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**THE (GEO)POLITICS
OF EU ENLARGEMENT**
ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVES
ON THE WESTERN BALKANS

Authors:

Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă

Cristina Bărăgănescu

Marius Ghincea

Radu-Vladimir Răuță

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Romanian perspectives on the Western Balkans**

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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the topic of enlargement has re-emerged as a critical concern for the European Union (EU hereafter). In December, the EU leaders made the historic decision to open EU accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia. Soon after this historical moment, lawmakers in both the Moldovan and Georgian parliaments waved EU flags and played the bloc's anthem at the opening of their parliamentary sessions. These decisions were adopted despite strong opposition from Hungary and the fact that Ukraine and Georgia are partially occupied by Russia which also has troops deployed in Moldova's Transnistria region. Several months later, in 2024, the European Council has just decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. With these decisions to open accession negotiations and offering the candidate status of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a new momentum was confirmed.

Understanding the geopolitical earthquake that shook Ukraine, the European Union and the world, which triggered a momentum for the previously lethargic EU enlargement, this book delves into the latest developments in the Western Balkans' European integration process from the Romanian perspective. Due to Romania's vested interest in expanding the EU to the Western Balkans and the political and economic

support it aims to provide, understanding the dynamics and mechanisms of European integration is exceptionally significant. Furthermore, given the challenging geopolitical backdrop of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the escalating tensions among the Western Balkan countries, the importance and relevance of this research are undeniable.

The primary purpose of this book is to conduct a thorough reassessment of the opportunities and challenges posed by the changing regional dynamics in the Western Balkans and Romania's role within this context, covering a timeframe marked by numerous geopolitical challenges that spans between 2015 and July 2024. To achieve this goal, this book strives to gain a profound understanding of the global and strategic trends that have the potential to influence, both positively and negatively, Romania's involvement in the region. Spanning seven main chapters, the book scrutinizes the recent political, societal, and economic developments of the six Western Balkan countries¹, with a strategic emphasis on three key areas: justice reform and anti-corruption initiatives, the energy sector, and the preservation of minority rights and at the end it elaborates a series of general observations and arguments.

Chapters 1 and 2 offer a comprehensive overview encompassing the geopolitical backdrop, critical discussions on the ongoing Western Balkans integration, and the research methodology underpinning the findings within this book. Chapter 1 provides the recent historical context of EU's enlargement policy and the EU-Western Balkans dynamics

¹ The authors opted for adopting the EU's official position of including all 6 countries from the Western Balkans in the process of EU integration. Even if Romania's official position is not to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, the authors opted to include it in the analysis and focus on the EU's main approach on enlargement, departing from Romania's official position. As such, the authors will refer across the entire book to all 6 countries in the Western Balkans, as in the official documents of the European Union.

is explored, with a particular emphasis on scrutinizing Romania's role amidst pivotal geostrategic events. The chapter meticulously outlines the study's objectives and methodological approach, providing a nuanced understanding of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans. This understanding extends beyond decision-makers and institutional perspectives to include insights from both EU member states' citizens and Balkan states' citizens, as seen in the *most recent Eurobarometer* and *Balkan Barometer* opinion polls. The study sheds light on the contemporary challenge posed by conflicting attitudes – some EU states and their citizens resist Western Balkans' enlargement on geopolitical grounds, while others fervently advocate for an expedited process.

Chapter 1 continues by delving into the region's significance, especially considering the war in Ukraine and escalating tensions. Notably, the Western Balkans found a place in both the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept in 2022, emphasizing the shared priority of bolstering the region's security and resilience. These strategic imperatives align with Romania's foreign policy strategy, focusing on both the Western Balkans and Black Sea states.

Two decades after the Thessaloniki European Council, which outlined a European perspective for ex-Yugoslav states and Albania, substantial transformations have occurred in both the region and the Union. With nine candidate countries and one potential candidate in the current enlargement process, the EU plays a pivotal role as the primary development donor, leading investor, and major trading partner for the Western Balkans. However, since Croatia's 2013 accession, the process has experienced a relative slowdown attributed to "enlargement fatigue". Renewed interest in EU enlargement surfaced in 2023 amid the Ukraine conflict and membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Examining the Western Balkans in the EU’s “waiting room”, one can see that various states are at different stages of accession, with Serbia and Montenegro achieving candidate status in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Negotiations have recently opened for North Macedonia and Albania, while Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidate status in late 2022 and opened accession negotiations in 2024. Kosovo² remains the sole potential candidate, albeit facing challenges due to normalization blockages with Serbia and security incidents in 2023.

NATO’s “open door” policy, guided by Article 10, has welcomed most Western Balkan states, with exceptions for Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Beyond national geopolitical considerations and security prospects, the study accounts for public opinion, which, at times, diverges from governmental stances. Notably, the European Council witnesses two groups of member states: one advocating treaty changes for accelerated integration, and another supporting internal EU institutional reform and staggered accession, as detailed in the French-German and Baltic-Polish reports.

