

# The EU Enlargement Strategy in the Western Balkans: Assessing the Implications Amidst the War in Ukraine

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*This article critically examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on European Union (EU) policies pertaining to the Western Balkan states, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. While the EU has long embraced a normative approach towards the Western Balkan region, the article argues that the Union is undergoing a profound shift towards a more geostrategic and geopolitical policy orientation. By employing an extensive analysis of the existing literature and first-hand data, this article makes a valuable contribution to the academic debates surrounding the EU's enlargement policy (EEP), particularly focusing on its inherent limitations as a normative power. The findings reveal significant inconsistencies within the EU's treatment of individual Western Balkan countries, with notable concessions being disproportionately granted to Serbia at the expense of the Union's credibility. It exacerbates the pressure faced by the Western Balkan region, consequently providing fertile ground for Russia to exploit and amplify its illiberal influence in the area.*

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, European Union, Enlargement, Geopolitics, Actorness

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the European Union (EU) has consistently emphasized that the countries of the Western Balkans will eventually become EU members based on meritocratic principles.<sup>1</sup> The concept of the Western Balkans encompasses six states, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. However, despite the passage of twenty years, these states remain in a prolonged process of accession as the EU has exhibited an

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<sup>1</sup> European Council, *EU-Western Balkans Summit: Thessaloniki Declaration*, Thessaloniki (21 Jun. 2003).

ambiguous and inconsistent approach to enlargement towards the region.<sup>2</sup> The recent decision by the EU to expedite the membership applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has generated mixed reactions within the Western Balkans. While the Western Balkan countries have welcomed the accelerated progress of others, it has concurrently elicited frustration among them, which have been awaiting similar advancements in their own EU membership trajectories for an extended period. This article analyses the impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU's approach to enlargement in the Western Balkans through the following research question: How does the EU's response to the war in Ukraine shape its action in the Western Balkans?

The main argument advanced in this research posits that the EU's behaviour exhibits traits that align more closely with those of a geopolitical power rather than a civilian (the EU's ability to influence and promote its values and objectives, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, through diplomatic, economic, and non-military means)<sup>3</sup> and normative power (the EU's capacity to shape global norms and standards by exporting its values, rules, and regulations, promoting its model of governance, and influencing the behaviour of other international actors through persuasion).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the article places significant emphasis on the geopolitical dynamics that heavily influence the EU's external conduct towards the Western Balkan states. It contributes to the existing research on the evolving approach towards Western Balkan countries in response to geostrategic events in the Eastern part of the European continent. Building upon the concept of EU geopolitical actorness, the article argues that the EU's shift towards a more geostrategic approach has resulted in a diminished emphasis on promoting EU's values, such as democracy and good governance, within the Western Balkan countries. Additionally, it also underscores that the Russian aggression of Ukraine has posed a challenge to the EU's role, prompting EU leaders to reevaluate the Union's influence and signalling a departure from prioritizing its normative significance in favour of a more pronounced geopolitical stance.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, this article aims to evaluate how the geopolitical and security considerations stemming from the war in Ukraine

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<sup>2</sup> L. Lika, *The meaning of the Western Balkans Concept for the EU: Genuine Inclusion or Polite Exclusion?* Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 1–16 (2023).

<sup>3</sup> F. Duchene, *The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence*, in *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign-Policy Problems before the European Community* 1–21 (M. Kohnstamm & W. Hager eds, London, Macmillan 1973).

<sup>4</sup> I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 40(2) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 235–258 (2002), doi: 10.1111/1468-5965.00353; Z. Laidi, *L'Europe, puissance normative internationale*, in *Politiques européennes* 227–242 (R. Dehousse ed., Paris, Presses de Sciences Po 2009).

<sup>5</sup> V. Anghel & J. Dzankic, *Wartime EU: Consequences of the Russia–Ukraine War on the Enlargement Process*, 45(3) *J. Eur. Integ.* 487–501 (2023), doi: 10.1080/07036337.2023.2190106; I. Marinova, *The EU at a Strategic Crossroads: A Geopolitical Player in Great Power Games?* 28(2) *Eur. foreign Aff. Rev.* 117–140 (2023), doi: 10.54648/EERR2023007.

affect the EU's enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkan states. In doing so, it fills a significant gap in the existing literature on the subject.

From a methodological point of view, this article draws upon primary sources, including EU official publications, particularly since February 2022, as well as relevant scientific literature. To substantiate its arguments, the article employs first-hand data to provide valuable novel insights into the dynamics of EU actor-ness and its influence on the EU's Enlargement Policy (EEP) towards the Western Balkans. The first section of the article contextualizes the EEP in relation to the region. The second section examines the EU's enlargement strategy within the framework, in particular since the 2022 war in Ukraine. Lastly, the third section evaluates the impact of the EU's recent action in the Western Balkans.

## 2 REVISITING ACADEMIC DEBATES: CONTEXTUALIZING THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS

The EU's external policy, including its approach to the Western Balkans, has been extensively examined in International Relations (IR), accordingly contributing to the ongoing debate on the EU as an international actor.<sup>6</sup> The definition of an actor necessitates the convergence of various elements, including authority, autonomy, coherence,<sup>7</sup> and recognition,<sup>8</sup> thus prompting some studies to delve into the EU's challenges in formulating a unified, consistent, and harmonious external policy.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, an extensive body of literature exists on EU foreign policy<sup>10</sup> and European integration,<sup>11</sup> while several analyses have employed constructivist approaches to explore the EEP towards the Western Balkans. Notably, scholars have scrutinized the role of ideas and discourses regarding the conceptualization of the region within the EU's political discourse,<sup>12</sup> state-building and Europeanization as everyday practices,<sup>13</sup> as

<sup>6</sup> S. Santander & A. Vlassis, *EU in Global Affairs: Constrained Ambition in an Unpredictable World?*, 25(1) Eur. foreign Aff. Rev. 5–12 (2020), doi: 10.54648/EERR2020002; C. Bretherton & John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor* (London & New York, Routledge 2006); C. Hill & M. Smith eds, *International Relations and the European Union* (Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press 2005).

