

## EU ENLARGEMENT: WHY HAS EU OFFERED THE PROSPECT OF MEMBERSHIP TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract:** The European Union has grown in the number of its Member States since its creation some 60 years ago, from six to the current 28 member states, a process which has happened in different waves of enlargement. Enlargement continues to be an ongoing and open process. The European Union states that “enlargement policy applies to countries currently aspiring to join the EU and potential candidates”. EU has offered the prospect of membership to the six countries of the Western Balkans, initially in year 2000 and has confirmed it as lately as 2020. This European perspective was first offered during the Feira European Council in 2000, then it was confirmed by the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003. The prospect of membership has been confirmed by the EU on other more recent occasions.

EU has offered the prospect of membership to the six countries of Western Balkans: Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo (with a footnote that refers to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244).

The Western Balkans is a neighboring region with historic ties to the EU, however the cost of funding the aspirations of the poorer states and the possibility that these additional Member States weaken the coherence of the decision-making process within EU – due to increased number of positions and veto votes – make EU enlargement in the Western Balkans an interesting and important case study. The main hypothesis in this research is that EU hasn’t offered membership to the countries of the Western Balkans because of economic interests, but because of security or political interests. The hypotheses are within the theory of rationalism (the role of states, national interests, benefits, costs and bargains). The research used the official EU trade statistics data and reports of different international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The research found that although EU trade with Western Balkans has grown over the years, with EU exports to the Western Balkans doubled in the last 10 years, it still is not a significant element in EU total trade with other trade partners as it is only 1.4 percent of EU’s total global trade. On the other hand, EU has recorded significant gains in the security and stability of the region, pressuring the Western Balkans countries into agreements using the carrot of EU accession.

**Keywords:** EU Enlargement, Western Balkans, Member States

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union has grown in the number of its Member States since its creation some 60 years ago, from six to the current 27 member states, a process which has happened in different waves of enlargement. Enlargement continues to be an ongoing and open process. The European Union states that “enlargement policy applies to countries currently aspiring to join the EU and potential candidates”.<sup>76</sup> EU has offered the prospect of membership to the six countries of Western Balkans: Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo (with a footnote that refers to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244).<sup>77</sup> This European perspective was first offered during the Feira European Council in 2000, then it was confirmed by the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003. The prospect of membership has been confirmed by the EU on other more recent occasions.<sup>78</sup>

EU anchored its enlargement policy toward the region, in the instrument of Stabilization-Association Process (SAP), launched in 1999, which contains the carrot of potential membership. SAP’s ‘ultimate goal’ is to ‘bring peace,

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<sup>76</sup> European Commission. EU Enlargement. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/eu-enlargement\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/eu-enlargement_en)

<sup>77</sup> Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008 and is recognized as such by 22 out of 27 current EU Member States.

<sup>78</sup> European Commission. Brussels. 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. 29.5.2019. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf)

stability and economic development to the region and open the perspective of integration in the EU'. Within SAP a contractual relationship (Stabilization-Association Agreements) and an assistance program (initially CARDS and later IPA) help countries to progress, at their own pace toward the EU membership. The European Commission is actively engaged in monitoring implantation and in reporting progress to the Council of Ministers, Parliament and to the Heads of Member States, the progress of these countries on the offered roadmaps to membership.

The Western Balkans countries which are now aspiring EU membership are poorer than established EU member states, and face additional challenges besides those of post-communist transition shared by most of the newest members of the EU, such as weak institutions, inter-ethnic problems, and rule of law issues. The cost of funding the aspirations of the poorer states and the possibility that these additional Member States weaken the coherence of the decision-making process within EU – due to increased number of positions and veto votes – make EU enlargement in the Western Balkans an interesting and important case study.

There are also concerns among voters in the EU Member States about immigration issues, loss of jobs, increase of crime, as perceived consequences of the previous enlargement. Recently with the Euro crisis there could be more concerns regarding the economic impact of further enlargement. The accession of Western Balkans in the EU also brings debates regarding cultural identity of the EU since significant portion of population of Western Balkans nominally belongs to Christian Orthodox and Muslim religions, minority religions in the EU. Enlargement in the Western Balkans also has the burden of old “intellectual history of Western stereotypes”<sup>79</sup> of a violent and backward place.

