

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

RESTART EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

Why the EU has to integrate the Western Balkans

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RESTART EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

Europe is experiencing a new period of uncertainty. The assumption that democracy and peace are permanently guaranteed has been profoundly shaken. Putin's war against Ukraine is a challenge to the EU, which in recent years has often been afflicted by discord and hesitancy. In response to this latest aggression, however, it has shown itself to be united and appears to have realised that it needs a common stance and coordinated action, especially towards the outside world. This realisation is long overdue and underlines that the EU ought not to wait for escalation before living out its creed as a sovereign and value-led actor.

Developments in Ukraine, their desperate urgency, and the brutality and geopolitical upheavals they entail call for a direct response and, at the same time, mark a turning point in Europe, which affects the entire European neighbourhood. The EU is not an island and must re-evaluate its responsibility for the continent from the ground up. To ensure peace and democracy in Europe we need an active and decisive EU, one that takes the initiative instead of just waiting.

The Western Balkans represent a particular challenge and opportunity for an EU intent on living up to its rediscovered responsibilities. It is not a matter of some supposed parallels between the Eastern Partnership and Southeast Europe, because the conditions are different. Nevertheless, the current circumstances emphasise what in recent years has received too little attention, namely the importance of a successful enlargement policy. In Southeast Europe, where war raged in the 1990s, peace, democracy and the rule of law must be defended and reinforced. Enlargement policy offers a unique opportunity to revive the European peace project and use socioeconomic convergence to foster a positive outlook for the future. This would benefit not only the accession countries, but also existing EU Member States.

The EU and its Member States have made enormous efforts to bring peace to the countries of the Western Balkans and to bring them closer. At the same time, there have been some surprising disappointments that jeopardise its achievements, threatening gradually to convert a possible success story into one of failure. In this *Perspective* we shall present what opportunities may open up if the EU commits itself to enlargement. It highlights the EU's potential and the aspiration of a »geopolitical Commission« to convert value-led policymaking into real change and tangible

success. It demonstrates why a strategic EU security policy towards the Western Balkans must not be blocked by the short-term national interests of individual Member States, because ultimately this endangers the security interests of all. It points out that relentless joint efforts are required Europe-wide to safeguard democracy and the rule of law. It shows why the EU must commit itself to advancing Southeast Europe's integration, for the sake of solidarity. This *Perspective* also warns against pursuing a policy of small steps as a strategy and underestimating the effects of symbols and the tangible. It also warns against offering mere rhetorical support for one's own values, while failing to assert them in practice, thereby bringing them into disrepute. This *Perspective* warns against a policy of the lowest common denominator and sees the future in a continent that is more than the sum of its individual parts.

COMMON SECURITY POLICY INTERESTS

The EU's draft Strategic Compass of March 2022 begins with Josep Borrell's admonition: »Europe is in danger«.¹ This amounts to a simple statement that the EU is not independent of the outside world. The EU is scarcely immune to dangers, conflicts and tensions in the neighbourhood, but also worldwide. Democracy, peace and prosperity must all be actively protected by the EU as a sovereign power. There has been a European consensus on this since, at the latest, 24 February 2022 and Putin's assault on Ukraine, which has shaken the foundations of the European security order.

The Compass is a signal that the EU wants to be regarded as a strategic, sovereign and geopolitically capable actor. This claim is the logical consequence of the current European Commission's aspiration to be a »geopolitical« Commission. In periods of manifold crisis this signal seems long overdue, both internally and externally

So far, the EU has scarcely projected a strong and consistent posture. There has rarely been a united European foreign and security policy position. Instead, many European positions have been communicated, striving for dominance in Brussels or circumventing Brussels completely. It has taken the escalation in Ukraine to get the EU to close ranks. Competing nation-state interests, as well as the coupling of foreign and security policy demands to other domestic and European-policy aims have often thwarted a united EU stance and diverted attention from what the Strategic Compass now wants to highlight, namely that there are real European interests at the heart of security policy, which must be defended through the concerted efforts of the EU and its Member States. They should take precedence over national interests, if the EU is to act coherently and assert itself as a sovereign power. The individual Member States would themselves benefit from this. The greater the importance attached to national interests, the less likely it is that EU foreign policy will be based on a well thought out strategy. Instead, it will be plagued by compromise in pursuit of whatever Member States are willing to put up with.

