

Strategic deficiencies? From the EU's revised enlargement methodology to the development policy

During an international scientific roundtable organized in October 2021 by the Institute of International Politics and Economics in conjunction with the Hanns Seidel Foundation, several academicians from different countries deliberated on the purpose and perspectives of the revised EU enlargement mechanism in the Western Balkans (IIPE 2021).¹ In a non-linear fashion, the panelists reflected on the perceived benefits of the altered approach for the candidates and for the EU, while also pointing out to persisting challenges: the role of veto actors (both within the EU and in the WB), the reduced institutional capacities of the Union, democratic underperformance in the region, inhibitions to the Europeanization efforts in different domains, and so on.

While the altered enlargement methodology has been attempting to increase the dynamics, predictability and overall credibility of the stagnant enlargement policy, it hasn't brought significant changes neither regarding the bureaucratic tools, nor the actual political practice. On one hand, no new instruments have been introduced; the reversibility clause, the Union's disclaimer regarding its absorption capacity (Kovačević 2020, 143)², the balance provision and the need for more credible and more responsible conditionality have for many years been embedded in the *acquis*. On the other hand, the revised approach hasn't been put in force throughout 2020 and 2021 due to either lack of progress of the leading candidates or bilateral disputes as seen in North Macedonia-Bulgaria case. The pandemic *force majeure* has only exacerbated the previously visible difficulties in the Western Balkans and their open-ended accession undertakings (Petrović and Vučković 2021, 294).³ In addition, the inclusion of

¹ IIPE. 2021. "Overview of the application of the EU's revised enlargement methodology in the Western Balkans". Institute of International Politics and Economics. Accessed 10 June 2022. <https://www.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/en/2021/10/14/overview-of-the-application-of-the-eu-s-revised-enlargement-methodology-in-the-western-balkans/>.

² Kovačević, Maja. 2020. *Evropska diferencirana unija*. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka, p. 143.

³ Petrović, Miloš, Vladimir Vučković. 2021. „Kovid 19 – remetilački činilac u bližem povezivanju Evropske unije sa regionom Zapadnog Balkana“. In: *Razvojni pravci Evropske unije nakon pandemije Kovid 19*, edited by Nevena Stanković, Dragana Dabić i Goran Bandov, p. 294. Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu.

several eastern partners into the enlargement policy in the context of the military assault on Ukraine, however (generally) strategically-rational, does not necessarily need to translate positively into the Western Balkans' protracted EU accession, as per some previous articles in this journal.⁴ The altered strategic circumstances shall likely require additionally modified enlargement policy mechanisms (apart from adaptation of other policies, as elaborated in closer detail by Nikolina Herceg Kolman M.A. and prof. Goran Bandov PhD).

Having in mind the abovementioned, the revised approach's transformative capacities should not be overestimated; despite somewhat sharpening the focus of the accession procedure, its improved technical-bureaucratic character do not seem to match the faulty political aspects of the process. Considerations of these aspects prompt other questions whether these changes have so far been at all conducive for the Western Balkans' accession ambitions, which challenges would need to be addressed on the EU side in order to additionally advance trustworthiness of the process, and whether the increased differentiation might result in more flexible forms of integration. As a Guest-Editor, I am very pleased that (some of our) panelists have agreed to present their valuable academic insights in this edition of "International Problems", specifically dedicated to the purpose and perceived impact of the EU's revised approach in the Western Balkans.

In her original paper for this Journal, prof. Maja Kovačević PhD points out to the inadequacy of the revised enlargement mechanism when it comes to addressing the chief challenge on the EU side, which is the lack of strategic decisiveness, coupled with the complicated decision-making procedures. By deploying a metaphor "Emperor's New Clothes" (a suitable reference to the old folktale), prof. Kovačević sheds a critical light not solely on the revised approach, but on various instruments and phenomena which decrease the effectiveness and credibility of the EU enlargement policy as such. The other authors also point out to the necessity to elevate the enlargement policy's credibility.

Helena Bauerová PhD analyzes the role of Czechia, an EU member state, in the context of theory of roles. The author argues that member states profoundly influence the direction of the enlargement policy, even more so than the EU as a supranational entity; however, the role of member-states is bounded by the external role prescriptions. EU and its member states should use the elements of the revised enlargement methodology to make the policy goals more attainable in the foreseeable future.

⁴ Petrović, Miloš. 2022. "European Union and Ukraine: the strategic partnership leading to (some)where?" *Međunarodni problemi* LXXIV (1): 90.

The research by Ivana Radić Milosavljević PhD and Spasimir Domaradzki PhD⁵ argues that the bifurcated national preferences continue to impede the articulation of EU's *raison d'état* in the Western Balkans. Apart from not addressing this fundamental challenge, the authors find that the revised methodology has the potential to disrupt the already complicated consensus procedures and result in regression, rather than progress towards membership. In spite of the geopolitical narrative, the enlargement domain has still not been become an EU priority.

Prof. Ana Bojinović Fenko PhD and Faris Kočan PhD examine the pertinence of European Union's normative power in the Western Balkans, which, according to the authors, could be advanced both from within the EU institutional elements and through sharpening of its cross-border tools. While the altered enlargement mechanism might be conducive for partial integration concepts and unlock certain membership benefits ahead of accession, such logic should be used carefully – to encourage further reforms and steps towards joining (rather than holding these benefits against the candidates, as part of negative conditionality).

The manuscript written by Nikolina Herceg Kolman M.A. and prof. Goran Bandov PhD focuses on the challenging *solidarity-interest instrumentalization* dichotomy of EU development policy, which crosses beyond boundaries of security and climate strategies. While the troublesome Western Balkan EU accession formally falls outside of scope of development domain, the authors rightfully recognize that effects of development policy in aspects of values, standards and peace constitute a common denominator with the enlargement policy. In other words, conditioning the respect of EU norms and values abroad (as per Bojinović Fenko and Kočan), according to Herceg Kolman and Bandov, doesn't apply solely to the enlargement policy, but also to development policy and all other aspects of EU as an international actor. It also resonates in the context of the Ukrainian geopolitical crisis, which has been profoundly affecting the continent.

Whereas EU's policies have historically been motivated by geostrategic aspects, its cross-border activities have in practice frequently been driven by individual national interests, rather than by some grand strategy acts. Inability to overcome the (mis)use of veto powers in domain of enlargement policy and the inclusion of bilateral issues (sometimes unrelated to European integration) in the accession procedure are damaging for the reputation and goals of the European Union in the Western Balkans. Apart from some potential benefits like the possibility of gradual accession to some policy domains, it would be highly damaging if the altered enlargement mechanism would be used to provide an additional

⁵ The authors cooperate through an international academic network UACES (University Association for Contemporary European Studies).

space for the unfavorable bilateral tendencies or strengthen the logic of negative conditionality, instead of focusing on paving the way for EU membership.

Considering the aforementioned, I would like to convey my sincere gratitude to the Institute of International Politics and Economics for this opportunity, as well as to commend the authors on their valuable academic contributions to this thematic issue of “International Problems/Međunarodni problemi”.

Miloš Petrović PhD

Guest Editor