

Soft vs. Hard Power: The EU's Lacking Mandate from the Eastern Europe's Fast-Tracked Membership to Western Balkans Enlargement

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SOFT VS. HARD POWER: THE EU'S LACKING MANDATE FROM EASTERN EUROPE'S
FAST-TRACKED MEMBERSHIP TO WESTERN BALKANS ENLARGEMENT

Author: Barbara MATIAS*

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Group for Legal and Political Studies
“Rexhep Luci” str. 16/I
Prishtina 10 000, Kosovo
Website: www.legalpoliticalstudies.org
E-mail: office@legalpoliticalstudies.org
Tel/fax.: +381 38 234 456

*Non-Affiliated Research Fellow at Group for Legal and Political Studies

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INTRODUCTION

As society-wide pressures of the Covid-19 crisis years dwindled down, Europe and the world entered into a new crisis: war returned to the Old Continent as Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. This meant yet another immense and arguably unprecedented upheaval for the European Union and its enlargement structures. Political pressure for EU leaders to act with equally unprecedented impetus was high and led to, in June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova being granted official candidate status, alongside Georgia as potential candidate country – a clear soft power strategic maneuver. Notwithstanding stepping-up towards Eastern Europe, EU action towards the Western Balkans has become inaction. Accession prospects and negotiations are stagnated for the longstanding Western Balkan enlargement countries, and such silence has grown louder as integration is prominently pushed for Eastern Europe newcomers.

The geopolitical context laid out above is well-known. Going further and looking ahead, this Policy Analysis considers where the fast-tracked membership for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia stands six months on, and how its unfolding has impacted the existing enlargement package. Notably, the paper assesses how the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue has sabotaged enlargement aims for the Balkan Peninsula as a whole, with the lingering problem increasingly appearing to be the EU's denial to acknowledge Serbia's uncooperativeness towards Kosovo's recognition or wider European values and international standards. On operationalization of the matter of enlargement and political ties, the Policy Analysis then delves into how the EU's civil-political nature has locked the Union in a need-to-act that, unlike NATO's civil-military mandate, pushes the EU towards symbolic political moves with little-to-no prospect of concrete on-the-ground follow-up. For this reason, this Policy Analysis ends with some "food-for thought" recommendations on how the EU could improve its decision-making processes to ensure it properly makes geopolitical (soft and hard power) profit off aligned partner countries.

I. THE SYMBOLIC IMPETUS OF FAST-TRACKED EU MEMBERSHIP FOR UKRAINE, MOLDOVA AND GEORGIA

On 23 June 2022, 4 months into the Russian unprovoked war of aggression on Ukraine, leaders from the EU27 decided to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, and potential candidate status to Georgia. The demonstration of power was clear: that the EU is ready to stand by its neighbors in the wake of Russian threats or open hostility. The EU opened its arms to these three countries – yet, one could say, the Union did not close the arms to in full welcoming embrace. In fact, another 5 months since the candidacy decision, seldom to nothing is the progress to report. This section looks into where the big statement of candidacy to the three Eastern European countries stands now, to better assess the tangible worth of the EU's decision.

The decision to grant official or potential candidate status to the three former Eastern Partnership countries, and now current Enlargement countries, was mixed: some applauded the bold move in record time, others criticized its hollow nature in practice when it comes to the active conflict, and some others, building off the last stance, dismissed it in light of the EU's infamous inaction on fulfilling enlargement aims. While the intrinsic value of this symbolic political move remains and is important for international affairs, it is undoubtedly one rooted in soft power. In this way, seeing as the situation in Ukraine pertains an active armed conflict, the

need to mobilizing hard power is brought to the forefront and, therefore, the arguable hollowness of the 23 June decision more so put on blast. Indeed, the Union's track record is not the best when it comes to acting on its promises of accession, at least in a timely manner and, most particularly, linked to the Western Balkans.