It is evident that there is great demand for the EU, especially in its direct neighbourhood, to operate as a sovereign and capable actor, for a number of reasons. These include both the need to safeguard peace directly and its neighbours' wish to cooperate with the EU, which establishes its legitimacy as a welcome partner. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars led to a defence policy rethink, even in Germany. Geographical proximity, ties between the populations and their own stability interests, together with the pursuit of values such as human rights led to action and military intervention.

The role of Germany, the EU and NATO in the Balkans have rightly been praised, at least initially. The military interventions were and remain not uncontroversial, although peace was brought to the Western Balkans and living conditions improved there in subsequent years. The Stability Pact for Southeast Europe and the ensuing EU aid packages for the region, alongside the promotion of peace and democratic structures laid the necessary foundations: convergence with the EU, the prospect of peace, prosperity and democratisation by means of *carrots and sticks*, strict monitoring of reforms and substantial financial aid have often enabled progress in the Western Balkans and encouraged the peaceful resolution of disputes. This shows that when European actors recognise the importance and possibilities of their actions in terms of their interests they can achieve positive results. The world order has changed, however, and thus there is now less room for mistakes. A multipolar order characterised by the »weaponisation of everything« has engendered new geopolitical initiatives, also in the Balkans. Loans from China that earn it political influence, Russian media channels that spread disinformation, transnational organised crime that strengthens corrupt elites – the list of hybrid threats is long and above all makes one thing clear: it is not only the EU that has geopolitical interests in the Western Balkans.

At the same time, the tensions underlying previous conflicts in the region have not entirely disappeared, and in fact in many places may spring to life again, as ethnonationalist breakaway efforts in Republika Srpska showed recently. Bosnia-Herzegovina is at risk of becoming a hotspot once again. But it is narratives of dominance and power fantasies, deployed particularly aggressively by Serbian President Vučić, that will not go away. In many cases, organised

¹ As this *Perspective* was going to press the final text of the Strategic Compass had still not been published. The reference is to a draft foreword from March 2022.

crime, together with state capture – in other words, the undermining and control of the state by private interest groups – prevent populations from sharing in progress and corrupt elites benefit from an uncertain status quo. There is no war, but no prosperous peace either; European money, but not European integration. Nowhere else does the EU have such concentrated interests and has already worked so hard as between Sarajevo and Tirana. And nowhere else is the EU and what it has to offer so welcome. Other power centres have little to compare with the prospect of aligning with the EU, accession and thus at some point living in peace, democracy and prosperity. The EU is thus the only entrant in the race, but somehow appears to be coming second. The failure of European efforts would not mean, however, that China, Russia or even the United Arab Emirates would achieve pre-eminence in the Balkans, because they lack a credible and attractive model for the future. The consequence would rather be a victory for authoritarianism. Populist actors are only waiting for the European promise to go up in smoke. If pro-European forces are unable to make progress with integration, the narratives of right-wing populists, which are as primitive as they are dangerous, will capture populations frustrated by lack of progress.

Backing autocrats would not be a problem for capital from Riyadh or Beijing. On the contrary, these states would regard it as a lucrative investment in the status quo in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine already makes it clear how Russia is consolidating its own influence in the region and is pursuing destabilisation with the Serbian government. The fact that three out of six states in the Western Balkans are NATO members – Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia – means that security in the region is directly tied in with the EU and the Transatlantic alliance. In contrast to Ukraine, standing by the region in an emergency is not a matter of political calculation, but an obligation to an ally.

