



**We are Europe III
A Liberal Perspective
on the EU's Enlargement
and Neighbourhood Policy**

Edited by
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We are Europe III: A Liberal Perspective on the EU's Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy

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Introduction: The Evolving Context

CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Evolving Context

When European Parliament voted in favour of the von der Leyen Commission two years ago, European Commission (EC) had an aspiring role on international stage and promised to become a “Geopolitical Commission”¹. Enthusiastic upon her election, Ursula von der Leyen, the new President of the European Commission, explained that the College of Commissioners will now report on “external action” during their weekly meetings and that all commissioner cabinets plan to form a new “External Coordination” body which will bridge their external and internal policy work. They have inherited from the previous composition of the Commission the EU Enlargement Policy. In EC communication from May 2019², this ambitious goal was elaborated stating that the “frontrunners in the accession negotiations could potentially be ready for membership in a 2025 perspective”.

At the beginning of 2020, just before the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), the European Commission, in coordination with the European Council, adopted a newly revised enlargement methodology³. The aim of the new cluster-based approach was to create a “more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process”, mainly for the countries of the Western Balkans. Following the delays caused by the global standstill in 2020, 2021 was set to be the turning point for the EU’s Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy. Slovenian EU Presidency was expected to offer fresh new perspectives based on the undertaken commitments and adopted positions.

- 1 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/commissioner_mission_letters/mission-letter-urpilainen-2019-2024_en.pdf
- 2 https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2019-05/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf
- 3 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_20_181/IP_20_181_EN.pdf

Although European Commission has made several geopolitical attempts to accelerate the developments in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood have, there has not been any significant progress on the ground. The lack of the credible engagement for the EU integration progress has resulted in the rise of the new tensions in the Western Balkans. While the government institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina are paralyzed and secessionist threats are escalating, Serbia and Kosovo are on the brink of an open conflict, Montenegro is facing dangerous political polarisation and North Macedonia and Albania are stuck in their reform agenda. Added to this, Eastern EU frontiers are dealing with the intensifying situation not only with Belarus as it has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership and engaged in serious security provocations with the EU, but with the Russian increasing military troops near the Ukrainian borders, and with Azerbaijani and Armenian lethal confrontations as well. Despite the engagement, EU has not delivered significantly beyond its borders, and this was emphasized at EU-Western Balkans Summit⁴ held in October 2021 when no new tangible impulse for the enlargement processes was provided, but only a commitment to organise the delayed Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021 in order to review the Resilience policy objectives “Beyond 2020”⁵.

Such EU approach is influenced by many diverse factors. On the one hand, as the result

- 4 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf>
- 5 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eap_joint_communication_factsheet_18.03.en_.pdf

EU Mentorship series have slightly changed as the counterparts from Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, have joined the participants from the Western Balkans

of COVID-19 pandemic the EU has become more inward-looking oriented and the internal resistance towards a stronger involvement of the EU beyond its borders has grown. In parallel, the emergence of regional and national leadership committed to nationalist and populist policies are evident. Combined, these factors have slowed down the liberalisation, democratisation and reform processes that the EU enlargement and diplomatic engagement have traditionally relied upon.

In this evolving context, the EU Mentorship project continues third year in a row, joining liberal activists and policy makers from four Western Balkan (WB) countries, namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. However, this year's EU Mentorship series have slightly changed as the counterparts from Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, have joined the participants from the Western Balkans. They have mutually decided to take initiative amongst European liberals and promote talks on a joint European Future and a stronger European Union, in accordance with the values and standards of liberal democracies. As a result, this report rather differs than the two previous ones⁶.

This report is an opinion piece which aims to inform European liberal activists, as well as others, about the liberal perspective of the Western Balkans on EU enlargement. It further reinforces the traditional view that the liberals outside the EU borders are the loudest advocates of EU enlargement and its transformative role. Compared to the previous years, it is noticeable that the constituency now suffers from declining enthusiasm and pervasive scepticism that shrouds EU's credibility and its engagement beyond its current borders. In a rapidly changing multipolar world, it would be a wasted opportunity and dangerous for the EU and the countries in question if they fail to deepen their mutual diplomatic, economic and political engagement.

