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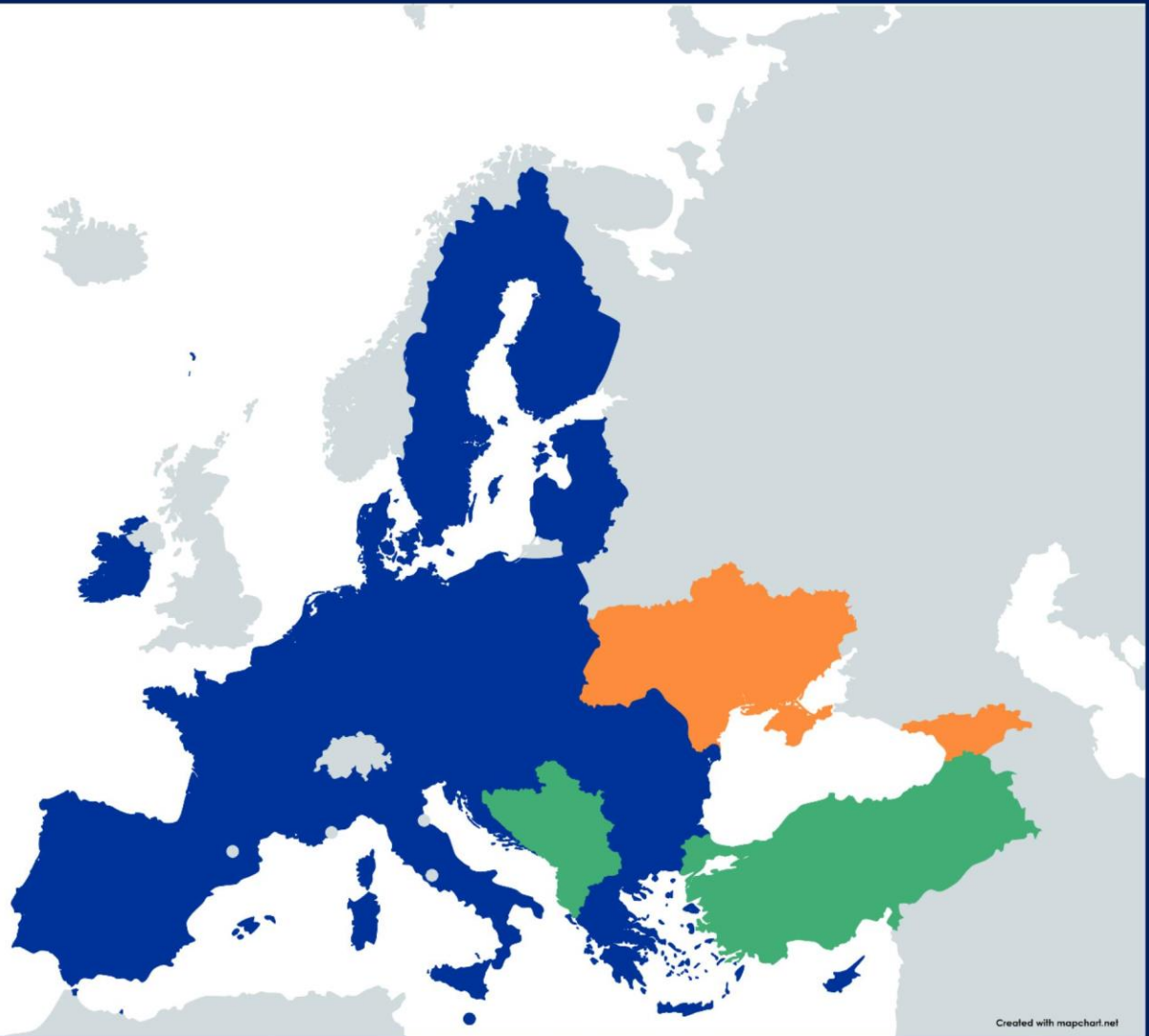
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Views on the Future of Europe from the EU's Neighbouring Countries

Bucharest, December 2021

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Working Paper Series, No. 40

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Executive Summary

The Conference on the Future of Europe aims at providing a platform for the European citizens to engage in debates and put forward proposals for adapting the European Union in order to be better prepared for challenges of the future. It represents a collective exercise with the purpose of drawing upon the various experiences within the European Union and building together a stronger institutional structure.

Starting from 2020, the European Commission has embarked into a process of including strategic foresight into its policy-making, in order to enhance the European Union's preparedness and adaptability, based on collective knowledge and expertise. The 2020 Strategic Foresight Report acknowledges the European Union's contribution to the resilience of the neighbouring countries,¹ while the 2021 edition underscores the need for strengthening the “strategic as well as issue-based coalitions and partnerships”, including with the neighbouring countries.²

Against this background, the collective report “Views on the Future of Europe from Neighbouring Countries” was designed as a means to open the debates about the Future of the European Union to the experts from the neighbouring countries, while contextualising the discussions about resilience and future challenges, as charted in the strategic foresight reports. The views expressed by experts from the neighbouring countries are essential since their relations with the European Union are a two-way street, which can be further adapted and improved through a meaningful dialogue and an understanding of how the European Union and its influence is perceived inside these countries.

To conduct this research, we gathered the contributions of 23 experts from the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), Turkey and the three Eastern Partnership members of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine). All the contributors provide their own views and perspectives based on their significant experience in working with and researching about the relations of their countries with the European Union.

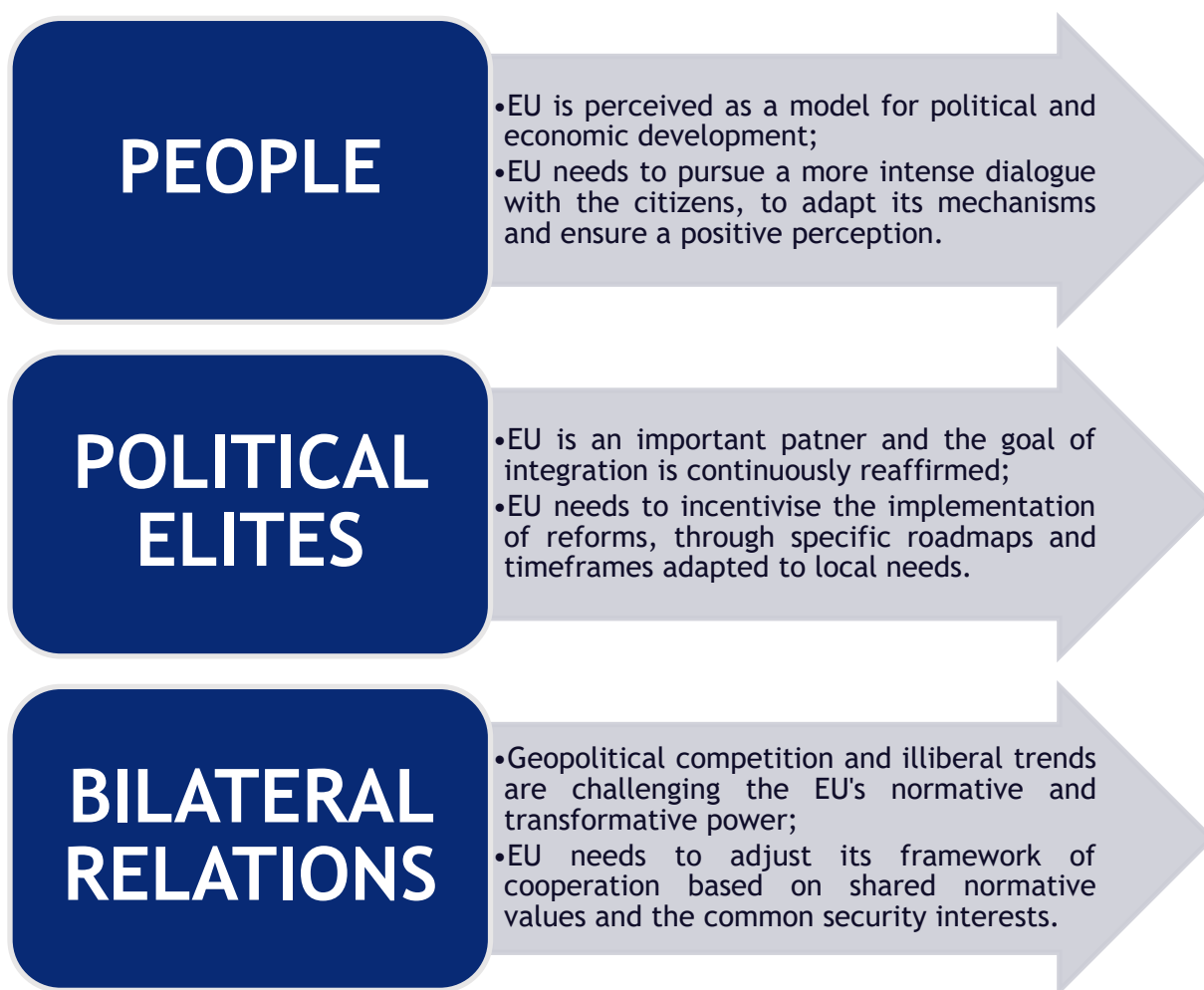
We invited the experts to think about the European Union's main challenges and priorities in its relations with their own countries and governments, while referring to their own expectations regarding how the EU should address them. Additionally, the experts were asked to consider whether their countries can have a contribution towards advancing the

¹ European Commission, “2020 Strategic Foresight Report - Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe”, 9 September 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/strategic_foresight_report_2020_1_0.pdf, p. 16.

² European Commission, “2021 Strategic Foresight Report - The EU's capacity and freedom to act”, 8 September 2021, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/strategic_foresight_report_2021_en.pdf, p. 27.

European project in their region. In this way, we intended to capture the bidirectional characteristic of the European Union relations with the neighbouring countries.

The ideas put forward by the experts in this collective report can be summarized considering three dimensions for the European Union actions: the populations of the neighbouring countries, the political elites, and the institutionalised bilateral relations.



The European Union is perceived by the citizens in the neighbouring regions as the solution for overcoming the economic and political challenges experienced by their countries. However, the divisions within the Union itself, which translate into different positions regarding a potential enlargement, led to a reduction of the EU's attractiveness and credibility. **Consequently, the European Union's institutions are expected to pursue a more intense dialogue with the citizens in the neighbouring regions, in order to adapt the EU mechanisms and ensure a positive perception, since the people are the main drivers of integration and of holding the political elites accountable.**

The views regarding the national governments largely converged, with all the countries explicitly considering the European Union an important partner and generally expressing their

intention to become member states. However, domestic challenges due to an insufficient commitment to democratisation, such as weak institutions, corruption and lack of significant progress in the implementation of reforms, are still visible and hinder the advancement of the relations. **Thus, the European Union needs to address the weak political will of the elites and to incentivise the implementation of reforms, through more clear-cut roadmaps and timeframes for specific goals, where the “more for more” approach is better suited to respond to local needs and still reward successful sectoral cooperation.**

The global geopolitical competition and the illiberal trends, coupled with the rise of actors with alternative agenda and lower conditionalities have been challenging the European Union’s normative and transformative power in the neighbouring regions. Additionally, the multisectoral challenges faced by the EU in the past years, whose effects were accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have been perceived as dividing the Union and impacting its resilience and security. Such developments are deeply interconnected with the ones in the neighbouring countries, which requires a more consolidated action on the part of the European Union. **The experts presented various proposals for further advancing the relations with the neighbouring countries, beyond the framework of enlargement policies, placing at the forefront the shared normative values and the common security interests. Moreover, through its commitment to a new level of cooperation in these countries, they can further promote the European transformative project in the neighbourhood regions.**

Furthermore, since the Conference on the Future of Europe was first proposed by France and it is scheduled to conclude in 2022 during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, we invited François Lafond, an expert with practical experience in the Western Balkans, as well as expertise on French foreign policy, to provide an overview of the priorities and the vision for the European Union, as seen from Paris. Given the importance of France as promoter of further increased European integration, including the prospect of EU enlargement for some neighbouring countries, this overview gives a glimpse of the Future of Europe.

The collective report concludes with an afterword written by Mihai Sebe, PhD, head of European Studies Unit within the European Institute of Romania. This section represents a short overview of Romania’s foreign policy priorities in the neighbouring regions, since Bucharest has dedicated special attention to the countries included in this report and strongly supports their European perspectives.

Foreword

Currently the European citizens are engaged in the *Conference on the Future of Europe* - a broad debate on Europe's challenges and priorities, as well as new orientations for the years to come. By Spring 2022, the Conference is expected to reach conclusions and provide guidance on the Future of Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe offers a much-needed framework for productive and provocative debates about the pressing issues and challenges faced by the European Union.

This vision is one for the future of us all, as well as the future of next generations, thus may not refer only to the current European Union citizens, but also include the citizens from the neighbouring regions with whom we share history, cooperation relations, and interests.

As a research centre based in a EU member state, we believe in the need to provide a platform for showcasing academia and experts' opinions from the neighbouring regions, as the Conference on the Future of Europe makes inside perspectives a priority. We wanted to provide a glimpse of the future of the Europe that should be defined along the lines of strong partnerships and close regional collaboration with our like-minded neighbours.

It is appropriate from an academic point of view to reach out and include the voices from the neighbouring regions in the chorus on the Future of the EU. Listening to what the pan-European citizens have to say in this EU citizen exchange of ideas, stretched across the continent, can only enrich our debate.

The purpose of this *collaborative report* is to present the expectations regarding the Future of Europe from the EU's close partners from the neighbouring regions (candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas members). We looked for expert perspectives on potential strategic, institutional, and sectoral developments that should be taken into consideration, focusing on concrete *policy recommendations* for actively contributing to a better Future for Europe.

The invited experts provided answers to two main guiding questions:

- *What are the European Union's main challenges and priorities regarding the relations with your country/government and how would you expect them to be addressed by the EU?*
- *Which could be your country/government's potential contributions towards advancing the European project in your region?*

Why did we choose the above mentioned countries?

Supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic course of the *Western Balkan states* is one of Romania's major foreign policy priorities. Romania's status as an EU and NATO member country, as well as its proximity to the Western Balkans, require a special relationship with the states in the region. All Western Balkan states have currently an institutionalized relationship with the EU. Membership negotiations have started with candidate countries such as Albania,

North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is promised the prospect of joining when it is ready.

Also, it is only natural that voices from *Turkey*, another candidate country with whom we have a Strategic Partnership to be added to this debate.

This list could not be complete without some of the countries from the Eastern Partnership that have developed a stronger and powerful relationship with the European Union. Regarding the *Republic of Moldova*, Romania has invested a lot in the development of the bilateral relationship, being a priority of our foreign policy, a priority based upon our common history and language. The fundamental guidelines of our relations have always been to support the European path of the Republic of Moldova, and also to enhance the concrete cooperation, for the close connection of the Republic of Moldova to Romania and to the European space, for the benefit of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova.

As for the other two countries from the Eastern Partnership, given the technical restraints of this collaborative report, the coordinating team selected *Ukraine and Georgia* as the other members of the EU Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), alongside the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, we also took into consideration their express political statements for further advancing towards the European Union, and their support of the differentiation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. This view was expressed on 5 December 2019, on the side-lines of the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Bratislava, when three partner countries, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, have signed a Joint Statement on the Future of the Eastern Partnership.

Additionally, given the upcoming French Presidency of the Council of European Union, we invited a French expert, François Lafond, with significant experience in the Western Balkans, to offer a glimpse regarding the upcoming period.

It is my belief that this sort of Collaborative Report can further unite the experts from our regions, and bring together a valuable pool of academic knowledge and expertise, while promoting the European spirit and values.

This Report is the result of a concerted effort of my colleagues in the European Studies Unit - Mihai Sebe (coordinator), Ana-Maria Andreea Anghelescu, Ionuț-Mircea Marcu - to whom I would like to thank for the initiative, their commitment and high editorial skills. The document relies on the elements and information provided by the local experts (to whom we address special thanks) and is addressed to all persons who wish to better comprehend what these regions may think about the *Future of Europe*.

Oana-Mihaela Mocanu
Director General of the European Institute of Romania

European Union and the Enlargement: a Future based on Cornerstone Values

Alba Cela

ALBA CELA is the Executive Director of the Albanian Institute for International Studies. Mrs. Cela holds a B.A in Political Science/ International relations from the American University in Bulgaria (magna cum laude) as well as an M. A in Nationalism Studies from the Central European University (with Distinction) in Budapest. She has been a recipient of the prestigious John Gunn scholarship at the University of Washington and Lee in Virginia. Alba's main areas of research are: democratization, political parties, national identity and European integration. Additionally, Alba participates as an independent expert in research, monitoring & evaluation and advocacy projects for several international donors and organizations such as OSFA/ FES/ BIRN/ HSS, etc.



The European Union used to be the dream for the Western Balkans region and now the long stagnation of the integration process has cast a gloomy shadow on this.

The young people in our region are taking things in their own hands and leaving in droves, seeking education, employment and a better future in the EU member states, without the patience to wait for their own countries to become part of the EU.

The EU has lost some leverage in the candidate countries, because of the inconsistency of the process and the politicization of milestones by individual member states. Bilateral disputes about unresolved historical issues, scepticism around the readiness of candidates to move forward and even the request for a new methodology have often derailed and prolonged the process. It is time to move on at a quicker and clearer pace.

The EU needs to vigorously reclaim its force and power as the key vision for the future, asserting itself not just economically, but also in the narratives of reconciliation, development and progress in all our region.

Notwithstanding the fact that other powers are here seeking influence in the region(?), the truth is that they cannot compete with the EU just yet. It is not for lack of trying that third parties, such as Russia and others, have not succeeded in becoming alternatives. The EU's unique and inspiring set of values, its economic and trade power and its shared cultural setting cannot be easily rivalled.

Albania has been an interesting story. When it comes to its foreign policy, the country has aligned itself with the European Union and in general with the transatlantic alliance. It has shown a fierce loyalty to the principles of the West. On the domestic front, despite difficulties,

the reforms have proceeded and the transformative power of the integration has radically changed the political and juridical landscape. This transformation needs to be salvaged from the stagnation of enlargement.

The EU needs to vigorously reclaim its force and power as the key vision for the future, asserting itself not just economically, but also in the narratives of reconciliation, development and progress in all our region.

In addition to its security-exporting and consistent foreign policy, Albania has shown and continues to show important values such as interfaith harmony, solidarity with those in need, just as in the recent case of welcoming hundreds of Afghan refugees. The EU has also shown Albania a lot of solidarity especially in the aftermath of the 2019 major earthquake and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the heart of the Future of the EU need to be the cornerstones of its creation: shared values and a shared desire for peace. Albania in this sense is fully aligned with the EU and will hopefully get a chance to go forward in the process of accession.

The EU and the Western Balkans - Serving the Purpose of Enlargement¹

Gjergji Vurmo

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Seven years ago, BiEPAG colleagues produced an important policy paper entitled “The unfulfilled promise - Completing the Balkan enlargement”.² It analysed the prospects for the Western Balkan countries’ ‘European Future’. At that time, Croatia had just joined the club and the EU’s complaints about ‘enlargement fatigue’ had reached a peak with Juncker’s famous statement - “no enlargement under my watch”.

The BiEPAG paper tried to raise awareness in the EU about the risks of downgrading enlargement’s importance. Many of those risks, unfortunately, have come to pass.

Where are we headed in the new decade (2021-2030)?

In BiEPAG’s worst case scenario for enlargement, the EU and Western Balkan countries de facto abandoned the policy, and a new level of unpredictability overtook the region, including nationalist- and conflict-driven agendas. In this scenario, the days of European values and a pro-Western consensus would be gone, and Western Balkan countries would pursue different foreign policy priorities and partnerships. Yet, they are all united in one core characteristic - the rule of law and democracy would no longer be a top priority, not only

¹ An expanded version of this article was first published on 20 September 2021 on the website of The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG): <https://biepag.eu/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-serving-the-purpose-of-enlargement/>.

² BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), “The unfulfilled promise - Completing the Balkan enlargement”, May 2014, available at: <https://www.balkanfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Policy-Paper-Completing-Enlargement-2.pdf>.

because they never have been for the Eastern powers (Russia, China, Turkey, Gulf countries), but also because security is now considered a much greater priority for the Western ones.

BiEPAG argued that this scenario was less likely than others. Today we see that this scenario was not as unlikely as we thought in 2014. Some of its features already sound familiar for many of us living in the Western Balkan. Not only have the Eastern powers penetrated the region, but now the West struggles to articulate a common position on many of its challenges, and even on the Eastern players themselves.³ The current decade is slowly unfolding as some version of Scenario C, “Abandoning Enlargement and New Unpredictability in the Western Balkans”. At this point, this scenario seems unavoidable, so the most logical need is managing it in order to prevent its misuse.

Considering that the Balkan Big Bang will not happen any time soon, pretending that enlargement is fine so that Western Balkan countries won't flirt with the East will not work.

Hence, the question is: What version of Scenario C do we want?

Considering that the Balkan Big Bang will not happen any time soon, pretending that enlargement is fine so that Western Balkan countries won't flirt with the East will not work. Albania is already doing so with Turkey⁴ and some Gulf countries⁵, while Serbia and a few others⁶ are way beyond the flirting phase with Russia⁷ and China.⁸ A new approach is needed to keep the Western Balkans firmly anchored with the EU. So, why not take this opportunity to prioritise democracy?

Until not so long ago, speaking about abandoning EU enlargement was a heresy, especially for civil society. This is because we wrongfully identified EU integration with democratisation. However, the past decade showed that this was not true. Serbia and Montenegro moved forward with EU accession negotiations, and they both became less

³ Demetri Sevastopulo, “Will Europe sign up to Joe Biden’s plan to counter China?”, *Financial Times*, 6 June 2021, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e4c7df1a-5048-4cf1-8a2d-c9a2d721ba92>.

⁴ Valerie Hopkins, Laura Pitel, “Erdogan’s great game: Turkish intrigue in the Balkans”, *Financial Times*, 14 January 2021, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/d99f7b3d-5dcc-4894-a455-1af5a433175f>.

⁵ Alice Taylor, “EU Delegation Seeks Clarification from Albanian Government over Durres Port Contract”, *EXIT News*, 3 March 2021, available at: <https://exit.al/en/2021/03/03/eu-delegation-seeks-clarification-from-albanian-government-over-durres-port-contract/>.

⁶ Vesko Garcevic, “Russia and China are Penetrating Balkans at West’s Expense”, *Balkan Insight*, 18 August 2020, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/18/russia-and-china-are-penetrating-balkans-at-west-s-expense/>.

⁷ Euronews, *EU warns Serbia to cancel free trade pact with Russia if it wants to join bloc*, 30 August 2019, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/28/eu-warns-serbia-to-cancel-free-trade-pact-with-russia-if-it-wants-to-join-bloc>.

⁸ Wawa Wang, Nils Resare, “China Is Changing Serbia From the Inside”, *The Diplomat*, 3 April 2021, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-is-changing-serbia-from-the-inside/>.

democratic while doing so. In fact, some leaders used EU accession to strengthen their positions.

So why shouldn't we at least talk about the alternatives when our political leaders are actually working quite actively against the EU's transformative power?

Indeed, some EU capitals have been pondering the implications of alternatives to EU membership. Some think tanks have already offered possible pathways such as the Norwegian model⁹ or differentiated integration.¹⁰ These are only a few of the otherwise rich array of alternatives which may be taken into consideration to avoid further unpredictability in the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan, or the latter's democracy.

Finding life beyond EU enlargement

Over the past decade we have continually pretended that enlargement is important for the EU, and the result was a mockery of the accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro. We kept pretending that it held transformative power, even while the EU shook hands with autocrats in the region and even inside its own borders. The result is that autocrats joined efforts against the EU, and against our quest for democracy in the Western Balkan countries.

We cannot afford to be in denial any longer.

Enlargement is not in crisis, as we have long argued. Rather, it is over - at least until the EU solves another reality about which it has been in denial, namely its own structural problems, its own decline of democracy, and the rise of extremist political ideologies and public support for them.

We should not stay truthful to a process that is not delivering anymore, but to the goals we've designed the process for: peace in the region, democracy and prosperity for our citizens. For that, the EU and the Western Balkans need new options to sail the turbulent waters of 2020s, and maybe even those of the next decade.

Just as the EU needs to address its own challenges, we in the Balkans must accept that there is life beyond enlargement. However, we must figure out a future that goes through democracy building and the rule of law.

Accepting the above facts will make it easier for us to actually move forward safely. An EU that doesn't waste energy on calming down opponents of enlargement, but rather, devotes them to solving its structural governance challenges would result in a much stronger Union and

⁹ European Stability Initiative, *Hamster in the Wheel - Credibility and EU Balkan policy*, 15 January 2020, available at: <https://www.esiweb.org/newsletter/hamster-wheel-credibility-and-eu-balkan-policy>.

¹⁰ Think for Europe Network, *The Enlargement Impasse and the Necessity for its Transformation - Statement on the occasion of the start to the Slovenian Presidency of the EU Council*, 1 July 2021, available at: <https://www.thinkforeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Enlargement-Impasse-and-the-Necessity-for-its-Transformation.pdf>.

a more credible player in the eyes of Western Balkan's citizens. Just as the EU needs to address its own challenges, we in the Balkans must accept that there is life beyond enlargement. However, we must figure out a future that goes through democracy building and the rule of law. One of the most important lessons from the Afghanistan debacle¹¹ is that tolerating corruption, state capture and rule of law decline kills not only democracy, but the whole country.

We should take the next several years to consolidate our democracies in a new context of relations with and support from the EU. Failing to do so would be catastrophic.

¹¹ Sarah Chayes, *The Ides of August*, 16 August 2021, available at: <https://www.sarahchayes.org/post/the-ides-of-august>.

Perpetually transitioning towards the EU: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Dženeta Karabegović

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The 2021 EU Progress Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) hardly reports any progress. In fact, the number of challenges and priorities the EU highlights for the country to continue in the direction of eventual EU accession is too long to even begin sorting. The lack of progress is consistent with Bosnian citizens' desire to migrate to the EU - voting with their feet to join rather than staying and attempting to hold domestic political actors accountable to do their jobs. Emigration reflects the frustration many feel due to the lack of perspective out of a transitional socio-economic and political climate nearly three decades after the end of the 1992-1995 war and genocide. While Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions and foreign policy objectives remain unchanged, citing EU integration as a major strategic goal, the political elites are aware that reform and integration would reduce their own opportunities for corruption, and lead to a loss in terms of their power and ongoing state capture. Instead, they continue using the same overused, yet dangerous ethnonationalist rhetoric, while doing little to advance the country on a European path.

The lack of progress is consistent with Bosnian citizens' desire to migrate to the EU - voting with their feet to join rather than staying and attempting to hold domestic political actors accountable.

Against the background of the current political stalemate on the domestic level in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the discord among EU members' attitudes about the Western Balkans' accession processes, the EU's pragmatic response in helping Bosnia and Herzegovina securitize migration demonstrates a more cohesive approach than its response to populism and nationalism in the country, two issues which plague EU members, too. Perhaps it's more fruitful to reflect critically in this short text on what is evaluated somewhat more positively, at least in the Progress Report, between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina, more precisely, migration management.

Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborates with the EU on the return of its own and third country nationals, ensuring the continuation of the visa liberalization regime. The number of irregular migrants has begun to decline, as the number of return agreements and assisted voluntary returns rise. Migrant camps and border security are largely financed through EU funds. Still, migrant camp infrastructures remain inadequate, not to mention that people on the move sleep rough throughout the border region. Additionally, measures including violent pushbacks by Croatia are increasingly leading to more human trafficking.¹ This all ultimately reflects badly on the EU, where most migrants want to settle.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to EU membership has a long way to go, but its future in the EU is in the interest of both sides.