<sup>7</sup> M. Merle, *Sociologie des relations internationales* (Paris, Dalloz 1988).

<sup>8</sup> J. Jupille & J. A. Caporaso, *States, Agency, and Rules: The European Union in Global Environmental Politics*, in *The European Union in the World Community* 213–229 (C. Rhodes ed., Lynne Rienner, Boulder 1998).

<sup>9</sup> R. Yakemtchouk, *La politique étrangère de l'Union européenne* (Paris, L'Harmattan 2005); S. Vanhoonacker, *The Bush Administration (1989–1993) and the Development of a European Security Identity* (London & New York, Routledge 2018).

<sup>10</sup> S. Saurugger, *Théories et concepts de l'intégration européenne* (Paris, Presses de Sciences Po 2020).

<sup>11</sup> F. Schimmelfenning & T. Winzen, *Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2020).

<sup>12</sup> L. Demetropoulou, *Europe and the Balkans: Membership Aspiration, EU Involvement and Europeanization Capacity in South Eastern Europe*, 3(2/3) Southeast Eur. Pol. 87–106 (2002); Lika, *supra* n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> V. Musliu, *Europeanization and Statebuilding as Everyday Practices: Performing Europe in the Western Balkans* (London, Routledge 2021); L. Greiçevci, *The EU as a State-Builder in International Affairs: The Case of*

well as the impact and limitations of the EU's normative power.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, previous studies addressing the EEP towards the Western Balkans have also specifically examined EU standards, conditionalities, and meritocracy.<sup>15</sup>

Recent academic debates have emerged about the concept of EU geopolitical actorness. As Stephan Klose develops, actorness is an 'entity's capacity to (re)-imagine and realize roles for itself in specific contexts of international affairs', while emphasizing an actor's internal characteristics.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, a meta-study by Licinia Simão highlights the centrality of the constructivist paradigm as a key approach to explaining EU geopolitical actorness and establishing conceptual links between its components.<sup>17</sup> According to this approach, EU norms (and its normative aspirations) transcend both the internal and external dimensions of actorness, especially its domestic and international role expectations.

In addition, several scholars have explored the concept of EU regional actorness in various policy contexts, including the EEP and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). According to these authors, EU geopolitical actorness is rooted in three fundamental assumptions,<sup>18</sup> which provide a framework for analysing the EU's role in various regional contexts. Firstly, the departure from the Union-centric approach to the concept of actorness is a key assumption in understanding EU geopolitical actorness as it allows for a comparison of the EU's role with other actors on the international stage. By examining the EU's position in relation to other actors, such as states and intergovernmental organizations, a more nuanced understanding of the EU's regional role can be developed. Secondly, EU geopolitical actorness should not be viewed as an immediate extension of its global actorness. Instead, regional contexts and third-party involvement play a significant role in shaping the EU's role in a particular region. Lastly, the EU's declared 'geopolitical awakening' necessitates a new understanding of its role, incorporating it in an interactionist framework. This framework enhances the conventional capacity-focused view of actorness by emphasizing an actor's capacity to mold

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*Kosovo* (London & New York, Routledge 2022); R. Ilazi, *The European Union and Everyday Statebuilding. The Case of Kosovo* (London & New York, Routledge 2023).

<sup>14</sup> F. Bieber, *Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 34(3) *East Eur. Pol.* 337–354 (2018), doi: 10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272; G. Noutcheva, *Fake, Partial and Imposed Compliance: The Limits of the EU's Normative Power in the Western Balkans*, 16(7) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol.* 1065–1084 (2009), doi: 10.1080/13501760903226872.

<sup>15</sup> S. Keukeleire & T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

<sup>16</sup> S. Klose, *Theorizing EU Actorness: Towards an Interactionist Role Theory Framework*, 56(5) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 1144–1160, at 1144 (2018), doi: 10.1111/jcms.12725.

<sup>17</sup> L. Simão, *Unpacking EU's International Actorness: Debates, Theories and Concepts*, in *EU Global Actorness in a World of Contested Leadership: Policies, Instruments and Perceptions* 13–32 (M. R. Freire et al. eds, Cham, Springer International Publishing 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Klose, *supra* n. 16; Simão, *supra* n. 17.

and reshape roles, norms, and expectations in a specific context, thus underscoring the dynamic nature of actorness.

The EU's engagement with the Western Balkans stems from its post-conflict response to the wars in the former Yugoslavia. However, the initiatives undertaken during this period were primarily oriented towards peacebuilding rather than the EU assuming a geopolitical role in the region.<sup>19</sup> An exemplification of such efforts is the establishment of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) following the Cologne Summit in 1999. The SAP represents a comprehensive framework that guides the integration process, encompassing political, economic, and regional cooperation reforms. Of significant importance within the SAP framework is the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), a tailored legal instrument concluded between the EU and individual Western Balkan countries. The SAA provides a structured roadmap for each state to align with EU norms and values, enhance cooperation, and facilitate integration. Its substantive coverage spans diverse areas, including trade, economic collaboration, political dialogue, legislative harmonization, and financial assistance. Simultaneously, a series of summits, most notably the Thessaloniki Summit (2003),<sup>20</sup> the Sofia Summit (2018),<sup>21</sup> and the Tirana Summit (2022),<sup>22</sup> have served to reaffirm the EU's aspiration to assume a primarily normative role in the Western Balkan region. Some of the actions that demonstrate this commitment include the extensive police reforms initiated by the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2005, its ongoing mediation efforts since 2011 in the process of normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia, along with its involvement in resolving the North Macedonia naming dispute.<sup>23</sup>

Attempts to consolidate EU's normative power towards the Western Balkans were further strengthened through the initiation of the Berlin Process in 2014. Initially led by Germany and subsequently joined by other EU Member States, this diplomatic endeavour aimed to foster collaboration and address the multifaceted challenges encountered by the Western Balkan countries.<sup>24</sup> These challenges encompassed various aspects such as infrastructure enhancement, economic resilience, empowerment of the region's youth, reconciliation, resolution of bilateral disputes, and countering the influences of external actors like Russia, China, and

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<sup>19</sup> W. van Meurs, *The next Europe: South-Eastern Europe After Thessaloniki*, 6(3) *J. Labour & Soc. Aff. Eastern Europe* 9–16 (2003); B. J. Gippert, *The Interaction Between Local and International Power in EU Police Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 39(1) *Contemp. Sec. Pol'y* 51–71 (2018).

