

# COMMON DYNAMICS IN THE EU INTEGRATION PATH OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## Abstract

The European Union's role in the region and in the world is changing rapidly due to several internal dynamics and external crises and challenges. EU's project of integration remains a role model for peace and stability in the region and beyond. The EU Integration has emerged as a shared key priority for the EU institutions and Western Balkan countries that are in different trajectories of the accession process due to several dynamics and developments within the Western Balkan countries, regional dynamics, and enlargement skepticism among EU member states. While a comprehensive academic thinking exists about the EU's enlargement policy at its approach to this region, this study aims to understand the internal/regional dynamics in the EU integration path of Western Balkan countries through an overview of their history of integration as well as the EC Progress Reports (2022) for each country. It combines theoretical and empirical knowledge to offer a descriptive analysis of internal and regional dynamics in the Western Balkans affecting their EU integration paths.

**Keywords:** EU integration, Western Balkans, member states

## Introduction

The role of the European Union in the Western Balkans (WB) region and in the world is rapidly changing with the emergence of new security crises, and a range of supranational climate, health and technological challenges inside and outside the Union's borders. This new context in which the EU must operate has been a test to its decision-making structures and institutions. Despite the debates among Eurosceptics and Europhiles, the EU's project of integration remains a role model for peace and stability in the region and beyond. The integration processes, as a key pillar of the EU studies, is characterized by two parallel processes of "deepening" and "widening". The widening or enlargement perspective is prioritizing the Western Balkan countries such as Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The Western Balkans integration in the European Union has emerged as a shared key priority of EU institutions and the Western Balkan states. It is the most important

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platform put in place by the EU to tackle the issues affecting the region through a range of initiatives dominated by the regional approach. Regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries has been added to the membership conditionality. The European Union has offered political, technical, and financial support to all six Western Balkan partners to help advancing their key political, institutional, social and economic reforms needed for the accession. The Russian aggression against Ukraine re-emphasized the need to speed up the EU accession process for the region. The EU approach, in words of President Ursula von der Leyen in the EU-WB Summit, is that “Western Balkan countries belong in the EU”. Also, in Summit’s Joint Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021 (para. 1) and Tirana Declaration (2022) the EU reconfirmed its commitment to the enlargement process.

The Western Balkan countries have signed different agreements with the EU showing their willingness and commitment to the EU integration (Leuffen et al., 2013, p. 2-6). The pace of integration of the Western Balkans countries toward the EU has proceeded through different cycles of acceleration and slow down, impacted not only by the EU’s internal crisis, enlargement fatigue and skepticism debates but also by the country-based and regional dynamics and developments. Through a comparative approach, this article focuses on exploring what are some common dynamics and challenges that dominate the EU integration paths of the Western Balkan countries? The qualitative analysis of the 2022 EU Progress Report for each country of the region, will shed lights on the common dynamics and challenges in their EU integration process.

## **1. EU enlargement policy and the EU accession**

The EU enlargement policy is the Union’s most important soft power tool (Rehn, 2008). It is a successful foreign policy that according to the EU Commission applies to countries with EU membership aspirations, categorized as candidate or potential candidate countries, and is comprised of the “principles, goals, and instruments defined by the EU to incorporate new member states” (Juncos and Borragan, 2019, p. 267). The integration of the new EU members is facilitated through the enlargement process. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002, p. 500) define the enlargement of the EU as “a key political process both for the organization itself and the international relations of Europe in general”. The enlargement process has a strategic importance for EU in terms of its role in the promotion of peace, security, stability and prosperity in Europe as well as in strengthening the EU role in world affairs. Also, the EU membership prospective might be an essential incentive for reforming the political and economic landscape in the EU candidate and potential candidate countries. Enlargement is also a political process considering that since its establishment the policy maintains intergovernmental nature requiring unanimity among the EU member states to reach an agreement (Juncos and Borragan, 2019). In case of conflict or bilateral problems between EU member and applicant states, the EU membership prospective for applicant countries can be affected and

prolonged due to asymmetric power relations fostered by unanimity principle in the decision-making process on enlargement.

