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Integration Under Pressure: Europe's Path Forward

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Integration Under Pressure: Europe's Path Forward

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Western Balkans in the European Integration Process

Jelena Ceranic Perisic

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I. Introduction: Background and Historical Perspective

The engagement of the European Union (EU) with the Western Balkans formally began in the early 2000s, in the wake of the Yugoslav conflicts. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 marked a key moment in the European path of the Western Balkan countries, as it was the first time that the prospect of EU

membership was presented to them, with an emphasis on the principle that each country's progress would be assessed on an individual basis. This political commitment by the heads of state and the governments of the EU Member States was understood as a strong incentive and a promise that the future of the region within the EU would be stable and prosperous.¹

This signaled the start of the EU's long-term strategy of anchoring the region through enlargement. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) was launched to support reforms, democratization, and economic transition. For years, the Western Balkans were treated as a single enlargement group—though with recognition that countries would move at their own pace. This regional approach was driven by concerns over stability, reconciliation, and avoiding fragmentation of EU policy in the region.

Despite the continued formal support by the EU and its Member States for the European perspective of the Western Balkans, over the past twenty-three years only one country from the region has acceded to the EU. The Republic of Croatia became a full member in 2013, while the rest of the countries remained in various stages of the accession process, facing both internal and EU-related obstacles.

The limited success of the EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans has been partly attributed to the low credibility of EU conditionality, which from the very beginning of the integration process has stemmed from insufficiently clear conditions and from rewards in the accession process that were neither timely nor adequate.² Consequently, at the Summit held in November 2019, a decision was taken to reassess the effectiveness of accession negotiations with the Western Balkan countries.

On 5 February 2020, the European Commission issued a Communication proposing to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions a new EU enlargement methodology entitled *Enhancing the Accession Process – A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans*.³

The primary objective of the new enlargement methodology is to revitalize the enlargement policy through the introduction of clearer parameters. Although

¹ Kmezić, pp. 54–61.

² Milicevic, p. 59.

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, COM (2020) 57 final.

the immediate trigger for adopting the new methodology was France's opposition to opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019, the underlying causes are deeper and more numerous.⁴ For some time, the EU has been facing what is commonly referred to as "enlargement fatigue," resulting from three waves of enlargement within a nine-year period. Accordingly, within only a few years, the EU almost doubled its membership. As a result, the willingness of EU Member States to accept the Western Balkan countries into the European community has become increasingly uncertain. In addition, the EU itself is burdened by numerous internal challenges.

While the EU has been experiencing "enlargement fatigue," the Western Balkan countries have, in turn, developed a certain degree of "accession fatigue." This fatigue has been further exacerbated by the EU's broad and multidimensional crisis, accompanied by the frequent introduction of new requirements on top of an already complex set of accession conditions. Coined in the early 2000s, "enlargement fatigue" in the EU and Western Balkan candidate states seemed more paralyzing than ever.⁵

It is therefore unsurprising that the accession process has reached a stalemate which the EU sought to overcome through the adoption of the new methodology. Today, circumstances are different following the EU's geopolitical awakening and the war in Ukraine.⁶ Following the granting of candidate status to Ukraine (June 2022), Moldova (June 2022), and Georgia (December 2023), the enlargement process appears to have gained renewed momentum.⁷

Although, for a while, the region's EU path seemed to be stuck in a kind of "Waiting for Godot" scenario, over the past year, we've seen some signals of renewed movement—at least in parts of the region. This paper examines recent shifts in EU policy toward the Western Balkans and considers their implications for the region's future within the EU. After the brief historical overview (Part [I](#)), the paper analyzes recent changes in EU policy (Part [II](#)) and presents a country-by-country analysis (Part [III](#)). It then discusses key challenges facing the region (Part [IV](#)) and the role of the EU (Part [V](#)). Finally, the paper explores possible future scenarios for the Western Balkans in the context of EU integration (Part [VI](#)), followed by concluding remarks (Part [VII](#)).