European Parliament's brand-new call for enlargement restructuring

Aware of how burdensome EU decision-making processes can be (and are), the European Parliament has come out to voice its request for a more sustained monitoring of progress towards advancing all 10 candidate and potential candidate countries along the accession ladder. A 23 November 2022 resolution – exactly 5 months since the candidacy decision – an approved European Parliament (EP) recommendation called for “the EU to overcome the status quo and re-energize the enlargement process both among member states and in applicant countries”¹. The document was overwhelmingly approved, with 502 votes in favor, 75 against and 61 abstentions. The text is clear and condemning in stating that “No alternatives should replace enlargement”, which refers to the fact that, no matter the funding or political attention put towards enlargement countries, realizing actual full-fledged membership must be the goal EU Member States and candidates are working towards together, and not just a theoretical far-off scenario. For this reason, the recommendation makes the constructive proposal that “stagnation or backtracking in the EU-related reform process is sanctioned in real time, the EU should also reward candidate countries when they make sustainable progress, including by phasing them into the EU single market. They demand clear deadlines for concluding negotiations with the accession countries and insist they should finish by the end of the current decade at the latest”². This would render the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries more tangible and measurable throughout the process, instead of relatively one-off and dispersed. On the topic of timelines, in addition, MEPs ask that accession negotiations for all enlargement countries in both regions be concluded by 2030 and, in this way, also put some onus on said countries by calling “on these three countries to advance with substantial reforms”³. Overall, the report is sound and constructive in its demands and alerts, and out forth within the scope of the ‘New EU Strategy for Enlargement’ the EP has been discussing in plenary sessions. The recommendation signals official Parliament approval of a renewed EU stance towards the enlargement process, one that “stresses the need to re-energize enlargement policy, in order for the EU to retain its geostrategic relevance and credibility”⁴. In parallel, Russia is still very much on the top of the European priority agenda. Also on 23 November 2022, the EP voted to declare Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and enactor of war crimes, and called for a quick completion and approval of the ninth sanctions package against Moscow⁵.

¹ European Parliament, “A strengthened enlargement policy is the EU's strongest geopolitical tool”, 23 November 2022, online via: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55710/a-strengthened-enlargement-policy-is-the-eu-s-strongest-geopolitical-tool> .

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ European Parliament, “Plenary - New EU strategy for enlargement”, 2 November 2022, online via: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/738205/EPRS_ATAG\(2022\)738205_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/738205/EPRS_ATAG(2022)738205_EN.pdf) .

⁵ European Parliament, “European Parliament declares Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism”, 23 November 2022, online via: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism> .

The need to harden soft power moves

The European Parliament's adamant call regarding the state of the enlargement process is clear in calling for more consequential follow-through from the EU, as well as a strategic bet on likeminded countries. Rapporteur Tonino Picula reminded that the success of further enlargement waves is not just in doing it in a timely manner, but "also depends on countries aspiring to join our EU family. They must make clear pro-European choices. EU membership means more than just EU funds and transport corridors. Before anything, it represents a set of values and principles to share and respect"⁶. The recommendation looks to pave the way for a way forward – however, the final say remains with the Commission and, eventually, the European Council. A re-energized enlargement processes focused on measurable rewards, sequential steps without delays and likeminded partners would enable candidacy decisions to be more consequential rather than symbolic. In the EU being a sociopolitical and economic interstate organization, its strength would never seek to be military interventions but political backing and diplomatic support. Notwithstanding, bulking up soft power maneuvers with hard decisions of measurable funds, concrete integration timelines or sanctions if backsliding occurs would render its standing as a geopolitical player credible and actually far-reaching. An example is the EP's recommendation of phasing candidate countries into the EU single market, as they advance along the realization of standards and best practices. Indeed, the EU should explore ways to make its political moves less hollow and more tangible, allowing for a more robust soft power mandate that is rooted in a reliable and fair carrot-and-sticks game. In short, one that is profitable for Member States and future members alike.

Referring back to the brand-new EP recommendation from 23 November, the document also highlights that "each enlargement country should be judged on its own merits"⁷. This condition is of particular importance in the Western Balkans, where countries are coupled up in terms of their accession paths and, most critically, Kosovo's prospects directly depend on Serbia's willingness to compromise, concede or cooperate on recognition of Kosovar independence – all options of which have blatantly rejected by Vucic's government. Kosovo's dependency on the Dialogue on Normalization of Relations and on Serbia, an increasingly close ally of Russia, renders the newborn country's accession prospects absolutely hindered at no fault of its own. The next section explores this grim dependency.