As envisioned in the Treaty on European Union (1992, Art.49) any European state respecting and committed to the promotion of European Values mentioned in Article 2 (TEU, 1992) “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” is eligible to apply for the EU membership. The states must fulfill a set of political and economic criteria, defined as the ‘Copenhagen Criteria’, focusing on institutional stability, functioning market economy, and the ability to take on the membership obligations (EC Conclusions, 1993, p. 13). The above-mentioned criteria are clustered in political criteria, economic criteria and alignment with the *Acquis Communautaire*. The EU Commission lists the rule of law, economic governance, freedom of expression and media, civil society, regional cooperation, common regional market, and SME performance as the main policy areas under concerns for the EU potential members. The Enlargement policy is unique because not only it sets criteria for accessions, but it is also a process through which candidate countries push for development by targeting the above-mentioned concerns in the pre-accession period through a range of strategies and initiatives. The case of Eastern Enlargement has demonstrated the important role of conditionality in enhancing democratic reforms, rule of law and development of market economy (Zuokui, 2010). Even though conditionality has been considered as the main driver of the enlargement, accession depends on the combination of applicant country preparedness, the EU’s absorption capacity and the EU member states approach to the EU enlargement. Throughout time and especially after the Eastern enlargement in 2004 the accession process has become even more complex.

The enlargement prospective is an important and successful EU foreign policy tool but it is facing a range of challenges. Debates and discussions within the anti-enlargement camp, based on the enlargement fatigue, focus on institutional overload that comes with the enlargement process and their support for deeper rather than wider integration. Also, they emphasize that widening the union will risk its political stability and absorption capacity. As mentioned by Juncos and Borragan, (2019, p. 277-278), enlargement fatigue is fueled by an increased “support for populist Eurosceptic parties in member states that consider enlargement as a source of insecurity”, and by the concerns “over the financial burden and migratory flows that will come with enlargement” especially after the economic crisis that increased gap between more and less developed countries in Europe. Hillion (2010) adds ‘creeping nationalization’, meaning tightening member states control over EU’s enlargement policy and expanding conditionalities that according to Geddes and Taylor (2016) can push candidate countries to make concessions to satisfy the needs of member states especially in case of bilateral issues. The competitive geopolitical context with Russia factor and the Brexit dynamics have also impact the EU enlargement policy. However, what remains a crucial challenge is the slow progress of candidate countries due to factors such as “democratic backsliding, legacies of conflicts and standing bilateral issues” (Juncos and Borragan, 2019. p. 277). This study aims to

explore the common challenges and dynamics in the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries.

## **2. EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans**

During 1990s the Western Balkans region had the image of Europe's 'trouble-making periphery' due to ongoing conflicts and delayed post-communist transitions and they were left out of the Central and Eastern enlargement wave. In the beginning of 2000s, the EU expanded the enlargement concept and affirmed its "unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans" (EC Declaration, 2003, para.3). As argued by Elbasani (2013), by that time, EU enlargement was considered as a success story due to its contribution to stability, development, and democracy consolidation in Central and Eastern European countries. Another reason for this change in approach to the Western Balkans region was a more stable post-conflict environment considered as more suitable for prioritizing EU integration issues (Pond, 2006). The combination of EU's support for integration with high "domestic demand for integration have generated high expectations that enlargement strategy will work to discipline democratic institution-building and foster post-communist reforms in the same way that it did in the previous candidates in CEE" (Elbasani, 2013, p. 4).

The EU integration has emerged as a shared key priority of EU institutions and Western Balkans states. It is defined most important platform put in place by the EU to tackle the issues affecting the region. The EU has a broad range of planned or ongoing initiatives for Western Balkans with the regional approach as most important EU initiative for the Western Balkans to enhance regional cooperation as a condition to move forward with the integration process. In line with the integration process and progress, EU has offered political, technical, and financial support to all six Western Balkan countries with the aim of helping them to advance the key needed political, institutional, social and economic reforms. Even though the basis of the EU demands for the Western Balkan countries are set in Copenhagen criteria, they are enriched with additional conditions such as regional cooperation, good neighborly relations as well as the return of refugees and cooperation with The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Financial assistance, including advancing relations with the region and offering assistance packages, and the membership prospective are important incentives and rewards for progress in terms of meeting the EU demands.

