

## PROGETTO

# THE FUTURE OF EU ENLARGEMENT: ACCELERATING EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Questo progetto è stato realizzato con il contributo del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale ai sensi dell'art. 23-bis del DPR 18/1967.*



Ministero degli Affari Esteri  
e della Cooperazione Internazionale

## RELAZIONE SINTETICA DEL PROGETTO

L'inizio del conflitto in Ucraina ha avuto un impatto fortissimo sul dibattito europeo di allargamento dell'UE, cambiano profondamente le condizioni di sfondo per lo svolgimento del tema del progetto, ossia il futuro dell'agenda UE di allargamento e come accelerare l'integrazione dei Balcani occidentali. Questi cambiamenti hanno richiesto una riorganizzazione del lavoro alla luce delle nuove tensioni e sfide geopolitiche in europea, le rinnovate sinergie euro-atlantiche e le richieste di accesso all'Ue da parte di Ucraina, Georgia e Moldavia.

Pur mantenendo inalterato il focus del progetto sui Balcani Occidentali, i cambiamenti delle situazioni di sfondo hanno necessariamente comportato rallentamenti nei tempi di svolgimento previsti e una rimodulazione dei diversi compiti. In particolare, essendo il lavoro svolto il risultato del processo di cooperazione tra due istituti partners (IAI e DGAP), lo slittamento dei lavori si è dimostrato particolarmente complesso da riprogrammare. Tutto ciò ha comportando quindi ritardi nel conseguimento dei deliverables del progetto, portando alla necessità di domandare una proroga.

Il fulcro del lavoro del progetto si è concentrato nel mese di giugno, vista l'importanza storica del Consiglio europeo del 23-24 giugno 2022, che ha anche ospitato a latere la conferenza di alto livello UE-Balcani occidentali, organizzata sotto gli auspici della Presidenza francese del Consiglio dell'Unione europea.

In questo contesto, le attività del progetto hanno prima portato alla pubblicazione di un commentary DGAP/IAI, volto a presentare alcune proposte di riforma dei meccanismi di voto nel Consiglio europeo in relazione alla politica di allargamento (Deliverable 1: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/enlarging-western-balkans>, si veda la pubblicazione in allegato). In linea con quanto programmato, il paper si è focalizzato sulle condizioni per ripristinare meccanismi decisionali funzionali all'interno dell'UE per questo ambito di policy, l'allargamento, contribuendo così al dibattito sull'autonomia strategica europea intesa come "capacità di agire."

Il 28 di giugno è stata poi organizzata a Roma una conferenza dal titolo "The European Union's Quest for Strategic Autonomy in the Western Balkans: Political and Economic Perspectives." La conferenza è stata un'iniziativa congiunta dell'Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) e del German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). Alla conferenza sono state discusse due questioni della politica di allargamento dell'UE che hanno implicazioni per il futuro dell'Europa nel suo insieme: in che modo la politica di allargamento si collega alla spinta dell'UE verso l'autonomia strategica dopo l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina; e le implicazioni geostrategiche dell'integrazione economica regionale nei Balcani occidentali. (Milestone 1:

<https://www.iai.it/it/eventi/european-unions-quest-strategic-autonomy-western-balkans-political-and-economic-perspectives>, si veda allegato il

programma dell'evento e lista dei partecipanti allegate).

Il secondo deliverable del progetto (Deliverable 2: Policy Brief on regional cooperation and economic integration plans among the six Western Balkan countries) riguarda invece i piani di integrazione economica regionale tra i paesi dei Balcani Occidentali, intesa quale strumento per accelerare la politica UE di allargamento. Il paper individua rischi e opportunità di una tale strategia. Il paper sarà pubblicato nei prossimi giorni, nel mese di settembre 2022 come Commentary IAI(DGAP). Si veda in allegato il pdf del paper.

Infine il terzo e quarto deliverable del progetto sono stati uniti assieme in un unico report finale volto sia a fornire un set completo di raccomandazioni su come accelerare la politica di allargamento (deliverable 4) sia ad enfatizzare il ruolo della cooperazione italo-tedesca in questo processo (deliverable 3). Il paper verrà pubblicato come IAI Docmunet. Viene allegato il draft del paper in corso di revisione interna.

## PUBBLICAZIONI

Deliverable 1: Policy Brief on EU accession policy as part of the EU strategic autonomy debate

DGAP(/IAI) Commentary

### **Enlarging to the Western Balkans: The EU Must Correct Its (Political) Math**

By Zoran Nechev and Matteo Bonomi

Disponibile qui: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/enlarging-western-balkans>

Deliverable 2: Policy Brief on regional cooperation and economic integration plans among the six Western Balkan countries

IAI(/DGAP) Commentary

### **Regional and EU integration of the Western Balkans: Beyond a two-track approach**

By Matteo Bonomi and Zoran Nechev

Disponibile in draft come allegato.

Forthcoming IAI Commentary (<https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/lista/all/IAI-Commentaries>) settembre 2022.

Deliverables 3: Policy Brief on the role for EU Member States (particularly Italy and Germany) in support of democracy and the rule of law in the Western Balkans e Deliverable 4: Final report with comprehensive set of recommendations

### **The European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: Political and economic perspectives**

By Filippo Brunner, Matteo Bonomi and Zoran Nechev

Disponibile in draft come allegato.

Forthcoming IAI Document

(<https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/lista/all/Documenti-IAI>) settembre/ottobre 2022

## EVENTO

### **The European Union's Quest for Strategic Autonomy in the Western Balkans: Political and Economic Perspectives**

La conferenza è stato organizzato a Roma il 28 giugno 2022, con l'obiettivo di riunire diversi esperti e funzionari governativi che lavorano sulla e nella regione dei Balcani occidentali, al fine di discutere insieme le modalità per migliorare l'impegno europeo con la regione. Il convegno è stato organizzato dall'Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) e dal German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), con il supporto del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale e della Compagnia di San Paolo. La conferenza è stata preparata e organizzata con la consapevolezza che l'approccio europeo nei confronti della regione deve cambiare per avere successo.

