

# DEALING WITH EU ACCESSION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTIES

## From halfway commitments to overlapping agendas



### Summary

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has put to test EU's cohesion and effectiveness not only with regards to its internal governance, but also in relation to its strategic partnerships with neighbouring countries, starting from the enlargement countries in the Western Balkans.

While a series of multiple crises in the EU were already contributing to cement resistance towards the enlargement agenda, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated pre-existing problems related to this policy, which is today crumbling under the pressure of current emergencies.

Indeed, the process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is today marred by ambiguities, not providing a clear path towards EU membership. To navigate through these doomy and gloomy days, EU-Western Balkan relations should move from halfway commitments toward a common agenda of tackling the root causes of the current situation, namely the enduring socio-economic entropy and political backsliding in the Western Balkans.

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# Dealing with EU accession in times of uncertainties

## From halfway commitments to overlapping agendas

By Matteo Bonomi

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## 1. Introduction

The process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is today marred by ambiguities. After 20 years of being in the EU waiting room and with the dreadful consequences of the global pandemic causing further delays, the Western Balkan countries seem to be left without both a clear track toward EU membership, and a model to follow to obtain stability and prosperity. Indeed, the pandemic is exacerbating sobering realities in the region, further highlighting the shortcomings of the EU enlargement policy as well as the Western Balkans' economic and political divergence from EU standards. Despite the EU enlargement policy framework and its declared goals, the Western Balkans risk to be pushed increasingly to the margins of the EU integration project, becoming more and more an enclave of economic hardship, social tensions and unsettled conflicts in the midst of Europe.

The ongoing pandemic has added no sense of urgency to the EU enlargement dossier. On the contrary, it has tipped it further down in the political agendas of Brussels and the main European capitals. Recent developments even suggest that the halfway commitments that today characterise relations between the EU and the Western Balkans could still be accommodated with a number of coping strategies. These include renewed plans of intraregional economic integration among the EU aspirants, the offer of a 'light' membership perspectives – for instance in the European Economic Area (EEA) – or a mixture of both.<sup>1</sup>

However, these proposals only risk to add more layers to the Western Balkan conundrum, rather than suggest genuine steps towards solutions to the region's numerous problems, including the

enduring socio-economic regression, unresolved constitutional disputes and backsliding in democratic standards.<sup>2</sup> Worst, instead of spurring positive transformation, such approaches could inadvertently give further impetus to the current drift in the relations between EU and the Western Balkan countries, where strengthening market integration with the EU has gone hand-in-hand with the rise and permanence in power of anti-reformist and illiberal forces. In fact, governance in the Western Balkans increasingly draws from the Chinese and Russian models of authoritarian capitalism<sup>3</sup> based on predatory state behaviour, state capture and corruption, rather than on the EU's *acquis*.

If we look at the past, the crisis of EU enlargement policy took mainly the form of an enlargement fatigue, epitomised by a cumbersome but somehow still teleological process towards EU membership. To be sure, this 'fatigue' syndrome showed serious symptoms and, since the Great Recession, EU-Western Balkan relations have rarely been on a path of economic convergence and fast Europeanisation. And yet, despite these hurdles – which were reflected by the lengthiness and, at times, lack of credibility of the administrative-technical process of EU accession – the faith in the 'European perspective' of the Western Balkans, understood as their future EU membership, was never seriously questioned. In other words, the parts involved were still working under the general assumption formulated in 2006 by the International Commission on the Balkans, chaired by former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato. Namely, the question was no longer "What should be done with the region?", but rather which were the right policy tools for the Balkans to catch up with the rest of Europe and to be brought into the EU.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lippert, B. (2021) "The EU after Brexit: Renewed debate about enlargement and deepening", SWP Comment, February. Available at: [www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C12/](http://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C12/); Emerson, M., Blockmans, S., Cenus, D., Kovziridze, T. and Movchan, V. (2021) "Balkan and Eastern European comparisons. Building a new momentum for the European integration of the Balkan and Eastern European associated states", Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2 March. Available at: [www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Balkan-and-Eastern-European-Comparisons.pdf](http://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Balkan-and-Eastern-European-Comparisons.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bonomi, M, Hackaj, A. and Reljic, D. (2020) "Avoiding the trap of another paper exercise: Why the Western Balkans need a human development-centred EU enlargement model", IAI Paper 20/04, January 2020. Available at: [www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/avoiding-trap-another-paper-exercise](http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/avoiding-trap-another-paper-exercise).