<sup>20</sup> European Council, *supra* n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> European Council, *EU-Western Balkans Summit: Sofia Declaration*, Sofia (17 May 2018).

<sup>22</sup> European Council, *EU-Western Balkans Summit: Tirana Declaration*, Tirana (22 Dec. 2022).

<sup>23</sup> D. Bechev, *The EU and Dispute Settlement: The Case of the Macedonian Name Issue*, 37(2) *East Eur. Pol. & Soc.* 698–717 (2023), doi: 10.1177/08883254221101905; Ilazi, *supra* n. 13.

<sup>24</sup> V. Musliu, *The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans. What Is in a Name?* 2 *J. Cross-Regional Dialogues* 83–101 (2021), doi: 10.25518/2593-9483.172.

Turkey. Participating EU Member States have engaged in formal and informal meetings with leaders from the Western Balkans, thereby strengthening ties and promoting regional security and communication. Through this process, they have played a role in shaping the interests and policies of the Western Balkan states through a mechanism of socialization. The launch of the Berlin Process has been positively received by the Western Balkan states, with their leaders expressing a firm commitment to promoting European regionalism and fostering dialogue and cooperation within the region and with the EU.<sup>25</sup> The initiative has brought a renewed dynamism and encouraged collaboration in the Western Balkans, despite mixed results in regional cooperation, connectivity in terms of transport, and reconciliation.<sup>26</sup>

However, in the context of the EU's limited ability to exert substantial normative power and economic development in the Western Balkan countries, certain leaders from the region launched a local initiative known as the Open Balkan. Initially referred to as the Balkan Mini-Schengen, the idea was introduced by Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, in 2018 and aimed to enhance economic and political relations among the six Western Balkan countries.<sup>27</sup> The plans for its establishment were first unveiled during a meeting held in October 2019, in Novi Sad (Serbia), and led to the signing of an agreement in Ohrid (North Macedonia) in July 2021, concluded between the leaders of Albania (Edi Rama), North Macedonia (Zoran Zaev), and Serbia (Aleksandar Vucic). This agreement primarily focused on the liberalization of goods circulation, labour market unification, and cooperation in the face of natural disasters.

Yet, while new summits were organized such as the Tirana Summit (2021) and Belgrade Summit (2022), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, declined to join this initiative, which is perceived as supportive of Serbian expansionism and Russia's interests in the Western Balkans.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, on 2 July 2023, Edi Rama announced in a speech that the Open Balkan initiative had accomplished its objectives, prompting a shift towards refocusing on the Berlin Process.<sup>29</sup> Rama's decision appears to have been made amidst strong criticism from Kosovo and opposition political parties in Albania, and influenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine and recent resurgence of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Notably, Serbia steadfastly maintains its alliance with Vladimir Putin's Russia, and the majority of Serbian citizens continue to perceive Russia as their closest ally,

<sup>25</sup> European Council, *supra* n. 1.

<sup>26</sup> L. Lika, *The impact of the Berlin Process on the Western Balkans*, Working paper n° 5 Studio Europa Maastricht and Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERiM), Maastricht 1–30 (2023).

<sup>27</sup> A. Kulo & A. Novikau, *The Open Balkan initiative: A Step Forward Towards European Integration or Running on Empty?* J. Contemp. Eur. Stud. 1–13 (2023), doi: 10.1080/14782804.2023.2204422.

<sup>28</sup> E. P. Joseph, *Open Balkan(s) Is Not Just Unwise. It's Dangerous*, Balkan Insight (15 Jun. 2022).

<sup>29</sup> A. Taylor, *Rama: Open Balkan fulfilled Its Mission, Time to Focus on Berlin Process*, Euractiv (3 Jul. 2023).

even in time of war in Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, relying on Serbia, Putin is actively seeking to destabilize the Western Balkans,<sup>31</sup> causing concern among Western leaders, both American and European, who are actively engaged in maintaining peace in the region and preventing the potential escalation of conflict beyond Ukraine. Despite yielding to EU pressure and ultimately voting in favour of non-binding United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions criticizing the Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Serbia stands as the lone dissenter in the Western Balkans by refraining from imposing sanctions on its Russian ally.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to the expected reactions on the EU front, no significant repercussions unfolded. EU officials continued to regard Serbia as a reliable partner and a contributor to regional stability.<sup>33</sup> Despite any potential discussions taking place behind closed doors, this steadfast perception thus only bolsters Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic's confidence in the EU's apparent failure to wield the influential leverage at its disposal.<sup>34</sup>

### 3 EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION OF THE EU ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS IN RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Concerned about the resurgence of tensions in the Western Balkans and recognizing its normative limitations, the EU has opted for a geopolitical shift in its influential enlargement policy.<sup>35</sup> Originally grounded in the Union's fundamental values, the EEP has proven to be one of the most successful and efficient tools in promoting political, economic, and societal reforms, diffusing of norms, consolidating peace and democracy, and fortifying stability throughout the EU and beyond.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the EEP helps the Union bolstering its international influ-

<sup>30</sup> V. Vuksanovic, L. Steric & M. Bjelos, *Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine*, Western Balkans Security Barometer (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2022).

<sup>31</sup> P. Bargañés et al., *Engagement Against All Odds? Navigating Member States' Contestation of EU Policy on Kosovo*, *The International Spectator* 1–20 (2024); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Managing the Risks of Instability in the Western Balkans*, Europe Report No. 265 (Brussels 7 Jul. 2022); F. Bislimi, *Serbia's Loyalty to Putin Threatens Renewed Conflict in the Heart of Europe*, Euractiv (3 Mar. 2022).

