

Is EU enlargement still the main policy instrument for the unification of Europe

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Abstract

Largely relying on the 2004/07 enlargement process and the soft power of the values and norms that were incorporated as normative principles in its accession conditions, the European Union has successfully supported the peaceful development, democratisation and economic marketisation of post-communist East Central Europe and the Baltics. However, the EU's impact on developments in the other two regions of post-communist Europe – the Western Balkans (WB) and six post-Soviet Eastern Partnership (EaP) states – has been less positive by far. The paper argues that the primary reasons for the EU's less successful impact on developments in the WB and EaP countries should be sought in the EU's decision to stop using the enlargement process as the main instrument for promoting and spreading EU values and norms to candidate countries following the completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round. While the EU had persistently refused to include the EaP states in the enlargement process until very recently, the enlargement process for the WB states since 2007 has primarily been used to address stability–security challenges in the region and advance related foreign policy goals and priorities of E Member States

Keywords: European Union, enlargement, Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, stability–security

Introduction and conceptualisation

After the EU's 2004/07 enlargement to the post-communist East Central European (ECE) and Baltic states successfully eliminated many of the political, economic and socio-cultural Cold War divisions between this group of states and the European West, many expected that the unification of Europe via EU enlargement would continue at the same or an even faster pace. However, such expectations have proven to be futile. While Croatia was the only country to accede to the EU after 2007, the accession hopes of its post-communist counterparts from the Western Balkans (WB) and six post-Soviet states included in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) have been (despite 'optimistic' rhetoric and promises, especially to the Western Balkan states) persistently and continuously dashed as accession has been 'postponed' by EU leaders and officials.

The basic aim of this paper is to explain how the EU has used the enlargement process of the Western Balkan states not to integrate and 'unite Europe'¹ by promoting and transferring EU norms and values to these states, but to achieve the current foreign policy goals and priorities of EU Member States. These priorities have been largely determined by Member States' aims to secure peace and political stability on the EU's borders, i.e. their geopolitical interests, but also by the exclusively national interests of (some) EU Member States (Anghel & Dzankic, 2023; Petrovic & Tzifakis 2021). The

¹into a zone of 'long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity' (European Commission. EU Enlargement website)

first two sections of this paper discuss the late beginning of the EU enlargement process with the Western Balkan states and the change in the EU's approach to enlargement after the completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round – from transferring EU norms to prioritising geo-political interests of EU Member States. The sudden and very rapid inclusion in the enlargement process of the (former) EaP countries after the Russian invasion of Ukraine is discussed in the final section of the paper. This section discusses how the changed geopolitical circumstances and foreign policy priorities of EU Member States, which had persistently refused to offer a membership “carrot” to the EaP countries since the EaP was founded in 2009, dramatically altered the EU's approach to both its enlargement process and the EaP. The findings of this section ultimately confirm that democratisation, the transfer of EU values and norms, along with the final award of EU membership to successful candidates are no longer at the core of the EU enlargement process.

The following analysis will confirm that the EU's lack of interest in the further unification of Europe through the enlargement process is the primary reason for the slow accession of the WB states, and not the domestic conditions and issues of these states, as is often claimed by EU leaders and officials (and a certain number of scholars as well).² This will be done through a comparative analysis of the content and character of the continuously changing accession conditions for WB candidates (from primarily normative to purely politically driven) and the once defined, dominantly normative (Copenhagen) accession conditions that the ECE and Baltic states had to meet during the 2004/07 enlargement round. The effects of these two sets of accession conditions are assessed with regard to both the progress in post-communist democratisation and the progress made by the candidate countries in meeting the EU's accession requirements. As a reference on progress in post-communist democratisation, this analysis relies on the Freedom House's “Nations in Transit” (NIT) ‘democracy score’ and the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (TICPI).³ These indicators provide similar comparative results to those offered by other international organisations or projects specialising in monitoring and assessing democratisation, human rights and political and civil liberties in respective post-communist states (such as the Economist Intelligence Unit or the Varieties of Democracy project). Progress in meeting the EU's accession conditions will be measured by the milestones achieved in the accession process by candidate countries: candidate status, the opening of accession negotiations and the closure of accession negotiations/EU membership (Table 2).

The findings of this analysis challenge the prevailing view that slow progress in both the democratisation and EU accession of the WB states is primarily the result of these states' unwillingness or (structural) inability to democratise and adopt other EU norms (Cirtautas & Schimmelfennig, 2010; Seroka, 2008; Keil, 2013). Such a view is even accepted by those who acknowledge that the EU has largely lost (or never had) a genuine interest in enlargement since Croatia's accession in 2013. Despite this

² This argument has been advanced by the author from slightly different perspectives in several of his recent publications (most notably in Petrovic, 2020 and Petrovic, 2024), but the present analysis offers its most comprehensive articulation to date.

