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FROM FATIGUE TO FRAGILE MOMENTUM: EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS UNDER GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to geopolitical, economic, and security pressures, the European Union mobilizes pro-European momentum and pursues a renewed trend towards accelerated accession for selected EU candidate countries, particularly in the hitherto deferred Western Balkans states.

Accelerated enlargement in the forerunners Montenegro and Albania coexists with continuous stagnation in the remaining states of the Western Balkans. External and internal pressures induce Brussels to compromise certain democratic standards to maintain momentum and credibility gains, perpetuating a long-standing benevolence towards “stabilitocratic” regimes in the region and prioritizing political (be it autocratic) stability over democracy.

Ultimately, the indulgence of autocratizing leaders risks alienating citizens and civil societies in candidate countries, jeopardizes the democratic foundations of the Union itself, and artificially separates democracy from European security.

In contrast to other candidate countries, such as Ukraine, the Western Balkan states represent “low-risk, high-impact” opportunities for enlargement, which could enhance the EU’s institutional and normative relevance in an increasingly rogue international environment.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Aufgrund geopolitischer, wirtschaftlicher und sicherheitspolitischer Zwänge nutzt die Europäische Union aktuelle pro-europäische Dynamiken und verfolgt einen Trend zur beschleunigten Aufnahme ausgewählter EU-Beitrittskandidaten, insbesondere der bislang wenig priorisierten Staaten des Westbalkans.

Die beschleunigte Erweiterung in den Vorreiterländern Montenegro und Albanien geht einher mit einer anhaltenden Stagnation in den übrigen Staaten des Westbalkans. Externer und interner Druck veranlassen Brüssel dazu, bestimmte demokratische Standards zu kompromittieren, um die Dynamik und die gewonnene Glaubwürdigkeit aufrechtzuerhalten. Langjährige Zugeständnisse gegenüber „stabilitokratischen“ Regimes in der Region werden fortgesetzt und politische (bisweilen auch autokratische) Stabilität dem demokratischen Wandel vorgezogen.

Letztendlich birgt die Nachsicht gegenüber autoritären Regimen und Strukturen in der Region die Gefahr, dass Bürger*innen und Zivilgesellschaften in den Kandidatenländern weiter von der EU entfremdet, die demokratischen Grundlagen der Union selbst gefährdet, und Demokratie und europäische Sicherheit künstlich voneinander getrennt werden.

Im Gegensatz zu anderen Beitrittskandidatenländern wie der Ukraine stellen die westlichen Balkanstaaten „risikoarme, ertragreiche“ Möglichkeiten für eine Erweiterung dar, die die institutionelle und normative Relevanz der EU in einem zunehmend unsicheren internationalen Umfeld stärken könnten.

KEYWORDS:

EU-Erweiterung, Beitritt, Westbalkan, Stabilitätspolitik

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MOVEMENT IN THE WAITING ROOM?

Contending with economic stagnation, limited political convergence, and enlargement fatigue across the European Union, the six Western Balkan states have been sitting in the EU's waiting room for years. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, heightened security and economic pressures have increased the EU's strategic constraints, prompting Brussels to actively leverage selective compliance from candidate states to reassert its interest and influence in the region. Commission president Ursula von der Leyen (2025) has framed this revamped prioritization as "an investment in our collective security and freedom." Optimism and political determination have emerged across the frontrunner accession states Montenegro and Albania—long-absent sentiments which the European Commission now seeks to harness. This political climate facilitates the attainment of compliance on crucial reforms, and the momentary dynamism carries the enlargement process forward at remarkable speed.

Notwithstanding, the Commission's latest communication on EU enlargement policy took stock of a landscape marked by ambivalence and stagnation, alongside modest glimmers of ambition. The region seems divided into "good"

and "bad" students. Montenegro and Albania have established themselves as the most auspicious candidate countries, suggesting the possibility of closing accession negotiations in 2026 and 2027, respectively. By contrast, Serbia and North Macedonia have not made strident advances in their accession process, pursuing formalities without substantial transformation while allowing—prompting, even—the erosion of their democracies. Serbian protestors are amid their second winter demonstrating for the rule of law, accountability, and political change following the November 2024 canopy collapse in Novi Sad. While Brussels has gradually adopted a more admonishing tone towards Vučić's regime, this delayed, lukewarm pledge has not augmented EU endorsement by protesters. It does, however, effectively hamper any Serbian advancement toward EU membership. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, continue to stagnate in their trajectories towards accession. While domestic political polarization and infights ahead of general elections in 2026 hinder progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo is still facing a non-recognizer wall within the EU with five member states refusing to accept its independence.

