

EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER, INTEGRATION AND MODERNISATION

Perspectives and Challenges in the Central
and Eastern European Region

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The Challenges and Prospects of the Development and Modernisation of the Western Balkan Countries in the Process of European Integration

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ABSTRACT: After the meeting of the leaders of the Member States of the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans in Thessaloniki in 2003, the Western Balkan states were included in the EU's accession strategy, which envisages concluding a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the six candidate countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo.¹ At the same time, this document projects the development of mutual economic ties through the introduction of autonomous trade measures with the aim of opening the EU market. For this purpose, the EU was ready to

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1 All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (United Nations, 1999).

provide non-reimbursable financial assistance. The prerequisite was the harmonisation of national legislation with the *acquis communautaire* and systemic preparation for the use of structural European funds. In the implementation of the aforementioned strategy, the development of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation was of particular importance, and in the interests of this the EU launched a number of different initiatives – from the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe to the Berlin Process to the European Political Community. A particularly significant Common Regional Market Action Plan was initiated within the Berlin Process. Its goals are based on four fundamental freedoms: the freedoms of movement of people, goods, services and capital, as well as the creation of regional digital, investment, industrial and innovation spaces. Essentially, all EU initiatives adopted so far have the purpose of preserving and advancing the democratic future and prosperity of the countries of the Western Balkans through the revitalisation of their industries and the achievement of sustainable economic growth. However, the achievement of the stated goals has been significantly retarded by the fluctuating methodology of the accession negotiations and the fulfilment of the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, which conditions the process of European integration according to the overall stabilisation of political conditions in the region.

KEYWORDS: EU, Western Balkans, development and modernisation, European integration

1. Introduction

The EU represents a unique economic and political partnership of 27 European countries. The partnership was established in the period after the Second World War, when the countries of Europe decided to prevent similar dramatic conflicts in the future. Encouraging economic cooperation was the first step on this path. Behind economic cooperation was the idea that countries which cooperated closely were likely to avoid conflict with one another, which was confirmed when Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands formed the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, and then the European Economic Community (EEC) – with the European Atomic Energy Community – with the conclusion of the Rome Treaties from 1957. Simultaneously with the formation of these Communities, Western Europe also worked on political empowerment, which was supposed to establish an order that could successfully compete with the Eastern Bloc (which at that time was dominated by the USSR). The basis of the unification of European states and peoples was the security component, which determined the construction of the common institutions and legal system that led to the process of European integration. First of all, this was manifested on the economic level, where through the construction of a common market, the achievement of four freedoms was ensured: freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital. In the pyramidal structure of the goals of European integration, this was the main achievement, since it was directly reflected in the preservation of European peace and security (Radivojević & Knežević Predić, 2008; Dimitrijević & Račić, 2011).

In 1993, a new treaty was concluded in Maastricht, which led to the formation of the European Union by uniting all three of the aforementioned

organisations with the intention of establishing a supranational organisation with a clear institutional structure and competences in terms of making and implementing legal, political and economic decisions.² Recalling these changes and transformations, it is clear why the Treaty on European Union emphasises European values such as freedom, dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law and, in general, respect for human rights. These common values greatly conditioned the process of expansion of this supranational organisation, since according to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, any country in Europe can apply for EU membership if it respects the stated values and undertakes to advocate their improvement. It thus becomes clear why the development of the EU enlargement process took place slowly and gradually, in several stages or ‘enlargement waves’ (Džombić, 2012).

Thus, the first wave of expansion of the EU (at that time the European Community) featured the admission of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom.³ The second wave marked the accession of Greece in 1981. The third wave included Spain and Portugal, which both joined in 1986. In the fourth wave, which took place in 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden were involved. The accession of the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004 marked the first phase of the fifth wave. In the second phase of the fifth wave, in 2007, Bulgaria and Romania also joined. At the end of this wave, Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

2 The Treaty of Amsterdam of 1999 supplemented the Treaty on European Union and the Treaties establishing the European Communities. The Lisbon Treaty of 2007 amended the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) and the Treaty on the Creation of the European Economic Community (Treaties of Rome).

3 The UK officially withdrew from EU membership in 2020, having previously concluded the “Brexit Withdrawal Agreement” with it.

Starting in 1993, each of the acceding countries had to undertake to meet the conditions known as the Copenhagen Criteria, which *inter alia* include: (1) Political criteria: stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minority rights; (2) Economic criteria: a functioning market economy that can cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the EU; (3) The ability to undertake the obligations of EU membership, including adherence to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union.

The current EU enlargement programme includes six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo) (Lopandić, 2017). Of these six countries, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are candidates for EU membership and are in the process of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a candidate for EU membership awaiting the opening of negotiations and Kosovo is potential candidate country (i.e. it is not recognised as a candidate country, but has the prospect of becoming one). At the beginning of June 1999, the European Council launched the Stabilisation and Association Process, a new type of agreement that offers the prospect of joining the EU when the Copenhagen Criteria are fulfilled.⁴ The Stabilisation and Association Process represents the framework for EU negotiations with all countries of the Western Balkans. It contains three main objectives: the stabilisation of countries and encouragement

4 The Copenhagen Criteria were established by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and strengthened by the European Council in Madrid in 1995. The criteria include the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minorities, then a functioning market economy and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively apply the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law, as well as adhering to the objectives of the political, economic and monetary union.

of their rapid transition to a market economy, the promotion of regional cooperation, and the preparation of countries for EU membership (Mišćević, 2005).

Simultaneously with the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process, the EU also launched the Stability Pact, which was supposed to facilitate democratisation, development, cooperation and security in the Western Balkans. In June 2000, in Feira, the European Council confirmed that the countries of the Western Balkans are potential candidates for EU membership. This perspective was confirmed at the Summit in Zagreb in November 2000, and especially at the Summit in Thessaloniki held in June 2003, which defined the agenda for the Western Balkans (Uvalić, 2023). The founding summit formalised the accession process on the basis of dual conditionality. Along with the Copenhagen Criteria, which actually reflected the conditions resulting from the painful legacy of war in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the tools used for the fifth wave of EU enlargement were also included. In this way, political dialogue and a free trade zone were promoted by the conclusion of the amended Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) at the end of 2006. Also, in line with the Stabilisation and Association Process, all the countries of the Western Balkans concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (Dimitrijević & Đukanović, 2013). In May 2007, The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council, involving ten countries in the process of cooperation in Southeast Europe (five countries of the Western Balkans and five neighbouring countries – Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Romania and Türkiye).

