The reach of state power in a globalized world – some lessons for the EU and the Western Balkans

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Abstract

Globalization trends have significantly influenced the role and importance of state power, though certainly not to the extent that one could argue globalization has rendered states obsolete or unnecessary. Many of today's global challenges, such as terrorism, climate change, the migrant crisis, and others, are impossible to address within national frameworks, necessitating the cooperation of sovereign states as the 'appropriate measure' in responding to these and similar global issues.

Starting from the fact that the components of state power persist even in an increasingly interactive and globalized world and that the past decades have witnessed attempts to balance state power among the often disproportionate member states of the European Union, this paper posits the hypothesis that the Western Balkan states lack the independent capacity to build institutions modeled after those of EU member states. Consequently, this region serves as a striking example of a neglected area with missed opportunities for clear integration into the EU. Furthermore, the paper analyzes, in light of knowledge on variability and development, identity and diversity, opposition and contradiction, the circumstances that have led to a series of missed opportunities for progress in this volatile region, as well as the internal problems within the Union that affect the Western Balkan countries on their European path.

Keywords:

Key Components of Modern State Power

The greatest disagreement among theorists of international relations concerns the importance attributed to the concept of power in the context of international and national security. Consequently, answers to questions such as whether power is the determining factor in explaining the behavior of actors or states seeking their security, and whether power is crucial in determining how states will pursue their national interests, can serve as a good criterion for assessing an author's stance toward the realist theoretical approach. For the representatives of the realist school power represents the overall material capabilities of the state and the influence they can exert upon other less-powerful actors in the international arena. Morality on the other hand is highly subjective and is not a primary concern for states that are seeking to accomplish their strategic goals (Pevehouse and Goldstein 2017, 40-43). The structure of the international system that lies on these foundations propels countries to act in certain ways in order to secure their survival. In other words, anarchy and the power struggle are unavoidable elements of international politics (Little 2007).

On the other hand, scholars from liberal and social theories offer different explanations, emphasizing that humans are not doomed to eternal power struggles among nations. The evolution of human society paved the way for the development of international institutions, organizations, and international law all of which contribute to the "proliferation of peace". The interconnectedness of modern society and the global economy provides further incentives to avoid power struggles and lead states toward deeper cooperation (Pevehouse and Goldstein 2017, 73-81). In other words, the non-realist scholars although acknowledging the significance of state power, often prioritize other concepts, such as cooperation, ideas (social constructions), or emancipation which can circumvent war and conflict among states (Lipovac 2017, 75).

The attempt to permanently define national power "is not possible due to one of its most significant characteristics – transformation, precisely because of its inseparable connection with human relations, which also transform depending on the situation" (Subotić 2019, 110). However, authors such as Hans Morgenthau provide us with insights in order to better understand such complex issues. Namely, Morgenthau defines national power through aspects such as geography, national resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, and quality of diplomacy (Morgenthau 1948, 80-108). All these factors allow us to evaluate national power and the direction in which states formulate their foreign policies.

The fundamental elements that a population must fulfill to represent the strength and power of the state it presents are numerical size, education, and workforce capability. Mastery of modern technologies or the presence of natural resource

wealth can significantly mitigate the impact of the demographic factor. Therefore, in the modern era, it is not uncommon for small nations, due to certain circumstances (capabilities), to render their states influential in the global community. Common examples of small yet influential nations include the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Japan. However, we cannot overlook that a larger population gives great potential for economic progress as well as a better foundation for military power. As Morgenthau states, assessing the distribution of military power among countries is crucial to account for the number of people and potential growth of the country's populace (Morgenthau 1948, 93).

