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The Challenges of "Renewed" Enlargement to the Western Balkan Countries

Abstract

In the last two decades, acting as an anchor for a transition to democracy and a market economy, the EU has given membership perspectives to the Western Balkan countries of Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Croatia. At the outset, the EU triggered democratic reforms, empowered civil society organisations, and established democratic rules in those countries. However, on Croatia's joining the EU in 2013, the Union demonstrated what can be best described as apparent enlargement fatigue and took a break from the widening of Western Balkan countries for the five subsequent years. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 revitalised the EU enlargement policy towards Western Balkan countries for security and geostrategic considerations. In that purview, this paper seeks to explore contextual constraints associated with the EU's renewed enlargement policy towards Western Balkan countries. Using the conceptual framework of Alcaro and his co-authors (2022), it is argued that the EU renewed enlargement operates in a context driven by the following three key processes: (1) multi-actor geostrategic competition; (2) regional fragmentation; and (3) intra-EU contestation. In this context, considering international, regional, and institutional contextual constraints, the EU's leverage on the Western Balkan countries would not be taken for granted, suggesting that the EU needs to develop hybrid strategies transcending classic tools of enlargement.

Keywords: Western Balkan Countries, Renewed Enlargement, Geostrategic Rivalry, Differentiated Integration

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Introduction

In the last two decades, the EU has given membership perspectives to several Western Balkan countries, namely, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Croatia, acting as an anchor for those countries' transition to democracy and a market economy. However, despite initial optimism, the EU has not been successful in introducing liberal democracy nor the rule of law in those countries (Džankić, Keil, Kmezić, 2019, p. 2), and Western Balkan countries continued carrying out political practices underpinned by patterns and behaviours far away from democratic ideals. In parallel to these internal challenges, Western Balkan countries have suffered from EU-related external and institutional constraints. Ever since the EU's expansion to include Croatia in 2013, the EU has demonstrated apparent so-called "enlargement fatigue" which manifested itself in the apparent unwillingness of the Union to grant membership to any other Western Balkan countries. Accordingly, as compared to Central and Eastern European countries, their Western Balkan counterparts were confronted with lower levels of credible EU membership. As a part of this general trend, the European Commission appeared to be less eager to integrate Western Balkan countries (Zhelyazkova, Damjanovski, Nechev, Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 27). Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission between 2014–2019, expressed doubts that the EU would expand during his mandate, stating that "the EU needs to take a break from enlargement" for five years in order to digest the integration of new Member States in the previous decade (Junker, 2014). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 changed the EU's stance on the issue. The concern that Western Balkan countries can become the second battleground and the new arena for geostrategic rivalry prioritised enlargement on the EU's agenda. In this context, a strong membership perspective to the Western Balkan countries became one of the central and most robust geostrategic instruments to cut Russia's influence in the region.

In this paper, using the conceptual framework proposed by Alcaro et al. (2022), it is argued that that the EU renewed enlargement operates in a context driven by the following three key processes: (1) multi-actor geostrategic competition; (2) regional fragmentation; and (3) intra-EU contestation. The main aim of this paper is to find out whether geostrategic enlargement is an effective policy to mitigate contextual constraints at the regional, international, and institutional levels.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows – firstly, based on a review of the pertinent literature on Western Balkan enlargement, the

EU's policies towards the Western Balkan countries are analysed. This is followed by an analysis of the context in which the EU operates towards the Balkan countries, and, finally, whether the geostrategic enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkan countries and parallel envisaged reforms on decision-making are effective or not in the context of regional fragmentation, intra-EU contestation, and multi-polar competition, is discussed.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The literature on Western Balkan enlargement is extensive and multi-faceted, covering aspects such as historical context, political and economic criteria for accession, as well as challenges associated with the EU membership process. Concurrently, a significant part of this body of work focuses on enlargement fatigue, which presents an important challenge to the EU's enlargement policy (Economides, 2020; O'Brennan, 2014). Previous studies highlighted a complex interplay of political, economic, and institutional factors underlying enlargement fatigue concerning the Western Balkans' entry into the EU (Börzel, Dimitrova, Schimmelfennig, 2017; Elbasani, 2008; Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, Balfour, Stratulat, 2017). There are also studies focusing on the effectiveness of the EU enlargement as an external instrument for the political transformation of the EU.