In the aforementioned way, it seemed that the European prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans were guaranteed. After all, this was partly foreshadowed by the adoption of an ambitious External Investment Plan in September 2016, which was supposed to stimulate investments in the EU Neighbourhood region in order to strengthen

partnerships and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2020c). However, even these incentives had no effect, and the reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans were prolonged. Thus, the European integration process was postponed until 2018, when the European Commission adopted a very important strategy named “Credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans” (European Commission, 2018). Confirming the European future of this region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values, the strategy describes the priorities and areas of cooperation to strengthen, with an emphasis on the specific challenges facing the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to the need for fundamental reforms and good neighbourly relations. In addition, every year the Commission adopts an enlargement package which clarifies the EU’s enlargement policy. This document includes a statement on enlargement, which determines the progress achieved since the previous year and analyses the situation in the candidate countries and potential candidate countries. At the same time, it provides guidelines on reform priorities that must be achieved before the end of the EU accession process. Although the Commission initiates decisions on EU enlargement policy, the final decisions are taken by the Member States, the European Council at the level of heads of state or government, or the Council of the European Union at the ministerial level. In October 2019, the Council of the EU did not decide to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, but announced that the issue of enlargement would be raised again before the May 2020 EU–Western Balkans summit in Zagreb.

Meanwhile, in February 2020, the European Commission published its Communication entitled “Improving the accession process – a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans” with the aim of revitalising the accession process by making it more predictable, credible, dynamic and subject to stronger political guidance (European Commission, 2020a). In

accordance with this new approach, the European Council emphasised the need to reach a consensus on the future enlargement of the EU. Acting in that direction, negotiations were opened with Albania and North Macedonia. After the EU–Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May of the same year adopted the Declaration confirming the EU’s strong solidarity with the Western Balkans region, the following October the Commission adopted the Enlargement Package with a comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2020c). The main goal of this strategic document is to encourage the long-term economic recovery of the entire region, support the green and digital transitions, and promote regional integration and EU rapprochement. The Plan establishes a significant investment package of EUR 9 billion to be mobilised through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) in order to support sustainable connectivity, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth, as well as the dual green and digital transition in the period from 2021 to 2027. In addition, investments of over EUR 20 billion have been earmarked for the economic recovery of the countries of the Western Balkans.

In November 2020, at the Berlin Process conference held in Sofia, the countries of the Western Balkans adopted the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which includes five priorities: clean energy sources and climate protection; the transition to a circular economy; the removal of air, water and soil pollution; the building of sustainable agricultural and food systems; and the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems (Regional Cooperation Council, 2020). Along with energy security, the green transition (which is related to the digital transition) has thus become an inevitable factor in the further sustainable development of the Western Balkans region and the achievement of greater social cohesion and justice (Energy Community, 2022). The key mechanism that will be used for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the

implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan is the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans. The Investment Framework is a joint financial platform of the European Commission, financial organisations, EU Member States (and Norway), which has the aim of improving cooperation in public and private sector investments for the socio-economic development of the Western Balkans region. After the adoption of the new investment package through the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans, 54 leading investments from the External Investment Plan worth approximately EUR 8 billion will be supported, including EUR 2.3 billion in EU grants (European Commission, 2023a).

2. The Procedural Aspects of Accession Negotiations with the EU

Accession to the EU implies a procedure that includes several stages of pre-accession negotiations between the candidate countries and the EU (Ministry of European Integrations of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). The first phase refers to the opening of negotiations and the conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. This is followed by the submission of an application for admission to EU membership and obtaining candidate status. Subsequently, comes the adoption of the draft Negotiating Framework of the European Commission by the Member States, and then to the opening of negotiations with the endorsement of the European Council. The negotiations formally begin with the convening and holding of an intergovernmental conference – comprising representatives of the governments of the EU Member States on the one

hand, and that of the candidate state on the other – where the negotiating frameworks of the two parties are exchanged. After the formal opening of negotiations, the phase of the analytical review of the legislation begins (so-called “screening”), which represents the phase of checking and evaluating the extent to which the legislation of the candidate country is harmonised with the EU acquis.

According to earlier methodology, the screening involved checking the legislation of the candidate countries according to the different legal areas included in the 35 chapters of the acquis, which the candidate countries can open and close in any order.⁵ Although those chapters and their criteria remained unchanged in the new methodology proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Council of the EU in March 2020 (European Commission, 2020a; Council of the European Union, 2020), the 35 chapters are now grouped into six negotiating clusters: (1) Fundamentals;⁶ (2) Internal market;⁷ (3) Competitiveness and

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- 5 These chapters cover the following areas: 1. Free movement of goods; 2. Free movement of workers; 3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services; 4. Free movement of capital; 5. Public procurement; 6. Company law; 7. Intellectual property law; 8. Competition policy; 9. Financial services; 10. Information society and media; 11. Agriculture and rural development; 12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy; 13. Fisheries; 14. Transport policy; 15. Energy; 16. Taxation; 17. Economic and monetary policy; 18. Statistics; 19. Social policy and employment; 20. Enterprise and industrial policy; 21. Trans-European networks; 22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights; 24. Justice, freedom and security; 25. Science and research; 26. Education and culture; 27. Environment and climate change; 28. Consumer and health protection; 29. Customs union; 30. External relations; 31. Foreign, security and defence policy; 32. Financial control; 33. Financial and budgetary provisions; 34. Institutions; 35. Other issues.
- 6 The First Cluster features the following chapters: 5. Public procurement; 18. Statistics; 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights; 24. Justice, freedom and security; 32. Financial control.
- 7 The Second Cluster features the following chapters: 1. Free movement of goods;

inclusive growth;⁸ (4) Green agenda and sustainable connectivity;⁹ (5) Resources, agriculture and cohesion;¹⁰ and (6) External relations.¹¹ As a rule, related chapters are opened together within negotiating clusters when the candidate country is ready for all of them, while they are closed individually in the same way as in the previous methodology.