The Pre-Accession Strategy for the Western Balkans aims to assist countries in implementing the reforms necessary for EU membership. Each Western Balkan country has signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) that is the main framework for the EU-WB relations. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) launched in June 1999 showed the EU readiness for a closer relation with the Western Balkans. It is the EU policy towards the Western Balkans aiming political stabilization, encouraging transition to market economy, promoting regional cooperation, and progressive partnership to be finalized with membership once the

conditionality is fulfilled. Even though the Stabilization and Association Process outlines the common economic and political criteria, countries are individually assessed on their progress in meeting the criteria. The Stabilization and Association Process, when launched, draw heavily on tools and mechanisms EU had developed in relations to Central and Eastern European countries. The pre-accession includes significant pre-accession financial assistance for EU candidate and potential candidates to comply with the conditionality as envisioned in the Copenhagen criteria. It consists of three Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) packages: IPA I (2007-2013), IPA II (2014-2020) and IPA III (2021-2027) targeting Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey.

The EU has reaffirmed its position to the Western Balkans in several occasions. In the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU's statement that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union" underlines the EU membership perspective of the region. They claim that "the prospect of membership of the EU is real" but "it must be earned" (Ip/03/860). The Thessaloniki Agenda (2003) consists of 5 key elements including: (1) measures to consolidate peace, promote stability and democratic development; (2) further integration with EU through enriched Stabilization and Association Process (SAP); (3) increased cooperation in fighting organized crime on Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) matters; (4) promotion of economic development; and (5) increased support for reconciliation and enhanced regional cooperation. Almost one decade later in 2014 the Berlin Process was initiated as a platform for high-level cooperation between the Western Balkans and some EU member states. It has four main objectives: (1) the solution of open bilateral and internal problems of the Western Balkans states; (2) reconciliation within and between societies in the region; (3) the improvement of regional economic cooperation; (4) the creation of a basis for sustainable growth. The 2018 enlargement strategy defined enlargement into the Western Balkans as "a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe" (EC Press release, 6 February 2018, para. 2). It introduced "six flagship initiatives to support transformation in the Western Balkans", with a focus on fundamental reforms and good neighborly relations." (EC Press release, 6 February 2018, para.3). Hence, throughout the last two decades, beside the Copenhagen criteria, 'regional cooperation' and 'good neighbourly relations' are added to the conditionality for the Western Balkan countries.

The current status shows that the Western Balkan countries are in different stages of the EU integration process. While Montenegro and Serbia are negotiating their accessions for a longer period, Albania and North Macedonia are the new arrivals in this cluster. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a candidate country since the end of 2022, and Kosovo has signed the EU's Stabilization and Association Agreement and is considered as potential candidate country. The Western Balkan states are in different trajectories of the accession process not only due to the Unions' internal dynamics and approach to the region, but also because of the region's common dynamics and each country's own progress and challenges.

### 3. EU integration prospective of the Western Balkans

The EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries is dominated by ambiguity and there is not an explicit membership premise for the countries of the region. While on one hand the EU is aware that the EU membership perspective is crucial to regional stability, security and prospective, on the other hand it is challenged by enlargement fatigue and resistance (Renner and Trauner 2009). Several EU members explain their opposition to enlargement towards unstable Western Balkan countries with the lack of reforms in the countries of the region. Despite this ambiguity, the Western Balkans countries have continued their integration processes characterized by mixture of progressive and regressive steps. O'Brennan (2014) points out the existence of a symbiotic relationship between the EU 'enlargement fatigue' and Western Balkans' 'accession fatigue'.

He argues that this symbiosis has had a negative impact on EU transformational power in the Western Balkans by becoming an obstacle to the EU *Acquis* transposition and implementation (O'Brennan, 2014). Blockmans (2012) argues that the political elites engage in misleading policymaking that gives the image of EU membership motivated reforms but they lack proper implementation. Hence, the gap between transposition rhetoric and implementation motivated by political interest remains a substantive obstacle to the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries. Economides (2020) discusses three main factors for the slow EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries. First the "hangovers from the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution which still play a central role in contemporary regional politics and act as a serious constraint to accession" (Economides, 2020, p.7). Second, the presence of other external actors challenging the EU influence in the Western Balkans region and lastly, uncertainty regarding the future of the EU and membership prospective might be discouraging Western Balkan countries to move forward with reforming (Economides, 2020). Hence, political/economic elites personal interest and fear of constrains on their political power and authority rest behind resistance to comply with the EU membership conditions in the Western Balkan countries (Economides, 2020).

