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EU-Western Balkans Relations in Transition: Historical Legacies, Geopolitical Shifts and Future Outlooks

Introduction

Since the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans region has evolved from a focus on post-conflict stabilisation to a complex mix of enlargement efforts, geopolitical interests, and regional ambitions. Initially, the EU positioned itself as the primary external force driving political and economic reforms, but the prolonged accession process and internal EU challenges have shifted this dynamic over time. Meanwhile, the Western Balkans has become a hotspot of geopolitical rivalry, with Russia, China, and other players seeking to increase their influence, thereby challenging the EU's strategic unity and credibility.

This analysis sets out firstly to examine the break-up of Yugoslavia. Then, it goes on to consider the increasing geopolitical rivalry shaping the region and evaluate current levels of engagement between the EU and the Western Balkan states. Finally, the paper will explore the future prospects for EU integration and cooperation in the region, followed by its conclusions. The goal is to determine whether the EU can sustain its central role in the region amid changing regional and global contexts.

Background

The collapse of the Soviet Union (SU) and the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) during the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the birth of a number of new states in Europe. The SFRY, a multi-ethnic federal state comprising several ethnicities, became disintegrated mainly due to the rise of an ultranationalist movement in Serbia. In particular, Slobodan Milošević's policies, aimed at centralising power in Serbia, were widely seen as efforts to create a 'Greater Serbia', which significantly increased inter-ethnic tensions and accelerated the federation's

break-up. His government played a key role in igniting, in the early 1990s, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting Serb nationalist forces and weakening federal structures. Later, towards the end of the 1990s, increasing repressive policies of the Serbian state, led by Milošević, triggered a new war in Kosovo. As with Bosnia and Croatia, in Kosovo too, Serbian state-led military and paramilitary forces carried out policies of ethnic cleansing, which also resulted in a large number of massacres of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, ultimately prompting NATO intervention. The EU failed to demonstrate its capacity to lead and resolve the violent disintegration of the SFRY, which was seen more as an opportunity for the US than for the EU. This was particularly evident during NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 and in Kosovo in 1999, both predominantly led by the US.

In this context, following the collapse of the SFRY, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of six new countries: Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008, was the last to secede from the SFRY's break-up, bringing the total of those countries that emerged from it to seven. In fact, the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo seemed to provide additional impetus for EU decision-makers to establish the ESDP and appoint the first High Representative for the CFSP. It also, to some extent, shifted the international community's attention towards the western Balkan region, especially in the case of the EU and NATO.

In this context, during the early 2000s, specifically at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Thessaloniki Summit, a European perspective was promised to all Western Balkan nations. Since then, Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, and Croatia in 2013. The remaining five countries from the former SFRY (i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina,

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Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), together with Albania, are now collectively referred to as the ‘Western Balkans’.

Beyond EU Enlargement: The Western Balkans as the Centre of a New Geopolitical Rivalry

The Western Balkan is positioned at a key crossroads in Europe, where various political, economic, and security interests meet. Although the vision of the governments in the region is officially EU and Euro-Atlantic integration (with some exclusions regarding NATO membership, e.g., Serbia and Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina), the region’s complex politics and uneven reform progress have created opportunities for multiple international players.

The EU has remained directly and extensively involved in the Western Balkans over the past 25 years, using its enlargement policy as a tool for stability and change. It employs financial assistance, regulatory alignment, and political conditions to set standards for governance, economic reforms, and regional cooperation. Initiatives like the Berlin Process, the Common Regional Market, and the Growth Plan aim to integrate the region into several sectors of the EU’s single market and foster lasting stability. Although there is occasional fatigue on both sides, the EU’s credibility and presence remain the most influential factors shaping the region’s strategic direction.

The United States (US) still plays an important role, though less extensively, mainly focusing on political stability and security. The US influence is most visible in NATO expansion, supporting the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and backing security sector reforms. For example, under US leadership, Albania became a NATO member in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Serbia remains opposed to NATO membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession process has been delayed by Republika Srpska (a constituent entity within that state). Kosovo is open to joining but faces difficulties in starting the process because four NATO members do not recognise it. Moreover, the US government often acts as a strategic partner of the EU, encouraging tough political compromises and opposing destabilising forces in the Western Balkans. Thus, the EU and the US form a loosely coordinated transatlantic framework that supports the region’s European integration and Euro-Atlantic goals.

At the same time, China and Russia are expanding their influence, each with distinct interests and methods. Recently, other regional and international actors, including Türkiye, the Gulf states, and multi-lateral organisations, have increased their presence, adding new layers of geopolitical and economic complexity. Understanding how these players interact and how their engagement affects stability and prospects for integration is essential for grasping the shifting geopolitics of the Western Balkans.

China’s engagement primarily centres on economic interests, notably infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. While its loans and investments provide governments with quick access to capital, they also raise concerns about debt sustainability, transparency, and compliance with EU standards. These factors can lead to parallel economic dependencies that complicate EU integration. Although Russia’s economic role is not comparable to China’s, its political influence is more significant. Moscow leverages historical and cultural ties, especially with Serbia and Republika Srpska, to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration and bolster nationalist sentiments, using energy reliance and disinformation as main strategies. Russia, along with other destructive policies in the region, is supporting Serbia on the Kosovo issue, leveraging its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Consequently, both China and Russia pose challenges to the EU’s normative influence, albeit through different approaches.

Regarding Türkiye, the Gulf states, and various multi-lateral organisations their roles include investments, trade, political, and cultural engagement, which contribute to the region’s complex geopolitical environment. Although these actors do not rival the EU’s transformative role, they present alternative partnership options for Western Balkan governments. These options can be used either to diversify alliances or to eventually enhance their bargaining leverage with Brussels.