Since the EU accession process should be built on mutual trust and the clear obligations of both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, the new methodology should be guided by the principles of credibility, predictability, dynamics and stronger political management. In practice, this means focusing on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration, as well as the economy of the candidate countries. Of course, this requires the harmonisation of internal legislation with EU law, which cannot take place without screening. The screening process itself consists of two parts: explanatory screening and bilateral screening. Both are performed for each negotiation chapter. Explanatory screening

2. Free movement of workers; 3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services; 4. Free movement of capital; 6. Company law; 7. Intellectual property law; 8. Competition policy; 9. Financial services; 28. Consumer and health protection.

- 8 The Third Cluster features the following chapters: 10. Information society and media; 16. Taxation; 17. Economic and monetary policy; 19. Social policy and employment; 20. Enterprise and industrial policy; 25. Science and research; 26. Education and culture; 29. Customs union.
- 9 The Fourth Cluster features the following chapters: 14. Transport policy; 15. Energy; 21. Trans-European networks; 27. Environment and climate change.
- 10 The Fifth Cluster features the following chapters: 11. Agriculture and rural development; 12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy; 13. Fisheries; 22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; 33. Financial and budgetary provisions.
- 11 The Sixth Cluster features the following chapters: 30. External relations; 31. Foreign, security and defence policy.

is the part of the screening process where the EU acquis in a given area is presented to the candidate country by the European Commission, while bilateral screening is the part of the screening in which the government of the candidate country presents its domestic legislation to the European Commission and when the differences between domestic and European legislation are determined.

Screening is performed with the aim of determining what still needs to be done in a specific negotiation chapter in order to harmonise the legislation of the candidate country with the legal acquis of the EU before accession. In this sense, it is the basis for drafting the negotiating positions of the candidate countries, especially those where it is necessary to define transitional deadlines for the harmonisation and implementation of a certain number of EU regulations, while for the European Commission it is an indicator of the readiness of the candidate country to open certain negotiation chapters. In practice, this means that for each negotiation chapter the European Commission submits a list of regulations related to that chapter – including judgements of the Court of Justice of the European Union – and the negotiating group of the candidate country then determines the differences between its domestic laws and European legislation. The next stage in the screening process is the preparation of a screening report for each separate negotiation chapter. The report is prepared by the European Commission in cooperation with the candidate country. After preparation, the European Commission presents the screening report to the EU Member States and the candidate state. The report presents an overview of the situation and an assessment of the readiness of the candidate country for the opening of individual negotiation chapters. In the next phase, the report is presented to the Council of the European Union. When it is determined that the candidate country is sufficiently aligned with the EU acquis, the EU invites the candidate country to submit a negotiating position for the given chapter.

The negotiating position for each chapter is prepared by the negotiating groups of the candidate country. However, if it is assessed that the candidate country is not sufficiently aligned with the EU *acquis*, opening criteria that must be met in advance are set for certain chapters. These benchmarks are mainly set for more difficult negotiation chapters and are mainly recommendations for the adoption of strategies and action plans, the fulfilment of contractual obligations with the EU, and above all, the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the adoption of the necessary legal acts.

Following the screening, the decision to open the chapter is made unanimously by the Member States within the Council of the European Union. Then, at the proposal of the European Commission, the Council considers the draft of the common position of the EU and decides whether it is possible for the chapter to be opened. The Council unanimously makes a decision on the opening of a certain chapter, as well as on the EU's common position with criteria for closing negotiations, the so-called "closing benchmarks". At the proposal of the European Commission and with the unanimous decision of the Council and the political confirmation of the European Council, the chapter is temporarily closed in cases when the candidate country has met the conditions for closing benchmarks. The European Commission permanently monitors each temporarily closed chapter. Until the signing of the Accession Agreement, the possibility of reopening a given chapter remains. Such a contingency exists to make provision for the candidate country adopting new regulations that are significantly different from the previously harmonised ones or not fulfilling its previously assumed international obligations.

After all the negotiating chapters have been temporarily closed, the European Council decides on the closing of the negotiations, and then the Accession Treaty is drawn up. The draft Agreement is drawn up by representatives of the Member States, the candidate state and

the EU institutions, and it contains everything agreed upon during the negotiations. Before signing the Accession Treaty, the European Commission issues an opinion on membership and the conclusion of the negotiations. It is necessary that the European Parliament gives its consent to that opinion and that the Council of the EU unanimously decides on the acceptance of the new state. After the signing of the Accession Treaty, the procedure foresees the ratification process in the Member States and in the candidate state alike. In practice, it is common to organise a referendum on EU membership in a candidate country. This procedure is directly dependent on the constitutional practice of each candidate state. Finally, if the candidate country would seriously violate the prescribed criteria for EU accession, especially the political criteria, upon the recommendation of the European Commission, the Council of the European Union may decide to temporarily suspend the accession negotiations. The new methodology of the pre-accession negotiations thereby enables the realisation of the principle of reversibility, that is, the reopening of a previously closed negotiation chapter. Such a solution can further politicise the process of accession negotiations, reflecting the possibility of reducing or increasing EU pre-accession support to candidate countries, which essentially hinders its dynamics and efficiency.

