

SUPPORT FOR EU MEMBERSHIP IN WESTERN BALKANS: WHAT IS EXPECTED?



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Abstract

This paper addresses the situation with the EU accession progress and membership from the perspective of five Western Balkans candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). It examines the slow pace of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and the absence of the EU's transformative influence on the political and economic structures of Western Balkan countries. The paper explains recent geopolitical shifts that led to the revitalisation and acceleration of EU enlargement into the Western Balkans. It presents a gradual integration approach envisaged to establish a concrete link between conducting structural reforms and gradual EU integration. This paper examines institutional obstacles and political challenges of the future accession process and analyses limitations of gradual integration into the EU single market.

Keywords: Western Balkan candidate countries, European Union enlargement, gradual integration approach, European Union institutional reform, integration to the EU single market

1. Introduction

The Western Balkans is a geopolitical term coined by the governing bodies of the European Union (EU) in the early 2000s and refers to those countries in South-Eastern

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Europe that were not EU members or candidates at that time, but which could aspire to join the EU.¹ The Western Balkans region comprised the territory of the former Communist Yugoslavia, but without Slovenia which started accession negotiations in 1998 and joined the EU in 2004. The Western Balkans region includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania as the only country that was not part of Yugoslavia. Croatia entered the EU in 2013 and effectively left the Western Balkans region.

Five Western Balkan countries are currently recognised as candidates for EU membership status (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).² All these countries have gone through the negotiation, signing and ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), applying for EU membership and obtaining EU candidate status. Four countries are currently engaged in accession negotiations (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), while Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet received a negotiating framework. The absence of substantial progress in fulfilling the political, legal and economic criteria of EU membership is a common theme with all five countries. However, there are considerable differences amongst Western Balkan candidate countries regarding phases of the accession process, implementation of structural reforms, complying to EU requirements, popular support for EU accession, and the perspective of achieving full membership status.

2. EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans

In the aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia, EU integration was considered a guarantee of peace, political stability and economic prosperity in the Western Balkans. EU membership perspective was supposed to consolidate democratic institutions, rule of law and respect for human rights, and foster socio-economic development in the Western Balkan countries. In June 1999, a genuine institutional link was generated by the introduction of the Stabilisation and Accession Process (SAP) that had three main objectives: (1) ensuring the stability of Western Balkan countries; (2) supporting their transition to democracy and a market economy; and (3) establishing regional collaboration.³ In June 2003, the Thessaloniki European Council declared

1 Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 2.

2 Kosovo is the only Western Balkan country without EU candidate status. Kosovo aspires to become EU member state, but the membership process is hardened by the fact that their statehood is not recognized by five EU member states (Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Cyprus and Romania). Kosovo submitted a membership application in December 2022, and it is officially considered as a potential candidate.

3 Yariş, 2024, p. 129.

for the first time that Western Balkan countries were eligible to become EU members in the future.⁴

The first Western Balkan countries in which SAAs entered into force were North Macedonia in 2004 and Croatia in 2005. They submitted their membership application even before the SAAs entered into force, Croatia in 2003 and North Macedonia in 2004. The slow pace of EU enlargement of Western Balkan countries already began in the first phases of the integration process. After the SAAs entered into force, the Western Balkan countries had to wait for the EU's approval of candidate status in the range from one (Croatia and North Macedonia) to six years (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The following phases of integration process have lasted even longer. In the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the EU, obtaining EU candidate status was equal to starting membership negotiations.⁵ For the Western Balkan countries these two phases were split in the range from one (Croatia and Serbia) to sixteen years (North Macedonia). Generally, the Western Balkan accession process has happened slowly compared to the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.⁶

2.1. Limited Transformative Influence of the EU

The process of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU was not only slow, but its transformative influence turned out to be very limited (except for Croatia), particularly as compared to the EU's influence on Central European countries.⁷ The EU's conditionality of the integration process with political and economic reforms proved to be both ineffective and inconsistent in the case of the Western Balkans. The EU's policy towards Western Balkan countries often preferred security and governability over democratisation and rule of law. By prioritising, for security reasons, effective government instead of democratic governance in the Western Balkans, the EU has helped stabilise non-democratic and corrupt regimes rather than transform them.⁸ Western Balkan countries are currently faced with substantial deficits in democratic governance, independence of judiciary and media freedom. Since 2019, all Western Balkan countries have been rated as Transitional or Hybrid Regimes by the Freedom House Nations in Transit (FHNiT).⁹ The Western Balkans is also facing deteriorations in good neighbourly relations, reconciliation and regional cooperation. Autocratic states such as Russia, China, Turkey and Iran have significantly increased economic, political and cultural influence in the Western Balkans.