Incentivizing EU funds and developmental support, demonstrated as being somewhat effective in terms of migration management, support for implementing more rule of law, fighting corruption, reforms based on individual rights, and legal frameworks aligned with the *acquis*, could go a long way in creating accountability mechanisms for Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens for their political elites, whether by voting out current politicians or by pushing for more efficient integration. This should be the EU's priority in Bosnia and Herzegovina: empowering citizens and raising awareness about the EU path, ultimately holding political elites accountable. It would in turn also slow the brain drain from the country and foster collaboration on sustainable migration management, including for irregular migrants. Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to EU membership has a long way to go, but its future in the EU is in the interest of both sides.

¹ Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "Biggest Indictment To Date For Organised Smuggling Of Illegal Migrants", 27.08.2021, available at: <http://www.tuzilastvobih.gov.ba/?id=5014&jezik=b>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans: From Crises to Prospects of EU Membership¹

Predrag Praštalo

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The founding fathers of the European integration project must have known that they were doing something extremely valuable and significant, perhaps not for themselves, but for future generations of Europeans. It was certainly an important endeavour, by means of which they have irrevocably entered the history of Europe and the world. The "European pioneers" from 1950 had a vision and a plan, imbued with idealism, but they also had a strong character and a sincere will for our continent to become, once and for all, an oasis of peace and prosperity. We, in the Balkans, are witnessing more and more how the EU acts as an economic giant, but only as an average diplomatic power when it comes to crucial issues, such as addressing EU enlargement in the Western Balkans or security issues, lagging behind in terms of public perceptions of great powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and even Turkey.

The Balkan countries have shown their commitment to the European integration process. For example, during the migrant crisis, Serbia, together with North Macedonia, played a significant role in protecting the EU borders, alongside Greece, Hungary, and Croatia. North Macedonia reached an agreement with Greece to change its name, fulfilling the basic conditions for progress on the path to EU integration. Unfortunately it remained "empty-handed" in the end and how the situation will develop in the coming years remains questionable. It is a case similar to the one of Montenegro, which became a NATO member

¹ The article is a shortened version of a speech delivered by the author at the International round table: *Western Balkans and European integration - experiences and perspectives*, which took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 20 January 2018, in the framework of the "West Balkans and the EU" lecture cycle, organized by the International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES). The full transcript of the speech can be found here: <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/prastalo-bih-i-balkan-ce-nadzivjeti-sve-krize-1223544>.

state, despite the public opinion's division on the topic. These situations turned the two countries into "ghost states", lacking a clear orientation and perspective in the foreseeable future to become EU members. North Macedonia may receive some kind of reward, Serbia, and Montenegro still have to resolve some issues, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain far behind, so much so that it is questionable whether they will ever become members of the EU. Still, specific conditions are needed to guarantee the peace of the three peoples and the three main religions, if the European Union requirements are maintained.

The Balkan countries have shown their commitment to the European integration process.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state where 97% of the population declare themselves members of one of the three groups of people and one of the three religions. Therefore, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a hostage of its national relations; only the Ohrid and Dayton agreements guarantee peace in the country, while the harmonization of the state constitution with EU-civil norms may offer the possibility of EU membership. On the one hand, if Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to join the EU, the country has to go through a transformation of the relationships within society, since a tradition of civil society and a common culture are missing. Following the violent breakdown of Yugoslavia and the experiences of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the United States made possible an agreement in Dayton. It offered the only possible option to stop the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and preserve a single state, with three equal groups of peoples, each having equal participation. The collapse of the constitutional reform in 2006, the so-called "April package", led to the withdrawal of the United States and the surrender of power to the EU. So far, the process has failed to promote a modality to consistently attract Bosnia and Herzegovina, with or without the rest of the Western Balkans, towards Brussels.

The scars of the past century's wars make the saying "History repeats itself" all the more powerful. Without the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, any conflict in our region would not spare the EU from destruction and suffering. The peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina are deeply disappointed with the EU's diplomatic passivity towards our region, with its inability and weakness to integrate a region of cca.18 million inhabitants. For the EU, the size of the population cannot be considered a security or economic issue, and neither can Russia's interest, since Moscow has never opposed, and has even supported, Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU path for a while, without joining NATO, just like China, though now the situation is changing significantly.

Although I am a pioneer of EU integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the way the Europeans think is not clear to me. This begs the questions regarding the feelings of ordinary citizens, 60% of whom are Muslims, who are convinced and publicly say that Bosnia and Herzegovina will never be like Turkey. It would be a great danger for the EU and Western democracy, if the Europeanization of Western Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular was delayed for another 10-15-20 years. We perceive more and more often in the Balkans that

"instead of Europeanizing the Balkans, Europe is becoming more Balkanized". We, in the European Movement, have been telling our citizens and media for more than 10 years: "YES to Brussels", which was recently recognised even by the European Commission's President, Mrs. Ursula von Leyen, on her Balkan tour.

Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union "play a football match", without a winner, deceiving each other. Domestic politicians do not sincerely want to join the EU, and the majority of them support this path only declaratively, as shown by the lack of reform processes and the 14 unfulfilled conditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress on the path to the EU. The case of the Croatian prime-minister Sanader, who was once among the most prominent politicians in the EU and ended up in prison for corruption, is by no means a good message to domestic politicians, who fear they might have the same fate. The EU is not and will not be ready to receive Bosnia and Herzegovina in the next 10-15-20 years. Until then, although the EU is currently the country's main partner and hope for a better future and prosperity, the Western Balkans can easily change course. In order to survive and prosper even in times of crisis, the European Union needs to strike a balance between economic strength and diplomatic influence, with more visibly expressed confidence. This is what the EU needs,

Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union "play a football match", without a winner, deceiving each other.

even if it means generating further disagreements on some issues.

Today the EU has a unique opportunity to definitely and finally grow from the current crisis period, following the example of the creation of the United States, and become an independent European project of a single European Union, without division and discrimination among members. This is a process that must be completed while focusing on reforming and integrating the Western Balkans in the EU as soon as possible, within a clear timeframe. Until that happens, there will still be a dark stain and a relic of past divisions on the European continent that would mean re-drawing the invisible lines that have divided Europe for decades. A vital step for the survival and further development of the EU itself, as the largest and most important human project in history, is the rapid integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans into the European Union at the longest in the next 7-8 years. Otherwise, without the integration of the Western Balkans, security and peace in the EU are questionable, because this time, the cataclysm would not be limited to the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans, as it was the case in the 1990s, but there would be refugees, as well as a humanitarian and a destructive wave resonating in Europe and beyond, on a significantly larger scale.

The concluding message is that the Western Balkans, from a geographic and historic point of view, belong to Europe. If the founding fathers of the European Union in 1950 could see Europe divided again today, they would not be happy that, after 70 years, the entire continent has not been integrated. The 30 billion euros for the next 10 years, promised at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Slovenia (6 October 2021), would have no use, because all

Today the EU has a unique opportunity to definitely and finally grow from the current crisis period, following the example of the creation of the United States, and become an independent European project of a single European Union, without division and discrimination among its? members.

educated and young people would have left this region, unless a realistic date for EU integration was set.

We, in the Western Balkans, still believe in the EU, and I would be happy if the EU believes in the Western Balkans with even half of that level of trust. Sometimes I have a feeling that the EU has never given up prejudice against this region. The EU cannot be peaceful if the Western Balkans are restless. For us in the Western Balkans, and especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the priority is peace and stability, without which, there is no continuation of the EU integration process.

The EU and its Eastern Partnership Poster Child - the Way Forward in the Post-2020

Tinatin Akhvlediani

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In line with its trade and neighbourhood policies, the EU's priorities in its relations with Georgia mainly refer to the full implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). On this front, Georgia remains among the best performers across the Balkan and Eastern Partnership states.¹ However, the recent political events in Georgia, particularly those following the 2018 and 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections, show that the country is clamping down on democracy and is backing out from completing judicial and anti-corruption reforms. Despite serious damage to Georgia's international reputation and democratic accountability, the country still announced its ambition to apply for EU membership in 2024. These events point at the serious challenges that the EU and Georgia are currently facing to bring forward the European project in the country and reshape the Eastern Partnership policy in the post-2020 period.

From Georgia's perspectives, it is crystal clear that, if the country really aspires to the EU membership, then it should do its homework and implement the needed reforms to strengthen rule of law, root out corruption and address politicized justice and informal governance.

From Georgia's perspectives, it is crystal clear that, if the country really aspires to the EU membership, then it should do its homework and implement the needed reforms to

¹ Emerson et al. (2020), "Balkan and Eastern European Comparisons", available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/balkan-and-eastern-european-comparisons/>.

strengthen rule of law, root out corruption and address politicized justice and informal governance. Only after completing these steps, Georgia could strategize around the EU's "more for more" principle and move forward with deepening sectoral cooperation with the EU, beyond the AA. To speed up its rapprochement with the EU, Georgia should remain actively involved with Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in the newly proposed "Trio/AA+" format. This would give more leverage to Georgia to move forward with deepening cooperation with the EU together with the like-minded DCFTA countries.

From the EU's perspective, it should be clear that the legislative approximation of the EU laws and international agreements and conventions laid down in the lengthy Annexes of the AAs should not be the end-result. The EU should make it clear that the final objective should be the proper implementation of these numerous commitments, which cannot be achieved without strong institutions, rule of law, anti-corruption, and democratic reforms.

Beyond offering a clear and credible set of incentives, through this approach, the EU could bring more clarity on what Georgia should do to strengthen its position for the EU membership application.

While implementation of these reforms remains in the mandate of the Georgian government, the EU has a geopolitical responsibility² to promote and inspire the correct conduct of these reforms in the country. To do so, it should revise its "carrot and stick" policy and show what "more for more" and "less for less" could imply in practice. For creating real incentives, "more for more" should offer more tangible and inspiring benefits in exchange for challenging and costly reforms. This could refer to deepening sectoral cooperation beyond the AA, and setting clear objectives, such as EU membership perspectives. By doing so, the EU could make its "more for more" approach clearer and more credible, leading to the spillover effects in its Eastern neighbourhood, by offering the needed incentives to the other Eastern Partnership countries, which wish to remain committed to the EU values and democratic reforms. Meanwhile, the "less for less" approach should demonstrate that the EU can effectively apply its conditionality in Georgia, and make clear that the EU membership perspectives are unrealistic if the country keeps backing out from implementing needed reforms. As suggested by a recent study,³ this could be applied by offering a progressive, conditional, and staged membership to Georgia, with a final objective of the EU membership. Beyond offering a clear and credible set of incentives, through this approach, the EU could bring more clarity on what Georgia should do to strengthen its position for the EU membership application, may it be in 2024 or later.

² Kubilius and Stanionis (2021), "Eastern Partnership Beyond Westlessness: A New Momentum for the European Integration", available at: <https://elpnariai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EaP-Beyond-Westlessness.pdf>.

³ Emerson, Lazarevic, Blockmans and Subotic (2021), "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU" available at: https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/?mc_cid=4077fbec2&mc_eid=0a0cf89c6c.

EU-Georgian Relations - Time to Impose Restrictive Measures on Abusers of Power

Marine Kapanadze

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The European Union (EU) remains Georgia's crucial strategic partner. It has provided hundreds of millions of Euros to support projects in numerous sectors and has been engaged in political processes to support democracy, human rights and rule of law in Georgia. To give an example, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel himself, and his representatives facilitated the mediation between the Georgian government and the opposition in order to resolve the political conflict caused by the controversial results of the parliamentary elections in 2020. As a result of the mediation, the parties involved were able to achieve a political agreement concerning significant topics such as justice and judiciary reform, electoral reform, separation and division of powers within the parliament and future elections. Thus, the EU has been an essential partner for Georgia's economic and democratic development.

While the EU's support is critical, serious challenges remain within the EU-Georgian relations. They are mainly caused by the Georgian government's failure to honour the commitments undertaken towards the citizens and international partners. The government, for example, left the above-mentioned political agreement in July, and failed to ensure the holding of the municipal elections in a fair and equal environment on 2 October. Moreover, the EU-Georgian relations are also hampered by the rise of far-right/ultranationalist groups which seem to sympathize with the Russian politics. While the EU's efforts to solve these problems through diplomatic means are appreciated, the time has come for it to adopt a stricter approach. Therefore, the EU should consider imposing restrictive measures on those responsible for the regress of democracy, rule of law and human rights situation in Georgia:

key political figures and the government officials, including the founder of the Georgian Dream and the de-facto ruler of the country - Bidzina Ivanishvili and prominent business figures supporting his regime. Sanctions can be similar to those imposed against Belarus and may include travel restrictions and asset freezes. If they are narrowly targeted, they are unlikely to adversely affect civilian population, while still pressuring the Georgian government to improve the EU-Georgian relations.

While the EU's efforts to solve these problems through diplomatic means are appreciated, the time has come for it to adopt a stricter approach.

Georgia can be considered the main partner of the EU in the South Caucasus, since it has stronger aspiration towards the Euro-Atlantic integration than Azerbaijan and Armenia. Despite the challenges described above, Georgia still cooperates closely with the EU and can consolidate this contribution to the European project in the region by implementing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. A successful implementation will not only strengthen the bond between the EU and Georgia, but will also provide a stimulus for other states in South Caucasus to enhance their relations with the EU. Moreover, Georgia can advance the European project in the region by assuming a peacekeeping role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In particular, it can help ease tensions and restore peaceful relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as Georgia can use its friendly relationship with both these countries to facilitate a dialogue. A peaceful resolution of this conflict is important for the EU's foreign and security policy in this region.

The European Union in Georgia: Challenges and Priorities

Bidzina Lebanidze

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The European Union's (EU) external governance in Georgia, and more broadly in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) area, faces three major challenges.

First, the EU is widely underrepresented in security and military areas. The lack of a security agenda in a region which is highly affected by geopolitical competition among various regional and global actors can easily turn into a liability. For instance, the EU's reluctance to engage in security and military areas in the region resulted in the Union's diminished role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Instead, the war's development and outcome were shaped by illiberal regional actors - Russia and Turkey, according to their national preferences. Similarly, the EU continues ignoring security-related developments in Georgia and its conflict regions.

The majority of both the political elites and the population in Georgia support and aspire for Georgia's EU membership, while the European Union itself intends to keep Georgia at arm's length.

