

EU Enlargement Policy Meets Eastern Partnership: A Cause for Concern?

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Abstract

The authors analyze a growing tendency of the EU institutions to treat the membership candidates and eastern partners through similar political, legal-bureaucratic, and other means rather than separating them and argue that such “clustering” is primarily damaging to the Western Balkans (WB). The authors observe two strategic processes: the political marginalization of the enlargement domain, combined with the increasing geopolitical relevance of the eastern neighborhood, which might further sideline the WB for two reasons. Firstly, the geopolitical rivalry with Russia in the eastern neighborhood diverts EU attention to that region. Secondly, as a politically and economically associated region, WB is heavily dependent on the EU, which is unlikely to change considering its small size and enclaved territorial position within the EU, despite the rising Euroscepticism on both sides. The authors argue that geopolitical urgency to engage in the eastern neighborhood is likely to further divert attention from the growingly peripheral WB, whose membership perspective appears to be increasingly vague and uncertain.

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A. Introduction

In the early 2000s, the European Union (EU) enlargement domain appeared to be the most comprehensive policy aimed at establishing a (politically) united continent.¹ During their “return to Europe”, numerous Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were successfully undertaking their democratization reforms, which also demonstrated the Union’s strategic approach.² The Western Balkan (WB) countries were also included in the enlargement agenda, setting in motion their own Europeanization processes, albeit at a slower pace and burdened with numerous challenges.³ Aware of its growing normative (and other) power, the EU also formulated a new platform – the European neighborhood policy (ENP), to be applied to a number of countries - from the post-Soviet European nations to North Africa, much to the dissatisfaction of countries such as Ukraine, which has always sought EU membership.⁴ Meanwhile, a systemic EU economic and financial crisis had protracted since 2008 over several years, prompting demands for reforms, exacerbated by the migrant crisis, the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine, and Brexit, resulting in the marginalization of the WB enlargement agenda. However, while only Croatia managed to conclude membership negotiations (2011), the confrontation between Russia and the EU led to increased geostrategic relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EP), which is a specific neighborhood area tailored for post-Soviet Europe. Comp to the unusually slow developments in the enlargement domain (with only Serbia and Montenegro launching the accession negotiations during the past decade), the eastern neighborhood has become much closer, through privileged EU partnership acts with Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as through negotiations

¹ *Moravcsik, Vachudova*, National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement, Perspectives 2002, p. 21.

² *Sedelmeier*, Eastern Enlargement: Risk, Rationality, and Role-Compliance, in: Green Cowles/Smith (eds.), The State of the European Union: Risks, Reform, Resistance, and Revival, DOI:10.1093/0198297572.003.00, p. 2.

³ *Ross Smith, Marković Khaze, Kovačević*, The EU’s stability-democracy dilemma in the context of the problematic accession of the Western Balkan states, Journal of Contemporary European Studies 2021, pp. 169-170.

⁴ *Petrović*, Nastanak ukrajinske krize: od političke iluzije Evropske unije do bitke za postsovjetsku Evropu, 2019, p.10.

with Azerbaijan.⁵ The political association with both the WB and the EP has reinforced the sense of an increased alignment, or grouping, to stimulate transformative efforts in both environments, whilst postponing or not considering membership perspectives in either - which forms a wider contextual focus of this paper. More specifically, the authors argue that the EP has overcome the enlargement domain as a strategic priority due to: (1) geopolitical circumstances which surround the strategic rivalry and impaired relations with Russia and (2) the absence of WB progress which is a result of modest progress in meeting the membership criteria, coupled with the EU's reluctance towards admission). Paradoxically, the position held by the WB within the EU territory and its strong involvement in the EU's political processes contribute to the fact that it is given less priority, where membership is concerned, than the more-strategically-relevant eastern neighborhood. The authors argue that, despite the WB's acknowledged prospect of membership (as per the Thessaloniki Declaration), the credibility of accession has been compromised to such a degree that the enlargement policy is producing results that are more adequate for the EP/ENP. The reduced performance of the enlargement domain, combined with the increased relevance, goals, and activities in the EP, leads to similar outcomes, despite the differences between the two areas. Similarities include the existence of advanced political and trade agreements and the distant perspective of EU accession. The authors will first address the notion of "European perspective", and then analyze recent changes in the EU's enlargement policy. These aspects suggest that, while the EU undoubtedly aims to exert greater influence in both areas, the increasingly similar approach represents a symptom of reduced enlargement ambitions.