The EU thus has a fundamental interest in combating populism and authoritarianism, which open the door to corruption and undermine every effort to establish the rule of law. More authoritarian governments at the heart of Europe would be a threat not merely to their own citizens, but also to the EU itself. Europe's promise of living in security and freedom remains its strongest attraction to the people of the Western Balkans and first and foremost boosts the democratic forces there. In recent years, the latter have fostered progress in many instances. On the other hand, there are social groups in each of the six states in the Western Balkans that benefit from the status quo and potential conflicts. Whether any of their provocations – which often try to incite and weaponise ethnic tensions – connect, also depends heavily on how decisively European politics makes possible a route to peaceful coexistence via the EU and its Member States. In recent years the EU has failed to exhibit such assertiveness, whether by repeatedly putting off essential integration measures or by turning a blind eye to failures to make progress or even steps backwards. The EU Member States neighbouring the Western Balkans have not always been helpful, either. As regards North Macedonia,

Bulgaria has adopted an irredentist stance, demanding that North Macedonia accept the contention that Bulgarians and Macedonians are one people with two states, thereby hindering for years now the opening of accession negotiations with the EU. It is high time to convert diplomatic commitments on enlargement policy into action to show that the EU is geostrategically capable and willing to act, and is able to put a common strategy in front of particular interests with a solely national agenda. Elsewhere, EU Member States have been forced to recognise what it means to be unable to act on security policy issues and thus not to have a seat at the negotiating table. This should be a lesson to decision-makers. Neither the Western Balkans nor the EU can cope with yet another trouble spot with growing authoritarianism, which benefits from unresolved conflicts. How rapidly the mood can change in response to rhetorical provocations between state representatives from the Western Balkans and to calls for separation, border changes or putative monoethnic mergers underlines that escalation is never far away. Future integration in the EU, however, offers a chance not only to extend the European peace project and alleviate regional tensions, but to reinforce it for all Member States. Enlargement is absolutely in the security interests of all European states.

What we need therefore are sober forces intent on convergence and peaceful solutions, that want to conduct the countries of the Western Balkans along a path of non-violent coexistence, notwithstanding existing societal and border disputes. Strengthening such forces and offering them real practical options in terms of European integration must be the aim of European security policy in the Balkans. The often politically disillusioned people of the Western Balkans would also welcome this. With a serious offer of rapprochement a strategically and politically resolute EU can not only show the populations of the six Western Balkan countries which of their governments want progress, but also demonstrate that it is a reliable transatlantic ally and, at the same time, has its own standpoints and strategies. Pursuing such a policy is very much in the interest of a democratic and peaceful Europe. The era of short-sighted obstructionism in the name of the nation-state must be brought to an end.

DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW AS A TASK FOR THE WHOLE OF EUROPE

»The EU should concern itself with its own problems« goes one argument against EU enlargement. This argument is based, on one hand, on the need to reform EU procedures and institutions and on the other, on shortcomings in the area of democracy and the rule of law – the so-called *fundamentals* – in potential accession countries. Although there is certainly need for action in relation to both issues, there are, first, no valid reasons why reform of institutions and procedures cannot take place in parallel with accession talks. Second, when it comes to the rule of law and democracy we face a major, perhaps even the decisive common challenge for the European future. It is a real problem that the EU has to fight internally to safeguard democracy and the rule of law. What has been going on in Hungary and Poland shows that the EU's fundamental rule-of-law values are not invulnerable. Furthermore, structural problems, such as corruption in the newest Member States, including Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, were not resolved by accession. Although these existing shortcomings should not be a reason to claim that these EU aspirants in the Western Balkans are destined to backslide in the wake of accession, the fundamental question has to be answered, how the bases of democracy and the rule of law can be safeguarded over the long term. Because it is clear that member status alone does not preclude regression or stagnation, and the existing instruments and institutions are clearly insufficient. Previous accession processes with all their reforms have not achieved adequate consolidation, and even countries in which democracy and the rule of law appear stable are not immune to the erosion of these values.