As mentioned by Elbasani (2013), the EU enlargement process toward the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries has been credited for its positive impact on post-communist reforms. Vachudova (2019) adds that the Western Balkan countries waiting for the EU membership, compared to their post-communist Central and Eastern European predecessors, have more security challenges and less economic potentials. Also, the uneven reforms across the Central and Eastern European region provoked discussions on the role of top-down conditionality vs. contextualized domestic influence. Vachudova (2019, p. 64) claims that "the Western Balkan states in the membership queue are hobbled by the capture of the state by elites who favor rent-seeking and ethno-nationalist appeals over economic reform, media freedom, and the rule of law". Among the domestic challenging factors to Europeanization, Elbasani (2013) highlights the strength of reformist (pro-EU) elites, hindering historical legacies, heterogenic ethnic composition, state-ness

problems and informal networks. According to Noutcheva (2012), EU membership conditionality in the Western Balkan countries is contested when identity and sovereignty related issues dominate the agenda. Previous Eastern enlargement waves have also left their footprints in the accession process due to the raising concerns over pre-mature politically motivated memberships (Ker-Lindsay et al., 2018). As such, there is more emphasis on the conditionality in the EU enlargement process of the Western Balkan countries. According to Economides (2020, p.12) non-compliance to conditionality “is largely determined both by lack of capacity and lack of will, and especially lack of political will among the ruling political and economic elites”. The Western Balkans’ EU membership perspectives are also threatened by security, organized crime and trafficking issues dominating the discourse on the region (Ker-Lindsay et al., 2018). Grabbe (2014) adds migration from the Western Balkans region towards the EU states as another rising concern. The prolonged integration process combined with enlargement experiences and slow progress of the Western Balkan countries in meeting conditionality have elevated the demands on candidates and accession negotiations. The EU is not monitoring only the legislative alignment with the *Acquis* but also the progress in terms of implementation. The analysis of drivers of enlargement from EU perspective highlights challenges to EU enlargement policy and EU’s internal problems and dilemmas. However, this study takes the approach that the integration process and conditionality on their own does not ensure the EU accession; the EU accession of the Western Balkans is primarily based on addressing a range of domestic and regional issues. The analysis of the 2022 European Commission Progress Reports for the Western Balkan countries reveals several common dynamics and issues in each country’s domestic environment and some regional challenges affecting the Western Balkan countries’ progress in meeting the EU conditionality.

Even though the Western Balkan countries have largely in place the legal and institutional framework for upholding fundamental rights, their full implementation requires further efforts especially in terms of minority rights and freedom of expression. Compared to other countries of the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina has shown the lowest progress in fundamental rights and it “needs to ensure that all citizens are able to exercise their political rights and also non-discriminating, inclusive and quality education for all” (EC Report for Bosnia, 2022 p. 6). Freedom of expression is another challenging issue for the Western Balkan countries. Most of the countries of the region have some level of preparation in this aspect but no progress has been recorded in 2022 except for Northern Macedonia and Kosovo that enjoy more pluralist media environments. Polarization of media landscape, political pressure and media independence, disinformation, and journalists’ intimidation are some problematic issues.

Political polarization emerges as common drawback in terms of political criteria for all six Western Balkan countries, according to their 2022 European Commission progress reports. The polarized political landscape is mainly observed in inter-party relations, except for the case of Albania that has been experiencing polarization due to intra-party conflict too. Polarization has affected the

parliamentary life in Albania and Serbia; created institutional deadlock in Montenegro; blocked state-level legislative and executive institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and hindered law adoption in North Macedonia and Kosovo. As mentioned in the 2022 European Commission's progress reports, civil society is operating in a more enabling environment in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, while Albania, Serbia and BiH need to put more efforts to ensure that environment. The need for further strengthen cooperation and consultation between the state and civil society is emphasized for all the countries of the region. Despite slow progress in terms of implementation, the Public Administration Reform (PAR) has been in the EU integration agenda for Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro for a longer period compared to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While Kosovo has recently initiated the reform, Bosnia and Herzegovina is far behind due to the lack of political decision-making body for it. The main themes that emerge from the analysis of countries' progress in Public Administration Reform include meritocracy or merit-based recruitment, as well as competence and independence of civil servants as common challenges for the countries of the region in their EU integration paths.