Geography and national resources of the state are some of the key components of state power because the principle is straightforward: the larger the territory, the greater the potential for spatial utilization. The significance of territory is strongly supported by Reymond Aron, who says that "if the territory of a state is space, then every international order is essentially territorial" (Aron 2001, 26). The quality of a given territory is determined by the degree of its various types of utilization: agricultural, mineral, mining, and energy. Having national resources a state can be self-sufficient giving larger freedom for political action in peace as in war. Ultimately, the power derived primarily from territory is enhanced by its positioning. This means that a state, connected with the most important transportation and other economic and communication links with other states, is difficult or impossible to isolate in economic, transportation, and even political terms. Good geography can bring much to the table regarding the defense and security of the state. Having large mountain ranges or large bodies of water a state can feel more secure; vice-versa, the absence of such natural phenomena can make a country less secure and vulnerable (Morgenthau 1948, 80-86).

In contemporary assessments of a country's industrial capacity, the following parameters are considered essential: diversity in production and export, a comprehensive and dispersed industrial basis, financial stability, and a well-educated scientific and technical elite capable of maintaining and advancing the economy. Conversely, a weak economic foundation and an underdeveloped economy result in a weak state whose influence on international relations is negligible. Such a state can easily be outvoted in international organizations and undermined in various ways. These nations typically lose their national and cultural identity and necessarily adopt another. "One thing must absolutely be avoided," argues the renowned French sociologist Emmanuel Todd, "and that is to forget that today, as in the past, the true forces are of a demographic and educational nature, while true power is of an economic nature" (Todd 2004, 203). Industrial capacity is not only important for civilian purposes but for the military as well. The technology of modern warfare relies heavily on vast industrial capacities and its ability to produce *en masse*. Having skilled workers, inventive scientists, and prudent managers a country can enhance its industrial capacity both for civilian as well as military purposes. It comes as no surprise, as Morgenthau underlines, that great economic power is often correlated with overall state power (Morgenthau 1948, 87).

Military power remains one of the most important characteristics of a state's overall strength and continues to be legitimized as such. In contemporary power reconfigurations, it represents what is known as "hard power" and serves a dual function. While it is primarily conceptualized as a defensive or deterrent force against potential armed aggression, it often also represents an offensive potential directed toward other states. When it comes to the application of military force, "it is successfully employed only by powerful states" (Gaćinović 2007, 11). The criteria for measuring the strength of a state's military power vary. Traditionally, these criteria included the number of soldiers and the extent of military infrastructure; however, they have been significantly updated by modern times, which have introduced new technological possibilities. States without large military forces can still be militarily powerful if they possess cutting-edge military technology, and today, states with nuclear capabilities are considered militarily superior. The exact number of such states is not reliable, as there is suspicion that some are secretly developing "nuclear programs." However, it is "reliably asserted that today the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, India, and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, while Israel and North Korea are believed to have them, and Iran is presumed to be pursuing them" (BBC News 2020).

National character and national morale also represent one of the factors that influence the state's power. Both of these aspects are essentially tied to the strategic culture of one nation and explain how a nation "thinks" and reacts in specific circumstances. National culture represents a collection of ideas through which a given community defines what is important, valuable, and desirable for that society. Although the achievements of a nation today are often associated with economic and material indicators, accomplishments in classical culture (literature, music, painting) contribute to the prestige of both the nation and the state. Culture thus represents "the temporal stamp of a nation, relating to patterns associated with the thoughts, lifestyles, goals, and actions of the nation, and thus the state that embodies a particular culture" (Maciois and Gerber 2011, 43). Reading Morgenthau we can see that national character influences national power both in peace and war since it represents the thoughts and fears of the populace at large; as well as the nations' understanding of political surroundings and the country's position in the international arena. National morale, on the other hand, reflects the support of the nation for the government and its foreign policy. Morale is especially important in dire situations such as war since it constitutes the will of the nation to fight and overcome difficult times. All this is closely tied to the country's government and how it governs over its nation. As Morgenthau concludes, the quality of the government can be both a strength and a weakness regarding the overall national power, since the decision made by the government directly influences all other aspects of national power (Morgenthau 1948, 98-104).