4 Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 3.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Yariş, 2024, p. 130.

8 Kovačević, 2022, p. 341.

9 Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 14.

2.2. Stalled Enlargement Process

The responsibility for the long-term and limited transforming process of EU integration lies with both Western Balkan candidate countries and EU Member states. The stalling of the EU accession of the Western Balkans is due to two interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors: enlargement fatigue on the side of the EU, and loss of momentum on the side of the Western Balkan countries.¹⁰ After the admission of Croatia in 2013, the EU became sceptical about further expansion and focused more on internal issues. In his political guidelines for the European Commission's mandate 2014–2019, Jean-Claude Juncker stated that the EU needs to absorb the accessions waves that had taken place in the previous decade, adding that 'the EU needs to take a break from enlargement'.¹¹ Juncker announced the continuation of ongoing accession negotiations, emphasising that 'notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years'.¹²

Recognising the danger of leaving the Western Balkans region empty-handed with such discouraging discourse at play, while accounting for the potential of third, non-EU actors' influence to grow, German chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2014 launched the Berlin Process.¹³ This aimed to maintain the dynamics of Western Balkans integration process by enhancing regional cooperation and economic integration. Some of the most important goals of the Berlin Process, such as the infrastructure connectivity of the region and resolution of bilateral disputes, were intended to act as a preparation for the Western Balkan countries to join the EU and participate in the EU single market.¹⁴ The Berlin Process delivered certain economic benefits for the Western Balkan countries and brought them closer to the EU single market. However, the Berlin Process did not manage to establish a regional economic area as its core project. The reason for the countries' lack of will to fully implement Common Regional Market (CRM) was an absence of a direct link between the Berlin Process and EU membership as the ultimate goal.¹⁵

2.3. Geopolitical Shift and Revitalisation of the Enlargement Process

As the Berlin Process was largely unsuccessful, the Western Balkans accession process mostly remained at a standstill for the period from 2014 to 2019. The standstill started to shift slightly in July 2020 when the EU approved the start of membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The tangible activation of the stalled integration process came only in 2022 with the Russia's full-scale invasion

10 Scazzieri, 2021, p. 4.

11 European Commission, 2014.

12 Ibid.

13 Marković, 2023, p. 2.

14 Ibid, p. 3.

15 Ibid.

of Ukraine. Russia's aggression against Ukraine which started in February 2022 dramatically altered the EU's geopolitical and security landscape, causing a change of the EU's position towards enlargement into the Western Balkans. The concern that Western Balkan countries could become a second battleground and the new arena for geostrategic rivalry prioritised enlargement on the EU's agenda.¹⁶ Prioritising and speeding up Western Balkan integration became the EU's strategic instrument in reducing Russia's influence in the region.

Revitalisation of EU enlargement into the Western Balkan begun with the official start of membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022. Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidacy status in December 2022 and received conditional approval for membership negotiations in March 2024. In June 2024 the EU reported tangible progress in membership negotiations with Montenegro which had started in 2013 and later stalled. The sixteenth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro at ministerial level noted that the country 'has, overall, met the interim benchmarks set for Chapters 23 and 24' which 'paves the way for Montenegro to start the process of closing chapters in the accession negotiations'.¹⁷ Serbia, which had started membership negotiations in 2012, remains the only Western Balkans candidate country without any visible accession progress during the enlargement momentum enacted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

2.4. Citizens' Attitudes About EU Accession and Real Prospects of EU Membership

According to the public opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) between February and March 2024, citizens in five of six Western Balkan countries overwhelmingly support the EU accession. In Albania 92% of the citizens would vote for EU accession in a referendum, in Kosovo that percentage is 89%, in Montenegro 79%, while in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina 68% of citizens support EU accession. In Serbia only 40% of the population would vote in favour of joining the EU, while 34% would oppose joining the EU.¹⁸

The situation is somewhat different regarding citizens' attitudes about real prospects of obtaining EU membership. In Serbia, 54% of citizens believe that the EU is not serious in its intention to offer membership status, while in North Macedonia that percentage is 47%, compared to 34% of citizens who believe that the EU is serious about enlargement. In Bosnia and Herzegovina 44% of population believe that EU is serious about membership perspective compared to 42% who believe the opposite. In Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo majorities of population – between 54%