- <https://www.iai.it/it/eventi/european-unions-quest-strategic-autonomy-western-balkans-political-and-economic-perspectives>
- *Agenda e liste partecipanti dell'evento a seguire*

## Conference

# THE EUROPEAN UNION'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

**ROME, 28 JUNE 2022**  
10.00-13.00

**ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI (IAI)**  
VIA DEI MONTECATINI, 17

*Working language: English*

*The future of Europe and of EU enlargement are high on the agenda. They will be discussed on 23-24 June 2022, first at the European Council then at the EU-Western Balkans high-level conference organised under the auspices of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. EU leaders will be called upon to take far-reaching decisions not just regarding the requests by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for candidate status, but also the pressure from the countries of the Western Balkans to unblock their sclerotic accession process. Most attention so far has focused on the need to give the three Eastern Partnership countries a credible accession perspective; and yet the credibility of that offer depends on the EU's treatment of the six Balkan countries, since they are already on the path from post-conflict reconstruction to membership. Meanwhile, some Western Balkan countries are advancing their own plans for economic integration with each other, raising questions of compatibility and synergies with the region's integration into the EU.*

*The conference is a joint initiative of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). It will discuss two issues of EU enlargement policy which have implications for the future of Europe as a whole: how enlargement policy relates to the EU's drive for strategic autonomy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and the geo-strategic implications of regional economic integration within the Western Balkans.*

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10.00-10.15	<b>WELCOME REMARKS</b> <b>FERDINANDO NELLI FEROCI</b> , President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) <b>RODERICK PARKES</b> , Research Director, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (DGAP); Head, Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies <b>GIULIANA DEL PAPA</b> , Head, Unit for analysis, planning, statistics and historical documentation, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
10.15-11.30	<b>SESSION I – EU accession policy and the EU strategic autonomy debate</b>
<i>Chair and introduction</i>	<b>ZORAN NECHEV</b> , Associate Fellow, Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (DGAP)
<i>Inputs</i>	<b>VALBONA ZENELI</b> , Professor of national security studies, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies
<i>Commentators</i>	<b>RENATO QUARTARONE</b> , Adriatic and Balkans Deputy Director, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation <b>CHRISTIANE HULLMANN</b> , Head of Division, Western Balkans, Federal Foreign Office, Germany  <i>Debate</i>
11.30-11.45	<i>Coffee break</i>
11.45-13.00	<b>SESSION II – Regional cooperation and economic integration of the Western Balkan countries</b>
<i>Chair and introduction</i>	<b>MATTEO BONOMI</b> , Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
<i>Inputs</i>	<b>RICHARD GRIEVESON</b> , Deputy Director, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)
<i>Commentators</i>	<b>OETA BARBULLUSHI</b> , Advisor to the Prime Minister & National Coordinator for Regional Economic Area, Albania <b>PETER GRK</b> , Director, Western Balkans, Foreign Ministry of Slovenia and Secretary-General, Bled Strategic Forum  <i>Debate</i>
13.00-13.05	<b>CONCLUDING REMARKS</b>

## LISTA PARTECIPANTI

Nome/Name	Cognome/Surname	Posizione/Position
Cornelius	Adebahr	
Claudia	Annovi	Analyst, CeSI
Matteo	Bonomi	speaker
Andrea	Cosentino	Partner, Renovaperform
Giuliana	Del Papa	speaker
Marco	Di Liddo	Head of Analysis Unit, CeSI
Leonardo	Dini	direttore, Polis
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Richard	Grievesson	speaker
Peter	Grk	speaker
Christiane	Hullman	speaker
Ivana	Mangov	First Secretary, Embassy of Serbia
Giacomo	Martinotti	Consultant
Maria Grazia	Melchionni	Editor of Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, Sapienza Università di Roma
Zoran	Nechev	speaker
Ferdinando	Nelli Feroci	speaker
Roderick	Parkes	speaker
Giulia	Porcelli	Senior corporate banker, Intesa Sanpaolo
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Lucia	Rotta	giornalista Agenzia Nova
Nadica	Tancheva	Interprete, Tribunale di Roma

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Arnd	WOLFRAM	France
Margit	Wunsch Gaarmann	Belgium
Saeid	Yousefvand	Lithuania

## **The European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans:**

### **Political and economic perspectives<sup>1</sup>**

Filippo Brunner, Matteo Bonomi and Zoran Nechev<sup>2</sup>

#### *Abstract*

*The future of Europe and of EU enlargement are today high on the agenda. Recent attention has focused on the need to give the three Eastern Partnership countries a credible accession perspective. Yet the credibility of that offer depends on the EU's treatment of the six Balkan countries, since they are already on the path from post-conflict reconstruction to EU membership. Meanwhile, some Western Balkan countries are advancing their own plans for economic integration among themselves, raising questions of compatibility and synergies with the region's integration into the EU. Against this backdrop, the conference titled "The European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: political and economic perspectives" was organised at IAI (Rome) in June 2022, in order to bring together experts and government officials working on the Western Balkan region. The aim of the conference was to discuss possible ways for improving the EU engagement with the region. This report illustrates some of the key conclusions of the conference, which was prepared and organised with the understanding that the European approach towards the region, in order to be successful, needs to change.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Within the European Union discourse, the connection between strategic autonomy, capacity to act and enlargement policy is missing. The acuteness of the situation and the desperate need for a fresh discussion on these issues was reinforced by the Russian aggression of Ukraine.

