

The EU's Enlargement Strategy at a Crossroads? Redirecting the Debate Toward Acquisition-based Integrative Models¹

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Abstract: There have been many recurring initiatives for an alternative EU-oriented enlargement process that could provide the Western Balkan region with a credible EU perspective. Several models have been developed conceptually and discussed in a variety of academic, policy and political spheres as potential replacements for the conventional EU model employed in the previous expansion waves.

The majority of the proposed alternative models for EU accession of the Western Balkans are non-invasive in nature and essentially align with the one used in the past enlargement waves. Each new proposal adds a differentiated value to the current model, and typically highlights the significance of candidate states' reform agendas based on the Copenhagen criteria, but with some flexible, specifically targeted, and/or phased approaches to the accession process designed to eliminate the ever-intensifying "integrational fatigue".

This essay intends to purposefully "radicalize" the ongoing discussions on the Western Balkans' weariness towards the current EU's enlargement policy by offering a new approach to the normative reconceptualization

1 **Nota bene:** This non-paper essay is intended to be read and evaluated as an *intentionally provocative rhetorical intervention* that primarily aims to radicalize current debates on the EU accession-related fatigue in the Western Balkans, in order to open up space for advancing and developing a more constructive dialogue on all feasible (alternative) solutions and approaches in the EU enlargement debates.

of the entire process. The model advocated in this essay proposes a “merger and acquisition” (M&A) design as a substitute for the so-called “accreditation-based” integration methodology the EU is presently using in its current enlargement strategy. The proposed model fundamentally questions the democratic essence of the approach that drives the ongoing EU enlargement procedures, reshapes the existing debates on alternative methodologies, and questions some of their fundamental ontological dimensions.

Keywords: European Union, Western Balkans, enlargement, alternative approach.

Introduction

Almost all EU policies have been affected by contrasting understandings of liberal democracy and the ongoing need to redefine the main instruments EU institutions and agents use in their external, enlargement, and neighbourhood policies. After several successful EU accession waves in the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s, many observers expected that the new expansion of the Union would effectively continue in the following decades. Instead, the EU enlargement process is facing a rather significant crisis and stagnation. There have even been some setbacks marked by Brexit and raising *integrational* fatigue in the Western Balkans.

Based on the available official reports, all sides involved in the ongoing EU accession-oriented reforms in the WB6 seem to be dissatisfied with its pace and headway, and the growing discontent is contrasted, manifested, and/or derived from and within different sets of priorities. The EU's accession goals and procedures are constantly put to the test in the WB, at both the national and the regional level, through normative and procedural contestations, a lack of consensus and/or active opposition to status quo changes, increasing Euroscepticism and/or EU-oriented apathy, societal and regional polarization cloaked within a long-lasting period of political instability, and finally, the mounting politicization of liberal democracy paradigms that drive the agents' motivations to act or block the current processes.

Each WB6 country has confronted its own specific democratic challenges within the EU integration methodology, mostly exemplified by democratic stagnation and unnecessary delays. Even though a nominal strategic vision toward EU accession exists, over time, the “integrational” dimensions of the process have lost their appeal in all relevant debates, both locally and regionally. Criticisms of the approach are mostly embedded in perceptions of messy compromises resulting in contentious results or in the bureaucratization of the EU enlargement principles, which lead to the rise of power among radical agents that promote disintegrative norms.

This essay focuses on highlighting the key factors that drive the current EU enlargement fatigue crisis in the Western Balkans. It first situates and briefly discusses the essence of the alternative models that are proposed to resolve the core dismantlement generated by the traditional, uncompromising EU’s approach to its own enlargement. The second part outlines the contours of a new proposal that deliberately pushes the debate to its normative liberal democratic limits. The essay also fundamentally questions democratic essence within the ongoing EU enlargement process, re-conceptualizes the existing debates on alternative methodologies, and questions some of their basic ontological dimensions.

Mapping the Alternatives to the Current EU Enlargement Model

Policy models serve their purpose when they capture the key definable features of the process(es) that unfold in reality. The workability of a model inevitably sparks discussions, since it deals with questions both inherent and important to the contexts it operates within.