16 Başak Yariş, 2024, p. 126.

17 Council of the European Union, 2024a.

18 European Western Balkans, 2024.

and 62% – believe that the EU is serious about offering membership to the Western Balkan countries.¹⁹

3. Gradual Integration Approach

As part of the new dynamics of integrating Western Balkan countries, in November 2023 the European Commission adopted the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for the period of 2024 to 2027. The Growth Plan is the policy instrument of the new enlargement approach that was posited by the European Council in June 2022. The EU leaders' summit in June 2022 called for a further advancement of 'the gradual integration between the European Union and the region (Western Balkans) already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner'.²⁰ The aim of the new gradualist enlargement policy is to advance a country's political association and economic integration as far as possible before its formal accession.²¹ Overall, the new gradualist policy gives both the Western Balkan states and EU more flexibility and prioritises effective progress in integration over rapid membership for geopolitical reasons.²² Gradual integration approach establishes concrete link between implementation of necessary reforms and benefits of EU integration.

The Growth Plan aims to enhance the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU's single market, advancing the regional economic integration through the CRM, accelerating fundamental reforms and increasing financial assistance to support fundamental and socio-economic reforms.²³ The Reform and Growth facility for financing the Growth Plan is worth six billion Euros, consisting of two billion Euros in grants and four billion Euros in concessional loans, with payments conditioned on the Western Balkans' partners fulfilment of structural reforms. Regarding the structure of the Growth Plan, the proposed areas of partial integration into the single market are rather selective (including inclusion in the Single Euro Payments Area – SEPA, the establishment of a voluntary roaming agreement and the recognition of professional qualifications) and no comprehensive access to the single market for an entire industry or sector has yet been offered.²⁴

19 European Western Balkans, 2024.

20 European Council, 2022, p. 5.

21 Lippert, 2024, p. 5.

22 Ibid, p. 8.

23 European Commission, 2023.

24 Becker and Lippert, 2024b, p. 7.

3.1. Reform Agendas

To receive payments from the six billion Euro Reform and Growth Facility, Western Balkan states must first prepare and submit its Reform agenda, which is approved by the Commission following positive assessment by the EU Member states. In October 2024 the European Commission approved the Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, paving the way for the allocation of funds. In December 2024 the Council concluded that the integration dynamics of Bosnia and Herzegovina had been stalled and urged the country to adopt and submit its Reform Agenda. The Council also called Bosnia and Herzegovina to appoint a chief negotiator and a national Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) coordinator and develop a national programme for the adoption of the EU legislation.²⁵

Conditions for approving the payments from Reform and Growth Facility include upholding democratic mechanisms, rule of law and respect for human rights. A specific pre-condition applies to Serbia and Kosovo who must engage constructively in the normalisation of their relations, including the implementation of all Dialogue agreements.²⁶ There were concerns that the implementation of a Growth plan would come at the expense of fundamental political, legal and economic criteria of EU membership. These concerns proved unfounded because the EU set the fundamental political, legal and economic reforms as one of the pillars of the Growth plan and a condition for the disbursement of funds. Council conclusions on enlargement from December 2024 stated that

sustained and irreversible reform achievements on the fundamentals, including the rule of law and fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration and the economic criteria continue to be the key benchmarks against which progress towards EU membership is assessed.²⁷

By insisting on meeting the fundamental criteria, the EU demonstrated its strong and consistent preference for the democratic governance and rule of law over authoritarian stability in the Western Balkans.

3.2. Revised Enlargement Methodology

A gradualist integration approach was preceded by the Council's adoption of a revised enlargement methodology in February 2020. The revised enlargement methodology grouped accession chapters into six thematic clusters: (1) Fundamentals, (2) Internal market, (3) Competitiveness and inclusive growth, (4) Green agenda and sustainable connectivity, (5) Resources, agriculture and cohesion, and (6) External

²⁵ Council of the EU, 2024b, p. 21.

²⁶ European Commission, 2024.

²⁷ Council of the EU, 2024, p. 3.

relations. Negotiations on each cluster would be opened as a whole, instead of opening chapter by chapter.