⁴ Jano, p. 18.

⁵ Börzel/Dimitrova/Schimmelfennig.

⁶ Lubbers/Haverland/Zhelyazkova, p. 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 67 et seqq.

II. Shift in EU Strategy

In recent years, particularly over the past 18 months, there has been a significant shift in the EU's approach to the region. The enlargement fatigue that dominated EU thinking in the 2010s has started to give way to a more pragmatic, geopolitically driven policy. Key changes include a "gradual integration" model, and a differentiated approach to each country.

1. "Gradual integration"

The "gradual integration" model allows countries to access certain benefits before full membership. This opportunity for candidate countries was provided for the first time by a new enlargement methodology. To make the accession process more predictable, a new enlargement methodology envisages instruments of positive and negative incentives. As regards positive incentives, if countries move on reform priorities agreed in the negotiations sufficiently, this should lead to closer integration of the country with the EU, work for accelerated integration and "phasing-in" to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programs, while ensuring a level playing field.⁸

Despite its initial assessment as a highly motivating and positive framework, the gradual integration model appears to present several challenges, especially when it comes to its feasibility. The possibility of "phasing-in" to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes for the Western Balkans countries has opened a few practical questions. First and foremost, it remains to be seen how this "phasing-in" will operate in practice, especially when it comes to the decision-making process. Does it mean that the candidate country will be allowed to participate in the decision-making process in certain EU policies and to vote in the Council and in the European Parliament? Or does it mean that the representatives of that country will participate only as observers in the mentioned EU meetings?⁹

One may recall the model of participation of EFTA countries (Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein) in the EU's internal market without being members of the EU. These countries do not formally participate in the decision-making process. As a compensation for their absence from the formal decision-making stage in the Union, the Agreement affords them extensive room for consultations during the preparatory stage of the legislative process in the EU.¹⁰ In this

⁸ COM (2020) 57 final, see above footnote 3.

⁹ Ceranic Perisic, pp. 136–137.

¹⁰ See What is the European Economic Area?, <<https://www.efta.int/~media/Files/Publications/Bulletins/eeadecisionshaping-bulletin.pdf>>.

regard, it is not realistic to expect that the Western Balkans countries, within the framework of closer cooperation, could gain more than the EFTA countries in terms of participation in the decision-making process.¹¹

2. Differentiated approach

In recent years, the EU has moved away from treating the region as a single enlargement group and has instead adopted a more differentiated approach, providing clearer, country-specific signals. Montenegro's accession trajectory illustrates this shift, as does the EU's increased support for granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. This differentiated approach represents a departure from the previous "one-size-fits-all" model. While it reflects the uneven progress among countries in the region, it also introduces new political dynamics and potential sources of tension within the region. Under the differentiated approach, certain countries have experienced accelerated progress, while others have seen no significant change.

III. Country-by-Country Overview

The countries of the Western Balkans are at different stages of the European integration process. Until two years ago, Serbia and Montenegro were considered frontrunners, while Bosnia and Herzegovina did not even hold official candidate status.¹² Over the past two years, however, the situation has changed significantly. Montenegro is now the most advanced country in the European integration process and is expected to be the first to join the EU. Albania has made remarkable progress over the last two years and is now also regarded as a frontrunner. Serbia is currently experiencing a period of stagnation. North Macedonia is facing numerous political challenges, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is making moderate progress. The following part analyzes the situation in each of the Western Balkan countries.

1. Albania

After years of delays, accession negotiations with Albania officially opened in July 2022, alongside North Macedonia. Since then, Albania has made steady progress in aligning with EU standards, particularly in areas such as judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts. Nevertheless, the country continues to face

¹¹ Ceranic Perisic, p. 137.

¹² Ceranic/Perisic, pp. 129 et seqq.

structural challenges and must deliver on key reforms, especially in public administration and the rule of law.