The landmark decision adopted by the European Council in June 2022, to grant the status of candidate countries to Ukraine and Moldova, and opening the prospect of accession to Georgia, brought a new sense of hope and stimulus to an important policy area - the enlargement policy - which has been characterised for years by stagnation. In fact, the countries in the Western Balkans

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was produced in the framework of the project "The Future of EU Enlargement: Accelerating European Integration in the Western Balkans." It has benefited from the financial support of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> Filippo Brunner is a research intern at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and a recent MAIA graduate at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, SAIS Europe.  
Matteo Bonomi is Senior Fellow at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).  
Zoran Nechev is Associate Fellow at the Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).

have been promised a “European perspective” as far back as 2000 at the Zagreb Summit, more than 20 years ago.

However, the decision regarding the status of Moldova and Ukraine shows that there is a new opening, a new window of opportunity to advance on the enlargement front. Currently, the EU has opened negotiations with four Western Balkan countries: Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia. For the other two countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the situation is complex and EU membership prospects are largely stalled.

The enlargement fatigue of the EU has profoundly frustrated these countries that want to become part of the EU, but have started to be convinced that the enlargement process is never-ending. The EU has an obligation to act and take concrete steps to create renewed faith and regain some of its lost credibility as a reliable partner in the accession process. This is especially important in order to reduce the influence of other global powers such as Russia, China and Turkey.

Therefore, the offer of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova has opened the opportunity to the EU and the countries in the Western Balkans to reinvigorate their negotiations. It is imperative to understand the acuteness of the situation for the future of European integration and the future of the Western Balkans.

Against this backdrop, a conference on “The European Union’s quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: political and economic perspectives” was organised in Rome in June 2022, with the aim of bringing different experts and government officials working on the Western Balkan region, in order to discuss together ways for improving the European engagement with the region. The conference was co-organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Compagnia di San Paolo. The conference was prepared and organised with the understanding that the European approach towards the region needs to change in order to be successful.

## **2. EU accession policy and the EU strategic autonomy debate**

The seemingly inability of the EU to commit and act coherently towards EU accession of Western Balkan countries has harmed the credibility of the Union. As mentioned, the countries of the Western Balkans have been in the process of EU accession for a very long period of time. This has increased frustrations and fatigue on both sides and is reflected in the results of the Balkans Barometer<sup>3</sup> of the Regional Cooperation Council. When asked about EU enlargement, only 22% of the respondents in the Western Balkans think that EU enlargement will be completed by 2030. Nevertheless, around 60% of the respondents still view enlargement in a positive way.

This shows that the willingness on the part of the Western Balkan populations to join the EU is still present. The citizens, however, have become discouraged and do not believe that it will happen anytime soon. This frustration is detrimental for all parties involved. These countries have started to question whether continuing on the EU accession path is worth it, since there is no end in sight.

Such attitudes have influenced the perception of people in the region regarding the foreign actor that has the greatest influence. For example, in North Macedonia, citizens’ perceptions of the EU is

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

at historic low (9.47 percent), whereas only some years ago, in 2019, the recognition of the EU as an influential actor was at 44.8 percent. In comparison, in 2021, the US was at 45.1 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the EU's enlargement fatigue after the big enlargement waves in Central-Eastern Europe, one can observe a reform fatigue in most countries of the Western Balkans. The region is increasingly experiencing political leadership with clear authoritarian tendencies without a clear EU narrative. Whereas this EU narrative is not missing, it does not match the actual performance on the ground. This is detrimental for everyone in the process, including the EU, which in the long-run has substantially decreased its leadership and leverage capabilities to influence policies.

Nonetheless, the willingness is still there to join the EU. In fact, when asked about the main challenges, Western Balkans citizens identified EU accession (primarily in order to improve the economic situation), unemployment and corruption as the three top priorities.

Finally, there are major geopolitical powers active in the region, not only the EU but also Russia, China and Turkey, which are fighting for economic and political influence. In economic terms, the EU and China are the most important players, as these are the two largest trading partners of the Western Balkans. For the EU, China's role is the most worrying, since it has financed around 122 big projects in the region. Furthermore, around 85% of these investments are in the form of loans, which aggravate the security situation and increase the risk of being caught in a debt trap.<sup>5</sup>

### *2.1 What could the EU do to improve the situation?*

Against this background, there is a need for a new EU approach. The reasons lie in the fact that for most countries in the Western Balkans, the accession process has not developed as initially planned. To do so, the EU has to better deliver on its promises made to the Western Balkans, because otherwise, it could be taken as a signal that it is not worth engaging with the EU. In fact, it could become detrimental for some countries to engage with the EU, as happened in North Macedonia where the government came under heavy pressure because of lack of progress regarding EU accession, despite the immense concessions the country has made to start accession negotiations.

At the same time, however, more could be done on the side of the Western Balkans countries, especially those which have shown signs of democratic and institutional backsliding. It is important for the EU and the member states to see that the political will from the Western Balkan countries to join the Union is there and persistent. However, it is the political will shown by Ukraine and Moldova to join the EU that makes them prime candidates for EU accession.

What can be done to improve the situation in the Western Balkans? There are three main elements that the EU has to acknowledge.

First, there must be a new awareness within the EU that it has to act and tackle the new geopolitical dynamics that have emerged as a result of the Russian aggression on Ukraine. This means that the EU has to credibly commit towards enlargement to the Western Balkans. Conversely, the countries of the Western Balkans also should recognise and seize the moment.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5\\_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See A. Vangeli ed. by (2022). *The role of China in Southeast Europe*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/athen/19416.pdf>

It is important to understand that the promise that was made in 2003 at the Thessaloniki European Council-Western Balkan summit, was political in nature and was part of a wider political project. Since then, the technicalities have prevailed regarding the political will to go forward, which has essentially frozen the accession process. Making progress on the EU enlargement path is key at this moment, but so is keeping it conditional on the necessary political, institutional and economic reforms. Now more than ever have these issues become important, considering the various instances of democratic backsliding that have happened in the region.

