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EU Enlargement and Geopolitics: Is it Relevant Today?

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Abstract: After the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine geopolitics has entered anew the European integration vocabulary. The EU official rhetoric consistently reiterates geopolitics as a driving factor for its renewed enlargement mobilization. The swift appearance of the enlargement perspective for Ukraine and Moldova as well as the pursuit of

geopolitical momentum for the approximation with the Western Balkans countries provoked diverse reactions from enthusiasm to questions about the practical consequences for the EU, its enlargement policy and the particular member states. This article raises the argument that the EU's geopolitical rhetoric plays much more important role in the search for an exit from the EU's internal political deadlock, than as a genuinely new geopolitical boost that will revive or speed up the enlargement process. The geopolitical argument aims to instrumentalize the enlargement policy in search of a new step towards the deepening of the European integration, making enlargement a hostage to EU's internal problems.

Keywords: geopolitics, enlargement, European Union, internal reforms

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore whether, and what role, geopolitical considerations play in the process of European enlargement. Commencing from a short overview of the existence and role of geopolitical considerations in the EU's history, this paper recognizes moments when and where geopolitics mattered. The second part juxtaposes these findings with the contemporary geopolitical narrative which has been particularly emphasized since the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Carrying out critical analyses of official statements,

political rhetoric and practical actions, this paper reaches the conclusion that at this point, despite the EU rhetoric, geopolitical considerations do not determine the course of the EU and its member states in the context of the EU Enlargement policy. Instead, the increased number of candidate countries does not mean that the EU has any plans for “fast-tracking” enlargement. On the contrary, the Enlargement process is becoming more and more subordinate to the EU’s internal problems and its member-states’ inability to overcome the deadlock on the future direction of European integration.

Geopolitics and European Integration

While geography plays a crucial role in the process of European integration, the mainstream political discourse on the integration process tends to downplay its role; both internally within the EU, and towards the candidate countries, the idealist and liberal institutionalist approaches of shared political values and benchmarks dominates. With that said, while there is a dominant narrative of considering EU enlargement as a process of accession of likeminded states sharing the same values, European integration has always been embedded in geopolitical considerations. *Art. 237* of the Rome Treaties draw, although not explicitly enough, the geographical limits of integration, acknowledging the willingness for the membership of “any European state”.

Since the early days of the integration process, the European Communities have operated within the geopolitical framework of what Europe is. The Cold war division of Europe and the geopolitical challenges of the global rival-

ry between the East and the West had, and continues to have, an impact on the EC member states internal policies.

This is not to say that geopolitical considerations were not important in the process of European integration. The particular European Communities’ interest towards Greece and Turkey, since the 1960s, was part and parcel of the US, NATO and the general Western strategic interest of containing the USSR. While these interests were not detached from the expectations for meeting basic standards of political pluralism, they constituted a careful calculation of the geographical and values-based priorities. The initiated Association Agreements approach aimed at hooking both Turkey and Greece, not only militarily, but also in the Western European economic orbit. The membership of Spain and Portugal sealed the European Communities’ south-western flank, although it was possible only after the end of their authoritarian regimes.

The most significant geopolitical change, the end of the Cold war, provided completely new perspectives for the process of European integration. The end of the ideological and military East-West rivalry created favourable conditions for the unification of Europe that eventually turned into the largest EU enlargement in the history of the integration process. This fifth enlargement constitutes an interesting example of the interplay between liberal (or values based) and geopolitical considerations. The dominant, values-based, approach under the Copenhagen Criteria and conditionality overshadowed geopolitical considerations. This “desecuritization” approach, as John O’Brennan argued, dealt with geopolitical issues within the enlargement process from a “soft” security template

and sought to de-link territoriality from traditional security concerns, to “normalize” a broad range of geopolitical issues as domestic EU politics within the enlargement negotiations.¹ This was the zeitgeist.

