

BETWEEN BRUSSELS AND BEYOND: GEOPOLITICAL CROSSCURRENTS AND EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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ABSTRACT

The European Union's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans has long been a cornerstone of promoting stability, democracy, and prosperity in the volatile region. However, increasing geopolitical tensions have complicated enlargement, including resurgent Russian influence, China's growing role as a global powerbroker, and internal EU issues like enlargement exhaustion and gridlock. This paper examines how external players and domestic EU politics shape the integration prospects of Western Balkan states. It discusses recent developments such as the EU's €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility and recalibration after Russia invaded Ukraine, arguing the EU needs a more strategic approach countering outside pressures to realize enlargement's transformative potential.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans—comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—has been central to EU expansionism since the early 2000s due to its pivotal position connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. While the EU framed enlargement as a democratizing and stabilizing tool, geopolitical crosscurrents have increasingly driven the process. This analysis explores Russia, China, and internal EU dynamics' influence on Balkan integration.

The shifting nature of the EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans over the past two decades has been defined by conditionality, reform fatigue, and geopolitical tensions. Initially framed as a process of promoting democracy and development, accession has become increasingly transactional and politically motivated. The EU's requirement for candidates to meet strict criteria has driven significant change but led to weariness, with states viewing it as overly bureaucratic. Within the EU itself, doubts about further expansion surfaced due to concerns over new members' impact and strain on institutions, stalling progress.

The intensifying geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans has created challenges for the region's European integration aspirations, as Russia and China increase efforts to cultivate strategic influence amid ongoing EU accession processes. Moscow has established significant presence through cultivating selective relationships, most notably with Belgrade, employing both traditional soft power tools as well as sophisticated disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening support for EU integration across the nations. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has added new layers of complexity, as the Kremlin increasingly leverages the Western Balkans to counter European and transatlantic presence while advancing its own agenda in the area.

Beijing has primarily relied on economic means to expand impact, pouring extensive infrastructure funds into nations such as Serbia and Montenegro through initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative. While the investments have provided welcome financial relief to governments facing budget constraints, they have raised growing worries about potential debt dependence and erosion of European standards. China's dominant creditor role has translated into considerable political say, seen most prominently in cases where projects fail to deliver anticipated economic returns for the receiving country.

The advancement of democracy in Southeastern Europe has been uneven due to political instability and external involvement fueling tensions within nations. While the European Union has invested billions toward infrastructure development and regional cooperation initiatives intended to accelerate reforms, these programs have seen mixed success in strengthening economic and social bonds across borders. Political obstacles have limited progress, as leaders prioritize short-term goals over cooperation.

Internal debates within the European Union regarding expansion have also complicated policy implementation. Unanimous consensus on enlargement among members has proved elusive as domestic concerns often supersede strategic visions for integrated stability. Institutional changes necessary to accommodate new partners have inched forward slowly, evidencing deeper uncertainties about managing diversity and responsibilities. Strengthening democratic foundations requires addressing fragmentation within nations and between them to cultivate shared

prosperity and autonomy over foreign meddling. Patience and resolve from all sides can help overcome existing vulnerabilities to outside influence.

The cases of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate the intricacy of navigating these hurdles. Serbia's integration trajectory has been complicated by maintaining close alliances with Russia and ambiguous dedication to EU-aligned changes. While certain financial reforms have been put into action, reluctance to synchronize with EU foreign policy positions, particularly regarding sanctions against Russia, has sparked significant concern among EU member states. Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits an even more perplexing situation, where fragmented internal politics and persistent secessionist rhetoric, notably in Republika Srpska, have seriously stalled progress towards EU integration. Moreover, the EU's inconsistent responses to political crises in Bosnia have additionally undermined its credibility as a transformative force in the area.



To tackle these multifaceted difficulties, the EU must develop and execute a more strategic and cohesive approach to enlargement. This necessitates establishing clear and credible membership pathways for Western Balkan states, with transparent benchmarks and realistic timelines for accession. Supporting regional economic integration initiatives becomes pivotal in countering outside influence while fostering stability and prosperity. Additionally, engaging and empowering civil society organizations can help counter disinformation campaigns and promote EU values at the grassroots level. The EU must also undertake internal reforms to ensure its enlargement process remains viable and transformative. This includes revising decision-making procedures to prevent individual member states from indefinitely obstructing accession progress and adapting institutional structures to accommodate future expansion while maintaining operational effectiveness.

In 2006, Montenegro achieved independence through a referendum, markedly altering its association with Serbia and establishing itself as Europe's newest sovereign state at that point in time. This historic change restructured the regional dynamic while cultivating new avenues for European integration.