Given the widespread stalemate in EU rapprochement marked by political inertia and paralysis, and disenchantment among civil societies, the any momentum to ensure that

enlargement does not morph into an empty appeasement promise, particularly in the face of a renewed wave

of geopolitical pressures. The anticipated swift accession of Montenegro and Albania has the potential to reinvigorate prospects and desires for EU integration in the wider region—an outlook the EU seeks to harness in 2026, even if it occasionally requires turning a blind eye to the slowness of reforms and the erosion of certain democratic standards.

EAGER BEAVERS, SELF-STAGERS, AND A DISAFFECTED CROWD

The European Commission constitutes a driving force advocating for Montenegrin and Albanian accession. At the core of this campaign is the unparalleled feasibility of their accession: in mid-December, Montenegro provisionally closed another five chapters in accession negotiations and Albania prides itself on opening all six negotiating chapters at an unprecedented pace. For the EU, the two countries embody the lowest hanging fruit on the enlargement tree. Their accession comes with comparatively low (financial) costs, and demographic, economic, and political conditions that EU “absorption capacity” can match (Bender, 2025). Montenegrin accession represents a “low-risk, high-impact” (Elezi & Klajic, 2025) endeavor and has the potential to bolster public trust in EU commitments after its long-lasting pursuit of strategic ambiguity in the Western Balkans. The Commission will be keen to capitalize on this momentum given its assumed positive spillover effects in the region—or, at the very least, the credibility boost it would effectuate. Beyond its immediate neighborhood, this could substantiate the EU’s role on a global stage

The EU is compelled to mobilize any momentum to ensure that enlargement does not morph into an empty appeasement promise

increasingly governed by unilateralism, international confrontation, and aggression.

The governments in Podgorica and Tirana are not unfamiliar with this game. In Podgorica, Prime Minister Milojko Spajić has declared EU membership a priority at the outset of his term. However, his government coalition composed of eight parties and coalitions, including pro-European as well as pro-Serbian (de facto pro-Russian) forces, complicates this venture. Chapters 23 and 24, commonly deemed the most (structurally) demanding, still require significant progress, while EU-skeptical actors have been mobilizing identity politics to thwart Podgorica’s course towards EU membership. Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama, in turn, has successfully marketed himself as EU’s darling: a reform-oriented, eloquent optimist impatient to lead his beloved country into a European future (idëmo!, 2025). While Albanian society demonstrates high approval rates for accession (91%, Press and information team of the Delegation to Albania, 2025), the country has witnessed considerable democratic backsliding, turning into a de-facto one-party-state under Rama, who has captured state institutions, weakened media freedom and the rule of law.

Thus, despite the Commission’s zeal for Montenegrin and Albanian accession, obstacles persist domestically. Paradoxically, as seen in Vučić’s Serbia, Brussels simultaneously entertains a tendency to coddle these “stabilitocracies”—regimes with democratic deficiencies benefitting from external legitimacy by offering supposed stability (Bieber, 2017)—at the expense of its credibility among local civil societies. Yet, Rama’s harboring of democratic deficits comes without tangible consequences for EU accession. Further, a growing number of Russian-style “foreign agents” laws, legal harassment of activists and journalists,

and media censorship account for a shrinking civic space, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (Narsee et al., 2025). Should the EU pursue its indulgence of autocratizing—and outright autocratic—leaders in the Western Balkans, it jeopardizes not only the outlook of civil societies and democracy in the region, but also compromises its own principles and democratic foundations. The geopolitical, security, and economic pressures that underpin such enlargement dynamics thus risk eclipsing the root principles of European integration.

FRAGILE MOMENTUM: WHY ACCELERATED ENLARGEMENT MAY NOT TRAVEL

While accelerated enlargement under geopolitical pressure constitutes a break with the widespread enlargement fatigue across the EU, the momentum witnessed in Montenegro and Albania is not necessarily a harbinger for deepening EU rapprochement elsewhere in the region, given the range of idiosyncratic legacies and bilateral issues of accession aspirants. Especially if accelerated enlargement is not applied by the same standards, Montenegrin and Albanian accession risks feeding resentment, cynicism, and alienation among remaining candidate countries.

Brussels' enduring credibility problem in the region further stokes this dynamic. Much of the formal(isitic) accession gains feel intangible and artificial to citizens and civil societies across the Western Balkans. As demonstrated by Serbia's enduring pro-democratic student protests, the development of a strong civil society as an intrinsic driver of change and provider of checks and balances for political leadership is crucial.

Finally, the EU itself may well be its own inhibitor. The long-standing debate around internal reforms

as a prerequisite for accession, as well as how to proceed with unanimity in the face of future enlargement are just two areas of heated discussion in Brussels. The drafting of the accession

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treaty also awaits the Montenegrin and Albanian governments and will be controversially debated among member states. Thus, even in the case of speedily implemented reforms in candidate countries, the ratification of accession treaties may turn into a protracted endeavor given the member states' sentiments, bilateral rows, as well as enlargement-skeptics across the board.

