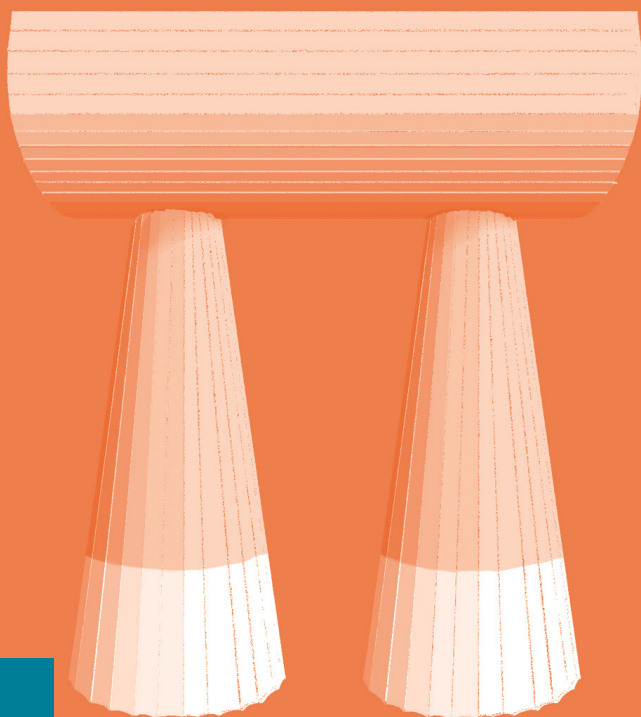


# EUROPE AND RUSSIA ON THE BALKAN FRONT

GEOPOLITICS AND DIPLOMACY  
IN THE EU'S BACKYARD

edited by **Giorgio Fruscione**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI



# **EUROPE AND RUSSIA ON THE BALKAN FRONT**

## **GEOPOLITICS AND DIPLOMACY IN THE EU'S BACKYARD**

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edited by Giorgio Fruscione

**ISPI**

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IN THE EU'S BACKYARD

Edited by Giorgio Fruscione

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The monument in the cover is a memorial to Mitrovica's Albanian and Serbian fighters who worked at the Trepca mines and lost their lives during World War II, symbolizing unity between the ethnic groups.

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# 1. The EU and Third Actors in the Balkans. Relaunching Enlargement, Reviving Credibility

Milena Lazarević, Sava Mitrović

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Two decades after the Thessaloniki Summit, which declared the European perspective for the Western Balkan (WB) countries,<sup>1</sup> only Croatia has become an EU Member. In contrast, the rest of the region is still a long way from attaining this goal. Membership negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia have spanned a decade with limited success, while accession talks with Albania and (conditionally) North Macedonia have just been opened. After years of groping in the dark, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has just become a candidate country, while Kosovo<sup>2</sup> has yet to surmount the obstacles to this initial milestone, having just received the green light for visa liberalisation. Individual Member States have – for various reasons – frequently blocked the process, causing it to become tediously slow and fragmented. As the process has dragged on with little real success, political will for reforms has dwindled, while autocratic tendencies have flourished in the weak WB democracies. A geopolitical vacuum in the WB which emerged due to the absence of a credible accession perspective has been

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<sup>1</sup> “[Eu-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki](#)”, European Commission, 21 June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

filled by the growing influence of third powers, most notably Russia and China as two dominant actors.

Although the Russian aggression against Ukraine has prompted the EU to advance enlargement policy on its political agenda, it is still struggling to reinvigorate real progress, transform the candidates into viable members and prevent the perverse influence of third actors. The authors of this chapter argue that policy innovations along the lines of the Model of Staged Accession to the EU<sup>3</sup> would help restore political will for demanding reforms in the accession countries as well as unlock political will among the sceptical Member States to further enlarge the Union. By making a success out of enlargement to the WB, the EU would not only reaffirm itself as a key geopolitical actor in its immediate neighbourhood, but also restore its status as a normative power capable of transforming accession states into consolidated democracies. The latter would also be of tremendous importance for the three Eastern Partnership countries which have just been granted either candidate status (Ukraine and Moldova) or a European perspective (Georgia) but are in an even more dire situation *vis-à-vis* external influences, particularly Russia's.