The membership perspective was contingent upon the fulfillment of the constantly evolving interpretations of the Copenhagen criteria, which served as a point of reference for the decision to keep Romania and Bulgaria as a separate group, and to encourage further reforms at national levels. However, the NATO airstrikes over former Yugoslavia and the security considerations for the stability of the whole region, served as a catalyst for the inclusion of the two countries into the group of ultimately twelve countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.² This move secured NATO’s eastern flank, which overlapped with the EU’s eastern border, providing for a coherent land connection from Tallin to Athens at the cost of unfulfilled political criteria. The concern for Bulgaria and Romania’s premature membership forced the EU to introduce the pioneered solution, or mechanism, of post-enlargement conditionality (Cooperation and Verification Mechanism), which was supported by a silent political agreement that the membership of these two countries, in the next integration formats, like the Schengen and Euro zones, would be contingent upon the further improvements in their judiciaries’ fight against corruption and organized crime.

The fifth enlargement not only completed the EU’s eastern flank and reached the border of the former Soviet Union,

¹ John O’Brennan, “Bringing Geopolitics Back in: Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19: 1 (March 2006), 156.

² Георги Д. Димитров, Как България се промуши в Европейския съюз. Геополитика и национални специфики в отношението към българското членство в ЕС. Том 2., Университетско издателство „св. Климент Охридски“, 2023 p.357-397

but also created a *de facto* enclave of non-EU member states surrounded by the EU in the Western Balkans. The emergence of this enclave practically diminished the role of other geopolitical rivals, and the declared membership perspective secured the EU’s privileged position in the region.

This favourable geopolitical turn of events in the first decade of this century was accompanied by the piling challenges of the fifth enlargement and the growing disenchantment between the social attitudes and political priorities of the EU’s member states national political elites. The enlargement *fatigue* and the regional instability together with the reluctance of the Balkan states’ political elites for reforms, paved the ground for the protracted, or more accurately, never-ending process of EU-Western Balkans rapprochement.³ (Anastasakis, 2008) This, however, was secondary to the fact that the Western (both EU and NATO) interests were secured in the Balkans.

The shared awareness that the process is stalled, turned into an explicit policy during the Juncker commission when, in 2014, the President of the European Commission declared that there would be no enlargement during his term.⁴ While the recipients of Juncker’s decision were supposedly the embittered Western societies, the repercussions in the Balkans were no less important. The political elites in the Western Balkans interpreted this statement as an easing of the EU pressure for reforms and saw it as

³ Othon Anastasakis (2008) The EU’s political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 8:4, 365-377, DOI: 10.1080/14683850802556384

⁴ “Juncker to halt enlargement as EU Commission head,” *EUBusiness* (July 15, 2014). <https://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29>

an opportunity to turn towards other, less values-oriented partners, like China, Russia, Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Although the enlargement supporters in the EU gathered around Germany's Berlin Process initiative, which aimed to sustain the pace of reforms and conditionality, the EU's position in the Balkans received a significant blow.

Juncker's decision would not have been possible without the EU's self-confidence that the Western Balkans were an enclave without alternative geopolitical options. Hence, their prospective membership is dependent not solely on their own efforts, but also on the already existing member states' willingness to accept them. The enduring cooperation between the Western Balkans' political elites and the EU institutions provided sufficient arguments for the emergence of the term "stabilitocracy," which practically answered the question, 'what are the EU priorities in the Western Balkans?' The mediocre performance of the internal reforms in the Western Balkans were balanced by the fact that these countries provided security and control necessary for the handling of the piling challenges of the economic, migratory, Brexit and COVID-19 crises.