3. The Status of the Western Balkan Countries in the Process of European Integration

Serbia

In April 2008, Serbia signed the EU's Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2013. That October, Serbia made a decision on the unilateral implementation of the Transitional Trade Agreement, which was signed together with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. In December 2009, Serbia applied for EU accession (Dimitrijević, 2009, 2010). After the European Commission made a recommendation for Serbia in 2011, the European Council made a decision on 1 March 2012 guaranteeing Serbia the status of a candidate country for EU accession (Dimitrijević, 2012). This decision came only after Serbia and Kosovo reached the Brussels Agreement on the normalisation of relations and regional representation. During 2014, the first intergovernmental conference between Serbia and the EU was held in Brussels, marking the beginning of accession negotiations at the political level (Budimir & Međak, 2014). Until 2018, several intergovernmental conferences were held, with sixteen negotiation chapters being adopted. In February 2018, the European Commission predicted that Serbia would be ready to join the EU in 2025, after the implementation of the expected reforms. At the beginning of 2020, the new methodology for conducting pre-accession negotiations was adopted, whereby the 35 negotiation chapters were grouped into six clusters. In the following year, two clusters were opened at the intergovernmental conferences: The First

Cluster – Fundamentals, and the Fourth Cluster – Green agenda and sustainable connectivity. The Fourth Cluster consists of four previously defined negotiation chapters – 14. Transport policy, 15. Energy, 21. Trans-European networks, and 27. Environment and climate change. Chapter 34 (Institutions) will be discussed at the end of the negotiation process, while Chapter 35 covers “Other issues”, which includes the process of the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. At the time of writing, in the negotiations with the EU, Serbia has opened 22 out of the total of 35 chapters – including areas in which the country must meet the set criteria in order to become a member of the EU. Only two chapters are temporarily closed – 25. Science and research, and 26. Education and culture (European Commission, 2023b).

Montenegro

Montenegro applied for EU membership on 15 December 2008. After the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 1 May 2010, in the following November the Commission issued its Opinion, in which it outlined the political and economic criteria for the country’s accession to the EU, which are related to systemic and institutional reforms. According to this statement, Montenegro should negotiate in 33 chapters, while the last two (cooperation with institutions and “Other issues”) will be considered at the very end of the negotiation process. In December 2010, Montenegro acquired the status of a candidate country for EU accession. After an intensive one-year reporting on the dynamics of fulfilling the assumed obligations, and based on the Commission’s report on the results achieved in the area of reforms, on 9 December 2011 the European Council decided to start accession negotiations with Montenegro. Finally, on 22 March 2012, the Commission assessed that Montenegro had achieved the necessary level of compliance with the accession criteria,

especially with the political accession criteria, in order to be able to start accession negotiations. During the negotiation process, the Commission emphasised that it would continue to give due attention to the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights – especially the fight against corruption and organised crime – in order to provide a solid monitoring mechanism of the progress concerning effective implementation and judicial practice. The European Commission especially emphasised that it will use all available means during the negotiation process in order to achieve the planned institutional reforms. On 26 June 2012, the Council of the EU adopted a decision to open accession negotiations with Montenegro. Since the European Council confirmed this decision, negotiations began on 29 June 2012 with the holding of the first session of the Intergovernmental Conference (Đurović, 2017). In its enlargement strategy, published in February 2018, the Commission highlighted 2025 as a possible target year for the accession of Montenegro, together with Serbia. So far, Montenegro has opened a total of 33 chapters, three of which have been temporarily closed (25. Science and research, 26: Education and culture, and 30. External relations) (European Commission, 2023c).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina entered into force on 1 June 2015, replacing the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-related Matters that was in force from 1 July 2008. The agreement established the time frames for systemic reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the coordination of the European integration process, which includes activities carried out with the aim of ensuring the highest degree of compliance and coherence in the work of institutions at all levels of government. On 15 February 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for EU membership in accordance with Article

49 of the Treaty on European Union. The European Commission adopted its Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for EU membership on 29 May 2019. Opining that the country was in the early stages of meeting the conditions for EU accession, the Commission therefore presented comprehensive proposals for reforms in the areas of the rule of law, democracy, fundamental human rights and public administration. The Commission believes that the negotiations on accession to the EU with Bosnia and Herzegovina should begin only after the country has achieved the required level of compliance with the criteria for membership, and especially with the political criteria from Copenhagen. Among other things, Bosnia and Herzegovina will have to thoroughly improve its legislative and institutional framework in order to ensure the fulfilment of the 14 key priorities listed in the Opinion, thereby ensuring visible results when it comes to the functioning of the coordination mechanism on EU-related issues at all state levels, including the preparation and enactment of the national programme for the adoption of EU *acquis* in order to ensure proper parliamentary functioning (Kostić, 2019). In December 2019, the Council of the European Union adopted the Conclusions on the Commission's Opinion, calling on Bosnia and Herzegovina to start addressing key priorities (such as public administration reform, judicial reform, strengthening the fight against corruption and organised crime, etc.). Bosnia and Herzegovina received candidate status for EU membership on 15 December 2022 (European Commission, 2023d). In March 2024, the European Council made a decision to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 9 April 2001. In March 2004, it submitted a formal application for EU

membership. At a meeting held over 15-16 November 2005, the European Council granted the country the status of candidate for membership. In June 2018, the European Council approved the Conclusions on the Stabilisation and Association Process between the EU and the Western Balkans including the Republic of North Macedonia. North Macedonia, however, had to resolve key outstanding issues with Greece. The main problem was the term “Macedonia”, with the Greeks objecting to the former Yugoslav republic’s use of the name, it also being a geographic region of Greece. On 18 June 2018, the Greek and Macedonian foreign ministers signed the so-called “Prespa Agreement”, in which they undertook to resolve the issue, which was done immediately after its ratification in the national parliaments. However, despite the fulfilment of the aforementioned condition, in October 2019 EU members did not agree on the proposal to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia. This delay was caused first by France’s request to change the methodology of the accession negotiations, and then by Bulgaria’s call for both the abandonment of the term “the Macedonian language” and its replacement with “the official language of the candidate country”, and the recognition of the identity of the Bulgarian national minority in North Macedonia’s constitution. Since North Macedonia is a multiethnic country, it is considered that it ought to respect the Lisbon Treaty of the EU, which guarantees cultural and linguistic diversity. Bulgaria did not agree to the European Commission’s proposal regarding the negotiating framework with North Macedonia, arguing that the Macedonian side was not implementing the provisions adopted in the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation of 2017. A mutual dispute that has historical roots led to Bulgaria blocking the start of North Macedonia’s negotiations with the EU (Arnaudov, 2023). That situation lasted until the European Commission confirmed that North Macedonia met the conditions for opening accession negotiations on membership, after

which the European Council made a decision on 24 March 2020. Finally, accession negotiations with North Macedonia officially began in July 2022 (European Commission, 2023e).