³ Although it is already included in the NIT's democracy score (which looks at National Democratic Governance, Electoral Process, Civil Society, Independent Media, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, and Corruption), the level of corruption in the respective countries as measured by the TICPI is also given here as a separate indicator – in order to address the importance of this factor of democratisation, which is often used as an expression of not only the existing level of corruption in the public sector but also of the general stability of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the respective countries.

acknowledgement, they still stress that the internal and regional issues of the Western Balkan states⁴ are equally responsible for their slow europeanisation and EU accession (Anghel & Dzankic 2023; Dopchie & Lika, 2024).

1 From the Copenhagen accession conditions to the Copenhagen+++ ... conditions for the Western Balkans

Forty years of communist institutional and ideological rebuilding have largely equalised political and socio-economic conditions throughout the countries of communist Central and Eastern Europe, all of which (with the exception of Czechoslovakia and East Germany) already lived in very similar settings of multi-party authoritarianism and predominantly agricultural economies before the Second World War (Berend & Ranki, 1974; Crampton, 1997; Rothschild, 1974). The most notable differences among communist states were not so much related to the socio-economic conditions or the living standard of their peoples,⁵ but rather to the existence of differences in the character and nature of communist rule among particular groups of these states.

In contrast to their counterparts in ECE, who struggled to establish a firm grip on power and failed to prevent the rise of pro-reformist and anti-communist forces during the late 1970s and the 1980s (Bunce, 2005; Crampton, 1997; Ekiert, 1996), communist leaders in four Balkan states were able to maintain a firm and long-lasting dictatorial rule. They established the regimes of personal dictatorship⁶ that 'thoroughly and regularly cleansed' any emergence of potential opposition to their political platforms and rule (Petrovic, 2013, p. 84). While post-communist political elites in ECE and the Baltic states, mainly recruited from the former anti-communist liberal democratic opposition, rushed to pull their countries out of the deep economic and social crisis of the early 1990s (Lavigne, 1999, chs. 4-7; Petrovic, 2013, ch. 1) by tying their post-communist reforms more closely to the EU, the political scenes in all the Balkan states at the time were dominated by members of the former communist nomenklatura. They preferred an 'illiberal concept' of democracy⁷ and were therefore not genuinely interested in substantial reforms and even less so in obtaining the EU's conditional assistance for reforms.

While Bulgaria and Romania, after replacing their illiberal governments in 1996 and 1997 respectively, were able to join the ECE and Baltic states in the EU accession process launched by the adoption of the Copenhagen accession conditions in 1993 (European Council, 1993; Lavigne, 1999; Nugent, 2004), their post-communist Balkan neighbours had to wait much longer for their EU prospects. The fact that the latter (with the partial exceptions of Croatia and Albania) have shared very similar pre-communist and communist histories as well as similar levels of socio-economic development with Bulgaria and Romania, did not play any role in their post-

⁴ Foremost insufficient democratisation (routed in inherent corruption and a lack of respect for the rule of law) and increasing authoritarianism in most of these states, coupled with ethnically based political disputes within and between some of these states.

⁵ Balkan countries, which started from the lower industrial base and significantly lower educational levels were largely able to catch up (all but Albania) due to extensive industrialisation and urbanisation their communist regimes underwent during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁶ Hoxa in Albania (1945-1985). Zhivkov in Bulgaria (1954-1989), Ceausescu in Romania (1965-1989) and Tito in Yugoslavia (1945-1980).

⁷ which pretended rather than introduced necessary political democratisation and economic marketisation (Petrovic, 2013, 108-113; Vachudova, 2005: 37-59; Zakaria 1997)

communist EU trajectories. Following the end of post-Yugoslav wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, and the later Kosovo conflict of 1998-99, the EU labelled all post-Yugoslav states (bar Slovenia)⁸ and Albania with the term ‘Western Balkans’, and designed for them the so-called ‘coherent strategy’ of ‘conditionality’ and ‘[a] gradual approach’ ...⁹ The positive impact of this strategy, which by 1999 was turned into the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkans rapidly became obvious (Pippan, 2004; Petrovic, 2013). Not only did the two largest countries in the region, Serbia (then with Montenegro) and Croatia, almost simultaneously replace their post-communist authoritarian regimes with strongly pro-reformist and pro-EU governments during a 10-month period in 1999–2000,¹⁰ but all the countries in the region (with the sole exception of North Macedonia) succeeded in significantly accelerating their post-communist political and economic transformation in the first half of the 2000s (Table 1).