⁶ https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/European-Voices-WB_FINAL.pdf

Status Quo:
Stuck (Together)?

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2

Status Quo: Stuck (Together)?

When it comes to the presence of the European Union in the region and the respective countries, the participants from the Western Balkan have an ignorant perception that the EU plays a passive role in the region. This was particularly noticeable during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the regional countries were left for four months with no access to global market of vaccines. In addition, they were cut off from the EU solidarity mechanism and isolated as the external EU borders remained closed. The general perception amongst the citizens of the Western Balkans is that the EU is not engaged enough in their countries or that EU response and support for the region is not promoted enough.

As an example, the analysis of the European Commission's 2021 Enlargement Package⁷ provides detailed assessment of the progress made in the Western Balkans and Turkey on their EU accession path. Although the EC points out the main issues in which Western Balkan countries are underperforming, the majority of general public finds them hard to read. The progress reports are detailed, however, they are very diplomatic and not critical enough towards their respective government.

The participants find this particularly important for the regional promoters of European values, as they find their current governments most responsible for not delivering on reforms required for EU membership. They also feel that their diplomatic networks are underdeveloped as they lack skills for leading substantial negotiations with the EU and its member states. Also, the corruption seems to be the main motive for this underperformance. Unhappy with the progress results of EU delegations on the ground, some citizens still feel there is a shared responsibility for the potential further decay of EU credibility influence in the region.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_21_5275/IP_21_5275_EN.pdf

Nearly two years since its formal approval, the new enlargement methodology applicable to Montenegro and Serbia is yet to yield results. The predictability and political clarity are essential for the implementation of the foreseen methodology. Nevertheless, the participants shared a certain level of cautious scepticism towards such methodology, as they are uncertain how it will deliver reforms. The new methodology is supposed to allow indication in case of a backsliding democracy, as it is the example of Serbia. They fear that as this process is more technical than value-based, it cannot lead most Western Balkan countries towards acceleration of the necessary reforms nor towards full EU membership.

EU and its member states are based on the rule of law and the implementation of the political and international agreements. Nevertheless, there is continuous reluctance of the EU to open accession negotiation talks with North Macedonia and Albania, as well as to initiate visa liberalisation for Kosovo, despite the fact that these countries have fulfilled criteria. This indicates a certain degree of hypocrisy of the EU and jeopardises not only the EU enlargement, but the general progress of European integration as well, as adhering to the agreed rules is the core of the process.

Nevertheless, EU membership remains the main preferred option for the liberal political activists from the Western Balkans⁸. The participants of the last EU Mentorship programme have indicated that they see the EU membership as the means for the estab-

⁸ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/11/08/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

Investing in cultural exchange and common knowledge is pivotal for achieving long-standing values-based integration of different parts of Europe

ishment of the rule of law and new values in their respective societies, which would result in achieving economic development and political stability in the region.

Although Eastern Partnership countries are not formally part of the EU accession process, their participants of the EU Mentorship programme also see their future in the EU. However, they are very concerned with the slow pace of accession of the Western Balkans to the EU. They feel that the presence of EU in their region is mostly due to geopolitical reasons, mitigating regional conflicts and human rights violations. This is particularly evident in the case of the Caucasus. Similar to the current crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the participants from Ukraine also hope for a stronger EU involvement in the prevention of war in their country. The presence of the EU increases when crises emerge and then decreases when the situation becomes more placid.