B. The "European perspective": a "catch-all" concept?

As the enlargement and EP dimensions have increasingly converged, the notion of "European perspective" has become a widely used term in both instances. Given the more and more distant accession date and the absence of such a commitment for the eastern

⁵ These countries have been included in Eastern Partnership since 2009 onwards. Attempts to motivate Belarusian participation in EP have been suspended following the legitimacy crisis in that country since 2020.

partners, such a situation is illustrative for comparative purposes. The authors apply both the temporal (focusing primarily on the past decade), and regional (comparing EP and WB countries) analogies, hypothesizing that the vagueness of the membership perspective reflects the EU's reluctance to deepen political integration in the case of WB, which is comparable to the Eastern Partnership, that prefers political association to integration.⁶

The neighborhood policy can be seen as a normative platform, aimed at promoting the transformative processes in the areas of rule of law, security, and stability, avoiding new dividing lines, while increasing the EU's strategic presence on its newly expanded borders.⁷ Generally speaking, the EU uses its normative power in both enlargement and ENP, to shape the neighboring regions in its own image. According to Skolimowska, Ian Manners' normative approach is centered around concepts such as liberty, the rule of law, democracy, respect for human dignity, equality, and human rights (Article 21 of TEU); these aspects amongst others are embedded into the European integration process as its legal and political norms and standards.⁸ However, as Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier noted, the prospects for renewed Europeanization of CEE countries have been hindered not only by the enlargement fatigue and absorptive capacity but also, for instance, by the high costs of adopting EU rules in the WB stemming from a lack of statehood and democratic legacy in these countries.⁹ According to the External Incentives Model (which focuses on the causal relationship between the conditionality principle and domestic change) Europeanization is promoted through rewards and sanctions, with governments facing various aspects: sizeable rewards, set conditions, credible

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/> (15/12/2021); also: *Lustigová*, The place and status of the Eastern Partnership policy in the European external relations law, in: Šišková (ed.), *From Eastern Partnership to the Association. A Legal and Political Analysis*, 2014, p. 7.

⁷ *Linkevičius*, The European Union Neighbourhood Policy towards Ukraine, *Lithuanian foreign policy review* 2008, pp. 62-63.

⁸ *Skolimowska*, The European Union as a 'Normative Power' in International Relations. Theoretical and Empirical Challenges, *Yearbook of Polish European studies* 2015, p. 116.

⁹ *Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier*, The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the external incentives model revisited, *Journal of European Public Policy* 2020, pp. 828-829.

conditionality, costs of compliance, etc.¹⁰ In addition to suffering from flawed or unrecognized membership dilemmas, WB and EP countries are also occasionally subject to inconsistent conditionality that translates into political and financial support despite the level of reform progress (which Kaca generally groups within the “wrong political calculations”).¹¹

Linkevičius, referring to Zagorski, pointed out that since the beginning of the ENP, EU-Ukraine strategic cooperation has been marked by misunderstandings stemming from different expectations, with the EU seeking a general approximation, while the Kyiv authorities have higher expectations.¹² The Ukrainian authorities have repeatedly asked to be included in the enlargement domain.¹³ The EP was tailored in response to these large political ambitions and in awareness of the excessive heterogeneity of ENP tools and scope.¹⁴ Its creation followed the 2007 enlargement round, coinciding with the crisis which disrupted the monetary, fiscal, and other EU foundations. The crisis was also reflected in the growing concern over the impact of the Eastern enlargement on the labor market, which was severely affected during the financial downturn, thereby fueling Euroscepticism.¹⁵ The appetite for WB enlargement has been additionally affected by concerns over the EU’s absorptive capacity and the potential instabilities posed by any new accession.