The second challenge the EU faces in Georgia is related to Georgia's unfinished democratisation process. Despite continuous attempts, the EU has not managed so far to help the country lock in its democratic reforms and consolidate the democratic structures. It seems that the EU's blend of limited use of political conditionality, vague normative vocabulary and absence of strong incentives discourages political elites in Georgia to embark on politically costly reforms.

Third, there seems to be a mismatch in expectations between the EU and the major stakeholders in Georgia. The majority of both the political elites and the population in Georgia support and aspire for Georgia's EU membership, while the European Union itself intends to keep Georgia at arm's length. The absence of a clear membership perspective and the EU's failure to offer new incentives and cooperation formats beyond the Eastern Partnership also negatively affects EU's transformative power in Georgia.

A democratic Georgia would be a strong case for EU's functioning transformative power beyond the European Union's borders.

On the other hand, Georgia itself, and first of all, the country's political elites, do not do their homework either to advance Georgia's European integration, and with it - the European project in the Black Sea and the Eastern Partnership region. Three steps need to be taken to contribute to the European project in the region.

First, Georgia needs to overcome the current semi-democratic limbo and a long-lasting political crisis which endangers the country's security and political stability. A democratic Georgia would be a strong case for EU's functioning transformative power beyond the European Union's borders.

Second, Georgia needs to become economically successful and a politically stable country, which can be only achieved if divisive socio-political issues are mitigated, including inequality, social exclusion, poverty and unemployment.

Third, Georgia needs to pragmatically manage security risks emanating from regional competition in the Black Sea and the Eastern Partnership area. They include, among others, keeping distance from close economic and societal ties both with Russia and China, and treating carefully investments and loans from China.

The EU may prove itself helpful in assisting Georgia in all three areas. By using a right policy mix, the Union can support Georgia's democratization and socio-economic reforms and shield the country from harmful influences of regional and global illiberal actors.

Expectations Regarding the Future of Europe from the EU's Close Partners from the Region - the Case of the Republic of Moldova

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The EU-Republic of Moldova relations are defined in the EU internal documents and enshrined in the Association Agreement, allowing for an ad-hoc or rather dynamic interaction, depending on the directions of developments in bilateral cooperation, subject to specific circumstances favouring different types of priorities. The EU's priorities towards the Republic of Moldova derive from the provisions of the Association Agreement (AA), serving as a roadmap for the modernization of the Republic of Moldova in two key areas: political environment and socio-economic development, thus guiding the internal policy reform process.

EU-Republic of Moldova relations need to focus more on a long-term transformation agenda with a specific emphasis on the functioning of democratic institutions.

The main challenge lies in the effective and practical implementation of the new legislation (adopting the EU *acquis* at the national level), which is often inconsistent in particular in the following areas: competition, public procurement, energy, transport or market regulation. The main causes for the lack of significant progress are the high-level of perceived corruption, and the weak capacity of state institutions. Systemic corruption, organized crime, money laundering and large-scale fraud lead to a strong concentration of money of dubious origin in the country, which is then used to corrupt politicians, buy votes and distort economic competition.

In addition, the unresolved situation of the Transnistrian conflict and the presence of the Russian army on the territory of the country fuel the problem of insecurity, also affecting the neighbouring areas, Romania and Ukraine.

To overcome these challenges, EU-Republic of Moldova relations need to focus more on a long-term transformation agenda with a specific emphasis on the functioning of democratic institutions. There is a *need to support a true democratic system* as an expression of the real desire of the Moldovan citizens and of the national interest. The Moldovan elections of 11 July 2021 provided, for the first time, an adequate framework for cooperation with the EU, since the current government has positioned itself as a credible, interested and capable partner for implementing the provisions of the Association Agreement without being constrained by other interests. Thus, the government needs to make sure that upholding the principles of rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions will be ensured and streamlined in all its reforms. Also, the investigation of bank fraud and embezzlement of state property in recent years cannot be overlooked, as it is imperative to recover the stolen money.

In order to encourage and sustain the *internal democratization of the Republic of Moldova*, the EU might need to explore the possibility of offering a differentiated integration,¹ and put on the table the membership perspective. Bigger rewards are needed in order to accelerate the internal reforms in sensitive areas. Such rewards are important for both the society, which needs to understand the need for some difficult reforms, and the political elites, which need to push for painful and unpopular reforms.

The *economic, social and political sustainability of the country* represents another important priority, since emigration remains on a positive trend and the political environment is speckled by parties with obscure funding. Therefore, in order to *foster the post-pandemic economic recovery and convergence*, greater support for SMEs and civil society focusing on local/community development² is needed. Areas such as: green deal, digital transformation, strengthening resilience of the societies are also important for the EU-Republic of Moldova collaboration agenda and need greater attention.

Counterbalancing the influence of the Russian Federation and the transformation of the neighbouring states into a buffer zone of insecurity remains one of the EU's biggest concern in Eastern Europe. In the context of fulfilling the commitments undertaken in the Association Agreement, Republic of Moldova can become the key player in the perspective of a pragmatic relationship with the Russian Federation, provided it can ensure the existence of strong, cooperative and sustainable state institutions. This approach may contribute to the credibility of European leaders, since the EU's foreign policy is becoming increasingly criticized by

¹ The relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine is very different from the relationship between the EU and Armenia or Azerbaijan. Because?

² These particular areas have been outsourced to development partners and neglected by national authorities, or the undertaken measures were delayed. For example, a program for the internationalization of SMEs in Moldova was launched only in 2020, six years after the signing of the AA.

citizens, especially in the context of Brexit, the slow progress of integration of the Balkan countries, and failures in the case of Ukraine.

In order to foster the post-pandemic economic recovery and convergence, greater support for SMEs and civil society focusing on local/community development is needed.

We can conclude that the Republic of Moldova's Europeanisation will not be realized only through external pressure, but it needs an authentic internal drive to support the agents of change, capable to further advance the European project. The European Union expects the Republic of Moldova to become a provider of regional security and not the other way around. This feature, on the one hand, would justify the money of European taxpayers invested annually in the Eastern Partnership countries, and, on the other hand would support the European Commission's intentions to deepen relations with these states. Accordingly, the EU needs a new success story, and the Republic of Moldova can deliver on these expectations with a firm commitment from the current government in Chişinău. In this case, the Republic of Moldova could set a good example for less cooperative Eastern Partnership countries, such as Armenia or Belarus.

Challenges and Prospects for the Cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union beyond 2020

Ludmila Nofit

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The European Union entered a new phase of profound reflection, with many open questions and challenges ahead. In turn, that triggered among the lead EU member states a certain level of concern regarding the Future of the European Union as a full-fledged economic, political and security power.¹ Despite the scepticism towards the EU's steady future, it's obvious that, at the time of its inception, the European project represented the appropriate framework to ensure peace, security, and economic development. Over the decades, it became a political actor with its own strengths and weaknesses, getting through ups and downs due to various internal issues (e.g. BREXIT, migrants' crisis, lack of consensus on further EU enlargement, rising populist and nationalism movements within some member states that pose a risk to the core European values, etc.), and external factors (such as a fluctuating transatlantic relationship, defence and cybersecurity issues, a rising competitive China, antagonistic approaches among the EU member states regarding the cooperation with the Russian Federation, the next Eastern Partnership agenda, etc.). The period ahead is crucial for the EU's Future, and the resilience concept has become a leitmotiv since the ongoing pandemic crisis and subsequent economic recovery, as well as the digital transition and climate change affected not only the European community, but its close neighbourhood and beyond. However,

¹ Mujtaba Rahman, "European sovereignty has lost its biggest champion", April 7, 2021, *Politico*, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-sovereignty-has-lost-its-biggest-champion-emmanuel-macron/>.

the European Union continues to be at this moment the appropriate development pattern for the countries such as the Republic of Moldova.

Having the European community support and willingness to provide accurate expertise and counselling in the most sensitive areas, the Republic of Moldova needs to seize the momentum of deepening the dialogue and association with the EU.

The question whether the EU is determined to take an active leading role, namely in the Eastern Partnership region, is undeniable. Based on the Association Agreement, but most importantly because of the Moldovan favourable political landscape and the government's commitment to accomplish strategic reforms in key sectors, the EU released a series of financial programs and packages to support the Chisinau authorities in strengthening the country's democratic growth. The European assistance provided is conditioned by the fulfilment of certain steps, for instance the achievement of tangible results in justice reform, fight against corruption and money laundering, the respect for rule of law, the development of a strong financial and banking system, a sustainable and innovative economy, etc.

A further engagement between EU and the Republic of Moldova in different bilateral and multilateral European programs designed to address those top issues would generate mutual benefits.

Having the European community support and willingness to provide accurate expertise and counselling in the most sensitive areas, Republic of Moldova needs to seize the momentum of deepening the dialogue and association with the EU. In turn, the European leadership must review its approach toward the Eastern Partnership countries, especially for those interested in expanding the domains of cooperation, for instance in the field of digital transition, climate change, defence and security focusing on mechanisms for early prevention and countering hybrid and cybersecurity threats, etc. A further engagement between EU and the Republic of Moldova in different bilateral and multilateral European programs designed to address those top issues would generate mutual benefits.

The Importance of EU and Montenegro's Close Cooperation in Fighting Corruption

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After three decades of the EU's promotion of democracy, the Western Balkans did not progress on a democratization track, but experienced a substantial backsliding instead. Currently, the Western Balkan region remains mostly dominated by illiberal democracies, political clientelism and, above all, high levels of corruption. Scaling it down to the national level, the ambivalence of the current Montenegro's government approach towards the EU integration and enforcement of stable democratic institutions is obstructing Montenegrin path to democracy, since without the EU's stronger assistance Montenegro's accession can only be delayed even more. This would leave Montenegro stuck in a hybrid *status quo* of competitive authoritarianism where corruption and criminals are undermining the rule of law and represent an obstacle to the fulfilment of human rights.

There is a need for a stronger political will and for pressure to efficiently address this issue, through a strong criminal justice system.

Firstly, the EU should better address the deficiencies in Montenegro's criminal justice system, such as the fight against corruption and organized crime, because general improvements in the accession negotiations depend on the progress made in the rule of law area, as described in the Negotiation Framework. Additionally, the importance and transnational nature of these issues, as recently confirmed in the Pandora Papers and in the

Yorgen Fenech case,¹ highlights the need to make fighting corruption a priority of cooperation. There is a need for a stronger political will and for pressure to efficiently address this issue, through a strong criminal justice system. Fighting corruption is central to the rule of law and a necessary condition for the respect of human rights, therefore increasing the need for a reinforcement of governance in international cooperation and a consolidation of the EU anti-corruption legislation, through the drafting and implementation of already functional EU and international laws such as Sapin II, FCPA and BBA.

Secondly, as Montenegro has a weak industrial based economy, constrained by the small market size, high levels of nepotism and a poorly done transition, it leaves the door open for foreign actors to get easily involved, with a lack of critical human rights safeguards, and use corruption to their ends. Since these actors, such as Russia and China, often do not share the EU's democratic ambitions, which was also evident during the ongoing pandemic, the EU, especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition, should better address the relations of candidate countries with authoritarian regimes, as it generates instability on a long term, whereas these foreign powers can only further frustrate the EU's efforts to guarantee the continent's security.

An EU geostrategic investment in Montenegro as a lead candidate is of utter importance, with a clear accession perspective which would serve as a driving force of transformation

The promotion and support for the fight against corruption would not only improve access to the basic human rights and strengthen the rule of law, but it would also increase the citizens' trust in institutions (30.8%)² and government's commitment to the EU accession, which is strongly supported by the citizens (70.3%)³. Considering that Montenegro is on the accession track and offered further assistance from the EU, it is expected for it to move on a more democratic trajectory, while setting a roadmap for the other Western Balkan countries on their EU integration and negotiation processes. Hence, an EU geostrategic investment in Montenegro as a lead candidate is of utter importance, with a clear accession perspective which would serve as a driving force of transformation, not only for Montenegro, but for other Western Balkan countries as well.

¹ Stephen Grey, Jacob Borg, "Exclusive: In Daphne murder investigation, money trail leads to Montenegro venture", *Reuters*, 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-malta-daphne-money-trail-exclusive-idUKKBN23Q1MA>.

² According to CEDEM's research "Political Public Opinion of Montenegro", conducted in June 2021 - available at: <https://www.cedem.me/en/publications/empirical-research/politacal-public-opinion/send/33-political-public-opinion/2007-public-opinion-poll-june-2021>.

³ According to CEDEM's research "Political Public Opinion of Montenegro", conducted in June 2021 - available at: <https://www.cedem.me/en/publications/empirical-research/politacal-public-opinion/send/33-political-public-opinion/2007-public-opinion-poll-june-2021>.

EU Integration of the Western Balkans - The Boulevard of Broken Dreams

Momčilo Radulović

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21 years after the Final Declaration of Zagreb Summit (24 November 2000)¹, where the EU membership perspective was promised to the countries of the Western Balkans, we are back at the beginning of a vicious circle that we have been experiencing for more than two decades. Meanwhile, only Croatia joined the EU club, while all the other Western Balkans countries have been deprived from that privilege, still waiting at the outskirts for the fulfilment of repeated promises also found in the latest Bled Declaration, adopted on 6 October 2021.

This 6 October didn't bring anything new to the Western Balkans, only the same old stories and phrases, now even degraded in terms of an eventual timeframe or more concrete action plans that might give the Western Balkans a certainty of EU membership. Unfortunately, this perspective is becoming more and more a mirage on the horizon of broken dreams for most of the citizens of Western Balkans countries.

Above that, the Western Balkans became a most visible confirmation that a unified EU foreign policy does not exist, and that the individual interests of some of the EU countries prevailed over possible joined initiatives. This resulted in policies of double standards, where many of the initial EU values were pushed aside in order to pave the way for the accomplishment of financial interests of the EU Member States.

