process is not accelerating quickly enough or is slowing down again. This would make alternative models, such as ‘associated membership’ instead of full membership, more relevant. These models would roughly correspond to stages II (intermediate accession stage) and III (new member state stage) of the ‘staged accession’ model (Emerson & Lazarević 2021: 2, 4–6, described in section one).

The issue of candidate inclusion or exclusion is an old and new story of enlargement. After almost two decades in the waiting room, it is a legitimate observation that the WB countries have been excluded from the EU. Since 2022, the EU has slowly revived its inclusion strategy, as evidenced by the central enlargement issue of ‘fundamentals’, with the EU including four WB countries for the first time in the 2024 Rule of Law Report. Following the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, the rule of law became the central conditionality of a ‘new approach’ to enlargement (launched in 2011). At the time, many argued that the two countries had been admitted (included) too early. Consequently, the EU introduced the ‘Cooperation and Verification Mechanism’, which defined and enforced the fulfilment of conditionalities during the first fifteen years of EU membership. Meanwhile, democratic backsliding and violations of the rule of law occurred in other EU member states. Formal rule of law proceedings, including sanctions, have been initiated against Poland and Hungary.<sup>10</sup> To avoid focusing solely on the offenders, reporting was extended to all member states in 2020. By including the candidate countries in this system, the EU is sending an important signal and demonstrating its willingness to treat the more advanced WB candidate countries in the same reporting system as the member states. The Brussels Declaration of December 2024 states that the four included candidates could participate in the September 2024 General Affairs Council to discuss trends in the rule of law within the EU (European Council 2024: 16). This example of inclusion is likely to be extended in the coming years (see Conclusions, political dimension).

The EU’s flexibility is evident in its approach to autocratic Serbia. It is the most important of the six WB candidates, both economically, due to its size, and politically, due to its influence on the politics of neighbouring WB states. The current regime in Serbia is a typical populist nationalist government, for which the EU is only one of several actors in a cost-benefit calculation. Due to Serbia’s relative weight, EU actors have so far turned a blind eye to the ‘stabilitocrat’ Vučić, driven by the belief that Serbia’s inclusion would benefit the Serbian public and the WB region as a whole. Criticism from the EU regarding electoral abuses, the suppression of opposition and restrictions on free

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike Hungary’s Orbán regime, the pro-European Tusk government in Poland was able to overcome them.

media, as well as the promotion of an overly nationalist, all-Serbian discourse, has been muted or non-existent. At the core of the new EU-Serbia ‘strategic partnership’ (Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and the Republic of Serbia 2024) is an agreement on cooperation exploiting lithium.<sup>11</sup> Notably, this was followed by an agreement for Serbia to purchase French military fighter jets. Serbian and EU business interests guide these partnerships. The events demonstrate the EU’s pragmatism. The EU is adopting a transactional approach to integration, offering more advantageous deals to the Serbian regime than China or Russia.

Gradual integration could potentially bypass the notorious veto power of EU member states in enlargement policy. The EU has a history of siding firmly with its identity-politics oriented blocking members, which are usually neighbouring states of candidate countries. North Macedonia has experienced this during twenty years and more in the EU waiting room. Bulgaria insists on the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority as a constitutionally recognised nation. The 2024 edition of the EU enlargement report on North Macedonia provides some results from the most recent screening process, which took place in 2023, and demonstrates an improved understanding of North Macedonia’s political processes within this bilateral dispute (European Commission, North Macedonia 2024: 22). Concrete economic measures within the framework of the new WB growth plan are also being implemented, thus ensuring that the minority conflict with Bulgaria does not bring the whole EU approximation process to a standstill. Nevertheless, the minority issue is fundamental, and formal accession negotiations must be opened with this cluster.