Nonetheless, the political aspect of enlargement should regain importance. The unprovoked Russian aggression in Ukraine is a “9/11 moment” for Europe. In fact, enlargement should also be viewed with the lens of granting security and prosperity to the region. The Western Balkans need to be considered as part of the wider geopolitical Europe, because only with a strong European presence in the Balkans can the EU claim to be a serious geopolitical actor. Any delays in the EU accession process will allow other geopolitical powers to get a foothold in the region and further alienate the Western Balkans from Europe.

Second, for the EU to achieve strategic autonomy, it needs to secure the stability of the Western Balkans. To achieve that, the EU has to step up its efforts to solve the intra-regional political conflicts and cooperate more on energy diversification. To combat the widespread frustration of the accession process, the EU could possibly include and start a wider public dialogue to solve the inter-societal issues. Furthermore, it is important to provide support and a platform for resolving the political conflicts of the region. This would make the region more resilient and less affected by the influence of external powers such as China and Russia. In turn, this would make the rest of Europe much safer. Therefore, there is a European responsibility to make the region safer and unblock the Western Balkans path to EU accession.

Third, the EU has not yet sorted out its dilemma between EU deepening and enlargement. An important discussion at the EU level needs to be initiated to form a clear position. Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine has reverted the European approach towards enlargement, back to what it originally was - a political strategy, rather than a technical process. However, the debate on further EU enlargement needs to be linked to the question of more effective decision-making within the EU, as this has become one of the impediments for any progress by the candidate countries. Keeping credibility alive in the EU27 is almost impossible under conditions where there is always an interest by an individual Member State to impose conditions to a candidate country, simply in order to gain something that has nothing to do with the Copenhagen accession criteria. This abuse of power given to the Member States ruins the credibility of the EU accession process. These are the main reasons why the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the enlargement process is so important and needs to be part of the package to be discussed among the EU Member States regarding the expansion of areas in which QMV is applied.

### **3. Regional cooperation and economic integration of the Western Balkan countries**

Recently, there have been multiple regional initiatives in the Western Balkans that have generated interest from a wide array of scholars. Within the Berlin Process, the Regional Economic Area initiative was launched, and its Action Plan for implementation was agreed in Trieste in 2017. Furthermore, the Common Regional Market initiative was launched, as well as different initiatives that were adopted within the Open Balkans framework.

Nonetheless, the regional approach towards the Western Balkans predates the launching of the Stabilisation and Association process and the related Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the Western Balkans. The regional approach was always there for the peculiarity of the region and for what happened in the 1990s, but also as a fundamental tool to implement EU standards and implement EU conditionality.

Two successful examples of regional cooperation have been the CEFTA 2006 agreement on trade liberalisation and the police cooperation among the Western Balkan countries aimed to re-establish the functioning of borders.

Despite these initiatives and the recent declarations made within the Berlin process, the implementation of regional projects has been slow. In fact, the proliferation of the different regional initiatives has generated important debates and reflections on whether these initiatives are complementary or contradictory to the EU accession process.

The promotion by the EU of regional integration in the Balkan region is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool that can contribute to bring the Western Balkan countries closer to EU membership. The idea is that more economic contacts can lead to better economic outcomes, in this way creating an incentive for all players to cooperate. This creates common interests and greater willingness to address and resolve political conflicts which have long stood in the way of EU accession.

In the past, the EU has implemented a wide array of instruments to incentivise the Western Balkan countries to work closer together through the adoption of trade and investment agreements. When looking at regional trade patterns, we see that after the CEFTA agreement entered into force, it increased intra-regional trade by roughly 40%, showing how successful CEFTA in fact has been.

Therefore, one can say that the economic integration in the Western Balkans has been successful, even though it did not deliver on the broader goals that were set in the early 2000s. There has not been any real economic convergence with Germany (or the EU), nor have the Western Balkan countries managed to increase their economic performance to match the Central East European countries. The most fundamental issue, however, is that it has not brought the region closer to EU accession.

### *3.1 Why has the process not gone beyond economic integration?*

First, the combined market of the Western Balkans is relatively small, implying that it cannot reap important benefits from economies of scale. In essence, regional economic integration did not produce the hoped outcomes, as the region did not converge towards EU income levels and has not achieved the expected level of economic development.

The Visegrád states, which were part of CEFTA before joining the EU, are an illustrative case, as they started to integrate among themselves only after they became EU members. This provides an important hint: that deeper economic integration among the Western Balkan states would be faster if they were to enter the EU, before full regional economic integration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ghodsi, M., Grieveson R., Hanzl-Weiss, D., Holzner, M., Jovanović, B., Weiss, S. and Zavorská, Z. (2022). *The long way round: Lessons from EU-CEE for improving integration and development in the Western Balkans*, Joint Study with Bertelsmann Stiftung, No. 2022-06, Vienna, June. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/pushing-on-a-string-en>

Finally, with the exception of North Macedonia and Montenegro, there is a widespread problem of institutional quality in the Western Balkans. Only healthy and efficient local and regional institutions can implement and monitor any economic and technical commitments taken at the regional level. The most worrisome situation on this front is in Serbia, that has shown institutional backsliding on good governance, rule of law and fight against corruption indicators.<sup>7</sup>

### *3.2 What can be done?*

The first recommendation is linked to the observation that regional integration in the Visegrád states only began after EU accession. In fact, the EU should offer full economic integration/cooperation with the Western Balkan countries to boost economic convergence and adoption of common standards. A possible option would be to adapt the Deep and Comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTAs) and implement them within the Stabilisation and Association Agreements between the EU and the Western Balkan countries.

In addition, to assure that economic convergence happens at a fast pace, the EU should offer more access to its structural funds. Also here, the experience of the Visegrád countries shows that it was partly thanks to the large EU budgetary transfers that regional integration was successful.