However, in recent years, scholars have started to address the "renewed" or "geostrategic" enlargement of the Union (Petrovic, Tzifakis, 2021, p. 159) For instance, Petrovic and Tzifakis (2021) critically evaluated the geopolitical shift in the EU's institutional thinking on enlargement. In another relevant study, Anghel and Džankić (2023) discussed whether geostrategic enlargement to the Western Balkan countries is a viable response to the undermining Russian impact. More specifically, the authors argued that a prospective enlargement of the EU could serve as a viable security and peace-building mechanism. However, several previous studies have also highlighted that the integration of Western Balkan countries without their complying to the EU's membership criteria would not comply with the underlying logic of European integration. It would transfer political and security problems of those countries to the EU, which will, in turn, jeopardise the European integration as a project. For instance, Genschel, Leek, and Weyns (2023) also discussed how a potential Russian attack would influence the EU's institutional structure.

While the available literature mostly focused on the credible membership perspectives granted to Western Balkan countries as something of a "one-size-fits-all" strategy, most previous studies failed to take into account

the ways through which geostrategic enlargement would take place under interconnected contextual constraints operating at the institutional, international, and regional levels. Different from the previous rounds of enlargement of the EU to the Central Eastern countries, it is not only the EU-related and domestic political structures, but also the changes in international and regional settings that would have an impact on the effectiveness of geostrategic or renewed enlargement. In this context, the present study aims to contribute to the enlargement literature by analysing the contextual constraints of geostrategic enlargement.

To this end, and in order to explain such institutional, international, and regional constraints, the following two theoretical frameworks are employed, namely, foreign policy decision-making perspectives on the one hand, and differentiated integration driven from theoretical strands of European integration on the other.

Overall, foreign policy analysis provides important variables from domestic, international, and individual levels of analyses (Singer, 1961; Waltz, 1960). This is particularly important considering that the present paper seeks to understand the constraints of "geostrategic enlargement" operating on domestic and external settings. The theoretical framework is also relevant, as it focuses on the structure and dynamics of the global system as a whole. This framework examines how the distribution of power among states – specifically in the form of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems – would shape the actors' foreign-policy decisions. This theoretical framework also provides important insights that determine the decisions on the state and the EU quasi-state level. Foreign policy analyses are particularly relevant in cases where single-factor explanations do not suffice to grasp the complexity and interaction of multiple variables.

According to Price (1978, p. 359), who analysed constraints in foreign policy decisions, constraints can be conceptualised as a "limited, sequential set of options for the decision makers rather than a large, random collection of possibilities". The constraints perspective provides a valuable contribution to a better understanding of geostrategic enlargement. The taxonomy of constraining factors can be established, and the impact of each of these variables, along with their interaction, can be determined (Price, 1978). Furthermore, Alcaro et al. (2022) suggested that a multi-polar rivalry, regional fragmentation, and the institutional structure of the EU can be identified as constraining factors as regards the effectiveness of geostrategic enlargement or other possible actions of the EU towards Western Balkan countries. In line with the theories of foreign policy analyses, the actions of the EU are constrained and determined by

an international structure that consists of multi-polar actors engaged in geostrategic rivalry.

The other theoretical framework used in the present study is differentiated integration. Differentiated integration is defined as a temporary derogation from the application of EU legislation (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, De Vries, 2022; Umbach, 2009), usually in the areas of monetary, defense, and border policies. The unique institutional structure of the EU is one of the restrictive parameters of the EU's geostrategic enlargement. At the supra-national and intergovernmental levels, the EU has to act within the limits of conferral powers and ensure a trade-off between deepening and widening. In order to maintain this delicate balance, the EU seeks to ensure its survival as a *sui generis* integration project that focuses on certain norms and principles. Differentiated integration can function as a policy instrument for integrating candidate countries, which are not yet fully ready for European integration.