Even the awareness that Jucker's *faux pas* had a negative impact on the relations with the Western Balkans, and that it emboldened geopolitical rivals to strengthen their foothold in the region, were not sufficient to mobilize the EU to provide a qualitatively different form of interaction with the region. Instead, the Western Balkans remained contingent upon the domestic politics of the EU member states, exemplified by Macron's veto on the kickoff of the enlargement negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in

November 2019.⁵ The enhanced enlargement methodology prioritized the French concerns about the inflexible and irreversible EU enlargement policy over the endless paralysis and growing disappointment with the EU in the Western Balkans. The new methodology acknowledged the need to "re-establish a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans and to make it very clear that for the Commission and for the EU as a whole, it is a top priority to have stability, peace and prosperity in our region."⁶ This renewed enlargement push was supposed to be established on the principles of "credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer" and continued to be "merit-based."⁷ The clustering of negotiation chapters and the political mobilization of all political formats and stakeholders was to result in new dynamics, notwithstanding the highest priority for the rule of law cluster. All of these efforts were part of a "geo-strategic investment,"⁸ as Várhelyi claimed.

The new methodological framework was an attempt at a new opening. While it was crucially necessary for the Western Balkans in order to revive the relations with the EU, it was no less needed for the embittered EU societies, as it equipped political leaders like Macron with the argument that the political elites have strengthened their command over the relations with the "questionably democratic" Balkan leaders.

⁵ Robin Emmott et al., "France under fire for "historic error" of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls," *Reuters* (October 18, 2019). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans-idUSKBN1WX1CT>

⁶ "Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press conference on the revised enlargement methodology," *European Commission* (Brussels, February 05, 2020). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/el/statement_20_208

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

However, the new formula has promptly become the hostage of yet another bilateral conflict, this time between Bulgaria and North Macedonia over national identity. Paired with Albania on the road to the EU, North Macedonia has once again become a source of concern. While the EU is involved in the resolution of this conflict, and both sides are under pressure to move forward, the bilateral tensions and the Bulgarian veto practically revealed the vulnerability of the EU relations with the candidate States on individual interests.

A New Geopolitical Turn?

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine resulted in the shift from being locked within the legal framework of contemporary international relations and political confrontations between Russia and the West, into an open contestation of the existing organization of the global order. The Russian annexation of Crimea, and the Moscow led separatism in Donbass, were still considered as a deviation from the dominant roles in international relations. Despite the imposition of sanctions and the deteriorating relations, the dominant narrative silently accepted the Russian interpretation that the war in Donbass was a local conflict and that although Crimea officially belongs to Ukraine, it was never actually so. Hence, after 2014, the US and the EU still searched for the accommodation of the Russian aggression within the dominant order. The Normandy format and the Minsk Agreement aimed at appeasing Moscow while ignoring Putin's growing demands. This is why the commencement of the full-scale military aggression in February 24, 2022 came as a surprise.

Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in another push for the advancement of the enlargement process. The Russian attack required a reassessment of the European security environment, especially in the context of the Balkans, where Russia has set her foothold in Serbia and Bosnia. The EU promptly extended its sanctions policy against Russia, which aimed to cripple Russia's ability to finance the war, and thus undermine its economic base. Ukraine has become a recipient of substantial economic and military support and, importantly, has received, together with Moldova, the status of candidate country. This was an important move from a symbolic perspective, but also a confusing step from a practical perspective, for both the EU public opinion and the candidate States. The rush for unreserved support for the victim of Russia's aggression completely ignored the complexity of issues which had piled up in the decades long enlargement justifications in relation to the Western Balkans. It was not surprising that "[...] the granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia without strict conditions has undermined its [EU's-SD] credibility in the region [Western Balkans – SD]."⁹ As Paul Taylor, contributing editor at *Politico*, noticed: "[...] Western Balkan elites understandably feared their countries were being pushed further back in the line for membership."¹⁰

The awareness in Brussels that the introduction of Ukraine and Moldova into the waiting room triggered dubious

⁹ Ljiljana Kolarski, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans," *The Policy of National Security* Y3;:2 (1022), 87-107. https://www.ips.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/pnb2_2022-5.pdf p.93-94