These positive trends were strongly supported and further boosted by the conclusions of several EU Council and European Council meetings on the bright prospects of all the Western Balkan states for an ‘EU future’. This culminated in the adoption of the *Thessaloniki Agenda* in 2003 (EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003) which clearly stated that ‘[the] Western Balkans['] ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU’ (paragraph 2). However, the enlargement optimism and hopes for ‘ultimate [EU] membership’ of the WB states began to deteriorate just a few years after the adoption of the Thessaloniki agenda and even before the 2004/07 enlargement round was completed. Emerging *enlargement fatigue* and fears for the EU’s ‘absorption capacity’ in key Member States, pressured the Council to ‘renew [the] consensus on enlargement’ and de facto tighten the Copenhagen conditions and make the accession process more demanding and complex for new applicants (European Council, 2006, point 4; see also Petrovic, 2013, and Phinnemore, 2006).

Nevertheless, tightening the Copenhagen conditions did not ‘cure’ *enlargement fatigue* after 2006. Grounded in some ‘traditional’ Western media stereotypes (Todorova, 1997; Hatzopoulos, 2003; Crampton, 2013) and structural theories on deep and longstanding socio-political, economic, cultural and even ‘civilizational’ differences between the European West and East (Huntington, 1993, 1996; Janos, 2000) and framed on the question of whether and how the EU’s institutions can continue to effectively function with accepting more politically unstable and socio-economically ‘backward’ post-communist states (Petrovic & Smith, 2013; O Brennan, 2014) *fatigue* has continued to define the EU’s approach to enlargement.¹¹ Economic problems and social disturbances caused by the emergence of the 2008 global financial crises – and even more so the Eurozone crisis of 2010/11 – had further weakened any motivation for new EU enlargements among the political and intellectual elites in the core EU Member States, and effectively put EU enlargement to the Western Balkans

⁸ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and since 2008 Kosovo.

⁹ ... in offering EU cooperation and assistance for “peace and stability, economic renewal, democracy ... and [mutual] cooperation” (EU General Affairs Council, 1997, Annex III).

¹⁰ After the death of Croatia’s authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of Serbia’s post-communist dictator Milosevic in October the following year.

¹¹ The emergence of *enlargement fatigue* in the mid 2000s was largely caused by the EU’s decision to grant candidate status to Turkey and to open accession negotiations with this country in October 2005 (on the same day as Croatia). However, these negotiations advanced very slowly from the very beginning due to a multitude of issues, particularly President Erdogan’s increased authoritarianism and his lack of desire to comply with EU demands and accession conditions. The negotiations were effectively stalled in the early 2010s and then formally frozen in 2018 by the EU Council (General Affairs Council, 2018).

on ‘life support’ (O’ Brennan, 2014). Despite the marginal size of the WB states¹² ‘the sense that the EU has already reached its optimum absorption capacity and institutional limits’ (O’ Brennan, 2014, p. 225) has started to define the EU’s approach to enlargement. In sharp contrast to the 2004/07 enlargement round, the main objective of EU enlargement policy towards the WB states has not been to ‘Europeanise’ and speed up the accession of these states. It has rather focused on avoiding the ‘mistakes’ of previous enlargement rounds, particularly those related to the ‘premature’ accession of Romania and Bulgaria,¹³ and using the enlargement promise as a ‘carrot’ to achieve the goals of its stabilisation – security policy in the region (Anghel & Dzankic, 2023).

In the early 2010s the Copenhagen conditions, tightened in 2006, were further tightened when the EU introduced the ‘three pillar process,’ which prioritised the importance (and early opening) of the three ‘key chapters’ on the rule of law, institution-building and economic governance in the accession negotiation process and set stricter criteria for successful completion of these chapters (European Commission, 2014; Grabbe, 2014). Moreover, in addition to the tightened Copenhagen 1993 accession conditions and conditions coming from the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for post-war reconciliation and peace-building in the region,¹⁴ the new approach to EU enlargement after 2006 also included the additional conditions related to compliance with the EU’s initiatives for resolving the contested statehood status of some of the Western Balkan states. In this way the Western Balkan states have been, unlike the ECE and the Baltic post-communist states and even their Balkan neighbours Bulgaria and Romania, exposed to an ever-increasing number of conditions that they needed to meet on their way to EU accession. While such an EU approach can partially be grounded in a genuine need to assure the successful building of state and government institutions in the largely dysfunctional Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (and to some extent also in Albania which suffered from an enormously high level of corruption and weak governance – see e.g. Bogdani, 2015), it was largely counterproductive in the cases of Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. By the late 2000s/early 2010s these three Western Balkan states were not much below the level of consolidation of democratic institutions of the neighbouring EU members Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania (compare indicators in Table 1, see also Petrovic & Smith, 2013).

¹² The combined population living in the Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate states for EU membership is currently some 16 million, which is 3 million less than the current population of Romania (European Union, *Eurostat*, 2025 data).

¹³ However, more thorough analyses show that there is no real evidence that the post-accession trajectories of these two countries have significantly differed from those of their post-communist counterparts who joined the EU in 2004 (see e.g. Pop-Eleches, and Levitz, 2010 and Sedelmeier, 2014).