Albania

Albania concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which entered into force on 1 April 2009. After that, it submitted a request for EU accession on 24 April 2009, and the European Commission issued an Opinion on this request in 2010, assessing that before accession negotiations could be formally opened, Albania still had to achieve a necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, particularly to meet 12 key priorities identified in the document. These priorities included completing essential steps in the public administration reform, adopting and implementing a reform strategy for the judiciary, strengthening the fight against organised crime, developing a solid track record in the fight against corruption, and reinforcing the protection of human rights. In October 2012, the Commission recommended that Albania be granted candidate status, on the condition that key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration reform and the revision of the parliamentary rules of procedure be implemented. Candidate status was granted to Albania in 2014. In April 2018, the European Commission issued a recommendation for the opening of accession negotiations with Albania. In June 2018, the Council of the European Union adopted Conclusions in which it agreed to respond positively to the progress made by Albania, and it set the path to the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. In the May 2019 enlargement package, the Commission recommended that Member States open negotiations with Albania. In October 2019, the European Council postponed a decision on this issue, but in its Conclusions from March 2020, it gave political consent for the

opening of accession negotiations with Albania (Aliaj & Sulmina, 2022). This was formally adopted by written procedure and endorsed by the European Council in the days that followed. On 19 July 2022, the EU held its first intergovernmental conference with Albania. The Council of the EU welcomed the fact that the first intergovernmental conference had been held and that Albania had achieved significant progress in the European integration process (European Commission, 2023f).

Kosovo

Kosovo (more precisely, Kosovo and Metohija, which is legally treated by Serbia as its southern province), has been under the international administration of the UN (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo – UNMIK) since 1999. Considering the fragile security situation after the establishment of the international administration in Kosovo, the UN Security Council decided to additionally engage the international military forces of its member states (the so-called “Kosovo Forces” – KFOR) and the NATO alliance under the auspices of the UN, as logistical support to the international civilian mission (UNMIK) (Dimitrijević, 2007). After the unilateral declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 (which Serbia and five EU Member States – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain – do not recognise), the dispute with Serbia escalated, which is why the EU reacted by forming its special mission in Kosovo (European Union Rule of Law Mission – EULEX) (Ker-Lindsay & Economides, 2012). The mission carries out its mandate under the Monitoring Pillar and Operational Support Pillar, and within the framework of Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council. As the largest civilian mission under the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, EULEX has a role to support selected institutions of the rule of law in Kosovo on their path to greater efficiency, sustainability, multi-

ethnicity and accountability, without political interference and in accordance with international human rights standards and also the best European practices. In October 2009, the European Commission issued a Communication expressing the need for the realisation of the European prospects of Kosovo. In 2012, Kosovo declared the end of supervised independence by the International Civilian Office, which was managed by an International Steering Group made up of representatives of the countries that recognised its independence. This was followed by the preparation of a feasibility study for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. As an entity under international protection, Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2015, it entering into force the following year. The first contractual act between Kosovo and the EU, the Agreement determines the mechanisms and official deadlines for the implementation of all reforms that will bring Kosovo closer to the EU in a progressive manner in all areas of public policies, up to the fulfilment of all EU standards. In December 2021, the second phase began with the implementation of the political priorities within the European Reform Agenda. The following year, Kosovo submitted a request for EU accession. In the meantime, relations with Serbia drastically deteriorated due to both the non-implementation of previously concluded agreements on the normalisation of relations (the “Brussels Agreement” and “Ohrid Agreement”) and the application of discriminatory political decisions in the north of Kosovo, where the majority of the population is ethnic Serbian. This practically suspended the results achieved in the negotiation process between Serbia and Kosovo under the auspices of the EU and the USA on the regulation of the future status of the southern Serbian province in accordance with Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council, which should have led to a legally binding comprehensive agreement. Since the Kosovar government did not act to de-escalate the political situation in its northern region, in June 2023 the EU temporarily suspended the activities

of all working groups and froze financial aid to Kosovo (Beta, 2023). In such a negative situation, it is up to Kosovo to work together with the EU and other mediators to resolve existing challenges and obstacles in relations with Serbia in order to improve its existing status as a potential candidate for EU membership (European Commission, 2023g).

4. The Challenges and Prospects of the Development and Modernisation of the Western Balkans

For all of the countries of the Western Balkans, joining the supranational international organisation of the EU brings many challenges regarding development and modernisation. These challenges are related to the transformation of the economy and the institutional and legal reforms that are needed to bring these countries closer to European management models and the European legal order. Such a transformation takes place in the conditions of globalisation and integration of countries at both regional and continental levels.

In the period from the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the process of European integration officially began, the Western Balkans – i.e. the countries of the former Yugoslavia, plus Albania – had to direct most of their energies towards overcoming the effects of the policy of violence that had led to the disintegrative processes of the collapse of the Yugoslav state. With the recognition of independence and the establishment of a new state order, the successor states of the former Yugoslavia took a radical turn in terms of economic and political development, which was

connected to the process of economic modernisation and institutional and legal reforms (through the implementation of the so-called “*acquis communautaire*”).¹² Of course, given the internal difficulties in each of the Western Balkan countries, as well as the new international circumstances created by the end of the Cold War, this process was neither quick nor easy. An additional aggravating circumstance was the fact that in the foregoing period the EU had been affected by a series of successive political crises that led to the slowing down of this process, as well as of the process of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, which had a negative effect on the EU enlargement policy itself.

