



Report

EU ENLARGEMENT UNDER GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURE: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Report on the EU Enlargement Under Geopolitical Pressure

On 4 February, experts and practitioners, including Ms Valentina Superti from DG ENEST, European Commission, Mr Wouter Zweers from the Clingendael Institute, Ms Jana Faktor Juzová from EUCRTA, Mr Marko Todorović from the Centre for European Policy (CEP) in Belgrade, and Mr Martin Vokálek from the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, met in Brussels with over 40 participants under the Chatham House rules to discuss EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, with a focus on its security dimensions. The discussion explored the tension between geopolitical urgency and democratic conditionality, the uneven progress of candidate countries, and the growing influence of external actors in the region.

A key theme was how Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reshaped EU enlargement, turning it from a mostly technical process into a strategic tool for European security. In parallel, the debate highlighted the long-term, multi-stage nature of enlargement, emphasising that democracy and the rule of law remain non-negotiable foundations for sustainable stability. Concerns were also raised about potential gaps between principle and practice, including the risk that geopolitical priorities could at times overshadow assessments of democratic performance.

NOTE: This report summarises the discussion and does not represent the official positions of the organisers, nor those of the institutions or individuals involved.



Main Points

- EU enlargement has become a key security instrument following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, it remains a long-term, merit-based process that depends on strict democratic conditionality.
- Gradual integration and new EU incentives can sustain engagement by delivering early benefits. Their credibility, however, depends on consistent implementation and genuine reform progress.
- The Western Balkans are increasingly shaped by external actors competing with the EU. Sustained engagement with both governments and societies is essential to maintain EU influence and support democratic change.
- Despite the growing visibility of Chinese investments, the European Union remains the largest investor and most important economic partner in the Western Balkans.
- The EU should focus more on the projects that deliver visible, everyday benefits (e.g., roaming or the Interim Agreement and Trade-Related Aspects) and not just work on strategic communication between actors.
- The strategic communication needs to go beyond technical messaging and engage more deeply with local context and cultural identity.

Differentiation and Country-Specific Trajectories

Differentiation among candidate countries was described as unavoidable, given the uneven pace of reform across the region. Montenegro and Albania were repeatedly cited as frontrunners, with relatively high levels of formal alignment demonstrating that sustained reform efforts can translate into tangible progress.

Participants highlighted by the speakers that these cases provide evidence that a merit-based approach can deliver results.

North Macedonia was also described as having recently picked up momentum, with renewed reform efforts generating cautious optimism among participants, despite earlier frustrations linked to bilateral disputes.

By contrast, **Serbia** was widely portrayed as lagging in key horizontal areas, particularly democracy and the rule of law. Several participants argued that while political leadership formally supports EU accession, this commitment has not translated into sufficient reform outcomes. Concerns were raised about continued societal and political influence from non-EU actors, which complicates the country's strategic orientation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and **Kosovo** were described as facing additional structural constraints, including complex domestic governance arrangements and unresolved bilateral issues, which continue to impede reform trajectories despite formal commitments. These cases highlighted the limits of EU instruments when domestic political blockages persist.

This uneven progress raised **a strategic dilemma**: how to keep slower-moving countries engaged without diluting the principle that progress must be earned through reform. Participants warned that abandoning conditionality would ultimately undermine both credibility and long-term stability.

Enlargement in a Contested Geopolitical Space

Beyond internal EU dynamics, **enlargement was repeatedly framed as unfolding in a competitive geopolitical environment**. Russia, China, the United States, and Türkiye were all identified as actors shaping political, economic, and societal dynamics in the Western Balkans.

External influence was discussed most explicitly in relation to Serbia. Participants noted that **Russia** continues to exert strong societal and political influence through **economic ties**, **media narratives**, and **hybrid tactics**. As long as Russia remains embedded in these spheres, participants argued, it will seek to maintain its influence and contest Serbia's strategic alignment. According to the speaker, such framing further complicates the EU's image, especially when it comes to strategic communication, and also amplifies local sensitivity.

China was described as a less overtly hostile but increasingly influential actor, primarily through **economic engagement** and **infrastructure investment**. Several speakers warned that future EU-China tensions could spill over into the Western Balkans, affecting countries such as Serbia and reinforcing the need for proactive EU engagement.

The role of the **United States** was also noted, with one participant recalling that, just a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable for an American politician to publicly suggest that Serbia abandon its EU path. These examples underscored that **enlargement** is not merely a legal or bureaucratic exercise, but part of a broader contest over political orientation.

In this context, participants stressed that **EU engagement must extend beyond governments to societies**, including civil society, academia, and local actors. Disengagement, they warned, would risk ceding influence to alternative models and undermining the EU's long-term credibility.