¹⁴ Although necessary for overcoming the negative legacies and consequences of the 1990 wars, the SAP conditions, particularly those related to cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague [ICTY] were sometimes very demanding to comply with as they involved ‘high political costs of compliance [for] the targeted governments’ (Schimmelfennig, 2008).

Table 1. Indicators of post-communist democratisation

	2010		2014		2018		2022	
	Dem. Score*	CPI**	Dem. Score*	CPI**	Dem. Score*	CPI**	Dem. Score*	CPI**
EU members								
Slovenia	6.07	64	6.07	58	5.93	60	5.71	56
Estonia	6.04	65	6.04	69	6.18	73	6.00	74
Czechia	5.79	46	5.75	51	5.71	59	5.54	56
Latvia	5.82	43	5.93	55	5.93	58	5.79	59
Lithuania	5.75	50	5.64	58	5.64	59	5.64	62
Poland	5.68	53	5.82	61	5.11	60	4.54	55
Hungary	5.61	47	5.04	54	4.29	46	3.68	42
Slovakia	5.32	43	5.39	50	5.39	50	5.25	53
Bulgaria	4.96	36	4.75	43	4.61	42	4.50	43
Romania	4.54	37	4.54	43	4.54	47	4.36	46
Croatia	4.29	41	4.32	48	4.25	48	4.25	50
Western Balkans								
North Macedonia	4.21	41	4.00	45	3.64	37	3.82	40
Albania	4.07	33	3.82	33	3.89	36	3.75	36
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3.75	32	3.57	39	3.36	38	3.29	34
Montenegro	4.21	37	4.14	42	4.07	45	3.82	45
Serbia	4.29	35	4.36	41	4.04	39	3.79	36
Kosovo	2.93	28	2.86	33	3.07	37	3.25	41
Eastern Partnership								
Ukraine	3.61	24	3.07	26	3.36	32	3.36	33
Georgia	3.07	38	3.32	52	3.32	58	3.07	56
Moldova	2.86	29	3.14	35	3.07	33	3.11	39
Armenia	2.61	26	2.64	37	2.57	35	3.04	46
Belarus	1.50	25	1.29	31	1.39	44	1.18	39
Azerbaijan	1.61	24	1.32	29	1.07	25	1.07	23

* Freedom House NIT 'democracy score' (7 being the highest: full democracy; 1 being the lowest: complete dictatorship)

** Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is published annually and gives information about the corruption level for that particular year. Since 2012 the TICPI has ranged from 100 (very clean) to 0 (highly corrupt), while in the period until 2011 it ranged from 10 (very clean) to 0 (highly corrupt). For simplicity's sake, it has been converted to a 100-to-0 scale for all years shown in the table.

Source: Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020 and 2023; Transparency International CPI, various years.

This data by itself largely refutes the claim often made by EU officials and a number of scholars that insufficient democratisation, continuously high levels of corruption and (in more recent EU documents and academic sources) the emergence of EU supported 'stabilitocracy' (Bieber 2018, 2020) and 'captured state' (see e.g. Keil 2018; Richter & Wunsch, 2020) are the main reasons for the slow progress of the Western Balkan states

in meeting EU accession criteria. The necessity to further consolidate and improve the functioning of the country's democratic institutions, which after 2014 considerably deteriorated in all the Western Balkan states (as well as in most EU Member States, particularly in Poland and Hungary – Table 1, see also Keil, 2018 and Gora & de Wilde, 2022) certainly exists, but it has never been the main reason for their slow progress in the accession process.

Compliance with the SAP conditions and other requirements raised by EU strategic visions (mainly formed under the decisive influence of the largest EU Member States) on stability and security in the region, primarily defined by the EU's stances on the resolution of the 'hot political-stability issues' in the region¹⁵ have always been at the core of the EU's accession conditions for Western Balkan candidates. Both the opening of Croatia's accession negotiations in October 2005 and the signing of Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008 were postponed (and Serbia's SAA also frozen immediately after it was signed in April 2008 – see Table 2) due to these two countries' lack of cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague in delivering their citizens accused of war crimes to the Court (Petrovic, 2013). Similarly, the Council postponed its response to the Commission's recommendation to grant official candidate status to Serbia from December 2011 to March 2012 due to Serbia's unsatisfactory progress 'in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue' on issues arising from its refusal to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 (European Council, 2011). Furthermore, although the Commission had recommended to the Council to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia already in 2009 (European Commission, 2009) the Council continued to block the opening of accession negotiations with this country until 2020. The main reason for this was not related to the country's democratisation or respect for the rule of law, but the Greek veto over North Macedonia's former constitutional name 'the Republic of Macedonia.' Moreover, after it officially changed its name in 2019, Bulgaria's veto over North Macedonia's national/ethnic identity and language became the primary obstacle to opening accession negotiations with this country, nearly 15 years after the European Commission declared it ready in 2009 (Petrovic & Wilson 2021; Vankovska, 2020).¹⁶