The challenge of safeguarding democracy and the rule of law over the long term cannot be met with a moratorium on accession. On the contrary, regarding enlargement as a problem in these circumstances upends the fundamental idea of European integration as a normative force and the EU as an open place protected by laws and values. Rather the question of consolidating and safeguarding democracy and the rule of law arises at pan-European level. While there has been progress in some countries in Southeast Europe, (supposed) consensus on common principles has been crumbling as a result of the actions of nationalists and right-wing populists undermining the rule of law in certain governments within the EU. The right response to this shared challenge is a common resumption of the EU's normative power and its active protection.

Two approaches to consolidating and safeguarding the rule of law and democracy are, on one hand, the rule of law mechanism and, on the other, the so-called new methodology, in other words a new accession procedure. Both point in the right direction: violation of the *fundamentals* cannot go unpunished. For Member States this might mean cuts in payments from the EU budget, while for candidate countries downgrades in the accession process are possible. In the case of progress, on the other hand, even before full accession more political and financial participation may be promised. Institutionalised mechanisms of this kind, which resemble forms of defensive democracy, are important.

But even if these mechanisms are developed further and reinforced, formal procedures are not enough. They are a necessary but not sufficient condition for safeguarding democracy and the rule of law. Compliance with the European *fundamentals* should not be in the interest of political decision-makers only because otherwise they would suffer sanctions. Although it is true that the more substantial the conditionalities with which – positive or negative – consequences are linked, the more effective they will be as levers of transformation and consolidation, these levers should be further developed by means of more effective sanctions and incentives. Nevertheless, on top of that, a democratic society and public are essential – a functioning democracy is its own best defence.

The wrong approach to the shortcomings afflicting democracy and the rule of law would be to withdraw into the shell of the nation-state. Instead, it is imperative to develop democratic societal structures, especially in potential accession countries, but also within the EU. Participation processes have a particularly significant role in this, both during accession talks and in the course of the reforms required for harmonisation with the EU *acquis*, but also in formats such as the Conference on the Future of Europe. It is important to create institutionalised possibilities for participation. This generates ownership, brings expertise into the various processes, builds trust and enhances legitimacy. In the Western Balkans the opening up of political processes for participation, more transparency and the introduction of accountability obligations should also be promoted, and not only in the enlargement talks, but as a rule. But even where civil society in the region has opened up possibilities for participation, resources are often lacking. It is therefore crucial to strengthen

and support civil society organisations. This requires sustainable strategies and resources. But that is not all. Democratic participation must be facilitated beyond organised civil society. In order to embed democracy and the rule of law in society, a robust public is essential for opinion formation and critical reflection on government actions. An independent media is indispensable for this. Political education is also decisive, something whose long-term significance is often grossly underestimated. The democratisation of political parties is also required, which in turn is closely related to increasing the importance of parliaments as central democratic decision-making bodies. These foundations of democratic participation are more complex and more difficult to enshrine in checklists than the harmonisation of legal texts. They may also call into question existing governance structures and are crucial for developing a democratically well-informed society. Without tackling these factors, it is not possible to answer the question of how democracy and the rule of law can be maintained and safeguarded for the future. These considerations are not adequately reflected in the thus far predominantly technical so-called enlargement methodology.

influence. Safeguarding democracy and the rule of law within the EU thus goes hand in hand with European peace policy.

In all this one crucial point must not be lost sight of: the people of Southeast Europe want to join the EU. Approval ratings in individual countries vary, but in each case a majority would welcome integration in the EU, at least as things stand. Besides a number of other factors, such as hopes of an economic boost, people would like to see their country join the EU because of the prospect of improved democratic processes and the rule of law, especially given the existing shortcomings in these areas. The likelihood of success of a serious enlargement policy is thus strong; even though the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law are not in the interests of all elites it can rely on the support of the majority of the population. This is not a matter of »exporting democracy«, but of responding to domestic demand. This demand confers legitimacy on the EU and potentially also for more insistent calls for reform, for discernible effects instead of baby steps, as before. This must be reflected in EU policy on Southeast Europe

The question of the future of democracy concerns us all. It cannot be answered if a group of states within Europe is left out. Instead, we have to conduct a serious debate on safeguarding democracy and the rule of law and use and build on the instruments we have. That is the only way of reviving the European idea as an idea of democracy and participation. If we fail in this, then not only accession policy, but the whole European project is cast into doubt. Bringing in the states of the Western Balkans, by contrast, offers us the opportunity, by focusing on strengthening democratic participation, to reinforce the basic idea of the EU, too, and even beyond the region.