New methodology for accession negotiations strongly emphasised the political and legal criteria which were placed in a cluster called ‘Fundamentals’. Under the new methodology, accession negotiations would begin with the ‘Fundamentals’ cluster which will not be closed until the end of negotiations. Meeting the fundamental reforms would dictate the pace of the entire negotiation. The political criteria from Chapter 23 (‘Judiciary and fundamental rights’) and the legal criteria from Chapter 24 (‘Justice, freedom and security’) from the ‘Fundamentals’ cluster are set as the interim benchmarks. The time limit for the opening and closing of the individual chapter would be within a year, depending on the progress of the reforms.²⁸

New methodology brought the opportunity for regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts. According to the new methodology, if a country manages to make sufficient progress in the reform priorities that were agreed during the negotiations, this could lead to its closer integration with the EU and its accelerated integration and ‘phasing-in’ of EU policies, markets and programmes, as well as to increased financial support and investments.²⁹ New methodology changed the requirements for the activation of the balance clause and suspension of the negotiations. Regarding the new procedure, the Commission may submit a proposal for the activation of the balance clause at any time, on its own or at the request of any (one) EU Member State to ensure a quick response to the situation by use of – where relevant – simplified procedures, including Reverse qualified majority voting (RQMV).³⁰ In RQMV, a proposal is approved if it is not blocked by a Qualified majority voting (QMV) that requires the votes of 15 out of 27 Member states representing 65% of the EU population.

3.3. Gradual Integration Into the EU Single Market

The new enlargement approach enables candidate countries gradual and early access to specific EU policies, with an emphasis on the EU single market. Inclusion in the EU single market promises candidate countries access to the European goods and labour markets as well as integration into international supply chains and the facilitation of trade in goods and services, as well as also attracting investors and foreign direct investment.³¹ To receive the benefits of gradual integration into the EU single market, candidate countries must adopt single market legislation – i.e., develop a functioning market economy capable of withstanding the competitive pressures within the single market. However, adopting the *acquis Communautaire* with respect to single market legislation is the most difficult challenge in any accession

28 European Commission, 2020.

29 Kovačević, 2022, p. 347.

30 Ibid.

31 Becker and Lippert, 2024, p. 2.

process.³² Among the Western Balkan candidate countries, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania have opened chapters of Cluster 2 ('Internal market') with Montenegro and Albania opening all nine chapters and Serbia opening four chapters. Montenegro has provisionally closed one chapter, while Serbia and Albania have not closed any of the chapters from the 'Internal market' cluster. No candidate country in the Western Balkans currently fulfils the criterion of a functioning market economy.³³

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
SAA entered into force	2009	2015	2010	2004	2013
Membership application	2009	2016	2008	2004	2009
EU candidate status	2014	2022	2010	2005	2012
Decision to open accession negotiations	2020/2022	2024	2012	2020/2022	2013
Status of negotiations	24 out of 33 chapters opened, no chapter closed	Negotiating framework not adopted	All 33 chapters opened, and 6 chapters provisionally closed	None out of 33 chapters opened	22 out of 35 chapters opened and 2 chapters provisionally closed
Internal Market chapters	All 9 chapters opened, none closed	–	All 9 chapters opened, 1 provisionally closed	–	Four out of 9 chapters opened, none closed
Reform Agenda	Approved	Not adopted	Approved	Approved	Approved

Table No. 1³⁴

Western Balkan candidate countries integration progress (as of June 2025)

³² Becker and Lippert, 2024, p. 2.

³³ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁴ Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 3; European Council and the Council of the EU, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d.

4. The Obstacles and Challenges of Gradual Integration

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought the impetus for the EU enlargement, but the effectiveness of the geopolitically incentivised enlargement is potentially constrained by the rules of decision-making in the Council (under the General Affairs Council configuration) which decides on enlargement process. The EU has historically sustained the integration project based on an intricate balance between deepening and widening, but the geostrategic enlargement presents an important challenge to the EU in terms of maintaining an institutional balance between widening and deepening.³⁵ The EU has renewed its interest in further enlargement and introduced a new integration approach, but has not resolved possible blockages in the accession process by individual Member states. All decisions related to the EU enlargement process require unanimity between all the Member states. Some EU member states used unanimity requirements in the enlargement decision-making process to meet their national interests or other domestic political goals, with North Macedonia being the biggest victim of such practices.³⁶

One of the options for avoiding the individual Member states' blockage of the enlargement process is to transfer enlargement related decisions from unanimity to QMV. A report of the Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform from September 2023 stated that 'every accession to the EU adds more potential veto players, making unanimity exponentially harder to reach'.³⁷ As a solution to potential veto blockages, the report proposed that decisions on each negotiation chapter should be voted on under QMV, with the final ratification of an accession treaty remaining subject to a unanimity vote. In November 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on proposals for the reform of the EU institutional structure and the decision-making process in the Council, thus initiating the procedure to amend the Treaties. The Resolution affirmed proposals that decisions on interim steps in the enlargement process should be taken by QMV.³⁸ The resolution was adopted by a slim majority of 291 votes to 274, with 44 abstentions. It was backed by an overwhelming majority of MEPs from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, Renew Europe and Greens/European Free Alliance, while the majority of MEPs from the European People's Party and almost all MEPs from European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy voted against the Resolution.³⁹

The next step in the procedure to amend the Treaties, is the European Council's decision on examining the proposed amendments. The European Council discussed the reform of EU institutions in December 2023 and committed to address the issues in its upcoming meetings, with a goal of adopting conclusions on a roadmap for

35 Başak Yariş, 2024, p. 132.

36 Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 5.