Recalling the above period, it would nevertheless still be appropriate to indicate certain positive developments that were made in this process. Firstly, in 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process as a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region. Secondly, the Stability Pact was then promoted as a broader political initiative that included all key international actors. Thirdly, in 2003, the European Council adopted the “Thessaloniki Agenda”, confirming that all Western Balkan countries were potential candidates for EU membership (European Commission, 2003).

This European perspective was reaffirmed in the Commission’s strategy for the Western Balkans in February 2018 and in the declarations following successive EU–Western Balkan summits. Achieving EU membership by 2025 was promoted especially for Serbia and Montenegro, which at the time had made the most progress in negotiations. However, this date was rejected at the European Council held in Sofia in 2018. Instead, at the initiative of France, a new enlargement methodology

12 The EU *acquis* contains primary legislation, general legal principles and international agreements concluded by the EU with third countries and international organisations, as well as secondary legislation.

was adopted in March 2020, which should accelerate the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU by giving the process a stronger political impetus through so-called “sectoral integration”, which would be accompanied by significant financial incentives from the EU (primarily from the IPA III fund, from which EUR 14.2 billion would be allocated for financial and technical assistance to undertake the necessary reforms in the period 2021–27).¹³ Special financial incentives should come through the EUR-750-billion Next Generation EU Fund, which is a special financial instrument for economic recovery linked to the regular 2021–27 budget of the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework in the total amount of EUR 1.074 trillion.¹⁴ At the same time, in 2020, as part of the Berlin Process, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans – announced in 2019 as part of the European Green Deal – was signed in Sofia (European Commission, 2019; Dimitrijević, 2022). The Green Agenda foresees the development priorities of the countries of the region in the areas of decarbonisation, circular economy, pollution reduction, sustainable agriculture and biodiversity. An Economic and Investment Plan with a budget of EUR 9 billion for the period 2021–27 is foreseen for the implementation of the Green Agenda. The planned

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- 13 It is interesting that in recent years, through IPA I (from 2007–13) and IPA II (from 2014–20), the EU allocated direct investments to the individual countries totalling the following amounts – Bosnia and Herzegovina: EUR 1,162.2 m; Serbia (with Kosovo): EUR 4,161.9 m; Montenegro: EUR 5,14.7 m; North Macedonia: EUR 1,223.8 m; Albania: EUR 1,230.7 m.
 - 14 The Next Generation EU fund is financed by borrowing for six years through European Commission bonds whose maturity date expires in 2058. Repayment begins in 2026. Of the total amount of EUR 750 billion, 438 billion will be divided as grants, 62 billion as guarantees, and 250 billion as loans. The fund can be separated from the upper limit of GDP of EU Member States by 2%. In this way, the EU can use its credit rating to collect and place funds on various financial markets for projects that meet the so-called “green criteria” (Xin, 2021).

funds will be used for ten flagship projects that will be financed through the IPA III fund.

The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans is of particular importance, as it represents a clear sign of commitment to meeting the long-term goals of the economic recovery of the countries of the Western Balkans (especially after the world economic crisis of 2008), their green and digital transition, and their faster regional integration and approximation to the EU. Offering a path for successful regional economic integration to accelerate EU convergence and close the development gap between regions, the Plan should assist the transformation of the Western Balkans into one of the most attractive investment regions in the world. In this sense, the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans includes the Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility and the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility. Through this common framework of the EU, and with the help of international financial institutions (the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Development Bank of the Council of Europe, KfV Development Bank, Agence Française de Développement and the World Bank) and bilateral donors, it would be possible to accelerate the process of the European integration of the Western Balkans. According to the Economic and Investment Plan, it would be possible to mobilise an additional EUR 20 billion through the Western Balkan Guarantee Facility. The Plan additionally supports investments in sustainable transport, clean energy, the environment and climate, the digital future, the competitiveness of the business sector, and the development of human capital in the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition, it would achieve the priorities foreseen by the structural foreign policy of the EU, which seeks to influence the political, economic and security structures in the countries of the Western Balkans. At the same time, the EU would thereby demonstrate its greater competitive participation in this region

in relation to other dominant geopolitical actors and also in the global governance system, which is rapidly transforming.

In light of the above, the fact that the EU is the most important donor and investor in the Western Balkans region and its most important political partner is not without significance. Neither is it negligible that the Western Balkans region is a relatively small market with fewer than 18 million inhabitants and a total GDP of USD 144 billion (which equals only 1% of the EU's GDP). What's more, it is not insignificant that in the last two decades the EU has become the Western Balkan countries' most important trade partner, with over 80% of the foreign trade exchange of the countries of the Western Balkans being directed to the EU, although at the same time imports from the EU have remained relatively lower (at approximately 59.5%). This disproportion – which stems from the non-competitiveness of the economy of the Western Balkans – influenced the increase in the region's foreign trade deficit. A certain consolidation in mutual relations occurred thanks to the application of macroeconomic measures that led to the reduction of public spending, the reform of the tax system and the observance of rigorous fiscal rules. Consequently, these measures improved the competitiveness of the economies and the economic growth of the countries of the Western Balkans. However, the level of living standards in the region remained almost six times lower than the EU average (USD 5,336 vs. USD 31,008 per capita). With a high level of unemployment (estimated at above 16%) and a high level of external indebtedness (around 80% of GDP), the countries of the Western Balkans remain highly dependent on external financing (Milenković & Vujović, 2020). In this sense, it would be useful to distinguish which of that external financing refers to direct foreign investments and which refers to foreign loans and credits that do not have a significant impact on national GDPs.

According to economic statistics after 2020, it appears that the EU leads in foreign direct investments in the Western Balkans region (with

a share of around 61%). Therefore, it is not in dispute that by realising the objectives of the EU's structural foreign policy, through sectoral integration into the EU single market, this region could achieve a good economic perspective that would enable its sustainable development and social prosperity. This strengthening of European integration in the Western Balkans would contribute to returning the EU's displaced real industrial sector closer to its borders, which would also to some extent help in achieving its greater economic autonomy in critical industrial sectors in relation to its geo-economic competitors. The realisation of this would certainly contribute to the new EU connectivity strategy, Global Gateway, which was launched in September 2021, and which is based on the goals and leading investments of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans in the areas of transport, digital technology and energy. By means of its implementation, a stronger connection between the region and the EU would be achieved.