Lastly, the most crucial factor in a state's foreign policy is its adaptability and quality of diplomacy. Broadly speaking, foreign policy adaptability is embodied in a state

that avoids conflicts, aligns with contemporary international political trends, and seeks allies in political, economic, and military spheres, all with the goal of preserving its own foreign policy identity and interests. The concept of neutrality, which has long served as a euphemism for foreign policy adaptability, has undergone various modifications throughout history. Traditional neutrality entailed political and military non-engagement, meaning non-participation in conflicts beyond its own territory. Although military neutrality often still implies political (state) neutrality, this is not a strict rule. For instance, "a state can be a member of international organizations, but if its military does not participate in the military operations of those organizations, it has the obligation to inform the international community that its armed forces will not engage in conflicts involving third states and will use force only if it is militarily attacked and thus exposed to foreign military power" (Radaković 2011, 299).

Balancing the Power of EU Member States

The position of smaller and medium-sized countries is characterized by a dichotomy within the international order. On one hand, great powers generally have the final say, while on the other hand, there are efforts to create a more orderly community of equal, sovereign states and a relaxed order based on rules within international institutions. Examples of "produced instability" following interventions in Iraq, Libya, or Syria illustrate that brute force alone is insufficient for resolving complex social problems, and the distinction between "small" and "large" does not guarantee the a priori success of the "large" actors. A notable example of a small country successfully advancing its interests against a much larger one is the so-called Cod War between Iceland and the United Kingdom, which ended in 1976 when "the United Kingdom accepted Iceland's 200-nautical-mile exclusive fishing zone" (Steinsson 2016, 37).

Moreover, the position of small and medium-sized countries is considered more favorable when they are part of a broader alliance organization defined by clear rules, which provides them with the opportunity to utilize specific instruments of action and influence. Perhaps the best example of this is the European Union. The original association (the EEC) was established in the mid-twentieth century precisely as a community of countries aiming to create an economic and political counterbalance within the strict bipolar international system.

With globalization, and the gradual shift in the international system where properly directed „soft power" plays an increasingly significant role, the relevance of the distinctions between „small," „medium," and „large" countries is being reassessed. Moreover, historical experience teaches us that the size of a state and its power need not be equivalent; that is, a small territory does not necessarily imply „powerlessness" in a given situation. Hill (Christopher Hill) rightly observes

that "size and position entail both substantial benefits and significant costs for a given country" (Hill 2003, 169).

The construction of the European Union, as well as the communities that preceded it, has consistently emphasized the sensitivity of relations between large and small countries. "This consideration was factored into the successive enlargements of the EU, both in terms of the formation of its main bodies and in the decision-making processes" (Lopandić 2010, 102).

Although there is no strict definition of what constitutes a small or medium-sized country today, it is generally considered that most EU member states fall into these two categories, with the exception of five countries that represent relatively "large" states within the European framework (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland). Accordingly, up to 22 out of the 27 member states of the Union could be classified as small or medium-sized. The advantage these countries enjoy within the EU is based on the Union's structure as a transparent political and legal system that operates on the principles of seeking compromise and aligning the interests of all member states, regardless of differences in size.

Thus, all 27 EU member states nominate one member to the European Commission. Additionally, the principle of the so-called blocking minority (during voting in the Council of Ministers) ensures that small and medium-sized countries cannot be easily outvoted by larger ones. Member states seek to exert greater influence by forming connections within various subregional groupings, such as the Visegrád Group, the Benelux countries, and the Baltic Trio, among others. This can, especially in the case of the Visegrád Group, present a potential problem regarding alignment on particularly sensitive issues, such as the ongoing issue of mass migration to Europe (Subotić 2022, 211). The decision-making process in the EU "is reflected in a constant search for ad hoc alliances, where the most crucial factor is each country's coalition capacity, which generally depends less on its size and more on the ideological and interest orientation of the member states" (Lopandić 2017).