II. WESTERN BALKANS' ACCESSION PROSPECTS: WRONGFUL DEPENDENCIES AND GAMBLER

On 12 October 2022 the European Commission adopted its 2022 Enlargement Package – yet another package released since the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Thessaloniki Summit first recognized Balkan countries as suitable future member states. The latest package gives "a particular focus on implementing fundamental reforms, as well as clear guidance on the reform priorities ahead" for candidate countries, by assessing progress insofar⁸. In addition, the Commission document suggests the Council grant official candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. This would leave Kosovo the only Western Balkan country not only without visa liberalization for the Schengen Area, but also the only remaining Western Balkan country without

⁶ European Western Balkans, "EP adopted resolution on enlargement", 23 November 2022, online via: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/23/ep-adopted-resolution-on-enlargement/>.

⁷ European Parliament, "A strengthened enlargement policy is the EU's strongest geopolitical tool", 23 November 2022.

⁸ European Commission, "2022 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses reforms in the Western Balkans and Türkiye and recommends candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina". 12 October 2022, online via: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6082.

official EU candidate status. Not a single enlargement package has proven to be on the side of Kosovo – indeed the backdrop of 5 EU Member States still not recognizing the newborn Republic's 2008 independence obstructs a smoother advancement. As things stand, Kosovo's EU prospects are directly and entirely tied to the EU-facilitated Dialogue on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which dates back from 2013 and has delivered important achievements that, nonetheless, remain far from the overall objective of mutual legally-binding recognition among both parties. The Dialogue put Serbia and Kosovo together around a table – a success of its own back in 2013. However, putting such feat into perspective in 2022, we find a frustrated 14-year-old state that is the Republic of Kosovo and an increasingly authoritarian Serbian state supportive of the Kremlin's war invasion against Ukraine and disinformation campaigns against the EU. The Dialogue has come to trap Kosovo in Serbia's unconceding hands, and rendered its EU prospects at the mercy of its main antagonist.

The nefarious cospiracy within the Dialogue

The progress of the EU-facilitated Dialogue between the two neighboring countries has been accepted as a prerequisite for both Kosovo and Serbia's advancements on the EU path. Nevertheless, since its 2013 inception, Serbia has started accession talks with the EU while Kosovo has not even been granted official candidate status (Serbia has it since 2012) nor visa liberalization for Schengen (Serbia has it since 2009). Needless to say, the two parties sitting around the table are not equal and do not enjoy the same leverage going into negotiations.

On the Dialogue on the normalization of relations, the 2022 Enlargement Package declares that "the EU expects both sides to engage more constructively in the negotiations on the legally-binding normalization agreement in the coming period and show flexibility in order to make rapid and concrete progress"⁹. Further, on Kosovo as potential candidate country requests stronger "efforts to strengthen democracy, public administration, the rule of law and to fight corruption"¹⁰. Finally, on Serbia as official candidate country, the report does not shy away from the polemic issue of Serbia's backsliding democratic values, in flagging that the country "needs to improve as a matter of priority its alignment with EU foreign and security policy which dropped significantly. It also needs to robustly tackle all forms of disinformation"¹¹. Against this setting, we see that the Dialogue that may have indeed started with the best of intentions almost a decade ago, has turned into a caricature of itself, in pleading for fairness and cooperative engagement when the facilitator itself does not set the scene for an equal playing field.

As such, this Policy Analysis assesses that the Dialogue has developed into a toxic monster of political codependency between two antagonist rivals, where, most critically, one is trying to annihilate the other. The Dialogue is now much more linked to conflict prevention rather than real progress or achievements of good neighborly relations.

In the same way, high-level achievements have become marred by tense backdrops on the ground. For instance, just some weeks ago in early November, "agreements on the mutual recognition of ID documents and educational qualifications to facilitate travel and work should have been a moment for the Balkans to celebrate. But the mood was dampened as back in Serbia troops were deployed to the Kosovo border, the army's alert level was raised, and a drone was shot down near military facilities at the border by Serbian forces. In a further escalation on Saturday, representatives of the Serb community in Kosovo announced their wholesale