2 The never-ending accession negotiation process for the Western Balkan candidates confirmed in 2018–2020

The EU's prioritisation of regional political stability (as understood and defined in the respective EU policy initiatives and proposals) over democracy standards and progress with necessary socio-economic reforms in its approach to Western Balkan accession can clearly be seen from the accession pathways of the two regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia. While Serbia's progress was primarily determined by its cooperation with the ICTY in the second half of the 2000s and then by progress in the Pristina–Belgrade dialogue (see Petrovic & Wilson, 2021 for more details) throughout the 2010s until the present day, Montenegro has largely been spared additional EU requirements related to the SAP and/or regional political stability. As a result, it is

¹⁵ Most notably the Serbia-Kosovo dispute over the latter's independence, the Bosnia-Herzegovina intra- ethnic disputes regarding the country's constitutional order and North Macedonia's disputes with its neighbours about its name, national identity and language (for more details see Petrovic 2017, and Petrovic and Wilson 2021).

¹⁶ Although the negotiations were formally opened at the Intergovernmental Conference in July 2022, the actual process is de facto stalled, waiting for North Macedonia to complete the constitutional changes demanded by Bulgaria (Council of The European Union, 2023. p. 1).

ahead of Serbia and any other Western Balkan states in the accession process although its progress in post-communist democratisation can hardly be assessed to be better. Measured by the internationally recognised indicators (shown in Table 1) Montenegro has reached a similar level of post-communist democratisation as Serbia and North Macedonia.¹⁷ Regardless, it opened its accession negotiations with the EU much earlier than its neighbours and by the end of 2020 opened all 33 negotiation chapters (*acquis communautaire*) with the EU (though it was only able to close three of them until very recently, as discussed below). On the other hand, Serbia started its accession negotiations three years later than Montenegro (Table 2) and has opened only 22 of 35 chapters,¹⁸ closing only two to date. North Macedonia, as noted above, had to wait almost 17 years (after it became the official candidate in 2005) to formally open its accession negotiations with the EU in July 2022 and has not, by the time of writing in September 2025, opened any negotiation chapters.

The EU's prioritisation of regional political stability over democracy standards and transfer of other core EU norms in the accession negotiation process with the Western Balkan states has not only hampered the post-communist democratisation of these states and postponed their (potential) accession to the EU, but it has paradoxically not much advanced peace and security in and between these states either. The EU's request for compliance with its proposals for solving intraregional and intra-national statehood disputes was often a 'pure burden' on the Western Balkan states, which could not have much assisted, but only postponed, the resolution of these disputes. This is particularly relevant for the EU's proposals and initiatives regarding the centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the resolution of the Greek – and (later) Bulgaria – North Macedonian disputes about 'naming' and national-identity issues. As argued in Petrovic (2013, ch. 5; 2017) (see also Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Bieber, 2011; Noutcheva, 2009), these proposals and initiatives, did not only impose 'high political costs of compliance', but were also inappropriately formulated (or not formulated at all, with regards to the Greek–Macedonian dispute), with very little respect for the countries' specifics and realistic chances of meeting them. Despite some successes in initiating and managing the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and maintaining tender peace and stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo these initiatives did not consider 'the strategic behaviour of domestic actors and constrains they face ... [and therefore] neglect[ed] the rational interests of domestic actors and the dynamics of two-level game negotiations' (Börzel & Grimm, 2018, p. 124).

When the European Commission started including political stability requirements in the accession negotiation process and became a 'geo-political' commission under Ursula von der Leyen (Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021; Petrovic, 2024) it was further

¹⁷ This seems to be even exaggerated, as the presented indicators obviously ignore the fact that Montenegro is the only post-communist state in Europe which until the parliamentary elections in August 2020 had never experienced an electoral change of ruling party or leader (even 'last European dictatorship' Belarus changed its political leadership in the early post-communist years). The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (DPMS - formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its leader, Milo Djukanović were in power throughout the whole period of the first 29 years of post-communist (and even the last few years of communist) history of the country. While the DPMS lost its parliamentary majority (by only one seat) in the August 2020 elections, Djukanovic, however remained the country's President with significant control over the army, police and foreign policy until the last Presidential elections in 2023. Since 1990 he has served six terms as prime minister and two as president of the country (for more details see e.g. Džankić & Keil 2017 and Vachudova, 2014).