The primary criteria for grouping EU member states arise from various classification parameters (such as wealthier or poorer, more "liberal" or "protectionist," more or less oriented towards consumer protection or favoring employers, and so on). Nevertheless, in the dynamics of negotiation within the EU, it cannot be overlooked that larger states, such as Germany and France, are in a better position to impose their views through bodies like the European Council, where the method of "intergovernmental cooperation" is applied. On the other hand, "small and medium-sized countries focus more on achieving a limited number of specific, but crucial national goals, which often provides them with better maneuvering space compared to larger countries, whose objectives are more numerous and therefore more diffuse" (Lopandić 2017).

The strength of small and medium-sized countries within the EU is most prominently demonstrated through their initiatives in regional contexts with "non-member" countries (e.g., Greece – Turkey, Poland – Russia, Croatia – Serbia, etc.). Such examples in recent years have led to numerous attempts by EU member states to automatically designate very narrow national interests (e.g., relations with neighbors, migration issues, challenges to certain achievements in human rights and freedoms) as "European" or to attempt to fully "nationalize" the EU's foreign policy. This trend has produced various tensions within the EU, both among member states and in relations between member states and the European Commission, which is the official representative of the Union's collective interests. Even in an environment that relies heavily on various institutional mechanisms, the process of power balancing, as discussed by realists, is inevitable. States will attempt to achieve their strategic objectives at the expense of their partners and allies, sometimes using soft balancing through diplomacy and the EU's institutional mechanisms. All this leads us back to the conclusion that strategies characteristic for the concept of balance of power are not necessarily tied to the idea of anarchy in the international system, but they can also be found in an "ordered" environment such as the EU (Little 2007).

The Western Balkans and the EU –
Years of Missed Opportunities

Today, it can be rightly said that the region variously referred to by different authors (Southeastern Europe, the Western Balkans, the former Yugoslavia, etc.) represents a unique arena of geopolitical competition. This competition unfolds either in the immediate vicinity or within the states of the region itself. There are more than enough actors involved. In addition to the old imperial players and their associates, some of whom have assumed new forms, there are also new global actors who astutely blend geopolitics with geo-economics. The advance of "non-traditional" major players in this region is conditioned by numerous weaknesses of the regional countries, as well as the indifference of European administrations towards this area.

What can be attributed, to a greater or lesser extent, to all the countries of the Western Balkans is what is described within European frameworks as a "lack of good or democratic governance." The judiciary is neither effective nor independent, being susceptible to political influence. Corruption is widespread, and the fight against organized crime cannot yet be considered successful. In line with the trend of rising autocratic tendencies in Europe and across the world, "the region is afflicted by a plague of populism, characterized by the rise of right-wing beliefs, and the personal and almost unrestrained power of leading politicians has become a feature of nearly all political regimes in the Western Balkans" (Freedom House 2023, 10).

The most recent report, Nations in Transit, which covers 29 countries, indicates that the Western Balkans region is responsible for many concerning events and that

regional security is often used by many political leaders as a pretext to undermine democratic institutions and disregard democratic norms. According to Freedom House, 11 countries, classified as so-called "hybrid regimes" with characteristics of both autocracy and democracy, are situated between two geopolitical and normative blocks (Radulović 2024).

The economic crisis that began in 2008, combined with an unreformed and inflexible economic sector, further destabilized the region. The migrant crisis, with the flow of over a million economic migrants and refugees traveling towards Western Europe, as well as the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, are additional negative factors that complete this grim picture (Subotić 2024a, 49). The disparity between the development levels of the Western Balkan economies and those of the EU is not encouraging: "The region is, on average, only about 30 percent as developed as the EU average, with significant differences between countries" (Anastasijević 2018). The remnants of identity conflicts from the 1990s remain very strong, and there is an impression that European administrations are neither particularly attentive nor inclined to significantly engage in overcoming them.

An additional problem for countries in the process of European integration is the multiple crises facing the European Union, which has been unable to find solutions for a range of crises (economic, institutional, and identity, as well as the crisis of democratic deficit and political leadership) for several years. In such conditions, where there is frequent discussion about the possible disintegration of the Union, countries in the "waiting room" for membership naturally lose confidence in EU leadership and its willingness to continue accepting new members in the near future. The former magnetism of membership and the popularity of the EU option are waning across the region. Particularly indicative are surveys showing that "young people in the Balkans today believe that their countries will never become part of the European Union" (Jović 2019).