In recent years, Albania has emerged as one of the most dynamic candidates in the EU enlargement process.¹³ By late 2025, the country had opened negotiating chapters across all six thematic clusters under the revised EU accession methodology, thereby entering the final phase of accession talks. Progress has been particularly notable in terms of the rapid opening of chapters; however, the decisive test will be the pace and credibility of their provisional closure.

In Tirana, the objective has become increasingly explicit: to conclude accession negotiations by 2027, with full EU membership envisaged by around 2030, conditional upon sustained reform implementation.

With regard to the relations of the EU with Albania, Brussels acknowledges the country's political commitment to reform but continues to insist on credible, measurable, and lasting implementation, particularly in the areas of the rule of law and judicial independence.

2. North Macedonia

North Macedonia has long been regarded as a model reformer. Its Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the first in the region, has been in force since 2004. The country applied for EU membership in March 2004, and the Council granted it candidate status in December 2005.

Despite these developments, its EU path has been repeatedly blocked – first by Greece and later by Bulgaria over identity and language issues. Following the resolution of the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018, the country officially changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia.¹⁴

Accession negotiations were subsequently opened in 2022. However, progress has once again stalled due to domestic resistance to the constitutional amendments required under the agreement with Bulgaria. Bulgaria imposed a veto in 2020, blocking progress due to bilateral disputes related to historical and identity-related issues. The impasse was temporarily overcome following the acceptance of the so-called French proposal by North Macedonia and Bulgaria,

¹³ See What are the next steps on Albania's EU path? <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/12/16/what-are-the-next-steps-on-albanias-eu-path/>>.

¹⁴ See Prespa Agreement enters into force: Macedonia officially renames itself, <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/02/13/prespa-agreement-enters-force-macedonia-officially-renames>>.

which provides for the recognition of the Macedonian language within the EU framework, constitutional amendments acknowledging Bulgarians among the constituent peoples, and enhanced protection of minority rights.¹⁵ These developments have contributed to growing public frustration and a declining level of trust in the fairness and credibility of the EU accession process. To date, no negotiating chapters have been opened.

Despite North Macedonia's longstanding commitment to reforms and European integration, its accession process remains hindered by bilateral disputes and domestic challenges, raising concerns within the EU regarding declining public confidence in the enlargement process.

3. Serbia

Serbia began accession negotiations in 2014 and has opened numerous chapters; however, the process has largely stagnated. To date, 22 chapters have been opened, and two chapters have been provisionally closed (Education and Culture; Science and Research). Although Serbia is technically ready to open Cluster 3, political obstacles remain. In particular, the normalization of relations with Kosovo* continues to be the central condition for progress, and recent tensions have further complicated the process.

The EU accession process in Serbia has slowed primarily due to political conditions rather than technical preparedness. While Serbia has achieved considerable alignment with EU standards, the opening of new clusters has been effectively paused since 2021, pending further progress on political and bilateral issues.

While the EU has promoted alignment with its foreign policy positions, Serbia has continued to cultivate diverse international partnerships, including with Russia and China. Within EU policy circles, this has been viewed as an element relevant to assessing Serbia's broader strategic orientation.

Thus, although Serbia was once regarded as a frontrunner, it now lags significantly behind Montenegro and Albania.

4. Montenegro

Often considered the most advanced country in the region in terms of EU accession, Montenegro opened negotiations in 2012. However, the last few years

¹⁵ Ceranic Perisic, p. 129.

have been marked by political instability, fragile governments, and stalled reforms, particularly in the judiciary.

Despite being a frontrunner on paper, there has been little actual progress toward the provisional closure of negotiation chapters. Montenegro has opened all 33 negotiating chapters, and as of January 2026, a total of 13 chapters have been provisionally closed (half of them last year), marking tangible progress on its path toward EU membership.¹⁶ However, the provisional closure of the remaining chapters remains contingent on continued institutional and political reforms, particularly in areas related to the rule of law and judicial independence. The government aims to complete negotiations by the end of 2026, with full EU membership targeted by 2028. From the EU perspective, support remains strong but conditional, with Brussels expecting concrete political and institutional progress.

5. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted EU candidate status in December 2022. While the EU supports its integration, progress remains slow due to internal political disagreements and limited implementation of key reforms.

In March 2024, the EU formally approved the opening of accession negotiations, but the actual screening process, which assesses the country's alignment with EU law, has not yet begun due to institutional and political challenges. Consequently, no negotiation chapters have been opened, and advancement remains contingent on the implementation of key reforms and improvements in the functionality of institutions.¹⁷ The country's deeply fragmented political system, persistent ethnic divisions, and limited reform progress continue to block advancement. Some recent steps – such as the adoption of certain EU-related laws – have been welcomed in Brussels, but they are seen more as symbolic than systemic. On the part of the EU, support exists but major concerns persist regarding the functionality of institutions and the commitment to reform across all levels of government.

¹⁶ See EU and Montenegro provisionally close another chapter in accession negotiations, <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-montenegro-provisionally-close-another-chapter-accession-negotiations-2026-01-26_en>.

¹⁷ See Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bosnia-and-herzegovina/bosnia-and-herzegovina-2025-report_en?s=219>.

Country	Chapters/Clusters Opened	Chapters Provisionally Closed	Status / Main Obstacles
Montenegro	33 chapters	13 chapters	Most advanced; aiming for accession by 2028
Albania	33 chapters	–	Actively negotiating; target EU entry by 2030
Serbia	22 chapters	2 chapters	Politically blocked; stalled reforms
North Macedonia	Screening completed (6 clusters)	–	No chapters opened; constitutional issues remain
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Screening started in 2024	–	Early stage; internal political delays

Summary Table: Negotiation Progress by Country

IV. Key Challenges for the Region

While each country faces its own specific obstacles, several broader challenges continue to affect the entire region of the Western Balkans and its EU integration prospects. The main challenges are rule of law and governance, bilateral disputes, political instability and polarization, external influences: and the credibility and enlargement Fatigue of the EU.

1. Rule of Law and Governance

The rule of law constitutes a foundational constitutional principle of the EU which is non-negotiable and represents a fundamental prerequisite for accession to the EU. The Union cannot operate effectively in the absence of reciprocity, mutual trust, and respect for the Union's core values and legal principles.¹⁸ Progress achieved in the field of the rule of law forms the very backbone of the EU accession process. Over the past two decades, the rule of law has increasingly occupied a central position within the internal policies and the governance framework of the EU and is no longer perceived merely as an abstract normative obligation but rather as a principle endowed with concrete legal and material effects.¹⁹

More than a decade ago, the European Commission introduced a new approach to enlargement policy, commonly referred to as the 'Fundamentals

¹⁸ Report on the Franco-German Working group on EU Institutional Reform, Sailing on the High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging EU for the 21st Century, <<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/19/Paper-EU-reform.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Knežević Bojovic/Coric, p. 51.

First' principle, according to which the absence of tangible results in the fields of democracy and the rule of law precludes overall progress in accession negotiations. Since 2011, the strengthening of the rule of law has been placed at the very center of the EU enlargement policy. Experiences from previous rounds of enlargement have demonstrated that the rule of law constitutes a fundamental precondition for the effective realization of the other values upon which the EU is founded. Moreover, the revised EU enlargement methodology for the Western Balkans has a particularly prominent role to the rule of law.²⁰

The main challenges related to the rule of law in the Western Balkan countries remain weak institutions, politicized judiciaries, and widespread corruption. When it comes to reforms, they often appear superficial or driven by external pressure rather than by genuine internal commitment. The EU increasingly expects not only legislative changes, but also tangible results – particularly in combating high-level corruption and ensuring judicial independence.²¹

2. Bilateral Disputes

Historical and political tensions between neighboring countries continue to disrupt the enlargement process. Such bilateral disputes frequently go beyond technical accession criteria and become intertwined with identity politics, historical interpretations, and issues of national sovereignty, making their resolution particularly complex within the enlargement framework (e.g. North Macedonia – Bulgaria)²². Their instrumentalization in the accession process enables individual Member States to exercise disproportionate leverage, thereby undermining the credibility, consistency, and predictability of EU conditionality. As a result, progress in enlargement increasingly depends not only on alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, but also on the ability of candidate countries to maintain good-neighborly relations and engage in constructive regional cooperation. Nevertheless, the EU has made clear that unresolved bilateral issues will not be imported into the Union, placing additional pressure on regional diplomacy.