The bigger financial interest of some of the leading countries of the EU in the Western Balkans, the bigger is the silence about the wrongdoings of their leaders. The best example of these double standards of EU actors is keeping the eyes wide shut on media, political and

¹ Final Declaration of Zagreb Summit, 2020, available here:
<https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/bridges/bosnia/ZagrebSummit24Nov2000.pdf>.

clerical propaganda that the President of Serbia, Mr Vučić, supported by his allies from Russia, is leading against Montenegro.² What kind of message is this for the other countries of the Western Balkans? In line with that, the prospects of the most advanced country of the region, Montenegro, are also fading away, due to the rising political crisis in the country, since the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian nationalistic powers took over the Government after elections in August 2020. The last EU Commission Progress Report on Montenegro from October 2021 was widely seen as the most negative one since the beginning of negotiations in June 2012.

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Along with the double standards in treatment of some of the Western Balkans countries and their leaders, it is hard to avoid mentioning the fact that the entire assistance to the Western Balkans countries within next decade will be just a little above the amount of money allocated to Croatia, one of the smallest EU members. Of course, one would say that Western Balkans countries should be grateful even for that, and that should go without saying, but does anybody count precisely how much money is going into the opposite direction, from the Western Balkans countries towards EU Member States?

Some facts can easily offer an answer to this question. Namely, analysts calculated that more than 90% of the entire banking system³ of the Western Balkans countries belongs to the banks from the EU, which leads to the conclusion that nothing comes for free to the Western Balkans states.

These facts and many more are the reasons why all of us should start thinking about EU membership of the Western Balkans in the rational context, and not in the context of fear and nationalism that is widespread among nations and leaders of many of the EU Members States. It was not the fear, nationalism and pre-electoral public opinion surveys that were leading the founding fathers of EU towards unification. On the contrary, those were ideas about joint and peaceful life, ideas of joint prosperity and courage to face and challenge nationalism and fears. Unfortunately, in the case of EU Integration of the Western Balkans countries, as well as in many other contemporary issues of European policies, it seems that we are facing a chronic shortage of both ideas and courage.

² While Progress Report or/and comments of EU officials are almost completely silent on media propaganda from Serbia towards Montenegro, Digital Forensic Centre from Podgorica is referring to thousands of aggressive, negative and attacking information from Serbian media against Montenegro, in the last two years. See more at: "DFC MONITORING OF THE SERBIAN MEDIA 2020/2021", October 2021, available at: <https://dfcme.me/dfc-monitoring-srbijanskih-medija-2020-2021/>.

³ Dušan Reljić, "Western Balkan's EU Path: Political and Economic Deadlocks", in *European Western Balkans*, 16 February 2016, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/?p=3782>.

Future of EU Enlargement: Neighbourhood Coexistence through the Prism of a Neighbourhood Blockade

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The Republic of North Macedonia gained independence peacefully in 1991, and managed to build a broad social consensus on its future development as a new state on the road towards EU membership. Public opinion polls over the past 30 years confirm this commitment, since the majority of citizens continue to support wholeheartedly the EU membership.

After the European Union-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, and the unequivocal statements that the future of the region lies within the European Union, the current messages, especially those conveyed at the recent Summit in Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia (5-6 October 2021), reinforce the rhetoric of continuous conditioning, wrapped in diplomatic packaging. Some of the remarks regarding the European Union refer to its inadequate commitment to the enlargement policy, entrapping the process in a difficult-to-resolve political dilemma. Consequently, the enlargement process lacks a clear timeframe, specific encouragements, and a dialogue regarding serious (and rather expensive) reforms, therefore distancing itself from the citizens and their conviction that, after fulfilling their obligations, the country will become a full-fledged Member State of the European Union. This is evident from the present 7th Progress Report by the European Commission, which offers a positive opinion and a recommendation to begin accession negotiations.

The European Union communicates with the institutions and government representatives, while we, at the European Movement, communicate with the citizens. We know that they, as before, continue to see an accelerated European integration process as a solution, because during the 20 years since the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, we accepted even the name change of the country, yet the result is meagre.

The Europeanization of the country, albeit slow, is a real process, which presently is blocked by objections raised by neighbouring Bulgaria. These demands threaten the very autonomy and identity of the Macedonian people and their historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious continuity. “If any nation in Europe has to choose between their identity and joining the EU, then there is something wrong with that set of options. There is also a stake here for the European Union,” argues North Macedonia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Nikola Dimitrov.¹ Regarding this bilateral dispute, the questions raised by the citizens are primarily addressed to the EU, rather than to neighbouring Bulgaria.² One of the questions concerns fundamental rights, the right to self-determination and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. The second question relates to the frequent blocking practice faced by candidate countries, pursued by their neighbouring EU Member States. This is the third obstruction that the Balkan country has faced following those previously initiated by Greece and France.³ If, by any chance, these practices remain in the enlargement debate for a long time, then it could send a message that a blockade can be profitable, which, instead of building good-neighbourly relations, further alienates citizens from the EU.⁴ Should the language issue imposed by neighbouring Bulgaria be a barrier to North Macedonia’s membership in FRONTEX, which violates the common security approach of the Balkans as a gateway to Europe?⁵

A change in the EU discourse towards the citizens of candidate countries would contribute to their better understanding of the EU integration process, and conversely to the EU better understanding of the internal barriers standing on the road to reforms.

While waiting for a resolution to the question of North Macedonia’s accession to the EU, the support of the citizens has been declining, although a positive attitude towards European integration continues to dominate with 68% acceptance rate.

Macedonian citizens are aware of the current situation within the European Union. The Union has been facing the multi-sectoral consequences of the pandemic crisis (health,

¹ *Politico* interview with Deputy Prime Minister N. Dimitrov, “Tongue-tied: Bulgaria’s language gripe blocks North Macedonia’s EU path”, 8 December 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-north-macedonia-eu-accession-talks-language-dispute/>.

² Marta Szpala, Mateusz Seroka, “Bulgaria blocks accession negotiations with North Macedonia”, Center for European Studies, 14 December 2020, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-12-14/bulgaria-blocks-accession-negotiations-north-macedonia>.

³ *Euronews* with AP, “Bulgaria’s block on North Macedonia’s bid to join EU ‘massively endangers Europe’s security’”, 08 December 2020, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/12/08/bulgaria-s-block-on-north-macedonia-s-bid-to-join-eu-massively-endangers-europe-s-security>.

⁴ Goran Buldioski and Vessela Tcherneva, “How to advance a European solution to Bulgaria’s and North Macedonia’s dispute”, European Council for Foreign Relations, 2 December 2020, available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-to-advance-a-european-solution-to-bulgarias-and-north-macedonias-dispute/>.

⁵ *European Western Balkans*, “Bulgaria blocks North Macedonia Frontex agreement”, 22 October 2020, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/22/bulgaria-blocks-north-macedonia-frontex-agreement/>.

economic, social), the post-Brexit changes and the need for restructuring and symbolic strengthening, as well as many other challenges generated by global processes. Most of these challenges also pose a threat to the small countries of the Region. The Conference on the Future of Europe, or the project for the democratization of the *Great European Project*, can be held in candidate countries, potentially in a different format. A change in the EU discourse towards the citizens of candidate countries would contribute to their better understanding of the EU integration process, and conversely to the EU better understanding of the internal barriers standing on the road to reforms.

“The road to Europe is a marathon where the finish line is constantly being moved forward, a marathon in which every obstacle is slowing us down and every encouragement is accelerating us forward.”

The European Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia, for the past four years, has been implementing the National Convention for the European Union, a platform for conducting a broad dialog on issues related to the European integration of the country. Over 3 000 stakeholders have so far participated in the debates, including representatives of institutions, civil society, academia and other stakeholders. The experience gained through the Convention⁶ brought us closer to the general consensus among the general public, which may be best summarized by the following statement: “The road to Europe is a marathon where the finish line is constantly being moved forward, a marathon in which every obstacle is slowing us down and every encouragement is accelerating us forward.”

⁶ For further details regarding the National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia, please visit: <https://nkeu.mk/>.

North Macedonia's Elusive European Future

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In terms of the relations between the European Union and North Macedonia, the bilateral issue with Bulgaria seems to be of the highest importance and a challenge to opening membership negotiations.¹ The European leadership, after adopting the new methodology and removing the French veto, seemed to be caught by surprise by the disagreement of our Eastern neighbour to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. So far, all of the efforts to convince Bulgarian leadership to postpone the resolution to this issue relating to identity, language, and history have proven unsuccessful. The EU seems to be unable to successfully intervene in this issue, so it remains to the two affected countries to try and solve it themselves. A quick resolution to this dispute would mean potential concessions on the side of Macedonian leadership, which could further increase political cynicism and Euroscepticism among Macedonian citizens.

Besides this, the conclusions of the EU-Western Balkans summit in Slovenia are far from encouraging, hinting that, despite a potential resolution of the North Macedonia-Bulgaria dispute, there might be new internal debates on enlargement. The outcome of these debates might not be favourable to the Western Balkans, thus leaving the region vulnerable to influence from international illiberal actors. This seems to be the second biggest challenge of

¹ Aleksandar Brezar, "Could North Macedonia be the graveyard of the EU's ideals?", *Euronews*, 20 July 2020, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/07/20/could-north-macedonia-be-the-graveyard-of-the-eu-s-ideals>.

the EU - how, without a clear perspective for commitment and a foreseeable calendar for enlargement, can they maintain the high support for the EU among Western Balkans' citizens?

The EU should be more sincere with the region, and clearly invest more in upholding European values, since they are becoming more and more endangered.

Internationally, North Macedonia has shown that it can contribute greatly to the European project, considering the significant progress it has achieved with inter-ethnic relations and the promotion of rights of non-majority communities, as well as the willingness to resolve difficult questions in the region, as seen from the Agreement with Greece. In this regard, North Macedonia can be a valuable contributor to resolving other disputes in the region, especially in terms of sharing experiences of internal dynamics in view of reaching consensus. Other challenges, however, remain, such as the persistent high level of corruption, remnants of state capture and the need to further build institutional and human capacities for the accession process.

In general, the situation leaves little hope for a quick opening of negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania, or significant progress in the integration processes of the other Western Balkan countries. The EU should be more sincere with the region, and clearly invest more in upholding European values, since they are becoming more and more endangered. In the next 10 years, I expect that new forms of association between the EU and Western Balkans will be developed - ones that do not guarantee full membership. In this sense, in the future the notion of "European perspective" should be redefined, to have a broader meaning than EU membership. The common regional market, planned within the Berlin Process, as well as the Open Balkans Initiative, seem to be movements in this direction: regional cooperation coupled with closer, multifaceted integration within EU structures, albeit without the complete rights and benefits of full membership.

EU-North Macedonia Relations: Showcase on Failures of the Integration Process

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The relations between the EU and North Macedonia are burdened by 16 years of failed progress of integration. Once a front-runner, now a laggard, North Macedonia ranks as one of the most unsuccessful European integration processes since the EU initiated its enlargement plan.

In the first years, the progress was slow and largely related to the state of Macedonian affairs, including lack of reform, failure to show progress in key areas, name issue and so forth. Recently, the delayed and vetoed opening of accession talks for three years in a row, even after the name issue was removed as an obstacle to the Macedonian EU integration, is perceived as an unprincipled and an unfair approach, especially in correlation to the overall repetitive positive assessment on our progress and the major concessions related to the Prespa Agreement. The implications of the latter still do and will continue to affect us, notably, since a large extent of the population rejects it, and a sizeable segment of the political elites keeps questioning it. Yet, most significantly, the Prespa Agreement was considered and promoted as a trade-off for EU accession, and was openly backed by the Union itself.

Despite many internal and external obstacles, North Macedonia has been enthusiastically working on the Europeanization project.

The EU's approach towards North Macedonia in the past few years has contributed to the increase of Euroscepticism, lately linked to the perception that the EU lacks the capacity to act responsibly and is practically helpless to counter severe damage to its Western Balkan policies by one of its member states. The negative attitudes emanates also from an overall decrease of the support for the EU project as result of past complexities - primarily related to identity politics, but also including the enlargement fatigue, significant brain drain and so forth.

North Macedonia is a clear example that the EU has the tools to promote democracy and rule of law and is able to bring change to its neighbourhood.

Despite many internal and external obstacles, North Macedonia has been enthusiastically working on the Europeanization project. The country has shown readiness and capacity to compromise, to initiate tough reforms, to continuously support the idea of Europe at home and to promote European values in the region, by attempting to close issues and disputes with its neighbours. Additionally, North Macedonia has continuously reaffirmed its dedication and preparedness to start accession talks, and the attestation of its progress has been repeatedly acknowledged by the EU.

North Macedonia is amply oriented and reliant on the EU as a key international partner, along with the US, since both play exceedingly large roles in the domestic political arena. The EU is the largest donor and leading supporter of democratic change and economic reform, largest trade partner and foremost contributor of assistance for recovery.

North Macedonia is a clear example that the EU has the tools to promote democracy and rule of law and is able to bring change to its neighbourhood (ending the political crisis and state capture, the Przino agreements, etc.).

Only a step forward to accession can assist the bettering of democratic health and shifting the discourse away from stabilitocracy¹ as dominant trait and part of many political agendas in the region. Lack of positive response in near future, will most probably open the door for any and every possible scenario. After 18 years since the EU made its original promise of membership to the Western Balkan countries at the Thessaloniki Summit, one should underline that the maturity of the policy is aged enough to be implemented. Further stalling of the process will inevitably affect the EU as well, by decreasing its leverage and eventually slowing or stopping the Europeanization of the Western Balkans, which is an unwelcomed scenario for all.

¹ Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies", *Horizons*, No. 10, 2018, pp. 176-185, available at: <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2018-issue-no-10/the-rise-and-fall-of-balkan-stabilitocracies>.

Keeping Enlargement on the Agenda of the Future of Europe

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The European Union is facing today numerous internal and external challenges and the Western Balkans is just one of them. However, the region can be already considered a part of the EU's geographical space, being deeply integrated through trade, investment and technology transfer, and having already millions of its citizens who emigrated to the EU Member States. The Western Balkans are an especially sensitive and fragile part of the continent, which did not find sound post-war solutions for security, stability and prosperity. Having in mind the growing influence of third actors, who have consolidated their positions in the region through increasing investments, political and military connections and rising soft power, during the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, there has been an impression that the EU is losing the region, being overwhelmed by its own unresolved problems and pulling together the new ones.