An interesting perspective on the EU-Balkans relationship is presented by Professor Eric Gordy from University College London, an expert on Balkan affairs, who suggests that "it is quite possible that all the candidacies were part of a plan for the EU to maintain influence over the Balkan countries, as it could always tell them that they would not become members if they did not behave well." He continues, "this strategy is becoming less effective as an increasing number of people seem to agree that these countries will never join the EU" (Rujević 2017).

An aggravating factor for candidate countries from this region is the trend of nationalizing EU policies, whereby conditions for further integration are imposed by individual member states, often in contradiction with the EU's common policy. The migrant crisis, which gained momentum in 2015, was an additional test that the Union failed due to its disunity, internal disagreements among member states, and a lack of solidarity and joint action. The inadequate response of European

institutions towards the countries of the so-called Balkan route and the speculations that emerged about returning a large number of migrants to the countries where they were initially registered further complicated the already complex relationship between the evidently divided EU member states and the Western Balkan countries in the process of accession.

The Diminished Power of the EU Towards the Western Balkans: Are More Favorable Winds Blowing?

Contrary to the optimistic expectations of European federalism theorists (Kovačević 2013), the emergence of the European Community, now the European Union, did not lead to the gradual marginalization and extinction of the power of European nation-states. Instead, it primarily resulted in their transformation within the peaceful European context. Europe has not abolished states—those "cold monsters," as Max Weber called them—but has instead transformed them into the principal units of the continental integration project.

It can be said that the process of aligning and dividing labor between the state, as the fundamental political community, and its supranational framework (the European Union) is still ongoing, with no clear perspective on a "unity in diversity." The European Union can be envisioned as a complex legal entity, a sort of "postmodern empire," or an external framework of a complex system empowered by its member states. The functioning of the EU today is inconceivable without the effective functioning of its member states as legal entities on which the entire structure of the Union rests. The Union primarily represents a community of national administrations and legal systems to which a part of national sovereignty has been transferred (either permanently or temporarily, wholly or partially) (EUR-LEX 2017).

Although European identity, marked by the development of science and technology, has been shaped over time, we are now witnessing how technology—not only bridging distances between people—also erodes cultural and civilizational differences between Europe and other regions that gravitate towards it. The populist nationalism we observe around us is merely an epiphenomenon, "before other factors continue to erode European history and culture" (Subotić and Pejić 2023, 29). In the digital age, transmitting history and tradition from one generation to another has become even more challenging than before. Now, everything can be deconstructed through competitive rather than shared narratives, while information floods European society and attention spans completely dissolve. Information overload is, as noted by Arnold, "an increasing problem exacerbated by the ongoing digitalization of the world and the intensifying (mis)use of information and communication technologies" (Arnold, Goldschmitt and Rigotti 2023). Under such circumstances, Kaplan argues, "preserving a distinct Western identity, separate from Eastern, Asian, or African, becomes an atavism from a bygone era" (Kaplan 2023, 334).

Where does this region fit within the internal dynamics of the Union, and what is the status of the gradual reintegration of the fragmented space of Southeastern Europe (or the Western Balkans) into the EU, as well as the formation of "subregional architecture" in the Balkans, which has been repeatedly characterized as "delayed integration"?

The delay in the process of EU accession has further deepened the disparity in development levels and economic potentials between the countries of the former Yugoslavia on one side and the rest of Europe on the other. The severe conflicts that arose during the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, which marked the entire last decade of the 20th century, had profoundly negative consequences for the evolution and modernization process of the post-Yugoslav countries (with the exception of Slovenia). This period represents a new stage of globalization and technological change on a global scale, and in the European context, it signifies a period of transformation and integration of the continent around the European Union and NATO (Kasim and Menon 2024, 6). At the same time, the process of integration and transformation of national European states was accompanied in the Balkans by regressive conflicts over territory and borders. The last decade of the twentieth century thus represents a particularly grim period in the history of the post-Yugoslav countries with regard to adherence to fundamental "European values"—peace, democracy, human and minority rights. While the key terms in the EU during this period were "compromise and integration," the Balkans were dominated by terms such as "conflict and separation."