Meanwhile, within the European Commission, the ENP’s status evolved from an external foreign affairs portfolio to a trade domain before being merged with the enlargement domain in 2010. In the WB, only Croatia - which was in the middle of the accession negotiations when the financial crisis escalated - concluded them in 2011, following

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 815.

¹¹ *Kaca*, Geopolitics and EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Partnership: Lessons learned, in: Deen, Zweers, van Loon (eds.), *The Eastern Partnership - Three dilemmas in a time of troubles*, Clingendael Report 2021, p. 23.

¹² *Linkevičius*, (fn. 8), p. 81.

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/5n87cs3v> (03/01/2022).

¹⁴ Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit 8435/09 of 7 May 2009, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ *Zahn*, European enlargement and the economic crisis: impact and lasting effects, ETUI 2013, p. 21.

the refocusing of the process on the judiciary and fundamental rights (chapter 23) and justice, freedom and security (chapter 24).¹⁶ Croatia not only negotiated the longest compared to other members but was subjected to the most detailed conditions, which focused on the judiciary, fundamental rights, corruption, and the rule of law.¹⁷ These changes severely affected the pace of accession negotiations with Montenegro (ongoing since 2012) and Serbia (since 2014), which remain the only candidates negotiating (and at an all-time slow pace, with only some of 35 negotiating chapters closed). Nevertheless, strategic acts such as the Brdo Declaration (2021) still refer to the WB's "European perspective", while failing to mention the fundamental notions like "membership" and/or "accession".¹⁸ The EU's reluctance to include the WB in the foreseeable future also contributed to a greater public affinity for other international actors (especially since the beginning of the pandemic), with the Union being perceived as the preferred external partner only in the demographically-minuscule Montenegro.¹⁹ In Serbia, another EU-frontrunner-candidate, Euroscepticism has increased sharply since the opening of accession negotiations, which can be attributed to (1) reduced expectations of the economic benefits of accession and (2) increased national attachment, including concerns over the loss of national sovereignty (both in the sense of supranational decision-making and in literal meaning – over the Kosovo* claim).²⁰

Contrastingly, the EP has been developing dynamically. Based on the logic of the enlargement policy, it promoted convergence with EU norms and standards, by providing financial assistance and monitoring reform progress; partners generally agreed to this hierarchical relationship to safeguard ties with the EU, but the lack of membership option, inconsistent conditionality, perception of sunk costs and selective

¹⁶ *Nozar*, *The 100% Union: The rise of Chapters 23 and 24*, Clingendael 2012, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ *Šelo Šabić*, (Ir)relevance of Croatian Experience for Further EU Enlargement, *Insight Turkey* 2019, p. 176.

¹⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf> (06/10/2021).

¹⁹ *Tzifakis et al.*, Geopolitically Irrelevant in its 'inner courtyard'? *BIEPAG* 2021, p. 8.

²⁰ Stanojević, Vujić, Vujović, The causes of the rise of Euroscepticism: a survey of Serbian citizens in 2020, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2022, p. 15.

approach have challenged the process.²¹ The terminology has also evolved, from the “acceleration of political association” in the 2009 Prague Declaration, to the “European aspirations and the European choice”, for the purpose of an “ever closer relationship with the EU” in the Warsaw Declaration (2011).²² The Vilnius Declaration (2013), *inter alia*, underlined the “sovereign right of each partner” to set their own goals regarding relations with the EU.²³ This formulation was likely directed at the previous Ukrainian authorities, who were under geopolitical pressure from both Russia and the EU, which helped escalate the (still ongoing) strategic crisis. While the Vilnius act formally noted the decision of Kyiv to abstain from signing the association and the comprehensive trade agreements (AA/DCFTA, respectively), it highlighted the political aspect: the “unprecedented public support” for Ukraine’s “political association and economic integration” with the EU.²⁴ The Vilnius EP summit produced modest results, such as the initialing of the association agreements and DCFTAs with Moldova and Georgia, commending their “European aspirations/choice”.²⁵ This wording signaled concern about the situation in Ukraine. Its pivotal significance for the EP strategy prompted the EU to politically engage in the “Euromaidan” protests, in order to influence the country’s geostrategic orientation. However, the developments were further complicated, resulting in Russian involvement, the loss of several territories, and thousands of lives, not to mention the change of government and its strategic course.