<sup>3</sup> Milanovic, B. (2019), *Capitalism, Alone: The future of the system that rules the world*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

<sup>4</sup> International Commission on the Balkans (2006), *The Balkans in Europe's Future*, Centre for Liberal

## 2. Recent Developments

This situation started to change and move towards ambiguity already in 2018. Paradoxically, it was precisely with the much-awaited European Commission's re-launch of the enlargement process, under Federica Mogherini's authority as HR/VP, that this ambiguity began to develop, and the EU enlargement policy went more decisively off track. After years of sluggish progress in the enlargement agenda and under the impression that the EU was losing ground in the region vis-à-vis third actors, the European Commission adopted a new enlargement strategy in February 2018. Building upon the pragmatic lines of the Berlin Process (an intergovernmental endeavour launched by Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 to give concrete support to the region), the Commission's new strategic document aimed exactly at recreating momentum and bringing the aspiring countries on an 'irreversible' track towards EU membership.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the February 2018 enlargement strategy had a positive 'motivating' approach, indicating the concrete steps the aspirants, as well as EU member states, should take to complete the enlargement process in the forthcoming years – even spelling out milestones and potential dates of accession. Nevertheless, the new approach was too demanding for the EU member states, which were already extremely busy in dealing with the legacies of ten years of multiple crises and had different visions about the future of the Union. Just three months after the adoption of the new strategy, at EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Sofia on 4 May, it became clear that EU's heads of state and government did not share the Commission's sense of urgency, did not like the reference to potential dates of enlargement, and preferred the use of the expression "European perspective" rather than "EU membership".<sup>6</sup> A

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Strategies, Sofia, p. 9. Available at: [www.cls-sofia.org/en/projects/europe-and-the-world-19/balkans-19/international-commission-on-the-balkans-47.html](http://www.cls-sofia.org/en/projects/europe-and-the-world-19/balkans-19/international-commission-on-the-balkans-47.html).

<sup>5</sup> European External Action Service (2017), *Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the 2017 Bled Strategic Forum*, Bled, 4 September. Available at: <https://europa.eu/lrr34cF>.

lack of consensus over new EU accessions was growing within the European Council.<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence, over the last three years, the EU enlargement process has continued to stride down the road of losing credibility and effectiveness. The most notorious stumbling blocks along this path are the failures by the EU to meet the promises made to candidate countries due to the repeated vetoes of the European Council – for example, granting visa liberalisation to Kosovo or starting accession negotiation talks with Albania and North Macedonia – undermining the very essential logic of EU conditionality. After numerous calls to make the EU more geopolitically relevant by the newly appointed president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the adoption of a revised enlargement methodology by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, the Council eventually green-lighted accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 25 March 2020. In reality, however, this decision tells us very little about the two countries' concrete chances to become EU member states in the future. So far, the Council's decision has not given enough basis for the call of intergovernmental conferences that would formally kick-off negotiation talks with the two candidates. Meanwhile, new divisions within the Council have emerged and hijacked again the EU accession agenda.

On top of this, the outburst of the global pandemic has not made EU-Western Balkans relations any easier and risks to push them beyond the breaking point. Difficulties in organising common responses to the emergency have put to test EU's cohesion and effectiveness not only with regards to its internal governance, but also in relation to its strategic partnerships with the Western Balkan countries. Indeed, uncoordinated efforts in obtaining medical equipment in the first stages of the pandemic, and securing the vaccines later on,

<sup>6</sup> Gray, A. (2018), "Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes", in *Politico*, 5 July. Available at: [www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/](http://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/).

<sup>7</sup> See Petrovic, M and Tzifakis, N. (2021), "A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another postponement? An introduction", in *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1891028>.

have immediately translated into geopolitical and nationalist rhetoric mobilising anti-European sentiment.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the pandemic has raised additional uncertainties about the trajectories of future economic recovery. In particular, it is most likely that the crisis will affect Western Balkans' growth prospects quite severely, by shrinking private and public investment, depressing human capital, impacting vulnerable groups and increasing the already high poverty rates across the region.<sup>9</sup>

So far, public authorities in the Balkan countries have been able to counter the worst effects of the economic crisis by providing credits for businesses and increasing social transfers. This came at the cost of a sharp worsening of their fiscal deficits and a rise in external debt. However, it is not clear for how long this will be sustainable, as no country in the region seems in a position to ramp up spending. The risk is now that they will be forced to turn to fiscal consolidation much swifter than the EU member states and with very strong measures, as it happened already during the Great Recession. At that time, they experienced an initial soaring of public budget deficits to sustain supply and demand, and an increase in foreign indebtedness, before turning to tough austerity policies and sobering growth for over a decade.

