

Challenges for EU Accession and the War Against Ukraine

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Abstract: The war against Ukraine is not the first war on European soil after World War II, the wars of Yugoslav succession are often forgotten when today's war is being discussed. But today's war is not just a regional war: it has wider repercussions for overall security in Europe and beyond. At the same time, there is an important connection to the countries that have emerged from Yugoslavia. The quick offer of future EU membership for Ukraine and Moldova (and eventually Georgia) has resulted in mixed feelings in the Western Balkans, and many fear that the new candidates will get priority access to the EU. However, the possibility should also be considered that the geopolitical urgency to defend the new candidates against Russian influence may lead to new opportunities for the Western Balkan countries in the long term.

Keywords: Russian aggression against Ukraine, NATO and EU enlargement, European Security, Western Balkans

What kind of war is it?

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has created a new overriding purpose for the European Union for many countries: a common defence against imperial occupation from outside the EU. Nevertheless, the character of the war is contested by some EU governments and political forces. Some prefer to call the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine the "Ukraine War"

or the “war in Ukraine.” But we should call it what it is: a war launched by Russia against Ukraine. In addition, the war is both a challenge to the entire EU and its core principles and values as well as a challenge to the broader West, including NATO. In this context, the West is composed of a community of states with democratic political systems and privatized economic systems. There are obvious differences in the specific arrangements of the economic and political structures of these states, but Western democracies share a unified basic system that is defined in various documents, from the Atlantic Charter to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

In some public and expert debates, including by experts for the “international realist school” to right-wing media, the West is seen as responsible or at least co-responsible for Russia’s war against Ukraine. All speculation about the contribution or responsibility of NATO expansion to and for the war must remain speculation, although this line of reasoning is often deployed by Russia and its allies to justify Russia’s aggression. It is also sometimes used by US experts like Jeffrey Sachs, who consider “in-between” countries such as Ukraine a battleground for great powers. For them, it is the great powers that can decide what kind of security arrangements are allowable for the smaller countries in their neighbourhood. Moreover, the great powers “need” a buffer zone for their security, as if no other security arrangement between the great powers themselves or between the great powers and small states could be reached.

The fact is that the Russian aggression challenges the European security order and the borders agreed upon after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. It can be rightly feared that a victory in Ukraine would be seen as an incentive to attack other countries as well. A victory would also give a boost to groups inside the EU that would like to weaken the role of NATO in defending the EU countries’ security and Europe’s ties to the US. Russia wants to change the existing order by changing the borders, and it has pursued this strategy by supporting separatist movements in Georgia, Moldova, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine. Russia’s current “special operation” in Ukraine, which is in fact a full-scale war, seeks to bring all of Ukraine under the direct influence of Russia, and in his famous article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” Russian President Vladimir Putin has gone so far as to deny Ukraine the right to exist independently. For Putin, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia belong together under Moscow’s leadership.

The current war is not just a war that has originated from a dispute between two countries. It is a direct result of Russian imperialism and Russia's desire for revenge. As a result, the EU must view and treat the war as a threat not only to Ukraine but also to the European security order in general and specifically to the regions that are characterized by ongoing instability. This instability has also been instrumentalized by some regional forces to achieve their own domestic goals, and such cross-border cooperation in promoting instability is endangering European security. This is specifically the case in the Western Balkans, Moldova, and the South Caucasus, where Russia benefits from the resulting fragility and destabilization to expand its influence. As mentioned above, the defence against outside destabilizing interventions has become a vital objective of the European Union in order to safeguard its own security. This was not yet clearly recognized when the Russian challenge to Ukrainian territorial integrity started in 2014, but the full-fledged war initiated by Russia against a European country at the doors of the EU has eventually made this necessity clear, creating a new urgency for an enhanced enlargement policy for the Western Balkans.

The EU as the stabilizing factor in Europe

It is obvious that EU enlargement (in addition to NATO enlargement) has supported stability in Europe, and for those countries that are not part of one of these organizations, instability prevails. This includes the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, ethnic divisions in Bosnia and Hercegovina, political divisions in Moldova, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and tensions inside Georgia due to Russia's intervention and occupation. In all these cases, Russia has pursued the role of the spoiler, and Russian influence has been clearly documented in all of these conflicts. Of course, there are also conflicts of interest both within the EU and between EU member states and other countries, but these pose no security risk or only very low-level ones.