From Enlargement Fatigue to Geostrategic Enlargement

Historically, the EU's relationship with Western Balkan countries has been a complex issue, with a multifaceted interplay of several parameters determining the patterns of those relations. In the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the countries of the Western Balkan had to confront internal conflicts, ethnic tensions, and economic problems. Pursuant to the Yugoslavian war, European integration was considered a guarantee of peace, and regional stability and security both for the Member States and for the six states within the Western Balkans.

Initially, leveraging diplomatic initiatives, peacekeeping missions, and financial assistance, the EU attempted to act as an entity contributing to the regional stability of Western Balkan countries. In June 1999, a genuine institutional link was generated by the introduction of the Stabilisation and Accession Process (SAP). The SAP had the following 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. The SAP was expected to prepare Western Balkan countries for EU membership (Nezirović, Ana, Durmišević, Hodžić, 2022, p. 37), and, subsequently, membership perspectives were later reconfirmed in the Cologne European Council in 1999, the Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003, and at the Zagreb Summit.

Initially, expectations that Western Balkan countries would succeed in their democratic transformation owing to the positive impact of

membership incentives were very high. However, later on, the EU's leverage on the transformation of Western Balkan countries turned out to be very limited, particularly as compared to the EU's influence on Central Eastern European countries. Democratisation and market transitions frequently stalled and, in some states, even waned (Börzel, 2011, p. 7). To date, none of the Western Balkan countries, except for Croatia, which applied for full membership in 2003 and became an EU Member State in 2013, have entered the Union. As an example, North Macedonia applied for full membership status in 2004 and was granted candidate status in 2005. However, although North Macedonia was the first Western Balkan country to sign the Stability and Association Agreement, the negotiation process was blocked by Greece and Bulgaria. Greece objected to accession talks with Macedonia because of a dispute over its name, claiming that the name implied territorial ambitions of Macedonia on the province of Macedonia in Greece (Ibish, Ferhad, 2024, p. 9). Macedonia's NATO accession was also blocked by Greece for the same reason.

After the Prespa Agreement was signed in 2018, Greece withdrew its veto on launching accession negotiations, and the country was renamed as the "Republic of North Macedonia". Following this agreement, NATO invited North Macedonia to join the alliance, after which, in March 2020, North Macedonia officially became a member. However, the EU's negotiation process did not progress smoothly for North Macedonia. This time, accession talks were blocked by Bulgaria on the grounds that Macedonia was not implementing a Friendship Agreement between two countries, nor was it taking action against the anti-Bulgarian official ideology in Northern Macedonia. It was only in July 2022 that the EU finally approved the negotiating framework for North Macedonia and inaugurated formal accession negotiations. Furthermore, Albania had signed the Stability and Association agreement with the EU in 2006. In April 2008, NATO invited Albania to the Alliance and, in April 2009, pursuant to the ratification process by all NATO countries, Albania officially became a NATO member. With regard to the EU, the country was granted candidate status in June 2014. In March 2020, the European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with Albania. However, the EU could not officially launch accession talks with Albania before the Bulgaria/North Macedonia dispute was settled. In 2022, the EU accepted the negotiation framework and official launched accession negotiations. The decision came alongside the approval of the framework with North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

Another Western Balkan country, Montenegro, which is the smallest NATO member of the Western Balkan countries, applied for the EU

membership in 2008, received candidate status in 2010, and started accession talks in 2012. However, the EU strongly criticised the country's "political volatility, government instability and tensions within the ruling majorities, along with stalling decision-making processes and reform implementation" (European Commission, 2022). The situation improved with the election of Prime Minister Milojko Spajić from the Europe Now movement. Spajić prioritised Montenegro's EU membership and declared his commitment to implement reforms in the judiciary sector, thus combating corruption and organised crime. Through its opening of 33 of the 35 chapters and its provisional closing three of them as early as 2024, Montenegro has made significant progress. In addition, through embarking on comprehensive reforms and alignment with EU standards, Montenegro is making a strong case for EU membership, demonstrating its deep commitment to the EU process.

