

CAN THE WAR IN UKRAINE REVIVE THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?

Erwan Fouéré

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Abstract

For years the EU has been repeating the mantra of its enlargement policy representing 'a strategic investment in peace, stability and economic growth on our European continent'. Yet it has singularly failed to deliver on its promises towards the Western Balkans region, with a succession of blockages and delays, many of which have more to do with the domestic agendas of individual Member States than with the objective criteria set out for EU accession.

Now with the unfolding tragedy in Ukraine, the world has changed and the international order that has kept war at bay on the European continent for decades has been thrown into question. Ukraine's application to join the EU as Russian bombs were literally falling on Kyiv has cast an urgent spotlight on the EU's enlargement policy.

Even if the EU does grant candidate status to Ukraine, as well as Moldova and Georgia, where does this leave the Western Balkans and their long journey towards the EU which began over 20 years ago? What impact will the current crisis have on the EU's enlargement agenda over the coming months?

Erwan Fouéré is an Associate Senior Research Fellow at CEPS.

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When High Representative Josep Borrell visited a number of Western Balkan countries on 13-14 March, he referred to the unfolding crisis in the European Union's neighbourhood as 'an awakening moment for Europe', and that it was 'high time to reinvigorate the enlargement process and integrate the Western Balkans in an irreversible manner into the EU.'

While his words were well meaning, they seemed to give credence to the common refrain of the Western Balkans only appearing on the international agenda in times of terror and trouble; the rest of the time they are scornfully ignored.

Despite official statements from the EU institutions and periodic summits between the EU and Western Balkan leaders, the EU's enlargement agenda has barely moved over the past few years and has lost almost all credibility.

While the negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, which were launched in 2012 and 2014 respectively, have been only progressing at a snail's pace, the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, a country which was granted candidate status over 16 years ago, haven't even started, regardless of the European Council's decision in March 2020 to open accession negotiations with both countries.

Because of the veto imposed by Bulgaria over historical and identity disputes with its neighbour, both Albania and North Macedonia have been left hanging in mid-air between hope and despair for over two years. This abuse of the veto power for issues that have nothing to do with the criteria and conditions which each candidate country must comply with highlights the inherent weakness and hypocrisy of the EU's decision making process in relation to its enlargement policy.

Even if there has been a new momentum in the bilateral discussions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia following the election of the new Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, who paid his first foreign visit as Prime Minister to Skopje in January 2022, there is at yet no indication of any agreement being reached in time to allow the next European Council in June 2022 set a date for the opening of accession negotiations.

In short, the issues under discussion will never be resolved under artificial timelines. Like the other unresolved bilateral disputes (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) that are a living reminder of the region's troubled history, they should be left to a separate mediated process parallel to rather than as a precondition for the start of accession negotiations.

These delays and blockages have caused deep disappointment and frustration in the Western Balkan countries. They have left the region vulnerable to malign influences, with Russia notably more than happy to take advantage of the many tensions and divisions within the region.

The threats of secession by the Republika Srpska President, Milorad Dodik (a frequent visitor to Moscow), in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the increasingly authoritarian behaviour of leaders such as President Vucic in Serbia or the nationalist rhetoric and even glorification of convicted war criminals which frequently go unchallenged by the EU, are just some of the deeply rooted fault lines underlining the region's vulnerability.

The EU's response towards the Western Balkans

The response from the EU has been weak, haphazard and inconsistent. The political and strategic approach which should have underpinned the EU's policies towards the Western Balkan region from the start has over the years been sidelined in favour of an excessively bureaucratic and technical process which has prioritised form over substance.

Even the reports that the European Commission publishes every year setting out the state of play and progress made by each of the Western Balkan countries (and Turkey) on their journey towards the EU have been criticised for at times minimising the continued backsliding in the rule of law and media freedom. They simply fail to maintain the level of objectivity that was the hallmark of the European Commission's approach in previous decades.

Faced with the worsening political climate in the region and growing disenchantment with EU Member States' neglect of their commitments, the European Commission published its [2018 Strategy Paper](#) which set out in unequivocal and stark language all that was wrong in the process. It called for urgent action both on the part of the Western Balkans countries but also by the Member States, reminding them that the 'merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political security and economic interest'.

Yet, four years later, there is little to show for this. The most recent European Court of Auditors [report on the EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans](#), published in January 2022, is particularly scathing in its assessment of the EU's record and financial support which has had 'little impact in advancing fundamental reforms'. The report points to the lack of effective monitoring of the reform process and criticises the Commission's reports which have tended to focus on 'quantitative outputs and not enough on what the reforms have actually achieved'.

The Court of Auditors also highlights insufficient support for civil society, despite the vital role civil society organisations play in ensuring the accountability of governments in the fight against corruption, as well as in freedom of expression and in all other areas linked to the rule of law. Lack of consistency in the EU's support for civil society actors, particularly when they are faced with government intimidation, undermines their impact when most needed.

These weaknesses in the EU's overall approach, combined with the failure to respect its commitments towards the region by allowing individual Member States to impose their own domestic agendas, undermines the credibility of the EU as a whole, leaving its enlargement policy as nothing more than an empty shell.

A 'Zeitenwende' for the EU's enlargement policy?

German Chancellor Olaf Schultz referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a 'zeitenwende' ('turning point'), a moment in history that fundamentally changes the established order. The EU has risen to the challenge and demonstrated a unity of purpose not seen for many years. At the Versailles European Council held on 10 March, the European Commission was asked to prepare an official Opinion on Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's formal applications for EU membership.

If the EU is to achieve its ambitions both *vis-à-vis* these countries as well as those from the Western Balkans, it will need a 'Zeitenwende' in its enlargement policy. It will have to demonstrate the same unity of purpose by first fulfilling its long-established commitments to the Western Balkans countries. This means a qualitative change in the EU's approach and an end to the veto power of individual Member States who use it throughout the accession process for reasons that have nothing to do with the accession criteria.

It will also mean implementing innovative measures to make the reform agenda more effective. This would include more intrusive monitoring mechanisms, as suggested in its 2018 Strategy Paper, and a more systematic involvement of civil society organisations, thus guaranteeing that the accession process becomes more deeply anchored at every level of society.

Introducing a '[staged accession](#)', providing for partial and progressive membership, would mean that the benefits of the accession process would be felt by citizens throughout the process and not just at the final point of accession. The same logic would also be applied to access to the EU's structural and investment funds, and other EU instruments, such as the [EU Justice Scoreboard](#) and [Rule of Law report](#). These innovative approaches have already been put forward by CEPS, together with the Belgrade-based [European Policy Centre](#) (CEP) and will hopefully be taken forward by the EU during this defining period of history.

If it does so, it will bring to an end the years of 'miscalculation and indifference since the Congress of Berlin (when European diplomats agreed in 1878 to replace Ottoman power by building a system of competing alliances on the Balkan peninsula), to quote Misha Glenny in his 2011 book '[The Balkans](#)'. He goes on to state that 'if the Union fails in its own backyard, then it can bid farewell to any idea of exerting its influence elsewhere'.

The EU must not fail in this historic endeavour, at a time when peace on the European continent has truly been shattered.