¹⁸ Differently than Montenegro, Serbia has an additional chapter (No 35) to negotiate, specifically focused on its relationship with Kosovo, i.e. progress in the Pristina – Belgrade Dialogue. It also has an informal chapter (No 34 – Institutions) to negotiate, which is not required for Montenegro.

confirmed that the EU's primary interest in the Western Balkans was to secure the stability–security goals of its common foreign policy, mainly formulated by its leading Member States, and not to prepare Western Balkan candidates for membership by transferring its core norms.¹⁹ Although the Commission has traditionally been responsible for carrying out the administrative–technical aspects of the accession process related to the candidates' capacity to meet EU standards and norms defined by the Copenhagen conditions, in the accession negotiations with Serbia (opened in 2014) an additional, above mentioned chapter on the resolution of Serbia's relations with Kosovo was included. This additional 'stability-security' accession condition was later applied to all candidate countries in the Commission's 'new' enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans of February 2018 (European Commission, 2018) through the requirement that the Western Balkan candidates have to find 'definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours' (p. 3) and solve them 'as a matter of urgency' (p. 8) as the EU 'will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail' (p. 3).

While the insistence on re-establishing good neighbourly relations has been at the core of the SAP since its very beginning, such a firm request for the resolution of disputes between the candidate countries and their neighbours as the *de facto* accession precondition had never been imposed on any candidate country in any of the previous enlargement rounds.²⁰ As Petrovic and Wilson (2021) argue, this accession precondition has 'in contrast to all other Copenhagen and post-Copenhagen accession conditions broadened the scope of its fulfilment beyond the capacity and competency of the [candidate] country governments' (p. 202). In fact, it enables an EU Member State that has a bilateral dispute with an EU candidate to hold up the latter's accession bid until their dispute is resolved to the former's satisfaction, even before the Commission's recommendation comes to the Council. Whereas earlier, a Member State could have vetoed a candidate's accession bid only in the Council, after the Commission had submitted its recommendation about this candidate's progress in accession (as was the case with the Greek and Bulgaria's vetoes over North Macedonia's accession) the Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy and the new enlargement methodology adopted in February 2020 (European Commission, 2020) allow this to happen already during the accession negotiations process.

¹⁹ A clear example of how leading EU Member States have influenced the formulation of EU foreign policy goals and priorities in the Western Balkans occurred in 2018, when Germany, the UK (then still an EU member), and several other Member States torpedoed a nearly finalised agreement to resolve the Serbia–Kosovo conflict that was facilitated and supported by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for Enlargement Hahn as well as some other EU Member States (Petrovic & Tzifakis 2021; Petrovic & Wilson, 2021).

²⁰ When Cyprus was admitted into the EU in 2004 it was not asked to solve its (still) unresolved dispute with Turkey over its partition on the northern (Turkish) and southern (Greek) part, nor was Croatia asked to resolve its (also still ongoing) dispute with Slovenia over their maritime border before it joined the EU in 2013.

Table 2. Progress in EU Accession

Country	SA/Europe Agreement		Application for EU Membership	Official Candidate Status	Accession Negotiations	
	Signed	Entered into force			opened	closed
Albania	12/06/2006	1/04/2009	28/04/2009	27/06/2014	19/07/2022**	NO
Bosnia-Herzeg.	16/06/2008	1/06/2015	15/02/2016	15/12/2022	NO	NO
North Macedonia	9/04/2001	1/04/2004	22/03/ 2004	16/12/2005	19/07/2022**	NO
Montenegro	15/10/2007	1/05/2010	15/12/2008	17/12/2010	16/06/2012	NO
Serbia	9/04/2008*	1/09/2013	22/12/2009	1/03/2012	14/01/2014**	NO
Kosovo	27/10/2015	1/04/2016	NO	NO	NO	NO
Ukraine	27/06/2014** *	1/09/2017	28/02/2022	23/06/2022	25/06/2024	NO
Moldova	27/06/2014** *	1/07/2016	3/03/2022	23/06/2022	25/06/2024	NO
Georgia	27/06/2014** *	1/07/2016	3/03/2022	14/12/2023	NO	NO
Croatia	9/04/2001	1/02/ 2005	20/02/2003	18/06/2004	5/10/2005	30/06/2012
Bulgaria	9/ 03/1993	1/02/1995	14/12/1995	12/12/1997	15/2/2000	16/12/2004
Romania	1/02/1993	1/02/1995	22/06/1995	12/12/1997	15/2/2000	16/12/2004
2004 EU-5	btw. 1991-96	btw. 1994-99	btw. 1994-96	btw. 1994-96	31/3/1998	12/12/2002
2004 EU-3	btw. 1993-95	btw. 1995-98	1995	1995	15/2/2000	12/12/2002

2004 EU-5: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia

2004 EU-3: Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia

* frozen pending further Serbian cooperation with the ICTY from 29/04/2008 to 7/12/2009

** provisionally/officially opened; the first chapters (35 and 32) Serbia opened only on 14 December 2015

*** Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement

Source: European Commission, various documents.