The European Commission progress reports reveal problems with the functioning of governance, institutions and rule of law in Western Balkan countries. In this perspective accountability, independence, impartiality and professionalism of judicial system remains a permanent common goal and challenge for the Western Balkan countries. Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia have shown some level of progress in judicial reform, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are dealing with the challenges of the early stages of the reform. Despite some progress, the justice system in Kosovo "is slow, inefficient and vulnerable to influence" (EC Report - Kosovo, 2022, p. 5), and the lack of progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina is attributed to "the lack of political commitment to judicial reform and poor functioning of the system" as well as the dynamics created by the "non harmonized legislations" across entities of the federation (EC Report - Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022, p. 5). Problems with justice system and rule of law have been reflected also in the fight against corruption and organized crime that is mentioned as another common challenge on which the Western Balkan countries need to focus and make progress.

The countries of the region have recorded at least some level of progress in terms of meeting the economic criteria mainly in terms of developing a functioning economy, but the consequences of Covid'19 and Ukrainian war have left their footprints in the region. A crucial challenge remains the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces in the EU. There are rising concerns regarding the quality of education and skills that should not be treated separate from the consequence of migration and brain drain phenomena ongoing in the region. In case of Bosnia and Herzegovina the political stalemate and fragmentation is also reflected in the progress of the country in terms of economic criteria.

The legacies of conflictual relations among the countries of the region have contributed in adding regional cooperation and good neighborly relations to the EU agenda and membership conditionality for the Western Balkans. The European



Commission reports analyze the progress of the country in their bilateral relations with countries of the region highlighting the need for improving relations and fostering regional cooperation. Serbia is the country with more reference in terms of addressing bilateral issues. The European Commission Report on Serbia (2022, p. 7) and European Commission Report on Montenegro (2022, p. 7) mention that their relations “remain challenging but both sides are signaling more willingness to reset relations and work toward addressing open issues”. Similarly, the European Commission Report on Serbia (2022) highlights strained relations with Croatia with ups and downs in different periods. However, what dominates in Serbia’s and Kosovo’s EU integration agenda is the normalization of relations between the two countries. As stated in the report “Kosovo and Serbia are now urged to engage constructively and advance the negotiations on the comprehensive, legally-binding normalization agreement with no further delay. Reaching such an agreement is urgent and crucial so that Kosovo and Serbia can advance on their respective European paths.” (EC Report Serbia, 2022, p. 7). Kosovo is also called to “make further substantial efforts on the implementation of all past agreements” (EC Report Kosovo, 2022, p. 6). In addition, strained bilateral relations are also observed in case of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, since Bosnia and Herzegovina does not recognize the independence of Kosovo and they “maintain a strict visa regime” (EC Report Kosovo, 2022, p. 7). All the Western Balkan countries are appreciated for being actively involved in regional cooperation. The issue of fundamental rights related to conflict dynamics is particularly emphasized in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina European Commission reports.

Even through some improvements are valued and countries show variations in terms of their preparedness, the analysis of the progress reports reveals a critical attitude to the developments within and among the Western Balkan countries. Overcoming political polarization, corruption, and organized crime; judiciary reform, administrative reform; sustainable economic model; human rights; and dynamics created by conflictual past relations comprise the main common priorities for the Western Balkan countries in order to progress in their EU integration path. Overall, the results of this study align with the literature that identifies democracy backsliding, unresolved bilateral issues and conflict related legacies of the past as the important obstacles to the Western Balkan countries progress in meeting the EU membership conditionality.

## **Concluding remarks**

The EU integration agenda of the Western Balkans blended with dynamics of regime transition and conflictual bilateral relations is characterized by achievements, failures and challenges. Relations between structural obstacles and effective Europeanization are neither deterministic nor linear. This study through an overview of the EU enlargement policy and process, EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries, and their progress in meeting the accession criteria based on the 2022 European Commission progress reports data for each country has identified

some common issues at the domestic context and some regional issues to be addressed for the Western Balkan countries move forward in their integration processes. Political polarization, fight against corruption and organized crime, reformation of judiciary system and public administration, developing a sustainable economic model, protection of human rights, and improvement of bilateral relations among the countries with conflictual pasts are the dominating themes in the European Commission progress reports for the Western Balkans. It shows that membership conditionality is not enough even though it provides an important guide and framework for political and economic progress in countries aspiring the EU membership. Despite the EU perspective on enlargement, developments and dynamics within the countries of the region show the technical readiness of the countries to join the union and they should not be overshadowed by the discourses on the EU integration as a political process. Even though this study is focused on common dynamics, being aware of the differences among the Western Balkan countries would contribute in understanding why they are in different steps of integration and progress.

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