

EU Enlargement at a Crossroads

Bumps on the Road to EU Membership in the Western Balkans

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Can we imagine the collapse of Europe? What would it look like? How would it take place (and how would we know it took place)? And, to adapt Henry Kissinger's truism, who would turn out the lights?

As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes point out in their seminal book *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, popular culture abounds with fictional representations of the collapse of the United States. Humankind. Our planet. But we never (dare to) imagine the collapse of Europe. Could it be because – almost 80 years since the last all-European war and 35 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall – we are still not clear what Europe is?

We often remind ourselves of George H.W. Bush's proclamation that **Europe is at its best when it is "whole and free"**. The fact that one of the most heavily quoted European mottos was coined by a non-European is not so much an exercise in irony as it is a trivial yet illustrative reminder of our continent's chronic lack of strategic vision. For a continent politically embodied by an organization as strategically ambitious as the European Union, the frequent mismatch between unfettered symbolic grandeur and blatant practical shortcomings of its bureaucratized institutions can lead to unmet expectations, simmering frustration, and ultimately, a weaker Europe.

EU enlargement at a crossroads: fatigue, double standards, and a different union

Nowhere has this mismatch been felt more acutely than in the so-called "Western Balkans" – a term coined by the EU itself at the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 to designate the laggards in the EU accession process. Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, were never included in this company (hence the "Western" in Western Balkans), and Croatia, which started out as a "Western Balkan" country, graduated from the label after its 2013 accession. On the other hand, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have now resided in the EU waiting room for decades.

To be sure, the prolonged and by now often satirized accession journey of these six countries (WB-6) has not been all pain and suffering. As candidate members, the WB-6 have benefited tremendously (Kosovo is not a candidate member, but it is eligible for assistance) from the EU's instruments of pre-accession financial support. Politically, the promise of EU membership has facilitated the democratization of the WB-6, as their overwhelmingly pro-EU (with the partial exception of Serbia) electorates have nudged their political elites to at least begin aligning national legislation with EU standards.

The EU would like to see a stronger relationship between the accession



process and democracy, as sometimes the less-than-democratic WB-6 leaders only pay lip service to European values. Yet, overall, the EU influence is positive, as one can easily imagine a much more authoritarian WB-6 today in the complete absence of the incentive of membership and the plentiful pre-accession funds.

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Which brings us to the (threefold) current political moment, where the carrot unfortunately seems further out of reach, more arbitrarily offered, and ultimately less appealing than ever – all at once.

Start with the increasingly elusive accession promise. Of the four WB-6 countries whose accession talks are already in progress, Montenegro and Ser-

bia have been negotiating the longest (since 2012 and 2014, respectively). Their negotiations are already lasting about twice as long as it took Croatia to complete the entire process (six years) and Montenegro and Serbia have (provisionally) closed only three and two of the 35 accession chapters, respectively. The crux of the matter remains the slow de facto movement of the legislations and societies towards the EU.

If the snail-like rate of progress by the apparent frontrunner Montenegro makes for somber reading, North Macedonia's membership prospects are surely even grimmer, as its (slow but generally positive) reform process has been nullified by a series of political ob-

EU actors in the public and civil sector alike and amplifying the WB-6's overall sense of powerlessness.

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Finally, even if the most optimistic scenario of membership by 2030 materializes, being an EU member might come to mean something very different by then. In light of the increasing appetite for enlargement into the ex-Soviet space, the leading EU officials are increasingly flirting with ideas around a multi-tiered union, where new additions might not enjoy the full privileges of membership. Should these peripheral tiers entail the lack of a commissioner spot, limited voting powers, or smaller financial benefits than those enjoyed by past East European additions, the EU membership would begin to leave an even more bittersweet taste, potentially discouraging the WB-6 from joining altogether.

Protecting a Europe whole and free

At present, of course, none of these obstacles are necessarily fatal. Efforts to reform decision-making on enlargement might curb the veto powers of individual member states, precluding future bumps on the road such as the WB-6 countries blocking each other should their enlargement not occur simultaneously. Geopolitical incentives might add up to advancing enlargement across the board through lower benchmarks for closing accession chapters, while maintaining meritocracy in the process. Finally, regardless of any internal reform the EU might undergo by the end of the decade, given their population size and economic performance, the WB-6 countries are highly likely to remain net recipients of EU funds. They should also be able to continue the trend of former socialist countries (with the notable exception of Hungary and Poland) reaping democratic dividends from joining a club of mostly established democracies.

Will the EU play its cards right and address the challenges adequately and timely? If it does, Europeans might be able to continue enjoying the luxury of not having to ever bother imagining what the collapse of their continent would look like. ■