This chapter starts by looking at the current state of play in enlargement policy, analysing both its political and procedural deficiencies and mapping their main consequences. It then provides an overview of the main non-EU actors' influences and examines their means and methods of penetration into WB countries. Next, the chapter introduces innovative proposals for overcoming the enlargement impasse, before concluding with how the EU should move towards both restoring the transformative power of its once most successful policy and reaffirming its geopolitical primacy in its own inner courtyard.

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<sup>3</sup> "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre – CEP, Belgrade, and Centre for European Policy Studies – CEPS, Brussels, October 2021.



## **EU Enlargement 20 Years After the Thessaloniki Summit**

Whereas the process of WB integration into the EU has been underway for the past two decades, its end goal is still nowhere in sight. Several factors, related to both politics and the enlargement policy itself, have contributed to such a status quo. This section discusses those factors, to illustrate how the EU's position in the region has weakened and opened up space for interference by third actors.

### Problems of a political nature

The core problem relates to the open-endedness of the process in the case of Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates (following Croatia's accession in 2013), which has led to a growing belief among both the region's citizens and political leaders that their countries might never join the Union as full-fledged members. In the twenty years following the declaration of the European perspective for the Western Balkans at the Thessaloniki Summit, the process has been slow and often obstructed by Member States' vetoes on the individual steps of the already highly fragmented and incremental process. In the five years of the Juncker Commission (2014-19), enlargement was even officially removed from the list of priorities in the EU's political agenda. The fact that the process was made into a bureaucratic exercise, with little political steering, has created widespread disillusionment and fatigue. It has also turned EU integration into a politically unattractive issue and has led local politicians to make unfavourable cost-benefit calculations regarding major reform actions.

The lack of political inclination on the EU side to further push for enlargement arguably came as a consequence of the polycrisis as well as difficulties with the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law in some of the countries that have acceded to the Union since 2004. Both these factors have made it abundantly clear that enlarging the Union further with weak and poorly

law-abiding democracies might lead to decision-making paralysis and added crises of unity and confidence among Member States. As a result, individual Member States have repeatedly indicated that an internal reform of the EU would have to precede any further enlargement. Yet, with the existing Member States largely divided on the question of whether the Union even needs further treaty and institutional reforms, EU enlargement policy emerges as a major casualty of such a position.

Equally importantly, the lack of a clear and predictable membership perspective has negatively affected internal political developments in the Western Balkans, lowering the appetite for the most fundamental – and for EU membership most critical – reforms related to the functioning of democratic institutions, governance and the rule of law. By failing to properly reward bold political decisions and reforms with equally bold advances towards membership (most vividly demonstrated in the case of North Macedonia – a country that changed its name in order to advance its EU perspective), the EU has shot its own “most successful policy” in the foot. With the dwindling credibility of the process and no accession on the horizon, the region’s leaders have resorted to less politically costly and more advantageous, albeit highly contentious, internal practices. These have included thwarting democratic processes, capturing of state institutions, increasing corruption as well as growing voluntary as well as forced exposure to both political and economic influences of third actors, most notably Russia and China.

### Problems inherent in the enlargement methodology

All of these political issues are further exacerbated by specific inherent traits of the enlargement policy, related to the methodology of accession negotiations as well as the way that Pre-accession assistance (now through IPA III) is allocated and disbursed. Although the 2020 revision of the methodology – and to an extent the programming framework for IPA III – have led to some improvements, they fall short of tackling those problems effectively.