<sup>32</sup> A. Vasovic, *Sanctions on Russia are Main Obstacle to Serbia's EU Bid – PM Brnabic*, Reuters (10 Feb. 2023); International Crisis Group (ICG), *supra* n. 31, at 12–13; S. Popovic, *Serbia's UN Vote Against Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Decrypted*, Euractiv (3 Mar. 2022).

<sup>33</sup> M. Ruge, *How to Kill Four Birds With One Stone: The West's Foreign Policy Challenge in Serbia*, European Council on Foreign Relations (26 Jan. 2023).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> S. Keil, *Enlargement Politics Based on Geopolitics? A Proposal for a Geopolitics-Driven Enlargement Policy*, in *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* 117–124 (J. Dzankic, S. Kacarska & S. Keil eds, Bologna, European University Institute 2023).

<sup>36</sup> M. Telo, *The EU: A Civilian Power's Diplomatic Action After the Lisbon Treaty. Bridging Internal Complexity and International Convergence*, in *The EU's Foreign Policy. What Kind of Power and*

ence and presence.<sup>37</sup> The successive waves of enlargement have played a substantial role in shaping the institutional negotiations that culminated in the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). To ensure that the enlargement process does not impede effective and accountable policy-making, the EU has had to adapt its decision-making procedures and institutions to accommodate the membership of new Member States.

More recently, German's State Secretary at the Federal Chancellery, Jörg Kukies, asserted that Germany will not agree to new EU enlargement without prior reforms of the EU itself, in order to safeguard the bloc's ability to effectively respond to challenges.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as some scholars have pointed out, the discourse surrounding EU enlargement has been marked by a politicized rebordering process, and enlargement itself has become increasingly contested since the mid-2000s.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Laurence Boone, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, emphasized that EU Member States should reach a decision on a suitable enlargement mechanism for aspiring countries, while upholding the integrity of the EU.<sup>40</sup> In August 2023, European Council President Charles Michel expressed his desire for the EU to be prepared for enlargement by 2030, stating: 'I believe we must be ready – on both sides – by 2030 to enlarge'.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the European Commission rapidly responded, with its deputy spokesperson Dana Spinant asserting that there is no specific timeline for the acceptance of new member countries.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the EU's enlargement strategy being considered challenged,<sup>43</sup> the Ukraine crisis and changes in the geopolitical landscape have caused the EU to realize its strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in its immediate neighbourhood. Boone advocates for a balance between the EU's security and

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*Diplomatic Action?* 27–63 (M. Telo & F. Ponjaert eds, Farnham, Ashgate 2013); Keukeleire & Delreux, *supra* n. 15.

<sup>37</sup> D. Dudley, *European Union Membership Conditionality: The Copenhagen Criteria and the Quality of Democracy*, 20(4) *Southeast Eur. & Black Sea Stud.* 525–545 (2020), doi: 10.1080/14683857.2020.1805889.

<sup>38</sup> O. Noyan, *German Top Aide: No EU-Reform, No Enlargement*, Euractiv (28 Nov. 2022).

<sup>39</sup> M.-E. Bélanger & F. Schimmelfennig, *Politicization and Rebordering in EU Enlargement: Membership Discourses in European Parliaments*, 28(3) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y* 407–426 (2021), doi: 10.1080/13501763.2021.1881584.

<sup>40</sup> L. Boone quoted in T. Bourgery-Gonse, *French Minister Says EU Enlargement Must Be Decided by Year's End*, Euractiv (15 May 2023).

<sup>41</sup> C. Michel quoted in L. Bayer, *Charles Michel: Get Ready by 2030 to Enlarge EU*, Politico (28 Aug. 2023).

<sup>42</sup> D. Spinant quoted in G. Sorigi, *Commission Snubs Charles Michel's. 2030 EU Enlargement Target*, Politico (29 Aug. 2023).

<sup>43</sup> M. Petrovic & N. Tzifakis, *A Geopolitical Turn to EU Enlargement, or Another Postponement? An Introduction*, 16(2) *J. Contemp. Eur. Stud.* 157–168 (2021), doi: 10.1080/14782804.2021.1891028; A. Hajrullahu, *The Serbia Kosovo Dispute and the European Integration Perspective*, 24(1) *Eur. foreign Aff. Rev.* 101–120 (2019), doi: 10.54648/EERR2019007.



integrity and expediting accession processes for candidate and potential candidate countries.<sup>44</sup> In June 2022, the EU granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status for membership, and opened an European perspective to Georgia, but some leaders, in particular Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, have argued that reforming the Treaty should be a precondition to enlargement.<sup>45</sup> According to Boone, the European Political Community (EPC), conceived by French President Emmanuel Macron and convened in Prague during the Conference on the future of Europe on 9 May 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is deemed as the suitable intergovernmental forum for deliberating the type of enlargement policy that the EU necessitates.<sup>46</sup> The second EPC summit was symbolically held in Moldova in June 2023 and brought together leaders from 45 European countries. In this context, the Group of Twelve – working on EU institutional reforms and convened by the French and German governments – as issued a report in September wherein it recommends the following: ‘The new political leadership after the EU elections in 2024 should commit to the goal of 2030 and agree how to make the EU enlargement ready by then’.<sup>47</sup>

The European Council decision on 14 and 15 December 2023 to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, coupled with the conferment of candidate status to Georgia, and the prospect of initiating accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina upon meeting the requisite compliance standards,<sup>48</sup> signifies a noteworthy pivot in the EEP. While scholars like Bernhard Stahl had previously highlighted the EU's limitations of normative assessments based on meritocracy regarding the progress of the Western Balkans towards EU accession, the decision to grant candidate status during a period of military conflict in the EU's immediate vicinity undoubtedly marks a significant departure from previous practices.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the European Council's rapid granting of candidate status and opening of negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova within the EU's decision-making process was unprecedented.<sup>50</sup> Georgia, strategically positioned as a pro-European country aiming to counter Russian influence in the Caucasus<sup>51</sup> also benefited from

<sup>44</sup> Boone quoted in Bourgery-Gonse, *supra* n. 40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> The Group of Twelve, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century* (Paris & Berlin 2023).