The second recommendation is that any decision or initiative taken, should be complementary and supportive of the EU enlargement process. Closer access and possibility to integrate with the EU market should provide the necessary incentives for a quicker EU accession process and not undermine it. This essentially means that economic integration needs to be accompanied by reforms consistent with the enlargement criteria.

Third, the European Union should acknowledge the particular role of Serbia due to its economic size (roughly equal to the rest of the five Western Balkan countries combined). Therefore, to achieve regional integration it is paramount that Serbia is included. This cannot be taken for granted, as in the past years Serbia has pursued a rather successful economic policy of engaging and integrating with many countries outside the Western Balkan region, including the EU, but also China, Russia and the Gulf states.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, it is the political impasses and the lack of political will that block regional integration. Therefore, without political breakthroughs it will be difficult to see any serious and sustainable economic integration happening.

Finally, it is important to understand the urgency regarding the demographic situation in the region, since it is experiencing a drastic reduction in the working-age population.

#### *Box 1. The great decoupling and the role of the Western Balkans*

In 2014, the Russian annexation of Crimea sealed the beginning of a global economic decoupling which continued with the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. European companies have started to see the Western Balkans as an interesting location to relocate their supply chains. The region is closer to their headquarters and they know the market, as most international companies already have a presence there. Near-shoring to the immediate neighbourhood, including the Western Balkans, can both secure and diversify European supply chains.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>

In order for this to happen, however, there are two main concerns that hold back European companies. First, there is the issue of good governance and functioning institutions, which are essential for creating a favourable business environment. Second, regarding labour costs, the Western Balkan countries are today not as competitive as they used to be, making EU member states such as Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland more viable in some cases. Thus, what is needed is both greater regulatory alignment on the part of the region, and the strengthening of industrial capacities and niches in each country.

Therefore, the conditions to really benefit from the great decoupling are not yet fully present in the Western Balkans. There have been many regional economic initiatives, but the fundamental barriers to economic integration still remain. The relatively small market size of the Western Balkans, the financial resources needed to properly develop the region (a gap that has increasingly been filled by Chinese loans), and the weak regional institutions, despite all the initiatives of the Regional Cooperation Council, are limiting the Western Balkans to fully benefit from closer economic cooperation.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the past, the big, but distant, carrot of EU accession could have been broken into smaller pieces and displayed along the way, through bilateral relations between the EU and individual Western Balkan countries, and the multilateral (regional) dimension. Today, however, these two intrinsically linked processes (of intra-regional and EU integration) require a more efficient approach that would include both dimensions. It is time to move from a two-track approach to an encompassing strategy for the Western Balkans that would ensure more effective harmonization of the different bilateral and multilateral policies in various fields.

At the bilateral level, careful political calculations and a refined geopolitical rationale are needed to revive political will in the EU for a further Balkan enlargement. With Brexit, a large member state of approximately 70 million citizens has left the Union, thus vacating positions in its institutional infrastructure that are of great importance in terms of absorption capacity. In short, the United Kingdom had far more capacity to block EU initiatives than any of the Western Balkan countries – with a combined population of no more than 18 million that is currently shrinking – could ever have.

At the multilateral level, more efforts are needed to synchronise plans of regional integration among the Western Balkans and the integration of the region into the EU Single Market. It would be beneficial for both the EU and the Western Balkans if the EU would actively help countries to approximate the *Acquis Communautaire* in the areas related to the Single Market, as a gradual phasing-in is necessary before fully complying with EU rules and standards. The EU and the Western Balkans could prioritise cooperation in those areas that attract most migrants from the region to the EU, especially in the areas of manufacturing, tourism and agriculture.

Regarding Italo-German cooperation, what more could be done?

The catalyst of a new geopolitical reality combined with a broader necessity to move toward QMV in foreign policy will shift the political calculus in the EU in favour of Germany and Italy and allow them to make a comparatively strong case for enlarging the Union to the Western Balkans and beyond.

By reinvigorating the Berlin Process, Germany and Italy could also work together to reinvigorate the regional dynamism in all 6 Western Balkan countries and initiate a discussion that should lead to finding middle ground, with the Western Balkan countries engaged in the OB but at the same time by politically integrating this initiative under the umbrella of the CRM.

DRAFT

# Regional and EU Integration of the Western Balkans: Beyond a Two-Track Approach

by Matteo Bonomi and Zoran Nechev

**DGAP**

Notwithstanding the conclusion of a number of EU-sponsored agreements aimed at deepening economic integration in the Western Balkans, implementation has lagged behind. In parallel, new developments have emerged under the so-called "Open Balkans" (OB) initiative which similarly promotes economic and political cooperation in the Western Balkans, but has attracted criticisms for its lack of clarity and the divisions it created in the region.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Elona Elezi, "Open Balkan Initiative Risks Aggravating Political Problems in the Region", in *Deutsche Welle*, 18 August 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/4Fe3p>.

Divisions have emerged among Western Balkan states – only Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia have joined the OB so far – but also among Western allies. The US and Germany have taken opposite positions, the former adopting a more pragmatic approach and the latter treading more cautiously. Other EU member states, such as Italy, have fallen somewhere in between.

All this suggests the need for careful assessments. This is particularly true now that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz seems ready to give new impetus to regional cooperation by

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convening a new summit in November 2022.<sup>2</sup> The summit aims to breathe new air into the “Berlin Process” (2014–21), the intergovernmental initiative of engagement with the Western Balkans, launched in 2014 by Angela Merkel and joined by Austria, France, Italy, the UK, Poland and others countries.

The EU’s support for regional cooperation and (intra)regional economic integration in the Western Balkans is far from new, having emerged in response to the Yugoslav wars in the second half of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, since the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process in 1999, regional cooperation has become a central part of EU accession conditionality, in addition to the Copenhagen accession criteria formulated in 1993.