To begin with, in terms of actual benefits to citizens, even with the revised methodology, the accession process delivers little along the way, saving almost everything for the period after accession. Unlike the early phases of the process, which include the signing and ratification of the association agreement, liberalisation of the visa regime with the Schengen area and entry into the regime of the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance, after the start of accession talks, the process does not include additional benefits along the way. Benefits, including participation in EU programmes, have no clear connection with progress in the accession process and the level of preparedness for membership. The same goes for the amount of funds a country can draw from the pre-accession funds. Admittedly, the IPA III programming framework now states that one of the three key criteria for approving proposed actions will be “progress of the beneficiaries on their enlargement agenda.” Yet, the limited total envelope of IPA III (€9 billion for the Western Balkans – corresponding to the structural funds appropriation for Croatia in the 2021-27 Multiannual Financial Framework - MFF) diminishes the possible impact of this factor on the creation of real political motivation and on closing the wide socio-economic development gap between the EU and the region.

Another inherent problem of the enlargement policy, which has plagued its credibility over the years, is its complete dependence on the unanimity rule for each decision by the Member States. Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) does indeed provide for a unanimous vote in the Council when a membership application is submitted. Similarly, the act of accession is dependent upon the ratification of the Accession Treaty, which is an international treaty, requiring a lengthy ratification procedure not only at the EU level, but also by each Member state as well as the acceding country. Yet, in practice, this rule has been translated into each operational decision within a process that has become so fragmented over the years that North Macedonia has now been subjected to a

two-phase process just to formally open accession negotiations, requiring two separate unanimous votes by the EU27. That country provides a clear demonstration of the ineffectiveness of such an approach, having been obstructed by the vetoes of two Member States, despite major efforts to secure its EU future. Considering that Member States already have the two above-mentioned instances in which they can use their veto, keeping the generalised unanimity rule throughout the intricate accession process appears both excessive and unnecessary. Most importantly, it severely undermines the capacity of the EU27 to properly reward political commitment and progress in reforms with adequate graduation towards membership.

Finally, the approach that the Commission uses to monitor and rate progress and preparedness for membership is inconsistent and lacks credibility among at least some Member States, notably those mostly concerned with the state of democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries. While some fundamental reform areas, such as public administration reform, rely on very detailed and evidence-based monitoring methodologies, others, such as democratic institutions, lack even a basic assessment of preparedness and include analyses of different issues and elements for different countries. Such inconsistencies arouse unnecessary suspicions among Member States and create distrust towards the Commission, resulting in additional problems when crucial decisions on rewarding progress (as well as sanctioning backsliding) need to be taken. Ultimately, this leads to a further slowing down of the overall process.

### **Third Actors' Impact in the Western Balkans**

With enlargement proceeding at such a slow pace, some authors have warned that the WB is gradually becoming a “geostrategic chessboard” for external actors, and the EU is no longer unchallenged as the dominant force in the region.<sup>4</sup> When

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<sup>4</sup> L. Hänsel and F.C. Feyerabend, “[The influence of external actors in the Western](#)

speaking about third actors capable of projecting significant economic and political power in the WB, either diverging from or opposed to the EU's approach, Brussels primarily refers to the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, it appears that "enlargement fatigue", caused by both the EU's internal challenges and external factors, costs the EU the dominant position in the region and allows third actors to gain meaningful influence. This section identifies the key fields of external actors' influence and shows the various ways in which their power projection has a negative impact on the European path of the WB.

### Russia – the sources of its political influence

Despite a significant increase in investments since 2006, Russia's economic role in the region has remained limited, but not negligible, in a few important strategic sectors. Its economic influence is most visible in the energy sector, as most of the WB countries are highly dependent on natural gas and oil imported from Russia. Russia's energy influence is highest in Serbia, North Macedonia and BiH, where it supplies nearly 100% of gas needs and owns several important assets.<sup>6</sup> After the Russian company Lukoil opened the first petrol stations in Serbia in 2005 – which is regarded as the beginning of Russia's economic offensive in the region<sup>7</sup> – Russian energy companies started expanding their network throughout the WB. In 2008, Serbia sold its most important strategic company Petroleum Industry of Serbia to the Russian energy giant Gazprom, which became the majority shareholder of the company. Russian enterprises also play a significant role in the energy sector of BiH, where the petroleum industry of the Republika Srpska entity, including its oil refineries in Brod and Modrica and distribution company

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Balkans: A map of geopolitical players", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> "EU chief: Russia, China vying for influence in West Balkans", *ANews*, 6 December 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans", European Parliament, June 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018), p. 36.

