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Rethinking EU Enlargement as Grand Strategy in the Western Balkans

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In June 2022, a few months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Council granted to Ukraine and Moldova candidate status hastily. Western Balkans countries, notably Albania and North Macedonia, had waited decades to be granted the same status. Four years on, progress on clusters for the Western Balkan countries remains lengthy. The decision on Ukraine and Moldova, was largely as a response to crisis rather than a product of deliberate grand strategy. For the Western Balkans countries, the lack of long-term strategic view of enlargement with security at its core, is what they have been accustomed to for some time now. This is despite that the Western Balkans continue to be a vulnerable and strategically contested region in the EUs backyard. Even with the EU's new enlargement methodologies and current geopolitical expediency, the region has remained in an eternal waiting room. Enlargement's credibility crisis has been made worse by this recent tension in trying to reconcile its transformative nature with current geopolitical necessity.

FROM TRANSFORMATIVE TO GEOPOLITICAL ENLARGEMENT, WITHOUT A TOOLKIT TO MATCH

Enlargement in the Western Balkans continues to be framed as a laborious process of democratic transformation.

Ever since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, the Western Balkans 'European perspective' was formulated as norm driven and technocratic process of integrating European standards and values through the approximation of the acquis. Early tools such as Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs), coupled by annual Commission Progress Reports, continue to shape the narratives of Western Balkan countries' reform progress in relation to standards set out by the EU. The process was built for its time. The promotion of democratic transformation was a value driven logic, whereas the tools, technocratic in nature. Considerations of malign influence and active undermining of the EU's democratic legitimacy have never really featured as critical components to be addressed within enlargement planning.

Immediately following Russia's war in Ukraine however, EU leaders started framing enlargement as "a geopolitical imperative". Examples such as Ukraine and Moldova signalled that the EU could deploy enlargement as a strategic tool, regardless a country's level of preparedness and reform. However, the EU has remained torn on executing fast-tracked integration. In reality, a coherent framework was and remains absent. The effect is that enlargement rhetoric has indeed become more geopolitical, yet the methodology has remained technocratic. This has raised serious questions about the extent to which the EU is both willing and ready to adapt its enlargement conditionality along its geopolitical security concerns.

This mismatch costs the EU in three ways. First, conditionality has lost its reputation. This is largely due to the EU's failure to reconcile how strategic urgency in light of geopolitical tensions interacts with rule of law benchmarks. Second, geopolitical hedging of political elites has become a norm. This comes as a direct result of the EU's failure to penalize some candidate countries'

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lack of alignment with the EU's sanctions policy on Russia. Third, the visible inconsistency between the accelerated integration offered to Ukraine and Moldova versus the long wait of the Western Balkans, has notably diminished elite and public support for European Integration in the region.

Considering recent attempts by malign actors, notably Russia, to undermine trust in EU processes and integration, treating enlargement as a mere normative tool, is no longer feasible. With the erosion of the transatlantic security guarantee as well as the active war in Europe's backyard, the EU has a unique opportunity to re-calibrate enlargement as a core grand strategic instrument. It must be (re) operationalized as a tool that serves a double purpose. First, it must continue to prioritize democratic transformation through robust conditionality and reversibility. Second, it must adapt its geopolitical anchoring by strategically blocking malign external influence.

THE STRATEGIC COSTS OF THE 'ETERNAL' WAITING ROOM

For years, the EU has struggled to ensure that its enlargement policy balances the interests of member states alongside Western Balkan's continuous engagement and political commitment. Often, these two factors have been at odds with each other. The EU's repackaging of its enlargement policy with the introduction of the 2020 revised methodology highlights this discrepancy. The methodology, characterized by clusters, reversibility and enhanced political steering, was meant to add a political dimension to an already dense technocratic process. The revised approach did not shorten timelines, nor did it realistically resolve the uncertainty created by veto prone member states. The prolonged uncertainty eroded the EU's leverage on democratic reforms. This encouraged domestic elites to move between Brussels and other power centres as in addition to leaving considerable space for significant democratic backsliding.

Freedom House's Nations in Transit assessments classified all Western Balkans countries as hybrid transitional regimes. Alongside their EU benchmarks, Western Balkans countries have continued to implement policies threatening democratic backsliding. Examples include challenges to the independence of the judiciary, restrictive NGO and media legislation, as well as the politicization of independent institutions. Despite this, no clear consequences have been noted. This has signalled that accession perspectives can be maintained despite domestic democratic backsliding. Regardless of the new methodologies' emphasis on political steering and reversibility, the EU has failed to ensure ruling elites' upholding of EU standards and values. Instead, the open-ended and politicized process has allowed some Western Balkans' leaders to maintain ties to other actors, thereby undermining the transformative logic that enlargement was meant to materialize.

The erosion of the EU's normative power in the Western Balkans has developed in in parallel to the geopolitical drift exploited by malign actors. While the EU has continued to utilize conditionality as a key feature of its engagement in the Western Balkans, the lack of tangible roadmaps for EU membership has had strategic costs. Russian outlets have consistently depicted the EU as an ineffective club unable to integrate the Western Balkans. On the other hand, they portray Moscow as a partner that protects Serbian and Bosnian sovereignty.