As previously emphasized, the European Union, as a sui generis international entity, did not entail the abolition of the nation-state and its power in favor of a supranational structure, but rather its transformation and modernization within the conditions of integration and globalization. The Western Balkans, specifically the countries of the former Yugoslavia along with Albania – at that time undoubtedly the most backward and isolated country on the continent (World Bank 2023) – had to channel the majority of their social and political energy into overcoming the effects of violence and rebuilding the "nation-state" within a radically changed regional and European framework. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (before the onset of war devastation), the EU's strategy was to gradually integrate the Yugoslav space along with the rest of Central and Eastern Europe into the Union. However, the deepening Balkan conflict prevented this (CVCE 2021). It was only with the democratic changes and the replacement of authoritarian regimes in Serbia and Croatia, along with the partial stabilization of conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of this century, that the conditions were created to redirect the "wheel of history" in the same direction as it was moving in the rest of Europe. This process, however, is neither swift nor easy, considering the internal difficulties and new international circumstances in each of the countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia. Serbia's rapprochement with the European Union, with the goal of membership, entails a more intensive study of the EU as a highly specific organization that is in almost constant evolution, alongside equivalent monitoring of

trends indicating how conditions in the Western Balkans are changing, particularly in the context of tectonic geopolitical and security shifts following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 (Subotić 2024b, 136).

At the same time, the trauma of the endlessly long journey towards Europe for Western Balkan societies and peoples is more than understandable. Over twenty years ago, on June 20, 2003, the Thessaloniki Summit announced a new era in the EU's relations with the Western Balkans. It formalized the European perspective of the region and provided hope for a better, more peaceful, and shared future. Although the countries of the Western Balkans achieved candidate status, secured visa liberalization, and signed free trade agreements with the EU during the subsequent period, only Croatia attained full membership. In short, the enlargement policy has become a depleted topic, characterized by a practice of low intensity with limited transformative power.

How did this situation arise? Of course, a significant part of the responsibility lies with the political elites in the region. Nevertheless, the proclamation by then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014 that further enlargement would not occur during his mandate (The Economist 2014) had a detrimental effect on the motivation of candidate states to engage credibly in the process (BiEPAG 2017).

The European Neighborhood Policy has certainly yielded some results, primarily in the areas of intensifying political contacts, providing financial assistance, signing various agreements, and increasing trade exchanges. However, the power of the European Union cannot be measured solely by the resources it employs in a particular region, nor merely by the increase in trade exchange; it also depends on its ability to exert substantial influence on political circumstances, democratization processes, and reforms, which would, in turn, lead to greater support for the values of the European Union.

In this regard, one of the theses of this paper is that the transformative power of the European Union towards the Western Balkans has had a weaker impact due to the strong influence of the stability-democratization dilemma. From the very beginning of the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Policy, the European Union pursued dual objectives in the region—first stabilization, and then integration—which reinforced the dilemma: stabilization and state-building or democratization and institution-building (Elbasani 2008, 299).

By prioritizing effective governance over democratic management, the European Union has arguably contributed more to the entrenchment of undemocratic and corrupt regimes than to their transformation. Despite the reforms supported by the European Union, there is a growing perception of the strengthening of authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans, as well as the increasing oligarchizing of the region (Lasheras 2016, 11).