In the past, regional cooperation initiatives have undoubtedly had a positive impact on the Western Balkans. This was evident especially during the first decade of the 2000s, when integration into the EU proceeded at a slow pace. The process was substantially delayed due to the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and other domestic

political problems.<sup>4</sup> At that time, regional cooperation proved to be pivotal in advancing the EU agenda for the region in a number of fields, from trade liberalisation and market opening (through the 2006 Central European Free Trade Agreement – CEFTA) to police cooperation and visa liberalisations,<sup>5</sup> promoting stability and economic growth.<sup>6</sup>

In such a context, support for regional cooperation allowed the EU to pursue a “two-track strategy” towards the Western Balkans,<sup>7</sup> complementing EU bilateral relations and enlargement conditionality for individual candidate (and potential candidate) countries, with the promotion of EU standards through EU-sponsored parallel structures and multilateral intra-regional initiatives. The basic idea was that these two processes of EU and intra-regional integration could be mutually reinforcing, since regional

<sup>2</sup> “Scholz Announces Western Balkans Summit in November”, in *European Western Balkans*, 13 July 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/?p=46354>.

<sup>3</sup> Regional cooperation and the respect of all international obligations were among EU demands for Western Balkan countries already in 1996, within the so-called “Regional approach for Southeast Europe”. See European Commission, *Regional Approach to the Countries of South-Eastern Europe: Compliance with the Conditions in the Council Conclusions of 29 April 1997* (COM/1998/618), 28 October 1998, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:51998DC0618>.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, these were linked to Western Balkan countries’ cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

<sup>5</sup> See Stephan Renner and Florian Trauner, “Creeping EU Membership in South-east Europe: The Dynamics of EU Rule Transfer to the Western Balkans”, in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2009), p. 449-465.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Grieveson, Mario Holzner and Goran Vukšić, “Regional Economic Cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Role of Stabilisation and Association Agreements, Bilateral Investment Treaties and Free Trade Agreements in Regional Investment and Trade Flows”, in *WIIW Research Reports*, No. 450 (September 2020), <https://wiiw.ac.at/p-5362.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Sandra Lavenex, “Concentric Circles of Flexible ‘European’ Integration: A Typology of EU External Governance Relations”, in *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4-5 (2011), p. 372-393, <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:76472>.



integration among Western Balkan countries would prepare them for smoother integration with the EU in the future, also strengthening EU conditionality in a region characterised by continuous political and economic instability.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that recent EU efforts to re-engage the region have placed a strong emphasis on further advancements of regional integration in the Balkans. This has been the case especially under the Berlin Process, which was meant to engage the Western Balkans under conditions of renewed geopolitical tensions with Russia, rising geoeconomic competition and mounting enlargement scepticism in some EU capitals. Thus, under the intergovernmental format, Western Balkan leaders agreed on two important projects for regional economic integration: the Multi-annual Action Plan on Regional Economic Area 2017–2019 (REA) and Common Regional Market 2020–2024 (CRM).<sup>8</sup>

These ambitious plans for regional economic integration appeared as key mid-term objectives that could have helped foster the enlargement agenda in the Western Balkans on the basis of the EU's four market freedoms. This would have fostered their alignment to the EU *acquis*, built trust among themselves and, ultimately, engender local ownership and responsibility.

<sup>8</sup> Western Balkans Six (WB6), *Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans Six*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/383>; and *Declaration on Common Regional Market*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/544>.

Yet, notwithstanding some progress, such as the negotiation of CEFTA's Additional Protocol 6 (a framework agreement extending the principle of free trade to the service sector)<sup>9</sup> or the facilitation of border-crossing procedures for goods (thanks to "Green Corridors"<sup>10</sup>), the results of regional economic integration among the Western Balkans have remained modest and uneven.<sup>11</sup> Overall, consensus remained mostly declarative, as lack of commitment and political will, together with unresolved bilateral disputes, have not made the REA/CRM fully applicable in practice.

Yet, this outcome is not surprising either. The effort to reinvigorate the EU's two-track strategy in the Balkans under the Berlin Process seems to faltered for at least three reasons.

Firstly, regional economic integration among the Western Balkans alone simply does not have sufficient weight and attraction. It does not represent a game changer for economic growth and development of the region and, thus, it hardly justifies the realisation of a fully-fledged internal regional market. Whereas a regional market remains important for the Western Balkans, representing a stable share in their total trade, it stands today at second or even third place (after the EU and China).

<sup>9</sup> See *CEFTA Additional Protocol 6 on Trade in Services*, Tirana, 18 December 2019, <https://cefta.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Additional-Protocol-6-on-Trade-in-Services-.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> CEFTA Secretariat, *The First Year of the Green Corridors/Green Lanes Implementation*, 15 April 2021, <https://cefta.int/?p=6970>.

<sup>11</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, *Common Regional Market Report on Implementation for 2021*, April 2022, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/145>.



Moreover, since the global financial and economic crisis, the importance of economic diversification has become particularly relevant, including the adoption of strategies to intensify economic relations with non-EU third countries. In other words, regional economic integration remains crucial, but it is only one component of a broader economic strategy in the Western Balkans which includes multiple economic relations at the regional, European and international levels.

Secondly, beyond the technical dimension, economic and trade policies are becoming more politically salient, and are hardly perceived as neutral. This includes long-term political projects, such as the European Green Deal for instance, but also increasing geostrategic competition and domestic contestation. In this regard, it is not by chance that trade has been the most relevant field of confrontation between Belgrade and Pristina in recent years, with the so-called “trade war” between Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2019) being one example.

Finally, and probably most importantly, the EU’s two-track strategy toward the Balkans was successful during the 2000s insofar as the regional approach was meant to complement a credible enlargement process that was challenged mainly on its demand side. In other words, the ongoing political and economic instability of the EU candidate (and potential candidate) countries did not allow for a fast advancement of EU enlargement policy and, therefore, had to be complemented

by a regional approach.