Not surprisingly, if some of the enlargement optimism stirred by the Commission's 2018 strategy document had started eroding in the following months of 2018 (Petrovic & Tzifakis 2021), it completely evaporated over the following two years. The regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia – continued their accession negotiations at an extremely slow pace, being able to open only a few new negotiation chapters after the adoption of the 2018 Strategy. While Serbia has not opened or closed any new chapters since opening just two in 2019, Montenegro was pleased to open its last chapter in June 2020 but has closed only six so far; three of those six only in December 2024, after not closing any for seven years (European Western Balkans, 2024). The three other official membership candidates from the Western Balkans, Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as a potential candidate Kosovo felt no less abandoned

by the EU. Albania and North Macedonia, which were the last of the Western Balkan states to open accession negotiations in 2022 (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are the only two states in the region which are still awaiting it) have not yet opened any of the (30+) negotiations chapters. For the sake of comparison, Croatia took 5.5 years to negotiate its accession with the EU, Romania and Bulgaria took a little less than 5 years and the countries which acceded to the EU in 2004 negotiated their accession for 4.5 years (Slovakia, Latvia and Lithuania in less than 3 years – see Table 2 and Petrovic, 2017).

3 The 'expansion' or the final nail in the coffin of the EU's eastern enlargement after 2022

Final confirmation that the EU's enlargement into the Western Balkans (and generally Eastern Europe) after 2013 is merely a foreign policy tool for achieving the stability-security or other national interests of EU Member States, with no real intention of guaranteeing membership status to candidate states came with the sudden 'expansion' of the enlargement process to the Eastern Partnership countries in 2022. Exclusively motivated by the geo-political interests and/or political preferences of (most of) its Member States, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the EU promptly decided to do something that it has 'stubbornly' refused to do since the creation of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 – to offer a membership 'carrot' to participating states. In this way, the Eastern Partnership, as a specific instrument for transferring EU norms and influence to neighbouring countries, ceased to exist, and its participating countries became subjects of the EU's enlargement policy and process, which have been, as discussed above, more or less, exclusively driven by the geo-political priorities of EU foreign policy and political interests of EU Member States.

Launched in 2009 as an advanced version of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the six post-Soviet European states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – with the idea to promote democratisation and support the socio-economic development and prosperity of these states without an enlargement promise (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2008; Petrovic & Klatt, 2015; Petrovic, 2024) it has barely contributed to advancing democracy and other core EU norms in these states. While, in the period 2010-2022, the EaP contributed to intensifying political cooperation, economic ties, and people-to-people links between the EU and the three most advanced EaP states – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia²¹ – the impact of the EaP on transferring the EU's core norms (foremost peace, democracy and the rule of law) to participant countries were at best disappointing. Aside from the outbreak of hostile relations between Ukraine and Russia after the Maidan Revolution of 2014, which have been all but promoting peace and security in the region, a brief look at the data presented in Table 1 shows that none of the countries included in the instrument were able to improve their generally very negative democracy scores throughout the period. Even worse, Ukraine, which was (after the 2004 Orange Revolution) the most democratically advanced of the six countries in the late 2000s, underwent significant backsliding during the 2010s, and in 2022 it was significantly below any of the WB states except Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (the only two WB non-official candidates for EU membership at the time).

²¹ All of which signed their associations agreements in their most comprehensive form – the Deepest and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) - with the EU in 2014 and established visa free travel regimes for their citizens to the EU between 2014 and 2017 (see European Commission, Eastern Partnership).

The other two ‘advanced’ EaP countries, Georgia and Moldova continued to have even lower democracy scores than Ukraine. Armenia remained behind these three countries (slightly improving its score in the early 2020s) and significantly ahead of Belarus and Azerbaijan, two countries which the Freedom House’s ‘Nations in Transit’ has labelled as “Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes” since the early 2000s, and where the dictatorial grip on power has been further ‘consolidated’ over the last decade. Clearly, the promotion of democracy, rule of law, respect of human rights and other core EU norms in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood through the EaP has not been working.

Nevertheless, and although EU membership was not labelled or even announced as a possible outcome of established cooperation in any of the EaP documents, and despite both countries’ (very) problematic democratic records, the ‘geopolitical’ European Commission recommended, and the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova only three months after the Russian invasion took place in February 2022. The defence of Ukraine ‘as long as it takes’ (Von der Leyen, 2025) has since become a priority in Ursula von der Leyen’s old and new Commission agenda to such a degree that it has largely overshadowed all other traditional tasks and fields of activities of the Commission (Mascitelli & Wilson, 2024). Such a ‘reorientation’ of the Commission’s priorities, strongly supported by the most influential EU Member States as well as Poland, the Baltic states and Finland²² has led to the EU’s increased political reliance on NATO and the USA. In fact, this reliance has become so extensive and subordinate to US foreign policy that the EU’s reputation as an independent global leader and peace maker, which had been gradually but consistently built over the decades following the end of the Cold War, has been significantly downgraded. (Mascitelli & Wilson, 2024). Under these circumstances, the EU enlargement process has become completely dominated by the EU’s foreign policy priority to ‘fight for Ukraine’. While having been on “life support” from the end of the 2000s and then, as discussed above, de facto frozen by the end of the 2010s, the enlargement process was ‘technically’ revived when Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022. This revival, however, did not serve the process’ original purpose – to transfer EU values and norms to candidate countries and adequately reward the latter for their success or failure to adopt these values and norms.