The EU's ambiguous stance on the development of "stabilocracies"-hybrid regimes where autocratic tendencies are tolerated for the sake of stability-further impeded democratic progress in the region. In these societies, "democracy weakens, democratic safeguards such as independent media and strong institutions decay, and clientelism binds many citizens to the ruling elites through cooperation and coercion" (Ekonomist 2018). In such an environment, ethnonationalism emerges as an ideal tool for populist mobilization for domestic use, fostering distrust towards other ethnic and confessional communities in the Western Balkans. When this is combined with the aforementioned so-called "external populism," which has distinct rhetoric and recommends power holders as "factors of peace and stability in the region," it all together creates a particularly conducive habitat for consolidating the stabilocratic system of governance (Subotić and Dimitrijević 2018, 83). This circumstance largely casts a shadow over the "sincere and unequivocal" commitment of EU officials to strengthening democratic institutions such as citizen rights and freedoms, promoting tolerance, media freedom, and so on, which would greatly contribute to easing the perpetually tense relations in the region and reducing the undeniable extremist potential of this area.

In some cases, the European Union has clearly conducted a strict assessment of the fulfillment of conditions, while in others, it has acted more flexibly to avoid security risks, thereby affecting the consistency of the entire process (Anastasakis 2008, 366). Democratization has been the greatest casualty of this approach. The Western Balkan countries have lost more than two decades in terms of democratization, while at the same time forging closer ties with the European Union, creating a paradox where closer alignment with the Union is not tied to progress in democratization. In addition to the undeniable harm to the democratic development of regional countries, this approach also significantly damages the perception of the Union's power. While lasting peace in the Balkans is certainly a considerable achievement, peace without institutional progress can lead to potentially dangerous stagnation, with the risk of reopening new (old) security dilemmas.

Simultaneously, the European Union's power has been deactivated for many years concerning the successful conclusion of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, leading to the alarming consequences we witness today. To make matters worse, the EU's geopolitical immaturity has resulted in oversight regarding key trends within its own "backyard," allowing China and Russia to fill the vacuum and, to some extent, limit the EU's political, economic, and social influence (Vulović 2023). Essentially, instead of taking concrete and decisive actions, the EU's passive approach has "lulled" the enlargement process.

Today, however, Russian aggression against Ukraine is directing the redefinition of the continent's security and economic architecture. Consequently, the enlargement policy has been placed at the top of the agenda. In a short period, the EU has granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and a European perspective to

Georgia, followed by the awarding of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, visa liberalization for the citizens of Kosovo, and the commencement of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Although encouraging, these steps should merely mark the beginning of further strengthening the enlargement process. The stakes are high: revitalizing the motivation of decision-makers and citizens in the Western Balkans is imperative for achieving European strategic autonomy while preserving the Union as an effective political and value-based community.

However, two decades after the "Thessaloniki initiation", the Union's lack of commitment to enlargement, coupled with the regression of Western Balkan states, has transformed into a vicious cycle of excuses and disappointments on both sides. By announcing the 2030 deadline, Charles Michel's team hopes to break this cycle, as it is deemed "ambitious yet realistic". They emphasize that the date is close enough to be perceived as achievable and worthy of the political investment of elected leaders in candidate countries (Bayer 2023).

Indeed, the political will within the EU to integrate Ukraine and Moldova, as a result of Russian aggression, has rekindled debates around enlargement. However, the Western Balkan states should not rely on the relaxation of enlargement criteria due to the current geopolitical context. Instead, a better approach would be for each state to advance at its own pace through incremental membership by implementing reforms, rather than the current binary approach of either being a member state or not. This so-called gradual accession would rebuild candidate countries' trust in merit-based processes and is already being discussed in many European capitals.

However, the EU must first regain its influence in the Western Balkan region by overcoming differences among member states on how to make its institutions more flexible and better equipped for gradual enlargement. The core package should include the following elements: participation in the single market, full integration with the EU's climate agenda (including access to the financial instruments of the European Green Deal), and access to EU structural funds (Tcherneva 2023). This initiative should have, as a prerequisite, full alignment of candidates with EU foreign policy and should originate from the European Council (not the European Commission) as a sign of strong political commitment.