As the biggest country in the Western Balkans, with the strongest economy and military capacities, Serbia has a decisive role in determining further political and economic developments in the region and the forms of integration into the EU. By strengthening the links with third partners, Serbia risks to increase the distance with the EU. Having, on the other side, the indecisive EU turning the enlargement into a “moving target”, without a clear road map and timeframe, makes inevitable the option for third partners, in particular in making economy more resilient. The Kosovo issue, with the stalemate of the Brussels Dialogue, pushes Serbia politically towards global powers and other states which, at the moment, show the support that Belgrade needs.

As the biggest country in the Western Balkans, with the strongest economy and military capacities, Serbia has a decisive role in determining further political and economic developments in the region and the forms of integration into the EU.

In this context, we turn to the European Union's main priorities regarding the relations with Serbia and how they are to be addressed more effectively. Although not explicitly, the EU offers to Serbia and to the Western Balkans a faster sectoral and functional integration, connecting them directly or by strengthening the regional cooperation (the Western Balkan

Common Regional Market) to the European sectoral policies, programmes and funds. This policy has evolved through the Berlin Process, and was integrated into the enlargement agenda, the Connectivity Agenda, Digital Agenda, Green Agenda and finally Innovation Agenda, supported by the Common Regional Market, and a number of important regional organisations (the Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, Energy Community, Transport Community, etc.), designated to implement the sectoral action plans. This was a pragmatic choice and an effective policy with concrete results, such as green corridors agreed in only one month during the pandemic, the elimination of roaming charges in the region, regionally agreed development of key infrastructure in transport, energy and digital areas, etc., which will be further supported by the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

There is a necessity to work hard, together with the EU, to improve communication towards Serbian citizens and promote the European project clearly and unambiguously.

To make all of that operational according to the EU standards, rules and regulations, the EU explicitly demands from Serbia clear progress in the rule of law, free judiciary, good governance, free media, fighting corruption and organized crime, and in general, requires the strengthening of democracy and preventing growing authoritarian practices.

Having in mind the existing internal political constellation, Serbia has certain capacities for joining the EU efforts in several areas in advancing the European project in the region. Serbia has undertaken reforms and related policy measures regarding better connectivity in the region and with the EU, and initiated increased investments in environment protection and fighting climate change. In the area of health and fighting the pandemic, the measures oscillated sharply from the Chinese type lockdown at the beginning, to the more or less Swedish model currently, with considerable investments in health infrastructure. Serbia has started to take advantage from the nearshoring wave provoked by the pandemic, getting even more integrated into the European value chains. Digital transformation has evolved with visible growth of IT and AI community, but in an insufficiently supportive environment. The investments and reforms in education, research, innovation and culture are insufficient, but may be encouraged by the new Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans.

In all mentioned areas Serbia explicitly or implicitly joined the EU ambitions for the better Future of Europe. Nevertheless, in the area of strengthening democracy, transparency, rule of law, freedom of press, fundamental rights and freedoms, and fighting corruption and organized crime the backsliding prevails. Additionally, good neighbourly relations and alignment with the EU foreign and security policy are lagging behind or progress in a very selective manner.

Above all, there is a necessity to work hard, together with the EU, to improve communication towards Serbian citizens and promote the European project clearly and unambiguously. In that respect, greater public involvement into the debate on the Future of Europe could contribute considerably.

A Template for Staged Accession to the EU¹

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Stability, peace, and economic development in the Western Balkans are the main objectives of the European Union's policy towards the region,² with future membership as the final goal. However, the enlargement stalemate has been the elephant in the room in recent years. Despite the adoption of the revised enlargement methodology in 2020, the Western Balkans' accession to the EU is not progressing. This determined CEP Belgrade, in partnership with CEPS Brussels and its regional partners from the Think for Europe Network, to address this issue and propose a model of membership in four stages. The aim of this proposal is to introduce a new dynamic into the enlargement process and simultaneously render the EU accession process more politically viable for the region's leaderships. The logic behind the proposed model is to break the binary concept of 'in' or 'out', and enable future member states to socialise and familiarise themselves with the participation in EU institutions early on in the accession process. This proposal can be seen as an original contribution of the Western Balkans towards the challenge of enlargement impasse.

The aim of this proposal is to introduce a new dynamic into the enlargement process and simultaneously render the EU accession process more politically viable for the region's leaderships.

¹ This article is a summary of the original report *A Template for Staged Accession to the EU* by Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans and Strahinja Subotić, published in October 2021, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf>.

² European Parliament, *Factsheet on the EU-Western Balkans relations*, June 2021, available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>.

In the first stage - *Initial accession*, acceding states would have either policy dialogue or observer status in the EU institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council and the European Council).³ Moreover, they would be eligible to receive up to 50% of the EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESI) to which they would be entitled as conventional member states. The requirements for entering Stage I would be: the acceptance of the application for membership of the given state (Article 49 TEU); the existence of an association agreement for the respective state, and at least *moderate* (3) ratings⁴ for policy cluster averages.

In the second stage - *Intermediate Accession*, more substantial participation of acceding states is envisaged, for instance speaking rights in Council and Parliament, but without voting rights, and eligibility for receiving 75% of the funding level for conventional membership. The main condition for entering Stage II would be for a state to have a mix of *moderate* (3) to *good* (4) ratings.

In the third stage - *New Member State*, full participation in the institutions with voting rights will be enabled, subject to exclusion from veto power in the Council and from having a member of the Commission. ESI funding would reach 100% of the conventional membership level and it would be possible to accede to the Schengen treaty and the European Monetary Union (EMU). In legal terms, for a country to move to Stage III, the signing and ratification of an Accession Treaty would be necessary, since this stage envisions voting rights in all policies where qualified majority voting (QMV) rule is used, as well as EU citizenship for the populations of the states entering this phase. In the case of simultaneous internal reform of the EU with the extension of the QMV rule, coupled with the changes to the composition of Commission, Stage III would effectively mean full membership in the EU.

The main advantage of such a proposal is that it brings membership benefits for the acceding countries and their citizens already during the accession process.

The fourth stage - *Conventional membership*, foresees full participation and equal rights with all current member states. The greatest concern among the current member states is the veto power of acceding countries. Therefore, Stage IV can be perceived only as a “reserve” for applicant states, considering that, by the time new member states reach Stage IV, the QMV system might be introduced for areas now ruled by the unanimity principle, as well as a rotation system for European Commissioners. With such a turn of events, Stage III would automatically mean the end of the accession process.

³ Participation in other EU institutions such as the Court of Justice of the EU, Comitology, European Court of Auditors, Agencies, and Consultative bodies is envisaged and discussed in more detail in the original paper.

⁴ There is a genuine need to make the yearly progress reports of the European Commission more transparent and systematically defined. More evidence-based and quantifiable progress reports would be expressed from 0 to 5, depending on the progress of reforms and *acquis* implementation. Numerical values would designate no implementation (0), some (1-2), moderate (3) and good implementation (4-5) of the EU *acquis*.

The main advantage of such a proposal is that it brings membership benefits for the acceding countries and their citizens already during the accession process, and progressively increases those benefits with the advancement towards membership, which is not the case at present. Additionally, not only would the implementation of this model break the deadlock, but it would accelerate the process of enlargement and enable Western Balkan candidates to sign accession treaties earlier than it would be the case in the current accession approach.

The Perspective on the Future of Europe as seen from the Republic of Serbia

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The Republic of Serbia has been a candidate country for membership in the EU since 2012. The main goal of the EU in the process of integrating the Republic of Serbia was to ensure the political, economic and security stability in the wider region of the Western Balkans. Membership in the EU was considered a powerful lever for Serbian political elite to conduct reforms that were necessary to accomplish these priorities, but, over time, these priorities transformed due to internal and external challenges.

At the internal level of the EU, the challenges are caused by the doubts among key member states regarding the right time for enlargement in relation with EU internal reforms, which would enable it to accommodate more easily new member states. External challenges are visible in the ever more obvious influence of other powers, such as Turkey, Russia and China, over Serbian political and social landscape. While the EU was preoccupied with the global economic crisis, the waves of irregular migration over the Balkan route and internal disagreements over fundamental values (such as the cases of Poland and Hungary primarily), these powers have, in a way, infiltrated the region with offers of financial, political and cultural opportunities for Serbian government and society, which do not always align with the EU values and interests. These opportunities enable the Serbian government to diversify its foreign policy priorities, and lower the attraction of the EU integration for an ordinary citizen.

Serbia guarantees the stability of the region and indirectly of the EU itself, through its control of illegal activities on the Balkan route, such as drug and migrant trafficking.

Regardless of these challenges, the Republic of Serbia might still provide beneficial contributions towards advancing the European project in the region. Its economy is deeply integrated with the EU's internal market, with the majority of foreign investment being

received from the EU member states, and the majority of international trade being conducted with the EU. Serbia still offers a pool of well educated, talented population that might attract future investment and human capital exchange.

This finalization of the long-overdue process would secure the EU's geographical backyard of the Western Balkans from possible malign influence of other foreign powers, and prevent negative internal dynamics of the region that might serve as causes of another conflict.

Serbia guarantees the stability of the region and indirectly of the EU itself, through its control of illegal activities on the Balkan route, such as drug and migrant trafficking. Its relationship with other neighbours of the Western Balkan region and some EU member states, such as Croatia, is key for preserving wider peace and security in this part of Europe. Its population is culturally a part of Europe and feels itself as a nation sharing a common European identity.

All these reasons point to the need of the EU to continue with the integration process of the Republic of Serbia, in order to finally complete the enlargement in this part of Europe. This finalization of the long-overdue process would secure the EU's geographical backyard of the Western Balkans from possible malign influence of other foreign powers, and prevent negative internal dynamics of the region that might serve as causes of another conflict, such as the one that happened during the disintegration of former Yugoslavia.

The Future of Turkey-EU Relations: Issue based Rather than a Full-scale Collaboration

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The EU-Turkey relations have long been in a deadlock and indeed, have recently been going through a period of tension. It appears that Turkey's perceived aggressive approach and militarization of its foreign policy since the early 2010s, especially in the Mediterranean region, allows the EU and its member states to put the blame on Turkey. However, the EU approach remains as problematic as Turkey's, and perhaps the main challenge is to establish a sustained framework for dialogue to overcome the conflictual and confrontational nature of relations that has been building up. In this respect, the debate on the Future of Europe offers a possibility to reconsider the future of Turkey-EU relations and indeed, the future orientation of Turkey itself.

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Several challenges remain between Turkey and the EU, and some of them present insurmountable differences, as in the cases of democracy and human rights, and the Cyprus problem. These challenges have become more and more entangled with the regional/global dynamics and the struggle for power, further exacerbating the problematic relations. The EU presented a fragmented and unsuccessful approach in addressing geopolitical concerns, especially in the common neighbourhood that it shares with Turkey.¹ In addition, problems of

¹ The EU was criticized for presenting weakness and a lack of vision by İbrahim Kalın, Turkey's Presidential Spokesman: see Erbil Başay, "EU lacks vision to shape relations with Turkey: Turkish official", *Anadolu Agency*,

commitment to rule of law and democratic values among the EU members, exacerbated by the Polish and Hungarian cases, brings forward questions on EU's international role as well.² The inability of the EU to act effectively and efficiently creates not only problems of credibility but also legitimacy with respect to its role as a norm setter and an influential global actor. In fact, people from various standpoints in Turkey argue that the debate should also focus on institutional aspects, to enable a more effective decision-making process, and one that will prevent certain member states from blocking relations with Turkey with the intention of furthering their national interest.³

Turkey perceives itself as a key country and expects the EU to follow a more inclusive approach with respect to Turkey, by creating platforms for common discussion and projects at the regional level.

Turkey perceives itself as a key country and expects the EU to follow a more inclusive approach with respect to Turkey, by creating platforms for common discussion and projects at the regional level. The restart of high-level dialogue meetings, after more than two years of suspension, due to the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, is a positive sign in furthering priorities of both sides and building on areas of mutual interest. Turkey has the potential to contribute towards advancing the European project on migration and security, prioritised by both sides, as well as on energy issues, and climate change, since Turkey has recently ratified the Paris Agreement. The EU's stance on these challenges has the potential to influence not only Europe itself, but its neighbourhood as well. Indeed, rethinking Turkey-EU relations through such a prism presents a possibility to transform the conflictual relations between the two, as well as an opportunity to reconsider Turkey's foreign policy towards the neighbourhood. Assessing opportunities of mutual interest and cooperation, where the EU can act as a catalyser, can establish a basis for transforming regional conflicts and confrontational relations, such as the case regarding the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the East Mediterranean region.

3 July 2021, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-lacks-vision-to-shape-relations-with-turkey-turkish-official/2293537#>.

² Nilgün Arısan-Eralp, Sanem Baykal, and Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe, "Biz Bu Filmi Görmüştük: AB'nin Geleceği Yine Yeniden Tartışılıyor! (We have seen this movie before: The EU's Future is being debated, yet again!)" Women in Foreign Policy, *DPK Notları*, 12/2020, June 2020.

³ See the webinar series organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Economic Development Foundation - İKV on "The Future of Europe and Turkey", available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U49PgTLoNdQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdH8z89BAkk>.

The Future of the EU from Turkey's Perspective: Social Aspects

Ayşe İdil Aybars

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The social dimensions that entail significant implications for the future of the EU, in particular the refugee crisis, the Covid-19 crisis, and challenges concerning gender equality, are overlooked in many accounts and constitute important directions for determining its relations with Turkey. While official accounts underline the amelioration of these relations over the course of the last year, there are still important challenges ahead, where a more determined EU response is awaited, and Turkey needs to contribute by expressing a renewed and stronger commitment to the EU membership process.

The extension of this humanitarian support programme, as well as the fulfilment of the conditions agreed upon by both parties since 2016, will constitute an important priority of EU-Turkey relations in the upcoming period.

The humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis currently forms a crucial pillar of EU-Turkey relations, since the two have forged a strong collaboration to support the livelihood of refugees and to enhance their cohesion with the host communities. At the moment, Turkey is the country hosting 4 million refugees, the largest number of refugees in the world. The EU has deployed a significant budget for this purpose, including the recent Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), the largest humanitarian programme in the EU's history designed as a multi-purpose cash assistance for specific target groups, in order to cover their essential needs like food, medicine, rent, bills, rent, etc. The extension of this humanitarian support programme, as well as the fulfilment of the conditions agreed upon by both parties since 2016, will constitute an important priority of EU-Turkey relations in the upcoming period.