The European Union’s enlargement policy and its manifestations within the integration process, although firmly grounded in long-standing sets of criteria, has fallen victim to its own structural capacity exhaustion. The citizens of most EU member states, as well as a vast number of policymakers, politicians, and scholars, have already expressed their scepticism about the benefits of further enlargement processes. This fatigue is also felt on the applicants’ side, slowly hampering their

motivation to engage and act more effectively. To the non-EU counterparts, the whole system has become over-bureaucratized and distant from the “big picture” goals the EU should normatively pursue for its own long-term stability. Without a properly functioning enlargement model that can sustain the final membership admissions on the European continent, the EU could face an even deeper multilateralism crisis that is incompatible with the applicable dimensions of state sovereignty.

Accession to the EU remains one of the key long-term goals of all Western Balkans counterparts, and some countries in the region, like Serbia and Montenegro, have already initiated membership negotiations with their Brussels-based partners, while others are fairly close to opening their first chapters. However, the EU's foreign policy and enlargement portfolios toward the WB6 have gradually become entangled in the last two decades (Hasic et al, 2021). Many signs of “EU integration fatigue” are strongly present in the Western Balkan region, particularly among the young generations, who are frustrated with the slow pace of the EU-motivated reforms and the perceived and/or real lack of political will to tackle corruption and strengthen democratic institutions (O'Brennan, 2014; Economides, 2020). As a result, the benefits of EU membership and the essence of the integration-driven societal transformations are constantly questioned locally and regionally. Despite the EU's repeatedly confirmed rhetorical commitment to the WB6's future perspective within the Union, noticeable progress has been slow and postponed repeatedly, while the lack of “rewards” immediately affecting citizens' lives contributes to the accumulating scepticism. The piling suspensions as to what the EU's “real intentions” are, and the ever-growing lack of clarity of what will happen in the coming decade have both led to a habit of constantly probing the EU's interests in terms of integrating the WB6 within its current structures.

Consequently, some new models of integration have been elaborated in theory and discussed within various academic and policy circles, flagged as alternatives to the traditional EU enlargement-integration models that were employed in past expansion waves.

One of the most extensively discussed alternatives refers to the multi-speed integration design, which entails greater flexibility and differentiated levels of integration between the EU and individual

countries or groups of countries, allowing them to manoeuvre the integration requirements at their own pace (cf. Schimmelfennig et al, 2023). Another widely elaborated option is the enhanced cooperation model, which would allow a certain group of the EU member states to deepen their ties with selected non-EU countries in specific policy areas they find relevant or feasible, while other member states may opt out and stay disengaged (Busch and Sultan, 2023). The most germane application of this model is associated with special association agreement arrangements between the EU and non-EU countries. They create closer economic and political ties, including the establishment of a free trade area with improved access to the EU market, without full membership burdens or requirements.

There have also been many discussions about various special status models of integration, which would allow closer cooperation and integration while maintaining some critical distance from full membership in the EU. Some authors have also proposed various “phased approach” or “staged accession” models, which promote a segmented and gradual adoption of the Copenhagen and Madrid criteria over time (Emerson et al, 2021). Finally, there have been many proposals to link and couple the fulfilment of the EU accession criteria with enhanced reform-oriented regional cooperation and integration processes within the Western Balkan region. This tactic would help countries in the WB6 region work closely together in addressing some common challenges, such as corruption and organized crime, which would effectively help them build a stronger foundation for their integration into the EU (Metodieva et al, 2022).

Overall, all academic and policy scholars involved in debating the alternatives to the current EU enlargement model agree that there is no one-size-fits-all alternative theoretical solution for reframing and reforming the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria, and any fluctuations from the current stream would need to be carefully considered and negotiated, as well as most evidently probed before entering into force. There is also a consensus among scholars that adopting more flexible, targeted, and/or phased approaches within the accession process could eliminate the intensifying fatigue and enhance the overall quality of the integration process while also ensuring that each country is firmly held to the high standards necessary for eventual EU membership.

One common feature of all available enlargement alternatives is their being grounded within the liberal democratic values of the EU and its member states. Additionally, most of them propagate the “non-invasive character” of the EU enlargement process, with some even opening up space for overall socio-political stabilization at the cost of non-integration as the endgame of the entire process. The proposal below deliberately and provocatively challenges this rhetoric and radicalizes the ongoing debates in order to shape their outer normative limits.