The EU’s decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova was followed by the final opening of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022²³, the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, the European Council’s decision of 14 December 2023 to grant candidate status to Georgia and to (already) open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and the official opening of the negotiations with these two in June 2024. These developments have been labelled by the European Commission as ‘a new phase with fresh momentum’ in the enlargement process (European Commission 2024a, p. 1). In the same vein, the new-old President of the Commission has declared that ‘enlargement will remain a top priority of the new Commission’ (European Commission, 2024b). As this author commented in his 2024 paper (Petrovic, 2024), if such a ‘commitment’ means that “enlargement will remain a top priority for the new Commission” in the same way as it was for the old Commission, then one can safely

²² Strong collective memories of Russian wars and conquest, often accompanied by a Russophobic exaggeration of Russia’s current military power and capacity to ‘(re)conquer them (and Europe)’ are largely present in the approach and policies of these countries towards the Russia-Ukraine war (Mascitelli, Wilson, 2024; Kuczyńska-Zonik, A.; Sierzputowska, 2023).

²³ 17 and 8 years respectively after the EU granted them candidate status.

conclude that the EU will continue to use the enlargement process as a tool for promoting and protecting the geo-political priorities of its common foreign policy and political interests of its Member States without any serious intention to complete the accession process for any of the candidate states' (pp. 601-602).

Indeed, the latest Commission paper on enlargement and the individual country reports of October 2024 (European Commission, 2024a), as well as the most recent Council (and European Council) conclusions on enlargement, do not provide any indication that EU leaders are seriously committed to conclude the enlargement process and grant membership status to any of the current candidates in the foreseeable future. Moreover, not only do these documents omit to provide targeted dates or timelines for completion of the accession process, with any of the candidate countries, they continue (as have more or less all previous Commission documents and Council conclusions on the Western Balkans since the late 2000s) to list various types of problems that the Western Balkan aspirants for EU membership need to solve, and define new accession conditions for these states. When, in June 2024, the European Council adopted '*The EU Strategic Agenda 2024–2029*' in section VII of its conclusions (titled 'Roadmap for future work on internal reforms'), it stressed the necessity of (further) internal reforms to the Union to 'address key questions related to its priorities and policies as well as its capacity to act in the face of a new geopolitical reality ... [that] should advance in parallel with the enlargement process' (points 48-49, p. 12). That this does not mean anything other than additional requirements for the candidate countries and a further postponement of the enlargement process was 'clarified' by the EU General Affair Council's conclusions of 17 December 2024 (endorsed by the European Council two days later). In Point 2 of these conclusions, the Council clearly stated that its 'reaffirm[ed] commitment to enlargement' is subject to several layers of additional (post-Copenhagen 1993) accession conditions, which have been defined by 'the renewed consensus on enlargement approved by the European Council in December 2006, subsequent Council and European Council conclusions, and the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 of June 2024'.

Twenty-two years since they 'promised' an 'EU future' for the Western Balkan states, the leaders of EU Member States are still unable (and unwilling) to set even a provisional year for the realisation of the Western Balkans' 'EU future', but rather continue to 'invent' new and additional conditions for the 'indefinite membership candidates' from the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

The EU's request for the fulfilment of the 1993 Copenhagen accession conditions within the 2004/07 enlargement process was both great assistance to the successful post-communist democratisation and socio-economic transition of the ECE and Baltic states, and a giant step towards the post-Cold War geo-political and socio-economic unification of Europe. However, the accession offer given to the Western Balkan states in the early 2000s was more conditional from the very beginning, and the EU has continued to tighten these conditions ever since. Moreover, the content and character of the accession conditions for WB candidates have changed since 2006. While the ECE and Baltic states had to meet the once defined and, unchanged, dominantly normative (Copenhagen) accession conditions during the 2004/07 enlargement round, the Western Balkan states have been required to comply with ever-changing, largely politically driven accession conditions. Rather than serving as a mechanism to transfer EU values and norms that could support democratisation and other post-communist

reforms in the Western Balkan states, the enlargement process for these states has been primarily used to address the stability-security challenges in the region and advance the related foreign policy goals and priorities of EU Member States. In this way, the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans has shifted away from being a tool for (further) unification of Europe, to become a process of never-ending negotiations that keep the WB candidates 'on a leash'. without granting them membership.

Likewise, the recent (and sudden) inclusion of three EaP countries in the enlargement process after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, was exclusively done to address the security and geo-political interests of EU Member States, and not to genuinely prepare Ukraine and other EaP states for ultimate EU membership. The unification of Europe via EU enlargement stopped with Croatia's accession in 2013. It remains highly questionable whether, when, or how it will ever resume — let alone be completed.

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