### 3. Way Forward

Against this backdrop, it is clear that decisions and emergency measures that are going to be undertaken by the EU and Western Balkan leaders to face the pandemic will significantly shape their future relations for the years to come, far beyond their immediate outlook or any paper pushing exercise. In front of this formidable challenge and despite all the ambiguities regarding EU enlargement policy, the Western Balkans must remain in focus. The region cannot be left behind,

because the EU's own strategic interests overlap with those of the Western Balkans, at least in three fundamental ways.

First, it is almost unthinkable today for the Western Balkans (as it is for EU member states) to act alone and successfully in all topical fields. The EU candidate and potential candidate countries in the Balkans are already part of the EU economic bloc; but they are its soft belly, as their high level of market integration comes with many disadvantages and few amelioration mechanisms. Health emergency aside, there is a need to find a common response to the current economic crisis and include the Balkans into the EU economic recovery plan, green and digital transitions, infrastructure investments, and so on.

In this regard, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, presented by the European Commission on 6 October 2020, appears far from enough. Despite some rebranding and little reallocation of funds from Turkey to the Western Balkans, the overall amount of the EU resources earmarked for the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III – for all the seven beneficiaries – is equivalent, in real terms, to the amount offered through IPA I and II (around € 12 billion in 2018 prices).<sup>10</sup> In other words, the instrument of pre-accession has failed to speed up the accession process and, more recently, adapt to the post-pandemic reality. Greater economic engagement with the region is an absolute imperative for the EU if it wants to foster resilience in its closest neighbouring countries, whatever may be its longer-term goal in the Balkans. This should be pursued through a number of tools, including a greater reallocation of funds within IPA III and through more ambitious efforts in the internationalisation of EU key programmes, such as the European Green Deal, as

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<sup>8</sup> Aydıntaşbaşı, A. et al. (2021), "The geopolitics of covid vaccines in Europe's eastern neighbourhood", European Council of Foreign Relations, Commentary 27 January. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-geopolitics-of-covid-vaccines-in-europes-eastern-neighbourhood/>.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank (2020), "An uncertain recovery", in *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report*, No. 18/Fall. Available at:

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34644>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-stronger-europe-in-the-world/file-mff-ipa-iii> and [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRI/E/2017/603957/EPRS\\_BRI\(2017\)603957\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRI/E/2017/603957/EPRS_BRI(2017)603957_EN.pdf).

recently proposed by the European Council of Foreign Relations.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the EU and the Western Balkans are both facing overlapping challenges to the European democratic values. There is no doubt that national responses to the pandemic have eased the path toward authoritarianism of some Western Balkan countries, but these developments interlink with the fight for the defence of the rule of law and democratic values within the EU, as the DNA of the EU integration project. The limited role that pro-European messages had in the key 2020 parliamentary elections in Kosovo and Montenegro is lamentable, as these elections marked the first real regime changes in the two countries since the start of democratic transitions. In this regard, there are no shortcuts: democratic political culture should be always given precedence and defended. In the EU-Western Balkans relations, linkages with the reform process must assume priority, despite the immediate frictions this could bring with local leadership.

Lastly, engaging with the Balkans corresponds to the fundamental need to reaffirm the European unity and cohesion in front of external actors and within an (increasingly) challenging global environment. Defending the survival and further

development of democratic culture and decent economic conditions in the Western Balkans is the best way for the EU to be a truly strategic and autonomous actor in this region. The prolonged economic regression of the Western Balkans, marked by the deterioration of many socio-economic indicators, is among the main causes of the failures of the domestic governance reforms and the EU policies in the Balkan region. Poverty and income inequality are the defining characteristics of the social fabric of the Western Balkans: a middle class exists only nominally, while most people live under the threat of poverty. In the 'captured states' of the Western Balkans, those who are not among the few privileged by wealth, find themselves at the mercy of the incumbent rulers for access to decent employment, education, medical services and other public goods. As stated in the EU Global Strategy, the internal dimension of EU security is inherently intertwined with the external one. Devoting money and efforts to sustain the Western Balkans' fight against the pandemic should therefore not be understood as a mere act of solidarity, devised from an actor that aspires to be a normative – if not ethical – power in the international arena. On the contrary, it is a direct investment in Europe's security itself.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard, M., Pisani-Ferry, J., Shapiro J., Tagliapietra, S. and Wolff G. (2021), "The geopolitics of the European Green Deal", European Council of Foreign Relations, Policy Brief 3 February. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-geopolitics-of-the-european-green-deal/>.

<sup>12</sup> See Amadio Viceré, M. and Bonomi, M. (2021), "The EU's Search for 'Effective' Strategic Autonomy in the Neighbourhood", in *IAI Commentaries* 21/05. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eus-search-effective-strategic-autonomy-neighbourhood>.

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