¹⁰ Paul Taylor, "EU must seize the geopolitical moment in the Balkans," *Politico* (Dec 14, 2022). <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-balkans-accession-russia-china-geopolitics/>

feelings, forced EU politicians to pay visits to the region. In August, German Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Sarajevo, Prishtina, and Belgrade, while Borrell visited Albania to start a tour in the region and delivered messages of hope for the quick EU integration of the Western Balkans countries in light of recent events in Europe.¹¹ Simultaneously, two EU-Western Balkan summits — in Brussels and Tirana — were held and the Berlin Process was revived in order to support regional economic integration in preparation for joining the EU's single market. The Western Balkan leaders also attended the inaugural summit of a new European Political Community in Prague in October 2022.¹² This noticeable intensification of relations, including the removal of the Bulgarian veto, created the impression that a genuine breakthrough was possible. However, the new dynamics contained consistent demands for EU reform on its decision-making system to scrap national vetoes on sanctions and taxation policy before new members are admitted.¹³

Does the EU Really Want Enlargement?

Looking beyond the political rhetoric of the European institutions, which contains all possible declinations of "geopolitics," it seems necessary to take a look at what a geopolitical approach would mean. At first, it would need to clearly define the territories (and hence countries) that constitute a geographical priority. We can generally agree that such an argument is relevant for the candidate EU member States, as their membership is already anticipated, but then it is not so clear how to treat the countries

subject to the neighborhood policy. Until Feb 24, 2022, the Eastern Partnership countries were not officially considered as countries, for which the EU perspective is an option. The EU granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022, thus expanding the EU's "waiting room."

This extension of the EU's waiting room brought about a number of questions on the further consistency of the EU's approach. It is reasonable to wonder whether or not the merging of countries from the enlargement and neighborhood policies into one group will be harmful for the former or beneficial for the latter? This, especially considering that the post-2013 EU enlargement policy record is rather dubious, to put it bluntly.

The general agreement among experts that the enlargement policy after 2007/2013 does not work, raised the logical question, 'what is the way forward?' Apart from the symbolic value of the Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, and even the potential commencement of formal negotiations, the question of 'how exactly to secure that these countries will not get stuck in the same waiting room' arises. What do the Western Balkans countries, who have been lining up for membership for decades, think about the war-motivated "fast-track" for the two former Soviet Republics? Maybe a small war in the Western Balkans can speed up the process? This has become a question that attracted the intellectual efforts of many experts on the Enlargement and Neighborhood policies from respected think tanks as well as academia.

The general diagnosis underlines the awareness that the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans does not work

¹¹ Kolarski, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans," 93.

¹² Paul Taylor, "EU must seize the geopolitical moment in the Balkans."

¹³ Ibid.

and must be corrected. Whether it is the Centre for European Policy Studies' (CEPS) staged accession model,¹⁴ The Institute of Human Sciences' (IWM) access to the Single Market and the Four Freedoms,¹⁵ or The German Institute for International and Security Affairs' (SWP) suggestion for the coordination of the future accession negotiations, current process of association, and potential new formats, such as a European Political Community or a European Political and Economic Area,¹⁶ the dominant responses to this dilemma have all attempted to square Macron's demands for internal EU reforms and a renewed enlargement perspective. As Wolczuk pointed out, "in May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron said it would take decades for Ukraine to join the EU. More recently, he embraced the imperative of enlargement for geopolitical reasons while promoting the idea of a Europe of different speeds."¹⁷

Interestingly, what unites all of these proposals is not the increase of the enlargement process efficiency, which is in itself the essence of the Enlargement policy's weakness, but an effort to blur its importance, by replacing the final goal of membership with selective access to bundles of EU policies or politics. Importantly, the implementation

¹⁴ Michael Emerson et al., "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU," *Center for European Policy Studies* (Oct 01, 2021). <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

¹⁵ Kristof Bender, "EU Enlargement and Europe's Future: How to Revive One of the EU's Most Successful Policies," *Europe's Futures* (September 14, 2023). <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-and-europes-future-how-to-revive-one-of-the-eus-most>