<sup>48</sup> European Council, *European Council Meeting (14 and 15 December 2023) – Conclusions*, Brussels 15 Dec. 2023).

<sup>49</sup> B. Stahl, *Perverved Conditionality: The Stabilisation and Association Agreement Between the European Union and Serbia*, 16(4) *Eur. foreign Aff. Rev.* 465–487 (2011), doi: 10.54648/EERR2011032.

<sup>50</sup> Anghel & Dzankic, *supra* n. 5, at 488.

<sup>51</sup> Z. Adzinbaia, *EU Aspirations and Russian Realities: Georgia at the Geopolitical Crossroads*, Atlantic Council (11 Jan. 2024).

this acceleration, securing its own candidate status, and shows the EU's commitment to open the prospect of membership to a geographically disconnected country. These swift developments in the enlargement process toward Eastern countries have generally received favourable reception among the majority of Western Balkan countries. However, concurrently, the EU has faced criticism for neglecting the region. As of the current writing, all Western Balkan states have achieved candidate country status for European membership, except for Kosovo (considered by the EU a potential candidate for membership) which still faces the challenge of lacking official recognition from five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain). On 15 December 2022, Kosovo formally submitted its application for EU membership and is seeking the status of candidate country.<sup>52</sup> As for the other countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina attained candidate status in December 2022, years after having introduced its official request in 2016, and the opening accession negotiations for EU membership is expected to start in 2024.<sup>53</sup> After numerous delays, Council conclusions on North Macedonia and Albania on 18 July 2022 paved the way for the opening of membership negotiations.<sup>54</sup> Albania and North Macedonia completed the mandatory screening process in November 2023, a prerequisite for initiating negotiations.<sup>55</sup> Montenegro has opened all thirty-three negotiation chapters, but since 2018 there has been no meaningful advancements.<sup>56</sup> So far, Serbia has opened 22 out of 35 chapters. However, Belgrade's reluctance to impose sanctions against Moscow has hindered significant progress in the negotiations.<sup>57</sup>

Notably, the backdrop of the conflict in Ukraine has also had the effect of bolstering Bosnian Serb separatist sentiments in Republika Srpska, one of the two constituent entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a manner reminiscent of Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vucic, local leaders in Republika Srpska have adopted a diplomatic balancing between the West and Russia. Russia has strategically cultivated political, economic, and cultural connections with Slavic and Orthodox communities in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, promoting a contrasting

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<sup>52</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document. Kosovo 2023 Report*, Brussels, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM(2023), 692 final (8 Nov. 2023).

<sup>53</sup> European Council, *supra* n. 48, at 5.

<sup>54</sup> Council of the European Union, *Enlargement – Council Conclusions on North Macedonia and Albania*, Brussels (18 Jul. 2022).

<sup>55</sup> European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), *Screening Meetings Completed as Part of Screening Process With Albania and North Macedonia* (8 Dec. 2023).

<sup>56</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document. Montenegro 2023 Report*, Brussels, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM(2023) 694 final (8 Nov. 2023).

<sup>57</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document. Serbia 2023 Report*, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM(2023) 695 final (8 Nov. 2023).

agenda to that of the EU.<sup>58</sup> Russian agenda includes endorsing practices such as censorship, militarization, incitement to conflict, disinformation campaigns, fostering instability, and discouraging the region's accession to the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>59</sup> Serbian leaders of Republika Srpska persistently advocate for secessionist plans, continually issuing threats for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Russia has repeatedly interfered in the internal affairs of Montenegro in recent years.<sup>61</sup>

In a nutshell, the EU decision to grant the status of candidate countries to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and the opening of accession negotiations with Kyiv and Chisinau, not solely on the basis of the EU's established meritocracy criteria but also with consideration of political and geopolitical factors, has significant implications for the EU's normative power concept, twofold in nature. Firstly, it serves to corroborate the longstanding argument put forth by a number of scholars, namely that the process of EU accession represents, and has always been, a political and geopolitical decision, and that the notion of meritocracy espoused by the European Commission has either lapsed or been set aside.<sup>62</sup> This argument weakens the core tenets of Manners' concept of the EU's normative power.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, the EU is undergoing a major paradigm shift in its foreign policy, which, as per the notion of EU regional actorness, reflects a marked inclination to position itself as a geopolitical actor,<sup>64</sup> in addition to, or instead of, its normative actor status. This shift is also evidenced by the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), for which EU leaders have openly acknowledged providing unprecedented support to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAFs), including military equipment as well as training.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, several EU Member States, including France and Germany, have taken the initiative to provide supplementary assistance to Ukraine, thereby underscoring their support for the Union's new geostrategic direction. This highlights a notable

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<sup>58</sup> *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations With Non-Western Countries* (F. Bieber & N. Tzifakis eds, London & New York, Routledge 2020).

<sup>59</sup> A. Rrustemi et al., *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies 2019).

<sup>60</sup> M. Szpala, *In the Footsteps of Ukraine? Republika Srpska's Challenge to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Future Scenarios* (Barcelona, European Institute of the Mediterranean 2023).

<sup>61</sup> J. Marovic, *Montenegro: Always at a crossroads*, in *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations With Non-Western Countries* 146–163, at 147–149 (F. Bieber & N. Tzifakis eds, London & New York, Routledge 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Keil, *supra* n. 35, at 119.

<sup>63</sup> Manners, *supra* n. 4.

<sup>64</sup> K. Raik et al., *EU Policy Towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition Over European Order*, *The International Spectator* 1–20 (2024).