Given that EU enlargement provides an important stabilizing force, the EU should pursue new initiatives to extend its contribution to European stability. However, EU enlargement is not only an issue of political will.

That may be more the case for NATO enlargement, although NATO also requires that certain conditions be met by the countries aspiring to join it. As for the EU, a lengthy list of conditions must be dealt with in the accession talks and be ultimately met by the applicant countries before they can join the EU. In addition, bilateral issues may arise at the negotiation table, which may block progress during the accession process. This was done by Slovenia during the accession talks with Croatia and is presently being done by Bulgaria (even before negotiations have started) with North Macedonia, after a similar veto by Greece had been resolved. These vetoes were basically based on minor bilateral issues and had their origins in domestic politics. Other EU member states (most notably France) have also blocked progress on enlargement for domestic reasons. Fears about increased migration is one such reason. That being said, emigration could be reduced if the countries received help in their economic and social development, especially inside the EU. All this shows just how fragile relations between European states remain as long as there is no overall common political, economic, and security umbrella. Even if some conflicts between the countries remained unresolved, the outside challenges would be weakened substantially.

This does not mean that, in order to achieve and maintain security, all European countries must become members of NATO. However, as shown by the support for the defence of Ukraine, close cooperation between the EU and NATO is paramount to combating any external aggression. Therefore, increased alignment with the European Foreign and Security Policy, which itself is coordinated with NATO, not only supports countries in their security aspirations, but it is also one – if not the most – important element of the European security order. Such a common strategy is a precondition for pushing back and defeating any external aggression, especially as aggression today may not only come in the form of a direct military attack but may be hybrid, including cyber elements.

Even though the war in Ukraine has had no immediate, visible consequences for the enlargement of the “traditional” candidate countries of the Western Balkans, it has had an enormous impact on how the EU project is understood and defined. In this respect, the majority of the EU governments expect the Western Balkan governments to take a clear position concerning the Russian war against Ukraine. They should condemn Russia without

reservations and actively support the sanctions against Russia. The attitude of the Western Balkan countries towards the war, including the origin of this war, has become a decisive criterion for acceptance in the EU family.

The idea of a united Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok is, unfortunately, dead. Whatever the many reasons for the death of that dream, the mortal blow was delivered by Putin with Russia's attack on Ukraine. Moreover, the attack has been, as Putin himself has underlined, an attack on Western values and European borders based on the free will of peoples. To avert such an attack, the EU must stick together in defending Ukraine, and all the countries wishing to join the EU must agree with this political line.

Russia's war against Ukraine has also influenced the relations between the EU and the US. Defending Ukraine or the EU is not possible without the support of the US. Russia's attack on Ukraine has made this clearly visible and brought the EU closer to both the US and NATO. It will take a long time for the EU to reach its much-discussed goal of "strategic autonomy or sovereignty." Of course, improved coordination and cooperation within NATO and between NATO's and the EU's defence policies (including their policies on arms procurement) would reduce costs and increase the efficiency of the EU countries' defence efforts. For the time being, the EU's enlargement strategy should also be coordinated with the US, although the EU should have the most important and final word. This cooperation should be especially strong in relation to security and bring solutions for the unresolved conflicts at the borders and periphery of the EU.

New challenges for EU security and the enlargement policy

The EU has a strong interest in encouraging candidate countries to align their strategic aims with its own. With the exception of Serbia (and partly Bosnia and Herzegovina), the Western Balkan countries are in line with the EU's foreign and security policy, especially concerning the Russian war against Ukraine. Serbia also often follows the political line taken by the EU, and it also conducts regular manoeuvres with NATO – more

than it does with Russia, as Serb government officials underline. However, the Serbian leadership has often played an ambiguous role for domestic reasons. After having nurtured anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments, it is not easy to promote a clear pro-Western policy. This partly self-induced conflict between the official position of the government and the media supported by the government on the one hand and realistic policies needed to stay in line with the EU's positions on the other hand can also be seen in the case of the talks on Kosovo. Time and again the dominant forces in Serbia rely on the Russian government (and recently also on the Hungarian government) to reject the acceptance of Kosovo in international organizations. Enhancing demagogic anti-EU positions and at the same time accepting that some realistic positions must be accepted will time and again create problems for Serbia in attempting to draw closer to the EU. The recent talks, which have ended without the signature of an agreement that could advance Kosovo's international position, is a clear example of an ambivalent muddling through policy on the part of Serbia. At the same time, the resistance of the Kosovo government to fulfilling its obligations is also preventing a constructive position from the Serbian side.