Gradualism could undermine the ‘region’ principle that the EU applies in dealing with the Western Balkans. There are several reasons to consider the WB as a group, such as the small size of the states and the legacy of conflicts during the disintegration process of former Yugoslavia. However, for many years, the ‘region’ principle meant that the EU’s enlargement policy was lenient towards laggards. Today, Angela Merkel’s strategic assumption that the path to Brussels for the Western Balkans could only be through the inclusion of the most important WB-6 power, Serbia, has backfired. The idea was that a Europe-oriented Belgrade would pave the way for the other five Western Balkan states. The opposite happened: Vučić and the SNS-led government of Serbia have drifted away from EU values over the past decade. Serbia’s foreign policy positions on Ukraine and Russia/Belarus have highlighted the differences between Serbia and the other five WB states as the latter are fully aligned with the EU. The EU’s WB growth plan and the EU-Serbia lithium deal suggest that the EU has become

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11 A previous contract with the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto sparked fierce protests from the Serbian public and was eventually withdrawn. Both the EU and Serbia claim that their deal addresses the environmental and social issues that were raised during the earlier protests (see also Dzihic 2024).

more flexible and has partially abandoned the group imperative. Economic integration, accompanied by a few financial incentives, could potentially serve as a pragmatic, face-saving intermediate option for Vučić's regime.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusions: Reinvigorated EU engagement in security and in rule of law paramount**

This article argues that the EU adopted innovative measures to bring the candidate countries closer to membership, and that the WB candidates are responding to the new opportunities. There is a sincere interest on both sides in integrating the six economies into the EU's common market. However, beyond the economic dimension, the region has developed at different paces. Of all candidates, Montenegro is the closest to becoming a full EU member before the next European Parliament elections in 2029. The other candidates all face serious difficulties in meeting the 'fundamentals' criteria. It remains to be seen whether the EU will be willing to move forward with sectoral integration, in line with its criteria for individual negotiation chapters, in order to achieve sectoral or associated membership. In terms of external actors, Russia and Belarus will continue to present themselves as partners to Serbia and Republika Srpska. The EU's economic rival, China, will continue to offer WB governments significant financial incentives, as will Turkey and the wealthy Gulf states. It remains to be seen whether Trump's United States will turn away from the region and leave a vacuum, or engage in state-threatening deals in the style of Trumpism or Trump-Putin, which have the flavour of divide-and-rule imperial practice. Either scenario poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and would represent a worst-case scenario for the European integration of the three WB states involved.

More specific conclusions should be drawn regarding the security and political aspects of the EU. Security in Kosovo is provided by the NATO-led KFOR. Its current strength is 4,300 troops. Italy and the United States are the more important nations in command positions and together provide 1,500 troops. In terms of security policy, European NATO partners may face a reduction in US KFOR commitments. A greater commitment from EU states to provide additional KFOR troops would mitigate security risks. The provision of more international troops could be coordinated with more states who already engage in KFOR, like Great Britain, Turkey and Switzerland. All these EU and non-EU states have a profound interest in the stability of Kosovo. Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on a UN mandate that must be renewed annually. The mission, known as EUFOR Althea, is politically led by the European Union and comprises 600 troops. In light of Republika Srpska's secessionist ambitions, it is

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12 On the EU's unequally conciliatory position towards Serbia, see also Dopchie & Liridon (2024).

essential to deploy more troops to the strategically important Brčko area (Wölfl 2024). This could effectively limit the realisation of Milorad Dodik's secessionist ambitions. However, all parties recognise that reducing tensions between the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires a political solution (see below) whereas a military force can only serve as a security provider.

In terms of security, the cost-benefit calculations underpinning the EU's enlargement policy have also changed as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. For a variety of reasons, showing full solidarity with Ukraine is and remains a top priority for Europe and the EU. Setting aside the loss of life and the suffering of the wounded and displaced, who deserve full support, backing a country at war is very costly. In comparison, EU enlargement to the Western Balkans would be much cheaper.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, investing in the security of fragile states such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina would help keep costs down.