Clearly, the participants recognize the positive sides of accession and membership to the EU. The EU's influence is viewed as an instrument for promoting liberal values and investing in rebuilding functioning institutions, independent judiciary, and strong self-governance. The participants from the Eastern Partnership countries claim that the EU's effort is visible. A positive example of such engagement is when Charles Michel, President of the European Council, acted as a mediator between the government and the opposition during Georgia's political crisis. In their opinion, Georgian political actors eventually failed to deliver on the terms of the mediated agreement. In addition, some feel there is a generational gap which is an obstacle for the orientation towards the EU in Armenia, with youth leaning towards EU and its values more than the older generations. In this region, the opinion about the EU is also subject to propaganda influence of the Russian government.

All participants from EaP countries agree that the ultimate responsibility for enhancing the delivery of rule of law, security, electoral and institutional reforms, as well as prevention of further political crises, lies with the governments of their respective countries. They share a common negative opinion on how their current governments are handling the reform processes, which is very similar to the opinion of their colleagues from the Western Balkans on the underdevelopment of the diplomatic

networks of their respective countries.

Participants from both groups have agreed on the importance of cultural exchange. They believe that the cultural diplomacy between EU member states and countries from the Western Balkans and the Caucasus should be a key priority for the future, as it is one of the best ways to establish a link between different groups of people across Europe. Investing in cultural exchange and common knowledge is pivotal for achieving long-standing values-based integration of different parts of Europe.

Other Foreign Actors: A Clash of Values

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3

Other Foreign Actors: A Clash of Values

The geopolitical dimension and the current state of competitive foreign influence in the Western Balkans is extremely alarming for liberal political activists. Although there is still an obvious presence of foreign actors who cherish the liberal and democratic values of the EU and the United States of America, there are also different intertwined foreign influences and interests in the region that continue to rise. The most prominent is the alarmingly increased influence of the Russian and Chinese governments which became more exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is very apparent in the case of Serbia, where the situation is increasingly worrisome. In combination with democracy backsliding, the government's actions enforce such influence as it is evident in the example of acquiring weapons from Russia or taking loans from the Chinese governments. Similarly, besides taking loans from China, Montenegro is also potentially influenced by the Russian government which is using religion as a cover to stir the internal political division in the country. Russia is also greatly involved in the internal political issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they openly support the secessionist actors who are blocking the country's institutions and threatening peace and stability in the region.

The other international influences and interests are also present in the Western Balkans. Turkey's clear geopolitical interest in this region are backed by economic investments and political influence. Furthermore, there are intraregional dynamics with not only Serbia and Albania which prominently engage in neighbouring countries, but with some EU member countries like Croatia and Bulgaria, which have special interests in the region. Another increasing challenge is

the effect of EU member states which have illiberal governments that tend to cooperate with their regional counterparts, providing them with direct financial, logistical and political support. This is especially important in the countries where the governments or parties have authoritarian and corrupt tendencies, with no intention to abide by the values of liberal democracies.

Equally, the participants from the EaP countries fear that the Western influence, namely that of the EU and the USA, in their respective countries is decreasing. They find this dangerous as the high domination of Russia in the region is now combined with an ever-increasing Chinese influence. They state the EU's influence is present, however mostly from the governments of individual EU member states, notably France and Germany. The participants feel a more coordinated involvement of the European Union is necessary. The example of Ukraine was emphasised, where their need for EU support against Russian aggression is evident. An increased EU involvement and influence is particularly important given their consensus that EU integration of EaP countries is a key determinant for their foreign policy and geopolitical positioning. Moreover, this is closely linked to a country's positioning in terms of societal values as well.

EU Mentorship participants from both regions agree that there is a justified fear of the simultaneous decrease of EU's influence in the region.

European Union should take its foreign policy and geopolitical position more seriously and increase its presence in the region

They agree that the commitment for a “Geopolitical Commission” needs to deliver. European Union should take its foreign policy and geopolitical position more seriously and increase its presence in the region. However, for full value-based EU integration of the societies, they should not only work with governments, especially in the Western Balkans. Engagement with civil society actors, academia, independent media and opposing political activists is necessary.