Maintaining a clear position against the Russian aggression and helping Ukraine defend itself must not change the original goals of European unification. The EU, which was built after the devastation and horrors of World War II, is and must remain a peace project. The builders of that union thought that the economic basis of the EU and its relations with other countries, especially Russia, would be a major force for peace in Europe. Where necessary, a small number of NATO troops, mostly on behalf of the UN, would be able to support efforts to reach and maintain stability, as in the Western Balkans. Russia's attack on Ukraine has changed our fundamental beliefs about promoting peace in Europe, as it has become necessary to deliver weapons to Ukraine so that it can defend itself. The EU has had to recognize that, in order to maintain peace, weapons may be necessary. However, weapons alone can never bring about peace.

In addition to weapons, Ukraine has also received official EU candidate status. The promise of future access to the EU and offers of economic support for reconstruction are certainly helping Ukraine resist the Russian

aggression. However, the possibility of a fast track for the EU membership of Ukraine (and Moldova) has been seen with great and understandable reservations by the countries of the Western Balkans. They had to fulfil many conditions before their candidate status was accepted and negotiations could start. It was a long and complicated process. Many EU governments put much more pressure on the European Commission to give the green light for the accession negotiations with Ukraine than they did in the case of the Western Balkan countries. Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influences in the region would be much weaker today had the EU (or some member countries) developed a more strategic and forward-looking enlargement policy in the years before the war.

However, past mistakes and failures can not only be found on the EU's side. Enthusiasm for the necessary reforms in the Western Balkans has been decreasing for some years. This is partly due to EU enlargement fatigue, especially following the anti-enlargement stance of some domestic politicians. At the same time, the missing readiness of many EU countries is not the only reason, and it is certainly no justification for the lack of reforms in the region. The fact that these reforms would also strengthen the Western Balkan countries themselves in order to develop economically and encourage young people to stay is often overlooked. All too often, the political and ethnic divisions within the Western Balkan countries, as well as the nationalist divisions between the countries, have diverted politicians from the most important task: pursuing stable economic and social development. The result is mass emigration, especially by the young and well-educated.

The EU must not discriminate against the Western Balkans

Despite the necessity of supporting Ukraine (and Moldova) militarily, politically, and morally, the EU should not spread the fantasy that a quick accession is possible or that Ukraine's accession could overtake or surpass that of the Western Balkan countries. Ukraine's reconstruction both materially and morally after this war will be a tremendous

undertaking. As a result of the war, the oligarchs who had dominated business and politics in Ukraine have lost significant wealth and influence, but corruption in the country has not disappeared. The EU must ensure that the authoritarian measures taken during wartime are transitioned into a fully democratic system on the basis of EU principles and values once the war ends. Fundamentally, the EU must not demand anything less from Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia than it does from the Western Balkan countries.

The conditions for membership must be transparent and valid for all countries. However, with some governments there is greater sympathy for the membership of Ukraine than the support offered to the Western Balkan countries. It would be very helpful for winning the hearts and minds of the populations of these countries if they were able to see the benefits of support for Ukraine themselves. All the benefits and advantages granted to Ukraine should also be offered to the Western Balkan countries.

June of this year will mark twenty years since the Thessaloniki Summit, when the EU offered the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania a membership perspective. Only Slovenia and later Croatia have succeeded in passing the entrance test. Similarly to Ukraine, Croatia was in a difficult position after the war with Yugoslavia/Serbia, but the Croatian government, led by prime ministers from different political parties, had the courage to transcend ethnic divisions and build bridges between different political and ethnic groups in the interest of meeting the EU accession requirements. For the accession of Croatia, there was, despite the already growing enlargement scepticism, still a readiness by the EU to accept new members. At the same time, Croatia also had a strong willingness to implement the necessary reforms, which proved decisive for its successful EU accession.