Flexibility, post-accession conditionality, and institutional constraints

Flexibility featured prominently in the debate. Several participants argued that **the EU should move beyond a rigid “all-or-nothing” accession model** and adopt differentiated or multi-speed approaches. One proposal suggested recognising Ukraine as an EU member without full integration into all policies, while countries such as Montenegro and Albania would continue through the standard accession process toward full membership.

It was also widely acknowledged that expecting full democratic consolidation at the moment of accession is unrealistic. Previous enlargements, including Croatia’s accession in 2013, were cited as evidence that reforms often continue after membership. This led to calls for stronger post-accession conditionality to ensure sustained alignment with EU standards.

At the same time, **institutional constraints were identified as significant obstacles**. Accession requires unanimous approval, and in some countries national referenda, making the process politically fragile. If Montenegro were to conclude negotiations by 2026 or 2027, member states would need to demonstrate genuine political commitment, particularly in countries where enlargement remains controversial.

Participants also noted a tension between rhetorical support for enlargement and reluctance among member states reluctance to relinquish veto powers or to move toward qualified majority voting in intermediate stages. This reluctance limits the scope for institutional reform and risks further slowing the process further.

Shaping the Narrative

The EU remains the largest investor and trading partner in the Western Balkans. Even in a context of growing Chinese investment, the EU's financial contribution significantly outweighs that of other external actors. However, Serbian public discourse often overestimates the role of China, while underestimating the EU's economic importance.

The suggestion was related to the financial aspect of the EU-Serbia relations and, therefore, crucial and should be communicated more consistently. The narrative should highlight the EU-funded projects and long-term economic benefits, and also be implemented in broader cultural and social contexts.

How and what efforts should the European Union make in Enlargement?

The discussion highlighted that the effectiveness of the EU's enlargement policy increasingly depends on its ability to combine credible incentives with strategic communication that resonates at the societal level. While the EU continues to uphold strict, merit-based conditionality - particularly in core areas such as the rule of law, democratic institutions, and anti-corruption - participants emphasised that conditionality alone is insufficient to keep public support in a prolonged accession process.

In this context, several speakers pointed to the growing importance of initiatives that deliver visible, everyday benefits to citizens in Western Balkans. Sectoral integration measures, such as the European roaming enlargement and participation in SEPA were cited as a concrete success. By reducing communication costs or facilitating faster and cheaper financial transactions,

these initiatives bring the EU closer to citizens' daily lives and help bridge the gap between lengthy negotiations and public expectations. As such, they function not only as technical integration steps but also as powerful political and symbolic incentives.

New instruments, including the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, reform agendas, and gradual integration mechanisms, were widely discussed as further attempts to implement this incentive-based approach. By offering **partial access to EU benefits** before full membership, these tools aim to reward genuine reform efforts while maintaining engagement in a challenging geopolitical environment. Speakers agreed that their impact is strongest when citizens can clearly perceive the link between reforms and concrete improvements in their quality of life.

Nonetheless, participants stressed that the success of these incentives depends heavily on strategic communication. Institutional engagement prepares political elites, but this does not automatically win support from the wider public. The EU should clearly communicate the concrete benefits of its initiatives and connect them to social and cultural contexts, showing that **Western Balkan societies are part of the European community**.

Q&A

The overall discussion was also steered by other participants who raised various topics and questions, broadening the debate and enabling deeper reflection.

Following the moderated debate, the floor was opened to questions from the audience, which broadened the debate and allowed for deeper reflection.

The first question addressed how to sustain momentum in connecting the Western Balkans with European objectives, particularly in the context of **migration**.

Participants agreed that migration became a central frame shaping public attitudes toward the EU and its enlargement. It emphasised that migration is linked to citizens' everyday experiences, making it a politically sensitive issue. The migration waves of 2014/2015 were noted as continuing to influence perceptions of enlargement across the EU.

In response, a participant argued that the EU should deepen cooperation with candidate countries on migration management, shifting toward structured collaboration. Legal migration pathways or regular exchanges were noted to be more effective than restrictive policies. One of the speakers even expressed the **importance of projects focused on education, training, and skills development**, with these partnerships identified as a way to address both unqualified migration risks and the EU's growing labour shortages.

Another question focused on emerging new political and civic factions in Serbia, particularly student-led and pro-democratic movements. Participants debated that these groups represent potential long-term partners for the EU and that early engagement could be strategically beneficial. At the same time, concerns were raised that such engagement could complicate relations with the current government, showing the tensions during decision-making.

The discussion then turned to the pace of enlargement. Some participants expressed scepticism about Vučić's proposal for all six Western Balkan states to join simultaneously, **highlighting differences in the preparedness** of ratification processes. Montenegro was cited mentioned as the frontrunner, whereas other states face more structural challenges (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo).

These questions concluded with reflections on future success indicators, renewed momentum in stalled processes, and parallel reforms within both candidate countries and the EU itself.