More generally, low fiscal growth gives the Union little room for political maneuvers and enlargement competes with other priorities regarding security and global economic competition. For enlargement to become re-prioritized in this climate, its perception among member states also requires overhauling. Given the limited "institutional readiness, decision-making efficiency, and credible tools against democratic backsliding" (Akhvlediani, 2025) within the EU itself, there is a lingering risk that enlargement remains a slow process, constituting a potential internal trend breaker for swift accession. The outcome of the April 2026 elections in Hungary—the EU's anti-democratic "problem child" and a muse for

Balkan autocrats—will be decisive for EU-internal dynamics here.

It also remains to be seen to what extent Russia's war on Ukraine—and an imminent peace agreement in 2026—impacts the current momentum, reform drive, and EU responsiveness, particularly regarding US (non-)involvement in the region.

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they deliver alignment on security and formal reforms. As a consequence, civil society is rhetorically acknowledged but remains de-facto sidelined.

B) Stagnation, Differentiation, and Fragmentation

The EU sustains momentum rhetorically but fails to unify and commit to acceleration. Enlargement proceeds through differentiated, reversible, and conditional integration, with no clear trajectory for most Western Balkan states. While Montenegro and Albania continue to advance, their accession remains obstructed by member state vetoes. Serbia remains in a strategic limbo, wherein Vučić leverages ambiguity to oscillate between the EU, Russia, and China. Given the low support rates for EU membership, even a new government will need some time to induce a definite turn towards Brussels. North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo continue to stagnate due to internal blockages and EU disengagement. Civil societies across the region grow disillusioned as reforms and concessions fail to deliver tangible changes in their political realities—a dynamic readily exploited by “stabilitocrats” and competing geopolitical actors. The Western Balkans remain in the perpetual waiting room for EU membership. Such a scenario—the closest approximation to the status quo at the time of writing—is likely to transpire in the long run, well beyond 2026.

ENLARGEMENT SCENARIOS FOR 2026

Enlargement embodies a mechanism for the EU to manifest its role, agency, and stance in an increasingly rogue and illiberal international environment. Beyond the geopolitical dimension, enlargement in the past has engendered rises in living standards, economic opportunity, and democratic governance for societies on the ground (Grassi, 2024). A new EU enlargement thus has the potential to convey a geopolitical signal of the EU's normative and institutional relevance and citizen-centered scope of action. That is, if both the EU and candidate countries decide to proceed with it.

A) Selective Accession and Calculated Democratic Trade-Offs

The Commission emphasizes security, credibility, and momentum over strict norm enforcement in enlargement. Though doubts persist surrounding the feasibility—and sustainability—of Montenegrin and Albanian accession reforms, Brussels indulges accelerated accession for the two front runners under sustained geopolitical pressure. Thereby, it tacitly lowers the political cost of democratic shortcomings and downplays potential democratic regression within the EU in the years to follow. Autocratizing leaders are tolerated as long as

C) Disrupting Stabilitocratic Cycles: Serbia as a Regional Catalyst

In the run-up to (early) elections in Serbia projected for late 2026, the EU significantly escalates its political, diplomatic, and technical engagement in Serbia through sustained pressure,

monitoring, and clear conditionality to ensure that electoral conditions meet democratic standards. Such free and fair elections are likely to engender the fall of Vučić’s regime, marking a political turning point in the Western Balkans. This shift generates democratic spillover effects across the region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo. By supporting democratic change rather than prioritizing short-term stability, the EU begins to break out of its credibility-tarnishing “stabilitocracy” trap. This more principled approach enables greater consistency in EU relations with other regional leaders, reinforcing democratic norms as the core benchmark for engagement, flagging democracy as the precondition for European security, and smoothing the path for Europe to re-establish itself as a normative power. Though this scenario allows an optimistic outlook, it remains a wild card for 2026.

OUTLOOK

Any extent of enlargement in the next year(s) is bound to be a starkly different one compared to the last. With geopolitics front and center, the EU enlargement debate occurs against the backdrop of negotiating a new European security, which comes with concessions to strong leaders and the stability guarantees they are expected to deliver.

In light of geopolitical and internal pressures, the EU can afford neither a further stagnation in the enlargement process of the Western Balkans, nor its own disintegration over such issues. Therefore, in 2026, Brussels seems eager to further advance selected accelerated accession to secure a win on the enlargement front. However, the EU has yet to finalize the innovation that will allow for constructive and sustainable accession to proceed. This will include questions surrounding unanimity, the design of EU reforms bolstering absorption capacity, and the reprioritization of a democratically

empowered civil society at the core of European politics—issues costly to overlook in 2026.

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