<sup>65</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *About EU Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine)* (8 Dec. 2022), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine/about-eu-military-assistance-mission-support-ukraine-cumam-ukraine\\_en?s=410260](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine/about-eu-military-assistance-mission-support-ukraine-cumam-ukraine_en?s=410260) (accessed 26 Jan. 2024).

shift from the traditional centrality of normative criteria in the process of integration, further exemplified by the current trajectory of Hungary and Poland, both of which have taken an illiberal turn, as well as a new pro-Russian government in Slovakia. The cases observed in Poland and Hungary underscore that the ‘European democratic development is not irreversible’.<sup>66</sup> Both states have engaged in a prolonged dispute with the EU, stemming from their reluctance to adhere to European norms, values, and the principles of the rule of law.<sup>67</sup> According to Christina Griessler and Fanni Elek, Hungary’s skepticism towards Brussels and its positions on the rule of law, media freedom, and domestic justice have impeded the enlargement process, with cautious EU Member States striving to avert scenarios akin to Hungary’s emergence.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, certain EU Member States express apprehension that the Western Balkans may follow the path of Hungary or Poland within the EU.<sup>69</sup> Viktor Orbán is not regarded as a role model for all politicians in the Western Balkan countries, however, his advocacy of illiberal democracy has resonated in specific states, including Serbia.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Orbán has fostered amicable relations with some leaders in the Western Balkans, such as Serbia’s President Vucic and former North Macedonia’s Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who perceive Hungary as an ally.<sup>71</sup> Western Balkan autocrats, in particular Aleksandar Vucic, draw inspiration from Orbán’s model, rhetoric, and tactics.<sup>72</sup> Over recent years, Orbán and Vucic have consolidated their ties through regular visits, sharing similar worldviews and a mutual interest in maintaining political control within their respective countries.<sup>73</sup> Notably, Nikola Gruevski obtained refuge in Hungary with the aid of Hungarian officials to evade imprisonment for abuse of power and corruption charges in 2018.<sup>74</sup> Hungary, in defiance of extradition requests from North Macedonia, shields Gruevski from legal proceedings. This deviation within the EU’s own Member States raises substantive questions regarding the Union’s credibility, particularly as it pertains to the enforcement and adherence to the criteria that the EU imposes on (potential) candidate countries.

<sup>66</sup> S. Cvijic, *Hungary’s Illiberal Infection of the Western Balkans*, Politico (15 May 2018).

<sup>67</sup> C. Griessler & F. Elek, *Hungary, an Anti-role Model for Successful EU Integration?* ÖGfE Policy Brief 14, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Vienna, 1–8 (22 Oct. 2021).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> A. Hoxhaj, *The EU Rule of Law Initiative Towards the Western Balkans*, 13 Hague J. Rule L. 143–172 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s40803-020-00148-w.

<sup>70</sup> Cvijic, *supra* n. 66.

<sup>71</sup> Griessler & Elek, *supra* n. 67.

<sup>72</sup> Cvijic, *supra* n. 66.

<sup>73</sup> Griessler & Elek, *supra* n. 67.

<sup>74</sup> Hoxhaj, *supra* n. 69.

#### 4 INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE RECENT EU ACTION ON THE WESTERN BALKANS

The EU's primary focus in the Western Balkans is on maintaining peace, reflecting a policy of 'stabilitocracy'.<sup>75</sup> The Union aims to prevent new crises, especially given the attention of both the EU and the United States being directed towards Ukraine. Consequently, the EU's approach in the Western Balkans can be characterized as crisis management, resulting in ambiguous incremental agreements and limited progress only.

For instance, the 2023 Ohrid Agreement represents a diplomatic arrangement with the main objective of normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>76</sup> The agreement mentions that 'Serbia will not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organization'<sup>77</sup> and that both countries 'mutually recognize their respective documents and national symbols, including passports, diplomas, licence plates, and customs stamps'.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Kosovo has been asked to provide 'an appropriate level of self-management' for the Serb minority.<sup>79</sup> The agreement aims to establish a comprehensive and binding framework to address the multifaceted aspects of the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia. However, akin to its predecessors, this agreement is similarly marked by ambiguities in both language and substance, lacking a precise timetable for implementation. Another example is the decision by the European Council to endorse the Council conclusions of 13 December 2022 and grants, as mentioned *supra*, candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>80</sup> which raises hope for notable political achievements in the Western Balkans. The recent recommendations of the European Commission to open accession negotiations follow the same trajectory.<sup>81</sup> However, this new status has been marred by uncertainties, particularly since, according to the EU itself, minimal progress has been observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards EU membership.<sup>82</sup> While various factors contribute to this lack of progress, it is

<sup>75</sup> The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy* (Graz 2017).

<sup>76</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue: Agreement on the Path to Normalization Between Kosovo and Serbia* (27 Feb. 2023), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en) (accessed 26 Jan. 2024).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, Art. 4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, Art. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Art. 7.

<sup>80</sup> European Council, *European Council Meeting (15 December 2022) – Conclusions* (Brussels 15 Dec. 2022).

<sup>81</sup> Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), *Commission Adopts 2023 Enlargement Package, Recommends to Open Negotiations With Ukraine and Moldova, to Grant Candidate Status to Georgia and to Open Accession Negotiations With BiH, Once the Necessary Degree of Compliance Is Achieved* (Brussels 8 Nov. 2023).

<sup>82</sup> Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), *Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2022*, Brussels (12 Oct. 2022).

reasonable to underscore the correlation between the swift granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and the sudden progress made in Bosnia and Herzegovina's case. For instance, as Veronica Anghel and Jelena Dzankic state, 'none of these decisions would have been made in the absence of the security threat brought by the Russia–Ukraine war for the European Union'.<sup>83</sup>

The EU's strategy in the Western Balkans primarily focuses on two aspects: securing funds for the countries through initiatives such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA),<sup>84</sup> and shaping public opinion both within the EU and the Western Balkan states. Nevertheless, the EU showcases an imbalanced level of criticism towards Western Balkan countries grappling with integration challenges. The EU has tolerated Serbia's destabilizing behaviour in the Western Balkans. Aleksandar Vucic's Serbia has shifted towards an authoritarian regime, which is making direct interferences in neighbouring states by instrumentalizing Serb minorities, and has cultivated significant affiliations with the Putin regime.<sup>85</sup>

Besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, two other notable examples underscore Serbia's instrumentalization of Serb minorities in neighbouring countries and its destabilizing potential for the Western Balkan region. Firstly, Serbia leverages the influence of individual Orthodox leaders based in Montenegro to exert its influence in the country.<sup>86</sup> The issue is highly sensitive in Montenegro, which gained independence from Serbia in 2006, as opinions vary regarding the authority of Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porfirije in the country.<sup>87</sup> Since Montenegro's independence, Montenegrins have called for a new Orthodox Christian Church that is separate from the influence of Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>88</sup> Fierce debates about the issue of the church and Serbian influence in the country have created great polarization in society and large divisions between pro-Western political parties on the one hand, and pro-Serbian and pro-Russian ones on the other.<sup>89</sup>

Secondly, Serbia destabilizes the northern municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo. The recent escalation of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia was

<sup>83</sup> Anghel & Dzankic, *supra* n. 5, at 488.