Despite a decline in Western Balkans’ public enthusiasm to join the European Union, roughly 59% of the population favors accession. The study highlights Romania’s unique position, aligning its economic and security interests with the Western Balkans. The chapter articulates the study’s primary objectives, focusing on anti-corruption, energy, and minority rights as areas where Balkan states require direct support and where Romania can contribute expertise.

Chapter 2 introduces the chosen methodological approach, employing a blended methodology that combines both qualitative and quantitative data. This comprehensive

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

strategy involves content analysis, the facilitation of two online meetings with experts from Romania and the Western Balkans region, and the utilization of statistical methods for a comparative analysis for the recent developments. This mix of approaches ensures the seamless and coordinated integration of diverse datasets, enhancing the overall potential of the study. Including data and studies from secondary sources is pivotal in achieving a thorough understanding of the region’s geopolitical dynamics. Secondary data were gathered through a meticulous review of reports and progress studies on each state, sourced from institutions such as the European Union (specifically, country reports from the European Commission, in the form of ‘Communications on EU enlargement policy’), resolutions of the European Parliament, and reports from international non-governmental entities like *Transparency International*, *Freedom House*, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*, *European Stability Initiative*, and *V-Dem*.

Additionally, qualitative data obtained from two virtual meetings with experts on September 19 and September 21, 2023, have been integrated. To scrutinize Romania’s role and engagement in the region, a triangular methodology was employed, encompassing foreign policy analysis and a quantitative examination of projects financed in strategic areas through pre-accession funds. The chapter concludes by addressing the study’s limitations and ethical concerns arising from access to sources or challenges in obtaining specific types of information.

Chapter 3 stands out as one of the most intricate sections in the overall analysis, delving deeply into the progression of the European integration process within the Western Balkans. This chapter meticulously examines each of the six Western Balkan states individually, employing a structured approach with state-specific sub-sections dedicated to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro,

and Serbia. The exploration focuses on the three pivotal aspects of the integration process: anti-corruption measures, energy policies, and the safeguarding of minority rights. Additionally, the chapter introduces a diverse array of key actors interconnected with both these thematic areas and the broader European integration process.

Each state-specific presentation follows a uniform structure, facilitating easy comparison and analysis. The analysis kicks off with a concise historical overview of the respective state's relations with the European Union. Subsequently, it assesses the current stage of the integration process, emphasizing the identification of the state-specific opportunities and challenges. The chapter, next, scrutinizes the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on each state, delineating relevant geopolitical dynamics and detailing recent internal political crises influencing the integration process. Noteworthy is the examination of indicators reflecting fluctuations in democracy quality and the implementation of EU conditionalities over recent years, influenced by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine. These fluctuations are contextualized within the national settings of each state.

In summary, the comparative analysis of the developments across these three key areas in the Western Balkans reveals a complex landscape characterized by a deficiency in structural reforms, internal and cross-border political and ethnic tensions, posing a risk of further delays in the European path of these states. Despite the challenges, the Western Balkans have demonstrated progress towards European integration, with the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine injecting renewed momentum after a perceived decade of 'enlargement fatigue'. However, the six states face hurdles, lacking the capacity or, in many instances, the internal political will to enact the necessary reforms for concluding negotiations with the

European Union. The rule of law presents a particularly intricate challenge. Montenegro and Serbia lead in the accession process, but grapple with significant political tensions and democratic regression tendencies. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina face precarious situations marked by internal threats of secession, instability, and security incidents. Meanwhile, Albania and North Macedonia find themselves in an intermediate position seemingly conducive to faster transposition of the *acquis communautaire* in the coming years.

Chapter 4 focuses on researching the involvement and influence of external states on socio-political developments in the region and, implicitly, on the European integration process. This research approach is focused on the actions of the member states of the European Union – such as France, Germany or the countries from the Visegrad Group – but also on the role of international actors with aspirations to influence the Western Balkans, such as China, Russia and Turkey.

The chapter shows how in the last decade, the Western Balkans have become a space of geopolitical competition between the great powers, with the increasing influence of Russia and China. At the same time, other actors outside the region, such as Turkey, have become active. Together with the involvement of the countries of the European Union, this competition affects the process of European integration and complicates the calculations of local elites. France and Germany, together with the countries of the Visegrad Group, contribute positively to accelerating the European integration process, but their influence seems limited.

The V4 countries, especially Poland, also support other intergovernmental projects and initiatives aimed at helping enlargement in the Western Balkans, such as the *Berlin Process*, which is an initiative to intensify regional cooperation with the ultimate goal of integrating the Western Balkan countries into the European Union. At the bilateral level, too, the four states