More collaboration would be needed to address the social, economic, cultural and political tensions surrounding the refugee crisis for both sides.

Another important issue concerns the cooperation between Turkey and the EU within the framework of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby the EU has played a significant role in mitigating the economic and social impact through financial and socio-economic support. However, specific measures should be implemented to address these effects on the most vulnerable groups of the society, including refugees, and Turkey is expecting the EU to take further steps in this direction.

Specific measures should be implemented to address these effects on the most vulnerable groups of the society, including refugees, and Turkey is expecting the EU to take further steps in this direction.

Also, a more determined integration of the country into the EU's plans for digital transformation and transition to green economy would provide significant grounds to provide long-term benefits for both parties' economies and to mitigate the harsh societal impact of the pandemic.

A further point concerns Turkey's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, which is the first international legally binding document in the fight against violence against women and domestic violence. The EU's strong commitment to gender equality had resulted in significant progress at least in the early period of Turkey's accession process. This progress has now been stalled or even started to move backwards due to controversial developments in Turkish domestic politics. The EU could still provide an anchor by advocating for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality, and deploy its soft power through its various instruments and mechanisms for this purpose.

The EU has been facing a series of economic, political and social challenges over the course of the last years, which will be shaping its direction in the future, where Turkey, in all the aspects outlined above, will play a crucial part. From Turkey's side, there is a need for more solidarity with and contribution to the EU on these areas, and a renewed commitment on membership on the part of the EU. These aspects would facilitate the management of these crises and would open a new page in the EU-Turkey relations.

Impact of Increasing Geostrategic Concerns on Europe and Relations with Turkey

Çiğdem Üstün

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Both the European Union and Turkey have been facing serious challenges in their neighbourhood in the last decade. Starting with the Arab uprisings, the unrest in the southern neighbourhood amplified the threats emanating from the region, as Russian annexation of Crimea changed the borders and disrupted the status quo in the north. While the social unrest and military activities in almost all of the neighbouring countries increased cautiousness both in Turkey and the EU, their bilateral relations were severely affected.

After the attempted coup in 2016 in Turkey, Turkey blamed the EU and some of its member states for being not only late to condemn the attempt, but also supporting the organization behind it, FETÖ. Since then, on the one hand, the EU's, especially the European Parliament's, criticisms on rule of law and democratic practices increased. However, on the other hand, the major flow of migrants, mainly from Syria to Turkey and the EU, opened a new door for cooperation, which changed the nature of Turkey-EU relations. Since the 2016 "deal", the transactional character of the relations remained at the forefront, while the conditionality principle and values were downplayed.

There is an evident need to restate the significance of norms and values in the relations between the EU and Turkey as a candidate country, even if differentiation or compartmentalization is expressed frequently.

The emphasis on the strategic importance of the relations jeopardizes the norm-based relations, and turns the EU into an entity with which Turkey can only have compartmentalized and profit-driven relations in areas such as energy, migration and trade. The EU's emphasis mainly on benefits and strategic partnership disappoints even the most enthusiastic EU

supporters in the country. There is an evident need to restate the significance of norms and values in the relations between the EU and Turkey as a candidate country, even if differentiation or compartmentalization is expressed frequently.

Therefore, the solid relationship between Turkey and the EU, should be focusing on common concerns, while, at the same time, paying the most attention to democratic practices.

An institutionalized relationship, endorsing democratic rule of law, between Turkey and the EU would demonstrate the EU's capabilities to engage in a constructive dialogue, while helping to improve the image of fortress Europe. Especially after the Arab uprisings, the EU's credibility has been suffering, since strategic concerns overtook the norms and values once praised the most by the EU. In the wake of migration flows, the EU's and its member states' report card on migration has been very poor, since they were prioritizing tight border controls, protectionism, and were unable to support democratic governance, thus leading to increased Islamophobic rhetoric among not only the far-right parties, but even mainstream parties.

Therefore, the solid relationship between Turkey and the EU, should be focusing on common concerns, such as border security, energy transition, cooperation in defence and security field, as well as economic partnership, while, at the same time, paying the most attention to democratic practices. This framework would have the potential to help the EU to be perceived as a reliable partner, not only focusing on the continent's strategic concerns, but also the political, economic and social needs of the region.

European Union in Ukraine - Ensuring Transformation in a Geopolitical Place

Sergiy Gerasymchuk

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Ukraine is the place of explicit geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia. In this fight, the EU applies the economic instruments, including the DCFTA, and prioritized reforms in Ukraine, and supports it with generous economic assistance. Russia in its turn challenges Ukraine by military and hybrid means. Although Ukraine appreciates the European financial and institutional support, it also has an appetite for the security component, which the EU cannot provide so far. Additionally, the EU faces a challenging task of ensuring further transformations in Ukraine, without providing a clear accession perspective.

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Therefore one of the key challenges for the EU is preserving the path of the reforms of Ukraine, containing Russian influence in the country, and explaining to the Ukrainian population its policy of skipping security component (traumatized by the war with Russia, the Ukrainian society that has made European choice, has high expectations and an appetite for the European involvement in security issues. The EU's reluctance to engage causes certain disappointment and might affect attitude towards the EU). These tasks can be completed by granting priority status to the Association Agreement (AA) Trio countries, including Ukraine, elaborating at least soft security policies regarding the Eastern Partnership countries and the AA trio in particular, assuring further efforts aimed at containing Russia by means of maintaining and extending the sanctions against Russia, as a response to the Russian interventions and hybrid threats to the AA trio. Another growing problem, indirectly caused by an EU member-state, Germany, is the escalation risk of the energy security problems. In this regard, Kyiv expects the EU to enhance its efforts aimed at energy reforms in Ukraine,

assuring Ukraine's energy security, and expects that the EU's and German support will not be limited to the approx. 1 billion euro promised by Berlin so far.

The EU's integrational attractiveness is mostly rooted in its transformational and normative power. It has resulted in the significant success for the Central and Eastern European states, most of which proved to be success stories after accession. Nevertheless the EU's reluctance for the further enlargement, alongside with the other failures, have resulted in the shrinking of the aforementioned attractiveness. In this regard, the EU needs success stories to prove that it still remains attractive and, even without granting accession, it still has integration gravity. Assuring transformations in Ukraine, its reforms and approximation to the European norms may be an example of such gravity that the EU can convert into its strength as the geopolitical actor.

The EU's integrational attractiveness is mostly rooted in its transformational and normative power.

Moreover, Ukraine has already declared full support to the European green transformation and links its strategies and policies to the European green goals. Reaching success by Ukraine in this regard may eventually be used by the EU for further promoting the green transformation among the neighbouring nations, both to the East and to the South of the EU.

Furthermore, the success of Ukraine may indirectly affect Russia, as the example of transformations that may inspire Russian opposition and its supporters but also other Eastern Partnership states.

From the Association Agreement to the Staged Integration to the EU

Veronika Movchan

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For the EU, the priority in the relations with Ukraine is to have a stable, reliable and economically sound partner that shares the European values and contributes to European security and sustainable development. Reciprocally, the main challenge is that modern Ukraine is not entirely in line with the desired priorities. The country is one of the poorest and least energy-efficient countries in Europe, still requiring extensive reforms, particularly in judicial and law enforcement spheres and in the fight against corruption.

In 2014, Ukraine and the EU signed the Association Agreement (AA), defining the establishment of political association and the gradual economic integration of Ukraine into the EU Internal Market as longstanding goals in the relations between the parties. The Agreement envisages broad-based reform commitments of Ukraine regarding the AA political components and the lists of specific EU *acquis* that Ukraine is obliged to implement before the parties proceed with the deeper economic integration. Notably, the treaty contains the EU obligations to support and verify Ukraine's alignment efforts, thereby fostering and streamlining the reform process.

The EU-Ukraine Summit held in October 2021¹ highlighted significant achievements and challenges of the Association Agreement implementation. Ukraine progressed in regulatory and institutional alignment in many economic spheres, and further steps will require much

¹ See the *Joint statement following the 23rd EU-Ukraine Summit*, 12 October 2021, available at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilna-zayava-za-pidsumkami-23-go-samitu-ukrayina-yevropejsk-71037>.

deeper EU involvement to fine-tune the process and complete the integration². However, the most intensive efforts are needed to advance in political spheres, especially in judicial reform.

For Ukraine, advancing the European project means the EU membership a possible way forward could be a staged integration.

The establishment of the formal scoreboard for assessing Ukraine's progress in its political and economic approximation efforts, as the EU typically does for candidate countries, will be very beneficial for future relations and the advancement of the European project in Ukraine.

For Ukraine, advancing the European project means the EU membership for the country primarily. While the enlargement has been most sensitive for the EU member states, a possible way forward could be a staged integration, as suggested recently by Michael Emerson and his colleagues.³

Implementing the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) provides practical ways for advancing the European project in Ukraine. In the political sphere, it serves as an anchor for strengthening democracy and the rule of law. Furthermore, the Agreement envisages extensive legal and institutional harmonization in the economic sphere, such as accommodating the EU regulatory environment into Ukraine, increasing the EU normative power and simplifying economic links. The specific examples include the recognition of equivalence for food safety certification, the Agreement of Conformity Assessment and Acceptance for industrial products, access to the European common transit system, the mutual opening of public procurement, Ukraine's participation in multiple EU programs and agencies.

Most recently, Ukraine has been very active to participate in the EU Green Deal aiming at the climate neutrality of the continent. Despite noticeable progress, Ukraine has remained the least energy-efficient country in Europe and the top air polluter. The ambitious green transformation will benefit both Ukraine and the EU.

² See *Summary of the report "Integration within Association: dynamics of the EU-Ukraine Agreement implementation"* Fourth edition, 2021, available at: http://www.ier.com.ua/files/Projects/Integration_UA_EU/Summary_en.pdf.

³ See *A Template for Staged Accession to the EU* by Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans and Strahinja Subotić, published in October 2021, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf>.

EU-Ukraine: Towards a New Quality of Partnership

Mykhailo Pashkov

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Today, one of Brussels' key priorities in the Ukrainian direction is the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, including its update. It is clear, however, that this "pre-war" document should undergo a major modernisation and include a joint movement towards the "four freedoms" of the European single market, in addition to trade liberalisation. It is also essential to make the Agreement's Title II (Foreign and Security Policy) more specific by developing relevant annexes and action plans. In other words, the framework's declarative novelties must be filled with specific content.

Modern realities and challenges bring to the fore issues of strategic prospects, the need for a new quality of the EU-Ukraine solidarity and the partnership in the economic, political and security spheres.

But the country still has no clear European prospects providing full-fledged membership in the EU.

Ukraine literally fights for its European choice, countering Russian aggression on the European continent and covering the EU's eastern flank, which has become even more dangerous because of Belarus. Sustaining huge human and economic losses, Ukraine is forced to spend significant resources on curbing the Kremlin's expansion. But the country still has no clear European prospects providing full-fledged membership in the EU.

Officially, Brussels views Ukraine as an external partner and is reluctant to discuss its membership prospects. Reasons for that include both Ukraine's internal problems and the EU's unwillingness to deepen the conflict with Russia. One way or another, the issue of long-lasting "strategic uncertainty" is latently present on the agenda of EU-Ukraine relations and is becoming increasingly relevant. Developing a roadmap for Ukraine's EU membership should be

a logical step that would incentivise internal reforms and contribute to pro-European self-identification of Ukrainians.

In the meantime, the adoption of a new EU's Russia policy with its subsequent transformation into a clear programme of action requires a revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy to introduce a new quality of relations with partner countries opposing Russian influence, namely the Association Trio - Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

In turn, given the increase debate concerning the EU's strategic resilience and the creation of joint European armed forces in the future, Ukraine is interested in expanding its representation in EU security programmes (including PESCO) and in equal participation in the dialogue on future EU architecture.

It is no exaggeration to say that European integration and solidarity with the EU are essential components of the country's foreign policy, public narrative and worldview of the leading political parties and citizens of Ukraine alike. It should be added that the prospect of joining the EU is enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine, and is a key priority in the new foreign policy strategy adopted in August 2021.

It is no exaggeration to say that European integration and solidarity with the EU are essential components of the country's foreign policy (...)

Ukraine's successful European integration has several significant elements for promoting the European project in Eastern Europe. First, it is an effective resistance to Russia's continental expansion. Second, it is a powerful stimulus and example for other Eastern Partnership countries. Third, it is the failure of the Eurasian reintegration under the Russian scenario. And finally, a successful European Ukraine "dooms" the police state model built in present-day Russia and its satellite Belarus.

Meanwhile, it should be borne in mind that Russia-Ukraine conflict is an integral part of the Kremlin's aggressive policy on the European continent. To this end, it is vital for Ukraine to: a) maintain political and economic support from the West; b) strengthen the sanctions front against Russia; c) expand the range of countries in solidarity with Ukraine.

Partnership and solidarity are only worth something when they have common strategic goals, strong economic basis and solid protection. These are components of a new quality of solidarity that we expect from EU-Ukraine relations.

Thoughts on the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union

François Lafond

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The French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, scheduled for the first semester of 2022, will not be a usual one. Many reasons could be invoked in order to explain this presumptuous statement. First, the international context with rising tensions between the United States and China, the global pandemic still uncontrolled, with the governments' reluctance to slow down the new economic dynamism, the climate change disorders impacting all parts of the world, in addition to regional crises feeding, in particular, migrations or risky instability. The EU will need to absorb these external dynamics, maintaining a cohesive reaction of the 27 members. But every Presidency has to face world emergencies, and, since the last French Presidency in 2008, there is also a new institutional piece having a proper role in that: the President of the European Council.

In reality, because of infra-European reasons, most of the observers are curious to see how France will lead the EU vessel. If the motto of the French Presidency has already been unveiled (*"Relance, puissance, appartenance"*) [*"Recovery, power, belonging"*], the priorities and the full details are still in President Macron's kitchen, and will be detailed during his first speech in front of the European Parliament, on 19 January 2022.