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

withdrawal from Kosovan institutions¹². Indeed, the lingering fear of tensions turning into violence and eventual armed conflict keeps both parties returning to the same EU-mediating table they have been dragged to for years. To cite William Nattrass, political commentator, “The possibility of a new war ties all parties into talks, for fear that a breakdown in negotiations would lead to a flare-up – but it also makes the chances of either Serbia or Kosovo ever actually joining the EU slim”¹³. This fear is now much more present since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Serbia’s close ties with Putin and wider Kremlin. Once more, here we see another example of where the EU’s soft power reach falls short in light of the on-the-ground reality of open inter-ethnicity violence and preventive (and arguably offensive) deployments beyond Serbian borders. The EU’s soft power, as manifested in the Dialogue on normalization of relations, falls flat in delivering the robust hard measures needed to keep parties in check. On the other hand, it is difficult to argue that resorting to hard power moves is the best way forward on Kosovo-Serbia issues, seeing as it would imply an open armed conflict with a close Russian ally, in the heart of Europe, and with neighboring EU and/or NATO member countries. It is a tricky situation to assess, that of soft power moves indeed falling short, but hard power (for instance by the hand of NATO KFOR) moves being unhelpful in the big scheme of things.

What is certain is that there is no Western Balkans enlargement, there is no Western Balkans-six, without a successfully-concluded Dialogue. With open violence being more destructive than constructive, the Dialogue’s platform of diplomatic talks and negotiations should be the way forward. Nonetheless, it is absolutely key that it once and for all put both parties in equal standing and level the playing field. Otherwise, it is inevitable that the power struggle will tilt in favor of Serbia – not only in the country itself being more powerful, but also being backed by Putin. Only this way can Kosovo be freed of a nefarious codependency on the Dialogue, and rather turn it into a positive codependency that, indeed, triggers fruitful concessions and genuine discussions.

Serbia’s growing dissension with EU values

In line with the above, Serbia has increasingly become a question mark when it comes to EU enlargement. Nattrass argues that “Serbia’s membership talks should embarrass the EU”¹⁴. Alignment on core EU values and policies, most fundamentally the Common Foreign and Security Policy is a necessary pre-condition for accession. While Serbia has yet to accede the Union, many criticize the EU’s decision to sustain chapter negotiations throughout a clear democratic backsliding in the country. After all, accession negotiations with Turkey were suspended due to core differences when it came to key EU values, such as democracy, rule of law and human rights. Most recently and pressingly, Serbia’s close ties to Russia have raised even more red flags and prompted even harsher criticism – very much like the vicious codependency I argue before. For example, Serbia is the only candidate country that has not supported or officially aligned itself with the sanction packages the EU has adopted against Russia since its invasion into Ukrainian territory. Certain MEPs have even suggested the EU halt all SAA or IPA-related funding

¹² The Spectator, “Serbia’s membership talks should embarrass the EU”, 5 November 2022, online via: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/serbias-membership-talks-should-embarrass-the-eu/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

to Serbia altogether “in order to ensure that all EU expenditure is fully in line with the EU’s strategic goals and interests”¹⁵.

Moreover, looking beyond state structures and into public opinion, a recent survey polling the Serbian population found that interest in joining the EU is dwindling. Only 28% of the polled individuals would be “glad if Serbia were to join the EU”, with 36% being “indifferent” and 33% “concerned”¹⁶. Such results are, in their own, very concerning for the future of Europe, however not surprising given the widespread disinformation campaigns exerted through state-owned media, and the heavy influence Vucic’s authoritarian and allied-to-Russia rule has on the media generally. On a more disturbing level, the majority of Serbs (58% in September and 66% in May) support Russia in the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine¹⁷. Similarly, 64% of Serb consider the West responsible for the war in Ukraine¹⁸. Besides confirming their historical, cultural and emotional ties to Russia, Serbs have also grown weary of joining the EU, especially since their accession is directly linked to recognizing Kosovo’s statehood independence. Colloquially speaking, Serbia is, inarguably, the bad apple in the Western Balkans-six. In short, Serbia’s country’s democratic track-record and alliances drags the enlargement momentum down.

Looking ahead and considering the six Western Balkan countries, questions arise: has the EU become the wanted way forward, or simply the way forward? With delayed enlargement and burdensome accession processes, is EU membership a gain, or would candidate countries consider the implied reform sacrifices trump the advantages? More critically thinking, is EU membership necessary for weaker countries landlocked by Member States and neighboring a hostile superpower state – the case of Kosovo being one? Over the years, even decades, the appetite for enlargement has waned down – both from the side of the welcoming Member States, as from the frustrated candidate countries. North Macedonia and Albania are clear examples of candidate countries hungry for conclusive action to open accession negotiations, while Kosovo remains in the hopes of being extended a hand by means of finally getting visa liberalization for Schengen. The next and final chapter examines ways to improve the mutual momentum around enlargement, focusing in this case on how the EU can mend the decision-making process or interpretation of its soft power mandate.