Taking the above into account, it would be important to fully realise the freedom of movement as one of the fundamental freedoms promoted by the EU. For the citizens of the Western Balkan countries, this freedom is guaranteed through the visa-free regime within the EU (through the so-called "Schengen Area"). The visa-free regime has been in place for citizens of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia since December 2009, and for citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina since November 2010. After lengthy inter-institutional negotiations and the final vote in the European Parliament in April 2023, citizens from the territory of Kosovo have been able to enter the Schengen Area without visas from January 2024. Achieving this freedom along with other guaranteed freedoms for the citizens of the Western Balkans in recent times has meant an improvement in their quality of life. In a certain way, it has also affected their well-being as measured through the human development index, which is slightly increasing in the countries of the

Western Balkans. Despite this trend indicating its positive effects, the European integration of the Western Balkans remains conditioned by the latest geopolitical shifts and challenges (especially after Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine in 2022), which cause additional turbulence in the implementation of the EU enlargement policy.

In June 2022, the EU's need to urgently respond to the accession demands of its three eastern neighbours, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, led to the European Council adopting a very problematic decision on the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (while Georgia de facto received the status of a potential candidate). The extent to which this decision was conditioned by the new political constellation in Europe is shown by the fact that it was made not in proportion to the democratic achievements of these countries, nor to their consistent fulfilment of the political, economic and institutional criteria for membership, but rather on account of the assessment that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has led to a disruption of the balance of power that requires new expansion for the sake of preserving its own geopolitical interests. In this way, the EU showed the historical mistake made towards the countries of the Western Balkans, since it has been developing relations with these countries for a period of almost two decades, yet there are still no visible results in terms of European integration. In this respect, neither the incentives that came from the Berlin Process, which was primarily a German initiative to create conditions for comprehensive cooperation in the political, economic and social sense (as a kind of supplement to European policies and initiatives such as enlargement policy, the Energy Community and trans-European networks), nor the inclusion of the Council for Regional Cooperation (which, as the operative body of the South-East European Cooperation Process, inherited the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in 2008), nor the French platform of the European Political Community from 2022 (which was supposed to contribute to greater coordination of European

policies with the aim of strengthening security, stability and prosperity in Europe), were sufficient in themselves to avoid all the negative consequences and adverse effects of the global geopolitical realignment in the Western Balkans region.

Although the European integration process has somewhat revived – and despite symbolic advances such as the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, or the granting of full candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina – there are still certain challenges that burden it. The challenges for the finalisation of this process (and then for the further recovery, development and modernisation of the countries of the Western Balkans) depend not only on the implementation of the obligations undertaken, but also on the wider reform of the EU itself, which implies essential changes in the decision-making process and implementation of the enlargement policy. If we add to the aforementioned factors the rise in inflation in the eurozone in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing recession in the Western Balkans region (7.7%), as well as other aggravating circumstances on the world market caused by geopolitical shifts during the war in Ukraine (primarily on the food and energy markets), it is clear that there are serious challenges in the implementation of the accession process that depend not only on the political will of the participants, but also on global economic trends that affect the strategic positioning of the countries of the Western Balkans (Filipović & Ignjatović, 2022).

This is all the more so because, due to the geopolitical shift in the world, the tendency to build a new multipolar world order is also strengthening, in which, in addition to the leading Western powers, rising powers such as Russia and China, and regional powers such as Türkiye or the countries gathered in the BRICS intergovernmental forum for cooperation, find their place in the global governance system. These changes can consequently cause a new geopolitical regrouping, as well as changes

in existing economic models based on neoliberal concepts of global governance (Dimitrijević, 2023). In the future, this could have positive effects as it would lead to a reorientation of the economy into a knowledge economy, and subsequently to significant changes in various branches of industry, as well as in technological processes and the supply of scarce energy sources. In this regard, the finalisation of the European integration process of the countries of the Western Balkans will largely depend on these states' strategic positioning in global geopolitical relations.

Considering all of this, it should not be surprising that, although the countries of the Western Balkans have expressed their political will to accede to the EU, they have not yet made sufficient progress in economic, institutional and legal reforms. This gives the impression that they do not actually want to join the organisation or at least not in the near future. An illustrative example is Serbia, which in the past decade has demonstrated “enlargement fatigue” by not harmonising its foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU (for example, by refusing to introduce sanctions against the Russian Federation due to its aggression against Ukraine), which led to a serious stagnation in the process of European integration (Ćeranić Perišić et al, 2023). An added problem is the stagnation in the implementation of institutional and legal reforms (the absence of the rule of law), which, along with the impossibility of reaching a comprehensive agreement on resolving the status of the southern province (Kosovo and Metohija), prevents further progress in accession negotiations with the EU. In this sense, the other countries of the Western Balkans are also faced with similar internal political problems or with unresolved issues with neighbouring countries that lead to political instability and a halt in the initiated reform processes.

These reform processes are objectively necessary in order to increase the level of economic growth, reduce external debt and increase productivity, which would significantly affect the economic dynamics of the entire

region and create the preconditions for political stability. In order for this to actually happen, it is necessary to integrate the fragmented national markets more quickly and intensify regional economic cooperation.¹⁵ In this regard, some progress has been made, since at the 2020 Summit of the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan countries gave their support for the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan, spanning 2021–24. This strategy is made up of ‘targeted actions in four key areas: (1) Regional trade area: free movement of goods, services, capital and people, including crosscutting measures, such as Green Lanes, to align with EU-compliant rules and standards and provide opportunities for companies and citizens; (2) Regional investment area: to align investment policies with the EU standards and best international practices and promote the region to foreign investors; (3) Regional digital area: to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market; (4) Regional industrial and innovation area: to transform the industrial sectors, shape the value chains they belong to, and prepare them for the realities of today and challenges of tomorrow’ (Regional Cooperation Council, 2020). The Action Plan aims to preserve and improve the democratic future and prosperity of the countries of the Western Balkans through the revitalisation of their industries and the achievement of sustainable economic growth. In this regard, the Western Balkan countries should be committed to its implementation, since it removes obstacles and reduces the costs and time required for the free flow of goods, services, capital and people, which in itself opens up opportunities for new capital investments in various branches of industry and technological development.