Adhering to democratic standards and the rule of law within the EU also affects the abovementioned aspiration to be perceived as sovereign and capable of acting in its own right. If it comes to be believed that the EU no longer lives out the meaning of its creed it will lose credibility and thus

THE NORMATIVE ASPIRATION OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Accession to the EU is not an end in itself. There are important EU security policy and democratic interests that make it a good idea to support the countries of the Western Balkans in their efforts to join the EU. Besides that, however, it is the normative aspiration of enlargement and integration that should encourage the Member States to help them.

This aspiration of the EU must be measured, first, in terms of the Member States' solidarity with the people of the Balkans. As a peace project and a prosperous economic area, the EU is grounded on a notion of solidarity and coexistence. One consequence of this self-conception must be to act responsibly from its position of strength instead of excluding the countries of the Western Balkans from participation. A solidarity-based policy with regard to Southeast Europe should thus include integration in order to foster socio-economic cohesion and democratic consolidation. It has to be understood in Brussels and European capital cities that an approach based on the lowest common denominator, which makes only minimal concessions without substantively advancing integration merely prolongs the period spent in the EU's waiting room. During this period the populations concerned will wait in vain for change and tangible improvement. It is not that long ago that many people in Southeast Europe enthusiastically raised the EU flag, but in the meantime, they have become increasingly disillusioned. It is not surprising that some of those who have lost heart have heeded populist siren calls, reviving old hostilities and in particular conjuring up tangible antagonists with ethno-nationalist slogans. Solidarity with these populations thus requires satisfying their desire for integration, democracy and participation with substantive offers. Illustrative of such wasted opportunities to show support was the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines in 2021. Instead of closing the EU's borders to the export of health-care supplies, providing at least medical personnel in Southeast Europe with vaccines would have been an important signal that this region's unforeseen dependence on EU distribution mechanisms had been heeded and acted upon in solidarity. In particular it would have been relatively easy to include the emergency services in the countries of the Western Balkans in the first deliveries of the vaccine because all six states together have fewer inhabitants than, for example, the Netherlands. Instead, vaccines were delivered only after some delay and the Western Balkan states had not only the highest death rates on the continent, but also had to

procure their vaccines in China, Russia and Turkey. Solidarity also entails a clear stance in relation to the governments of the region. Restrictions on freedom and the media may not be allowed to go by without comment or sanction. That is the only way to signal to voters in the Western Balkans that the EU will support them in the struggle for European values, not the political elite's efforts to extend its power.

Second, it is a matter of credibility. Joining the EU has been promised to the Western Balkan states for years, linked to specific reform recommendations and financial and technical support measures. Although the six states in the region have pursued very different paths and none of them are likely to experience accession in the near future, the status of accession country provides populations and governments with a goal for reform efforts beyond the current legislative period. In the absence of such a prospect even a country's achievements are at risk of fading. None of these governments can credibly win support for reform if there is no long-term goal. Only the prospect of belonging to the EU family can provide the necessary urgency for far-reaching reforms in the states of the Western Balkans, so that EU accession becomes a realistic option. Unfortunately, the recent past shows that the more enthusiasm and ambition a democratic government puts into demands for reform the further it may fall. For example, former Macedonian prime minister and long-term beacon of hope Zoran Zaev may still have been in office if the EU had used the period of his reforms to achieve agreement of the Member States to accession talks with North Macedonia and prevent Bulgaria from stepping out of line. Credibility and strategic competence in asserting interests entails keeping promises also within particular terms of office in order to support democrats, promote enthusiasm for reform and sanction violations. The Western Balkans pays the price of failure as regards enlargement, on one hand, through the attrition of reform-oriented politicians and the emergence of another generation of young people that feels it has no prospects other than emigration. But the EU also suffers because individual Member States are subject to European compromises and interests, which over the long term threatens the EU with a loss of integrity.