In brief, the Western Balkans remains a strategically contested yet EU-centric region. The EU’s enlargement policy remains the most influential framework for reform and long-term stability, even as its credibility is periodically challenged. The US provides vital security support, China offers destructive economic alternatives, and Russia brings political tension. Other emerging players add complexity without fun-

damentally changing the region's European path. Therefore, the interactions among these international actors emphasise the importance of a consistent and credible EU role, as it remains the sole partner capable of offering both a transformative model and a long-term strategic goal for the Western Balkans.

The current state of EU-Western Balkans relations

Although Croatia's 2013 EU membership marked a significant turning point, the rest of the region has remained in limbo since then, with minor moves and no substantial progress regarding EU membership.

In fact, the EU's enlargement fatigue, rising populism in both the EU and the Western Balkans, and the growing influence of competing geopolitical interests such as China and Russia, have made the prospects for enlargement more uncertain¹. Inner challenges, including economic crises, Brexit, and growing nationalism and populism, along with unresolved disputes such as those between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the deeply divided Bosnia and Herzegovina, further hinder the process². Additionally, bilateral disputes between the Western Balkan countries and EU members, such as Greece and North Macedonia's previous name dispute, Bulgaria and North Macedonia's ongoing constitutional conflict, and unresolved issues between Croatia and Montenegro, also contribute to the enlargement stalemate³.

Therefore, none of the six Western Balkan countries has succeeded in joining the EU, i.e., achieving their ultimate goal of EU membership. Among these nations, Montenegro began accession negotiations in 2012 and is currently regarded as a frontrunner in the process. Albania has opened all 33 negotiation chapters, with the last ones opened in November 2025, and has made notable progress, especially over the past year. Serbia, which started accession talks in 2014, has seen its progress stall over the last three years due to its lack of support for EU sanctions and policies on Russia, as well as the autocratic tendencies of the current government. North Macedonia has resolved its previous name dispute with Greece, but is now struggling to open accession negotiations due to an ongoing constitutional dispute with Bulgaria. Bosnia and Herzegovina has held candidate status since 2022 but has yet to open accession negotiations. Kosovo is regarded only as a potential candidate; despite sub-

mitting its application for candidate status in 2022, it has not yet been assessed by the EU's institutional bodies, mainly because five EU member states still do not recognise its independence. The recent progress in the cases of Albania and Montenegro is also linked to the EU's shift in its enlargement policy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such a change in the EU's enlargement policy resulting from the war in Ukraine was also noted in the cases of Ukraine and Moldova regarding their progress in EU integration. Nevertheless, whether this shift in EU enlargement policy will continue in the event of an armistice or the end of the war in Ukraine is still a big question mark.

Future prospects: the EU-Western Balkans relations

There are four potential scenarios for framing future relations over the next 5–10 years between the EU and the Western Balkans: the status quo, the status quo+ (i.e., liberal scenarios), geopolitical partial enlargement, and geopolitical full enlargement (i.e., realist scenarios)⁴. In the *status quo* scenario, no significant changes or developments will take place in the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans, whereas in the *status quo+* scenario, the Western Balkan states gain limited access to the EU single market while making only limited progress toward full EU membership⁵.

Nonetheless, for the Western Balkans, this means no full EU membership, a continuation of the EU's approach over the last 12 years (since Croatia joined the EU), and, in the best-case scenario (with status quo+), it would mean limited access to the EU's single market⁶. In other words, this involves a gradual process of engagement and sectoral integration into the single market without granting immediate full membership. For the EU, this would mean reduced influence in the region (particularly with the status quo scenario) and a heightened opportunity for other international actors (e.g., China, Russia) to exert influence and impact⁷.

On the other hand, within the *geopolitical partial enlargement* scenario, only one or two of the six Western Balkan countries may join the EU within the next 5–10 years, while the *geopolitical full enlargement* scenario envisions the complete integration of all six Western Balkan countries into the EU within the next 5–10 years⁸.

For the Western Balkans, the approach depends on the selected realist scenario. If geopolitical partial enlargement is implemented, this could result in rapid full membership for one or two countries, while others remain in their current state. Alternatively, if the EU pursues a policy of geopolitical full enlargement, all six countries could accelerate their accession within 5–10 years through a differentiated integration approach⁹. In these scenarios, especially in the case of geopolitical full enlargement, security concerns would have to take precedence over procedural rules, and ultimately, external influences from Russia and China would be countered with more robust enlargement strategies. Consequently, this would enhance the EU's influence in the region while restricting that of other international actors, such as China and Russia¹⁰. However, the EU's standing as a normative entity may then be put into question.

Conclusion

In brief, the EU-Western Balkans relationship highlights both the enduring appeal of European integration and the persistent challenges hindering its achievement. The legacy of Yugoslavia's break-up,

the EU's fluctuating commitment to enlargement, and the emergence of rival geopolitical powers have collectively created a region where progress varies, and expectations grow more strained. Nevertheless, the EU still holds influence, normative authority, and institutional presence assets that, if strategically leveraged, could invigorate the accession process and enhance regional stability amid rising global competition. The future of this relationship depends on the EU's ability to address internal divisions, clarify a geopolitical vision, and implement tangible improvements for Western Balkan citizens, as well as on the willingness of governments in the Western Balkans and their respective societies to undertake deep reforms and transformation. The EU should learn from past Western Balkans failures, and better coordination and clear policy goals are needed for the next 5–10 years. The vague 'European perspective' since 2003 must become a concrete, achievable plan within a decade for all six states. Whether the coming years will bring renewed momentum, continued stagnation, and/or a return to violence in any of the region's hotspots will ultimately test the region's resilience and the EU's credibility as a global actor.

References

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- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.6-7.
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- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
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