<sup>84</sup> Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), *European Commission Announces Additional €680 million Investment Package for the Western Balkans under the Economic and Investment Plan* (13 Dec. 2023).

<sup>85</sup> F. Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan 2020); M. Nic, *Balkan Troubles* (Berlin Policy Journal 2017).

<sup>86</sup> K. Morrison & V. Garcevic, *The Orthodox Church, Montenegro, and the 'Serbian World'* (Sarajevo, Atlantic Initiative 2023).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> DW, *Tensions in Montenegro Over Serbian Church Leaders* (9 May 2021).

<sup>89</sup> Morrison & Garcevic, *supra* n. 86; D. Sito-Sucic, *Montenegro's Parliament Passes No-confidence Motion on Cabinet*, Reuters (20 Aug. 2022); RFE/RL's Balkan Service, *Montenegro Government Signs Controversial Agreement With Serbian Orthodox Church* (3 Aug. 2022).

underscored by the abduction of three Kosovo's border police officers by Serbian special forces on 14 June 2023.<sup>90</sup> Kosovo's officers were released only two weeks later. Moreover, tensions heightened due to the disregard for the 2013 Brussels Agreement, which aimed to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia and prevent hindrances to each other's European path.<sup>91</sup> The situation even worsened when Serbia's President Vucic urged the Serb minority to boycott local elections in Serb-majority northern municipalities in the Republic of Kosovo, resulting in Kosovo Albanian mayors assuming power. However, even though the EU regretted the boycott of elections by Kosovo Serbs, no sanctions were taken against Serbia's leaders who initiated the movement. Instead, both the EU, specifically France and Germany,<sup>92</sup> and the United States, condemned Kosovo's decisions regarding the Albanian mayors in the northern municipalities.<sup>93</sup> In addition, the EU has taken measures to curtail high-level visits, contacts, and financial cooperation with Kosovo.<sup>94</sup> Given Kosovo's strong pro-EU and pro-United States stance, with its foreign policy firmly oriented toward the West,<sup>95</sup> these measures have faced criticism within the Western Balkan state<sup>96</sup> and from prominent politicians and lawmakers in both Europe and the United States.<sup>97</sup>

More recently, on 24 September 2023, an unsettling surge in violence unfolded in the north of the Republic of Kosovo. A heavily armed group of Serb paramilitaries carried out an armed action resulting in the loss of one Kosovo police officer's life. Kosovo and the EU qualified this armed action as a terrorist attack.<sup>98</sup> While the evidence published by the Government of the Republic of

<sup>90</sup> European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 19 October 2023 on the recent developments in the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo*, P9\_TA(2023)0372 (Brussels, 19 Oct. 2023).

<sup>91</sup> A. Beha, *Disputes Over the 15-Point Agreement on Normalization of Relations Between Kosovo and Serbia*, 43 (1) Nationalities Papers 1–20 (2015), doi: 10.1080/00905992.2014.990367; Kosovo Democratic Institute (KDI), *7 vite pas marrëveshjes së parë për normalizim: ku janë Kosova dhe Serbia me 'normalizim' sot?* Prishtinë, Republic of Kosovo 1–14, at 9 (Apr. 2020).

<sup>92</sup> L. O'Carroll & C. Bell-Davies, *Macron and Scholz urge Kosovo to hold fresh elections to ease Serbia tensions*, *The Guardian* (2 Jun. 2023).

<sup>93</sup> X. Bami, *EU Announces Measures Against Kosovo Over Unrest in North*, *Balkan Insight* (14 Jun. 2023).

<sup>94</sup> M. Dunai, *EU hits Kosovo With sanctions After Serb Tensions Flare Up Again*, *Financial Times* (14 Jun. 2023).

<sup>95</sup> *Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Bilateral Relations* (L. Lika ed., London & New York, Routledge 2023); D. Gashi & P. Kelmendi, *The Dynamics of US–Kosovo Relations: An Investigation of Key Factors*, in *Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Bilateral Relations* 29–54 (L. Lika ed., London & New York, Routledge 2023).

<sup>96</sup> RTK, *Kurti: Masat e BE-së kundër Kosovës të padrejta* (2 Jul. 2023).

<sup>97</sup> L. O'Carroll, *US and EU Leaders Urged to Change Tack on Kosovo–Serbia Tensions*, *The Guardian* (8 Aug. 2023).

<sup>98</sup> A. Kurti, *Prime Minister Kurti's Full Address at the Joint Press Conference With the Deputy General Director of the Kosova Police, Fehmi Hoti*, Prime Minister Office, Prishtinë, Republic of Kosovo (24 Sep. 2023); European Parliament, *supra* n. 90.