¹⁶ Barbara Lippert, "The EU's Next Eastward Enlargement Will Be Complicated and Expensive," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (August 12, 2022). doi:10.18449/2022C46. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C46/>

¹⁷ Katarzyna Wolczuk, "Overcoming EU Accession Challenges in Eastern Europe: Avoiding Purgatory," *Carnegie Europe* (June 28, 2023). <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/06/28/overcoming-eu-accession-challenges-in-eastern-europe-avoiding-purgatory-pub-90039>

of these ideas opens a Pandora's box, as it will not only concern the current candidates but will also provide an opportunity for the "relegation" of those current members unwilling or unable to join the EU's core, thus further deepening the divides in the integration process.

The informal meeting of the EU leaders in Granada this October (2023), which simultaneously took place with the European Political Initiative, shed more light on the distribution of the accents in the internal EU political debate. The burning issue remains migration, where the Polish and Hungarian veto for the European Summit statement of Ursula von der Leyen is sufficiently informative. While there is awareness for the need for enlargement, there are also "no shortcuts," meaning that the countries are exposed to a merit-based approach.¹⁸ These "no shortcuts" or "merit-based" approaches are largely shared by the experts on the topic. This, one could argue, consistent approach, seems to be indifferent to the geopolitical challenge that Europe is facing, since the membership conditions remain as they were.

Charles Michel's closing press conference also shed more light on the set of priorities in the internal EU debate and the place of the Enlargement policy in them. As he states: "The EU needs to focus on three questions: what are the EU's common priorities and policies for the future, how Europe will act together in terms of decision-making, and how to make sure that Europe has the budget in line with its ambitions." An additional four corresponding topics

¹⁸ EU summit statement adopted without migration paragraph – as it happened, *The Guardian* (Oct 6, 2023). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/06/viktor-orban-eu-ukraine-migration-policies-leaders-granada-armenia-azerbaijan-europe-live>

of discussion were: Europe needs to strengthen its economic and technological basis; Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of developing the industrial basis for security and defence; There was a need to speed up work on sovereignty; Europe needs to engage with the rest of the world, and the EU has a special role to play in a multipolar world.¹⁹ In that context Von der Leyen's argument that "we also have to do our own homework so that we are ready in case that [...] candidate countries are ready to join, that we are also ready to welcome them to the European Union,"²⁰ means that regardless of all of the candidate countries' efforts, there is little chance that any enlargement can take place prior to the introduction of internal EU reforms. These reforms primarily concern the pressure exerted on the member States to accept the Quality Majority Voting (QMV) as a new voting principle replacing unanimity and member-States' veto power, securing their own budget resources and defining a clear path for the further development of the EU. All of these are topics highly contested among EU members and there is no political constellation for their prompt incorporation without overcoming a potential veto or removing a member ready to apply such veto. Hence, there is little hope that the perplexed internal situation will be resolved promptly, and the membership perspective will be solely dependent on the candidates' merit-based progress.

This tendency is even more clear, when looking at the content and recommendations of the Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for

the 21st Century, that was presented on September 18, 2023 and was endorsed by representatives of the French and German governments.²¹ Although the "report recommends a flexible EU reform and enlargement process,"²² it acknowledges that the EU enlargement is high on the political agenda for geopolitical reasons and that simultaneously "[...] the EU is not ready yet to welcome new members, neither institutionally nor policy wise."²³ Hence, without the imposition of a new organization of the EU institutional and decision making process containing QMV and delivering a Rule of Law tool for interference in the member states internal matters, thus securing the interests of the core (or if someone wants "the strongest" in the EU), the enlargement will not take place. Having in mind that the proposed reforms are a highly contested issue, and that there are internal divisions on every policy issue, it is not surprising that the proposal follows a path, settled already by the European Commission's White paper on the future of Europe²⁴ five scenarios on the future of Europe, that formally draws alternative options but practically advocates the introduction of the next incarnations of the "two speeds" or "Europe a la carte" concepts. Any version of this will facilitate the deepened integration of

²¹ Mared Gwyn Jones, "Germany, France present EU reform proposal as bloc prepares for new members," *Euronews* (September 19, 2023). <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/19/germany-france-present-eu-reform-proposal-as-bloc-prepares-for-new-members>

²² "Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century," (September 18, 2023), 5. <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/19/Paper-EU-reform.pdf>

²³ *Idem*.