37 France Diplomatie, 2023, p. 20.

38 European Parliament, 2023.

39 HowTheyVote, 2023.

future work by summer 2024.⁴⁰ In June 2024, EU leaders adopted a roadmap on future work of internal reforms and invited the Commission to present in depth policy reviews on the EU institutional reform by the spring of 2025. The European Council affirmed that the work on internal reforms ‘should advance in parallel with the enlargement process, as both the Union and future Member States must be ready at the time of accession’.⁴¹ At their meeting in June 2024, EU leaders did not consider the European Parliament’s proposal to amend the Treaties.

4.1. European Integration in Four Tiers

Another potential EU’s institutional novelty regarding Western Balkan candidate countries is dividing of European integration into distinct tiers. The Franco-German working group proposed future European integration with four distinct tiers, each with a different balance of rights and obligations.⁴² The first tier (‘The inner circle’) would consist of EU members states that belong to the Eurozone and Schengen Area. The second tier (‘The EU’) would comprise current Member States that are not part of Eurozone and future Member states. The third tier (‘Associate Members’) would include countries integrated into the EU’s single market, but not participating in the EU’s decision-making processes. It would still require compliance with the EU’s common principles and values, including democracy and the rule of law.⁴³ The fourth tier (‘The European Political Community’) would not include any form of integration with EU or access to its single market but would focus on geopolitical convergence and political cooperation in policy areas of mutual importance and relevance such as security, energy or environment and climate policy.⁴⁴ A minimum normative criteria for joining the fourth tier would be membership in the Council of Europe and the European Convention of Human Rights. According to the proposed model of integration, Western Balkan countries could be placed in the outer circles for a while and would thus have a relaxed form of relationship with the EU and still have explicit integration perspectives.⁴⁵ Yet the multi-tier integration could demotivate Western Balkan states to complete all fundamental political, legal and economic reforms if they would lose interest in advancing from one of the outer circles. The reform impetus might also be slowed down by a new wave of EU-scepticism in the Western Balkans whose political and societal elites hold in disdain the idea of integration falling behind full membership.⁴⁶

40 European Council, 2023, p. 6.

41 European Council, 2024, p. 12.

42 France Diplomatie, 2023, p. 35

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Başak Yariş, 2024, p. 133.

46 Başak Yariş, 2024, p. 134.

4.2. EU Citizens' Views on the Future Path of the EU and Accession of Candidate Countries

According to the recent survey conducted across all EU Member States, a Europe of different speeds and topic-specific flexible alliances more closely reflects the vision of the majority of EU citizens.⁴⁷ The same survey revealed that an absolute majority of EU citizens do not support accession of the current candidate countries. Ukraine gained the largest support to enter the EU with 41%, followed by the support for accession of Western Balkan countries with 35%.⁴⁸ Almost one-third of citizens of the EU Member States (32%) are opposed to the accession of Western Balkan countries.⁴⁹

Scepticism about Western Balkans region is deeply rooted mainly in Northern and Western EU countries where security and economic concerns, as well as fears about negative impacts on the efficient functioning of the EU, dominate these unfavourable attitudes.⁵⁰ According to the survey, EU citizens strongly insist on democratic and economic stability as the conditions for joining the EU. There is an overwhelming consensus (91%) that internal political stability, good governance, expressed by democratic procedures and institutions, independent justice, and the rule of law matter first and foremost in accepting new EU Member states.⁵¹ The criteria of a strong and resilient economy is essential or important to 86% of EU citizens.⁵² The research also revealed that a significant majority of EU citizens (65%) are in favour of having a direct say on which countries should be allowed to join the EU.⁵³

4.3. Compliance With the EU's Foreign and Security Policy

Besides implementing political and economic reforms in alignment with EU legislation, the EU expects Western Balkan candidate countries to align with its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The main indicator of harmonisation with the CFSP is whether applicants support the relevant positions adopted by Brussels – i.e., the statements of the High Representative on behalf of the Union and the decisions of the Council.⁵⁴ In the light of Russia's ongoing full-scale war against Ukraine, Western Balkan candidate countries are expected to fully comply with the EU's restrictive measures that were adopted in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Complying with the EU's position towards Russia's aggression is considered 'a key aspect of the