Although the AA and DCFTA were ultimately signed by Ukraine, the events surrounding the geopolitical and territorial conflict in Ukraine demonstrated that the entire process – which was intended as a showcase for the EU’s transformative power – was an example of an

²¹ *Kaca*, (fn. 12), pp. 22-23.

²² Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit 8435/09 of 7 May 2009, p. 6; Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit Warsaw 14983/11 of 29-30 September 2011, p. 1.

²³ Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit Vilnius 17130/13 of 28-29 November 2013, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part OJ L 260 of 30/08/2014, p. 5.

inadequately articulated strategy and unintended consequences in the eastern neighborhood.²⁶ These aspects also signaled what Kapitonenko perceives as the Ep's "recurrent strategic dilemma" in which long-term normative requirements are often sidelined by short-term interests or political interventions of member-states.²⁷ This dichotomy between strategy, on the one hand, and the need for short-term results, on the other, is, in our view, compromising the effectiveness of both EP and enlargement domains. For example, Bulgaria's veto on membership negotiations with North Macedonia is perceived to be of ethnopolitical, rather than Euro-integration character, and to make matters worse, Albania's EU application was unjustly suspended.²⁸ Since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis, there have been changes in the ENP. To increase its "attractiveness" to neighbours and encourage local initiatives, the revised ENP established a set of agreements and instruments, decentralizing the concepts of "differentiation" and "flexibility" to better reflect the views of the partners.²⁹ Meanwhile, the Ukrainian AA envisaged a comprehensive approximation in foreign and security policies (with the aim of contributing to a peaceful environment), progressive adjustments with the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy), development of democratic institutions, rule of law, fundamental freedoms, etc.³⁰ Interestingly, these aspects largely corresponded to those outlined in the negotiation framework for EU candidate Serbia adopted by the Council in 2013 in the preliminary stages of accession talks.³¹ Somewhat surprisingly, the European Commission (EC) President candidate Jean-Claude Juncker while addressing the European Parliament in 2014, stated that it would have been "inconceivable" for Serbia or Montenegro to join the EU within five

²⁶ Kovačević, *Evropska diferencirana unija*, 2020, p. 173, referring to Olga Burluk (footnote 638) and Jolyon Howorth (footnote 639).

²⁷ [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193393/NeighbourhoodPolicyPaper\(15\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193393/NeighbourhoodPolicyPaper(15).pdf), p. 4, (07/2015).

²⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/bdhwcam7> (02/12/2020).

²⁹ <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/the-eastern-partnership-3-0-change-or-continuity/> (24/04/2020).

³⁰ OJ L 161 of 29/05/2014, p. 7.

³¹ General EU position - Ministerial meeting opening the Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of Serbia to the European Union, CONF-RS 1/14 of 21 January 2014, pp. 9-10.

years.³² While justified (considering the early phase of talks) this was interpreted as potentially damaging by some.³³

The distaste for the enlargement agenda was institutionally endorsed by the renaming of the EC portfolio to “European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations”. Not only was the ENP mentioned first (signalling its higher priority), but the focus of the enlargement domain was symbolically narrowed to the negotiating countries whose accession was regarded as “inconceivable”). While a period of increased stagnation ensued in the enlargement domain, a more flexible approach in the EP area resulted in preparations for negotiation of a partnership agreement with Azerbaijan (since 2016) and the signing of the Comprehensive and enhanced partnership act with Armenia (2017). Through these activities, the EU demonstrated a political willingness to alter its approach within the EP and enable a greater degree of differentiation.