3. Political Instability and Polarization

Political instability and deepening polarization represent persistent challenges across the Western Balkans. Frequent government crises, fragile coalition arrangements, and increasingly divisive political rhetoric contribute to an un-

²⁰ COM (2020) 57 final, see above footnote 3.

²¹ Knežević Bojović/Corić, pp. 352 et seqq.

²² See above [III.2](#).

stable governance environment. Such instability significantly undermines the effective implementation of reforms and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. In several countries, these dynamics are accompanied by democratic backsliding, particularly regarding media freedom, the shrinking of civic space, and the deterioration of electoral standards. Collectively, these trends weaken democratic resilience and further complicate the EU accession process.

4. External Influences

The geopolitical vacuum created by the slow pace of EU integration has increasingly been filled by external factors such as Russia, China, Turkey, and other regional and global powers. These actors pursue strategic, economic, and political interests that run often counter to EU norms and standards, providing alternative sources of investment, energy, and political support. Their growing influence complicates domestic reform dynamics and can weaken the effectiveness of EU conditionality, particularly in countries where governments leverage these relationships to consolidate power or to resist unpopular reforms. Consequently, the presence of competing external actors not only challenges the normative and political authority of the EU in the region but adds an additional layer of complexity to the accession process.

5. EU's Credibility and Enlargement Fatigue

The Union has been facing 'enlargement fatigue' for some time, which emerged as a result of three waves of enlargement within a nine-year period.²³ Accordingly, the EU nearly doubled its number of Member States in just a few years. As a result, the willingness of EU Member States to integrate the Western Balkan countries into the European community is questionable. Moreover, the Union itself is burdened with numerous internal challenges.

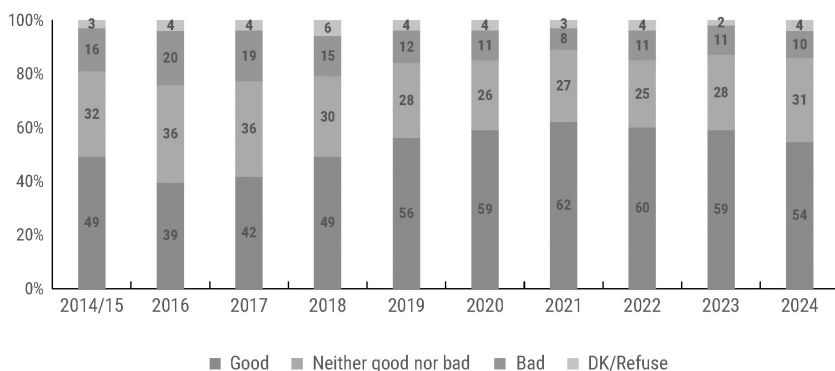
Many in the region feel that the EU keeps raising the bar and delaying rewards, despite the criteria being fulfilled. The long stagnation has eroded public enthusiasm for EU membership, especially among younger generations. This raises a deeper question: Is enlargement still a real political project or just a bureaucratic process?²⁴

In this context, it is instructive to examine the following chart. The question posed was: "Do you think that EU membership would be good, neither good nor bad or bad?"

²³ Szolucha, pp. 107 et seqq.

²⁴ Lubbers/Haverland/Zhelyazkova, p. 67.