Some Thoughts on the EU's Current Enlargement Model

The EU's current enlargement policy structurally resembles a membership-type accreditation procedure. The practice is led by several basic democratic principles, and its end goal is to ensure quality and foster a culture of continuous improvement. It is conducted to formally recognize candidate countries' capacities to meet certain predetermined criteria or set standards and eventually award a “quality label” (i.e. full membership status). The EU member states, as well as all candidate countries, operate with a considerable amount of independence and autonomy, relying on democratic principles and acting within strong national sovereignty frameworks. The EU's centralized “federal” authority exercises oversight and control over the quality of joint policy areas, while the states assume varying degrees of control over other policy areas. To preserve this delicate balance and power dynamics, the EU enlargement process has essentially been shaped as a practice of “accreditation”, with membership status as its final stage.

The EU's current integrative *accreditation-based membership method* works as a means of conducting external standard-based quality assessment and assurance through a peer evaluation of a vast number of policies, institutions, and administrative and legal frameworks, focusing on both fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose. The EU's enlargement process, observed as an integrative accreditation procedure, aims to ensure a specific level of quality according to the EU's overall mission, the commonly agreed objectives and expectations of its member states, and to safeguard particular national development interests and objectives.

The EU's accreditation-based enlargement procedure is commissioned and overseen by a suitable and recognized EU body, and further encouraged by various institutional stakeholders to ensure integrative “value for the money” progression and to adopt corrective measures and improve candidates' overall capacity and admission quality. Such a transparent “accountability through evidence of results” procedure is considered to be viable, valid, and reliable by all EU member states that had previously gone through the same steps to “join the club”. It preserves the competitive spirit among the candidate countries and helps enhance and assure the overall quality of the process. It also increases overall quality awareness, and it improves international communication, motivation, and cooperation.

The accreditation process follows specific membership licensing dimensions within a wider European continental set-up. The process presupposes high levels of democratic capacity on the part of the candidate countries to approximate their performance to the commonly agreed standards. The procedure is application-based and voluntary in its nature, and it is founded upon internationally accepted codified standards. The candidate countries are expected to be consistent with the process requirements, to be self-critical and in service of safeguarding the EU's overall mission, as well as showcase a strong commitment to the range of EU and member state interests. The overall process follows both a “fitness-for-purpose” approach, verifying whether the candidate country is achieving the set EU goals (i.e. mission quality improvement), and “fitness of purpose”, validating whether the purpose itself is acceptable, which prepares the candidate states for future market requirements and reduces quality-related complaints from EU-based stakeholders.

Potential Paradigm Shift: An Acquisition-based Integrative Model

What if, instead of observing the EU enlargement process as an accreditation-based integration procedure, it was perceived as a merger and acquisition (M&A) practice? In this sense, the EU would be an interested “buyer”, acting as the acquiring entity of an underdeveloped

European (economic and security) space, willing to transform and integrate it into a completely renewed “assets and liabilities” mass that is able to meet the acquiring entity’s standards and its stockholders’ interests. This novel organizational consolidation would not create a new company or drive the acquired company out of existence, it would rather result in a new and enriched organizational consortium, attaching a new, fully operational business unit. The principal goal of such integration is, naturally, to make more effective use of the existing potentials and capacities.

There are many motives for such an approach from the EU toward the European areas that have not been integrated yet, primarily the Western Balkan states. The simplest one would be the “excess capacity” intention to acquire another entity in an established market in order to gain greater efficiencies for its own stakeholders (i.e. expanding the EU’s product lines, including democracy and human rights, *or* widening its market reach, with various types of business opportunities in newly transformed and regulated markets). Another dimension could be a “geographic expansion strategy”, in which the EU, operating in an already fragmented industry, is interested in acquiring other entities to broaden its overall position.

The entire acquisition-based integrative enlargement process would essentially entail a sequenced activity with many steps, regulated by mutually agreed binding contracts signed in advance, which would temporarily suspend candidate states’ decision-making sovereignty in all EU-related reform processes and transfer them onto the EU’s acquisition commissioners, who would be mandated to handle the transformation process until full integration is completed. The scope and range of competencies the candidate states would “give up” in advance would correspond to the same scope and range of competencies the states would lose to the EU once they become full EU members. The only difference to the current models is that the candidate states would give up the competencies in advance, and they would never receive them back, since they would effectively drop them upon full EU membership.