Petrolis, is owned by NeftGazinKor. Although Russia remains a marginal trade partner (3.9% for imports and 2.7% for exports)<sup>8</sup> and a modest foreign investor in the WB (4.6% of total foreign direct investments),<sup>9</sup> its control over the energy sector allows it to wield disproportionate political power. All in all, it is evident that Russian gas pipelines carry more than just energy products, and Russia's strong presence in certain Western Balkan countries is a textbook example of converting energy dependence into political influence, which Moscow has tried to use extensively in the wake of its aggression in Ukraine.

Besides the influence it draws from the energy sector, Russia's geopolitical power in the WB also stems from the unresolved Kosovo status. Given that Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with the power to veto a decision on Kosovo's potential membership of the UN, Moscow is a key factor in this regard. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin manipulated Kosovo's secession from Serbia to justify the annexation of Crimea in 2014<sup>10</sup> and currently uses it as a precedent to justify the right of four Ukrainian regions to declare independence,<sup>11</sup> Moscow's Kosovo policy remains unchanged and Russia has continued to refuse to recognise Kosovo.<sup>12</sup> By endorsing Serbia's stance on the Kosovo issue, the Kremlin has gained significant leverage in the country, building on historical, religious and cultural ties between the Russian and Serbian peoples. As a consequence,

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<sup>8</sup> “Western Balkans-EU – international trade in goods statistics”, Eurostat, March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> I.N. Sushkova and A. Koumpoti, “FDI to and from the Russian Federation: A Case Study of the Western Balkans and the Role of the EU”, in C. Nikas (ed.) *Economic Growth in the European Union: Analyzing SME and Investment Policies*, Springer, 2020, pp. 127-53.

<sup>10</sup> “Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession”, *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014.

<sup>11</sup> “How the ‘Kosovo Precedent’ Shaped Putin’s Plan to Invade Ukraine”, *Balkan Insight*, 9 March 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “Russian Ambassador to Serbia Denies Change in Putin’s Kosovo Policy”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 April 2022.

Serbia is the only WB and one of the few European states that refuse to impose any sanctions against the Russian Federation. This has led to *backsliding* in its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy for the first time since the accession process began.<sup>13</sup> To conclude, even though Russia's influence in the WB is generally limited to the areas where the Orthodox Christian population lives, as long as the Kosovo dispute remains unresolved and until energy supply is diversified, Moscow remains an important geopolitical player in the region.

### China – down the New Silk Road

After launching the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative, now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>14</sup> China proved to be the EU's most serious economic competitor in the WB. A year before the OBOR Initiative was officially announced in September 2013, China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) was launched by the First China-CEEC Summit in Warsaw, with the goal of enhancing cooperation in the infrastructure, transportation, trade and investment sectors.<sup>15</sup> The fact that all WB partners participate in this format of cooperation – with the exception of Kosovo,\* which is not recognised by China – proves that the region plays an important role in the BRI and, from Beijing's perspective, represents a “gateway to the EU market and land bridge between the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus and Central Europe”.<sup>16</sup> Although WB countries do not represent a formal sub-group within broader China-CEEC cooperation, at the

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<sup>13</sup> See: “[Serbia 2022 Report](#)”, European Commission, 12 October 2022, pp. 134-37.

<sup>14</sup> Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale (For more information: “[China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape](#)”, OECD, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For more information: <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>.

<sup>16</sup> Hänsel and Feyrabend (2018), p. 6.

bilateral level, China's approach to the WB partners includes more prominent financing of infrastructure projects compared to other CEEC.<sup>17</sup> Altogether, it can be concluded that China unequivocally perceives WB as a region in which it can project its growing economic power, which may come into conflict with the EU's value-based approach.<sup>18</sup>