Kosovo<sup>99</sup> and many analysts<sup>100</sup> have discerned notable parallels between these Serb paramilitaries and President of Serbia Vucic, even drawing comparisons to the military conduct observed during Russia's invasion of Ukraine,<sup>101</sup> the EU has refrained from establishing a direct causal connection between Belgrade and the perpetration of this terrorist attack. Instead, the Union has chosen to only condemn the acts of violence and has urged the governments of both countries to take measures to prevent further escalation.<sup>102</sup> However, by refraining from taking punitive sanctions against the Serbian leaders responsible for instability in the Western Balkans as a whole, the EU achieves the opposite outcome. This EU approach indirectly paves even more the way for external influences, particularly Russian interference. In fact, EU's influence in Serbia during the Russo-Ukrainian war has proved to be ineffective.<sup>103</sup> Serbia has historically received political and military support from Russia. The concept of the 'Serbian world', a nationalist and expansionist doctrine aiming to assert influence over all territories inhabited by Serbs in the Western Balkans,<sup>104</sup> bears striking resemblance to Russia's project known as the 'Russian world'. This Russian initiative involves extending influence beyond Russia's borders into areas inhabited by populations sharing common historical legacies, cultural affinities, as well as linguistic and political ties with Moscow.<sup>105</sup> EU's failing influence on Belgrade risks destabilizing the Western Balkans due to Serbia's aspirations for expansionism. Despite the events of 24 September 2023, and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti's repeated appeals to lift political and economic restrictions, the EU paradoxically continues to maintain punitive measures against Kosovo.<sup>106</sup> In the same period, the EU applied an appeasement policy towards Aleksandar Vucic in order to try distancing Serbia from its alignment with illiberal powers like Russia. This EU's appeasement policy, criticized by a majority in the European Parliament, has been deemed unsuccessful in achieving its intended objectives.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo, *Svečla: Yesterday's Attack in the North Was a Terrorist Organisation That Has Been Led and Ordered Directly by Official Belgrade*, Prishtinë, Republic of Kosovo (9 Oct. 2023).

<sup>100</sup> J. Dettmer, *Kosovo attack: Who Benefits*, Politico (2 Oct. 2023).

<sup>101</sup> S. Marsh, *Kosovo Says Serbia's Behaviour Same as Russia's Before Ukraine Invasion*, Reuters (2 Oct. 2023).

<sup>102</sup> European Parliament, *supra* n. 90.

<sup>103</sup> B. Radeljic & C. R. Ozsahin, *The Inefficiency of the EU Leverage in Serbia During the Russo-Ukrainian War*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 1–20 (2023).

<sup>104</sup> Morrison & Garcevic, *supra* n. 86.

<sup>105</sup> M. Suslov, *Russian World Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of Spheres of Influence*, 23 (2) *Geopolitics* 330–353 (2018), doi: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921.

<sup>106</sup> S. Lynch, *Kosovo Wants Back in EU Good Graces, Comeuppance for Serbia*, Politico (24 Jan. 2024).

<sup>107</sup> T. Reuten quoted in Euronews Albania, *Dutch MEP: EU Must Stop Disastrous Appeasement of Vucic!* (7 Oct. 2023).



## 5 CONCLUSION

The Western Balkan region encompasses a diverse array of nations, ethnicities, states, languages, and cultures. While the region has experienced relative stability in the past two decades – primarily due to the EU's and United States' commitment to peace – old tensions, rivalries, and bilateral disputes have resurfaced with increased intensity following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The purpose of this article was to provide a critical analysis of European involvement in the Western Balkans against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Its main contribution lies in highlighting the geopolitical and strategic actions undertaken by the EU to uphold peace, stability, and, most importantly, prevent the conflict from spreading from Ukraine to the Western Balkans. It is worth noting that Russia continues to rely on its alliance with Serbia to maintain tensions in the Western Balkan region. Moreover, Serbia draws inspiration from the 'Russian world' doctrine to promote its nationalist agenda known as the 'Serbian world', which seeks to extend its influence over neighbouring countries with Serb minorities.

The EU's normative power in the Western Balkans has experienced a notable decline. Normative incentives that were once attractive in the region have lost their appeal, and recent EU policies towards Western Balkan states indicate a strategic shift. The EU's paradox lies in its decision to implement punitive measures against Kosovo, an ally of the West, while refraining from sanctions against Serbia, which maintains close ties with Russia and provokes tensions in the Western Balkans. The EU's policy aimed at appeasing Aleksandar Vucic's regime in Belgrade, with the intention of persuading him to distance himself from Moscow, has been proven unproductive. This, however, comes at the expense of pro-European countries in the region, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (particularly the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Kosovo, and Montenegro. The EU's approach thus seems to be centred on delicately handling the security issue to prevent a deterioration of the situation in the Western Balkans. In other words, instead of solely focusing on encouraging compliance with EU expectations on the path to EU membership, the Union's decisions now appear to be driven by geopolitical considerations. Consequently, the EU's actions towards the Western Balkans have become characterized by ambiguity and inconsistency, particularly regarding its normative approach. The prevalence of nationalism and the existence of authoritarian regimes, as observed in Serbia, have significantly eroded the effectiveness of the EEP in the region. Furthermore, the examples of Hungary and Poland, both EU Member States, have sent a negative message to the Western Balkans, showing that normative criteria are not being strictly upheld by EU members themselves. These factors hinder the Union from implementing an

enlargement process founded on normative criteria, contrary to its asserted approach. Although the EU has maintained a presence in the Western Balkans through official statements, funds, meetings, and summits, its tangible progress towards advancing membership has been limited.

This article elucidates that, particularly since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the EU has consistently reiterated its enlargement commitment towards the Western Balkan states. However, the practical realities diverge from these affirmations, as the accession process for these states is characterized by varying degrees of advancement. Consequently, it is evident that these states are likely to endure a prolonged waiting period before attaining full integration into the European integration project. In essence, beyond mere rhetorical pronouncements, the EU's commitment towards the Western Balkans, even within the current context of the war in Ukraine, remains questionable. Above all, the EU's predominant focus lies in crisis management and the alleviation of tensions prevalent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, as well as between Kosovo and Serbia. The war in Ukraine has showed the critical importance of regional stability, prompting the EU to shift from merely a normative power to actively engaging in crisis management and asserting itself as a geopolitical actor. However, it is evident that the EU is lacking a genuine political willingness for the swift integration of the Western Balkan states. The present article thus reveals a notable disparity between EU's involvement in crisis management and its stance on the accelerated membership of Western Balkan countries.