For some critics inside Croatia, the EU membership came too early, as nationalism has not been overcome. However, it must be recognized that no EU country is in full accordance with the EU's founding principles and values, as expressed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. That is also true for Croatia, where nationalist rhetoric once again sours both public debate and its relations with its neighbours, especially Serbia. Even the events of World War II are used by Croat and Serb nationalists to attack the other side. Still, much can be learned from Croatia's

accession process by the other countries of the Western Balkans, even if the ethnic divisions and outside influences are less strong than in other countries of the Western Balkans. Overall, as a guiding principle, the countries of the Western Balkans should not be discriminated against as compared to Ukraine, nor should they expect to get a free ride parallel to a fast-track accession of Ukraine.

The EU must take decisive steps now

The EU must also continue to pay special attention to the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. After the name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece had been resolved by adding “North” to Macedonia’s name, Bulgaria intervened and vetoed the opening of the accession talks by demanding the explicit inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian constitution and the clarification of “identity” issues going back far into history. A French “compromise”, which recognizes some of the Bulgarian demands, especially the mentioning of the Bulgarian minority in the constitution, has led to an agreement between the two governments.

However, the Macedonian parliament still lacks a majority in favour of the constitutional amendments. In the meantime, extremist forces within both countries seek to exploit the dispute and poison bilateral relations. However, the global security situation is far too precarious to let such conflicts spiral. The EU as a whole and the European Commission and the European Parliament in particular must push for solutions that are acceptable for both sides. The EU must be actively involved in the ongoing dialogue between the two states, as the prolongation of the conflict has a negative impact on the entire EU.

In addition, the conflict-ridden situation in Bosnia and Hercegovina should be of great concern to the EU. There is much scepticism about maintaining the office of the High Representative, with its wide-ranging “Bonn Powers”, which give the High Representative the possibility to overrule democratically-based decisions. At the same time, it may be argued that the office is still necessary as a security guarantee to keep the country together and prevent the secession of Republika Srpska. If so, the High Representative must act with great sensitivity and

involve citizens in an ongoing dialogue. They must assist in building a modern state rather than participate in constant debates about who gets what position. Instead, the basic needs of Bosnia's citizens must be at the centre of political deliberations and decision-making.

Elsewhere in the region, the unresolved issues between Serbia and Kosovo have led over and over to new conflicts, which continue to sow new divisions and antagonisms between the two countries. Both sides must be pushed into taking courageous steps to overcome the tragedies of the past. Reconciliation takes a lot of time, but recognizing facts and the need to move forward together toward the EU may be achieved in a shorter time. Serbia should support or at least accept a stronger presence of Kosovo in international organizations, and Kosovo should finally accept and implement the federation of Serb cities in Kosovo.

Immediate EU membership is not possible. There is no general readiness by the EU to accept new members for the time being, and no candidate country is currently prepared to join the EU. However, opening serious negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia would be an important signal that accession has not come to an end. Both the Western Balkans and the EU itself need a win in the form of opening and constructively pursuing new accession talks. Such talks will not lead directly or immediately to membership, but they would at least provide a basis for hope that the path to EU membership is open and coming closer.

Conclusion

Parallel to opening the long-overdue negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and facilitating talks on settling the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, the EU must develop specific plans for a staged or step-by-step integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. Based on their level of preparedness, candidate countries must be given the opportunity to join EU policies and programs before acceding to the EU. Such intermediate steps and provisional membership, without full rights and obligations, could deliver immediate results for the Western Balkans but also present models for Ukraine and Moldova, and even Georgia, if the government in Tbilisi is able to free itself from the domination of former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Proposals for such an integration process have been elaborated by CEPS in Brussels, in cooperation with the European Policy Center in Belgrade. This “Template for Staged Accession” proposes an accession in stages before integration with full rights and responsibilities can be agreed upon. It could overcome some of the resistance in the EU countries against quick accession and help accession countries implement the EU policies in a step-by-step process. However this process is defined and organized, Russia’s war against Ukraine, as well as the EU’s values of cooperation and democratic decision-making, should push the EU not only to support Ukraine but also to elaborate a clear and effective enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans. The EU should not miss the chance “offered” by Russia’s aggression, and it should act now to ensure the future stability of the Western Balkans. Only such stability could prevent the emergence of a new crisis in Southeast Europe.