47 Martens Centre, 2024, p. 5.

48 Ibid., p. 7.

49 Ibid., p. 17.

50 Ibid., p. 7.

51 Ibid., p. 6.

52 Ibid., p. 17.

53 Ibid., p. 8.

54 Lippert, 2024, p. 4.

EU integration process and a strong expression of a partner's strategic choice and place in a community of values'.⁵⁵

According to the Council's conclusions from December 2024, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia are in full alignment with CFSP, including the EU's restrictive measures. Bosnia and Herzegovina is in full alignment with CFSP but not fully implementing the EU's restrictive measures. Adoption of the EU's restrictive measures is blocked by the political representatives of the Serb constituent people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia is the only Western Balkan candidate country that is not fully aligned with the CFSP and that has not joined the EU's sanctions against Russia and Belarus. Among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia is most exposed to trade with Russia.⁵⁶ Serbia also has strong cultural, religious and political ties with Russia. In December 2024, the Council reiterated 'its strong expectation of Serbia to step up its efforts towards full alignment with EU CFSP positions and restrictive measures, including on Russia and Belarus, as a matter of utmost priority'.⁵⁷

4.4. The Limitations of Partial Single Market Integration

The EU has secured financial support for the Western Balkan states' demanding tasks of adopting to single market legislation and creating necessary structures. However, it is not certain whether the Western Balkan countries will be able to fulfil the standards of a functioning market economy. This will depend on how the governments of the Western Balkan countries weigh the potential (and usually future) advantages of partial single market integration against the (current) political and financial costs of far-reaching structural reforms.⁵⁸ So far, Western Balkan candidate countries have made very limited progress in adopting single market legislation. It remains to be seen whether the Western Balkan candidate countries will be determined to fulfil democratic and governance criteria within a gradual accession process. If the acceding countries' elites are not prepared to adopt the EU's political, economic and social model, access to the EU single market will only be open to them without formal EU membership where they would still need to comprehensively fulfil the legal obligations, but not necessarily the political and normative conditions.⁵⁹

55 Council of the EU, 2024b, p. 5.

56 Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024, p. 11.

57 Council of the EU, 2024b, p. 11.

58 Becker and Lippert, 2024, p. 6.

59 Becker and Lippert, 2024, p. 8.

5. Conclusion

The accession process of the Western Balkan countries is characterised by slow pace, a lack of the EU's transformative influence and limited progress in fulfilling the political, legal and economic criteria of EU membership. Despite the ongoing stagnation of the accession process, the EU remains firmly committed to its enlargement into the Western Balkans. The EU's support for the integration of the Western Balkan countries has been solidified following Russia's full-scale aggression on Ukraine and dramatic alteration of EU's geopolitical and security circumstances. The EU's commitment to the membership perspective of the Western Balkan countries was reaffirmed with the introduction of a gradual integration approach which rewards reform progress with quicker access to the EU single market. A gradual integration approach poses demanding requirements to be fulfilled, and bears certain weaknesses but offers concrete benefits for conducting structural reforms. Despite the absence of substantial progress in the EU accession process, popular support for joining the EU remains significant in almost all Western Balkan candidate countries. However, many citizens in Western Balkan candidate countries do not believe in the real prospects of EU membership status.

The further pace and outcome of Western Balkan countries' accession process will be determined by the two mutually connected factors. The first factor is the further development of internal political processes in the EU regarding the reform of its institutional framework and forms of integration. This will largely depend on the attitudes of EU citizens towards a deeper and larger EU. A majority of EU citizens prefer a Europe of different speeds and a topic-specific flexible alliance. Also, the vast majority of EU citizens strongly insists on democratic governance and a strong and resilient economy as the criteria for accepting new EU member states. In this sense, some form of associate membership and access to the single market seems the most realistic perspective for Western Balkan candidate countries.

The second factor is the Western Balkan countries' willingness and capability to conduct necessary political and economic reforms. Not all Western Balkan countries have institutional capacities, political willingness and popular support to implement fundamental reforms. The interplay between the two aforementioned factors will not result in full EU membership for all current Western Balkan candidate countries. It can be expected that some of the Western Balkan candidate countries will become full Member states, while the others will enter some form of associate arrangement with the EU.

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