C. The Recent Enlargement Policy Alterations

Towards the end of the Juncker EC mandate, a strategic act on the enlargement perspective and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans was adopted (2018), highlighting the necessity for a more credible and efficient process, with a focus on 2025.³⁴ Its value was two-fold. First, it recognized the need to additionally support transformative efforts in the WB (via the “Six flagships” priorities: strengthening the rule of law, closer cooperation on security and migration, support to socio-economic development, transport, and energy connectivity, digital agenda, and regional cooperation). Second, it allowed for “potential readiness” of (primarily) Montenegro and Serbia for membership by 2025, in case of fulfilling the Copenhagen and regional cooperation criteria, while also highlighting that would be “extremely ambitious”.³⁵ In line with the focus of the accession negotiations portfolio, the act conveyed a positive signal to the front-runners. As for the

³² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567 (15/07/2014).

³³ *Gateva*, European Union enlargement conditionality, 2015, p. 177.

³⁴ A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, COM (2018) 65 of 6.2.2018.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 2-15.

other WB countries, the proposed target dates were dropped due to objections of some member-states, so the focus remained on the front-runners.³⁶

On the diplomatic front, the EU brokered the Prespa Agreement which ended the decades-long Greek-Macedonian dispute; unfortunately, it failed to secure support from other members –France, followed by Bulgaria - towards the long-awaited opening of negotiations with Skopje. Since the EU coupled North Macedonia with Albania, both bids have been suspended ever since.³⁷ Paradoxically, it was Bulgaria that organized the first EU-WB summit dedicated to the region's European future since the historic Thessaloniki gathering (2003).³⁸ Although the Sofia Declaration (2018) refers to the WB as “partners” (a neighborhood-sounding-term), it appears that such wording was intended to appease those EU countries that do not recognize Prishtina's act of secession, rather than to draw analogies with the EP.³⁹ WB authorities continued to be referred to as “partners” in the Zagreb Declaration (2020) and Brdo Declaration (2021), indicating a high level of political interest in the Western Balkans despite their unambitious terminology. However, the von der Leyen Commission did preserve the portfolio name - ENP and Enlargement Negotiations, implicitly signalling that the first policy continues to take precedence over the second (in addition to the enlargement negotiation aspect, which was again highlighted as the most important policy activity). The logic of increased institutional “clustering” also manifested in merging the Serbian and Montenegrin units within the Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, to the dissatisfaction of some in Podgorica.⁴⁰ Despite its contribution to the enlargement, the Sofia Declaration should not be overestimated either. During the previous enlargement rounds, the “European conferences” with the candidates took place much more frequently - on an annual basis (which has not been the case with the

³⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/2p8erf99> (05/02/2018).

³⁷ The non-opening of accession talks with Tirana and Skopje practically leaves Serbia and Montenegro as the sole negotiating candidates. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo* are still regarded as „potential candidates“.

³⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/yckpu6pm> (14/05/2018).

³⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/4e2vu66v> 17/05/2018); <https://tinyurl.com/yc6m9nrf/> (23/04/2018).

⁴⁰ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-srbija-eu-pregovori/31618020.html> (20/12/2021).

WB until the adoption of the revised methodology).⁴¹ While the Thessaloniki Declaration clearly linked the term “European perspective” to the accession process by referring to the “EU future of the Balkans”, and the region’s “preparations for integration” and “final membership”(point 2), the Sofia Declaration did not mention these terms. However, that act did so in an implicit manner, by pointing out to the “unequivocal support for the European perspective of the WB”, with reference to the Thessaloniki Declaration. Moreover, none of the recent EU-WB declarations mentioned important terms like the “future” (in the context of accession), which reinforces the impression that the political perspective of the process is more uncertain than it initially appears to be. In contrast, the EP acts like the Brussels Declaration (2021), which acknowledges the “European aspirations and the European choice of the partners” with the perspective of deepening “political association and economic integration with the EU” (point 8). This formulation sounds more decisive and clearer concerning the political future of the eastern neighborhood than the declarations of the WB, which do not support the political integration of this region in the foreseeable future.