III. WAYS TO IMPROVE EU DECISION-MAKING ON ENLARGEMENT

This Policy Analysis argues that the European Union’s economic, political and social mandate by nature prelude its global reach and commitments. In line with that, the EU is expected to be a payer – funding positive change, reforms, human rights progress – and not so credible in its role as a geopolitical player. The EU lacks the hard power to support its soft power aims which, necessarily, as the foundation of real change and partnership. Indeed, the EU has the diplomatic leverage, but not the hard military might to back its mandate. Here we consider particularly the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, in that the EU is facilitating it and is establishing it as a precondition for both countries’ accession, yet it seems to lack the means to push the Dialogue beyond stalled discussions, stagnated negotiations and tense stand-offs. This is the reality. The

¹⁵ European Western Balkans, “Tonino Picula presents recommendations concerning new EU strategy for enlargement”, 23 November 2022, online via: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/23/tonino-picula-presents-recommendations-concerning-new-eu-strategy-for-enlargement/>.

¹⁶ CRTA, “Indifference towards EU; concern about the war in Ukraine”, 22 November 2022, online via: <https://crt.rs/en/serbia-eu-ukraine-research/>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

interpretation of such reality is debatable and one can argue both sides – indeed being a soft power global actor is perhaps more useful and difficult than being a hard power global actor; and indeed, not resorting to hard might is perhaps the preferred way to go in a mandate that seeks peace and not violence.

On the topic of wider enlargement, looking now more so at the EU's decision-making processes, we find stalled discussions just the same. Here, we find there is an undisputed need to reform the EU's internal kitchen mechanisms and render it more able to move ahead with strategic aims. In line with this, below a couple of suggested ways to improve current state of affairs are put forth.

Reform the EU's decision-making processes

As per the recommended way forward the European Parliament has already suggested, it must be imperative to reform the EU's decision-making processes. Decision-making in the EU - particularly the so-called trilogue between the European Parliament, European Commission and finally the European Council - must make the most of the enthusiasm, positivity and determination likeminded countries manifest in their official foreign policy of seeking EU membership and comprehensive alignment with the EU acquis, and further showcase in their population's eagerness to be part of the European integration project. In today's increasingly multipolar world of those resistant to human rights or international-order-based governance and actions, the EU must capitalize on likeminded countries and do not let such enthusiasm and drive to follow its own global foreign policy strategic orientation fade away. As things stand, the stalled EU decision-making process on enlargement is taking the Western Balkans' interest in membership for granted - this is not a foreign policy best practice. Now that membership is closer to 30 Member States rather than 20 as it was in the beginning of the 2000s, the EU must recognize that it cannot upkeep its approval or decision-making mechanisms. With other 60 years of existence, the EU has matured into a not-only economic Union, but also a political and social Union. This sociopolitical mandate means membership implies clear-cut political standards and social principles, which render accession process multi-layered and complex. On the other side of the coin, one can argue that NATO being a civil-military Alliance with a predominantly military mandate, has enabled it to integrate Western Balkan countries in a much swifter manner - already since Albania's accession in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020. In this way, with the EU's scope and accession criteria being so complex, it could be considered to reform the EU's decision-making process by eliminating the consensus-only rule for accession decisions.

Furthermore, as was already started in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, the European Parliament's power should be further reinforced. After all, the European Parliament entails representatives elected by the EU populations across the 27 Member States, and more diversified discussions given the Parliament's wide political spectrum from far-left to far-right. The European Parliament's resolutions and recommendation, aligned with Commission policies, should be closer to the European Council final approval than it currently stands, and their resolutions should be considered much more than they currently are. At the end of the day, resolutions approved by the EP are rendered symbolic if no execution follow-up is granted by the Council.