In turn, Serbia also applied to the European Union for membership in 2009 and received candidate status in 2012. The corresponding accession negotiations have been in place since 2014. However, because of several domestic and external challenges, including Serbia's claim over Kosovo, its close relations with Russia, as well as a democracy deficit and skepticism towards the EU, the accession process has progressed with certain ups and downs. As regards Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country submitted its membership application in 2016 and was granted candidate country status in 2022. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with the country, thus giving the same rank to all Western Balkan countries, apart from Kosovo, whose statehood is not recognised by five EU Member States (namely, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, and Romania).

The relationship between the EU and Kosovo, a country which signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2015, is complicated. Despite the fact that Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, not all members of the EU recognise the country's independence, and this lack of unanimity has had an adverse impact on the pace of the negotiation process. One of the most important components of these particular membership negotiations is normalising its relations with Serbia through dialogue, the countries' mutual recognition, and granting collective rights to ethnic communities in Serbia.

In summary, to date, upon its integrating of Central and Eastern European countries to the EU in 2004 and 2007, the Union has demonstrated a noticeable unwillingness to integrate Western Balkan countries. In the last two decades, since the adaptation of the Stabilisation and Association Process, among all countries addressed within the context

of the SAP, only Croatia has succeeded in becoming an EU Member State. And yet, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU has demonstrated a renewed interest in geostrategic enlargement. After the invasion, the Ukrainian government officially declared its membership bid which, in turn, triggered the process of the enlargement of the EU with respect to Western Balkan countries. Accordingly, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and reaffirmed its membership commitment to the abovementioned six Western Balkan countries, which signalled the EU's willingness to widen its borders to Western Balkan countries, as well as to Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Contextual Constraints on the Institutional Level

The EU has historically sustained the integration project based on an intricate balance between deepening and widening. When the EU has been faced with the dilemma of having to choose between deepening or widening, it has always selected the former. Said differently, the EU's "vertical institutionalisation" – defined as "a rise in the scope and the level of European integration in terms of institution-building, democratic legitimacy and European policies affecting both the EU's polity and policies" – overcomes "horizontal institutionalisation", which is seen as the process of "geographical spill-over" (Umbach, 2009, p. 6). However, this priority can shift whenever there is a security threat to the project that is European integration.

Although the EU has a security-centered approach to the Western Balkan countries, the ongoing *status quo* established after the Yugoslavian War did not pose a serious security threat to the European Union. Accordingly, enlargement to Western Balkan countries was not a priority issue. Instead, the EU prioritised vital domestic issues, such as economic and financial crises, the challenges of its welfare systems, Brexit, the refuge crisis, radicalisation, and Islamic fundamentalism as well as regional conflicts in its neighbourhood (Sekulić, 2020a). Yet, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has altered the context of EU security and the EU has, as a consequence, revitalised the process of enlargement. Concurrently, however, this geostrategic enlargement presents an important challenge to the EU in terms of maintaining institutional balance between widening and deepening (Sekulić, 2020b). In fact, the EU's position revolves around not only enlargement itself, but also how to reform the EU to absorb new Member States. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice president of the European Commission, reiterated that "the geo-political imperative for the EU is to

both widen and deepen," referring to expansion to new Member States and, in the meantime, reforming EU decision-making by "reducing the scope of the unanimity rule in foreign policy and other areas, to take more decisions by qualified majority vote" (Borrell, 2022).