The entire process would be broken down into several stages, with precisely outlined tasks and goals set out in the acquisition contract. The reform procedure would thus be outsourced to the external experts

of the acquiring entity (i.e. the EU), while the internal agents (i.e. the national governments of the WB6), who had previously decided to temporarily transfer their decision-making sovereignty in all EU-related affairs within a democratic parliamentary procedure, would be “powerless” to stop the imposed EU-related reforms and unable to hinder the acquisition-based democratic transition process until it is fully completed. The progress each candidate state makes would be reviewed bilaterally on an annual basis, by the two contracting parties’ expert panel boards, to prevent any potential violation of national state sovereignty.

The operational paradigm that would drive the cooperation and elites’ willingness to forfeit their sovereign rights is reflected in their functionally philosophical determination of giving up decision-making competencies in advance in order to attain the higher goal of full EU accession. The accountability dilemma toward citizens and elections would refocus on local matters only, in domains that are not exclusively related to EU matters. In this way, local politicians in the WB6 would be able to focus their attention on reforms that remain nationally relevant to their citizens, and they would not be able to divert their attention to decisions that pertain to EU regulations, which they are effectively not able to negotiate or change.

In essence, the “acquired” WB6 entities and their legal orders would be effectively subjected to painful and long-delayed system interference (i.e. reform processes) that might be perceived as adversarial and undemocratically imposed by an externalized group of experts, although they would ultimately be based on democratically transferred powers, working under a specific set of agreed rules. While there might be resistance to this process in the beginning, in the long run, the responsible elected leaders in the “acquired societies” would benefit from the top-down exchange, as opposed to the ongoing and painful adaptation processes that demonstrate no visible progress, and the overall effects of the reform processes directed and guided by the experiences of various societies that have already managed to integrate into the EU, as well as the structural changes and specific skills that are being transplanted, including the adoption of the policies and practices of the acquiring entity.

Such a transformational process would, at first, most definitely awaken sentiments of the neo-colonial and post-colonial tutorship the EU wants to avoid at all costs. It would most certainly also deepen “them versus us” types of societal conflicts and cultural differentiations. The psychological effects of such top-down acquisition-based integration procedures are severe, and they can negatively affect the overall process. They can even shake the basic principles of the EU as a democratic legal order.

However, it is important to remember that any successful acquisition process needs to be based on integration as its key principle. Added values are only created when the two involved entities come together and begin to work toward the purpose of the acquisition. As outlined, at the outset, the enhanced integration might lead to more cultural clashes and negative attitudes and reactions, as well as very high degrees of stress and anxiety. Only in the “consolidation phase” of the acquisition would the real sociocultural integration values emerge, when the two “corporate cultures” are truly blended. This is when the integrative maturity phase starts, and the new social norms, previously thought to be foreign and imposed, are understood as internal, cohesive, and integrative components of the candidate states, now new EU member states about to assume their full and formal membership and regain their full national sovereignty.

Concluding Remarks

Although the WB6 counterparts should be held accountable for their own inability to carry out the essential EU-oriented reforms, there is a growing belief in the region that the current EU enlargement system is over-bureaucratized and far from the big-picture objectives the EU should normatively pursue for its own long-term stability.

The goal of this essay was to purposefully radicalize the ongoing discussions over the Western Balkans’ weariness over the EU’s enlargement policy by offering a new approach to the process. The model advocated in this essay proposes a merger and acquisition (M&A) design as a substitute for the “accreditation-based” integration methodology the EU is using in its current enlargement policy.

The entire acquisition-based integrative enlargement process of the EU is essentially seen as a sequenced activity with many steps, governed by mutually binding contracts that temporarily suspend candidate states' decision-making sovereignty in all EU-related reform processes and their a priori transfer to the EU's "acquisition commissioners", who are charged with managing the transformation process until full membership takes place.

Such a top-down transformational process would undoubtedly stir feelings of neo-colonial and post-colonial tutorship at first, which the EU is determined to avoid at all costs. However, the true sociocultural integration values of such a radical model might only manifest after the "consolidation phase" of the acquisition begins. Only when the two "corporate cultures" are really merged and the integrative maturity phase begins, will the cohesive and integrative elements of the process become apparent and justifiable.

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