Our Priorities: Rule of Law and Liberal Democracies

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4

Our Priorities: Rule of Law and Liberal Democracies

Strengthening liberal democracy in and outside the European Union is the most important priority. The work of the “Geopolitical Commission” must be vocally led by that notion. That is mostly relevant for the accession process of the Western Balkans and the dialogue with Eastern Partnership countries. In that sense, participants of the mentorship programme state the recent progress reports are overly diplomatic and subject to misinterpretations. This is evident in the case of Serbia, where the progress report of the European Commission does not appropriately address the entire scope of the state capture. The progress reports are highly appreciated as they highlight the key areas for improvement and identify the crucial issues and priorities in the accession process. For greater effectiveness, they must not be too technocratic or use formalistic language that obscures the state in some thematic areas, in order to avoid putting in the foreground some issues such as the discriminatory constitutional provisions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the participants noticed that the reports failed to highlight the importance of insufficient progress in areas that dominate the EU political debates, as the green transition or digital connectivity agenda.

For the future of their regions, the key concerns of the participants vary among the countries. Nevertheless, the lack of progress in strengthening the liberal democracy and rule of law is their common concern. Montenegro is recognised as a deeply polarized society where the opposition and the government are at the brink of a conflict, while Serbia, although formally on the accession path, is substantially

becoming an autocracy. Moreover, Bosnia and Herzegovina is categorized as a corrupt country where state capture is rampant, necessitating more efforts to begin a meaningful fight against corruption.

The EaP liberal activists are more enthusiastic than their Western Balkans counterparts in marking the path forward, putting their faith in the transformative power of the EU approximation and/or enlargement process. Their priorities are legislative reforms that would align the countries more closely to the EU standards in all domains, thereby reducing the political polarizations in the countries and introducing more pluralism. They pointed out that the judicial reforms would make most significant impact in the society as this branch of power would then tackle serious cases of crime and corruption.

The participants agreed that achieving progress in rule of law and democracy, and ultimately peace and stability, would help them promote progressive initiatives related to educational reforms, sustainable development and human rights.

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New Perspectives: Alternatives to Accession - Yes or No?

CHAPTER 5

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New Perspectives: Alternatives to Accession - Yes or No?

EU mentorship participants support full EU membership and regional cooperation and integration. There are different approaches and degrees of regional integration that they prefer, however, always as part of the European integration process.

The participants from the Western Balkans do not consider any alternatives to EU accession. The associated membership or projects such as the Open Balkan are not taken into account and reasons for this scepticism vary. On the one hand, they believe the associated membership could jeopardise the benefits of full membership, while the Open Balkan project does not have the transformative drive of the full EU membership. In addition, it is considered as a project of the authoritarian regional leaders and such initiative is not necessarily compatible with the EU enlargement. However, Common Regional Market is a better perceived project. The idea for a single market between the Western Balkans and the EU modelled after the European Economic Area⁹ is considered to be realized by 2026. Although the participants prefer full EU membership, this is not feasible before 2030 at the earliest. Interestingly, the participants are not fully supportive of the Berlin Process¹⁰ as they are unsure whether to view it as a means that brings the countries closer to the EU or as an unsatisfactory alternative to the enlargement.

⁹ For an overview of this proposal, see European Stability Initiative (2019). Hamster in the Wheel, A credible perspective for enlargement.

¹⁰ The Berlin Process is an initiative of the German government for a closer collaboration between the EU and Western Balkans countries since 2014 with several launched flagship initiatives such as the Regional Youth Co-operation Office and Western Balkans Investment Forum

The participation in the 2024 European elections was recognized as most attractive opportunity where the elected MEPs from the Western Balkans will have a status of the observers. This is not surprising as it comes from persons of liberal attitude that are very pro-enlargement oriented. Nonetheless, they believe this is an unrealistic scenario.

The liberal activists from Eastern Partnership countries view the enlargement and overall aligning with the EU rules and regulations as an opportunity for economic and democratic development. Even though the contexts vary between the regions, the two groups of the EU Mentorship project complemented each other well and they supported an idea of a stronger interregional collaboration between liberal activists from the both regions.