In this institutional context focused on the balance between widening and deepening, the EU does not intend to make further enlargement without institutional reforms. Some Member States, such as France and Germany, have proposed a "new multi-tier and multi-speed EU" before the integration of eight new candidate countries including Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, as a renewed form of differentiated integration (Fabbrini, 2023, pp. 77–79).

Such multi-tier and multi-speed integration involves different forms of membership that is divided into four explicitly-defined tiers, each having different levels of integration and obligations, with the tiers themselves having concentric circles spreading from the inner to the outer core. The first circle would consist of deeply-integrated Member States. These are the Member States that have adopted the Euro and which are part of the Schengen free-movement area. The second circle would be the EU current Member States that do not use the Euro, plus those states pending to join the EU in the future. The third circle would include associate members, i.e., countries willing to participate in the single market, but not involved in the decision-making process. Finally, the outer circle, which would be something similar to the newly-formed European Political Community, would not include any formal integration or access to the single market, but would focus on geopolitical convergence and political cooperation in policy areas of mutual importance such as energy security and climate change. In this institutional balance, Western Balkan countries can be placed in the outer circles for a while and would thus have a relaxed form of relationship with the EU, yet still have explicit integration perspectives.

In practice, the EU has already implemented a multi-tier and multi-speed integration of the countries from its Southeastern and Eastern neighbourhood. Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU had two different policies; one being the context of enlargement for Western Balkan countries, while the other is the Eastern Partnership for countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The basic difference between these two strategies is that, while the former countries are eligible for membership, the latter countries are not. That is, the countries under Eastern Partnership could develop relations with the EU as an alternative to integration. Russia's aggression, however, has triggered a change to this so-called "two-track" approach. The EU has now granted candidate status

to the front-runners of the Eastern Partnership, including Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia and elevated their status to that of Western Balkan countries. The integration of these countries in the format of multi-tier and multi-speed integration is considered as a remedy to the hurdles of integration that the states of the Eastern Partnership face.

However, the question remains to what extent the implementation of multi-tier and multi-speed integration of the countries of Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership would help to overcome institutional challenges. First, a multi-tier EU would give rise to the so-called "core" Member States and the "periphery" countries of the Western Balkan within the EU. Western Balkan countries might also lose their motivation to implement the costly democratic, economic, and governance-related reforms if they find themselves satisfied with the incentives of being a part of the outer circle and the degree of institutional ties generated by the EU. The reform impetus might also be slowed down by the new wave of EU-skepticism in Western Balkan countries whose political and societal elites hold in disdain the idea of integration falling behind full membership. The implementation of this integration model would also be difficult in the international context that has, as is discussed below, multiple regional and global actors that are alternatives to the EU.

Another institutional constraint of geostrategic enlargement is the EU's own normative framework that focuses on the democratisation and Europeanisation of post-communist, post-Yugoslav, and post-conflict transitional societies of Western Balkan countries. Western Balkan countries have to fulfill Copenhagen criteria, including: (1) stable political institutions and the guarantee of human rights and the rule of law; (2) economic stability and the existence of a robust market capable of coping with economic integration with the EU; and (3) an acceptance of the Community *Acquis*. Despite the EU's differential impact on Western Balkan countries, most of these countries have not yet complied with the inherent membership criteria. As of now, Western Balkan countries are still confronted with the issues of authoritarianism, territorial disputes, and legacies of ethnic conflict along with issues concerning the construction of national identity and statehood. Conditionality, as the main instrument of the EU's foreign policy, was not successful in finding effective solutions to these issues. In fact, the ineffectiveness of conditionality cannot be reduced to the lack of credible membership perspective granted to Western Balkan countries as it is also connected to the deep-rooted legacies and domestic political structures of these countries. If the EU enlarges Western Balkan countries for geopolitical consideration with the existing institutional setup, the Union has to adopt a loose and superficial interpretation of the

Copenhagen criteria, which could eventually jeopardise the normative framework on which EU integration has evolved.