15 The Agreement on the Energy Community of Southeastern European countries, signed in Athens in 2005, can serve as an example of good practice in this regard. The contract defines the energy market of electricity and gas of the countries of the region.

This Action Plan for the countries of the Western Balkans was also confirmed at the Summit of the Berlin Process held in Tirana in October 2023, where the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced the adoption of the Growth Plan. The implementation of the Growth Plan would take place through four pillars: (1) the introduction of the Western Balkans into the single market; (2) the finalisation of the formation of the regional market; (3) the completion of reform processes; (4) the new investment package of EUR 6 billion (2 billion in grants and 4 billion in loans). According to current estimates, if the Growth Plan were to be implemented, it would be possible to double the economic growth of the countries of the Western Balkans in this decade (EU in Serbia, 2023).

5. Conclusions

The prospects of the further expansion of the European Union to include the countries of the Western Balkans depend, first of all, on the implementation of their previously assumed obligations towards the EU, that is, on the concretisation of the expressed political will to fulfil the set criteria and to implement comprehensive reforms in key economic areas, as well as in their legal and political systems. Economic reforms must be decisively implemented in order to eliminate structural weaknesses, low competitiveness and high unemployment. Given that all the countries of the Western Balkans are facing the same or similar problems arising from the weakness of state structures that are manifested in the fight against corruption, organised crime, terrorism, cybercrime, illegal migration, trafficking in arms, drugs and people, and other hybrid threats, which jeopardise vital national interests, judicial and public administration

reforms should bring some real and visible results with the aim of the more efficient functioning of state institutions and the final establishment of the rule of law. In this sense, it would be advisable to take advantage of the somewhat more favourable political constellation that currently exists in the EU and emphasise the importance of the Western Balkans for the preservation of international peace and security.

Although not all EU Member States always share the same position regarding the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans, this does not mean that the EU should forgo new enlargements of its membership, because otherwise this region might remain in limbo or be open to the penetration of other international actors whose political and economic power is burgeoning. After all, the EU is obviously aware of this fact, because in recent years – in the conditions of the world economic crisis – it has adopted a series of protectionist measures and established special control mechanisms to supervise foreign investments in its strategic assets, infrastructure and technologies (European Union, 2019).

Intending to implement the model of open strategic autonomy, which should lead to the strengthening of currency stability and the revision of the existing trade policy to ensure the diversification and strengthening of global supply chains necessary to protect against potential future economic crises, the EU has established restrictions on problematic business transactions from third countries that affect its security and public order and which are partly related to the increasingly visible economic penetration of its immediate neighbourhood (through non-transparent investments and loans, unbalanced trade relations and energy ties that strengthen the dependence of neighbouring countries on foreign capital) (Dimitrijević, 2021). On the political level, this kind of action by competitors in the EU's neighbourhood is directly reflected in the strengthening of authoritarian governments that, as a rule, behave arbitrarily and often contrary to the objectives of the Common Foreign

and Security Policy of the EU. It follows logically from this that by further delaying the European integration process of the Western Balkans, the EU weakens its influence in its immediate neighbourhood, a shortcoming that will certainly be exploited by those countries in competition with the EU to realise their strategic geopolitical and geo-economic goals in this region (Domachowska, 2021). Consequently, the question arises that if its enlargement policy is one of the EU's most successful strategies and if it provides the countries of the Western Balkans with certain European prospects, then why are the parties unable to reach a consensus on the key directions and dynamics of the accession negotiations without any further conditions and with clearly defined roadmaps that would lead them to the end of the negotiations?

From the foregoing analysis, it follows that this synergistic action is achievable, but it would have to be accompanied by the EU Member States' greater solidarity with the Western Balkans region, with the provision of significant technical assistance, more funds in the pre-accession period (in order to pave the way for the use of funds from structural funds and the Cohesion Fund), and the provision of more visible support through the innovative Economic and Investment Plan, all of which would contribute to the Western Balkan countries being able to continue their modernisation and economic growth through the introduction of new, more efficient, sustainable and legitimate models of economic development that take more account of climate change and environmental protection in order to establish a socially just, ecologically sustainable and economically stable, integrated and prosperous democratic society with a common regional market of a "green" and "digital" economy. Although achieving the stated goals is realistically possible, a significant slowdown occurred due to the new fluctuating methodology of accession negotiations (which builds on the existing Copenhagen Criteria with a specific requirement to establish more efficient regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations).

It still seems that the biggest challenge in the process of European integration is fulfilling the conditions of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU to achieve the stabilisation of the overall political situation in the region. This condition certainly has its justification from the security aspect of the EU enlargement policy, but we cannot ignore the fact that similar open issues existed between neighbouring countries that were previously admitted to EU membership (for example, on the occasions of the accession of Ireland and Cyprus). In light of this, the EU's approach is somewhat irrational from a political point of view, as it prevents long-term European perspectives for most Western Balkan countries (Petrović et al., 2023). In order to overcome this situation, it would be necessary for the enlargement policy to concentrate more on the enlargement of the EU itself, and to leave the politically controversial issues (which are shared by the EU Member States themselves) for regulation after the actual accession of the countries of the Western Balkans. This would bring a more rapid conclusion to the process of European integration and the models for solving open regional matters and issues between neighbours would be in line with good international legal practice and established European standards. In the long term, regardless of any inconsistencies in the legal and political situations in practice, the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union would contribute not only to the improvement of security on the EU's current borders, but also to the general calming of tensions in the Western Balkans region itself.

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