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Conclusion: We Are
(Still) Europe Too

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6

Conclusion: We Are (Still) Europe Too

While the EU doubts the prospects of the enlargement process and faces strong challenges within the enlargement project itself, it did not make any significant impact on the participants of the EU mentorship project to promote and work on EU enlargement related issues. Both groups however, the participants from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership liberal activists, retain faith in the strength of the EU's transformative power.

They view the relationship between the EU membership and key reforms aimed at rule of law and democracy as a two-way street. These reforms are not only necessary for the commencement of the enlargement and its evolvement, but also to defend EU values and preserve their accomplishments. Compared to the previous two reports, the scepticism for the enlargement taking place within the next decade has grown. On the other hand, this has not influenced their general perception of the EU as the participants recognize it as a guarantor of regional stability and value promotor.

The influence of the EU is generally viewed as positive. The non-EU influence, apart from the one coming from the United States, is considered to be a source of instability for both groups of activists. Positive examples of European influence, including the mediation of Charles Michel in the Georgian political crisis, are lauded, whereas their EU's inability to counter the negative foreign influence rises concern that needs to be addressed seriously. The commitment to reform to better respond to enlargement process remains undeterred among Western Balkans activists despite the disillusionment, lack of delivery from the EU and the subsequent talk of the alternatives, such as the Open Balkan initiative. Even though EU's credibility is seriously shaken,

the alternatives are not taken into consideration as they lack the transformative power that the enlargement would have on the societies and the well-being of the citizens.

The participants from both the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership shared a notable great synergy in comprehension of the European liberal leaders, highlighting the rule of law reforms as crucial for the development and defence of the democratic framework of their respective countries. It is important to emphasize these two groups of participants are aware of the rule of law crisis that is currently present in many of the European countries. In addition, they are familiar with the crisis which causes the European Court of Justice to issue judgments against states for infringements of treaty principle for separation of power and rule of law. This is why the participants of the EU mentorship clearly recognise that request for better European integration in many of their countries is a cry for more justice. They hope their societies will follow a set of predictable and enforceable rules in order to fuel the rule of law and European integration processes in their respective countries.

They fully adhere to the notion that the EU integration, and thus the EU accession process should be "more credible, with a stronger political steer, more dynamic and predictable."

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Messages to the
Institutions
Messages to the
EU Commission:

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7

Messages to the Institutions Messages to the EU Commission:

“Stop supporting non-democratic governments in the region. Get more involved and support your own values in the Western Balkans, including the democratic forces and processes. Citizens of the Western Balkans need you. They almost lost hope their countries will ever join the EU.” (Ivan Peković, Serbia)

“Do not give up on us. We need your support.” (Olga Nemanzhyna, Ukraine)

“We are Europe, too!” (Ivana Bokan, Montenegro)

“Do not take anything for granted and be ready to protect what is dear to you. Do not forget that the integration process has crucial importance for the EU itself.” (George Melashvili, Georgia)

“The regime of President Vucic is establishing a basis for the new conflicts in the region. He has to be stopped.” (Norbert Cvijanov, Serbia)

Messages to the European Parliament:

“To focus merely on stabilitocracy and keeping the peace in the region risks losing them both in the long run. A commitment to a better liberal and European future will allow us to realize our full potential.” (Maid Džaferović, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

“We need a guarantee for the territorial integrity of our countries.” (Mirela Džehverović, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Messages to The Council:

“Put the accession process on hold for Serbia until the democratic standards (mostly in the area of media freedom and institution independence) are at a satisfactory level for holding a fully free and fair elections.” (Natan Albahari, Serbia)

“Put before us a final model of accession requirements and stand behind it. We need you to deliver as well.” (Sanda Krekikj, North Macedonia)

“Pay more attention to the countries in the South Caucasus and use all possible mechanisms for improving democracy in our region.” (Gor Badalyan, Armenia)

A liberal future in a united Europe

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