Another contextual constraint that limits the effectiveness of the EU's renewed enlargement policy is intra-EU contestation. According to Lovato (2001) and Alcaro et al. (2022), internal contestation is "challenging, undermining, and reversing the EU norms, procedures, and policies by domestic political and societal actors both through the involvement of government policies directly or indirectly shaping the domestic debate". Enlargement is one of the most obvious arenas where domestic contestation has occurred. Accordingly, since 2008's economic and fiscal crisis of the European Union, public support for enlargement has dramatically decreased in all Member States. According to Hobolt (2014), support remains extremely low as regards the creditors of Eurozone countries. While there are many reasons behind skepticism over further enlargement, a major reason is that the societies which have benefitted greatly from European integration during the fiscal and economic crisis are not willing to share their shrinking economic and welfare benefits with relatively poorer and more unstable Western Balkan countries.

Parallel to intra-EU contestation, EU membership has been losing its attractiveness in Western Balkan countries since 2008 (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012). As argued by Börzel (2011, p. 5), "whether the «golden carrot» is big enough to draw the Western Balkans closer to Europe is still an open question". According to Belloni and Brunazzo (2017, p. 29), the Western Balkans are in-between "a mix of resigned and fatalistic Euro-realism and growing Euro-skepticism". Therefore, the envisaged geostrategic enlargement towards the Western Balkans should not be taken for granted, as the newly-emerging, multi-polar international structure carries the potential for alternative relations with Russia and China.

Contextual Constraints at the International Level

Using conditionality, the EU has easily contributed to the democratic transformation of candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Apart from the United States, there were no other strong external actors that would play an important role in the transition of those countries to democracy and a market economy. In this context, and facing the lack of an alternative, CEE countries had no choice but to stick to European integration. Taking advantage of the lack of geopolitical rivalry, the EU has, in the last two decades, independently determined the pace and intensity of the EU accession process for Western Balkan countries. However, this situation has dramatically changed with the emergence

of multi-polar international structures that emerged during the relative decline of American hegemony in the global order.

In the world of multi-polarity, the EU is one among different external actors. Super powers such as Russia and China, and regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Gulf countries, have also been exerting their influence and adapting more assertive foreign policies towards Western Balkan countries. For instance, Russia and China have been using foreign direct investment in the energy industries and their links with oil and gas companies in Western Balkan countries, particularly in Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina (Panagiotou, 2021, p. 222). Furthermore, these actors are also providing Balkan countries with military equipment. Russia and Serbia have also carried out joint military exercises that have jeopardised the EU-Serbia relations. Turkey and Iran have exerted their influence through their connection with Muslim communities in the region (Rrustemi, 2019). Likewise, Gulf countries of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, have increased their involvement in the region through trade and investment, as well as through religion and cultural or educational activities (Rrustemi, 2019).

The existence of multi-polar geostrategic rivalry in the region would constrain the EU's leverage in the region. Thus far, the EU has targeted political elites in Western Balkan countries to make further democratic reforms that would help these countries to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria. However, global and regional actors have been exerting influence in the region by employing "hybrid foreign policy" strategies targeting both political and societal elites, on the one hand, and using political, economic, and cultural instruments on the other (Rrustemi, 2019, p. 163). For Western Balkan countries, with their authoritarian legacies and disdain for the EU's democratic standards, generating close ties with authoritarian states such as Russia, Turkey, and Gulf countries would be easier due to the similarities of leadership and political culture. Accordingly, in order to mitigate the limiting effect of the geopolitical rivalry in the region, the EU needs to develop policies transcending enlargement and targeting the identities and societies of the region.

