

Guest Editorial

European Union's enlarged enlargement policy: geopolitical opportunities and challenges

Back in 2019, when the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen proclaimed the geopolitical character of her leadership, the term mostly designated the willingness to increasingly coordinate the external policies, considering the growing presence of power competition and international security elements in different EU policies (Haroche 2022). In such a context, over the last decade, the EU's quest for strategic autonomy has become an omnipresent thought, especially since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis. The pandemic confirmed that even the health and humanitarian domains contained geopolitical elements (Petrović and Jeremić 2021). Likewise, the approval of EU's Strategic Compass signalled an intention to move towards establishing a more ambitious security and defence strategy (IIPE 2022). This coincided with a profoundly unfavorable event in Europe's recent history.

The invasion of Ukraine provoked an unprecedented response from the European Union as Kyiv's chief strategic partner, as well as distancing from Russia in political, economic, diplomatic and other aspects. As Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig (2023) argue, the Russian invasion constituted a boundary shock that challenged the EU political community's very identity, autonomy, and security, including the 'external rebordering' – the shutting down of external borders towards the attacker. Apart from EU's deep engagement in terms of military aid, humanitarian cooperation, economic assistance, and other areas, the 27 Member States agreed to recognize the membership prospects to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. This represented a significant political change, considering that Brussels has been avoiding the issue of potential EU membership of its eastern partners for many years. In their latest publication dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Thessaloniki summit, Petrović, Kovačević and Radić Milosavljević (2023) argue that the EU decision to recognize

membership prospects to the aforementioned countries may be perceived as coerced, considering numerous other deficiencies in terms of strategic outcomes for both Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Partnership regions.

The enlargement of the enlargement policy, though logically sound and justified from a geopolitical standpoint, has elicited a range of emotions in Europe's southeastern capitals, who have grappled with the challenge of aligning with EU conditions since the turn of the 20th century. In addition to effectively integrating a number of Eastern partners into the EU accession plan in a fast-track fashion, the previous year has yielded noteworthy progress across the Western Balkans, at least administratively speaking. Notably, the first intergovernmental conferences between the EU and Albania and North Macedonia signalled the formal beginning of membership negotiation proceedings. However, by the beginning of September 2023, neither Skopje nor Tirana actually opened any negotiating clusters, which is also tied to the former's bilateral relations (identitarian disputes) with Sofia. Likewise, Sarajevo's EU membership application, filed six years ago, finally resulted in obtaining of candidate status. Conversely, the leading contenders, Serbia and Montenegro, have encountered roadblocks on their EU journey, each impeded by internal factors specific to their situations.

These developments, regardless of being relatively or somewhat favorable towards the WB, contrast to the speedy nature and 'generous' character of EU political decisions regarding the eastern partners since 2022. Petrov and Hillion (2022) discuss whether the moral or geopolitical character of the latest EU decisions concerning Ukraine and two other eastern partners would continue to be driven by the 'accession through war' approach, or whether it would ultimately be slowed down to the 'classic accession' track. Either way, the question arises: how would that reflect on the Western Balkans? Would their EU path be positively affected by the geopolitical considerations and decisions made in case of the eastern partners? Or would they become even more marginalized in the scope of the enlarged enlargement agenda? Should there be a precedence (for instance, chronological over the geopolitical, or perhaps vice versa), apart from the merits and democraticization accomplishments? Do the new developments contribute to the increased relevance of the entire enlargement agenda, or would the primary beneficiaries be some individual candidates, or some subregions over the others? Should there be a catch-all approach towards all EU candidates, considering the geostrategic urgency? If so, does the European Union have the necessary absorption, administrative, financial, institutional and other capacities in its current form, and are any major reforms in that regard certain?

Some of the authors for this journal issue have elaborated on these aspects during the UACES (University Association of Contemporary European Studies)

Conference held in early September of 2023 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom.¹ It is a genuine pleasure to briefly present the content of those, and other, scientific articles in further text.