Do you think that EU membership would be good, neither good nor bad or bad



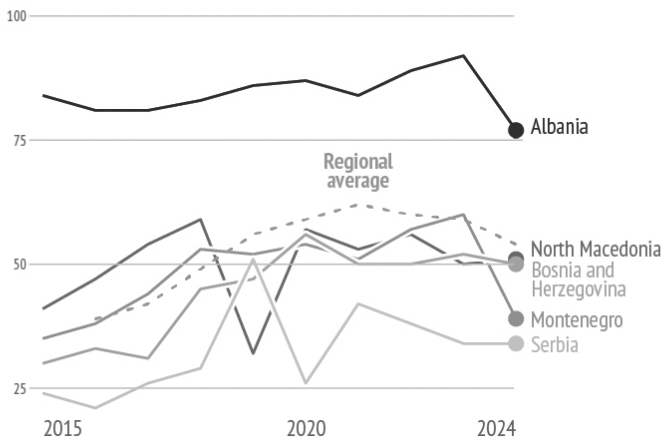
Source: Balkan Barometer 2024 Public opinion

The trend shown below indicates a rise in support for EU membership in the Western Balkans until 2021, with the proportion of positive views increasing from 49% in 2014/2015 to 62% in 2021. Since then, however, support has declined to 54% in 2024. Despite challenges such as slow progress in the accession process, reform fatigue, uncertainty regarding membership prospects, complex geopolitical dynamics, and significant economic and social obstacles, positive sentiment towards EU membership remains relatively strong. Citizens in the region continue to perceive EU enlargement as a means to address long-standing issues and to achieve stability, prosperity, and closer integration with Europe. At the same time, neutral responses have remained largely stable, while opposition has slightly decreased. The consistently low proportion of ‘don’t know’ responses suggests that most respondents hold a clear opinion on the matter.

Furthermore, it is particularly **revealing** to examine the chart illustrating public support for EU membership among the populations of the Western Balkan countries, as it sheds further light on regional attitudes toward the accession process.

Western Balkan attitudes towards EU membership

% of respondents who agree that EU membership would be good



Adopted from: www.iss.europa.eu

Public support for EU membership across the Western Balkans has remained relatively stable since 2015, albeit with significant country-to-country disparities. These variations largely reflect each country's internal dynamics, as well as growing public impatience with the slow pace of the accession process. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, support has remained relatively steady at around 50%, reaching a peak of 56% in 2020. North Macedonia has experienced notable fluctuations but has generally maintained support levels between 50% and 57% since 2020. Serbia's trajectory has been more volatile, with support increasing from 24% in 2015 to 51% in 2019, before declining to 34% in 2024. Montenegro, meanwhile, experienced a sharp drop in support from 60% in 2023 to just 39% in 2024. By contrast, traditionally strong supporters such as Albania have continued to register higher approval rates, although recent shifts are evident: support in Albania declined from 92% in 2023 to 77% in 2024.

This phenomenon reflects a paradox of proximity, whereby the closer a country comes to EU membership, the more public support for European integration tends to decline, often as a result of prolonged accession processes,

unmet expectations, and growing skepticism toward the credibility of enlargement conditionality.²⁵

V. The Role of the European Union

The EU plays a central role in shaping the political, economic, and social trajectory of the Western Balkans. However, its influence has become more complex, and often more ambiguous, over time.

In assessing the role of the EU in the European integration process of the Western Balkans, it is necessary to consider factors such as: Credibility of the Enlargement Process; The power of Political Signals; The EU' Renewed Strategic Interest; and Need for Internal EU Reform.

1. Credibility of the Enlargement Process

The EU accession is theoretically understood as a process in which external conditionality constitutes a key instrument of integration.²⁶ Within this framework, the EU conditions membership on the fulfillment of a set of requirements, including the harmonization of national legal frameworks and practices with the *acquis communautaire*.

While conditionality remains the core tool of EU influence, it is increasingly perceived as inconsistent. Repeated delays – particularly in the cases of North Macedonia and Albania – have sent mixed signals, thereby weakening the EU's image as a credible and reliable partner. This resulting credibility gap undermines reform momentum in the region and creates space for alternative narratives and alliances.²⁷

2. The Power of Political Signals

The EU influence extends beyond technical benchmarks; it also lies in the political signals it conveys. When the EU opens accession negotiations, grants visa liberalization, or provides additional funding, it creates political incentives for reform. Conversely, silence or prolonged delays often strengthen nationalist narratives and weaken pro-EU actors.