Less reach, more targeted execution

Looking at the EU's scope and mandate, we find it stepping in across the world in many different, and all extremely relevant, topics – from cybersecurity, to democratic liberalism, gender

equality, fair elections and social inclusion. Accession negotiations and support to domestic reforms across candidate countries is all but one of its foreign policy aims. Certainly, the EU is a key soft power global actor – for, despite its regional nature, its identified scope of action is entirely global. Moreover, in fact it goes beyond that – despite the EU's regional nature, it is expected by other global/regional/national actors to indeed have a global scope. Often, when crisis hits, it is the EU and the US the actors most expected to step up – not the United Nations, for instance, despite its global mandate. All this to say that the EU has planted a seed across all corners of the world, because it took it upon itself to have global aims and reach, but also because partners have come to expect or request it to give funding or political support to external domestic matters.

However, the truth is that the EU simply cannot be everywhere, yet that is what it seeks. So, the result is there is a start but often no execution. With the world becoming increasingly hostile and unpredictable, the EU must bulk up its presence with more concrete results and targeted follow-up, instead of box-ticking presence to appease external demands or expectations. After all, EU funding and human resources are not limitless. Looking at it from another perspective, at NATO, we see that NATO being a hard power means, to partners, that it can virtually 'afford' to stay out of soft-power matters or more trivial sociopolitical issues. Yet the EU has positioned itself in the international order in a way that, because its action would be civil-political, its support and stamp of assistance is expected to be everywhere. For instance, with regards to Ukraine and Eastern Europe since the Russian invasion broke out in February, the EU was expected to step up. Indeed, Ukraine and Eastern Europe is not part of the EU territory, but the expectation was there. While, on the other side, despite Ukraine and Eastern Europe not being part of NATO territory, it is understandable that it would not intervene. Arguably, there is a double-standard in place for these regional organizations, where the EU somehow finds itself in a need-to-act to appease critics. Therefore, EU27 leaders wanted and needed to act in an unequivocal demonstration of support. However, since there are not much external actors can do without hostilizing Russia too much, demonstrations of support needed to be political – therein the granting of candidate status to concerned countries, robust sanctions against Russia, temporary resettlement mechanism for displaced people, and dedicated funding to Ukrainian authorities and individuals. On the other side, once again, the United States and NATO generally have been clearly absent from support to Ukraine's fight for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As such, it is commendable that the EU acts on its word and offers support. The problem is such support is often rendered symbolic and, therefore, up for frustration and stagnation given its lacking mandate or proper timing for more targeted or consequential support.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The political world is a complex – the international political world even more. Add in power struggles between developed countries and developing countries, as well as likeminded and antagonist partners, and the situation becomes even more convoluted. The European Union has put in efforts to signal commitment to likeminded neighboring countries in the Western Balkans, yet seemingly lacks the will to realize this welcoming stance. Moreover, the European Union has offered diplomatic and political support to Ukraine and other countries deeply affected by the Kremlin's destabilizing policies, yet concrete execution on integration may take decades to come into fruition.

Intentions are good, yet mechanisms lag behind. Soft power and hard power do not live in good harmony in the world of armed conflict and a political integration – especially when the Union is already internally strained and fully opening up its doors may prelude its demise. This

carrots-and-sticks game is manifest in the enlargement process dragging on between the EU and the Western Balkans, wherein countries are becoming rightfully frustrated and the EU is finding it harder and harder to justify delays or make empty promises believable. Furthermore, the expectations and requirements it sets for incoming candidate countries are not always fair nor productive – a careful look at the Dialogue on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo clearly denotes the unequal standing parties have, and how Kosovo's lesser leverage renders it at the mercy of Serbia's (non-existent) good-will. Kosovo is a hostage to the Dialogue, much like the Western Balkans are held captive in an endless loop of "new" enlargement packages, with the most recent one being announced just last October 2022.

To move ahead in a constructive way for both the EU and candidate countries, its stance must be rethought with proper critical thinking. First, the EU must set clear limits and boundaries with regards to non-alignment on core values, with Serbia's alliance with Russia and rejection of Kremlin sanctions being a clear red flag. Second, it should seek to target its foreign policy interventions more as a means to ideally have a more comprehensive and consequential action, rather than symbolic.

The main message this Policy Analysis seeks to convey and one which is common to all recommendations to improve future results is that the EU and its Member States should prioritize capitalizing off partner countries which are alignment with EU values and ambitions, instead of being hostage of its own outdated institutional processes.

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