Additionally, some member states fear that a rapid accession process could result in the "import" of leaders who increasingly oppose EU values, such as the increasingly prominent Hungarian Prime Minister Orban. To prevent blockades in the enlargement process, the European Council has proposed two measures. The first is a "trust clause", according to which new members cannot block future members; the second is the method of "constructive abstention", derived from the neutrality of Austria in EU discussions about the European Peace Facility, which finances the sending of weapons to Ukraine (Bayer 2023). While the first measure seems feasible, the second might be overly optimistic as it assumes a high level of political

maturity. Relying on constructive abstention to overcome blockades is unlikely to succeed among politicians new to Brussels who wish to demonstrate their political strength. Therefore, a gradual approach to accession, where new members receive an incremental increase in voting power, has the highest likelihood of defending against this threat.

Beneath the focus of some member states on enhancing and reforming the enlargement process lies a lack of readiness within the EU to support the Western Balkans. Efforts by Ursula von der Leyen and the aforementioned Charles Michel to revive this process in the Western Balkans and create better preparedness within the EU may fail if not taken seriously. Instead of delaying the promise of membership and risking losing the region to disappointment, instability, and other partners, the EU must take immediate necessary steps to prepare for enlargement. The call of history can easily turn into another historical missed opportunity.

Conclusion

The power of sovereign states has persisted, yet we are witnessing the increasingly clear positioning of sovereign states within various alliances based on clearly defined values and interests. The European Union, as an entity founded on democratic principles and values, as well as clear economic interests, is also part of various transformative processes – processes in which its power and spheres of influence are being redefined. The power disparity among member states has been largely leveled by the principle of the so-called blocking minority (during voting in the Council of Ministers), which guarantees that smaller and medium-sized countries cannot be easily outvoted by the larger ones. However, the challenges that the European Union has faced over the past decades, such as the economic and migrant crises, as well as aid to Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression, have also revealed certain dissonances among the member states, raising questions about how the Union can act more cohesively and assert its power more effectively.

The European Union has been an influential actor in the Western Balkans, where it has applied a wide range of foreign policy instruments since the early 1990s: diplomatic and trade measures, financial assistance, civilian and military missions, and later, the enlargement policy, which remains its most successful foreign policy tool to date. The strong role of the European Union makes the Western Balkans a region where the Union's transformative power would be expected to be the strongest. However, it is increasingly evident that the success achieved in relation to the Central and Eastern European countries has not been replicated in the Western Balkans. This is the result of numerous factors, among which this paper highlights the following: the global crisis of the EU's transformative power and the dominance of purely security interests in the Western Balkans, which relegates the region's democratic transition to the background, as well as the region's distinctiveness marked by the strong legacy

of the wars of the 1990s. From this perspective, the European Union's influence on reforms, the democratization process, and the permanent resolution of conflicts in the countries of the European Neighborhood Policy is limited.

The incursion of non-traditional actors into the sphere of influence and power in the Western Balkans – primarily China, Russia, but also Turkey and some Arab countries – is a consequence of the unfinished processes in this region and has become increasingly noticeable over the past decade. Dangerous "abandonment" of reforms can lead to further democratic backsliding among EU neighbors and push them further east in search of allies. The unfavorable climate towards EU enlargement internally transfers to these regions, which have always been a paradigm for the intersection of interests and power of various global and regional actors. In the 1990s, Turkey strongly implemented its presence and influence in this region. The 2000s saw the return of Russian influence through economic and investment presence, while the second and third decades have been marked by China's significant increase in influence and presence in the region.

The prospect of further enlargement of the European Union primarily depends on aligning words with actions, specifically the concretization of the expressed political will on both sides (in all EU member states, as well as in the Western Balkans) to leverage the new geopolitical situation to achieve the historical opportunity of completing European integration in Southeast Europe. After "losing momentum" in European integration (initially during the last decade of the previous century, and then during the previous decades of this century), the countries of the region and their political elites now have the practical opportunity to finalize the historic goal of joining the EU, which will facilitate modernization and development of their societies and economies in the face of new and increasingly complex technological, social, security, and geopolitical challenges in the years ahead.

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