²⁵ Marinoni.

²⁶ Knezevic Bojovic/Coric/Visekruna, p. 233.

²⁷ See above [IV.4](#).

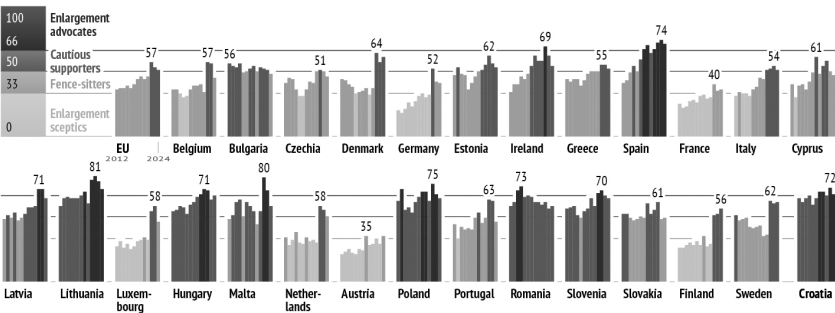
As a result, the effectiveness of EU conditionality depends not only on formal criteria and monitoring mechanisms, but also on the credibility, consistency, and timing of the political signals sent by the Union.

3. The EU's Renewed Strategic Interest

Over the past few years, in the context of the war in Ukraine and broader global instability, the EU appears to have begun to view the Western Balkans once again through a strategic lens. This renewed strategic interest is reflected in a stronger emphasis on energy security, resilience to disinformation, and alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy. The EU now seems increasingly aware that stagnation is not neutral; rather, it constitutes a risk both for the region and for the Union itself. Irrespective of the EU's strategic interests, it is important to bear in mind that, pursuant to the Lisbon Treaty, any future EU enlargement requires the unanimous consent of all 27 Member States. Specifically, each Accession Treaty must be ratified individually by every Member State, in accordance with their respective constitutional procedures. In some states, ratification is carried out by the national parliament, whereas in others, it necessitates a referendum. In light of these considerations, it is particularly instructive to analyze the positions of EU Member States with respect to prospective enlargement.

EU Member States' opinion on further enlargement

% of respondents in favour of EU enlargement



Source: Eurostat, EuroBarometer 2025

This chart illustrates the opinions of EU Member States on future enlargement over the period from 2012 to 2024, measured as the percentage of respondents in favour. The responses are shaded according to the level of support—from enlargement sceptics (lightest grey) to strong advocates (darkest grey). The highest levels of support are observed in Lithuania (81%), Malta (80%), and

Bulgaria (80%), while the lowest are in Austria (35%) and France (40%). Most countries fall into the category of ‘cautious supporters,’ with approval rates around or slightly above 50%. Some countries, such as Luxembourg and Germany, exhibit a notable share of skepticism. Overall, average support across the EU stands at 57%, reflecting a generally positive, yet divided, outlook on further enlargement.

It is somewhat encouraging that, in 2024, support for EU enlargement did not fall below 33 percent in any Member State. In France, Austria, and Germany, support remains below 50 percent, but it is no longer under 33 percent, as it had been for an extended period.