The French President has been permanently voicing and promoting a stronger European Union in all the possible dimensions.

This cautious attitude is first due to the German coalition formation, which may remain a question mark for Paris until Christmas. What will be the program agreed by the social democrats, greens and liberals, and what will be the composition of the federal government? Why release in advance the French priorities and objectives for the EU, if the main EU partner still does not agree on their own national common trajectory for the forthcoming legislature?

This is a well-known evidence: the Franco-German entente is obviously not sufficient to decide for the other 25 EU members, but no European progress is ever possible without a preliminary agreement between Paris and Berlin.

Beyond that, three more specific French elements have to be mentioned, since they will shape the French Presidency dynamism. The first obvious one is the Presidential election, which will take place in April 2022 (10 and 24). President Macron will use the EU Presidency framework to also campaign for his re-election. If he waits the maximum to publicly announce his intention to run for a second and last mandate of five years, there is no doubt that this key election in the French semi-presidential system will mean partly diverting most of the attention and energy of the government, parliamentarians and media from the EU daily business. Of course the French administration (in particular the General Secretary for European Affairs-SGAE in Paris and the French permanent representation in Brussels) will do the job to make sure that committees and working groups will accomplish their tasks, and the legislative process will move forward, but for three months, the public attention and the media will not focus on the EU challenges. This domestic aspect will be reinforced by the Parliamentary elections, which will take place in June (12 and 19), and will be highly competitive and risky for President Macron, as his political party (*La République En Marche*) is still weakly structured on the ground.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is supposed to address most of the issues the Member States have been dealing with since the 1950s: what kind of Europe do we want?

The second element attracting our attention is linked to President Macron's vision for Europe. Since the inspiring and detailed speech given at the beginning of his mandate in La Sorbonne (2017), the French President has been permanently voicing and promoting a stronger European Union in all the possible dimensions. Never before a French Head of State has been so committed to strengthen the EU, in particular the European institutions (promoting a strong European Commission, and respecting the European Parliament's role), and to launch policy initiatives to make the EU stronger, meaning a "more" global actor. The tool summarizing this new French dynamism at EU level has been encapsulated in the "strategic autonomy" concept. Initially criticized as a new French arrogance, or perceived as a new way to undermine the Atlantic security umbrella, the development of the academic and think tanks debates in Europe has demonstrated the relevance of reconsidering the place and role of the European Union in a fragmented world. The pandemic and the concrete consequences on the supply chain in several crucial sectors, the American attitudes since the Asian pivot of Barack Obama, followed by Trump's self-interested Manicheism, and the Biden's Afghanistan withdrawal have given a different light to this necessary "European sovereignty" put forward by the French President.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is supposed to address most of the issues the Member States have been dealing with since the 1950s: what kind of Europe do we want? Only a common market, as the United Kingdom has been the main engine before getting out for domestic purposes, and which seems also the minimalist vision of some Eastern members of the Union? Or do we consider that we will need to continue to share elements of national sovereignties to better equip the EU to face global challenges and to ensure the ability of the newly supra-national institutions to manage these new competencies in a legitimate and efficient decision-making process? What are the areas which need to be reinforced? Do we need to change again the Treaties, considering that such process could not end before ten years, and with national ratifications unpredictable? What about the Stability and Growth Pact criteria once the pandemic is over? Can we agree on a new common migration and asylum policy as proposed by the European Commission? How to make sure the rule of law will be respected and that European norms will continue to prevail upon national laws?

The conference, which has been slow to start, is supposed to end in March 2022. This is the third uncertain element directly impacting the French Presidency of the European Union. It may have been conceived to bring some concrete proposals to reform the EU and to be discussed during the French presidential election campaign. Five years ago, Emmanuel Macron has been elected on a clear pro-European agenda and he may consider that most (not all) of his proposals have been realized. The conclusions of the conference may offer him a new set of proposals, already discussed and then filtered to be proposed to French voters, giving him once again a renewed legitimacy to continue his transformative action at the European level.

With this background in mind, the Western Balkans accession process is not considered an immediate and urgent concern in Paris, in particular if the countries in the region are not fully committed to reform themselves, for themselves. The new methodology for the EU accession process, proposed by France and then adopted by the European Council, is supposed to upgrade the enlargement policy and to boost its completion. It has been proclaimed so many times that the Western Balkan countries will become, one day, members of the European Union. President Macron has also clearly stated this objective, provided that some essential parameters are guaranteeing the proper EU functioning and decision-making process following the enlargement. The Conference on the Future of Europe is also an opportunity to discuss these aspects, updating the two well-known matrices of the EU evolution: combining deepening the integration with enlargement, in order to make the European Union the best institutional and political construction capable to shape our future according our values and way of life.

The Future of the European Union Must Be a Future Open for All that are Willing and Able

Mihai Sebe

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Today's European agenda is being dominated by the topic of the Future of Europe and the proceedings of the *Conference on the Future of Europe*.¹ As the COVID-19 pandemic unravelled both the strengths and the aspects that need to be improved in our European Union, this well timed Conference aims at providing a series of answers to the European Union's adaptation to various challenges.

If, at the end of the day, the objective is to establish “an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”,² what is to be done? An unlikely source of wisdom in the context of European Affairs comes, in this author opinion, from the lessons and words of wisdom of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. One such lesson attributed to Saint-Exupéry is that: “*A goal without a plan is just a wish*” [“*Un objectif sans plan s'appelle un vœu*”]. At the time, we have won half of the battle for our common future - we have a goal, which shows that we still have hope for a better future, as we are not content with the status quo. We need therefore to step up from the wish section to that of achievement, and for that a plan is required, and the Conference may provide just the blueprint of such a plan.

How to do that? Well if we look inwards, we can all agree that consolidating Romania's role in the EU is one way of succeeding in this endeavour. This requires a two front approach: both an active involvement in the deepening the European construction, as well as maximizing

¹ Conference on the Future of Europe, available at: <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>.

² Consolidated Versions of The Treaty on European Union and the Treaty On The Functioning of The European Union (2016/C 202/01), available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12016ME/TXT&from=EN>.

the use of all the opportunities the European Union provides for the benefit of the Romanian citizens.

“A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

We have had in 2020 a first series of reactions at the level of the Romanian Parliament with regards to the *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe*.³ They stressed the importance of “respecting the principles of democratic representativeness and legitimacy of the members of the Conference and avoiding populist approaches”⁴. Additionally, education seems to be also the new buzzword: “emphasises the importance of education, which should not be neglected in the context of the dual environmental and digital transition, the improvement of public control over the use of funding for scientific research, and the strengthening of participation in research and innovation programmes funded by the European Commission”.⁵

At the time when this material was written, the Governing Programme⁶ in place stipulated, in regards to the Conference on the Future of Europe, that a series of aspects where to be supported:

- Pursuing that the results of the reflection process on the future of Europe focus on the goal of a strong and united Union and on a pragmatic dimension in the development of European policies in the medium and long term, so that the current and future challenges can be better managed, in line with the Treaties of the Union and with the principle of subsidiarity, making full use of the European institutional and decision-making framework;
- Identifying policies in which deepening the European integration is beneficial, but also of the policies that need strengthening of the coordination at European level;
- Streamlining the functioning of the European institutional framework so that the European institutions are more democratic, more representative and more efficient, serving first and foremost the European citizens;
- Streamlining the mechanisms for direct participation of the citizens in the European decision-making process;

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe COM(2020) 27, available online at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0027>.

⁴ Opinion of the Senate of Romania, 2020 available at: <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/document/COM-2020-27/rosen>.

⁵ Opinion of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies, 2020, available at: <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/document/COM-2020-27/rocam> The full Opinion, in Romanian language only is available at: http://www.cdep.ro/eu/examinare_pck2015.fisa_examinare?eid=611.

⁶ Governing Programme 2021 - 2024, pp. 244 - 245, available at: <http://cdep.ro/pdfs/guv202111/ProgramCiuca.pdf> (in Romanian).

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- Reaffirming, including in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the importance of the principles of European unity, solidarity and cohesion enshrined in the Sibiu Declaration⁷.

In its capacity as a EU Member State, **Romania has developed a neighbourhood of interest**,⁸ which includes the Republic of Moldova, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Region.

The development of the relations with the Republic of Moldova is a priority of Romania's foreign policy, based on the communion of history, language, traditions and culture and on supporting the European aspirations of the neighbouring state.

The development of the relations with the Republic of Moldova is a priority of Romania's foreign policy, based on the communion of history, language, traditions and culture and on supporting the European aspirations of the neighbouring state. On this basis, the landmarks of this relationship are the support for the European perspective of the Republic of Moldova and an intensified bilateral cooperation.⁹

Supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic path of the Western Balkan states is one of the major priorities of the Romanian foreign policy. Romania's status as an EU and NATO member, and the vicinity of the Western Balkans render necessary a special relationship between Bucharest and those states.¹⁰ This was visible during the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 January - 30 June 2019), when we as a country reiterated the need for the European Union to be a credible partner and to respect the promises made towards the candidates and potential candidates countries, which have kept their part of the bargain.

This is a political approach that also results from the Opinions issued by the Romanian Parliament during the scrutiny process of the EU documents, as reflected for instance in the Opinions on the *Communication on Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*.¹¹ For instance, the Romanian Senate "appreciates that a balance approach between the political and technical dimension of the [enlargement] process is

⁷ *The Sibiu Declaration* (9 May 2019), available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/05/09/the-sibiu-declaration/>

⁸ *Vecinătatea de interes a României ca stat membru UE* [Neighbourhood of Interest to Romania as EU Member State] (2021), Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/taxonomy/term/335/1> (in Romanian language only)

⁹ *The Republic of Moldova*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2110>

¹⁰ *Western Balkans*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2185>

¹¹ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS *Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans* COM/2020/57 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0057&qid=1637487284314>

needed. The progress of the candidates and the advancement to the next stages must continue to be determined by the fulfilment of the objective and clear criteria”.¹² Moreover the Romanian Chamber of Deputies “supports the strengthening of the accession process and the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries” and “underlines Romania’s ability to support the EU’s enlargement process in the Western Balkans”.¹³

The *strategic importance of the Black Sea* is reflected in the relation that Romania has with the riparian countries, as Romania tries to consolidate a stable, democratic and prosperous region in the Eastern proximity, by connecting the Black Sea area to European and Euro-Atlantic values and cooperation processes.¹⁴

This is in line with the Romanian Parliament Opinions on the Eastern Partnership and its future beyond 2020 as it results from the *Communication Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*.¹⁵ The Romanian Chamber of Deputies “supports the Eastern Partnership, as a strategic and ambitious partnership, based on common values and norms, on mutual interests and engagements and on shared responsibility”.¹⁶

Romania tries to consolidate a stable, democratic and prosperous region in the Eastern proximity, by connecting the Black Sea area to European and Euro-Atlantic values and cooperation processes.

In relation with Georgia, Romania has asserted itself as a strong supporter of the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country. Romania was the first EU Member State to ratify the Association Agreement between EU and Georgia (the Agreement entered into force on 1 July 2016), which includes a component regarding the creation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, leading new and increased opportunities for the economy of Georgia¹⁷.

As an EU and NATO member state, Romania’s main objective regarding Ukraine is to maintain its European perspective, as a key element to consolidate the regional stability, while trying to develop the bilateral dialogue, in accordance with the principle of good neighbourhood¹⁸.

¹² Opinion of the Senate of Romania, 2020, available at: <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/document/COM-2020-0057/rosen>.

¹³ Opinion of the Chamber of Deputies, 2020, available at: <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/document/COM-2020-0057/rocam> The full Opinion in Romanian language is available at: http://www.cdep.ro/eu/examinare_pck2015.fisa_examinare?eid=613.

¹⁴ *The Black Sea Region*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2183>

¹⁵ Communication Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all, SWD(2020) 56 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020JC0007&qid=1637490206468>.

¹⁶ Opinion of the Chamber of Deputies, in Romanian, available at: http://www.cdep.ro/eu/examinare_pck2015.fisa_examinare?eid=619.

¹⁷ *South Caucasus*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2108>.

¹⁸ *Ukraine*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2106>.

With Turkey we have a strong Strategic Partnership, signed in 2011, which is based on the strong political dialogue and common interests in the region.¹⁹ During the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 January - 30 June 2019), we succeeded in resuming, after 4 years, the meetings of the Association Council with Turkey (Brussels, 15 March 2019).²⁰

Summarising, we can say that Romania has a constant, substantial political dialogue and a great potential for bilateral cooperation that can be further developed. The strong Romanian presence in many of these countries can only serve as a bridge for further dialogue.

Romania supports an “open-doors” policy towards the states that show they have the will and the capacity to fulfil the criteria required for joining the EU.

These elements are in line with the main vectors of Romania’s action within the EU, which aim at strengthening the European project, cohesion and unity between the member states²¹. For that, one key aspect that is being constantly promoted is the EU enlargement “as Romania supports an “open-doors” policy towards the states that show they have the will and the capacity to fulfil the criteria required for joining the EU”.²²

It seems to exist a consensus on the fact that “a clear European perspective of the candidate countries and potential candidates has a strategic value and continues to exert a transformative effect and to be an anchor of stability and security in South-Eastern Europe. Romania supports the principle of an individual evaluation - based on its own merits, respecting the existing criteria for advancing the European path of the partners in the region”.²³

At the end of the day we are all facing an open road ahead of us with similar challenges and opportunities. Yet our diversity and shared past can help us develop a common future under the European Union framework.

¹⁹ *Parteneriatul Strategic între România și Republica Turcia* [The Strategic Partnership between Romania and Turkey] (2021), Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/node/15224> (in Romanian language only).

²⁰ *Results of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union*, January-June 2019, available at: <https://www.romania2019.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Brosura-200x210-bilant-ENG.pdf>.

²¹ *Priorități ale României în UE* [Priorities of Romania in the EU] (2021), Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/node/1579> (in Romanian).

²² *EU enlargement*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2057>

²³ *Politica de extindere a UE* [EU Enlargement], Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <http://www.mae.ro/node/1530> (in Romanian).

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