Today, these conditions are no longer in place. Since the 2008 global economic crisis, Western Balkan countries have had to diversify their economic relations and combine regional, EU and third countries economic strategies, in order to attract foreign investments and relaunch economic growth. Moreover, EU engagement has appeared highly ambiguous regarding its declared goal of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU, providing for further uncertainty and projecting its own instability on the region.

Within such a context, the OB initiative that emerged in 2019 under the name of “Mini-Schengen” has injected new dynamism, helping to promote trade and cooperation along more pragmatic lines, without a clear institutional setting and on a purely intergovernmental basis. Despite public declarations by the three founding countries about their willingness to realise a “single market” on the basis of “four freedoms,” in line with the REA/CRM, it is clear that the OB initiative is much less ambitious.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it seems meant to cherry-pick from these other regional initiatives, realising some of the measures that were negotiated – such as simplification of administrative procedure for access to labour markets – on an *ad hoc* basis.

Against this backdrop, Germany’s intention to renew the Berlin Process is certainly positive. However, the two-

<sup>12</sup> See Relja Radovic, “Open Balkans Shows No Sign of Delivering Promised Freedoms” in *Balkan Insight*, 16 June 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/?p=1005272>.



track approach in today's circumstances has become less credible and, in a way, unsustainable.

Whereas intra-regional and EU integration could still be mutually reinforcing, today this might require additional policy instruments, since there are no automatisms transposing gains from one process to the other. The two processes would require a more efficient approach across both dimensions.

It is time to move from a two-track approach to a more encompassing strategy for the Western Balkans that would ensure more effective harmonisation of the different bilateral and multilateral policies in various fields. The alternative is to accept a more pragmatic approach toward regional cooperation coming from the region, which does not necessarily converge towards the EU *acquis* and standards, and could, moreover, inadvertently give further impetus to the current permanence in power of anti-reformist and illiberal forces.

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# Enlarging to the Western Balkans

The EU Must Correct Its (Political) Math

Zoran Nechev | Dr. Matteo Bonomi



**While the EU has tended to frame enlargement in terms of charity, morality, and – above all – technicality, it has failed to exert political leadership over the process. Member states skeptical of enlargement have been able to block progress on technicalities and construct geopolitical excuses for their caution. Now, however, Germany and Italy can make a persuasive geopolitical case for enlarging to the Western Balkans, and they have the political calculus on their side. There is no excuse for missing this opportunity.**

Since the 1970s, the European Union has handled each major shift of international power through enlargement. It countered Europe's "loss of empire" by integrating the UK, Ireland, Denmark, and Iceland; addressed "third-wave democratization" by expanding to Spain, Portugal, and Greece; met the "end of global bipolarity" by including Austria, Sweden, and Finland; and embraced a "Europe whole and free" with enlargement in Eastern Europe. Each time, the EU bulked up its territory, but it never provoked other powers. Rather than following a classic geopolitical logic of size, power, and competition, the EU's past enlargement was done to achieve

stability through a technical process of market expansion and policy transfer. Although the return of power politics to Europe has left the EU bulky, directionless, and vulnerable, it is again turning to further enlargement.

Pro-enlargement Poland is now pressing the EU to embrace the narrative of a clash of civilizations that it says has always been below the surface when debating this issue. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, EU governments have, by their actions, given weight to this narrative: Dealing with 5 million refugees from Ukraine, the EU chose to apply the Temporary Protection Directive, the law that recognizes a whole group *prima facie* as deserving protection. This law was drafted following the wars in Yugoslavia, but it was never used – not even for the Syrian refugees flooding Europe in 2015. If the EU is a community of values, these voices say, then these values are not going to be realized by technical half measures but must be asserted.

And yet, the “return of geopolitics” argument has split the pro-enlargement camp because it also strengthens the case *against* enlargement. Countries like France that have historically put a brake on enlargement – often out of fear of a loss of national influence – can now cite classic Realpolitik to urge a cautious line. They can point to the dangers of “European overstretch,” arguing that, when the EU needs to be more unified and top-heavier, with smaller member states giving up their veto and bigger member states taking more of a leadership role, enlargement would mean political fragmentation and even “over-expansion.” The EU should not repeat NATO’s historical miscalculations: NATO provoked Moscow by enlarging into a zone where Russia has “vital interests,” rhetorically committing the Alliance to an open door policy that it had no intention of realizing.

## France’s Equation: A Package Deal to Lift the Unanimity Rule

French President Emmanuel Macron has now proposed a concept, European Political Community (EPC), to create an outer tier for accession hopefuls, involving them in some policies but without voting rights. This new concept comes with the disclaimer that it is not a permanent alternative to EU membership. Yet France’s earlier proposal for the EU to pursue “European autonomy” serves as a cautionary tale: while it claimed that it was neither protectionist nor anti-US, it was both. Thus, it seems likely that existing and future EU candidates will find themselves in an EPC

gutter. Whatever the geopolitical arguments for enlargement, the political math favors the skeptics. The enlargement process is mired in veto points and complex package deals that can seemingly only be overcome by changing [the treaties](#).

Germany and Italy, supporters of the classical enlargement logic, have perhaps been too quick to accept that they do not have the political math to unblock enlargement. This is understandable: Fifty years of enlargement has led to political gridlock on big issues, including further enlargement itself. And yet, contrary to widespread impressions, removing the veto and moving enlargement decisions to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) is already possible under Article 31(3) of the Treaty on European Union. Since 2005, the EU has moved ahead in just this way – by crisis rather than by treaty change, exploiting unused slack within the existing treaty framework. It can potentially do the same here.