²⁴ White paper on the future of Europe, Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, European Commission COM(2017)2025 of 1 March 2017, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2017-03/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

the few, and exclude the rest, thus removing the burden of solidarity. The implementation of such ideas will promptly produce tensions around QMV decisions on issues of fundamental importance in national politics and will fuel anti-EU narratives concerning the so called “oppression of Brussels.” Just as much as such solutions can facilitate the decisions of the “core,” it will deliver new tools for interference in national politics which, notwithstanding the specific type of democratic legitimacy of the EU, will also become a source of contention. This course of action found its place in the Granada Declaration, through the acknowledgement that “in parallel, the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms” to the aspiring members reforms.²⁵

Finally, in the context of our deliberations, this proposal makes enlargement policy a hostage to internal reforms. This step not only deprioritizes enlargement as an EU policy, but will also continue to discourage reformers in candidate States, and fuel the arguments of EU critiques, that the EU treats them instrumentally.

Geopolitics Matters, but not in this Case

With regard the analysis above, several conclusions can be made. Rhetorically, the EU signals a clear understanding of the ongoing changes in Europe and its statements are replete with geopolitical and geo-strategic considerations. However, practically speaking, no EU enlargement related actions are practically driven by geopolitical considerations. Instead, the EU continues to rely on vague,

constantly changing requirements²⁶ that serve more as a shield against the candidates than as a guide towards EU integration. Much more concerning however, is the fact that there is no coherent, consensus-based Enlargement policy within the EU. In other words, the EU enlargement policy is not a shared priority, or, in a sense, a *raison d'etat* of the European Union. Instead, it has become a victim of member States' short term political needs and interests, as aptly described by Bender.²⁷ This instrumentalization of the Enlargement policy for internal political purposes has devastating consequences for the EU and its member States' credibility, which, in the absence of hard power, is one of the strongest tools of political action, if used appropriately.

The enlargement process is no less dependent, or probably even more dependent, on the internal EU political dynamic than on the nature of relations between the EU and the candidate States. The current EU geopolitical arguments, or rhetoric, is simply a fig leaf covering the need to adjust the talk to the war time environment, but it contains no substance when it comes to the practical actions taken by the European politicians and/or the EU institutions. Instead, what we can deduct from the political statements and practical actions during the last year and a half is that what really determines the EU activity towards the candidate States is the EU's internal considerations. The Enlargement policy has become a hostage to the fed-

²⁶ Dragan Tilev, “The New EU Enlargement Methodology: Enhancing the Accession Process,” *Institute for Democracy, Societas Civilis – Skopje* (March 2020), 3 <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final-Commentary-Dragan-Tilev.pdf>

²⁷ Kristof Bender, “EU Enlargement and Europe's Future: How to Revive One of the EU's Most Successful Policies,” *Europe's Futures* (September 14, 2023). <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-and-europes-future-how-to-revive-one-of-the-eus-most>

²⁵ “Granada Declaration,” *European Council* (October 6, 2023). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/>

eralist push for reforms aiming to weaken member States' positions vis à vis EU institutions and the Franco-German vision of further political integration.

Despite the geopolitical turbulences, the EU stubbornly holds to the rule of law principles, despite the fact that they remain one of the most politically biased enlargement criteria. This, however, should not be surprising in the context of the EU's betting on the rule of law as a mechanism for intra-EU leverage on member States; a mechanism in which the EU invested a lot in the last two European Commission terms. Hence, for the sake of consistency, the EU cannot ease the pressure on external partners, when it tries to increase it internally, regardless of the fact that it is a controversial issue, to say the least. The fact that the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism was officially closed for Bulgaria and Romania, without any tangible improvements in the field of rule of law in Bulgaria, exposes the importance of an appropriate political constellation in the EU for the adoption or removal of such rule of law related tools. Instead, and conversely, the EU introduced annual rule of law reports on each member State.