The 2008 declaration of Kosovo's autonomy from Serbia represented a defining moment in regional politics, though its position remains debated. Serbia, backed by Russia, continues to reject Kosovo's autonomy while the majority of EU member states have acknowledged Kosovo as a sovereign state. This ongoing disagreement has significantly influenced regional stability and EU accession processes. Between 2009 and 2013, Croatia successfully navigated the EU accession process, becoming the second former Yugoslav republic after Slovenia to join the European Union. Croatia's entrance in 2013 demonstrated the tangible probability of EU membership for Western Balkan states while also underlining the rigorous criteria for participation. The 2015-2016 period witnessed the peak of the European migration crisis, with the Western Balkans route transforming into a critical transit corridor for refugees and migrants seeking access into the EU. This crisis tested regional cooperation mechanisms and exposed gaps in institutional competence, while also affecting EU-Western Balkans relations.

China's presence in the region intensified substantially during 2016-2020, denoted by the execution of major infrastructure initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative. Noteworthy among these was the Montenegro highway undertaking, which by 2021 had generated considerable debt issues, with Montenegro's public debt reaching approximately 103% of its GDP.

The 2018 Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia (formerly FYROM) and Greece resolved a decades-long name dispute, showcasing the potential for diplomatic resolution of regional conflicts. This agreement removed a significant barrier to North Macedonia's EU accession process, though subsequent challenges emerged.

During 2020-2022, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both regional vulnerabilities and the strategic importance of EU-Western Balkans cooperation. The EU's vaccine outreach and economic support packages competed with similar initiatives from Russia and China, demonstrating the ongoing geopolitical competition in the region.

The 2022 Russian assault of Ukraine visibly altered regional security dynamics, particularly affecting Serbia given its historical ties with Russia. This event prompted amplified EU engagement in the region, reflected in accelerated accession talks and enhanced economic support packages.

Initially the European Union sought to stabilize the Western Balkans after the devastating breakup of Yugoslavia through initiatives to foster political dialogue and economic cooperation. This followed the enlargement of 2004 which incorporated ten Central and Eastern European countries and shifted the EU's attention towards the region, yet integrating the Balkans has proven slower and more difficult owing to deep-seated ethnic divisions and governance issues plaguing the nations. The protracted accession process has bred fatigue among member states regarding further expansion. While the EU's conditionality-driven approach to reforms has had success cultivating improvement, it has also exposed the limitations of transforming a region so sharply defined by political and ethnic fractures. This led the policy to branch into a multi-tiered structure engaging the Western Balkans in select programs without full membership, such as the West Balkans Investment Framework and Common Regional Market. Recently the 2024 Reform and Growth Facility was inaugurated with €6 billion to accelerate socioeconomic changes. However, critics caution this risks locking countries into a perpetual pre-accession state where economic cohesion outstrips political integration.

Further complicating enlargement are present geopolitical tensions like Russia's invasion of Ukraine which has hastened Ukraine and Moldova's candidacy while raising issues for nations such as North Macedonia facing stalled talks despite concessions.

In 2023, the EU announced sizeable financial support through the Reform and Growth Facility, allocating €6 billion to back socioeconomic progression in the Western Balkans. This initiative represented a strategic shift toward more substantial economic integration mechanisms while maintaining the ultimate goal of full EU membership.

These developments collectively illustrate the complex interplay between regional dynamics, external influences, and European integration processes in the Western Balkans. The period from 2005 to 2024 has been characterized by incremental advancement toward European integration, punctuated by significant challenges and periodic setbacks, while consistently highlighting the region's strategic importance in the broader European context.

2. CONCLUSION

The path of Western Balkan countries towards European Union accession has arrived at a defining moment, influenced by opposing worldwide political powers and internal European Union traits. While the European Union continues as the predominant companion to the region, its means to create meaningful change relies upon employing a more organized and harmonious tactic regarding enlargement. Achieving success in this effort necessitates recognizing and dealing with both the geopolitical pressures and institutional obstacles presently forming the integration process, thereby aiding Western Balkan nations in accomplishing their European hopes while contributing to regional security and well-being. The future direction of these nations hangs in the balance, shaped both by their own attempts at reform and the degree of support provided by their aspiring community. Progress will require sustained cooperation across borders, reconciliation of differences, and reaffirming the shared vision of an expanded sphere of peace, stability and prosperity.

The region has emerged as a stage for geopolitical jousting as Russia and China actively cultivate their sway. Russia employs gentle persuasion, fake news, and nationalist cheerleaders to undermine integration, particularly in Serbia where cultural ties are leveraged. China's Belt and Road Initiative saw roads, rails, and bridges built across the land, though debts now burden budgets as standards are dismantled. Meanwhile, the Ukraine war complicates the situation further, with Russia challenging western impact. To balance aspirations with realities, the EU recalibrated. A €6 billion Reform and Growth package aims to hasten socioeconomic changes through infrastructure, green shifts, and digitization, though some allege this risks consigning states to perpetual waiting rather than full partnership. The Berlin Process and Common Market initiatives seek to promote cooperation and integration as an antidote to outside actors, but competing interests and split politics curb impact.

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