Even though Beijing officially supports the EU integration process of the WB and the realisation of planned infrastructure projects that can contribute to economic modernisation, competitiveness and connectivity in the region, China's investments are mostly incompatible with EU standards and pose a serious threat to the rise of corruption.<sup>19</sup> These concerns are primarily related to economic practices that fail to meet environmental standards, competition regulations, as well as public procurement procedures. For instance, there are serious indications that a China-owned tyre factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia, has compromised the air, soil and water in this area, which many environmental activists have warned about.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, there are many cases of violation of EU competition rules, which in the case of a Chinese loan for coal power plants in Tuzla resulted in the Energy Community opening a procedure against BiH over illegal state aid.<sup>21</sup> The lack of transparency of Chinese projects also fuels already growing corruption in the region, clearly illustrated by the project for the construction of two highways in North Macedonia by the Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro, in what became one of the biggest

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<sup>17</sup> W. Zweers, V. Shopov, F. Putten, M. Petkova, and M. Lemstra, "China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?", Clingendael, August 2020, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> M. Vučić, "European Union integration and the Belt and Road Initiative: A Curious case of Serbia", *International problems*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2020, p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> "Aktivisti traže ekološke garancije za fabriku Linglong u Zrenjaninu" ("Activists demand environmental guarantees for the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin"), *Radio Free Europe*, 16 February 2021.

<sup>21</sup> "Energy Community opens infringement procedure against Bosnia-Herzegovina over illegal Tuzla 7 state aid", BankWatch Network, 26 March 2019.



corruption cases in the country's history.<sup>22</sup> Altogether, these examples indicate that the WB's cooperation with China, although it has helped these countries reduce unemployment and boost economic growth, often has other harmful societal effects and might negatively affect their accession to the EU.

Although current China-WB cooperation primarily involves the economic domain, there is a reasonable fear that China's growing economic influence could easily be used as political leverage in the future. Besides the usual conflict between China's economic practices and the EU *acquis communautaire*, the fact that most of these infrastructure and energy projects are financed through loans is gradually bringing WB countries into a Chinese debt trap. Montenegro's loan from China's Export-Import Bank for the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway is the most illustrative example of this,<sup>23</sup> though the situation is only slightly better in other countries. Large sums of money have been borrowed from China by North Macedonia for its highways, for instance, by BiH for a number of energy projects, and by Serbia for several infrastructure projects. These loans have increased each of these countries' debt to China to around 10% of their total foreign debt, and if this borrowing trend continues, other WB countries could fall into a state of financial dependency on China.<sup>24</sup> These are undoubtedly the main tools for China's potential political influence over WB governments and one of the greatest challenges for the EU, which has yet to show a strong resolve to deal with them.

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<sup>22</sup> A. Krstinovska, "Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia", China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 6 November 2019.

<sup>23</sup> "Montenegro, the first victim of China's debt-trap diplomacy", *New Eastern Europe*, 7 May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Zweers, Shopov, Putten, Petkova, and Lemstra (2020), pp. 14-15.

## **Innovating the Enlargement Policy for a 2030 European Integration Agenda**

Previous sections have analysed the drawbacks of enlargement policy and have demonstrated how the undemocratic regimes of third countries have used the vacuum left by the EU to advance their own political and economic agendas, often to the detriment of that of the European Union. This section turns to a discussion of proposals made by the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels, with the goal of breaking the enlargement gridlock and restoring the EU's footing in the region.<sup>25</sup> The Template for Staged Accession to the EU, published in October 2021, seeks to achieve a twofold objective. On the one hand, it sets out to restore motivation for reforms needed to attain EU membership by proposing that certain benefits, which normally only belong to the membership phase, be extended to the candidates while they are still negotiating accession, in two separate pre-accession stages. On the other hand, it aims to unlock political will in the enlargement-sceptic Member States so as to proceed towards actual accession of the candidates by allaying their fears related to the functioning of a further enlarged Union.

The Staged Accession proposal:  
Pre-accession benefits

The Model of Staged Accession proposes bundles of benefits for acceding states as a reward for improved EU membership preparedness. To make them effective and ensure they really can stimulate reforms, rewards need to be clearly outlined and predictable as well as matter in terms of size and amounts. The Model therefore intentionally proposes packages of rewards which combine increasing funding with more substantive institutional participation, in order to create a positive impact

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<sup>25</sup> "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre (CEP) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), October 2021.

on the society, economy and political representatives of the candidate countries.