In terms of politics, the EU could play a more decisive role as a proactive institutional actor and integrate the WB states. Analyst Christophe Hillion suggests 'accession preparations by anchoring the candidates in its governance' (Hillion 2025: 4). The EU is the main agent of change. It is the EU that has the financial resources and administrative capacity to include the candidate countries in its governance. One tangible reward for those that meet the criteria in the respective negotiating chapters could be the integration of their experts and politicians into the EU institutions. The 2024 enlargement reports show an increased participation compared to previous years.<sup>14</sup> The reports praise Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia for aligning with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. So why not involve these countries in decision-making at all institutional levels? Full participation by candidate countries in selected policy areas could demonstrate gradual and differentiated integration into the EU. At the same time, this would demonstrate the EU's commitment to the candidate countries.

Hillion rightly highlights the ongoing challenges faced by WB states in meeting fundamental criteria. The lack of progress over the last fifteen years suggests that only a more proactive approach by the EU will lead to the changes it demands. Minority rights in Kosovo may serve as an example. The EU has the

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13 The EU's humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine, excluding all bilateral aid and excluding all military aid from all actors and allocated through the European Commission and the European Council amounts to 45 billion euro in the period 2022–2024. The budgets for IPA III and the WB growth plan amount to 20 billion euro. These two spending figures can be roughly correlated with the population figures of Ukraine and the six WB states (45 and 20 billion euro). The crucial difference lies in the time frame of the expenditure: less than three years for Ukraine *versus* seven years for the Western Balkans. Consequently, EU funding for the Western Balkans is approximately half that for Ukraine. Note that the distribution over the years in the WB is uneven due to the novelty of the WB growth plan. In other words, expenditure is proportionally lower in 2021–23 and proportionally higher in 2024–27.

14 This applies to analyses of individual enlargement negotiation chapters in the country reports (classified as 'Commission Staff Working Documents'). The 2024 versions are available under [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en).



power to set the agenda. The EU can champion minority protection in Kosovo by providing expanded financial and administrative support. If the European perspective becomes credible and produces tangible results, including improvements to the socioeconomic situation of Kosovar citizens belonging to national minorities, the revisionist rhetoric of Kosovo Serbs will also fade. Similarly, the EU could act as a mediator between Bulgaria and North Macedonia regarding their respective minorities. Evidence shows that taking the side of a member state simply prolongs the impasse for years.<sup>15</sup> A more proactive and creative approach is also needed to overcome the impasse between the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, domestic stakeholders often hinder progress. The EU delegation in the country is right to urge the finalisation and submission of the reform agenda, which would enable the EU to activate its growth plan, as has already happened in the other five WB states (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025).

Finally, is there a Central European dimension to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans? Yes, because the Central European states have undergone similar transformation processes and have long since achieved what the Western Balkans are striving for, namely EU integration. This is why the Central European EU members have always fully supported the EU integration of the WB. However, Central European states are also those where democratic backsliding in the EU is most pronounced. Hungary is the most notable case, followed recently also by Fico's Slovakia, and previously by Poland. Most of Romania's and Bulgaria's government parties have long-standing issues concerning state capture and the rule of law. This is linked to autocratic leadership and in Hungary's case Viktor Orbán's consistent use of a member state's veto power. EU leaders are pushing for reforms to the EU decision-making process ahead of the next enlargement in order to ensure that the organisation remains functional. They do not aspire for more Viktor Orbáns, i.e. more persistent veto-players, in the EU. As with the previous eastward enlargements, diversity will increase. However, the legacy of autocratic rule in the WB region presents an additional challenge. In times of war, decision-makers in Brussels and major EU capitals have concluded that perpetual EU waiting room status for the Western Balkans linked with the inability to reform the EU as an institution is either too risky or too costly, or both.

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15 There are many other examples of the potential positive impact of a proactive EU role in protecting the rights of national minorities. 2025 could be a pivotal year for Moldova with regard to resolving the Transnistria conflict. Transnistrians and Gagauzians alike may claim rights that will be difficult for Moldova to address satisfactorily. In the context of the Serbian anti-Vučić protests, tensions are rising between EU member Croatia and candidate Serbia in 2025. This could have a negative impact on their shared national minority. Croatia may find political reasons to veto Serbia's steps towards EU integration. Orbán's Hungary constantly claims that the Hungarian minority in Ukraine is being discriminated against. The EU could act as a trusted mediator in such cases.

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