Following their veto on Skopje and Tirana’s accession negotiations, the French authorities proposed a revised enlargement methodology, which was adopted, with certain amendments, before the pandemic crisis.⁴² The revised instrument was designed to increase impaired credibility and predictability and bring a new dynamic to the enlargement area. Meanwhile, the I WB summits in Zagreb (2020) and Brdo (2021) have kept the issue of enlargement in the EU’s focus. Unfortunately, this opportunity did not translate adequately into the actual political reform process.⁴³ Even Serbia and Montenegro have reached an impasse, taking only symbolical steps in the past years, marked by the outbreak of the pandemic, in addition to pre-existing issues in the

⁴¹ *Kovačević*, (fn. 27), p. 146.

⁴² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181 (05/02/2020).

⁴³ *Petrović, Tzifakis*, A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another postponement? An introduction, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2021, p. 163.

areas of the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and in the case of Serbia, unresolved relations with Kosovo*.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding the weight of these challenges and the faulty reform processes in both countries, the content of EU declarations has been discouraging. Neither the Zagreb Declaration nor the Brdo Declaration mentioned either “membership” or “accession”. Moreover, the Zagreb act did not even mention “enlargement”, sticking only to the “European perspective” (three mentions).⁴⁵ Despite the statements of the Slovenian Prime Minister that its 2021 presidency succeeded in reintroducing the phrase “membership perspective” into the official EU discourse, the final text of the Brdo Declaration continues to refer solely to the broad “European perspective” (a term also applied for the EP).⁴⁶ Apart from only three mentions of the otherwise-broad “European perspective”, the term “enlargement” was used once, including a “disclaimer” regarding the EU’s own absorption capacities as a prerequisite for any further accessions (point 1).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, at the beginning of the French Presidency of the Council (2022), President Macron announced the need to “clarify the European perspective of the Western Balkans” through increased economic and political engagement and differentiation to the EP.⁴⁸ This sounds encouraging because: (1) it comes from one of the two most influential EU nations, during its Council presidency; (2) it recognizes the need to separate the political ambitions of the enlargement agenda from those of the EP and (3) it calls for a stronger economic and political approach towards the WB, after a period of strategic inactivity.

⁴⁴ The chief achievements during the past several years have been the opening of the final negotiating chapter by Montenegro in 2020 and of one cluster by Serbia in late 2021, following a two-year pause.

⁴⁵ Consult footnote 19 for Brdo Declaration; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf> (06/05/2020).

⁴⁶ <https://www.shorturl.at/msLOR> (30/12/2021).

⁴⁷ Consult footnote 46.

⁴⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/bdf7z3c5> (10/12/2021).

D. Conclusion

The disregard for the boundaries between the enlargement and neighbourhood policies is a result of the EU's diminished political ambitions for further expansion, especially in the Western Balkans. Such an inadequate approach has two main outcomes: (1) the notion of "European perspective" no longer stands exclusively for EU membership, but also for privileged partnership, as seen with the Eastern Partnership; (2) the WB countries and the eastern partners are increasingly being subjected to similar criteria and instruments, with an additional commonality being that EU membership will not soon be an option for either region. This phenomenon not only contradicts the long-recognized EU membership perspective for the region but also creates confusing political expectations in the eastern neighbourhood. These inadequate expectations are largely connected to the EU's own internal incoherence regarding the political future of these two separate regions. This lack of clarity is expressed by pointing to the candidates' 'clear European perspective', while praising the "European choice" and steps toward an "ever closer relationship" with eastern partners like Moldova. These subtle terminological distinctions are intended to encourage pro-European processes in both regions, regardless of their distinctions.

While geopolitical arguments (such as the strategic rivalry with Russia) have increased the importance of the EU's eastern neighbourhood, political integration with the WB has not progressed. While the geopolitical aspect has always constituted an important part of the enlargement logic (exemplified by the Eastern accession rounds 2004-2007), two decades following the Thessaloniki Declaration, the region is still un-integrated, which can also be seen in the light of its own reduced strategic importance, at least compared to the Eastern Partnership. In the meantime, it appears that the EU has largely combined the two regions, despite their political, economic, social, and other peculiarities, in order to transform them by using similar tools. Such an approach is not only unselective and thus insufficiently effective, but also undermines the WB's membership ambitions, which are increasingly fading into the background in its third decade of Europeanization.

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