4. Need for Internal EU Reform

Some of the hesitation surrounding enlargement stems from internal EU challenges, such as institutional capacity constraints, rule of law backsliding in certain Member States, and enlargement fatigue. As a result, the EU increasingly links enlargement to its own reform agenda, encapsulated by the notion that ‘the EU must reform in order to enlarge, and enlarge in order to reform.’ This creates a double burden for candidate countries: not only are they required to meet all accession criteria, but they also face delays that are unrelated to their own progress.²⁸

The need for internal reforms has been debated within the EU for some time, particularly regarding institutional reforms. The proposal of the Franco-German expert group *Sailing on the High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging EU for the 21st Century*²⁹ which never became an official EU document but attracted considerable attention from the academic and policy communities, devoted significant attention to the issue of EU institutional reform.³⁰ These discussions are closely linked to future enlargement, as the Union’s institutional capacity to absorb new Member States is widely regarded as a prerequisite for maintaining effective decision-making, coherence, and democratic legitimacy in an expanded EU.³¹

²⁸ Marinoni.

²⁹ Report on the Franco-German Working group on EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on the High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging EU for the 21st Century*, <<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/19/Paper-EU-reform.pdf>>.

³⁰ Ceranic Perisic, pp. 94 et seqq.

³¹ Hakenberg, pp. 187 et seqq.

VI. Outlook

In assessing potential future scenarios, several possibilities emerge for the Western Balkans in the context of EU integration. None of these scenarios is inevitable but each depends on political will, both within the region and in Brussels.

Accelerated Integration (Selective or Gradual)

Under this scenario, the EU continues with its “gradual integration” model,³² allowing countries that meet criteria to gain access to parts of the Single market, EU funding, or enhanced political cooperation before full membership. Some countries (e.g. Montenegro, Albania) may advance more rapidly than others, setting a precedent for “staggered accession”. This approach would maintain momentum and reward reformers, while avoiding complete blockage due to slow-progressing neighbors.

Continued Stagnation

If reforms stall and EU signals remain vague or politically constrained, the region may enter a new phase of stagnation. In this scenario, the risk of political backsliding, public disillusionment, and regional tensions increases. Moreover, public support for EU integration could decline further, while external actors may expand their influence by offering short-term gains without democratic conditions.

Reinvention of Enlargement

A more ambitious possibility is that the EU undertakes substantial internal reform, clarifies the enlargement timeline, and restores credibility. This would require political courage at EU level and greater unity among Member States. For the region, it would provide a clearer path forward, with transparent criteria, measurable progress, and concrete rewards at each step. Contemporary scholarship has long moved beyond viewing enlargement as one-time event of territorial expansion, instead recognizing it as a catalyst driving changes within the EU and the candidate countries.³³

³² See above [II.1](#).

³³ Schimmelfenning/Sedelmeir, p. 96.

VII. Conclusion

The European integration of the Western Balkans remains one of the EU's most complex, yet also most consequential, policy challenges. Over the past year and the half, important shifts have occurred both in how the EU approaches the region and in how individual countries respond.

While progress has been uneven and at times frustrating, it would be a mistake to view the process as stalled or irrelevant. On the contrary, the last eighteen months have demonstrated that momentum can be regained – particularly when there is political will, strategic clarity, and a shared sense of urgency on both sides.

Enlargement has always been linked to peace, prosperity, and stability. The transformative power of membership and warns against indecision, arguing that enlargement remains the EU's most effective geopolitical tool.³⁴

Finally, rather than a formal conclusion, three key points should be borne in mind. Differentiation is the new reality. The EU no longer treats the Western Balkans as a single package which brings both risks and opportunities. This approach to EU enlargement is consistent with the broader approach to European integration. One of the most prominent theorists of European integration and current president of Finland, Alexander Stubb, proposes three levels of European integration: the EU, the European Community, and the European Space.³⁵ This model is designed to be inclusive rather than exclusive, with participation at each level depending on a country's political choice and its ability to meet the relevant criteria. Credibility matters. Without trust in the process, even the most carefully designed reforms are unlikely to generate meaningful change. If actors begin to doubt the fairness or consistency of the criteria, commitment weakens, and formal compliance may replace genuine transformation.

Integration is not just about meeting criteria; it is about shaping the future of Europe. The Western Balkans are not external to the EU's story; they are an internal part of it. Their stability, prosperity, and democratic development are inseparable from the future of the Union itself.

³⁴ Stubb, pp. 11 et seqq.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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