The EU also insists on internal EU reforms prior to the next enlargement, which will increase the Union's strategic autonomy, by securing new, reliable financial sources independent of the member States, and, most importantly, the abandonment of the member-States' veto power. The trade-off of the enlargement for the right to veto exemplifies the severe frustration within the EU towards the principle of consensus and the practical limitations stemming from it. This question has the potential to capsiz the EU train, and its connection with the enlargement policy

will slow rather than speed up the enlargement process. Therefore, apart from the geopolitical rhetoric, the EU's practical actions are not embedded in geopolitical considerations.

The war in Ukraine brought new countries into the "waiting room," but so far the EU has not produced any alternative approach to providing a solution that would allow for a swift entrance into the Union. While Ukraine and Moldova's candidate status were a necessary act of solidarity, it cannot result in the repetition of the same political practices that led to popular disappointment with the EU in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine changed the geopolitical environment in Europe as no other event has for the last thirty years, and the EU should take advantage of this in order to complete the enlargement of the Western Balkans, which has seemingly become an endless process.

What if Geopolitics Really Mattered?

Geopolitically, the Western Balkans are a non-issue. The NATO membership of all Balkan states with the exception of Serbia (although Bosnia and Kosovo are not members of the alliance, NATO troops are stationed there) substantially diminishes the potential for regional and European destabilization. Instead, in the current Western Balkans enlargement discourse, the accent is placed on local or "Balkan" problems like the Bulgarian-Macedonian identity dispute, or calls for further reforms. Without questioning the need for internal reforms in the candidate States, or the difficulties caused by such formal obstacles like the veto, the question remains whether the elimination of these obstacles will open the door for membership or

not? The new enlargement horizon, including Ukraine and Moldova, is even more replete with endless conflicts and obstacles. Now, whereas previously the challenges embraced a NATO dominated area, which still faced crucial security challenges like the Serbia-Kosovo conflict or the situation in Bosnia, the picture is getting even more complex. The EU will have to deal with the post-war borders of Ukraine, the problem of Transnistria and numerous other tensions that will emerge together with the dropping of tensions in Ukraine.

In the search for the “geopolitical” drivers for EU enlargement activities after February 2022, one particular aspect of the geopolitically driven factor of enlargement is missing. During the 2004/2007 enlargement, the “geopolitical” argument meant that despite the fact that countries were not ready to join the Union, their membership was important for other reasons that went above normative, or perhaps more accurately, “norms driven” considerations and concerns. Hence, despite the awareness that countries like Bulgaria and Romania were not willing (or able) to reach the preparedness benchmarks to the extent that the European Commission would consider them satisfactory, other priorities of a security nature outweighed these normative shortcomings. Namely, the countries were accepted because they sealed the EU’s eastern border and connected Central Europe with Greece. If this was the case in 2007, *ad analogiam*, it would be logical to expect a similar pattern of behavior, or political signals coming from Brussels after 2022. So far, however, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, as this analysis reveals, apart from the inclusion of “geopolitics” as a buzz word, there are no such

signals in important international documents that would indicate the EU’s readiness to turn a blind eye on systemic shortcomings in the candidate states for the sake of faster membership. Instead, as the recent conclusions from the Granada summit and the discussed report revealed, there is an exactly opposite trend that the EU will make no concessions whatsoever when it comes to candidate States’ duties within the EU’s new enlargement methodology. After 2022, no EU official even dared to say that the acceptance of the Western Balkans countries altogether would expand the sphere of peace in Europe, or that the four freedoms would make most of the regional conflicts meaningless. What continues to matter is the good old normative conditionality driven policy that turned the enlargement into a tool rather than a goal.