Russia's war on Ukraine certainly provides a crisis to spur both external and internal action, thereby opening a vista for internal EU reform. The prime bugbear of states like France that want quicker EU decision-making is the number of Commissioners. Accession countries could accept the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty that cap the number of Commissioners at two-thirds the number of member states and refrain from requesting to have a Commissioner themselves. They could also forfeit their conditional right to exercise their veto power in the initial phases of accession. In doing so, these countries would increase French momentum toward a European Commission consisting of only 15 members – an idea that was set out by President Macron in his 2017 Sorbonne speech and confirmed in the 2018 Meseberg declaration.

Any such package deal driven by crisis could also be embraced by EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe that have been skeptical about applying QMV to this or any other field. Most worry that giving up their right to veto will rob them of influence in the EU, strengthening the influence of big Western members. A small minority – including, for example, Bulgaria – wish to retain QMV in enlargement to give vent to their strong bilateral grievances. But their support for further enlargement has exponentially increased after Russia's invasion and Ukraine's subsequent request for candidate status. They also fret about blowback from the Balkans if countries from that region are now neglected. They have an interest in [streamlining EU decision-making](#) to achieve progress in enlargement.

# The Geopolitical Counterargument: The EU Can Achieve Cohesion Through Enlargement

Germany and Italy have been too quick to accept the idea that enlargement leads to political gridlock. In fact, as the above examples show, it can have just the opposite effect. Both EU members and the majority of the Western Balkan hopefuls responded to Russia's aggression by supporting candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This reaction suggests that cohesive widening is not only possible but also necessary given the new geopolitical reality. Indeed, it is refusing to widen the European Union that leads to more fragmentation. While skeptics will say that the EU cannot take in more "basket cases," accession hopefuls are in fact cementing into basket cases as they are made to wait outside the EU's doorstep – many of them more prepared for membership a decade ago than today.

On those past occasions on which enlargement has led to political fragmentation, it could have been overcome – again, by removing national vetoes. Take, for example, the EU's lack of cohesion when it comes to foreign policy. Small "new" EU members such as Malta or Cyprus have insisted on maintaining a veto in foreign policy for fear of being dominated by bigger member states. They have then used that veto to block EU action, including sanctions. Taken at face value, this experience serves as grounds for the EU to be cautious about taking in many more small states – those of the Western Balkans would presumably show a similar lack of discipline. And yet, the real reason why Malta and Cyprus have acted in this negative way is often overlooked. They do so because the targets of sanctions, large outside powers like Russia or Turkey, know that these small EU members have the power of the veto and can be bullied into exercising it. In real terms, therefore, the unanimity rule in the European Council makes small EU members less powerful, not more. Lifting the veto would not leave small members open to domination by big ones; rather, it would create a cohesion of purpose.

And it is not just outside powers like Russia that exploit this advantage. EU members also misuse their veto rights to gain concessions from individual candidate countries on issues that have nothing to do with the enlargement criteria – this, too, undermines the legitimacy of their governments and makes them ripe for external influence. Although EU members had made clear that they see North Macedonia as a future EU state and were ready to set the accession requirements without any preconditions, this move was blocked by Bulgaria. Indeed, this kind of

maneuvering has blocked the EU from reaching any significant decisions on enlargement in recent years. Its last major positive decisions were made [in June 2017](#) when it closed negotiations on chapter 30, external relations, with Montenegro. Subsequent decisions on enlargement, such as the one on the new methodology for accession negotiations, have in fact produced new blockages.

The French notion of a multitiered European Political Community and its thinking of enlargement by seeking alternatives to it already exist de facto. There are plenty of alternatives to EU enlargement policy through which the EU engages with its neighbors and has ratcheted the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe to itself. Moldova, for example, is one of the three new eastern enlargement hopefuls that has benefited from tools outside the enlargement toolbox. Thanks to EU trade initiatives, only 14 percent of its exports were going to Russia and Belarus when war broke out. Moldova now hopes for similar support from the EU in reducing its trade tariffs on agriculture and helping with its energy infrastructure proposals.

## How to Apply the New Geopolitical Math in the Western Balkans

As we mentioned at the outset, each previous EU enlargement had a motif. The guiding rationale for this one could be unfinished business – achieving the continental integrity that was first broached in 1990 but then neglected due to complacency. The countries of the Western Balkans, which have been in the EU's waiting room for more than twenty years and have seen motifs come and go, have especially been victims of this complacency. Now, once again, they risk losing out as the attention of the international community has been drawn to Eastern Europe. Consequently, these countries are experiencing further political fragmentation, reform fatigue, and increased emigration to the EU while their governments have begun looking for other external backers.

Careful political math and a refined geopolitical rationale are needed to revive political will in the EU for Balkan enlargement. If the Balkan countries did agree to become members with conditional voting rights until they prove their capacity to maintain and implement all membership criteria, it would feed perfectly into the narrative that the EU is not a place for basket cases or those who disrupt decision-making. With Brexit, a large member state of approximately 70 million citizens has left the Union, thus vacating positions in its institutional infrastructure that are of

great importance in terms of absorption capacity. In short, the United Kingdom had far more capacity to block EU initiatives than any of the Western Balkan countries – with a combined population of no more than 18 million that is currently shrinking – could ever have.

For this reason, the issue of the EU's capacity to "absorb" the countries of the Western Balkans within it has become obsolete. And the numbers on which proper enlargement calculations must be based are in flux. There are currently 5 million Ukrainian refugees in the EU with more to come as Russia's war drags on. This represents an EU population size about one third of that of the Western Balkans. Thus, there are already small groups in Europe that will influence EU policies without being integrated in legal and political terms.

Together, the catalyst of a new geopolitical reality combined with a broader necessity to move toward QMV in foreign policy will shift the political calculus in the EU in favor of Germany and Italy and allow them to make a comparatively strong case for enlarging the Union to the Western Balkans and beyond.

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