Access to increasing funding would have to be strongly conditional on progress in reforms and improved readiness for assuming membership obligations and functioning within the EU. The initial proposal of the Model is that already in the first stage a candidate gains access to funding corresponding to up to 50% of what it would be eligible for as a conventional Member state, on condition that it achieves at least moderate ratings for cluster averages (3 on the 1-5 scale). In the second stage, the funding could reach a level of up to 75% of conventional membership, on condition that each cluster reaches a good average rating of 4. Once a candidate closes all negotiation chapters and the accession treaty is signed and ratified, it enters the EU as a new Member state – the third accession stage, detailed in the next section. At that stage, it can benefit from all funding mechanisms as conventional Member States and also starts to contribute to the EU budget. The opening of new funds to support socio-economic development as part of progression towards membership would serve as a major carrot for the governments in the Western Balkans to press forward with otherwise hesitant reform agendas.

An additional incentive for the candidate governments would be created by allowing them to participate more closely in the political life of the EU through gradual access to various institutions as observers. Already from Stage I, candidates would attain selective observer status in the main EU institutions – the European Parliament and select configurations of the Council. As the country proceeds to Stage II, its level of participation in the institutions advances, and it obtains generalised observer status. Once a country becomes a new Member state in Stage III, its ministers and other representatives gain voting powers in the Council and its committees in simple and qualified majority voting procedures. Moreover, its citizens can vote and be elected as members of the European Parliament, just like in any other Member state.

The bigger pre-accession carrots, however, need to be coupled with effective sticks to ensure that reforms are carried out continuously and to prevent regression in achieved standards and values. Hence, the Model envisages a functional approach to freezing and even reversing certain rights and benefits, relying on the qualified majority vote (QMV) of conventional Member States or indeed on reversed QMV, as proposed in the revised enlargement methodology. Reversibility between stages is also possible, though as a last resort against a backsliding candidate country. If it is transparent and easily implementable, the threat of reversal would help to dissuade political leaders from non-compliance and backsliding in the reform processes.

The staged accession proposal:  
Allaying the Member States' fears

One frequently cited obstacle to enlarging the European Union is the fear that additional members would further hamper EU decision-making due to the still extensive use of unanimity voting. To address this concern, the Model proposes that, during the temporary Stage III, new Member States' veto rights in the Council would be limited, based on specific provisions laid out in their accession treaties as temporary derogations of membership rights. A new Member State would still be able to play a constructive role in consensus-building, without being able to block major EU decisions. Once the provisional status expires, a new Member State proceeds to the stage of conventional membership, which includes full voting rights in the Council. This time-barred limitation would allow the entry of new Member States into the Union while it is still undertaking internal reforms aimed at improving the decision-making processes to fit the growing number of members.

Another problem which has created fears of further enlargements to "new" and unconsolidated democracies, such as those in the Western Balkans, concerns the weaknesses of the EU's mechanisms to keep its own members in check regarding respect for the fundamental values enshrined in

Article 2 of the TEU. The Article 7 procedure of the TEU is cumbersome and the requirement for a unanimous vote to sanction a Member state that is in breach of the Union's values hampers its effectiveness when troublemakers forge alliances. The Model recognises that Western Balkan countries would need a long time to prove themselves as functional democracies and proposes a period of post-accession monitoring and even freezing of certain membership rights (such as funding) in case of backsliding in these fundamental areas. This provision of the Model, too, creates a safety period in which internal EU rules for sanctioning breaches of fundamental values would be fixed and made effective, without making the candidates wait at the EU's door. Moreover, subjecting the new members to post-accession monitoring of functioning in areas in which the EU lacks proper mechanisms to sanction non-compliant Member States can go a long way towards securing sustainability of reforms implemented before accession.

Eventually, as the transitional provisions of the third stage expire based on the provisions of accession treaties, the new members become conventional members with all rights and benefits – whatever that status would mean in the EU treaty framework of the day. In a way, the automatic expiration of these limitations creates a risk for the EU should it not manage to reform itself while the new members are still under the special regime in stage III. However, it would also create pressure on it to agree on these internal improvements and ensure that it is fit for future challenges.