Economically too, Russian and Chinese investments across energy and infrastructure projects are framed in contrast to the EU's. While Russian and Chinese support is portrayed to be pragmatic and unconditional, the EU's is framed as ineffective due to bureaucratic red tape and stringent conditionality.

The same logic has been applied to the long-running deadlocks in the context of the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue. Various disinformation campaigns aimed at local communities have put the blame on the EU's mediation methods, reinforcing the narrative that the EUs internal disagreements render it a weak external actor. This type of discursive framing by external actors has become even more damaging in relation to general support for EU integration among the Western Balkans. Because of the

slow integration of their countries into the EU, support for EU integration and legitimacy has come into question by local populations in the Western Balkans. This has allowed some candidate countries to benefit from their relationships other power centres.

OPERATIONALISING ENLARGEMENT AS A GRAND STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT

To turn enlargement into a comprehensive grand strategic instrument, the EU needs to fundamentally rethink its design. The recent Growth Plan for the Western Balkans promoted by Commissioner Marta Kos has been an important step in reinvigorating the process through economic integration and accelerated fundamentals reforms. The issue, however, is that the Growth Plan is largely framed as a financial instrument, and as such, it lacks the necessary legitimacy in offering a detailed roadmap for the actual political integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. Growth Plan milestones are defined as payment conditions, meanwhile, the main benefit is the disbursement of financial assistance. This does in principle support reform through country-specific reform agendas; however, it does not directly counter the malign of external actors. Beyond the Growth Plan, current debates about gradual or accelerated integration into the single market and Schengen floated by regional and EU leaders, only makes the process more vulnerable.

The EU should stop repackaging the technical process without a clear outlook on political integration. The current Growth Plan, suggestions of gradual single-market access, Schengen roadmaps, or even questions of observer status, further risk legitimizing the open-endedness of the same process they are meant to resolve. Recognizing this, the following recommendations are meant to integrate the proposed dual purpose (technocratic and geopolitical) into enlargement planning.

Restoring credibility through binding political commitments.

The European Council should authorize country specific accession roadmaps with specific timeframes. Enlargement commitments need to be backed up by concrete deadlines for the process to restore its credibility. Reform progress should continue to be dependent on technocratic steering, however, EU-wide political consensus on reversibility and accession deadlines must become a norm. Moreover, to ensure full transparency, these roadmaps need to be communicated directly to Western Balkans publics rather than political elites alone. Alongside this, enlargement, more generally, should become an integrated issue item within the European Council's foreign and security policy agenda. This would formalize the process through progress reports which would clearly link the enlargement trajectory to the EU's overall security policy. This also entails that beyond technocratic and geopolitical thinking, enlargement serves an additional purpose, to strengthen the internal security policy of the EU.

CFSP alignment across EU policies including sanctions, must be made a defining feature of enlargement.

Just as Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) requirements have it, any advancement on themed clusters should be conditional on comprehensive alignment with EU sanctions and CFSP positions. Should the Western Balkans become fully fledged members of the EU, they need to insulate themselves and the EU from possible influence from malign actors. In its current form, alignment with CFSP is treated as a soft benchmark, allowing the subsequent hedging to be left unaddressed. If a candidate's alignment record falls below a clearly defined threshold, cluster progression should be suspended, and the EU should further condition (re)opening of cluster negotiations.

Ensuring sector-specific benchmarks are explicitly tied to EU instruments.

Sector-specific reform requirements should be used to build local as well as EU resilience beyond technical approximation. At the core of this, is the need to design accession steps in such a manner that they directly strengthen the Western Balkan's ability to resist malign influence in high-impact sectors which are traditionally more vulnerable. These include justice, media, energy

and (economic) security. Cluster progression in these areas should be coupled with participation in sector relevant EU instruments. The EU needs to recognize that the Western Balkans inclusion within existing EU instruments is equally beneficial to the EU's resilience to malign influence in their neighbourhood. The strategic leverage of existing instruments (such as operational agreements with Europol and Eurojust, alignment with the European Media Freedom Act, ENTSO-E integration, etc.) can serve as a necessary pre-condition that allow the EU to proactively insulate the region and itself from competing interests and internal democratic backsliding. More importantly, alignment with the recently revised foreign direct investment (FDI) screening regulation in the EU should be treated as a key benchmark. While export controls feature as an important technical benchmark, FDI screening's importance is asymmetrically subordinate. With the exception of Kosovo who has an operational screening framework, the rest of the Western Balkans, and notably Serbia, who is the largest recipient of Russian and Chinese strategic investments, have not taken any steps to formalize checks.

CONCLUSION

For it to be considered a well consolidated grand strategic instrument, enlargement needs to be redesigned beyond its current label of a compliance exercise. This means that enlargement needs to be formulated to serve a double purpose. First, it must continue being promoted and consolidated as a transformative democratic tool that embodies rigorous conditionality and the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria, alongside concrete reversibility. Second, and equally as important, it must be used for geopolitical interests to strategically block malign influence. Should EU leaders continue to only periodically focus on Western Balkans enlargement, while similarly relegating the process to one of a technocratic nature, enlargement's grand-strategic influence will remain underutilized.

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