Christina Griessler assesses the inclusion and impact of additional prerequisites for Western Balkan (WB) countries to address conflicts, in relevant EU documents for the three most advanced eastern partners (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). While recognizing certain differences between the two regions in terms of size, population, and geopolitical context, conflict-related actions and reconciliation efforts are discernible in implementation reports, often tied to economic and security cooperation. Whereas the eastern partners' association agreements don't place explicit conflict-solving demands *vis-à-vis* Russia, peaceful regional resolution is urged. However, challenging circumstances regarding EU's deepened rivalry with Moscow constitute an aspect of concern. Despite the evolving geopolitical dynamics, the author considers that overarching need remains for the EU to maintain credibility and trust, leveraging its neighborhood strength and values.

Zhidas Daskalovski contends that the EU enlargement policy and conditionality principle appear to have reached a saturation point, compounded by EU enlargement fatigue and inconsistencies in dealing with regional governments, as observed in North Macedonia. Geopolitical variations in approach create issues; the EU's response differed starkly between Gruevski's regime and Zaev's administration in Macedonia. Corruption coupled with declining credibility of EU accession process not only undermine Europeanization efforts, but also pave the way for undemocratic influences. In addition, the author finds that third actors employ (dis)information campaigns and promote illiberal ideas, impeding democratization and Europeanization in Macedonia and the wider region. The potential spillover effects of the Russian attack on Ukraine further complicate matters.

Adam Bence Balazs examines the 'power of weakness' concept and considers Bertrand Badie's contributions, applying them to the context of Western Balkans as a vulnerable region. He contends the security motivation behind the need to integrate the EU candidate countries, while also reflecting on the anti-Western sentiments and the role of third actors in the region. Proper understanding of the WB beyond the conventional identitarian and Europeanization debates is required, taking into account the strategic and security implications and the power of weakness, could facilitate Europe in addressing its contemporary challenges more

¹ Research carried out by Dr. Christina Griessler and Dr. Adam Bence Balazs, respectively, constitute part of this journal issue. Other participants in the panel titled "Between the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. The blurring of EU policies" included Dr. Spasimir Domaradzki, Dr. Ivana Radić-Milosavljević, and Dr. Miloš Petrović.

properly. The need for incorporation of the WB not only contributes to the unification of the continent and its overall harmonization, but should represent a security priority in the context of the ongoing invasion.

Yağmur Yetimoğlu and Gökhan Aksemsettinoğlu consider the WB-EU cooperation, aimed towards the former's full membership, in the context of overlapping interests of USA, Russia and Turkey. Whereas the American approach complements the EU efforts to preserve security and stability in the southeastern part of the continent, it is also aimed at preserving its global hegemonistic role. Conversely, Russia aims to counterbalance the EU and USA by capitalizing on its ties with Serbia. Meanwhile, Turkey employs a strategy of soft power and the perception of friendly neighborliness toward the WB to enhance connections with historical partners based on shared culture, heritage, and history. The authors examine the divergent national objectives of the USA, Russia, and Turkey and their manifestations in the context of the EU's normative power aims in the Western Balkans.

The aforementioned articles point out to the increasingly geopolitical nature of the Western Balkans' EU accession efforts, which, apart from numerous mentioned challenges, also might contain new opportunities. Considering that every round of EU enlargement has been geostrategically motivated, coupled with the deeply altered circumstances in the European political arena, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Thessaloniki promise, the need to introduce a greater credibility and dynamics into the troublesome Europeanization efforts in the Western Balkans (towards their accession) should, *inter alia*, be observed as a security-related strategic priority, rather than a possibility.

Given the points discussed above, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Institute of International Politics and Economics for granting me this opportunity once again. I also want to recognize the authors for their significant scholarly contributions to this issue of "Medjunarodni problemi" (*International Problems*) journal." I hope that this publication would constitute a good academic reference for further reflections on the converging (or perhaps diverging) status of the two neighbouring regions in the context of EU's accession plans and actions.

Respectfully,
Dr. Miloš Petrović
Guest Editor