So far, the Model of Staged Accession has managed to create visible traction in the policy reality. It was echoed in the speeches of the President of the European Council in the European Economic and Social Committee,<sup>26</sup> as well as in the “non-papers” of two Member States (Austria and later Czechia), all of which have proposed the gradual integration of the

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<sup>26</sup> “Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee”, European Council, 18 May 2022.

Western Balkan region into the EU, picking up on several ideas from the Model. Building on the invitation of the June 2022 European Council, the EU's institutions are already working on proposals to further advance their gradual integration. The implementation of the Model, in all its aspects, has strong potential to restore trust in the EU's enlargement policy and strengthen pro-EU policies in the Western Balkans, as well as in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

## **Towards the Epilogue of EU Enlargement to the Balkans**

Enlargement has historically often served as a major incentive for the EU to reform its institutions and decision-making procedures, in order to retain functionality with an increased number of Member States. The 2004-07 enlargement wave is a case in point, as both the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon were to a great extent motivated by the anticipated expansion to the East and the need to prepare the Union for a much more diverse membership. The EU today similarly needs a boost to address the already demonstrated problems of its functioning as EU27, which may be further exacerbated once it is enlarged. Although the Model of Staged Accession offers a solution for the EU's own reforms to proceed in parallel with enlargement, they should be initiated immediately, to demonstrate that the EU is willing to and capable of making itself apt for the current and future challenges, which span much wider than accommodating the next enlargement.

Therefore, to secure a strong and enlarged EU at the end of the current turbulent decade, as a complement of the proposed innovations of the enlargement procedure, members and candidates should agree on a political pledge, acknowledging the common challenge and marking the start of a joint effort towards that goal. As recently proposed, such a "joint plan would explicitly state the obligations of the EU member and candidate states in terms of strategic EU integration with

clearly stated measures and deadlines for its implementation by 2030, which should be [its] indicative timeframe”.<sup>27</sup> This Joint European Integration Plan 2030 would in a way mark the end of the current “teacher-student” relationship in which the “perfect” EU continuously makes demands from the “naughty” candidates, who repeatedly fail to deliver. It would put the two sides on an equal footing, recognise the joint interests as well as the challenges they need to face, and create concrete plans, with actions and deadlines that need to be met in order to safeguard the EU’s functionality as well as geopolitical autonomy in the face of vast and growing challenges. Indeed, such a common agenda could go a long way towards supporting institutional preparations for enlargement, creating a consensus about the will to proceed with accepting new members into the Union and ensuring that candidates pursue a proactive reform agenda.

While the year 2030 would be a target date for accession and for the EU’s internal preparations, it should in no case be communicated as a promised date for either. Clearly, if the candidates fail to undertake the reforms and prepare for membership, the target year will move back. As for the EU’s own reforms, the temporary membership rights limitations for new members would give the Union an additional “grace period” to make itself fit for the enlarged membership. What is more, new Member States would thus get an opportunity to play a constructive role in building a better functioning Union, as they would be included as partners in these discussions, without being given the power to block decisions.

Finally, such a joint political pledge, coupled with further enlargement policy innovation based on the Model of Staged Accession, would signal to third actors seeking to undermine the EU in the Balkans that the Union is serious about its own sphere of influence and geopolitical ambitions. A smoother and accelerated accession process and eventual enlargement by

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<sup>27</sup> S. Majstorović, “[Joint European Integration Plan 2030](#)”, European Policy Centre (EPC), 22 December 2022.

2030 would logically lead to a diminishing dependence on third actors and also require their influence to be contained within the framework of EU membership, i.e. to respect the EU's fundamental values and environmental, state aid, competition and other rules and standards. The strong cultural ties that exist, for example, between the region's Orthodox Christian populations and Russia, as well as economic relations with China, will continue to exist, but they will be shaped to a large extent by the democratic, human rights and other fundamental values of the EU.