Contextual Constraints at the Regional Level

The EU has been confronted with drastic regional fragmentation in its wider neighbourhood, including Syria, Libya, and Yemen. This regional fragmentation is conceptualised as the "process by which state authority and regional rules of engagement erode or collapse altogether" (Alcaro et al., 2022, p. 7). Regional fragmentation has several consequences for

the EU's enlargement policy towards Western Balkan countries. Firstly, this process opens a space for geostrategic rivalry between the global and regional powers with different interests in the region, which creates an area of influence for opportunistic aggressors (Alcaro et al., 2022, p. 7). Secondly, the process of regional fragmentation and corresponding geostrategic rivalry can have a spill-over effect to other regions, as previously demonstrated by Russia's intense involvement in the Syrian conflict and, later, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thirdly, regional fragmentation has given rise to instability and insecurity within the EU, usually in the form of radicalisation, terrorist activities, and mass refugee flows.

Accordingly, the EU's revitalisation of enlargement policy to Western Balkan countries, along with the Union's comparable strategies concerning Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, can be considered as a reaction to the regional fragmentation and parallel geopolitical rivalry in its wider neighbourhood. Indeed, Russian aggression dramatically transformed the geostrategic space of Europe as it had existed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The former geostrategic space allowed the existence of so-called "buffer zones" between the EU and Russia, which encompassed the countries of Eastern Partnership, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Those countries were subsequently stuck between the EU and Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine rendered it impossible to maintain such buffer zones, and, as a consequence, a solid, strategic-fault line was drawn between Russia and the EU. At present, the EU has no option but to control those buffer zones between itself and Russia. Accordingly, not letting other geostrategic actors (e.g., Russia, China, and Gulf countries) influence Western Balkan countries is in the highest strategic interests of the EU.

In summary, since the Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and being surrounded by the threats around its borders, the EU has been concerned with the spillover effect of regional fragmentation and geostrategic rivalry on Western Balkan countries. In response to these trends, the EU has revitalised its enlargement policy – not primarily because the Union felt it should play the role of an actor of democratic transition, but rather in order to defend its own borders against the negative consequences of regional fragmentation.

Conclusions

To date, ever since the inclusion of Croatia to the EU in 2013, the Union has demonstrated an apparent degree of what can be best described as "enlargement fatigue". Accordingly, after 2013, the EU has not provided

any credible membership perspectives to Western Balkan countries. One of the major reasons underlying this trend is 2008's fiscal and economic crisis which hit the EU. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has changed the EU's position towards Western Balkan countries, leading to the revitalisation of enlargement strategies that are now perceived as a strong foreign policy instrument to sustain its external influence over Balkan countries.

Unlike enlargement to the countries of the CEE, the EU's perspective on Western Balkan countries is particularly determined by the geostrategic imperatives emerging from Russian aggression in Europe. However, the success of such geostrategic enlargement largely depends on the EU's ability to mitigate contextual constraints at the international, regional, and institutional levels, with the particular relevance of regional fragmentation, multi-actor geostrategic rivalry, and internal contestation.

At the institutional level, one of the most important challenges of geostrategic enlargement is the question of how to enlarge. The EU's integration of new Member States from Western Balkan countries and the Eastern Partnership which have not yet fulfilled the economic and political criteria of the EU has initiated important debates concerning institutional reform, even though there is a strong consensus at the EU level about the necessity of the enlargement so as to strengthen the EU's role as a geopolitical actor in its wider neighbourhood. Obviously, having more Member States will naturally influence the governability of the EU, *inter alia*, by changing the balance in the decision-making process among big and small Member States and among different institutions of the EU.

Moreover, there are two underlying types of logic behind European integration – namely, establishing peace and stability on the one hand, and promoting European values such as democracy, human rights, and fundamental rights and freedoms on the other. Western Balkan and Eastern enlargement will probably undermine both of them.

At the regional level, enlarging the EU will export border disputes of would-be member state should be used to the EU's own borders, particularly with the integration of Ukraine, a number of whose territories have been occupied by Russia. Accordingly, the EU will find itself in a new security setting characterised by regional fragmentation. This will increase the EU's dependence on the US for security. The leverage of conditionality on Western Balkan countries will be limited in an era of emerging powers engaging in global rivalry in the Balkan region.

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