Thirdly, a sovereign EU in the Western Balkans also needs to prove that it will address its neighbours on an equal footing. The EU can and must dissociate itself from the practices of other forces that are undermining the multilateral world

order by not negotiating with smaller states, but about them. If the EU would like to tie the countries of the Western Balkans more closely to itself it needs to encounter them in negotiations as equal partners that are to be taken seriously. If the European future is to be shaped by Europeans the states of the Western Balkans must contribute to it and have a seat at the negotiating table. It must be made clear that membership of the EU means acting responsibly in the interests of the Community. That includes recognising the populations and politicians of the Western Balkans as equal partners. If democracy and the rule of law are not merely to end at the border, elites and ordinary people must not be treated as an additional burden, but be included in the process as a creative actor.

SUMMARY: THE EU HAS NO FUTURE AS AN ISLAND

Enlargement is more than merely a formal process. And it's more than a rhetorical lifebelt in wartime. It involves the convergence of societies and the overcoming of borders in order to develop Europe further, to keep promises made about the welfare state and to modernise it in a networked world, and above all to safeguard peace and democracy.

In order to recognise the full significance of enlargement policy one needs to look beyond the short-term and ill-thought-through weighing of national interests. For too long the idea clearly was to try to fob the region off with a half-hearted enlargement policy and thus keep it reasonably stable. But keeping someone on hold may have consequences. Preferences on the ground may change over time. Because no progress was discernible the promise of accession has begun to lose credibility in recent years. Its indecision is increasingly depriving the EU of its strongest engine of transformation.

It is therefore high time that EU enlargement was treated with the requisite priority, because stability cannot be achieved by putting things off. It is rather in the EU's security-policy interests to integrate the states of the Western Balkans. Otherwise, authoritarian, populist and nationalist tendencies there threaten to grow as alternatives to the policy of European integration. If integration fails to materialise, there is also an increasing danger of ostensibly ethnically motivated tensions. It must be evident to democratic governments and Europe-oriented populations in the Western Balkans that the EU is committed to supporting them. If, by contrast, the EU continues to give the impression that it lacks a strategy and is incapable of united action this will soon become a problem – for the people of the Balkans, but also for the EU itself.

But improving the effectiveness of the enlargement strategy does not mean refraining from attaching any conditions on countries aspiring to accession. A serious strategy for enlargement rather needs to go hand in hand with new approaches to consolidating and conserving democracy and the rule of law, and which are relevant to the whole of Europe. After all, these foundations of the Union are under assault from within, a development to which we must respond collectively. If we fail to react, populist and authoritarian tendencies will call the entire European project into question, both externally and internally. An EU

afflicted by worries about enlargement because of internal inertia, while at the same time fearing being sidelined because of a lack of clout and an ability to prevail upon others is scarcely promising for the EU as a geopolitical actor, nor for the states of the Western Balkans as aspirants to accession. Instead of anxiously retreating into our separate national shells we need the courage for the collective. The *Zeitenwende* requires an EU able to breathe new life into and reinforce its ideas of peace, democracy and solidarity, thus demonstrating its own capabilities and strength of purpose. If the EU proves able to make enlargement policy a success in terms of the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law then the EU as a whole will be enhanced. And enlargement's potential to become a success story is shown once again by the approval of the people of the Western Balkans.

Not least it must be a normative imperative for the EU to integrate its own »inner courtyard«. It is not only a matter of solidarity to support people in their desire for recognition and European equality, as well as for socio-economic progress and democratic participation. The EU can not only afford to provide such support as an economic power, but it must also be a peace-policy and democratic aspiration. A serious, well considered enlargement policy with strict criteria enshrines the resilience of the European idea.

What needs to happen now? The promotion of European sovereignty and solidarity within Europe rather than isolation and business as usual. This also entails paying attention to democratic developments on the continent beyond the borders of the EU, and understanding that the EU has no future as an island. The integration of the Western Balkans is in the interests of the whole continent.

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