In this context, what were and what could be the interests of the European Union for enlarging in Western Balkans? The offer of prospective membership to Western Balkan countries was made twenty years ago, albeit in a very careful language. Progress towards accession has been relatively slow. Countries in the Western Balkans suggest EU has increased its conditionality with the aim of delaying the process, whereas EU institutional and Member State representatives highlight lack of reforms by Western Balkan countries and EU fatigue with enlargement.

On the other hand, EU is active globally, however not all parts of the world have undergone the same scale or type of EU's foreign policy focus, nor are they all important to EU equally. In EU's stated challenge of spreading peace and security beyond its borders Western Balkans is one of the top priorities, because of historic and geographic reasons. Peterson (2001:25) notes, that ‘the Balkans is simply where the EU policy lead is most visible and expensive’. For EU itself ‘determination to avoid further conflict in 21<sup>st</sup> century is one reason why the EU is so committed to building stability in this strategic region’.<sup>80</sup> Western Balkans represents a region which in the past decade has shown EU to the world and to its electorate as an incapable actor in foreign policy.

EU's former High Representative for CFSP explained in one occasion EU's interest in the Western Balkans in terms of border security and EU's role in the world: “It is in the European interest that countries on our borders are well governed. Neighbors who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organized crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders all pose problems for Europe. [...] The credibility of our foreign policy also depends on the successes achieved in the region”<sup>81</sup>.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Several hypotheses can thus be developed regarding the EU offer for potential membership to the Western Balkans. Following the rationalist approach, EU has offered enlargement because there were more benefits than costs for the member states. From the literature review, two competing hypotheses within the rationalist approach, which suggest EU offered enlargement because there were more benefits than costs for the member states, emerge:

1. EU has offered membership to the states of Western Balkans because the Member States and their union had **security or political interests** (security of the borderland and/or increase of the EU's role in the world)
2. EU has offered membership to the states of Western Balkans because the Member States and their union had **economic interests**.

The main research hypothesis is that EU hasn't offered membership to the countries of the Western Balkans because of economic interests, but because of security or political interests. The research will provide an analysis on which of the two hypotheses about enlargement presented earlier comes closer to being supported by evidence.

The research will analyze the six countries of the Western Balkans region as a bloc, although membership takes place individually (pooling of sovereignty at the EU level) and the European Commission assesses every country

<sup>79</sup> Mazower, Mark (2001) *The Balkans: From the End of Byzantium to the Present Day*. Phoenix. London. pp.6

<sup>80</sup> EU, [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/see/infos/brochure.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/see/infos/brochure.pdf)

<sup>81</sup> Solana, Javier (2003) ‘A Secure Europe in a Better World’, European Council, Thessaloniki, 20 June. Speech.

separately and also negotiates with every country separately. Enlargement in the Western Balkan will be considered as one case, because EU officials in Brussels and the diplomats representing the Member States often treat the countries en-bloc in their strategies and statements.

Direct, reliable historical sources on this process will be limited, therefore the analysis made use of publicly available data such as official documents and statements from the EU and member states, European think-tanks /civil society, local Western Balkans political authorities and local Western Balkans think-tanks/civil society. Content analysis was conducted as books, journal articles, thematic reports, magazines and newspapers were used.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. EU Trade with Western Balkans

Initially we will review to what extent is valid the explanation that suggests that EU offered the prospect of membership to the countries of the Western Balkans because of its economic interest (benefits), which could be having access to a larger market, more trade, more exports and more imports.

Countries have economic benefits from both importing and exporting, but while importing can give countries important resources and products not otherwise available or at a cheaper cost, exports on the other hand bring more production, jobs and revenue. If a country is a net exporter, its gross domestic product, GDP, increases (the total value of the finished goods and services it produces in a given period of time). In other words, net exports increase the wealth of a country and as such countries want to be net exporters rather than net importers.

The EU has concluded bilateral Stabilization and Association Agreements, which are Free Trade Agreements, with all the countries of the Western Balkans: North Macedonia (2004), Albania (2009), Montenegro (2010), Serbia (2013), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015) and Kosovo (2016).

According to the EU, the SAAs constitute the legal instrument for alignment to the EU acquis and progressive integration into the EU market. The SAAs have established a free-trade area over a transitional period which has now ended for all but Kosovo, for which it ends in 2026. The Agreements foresee the elimination of duties and non-tariff restrictions on bilateral trade. In addition, SAAs also include also protection of intellectual property rights and strengthened co-operation in customs matters.

What are the results? EU trade with the Western Balkans region has more than doubled since 2006 with the total trade between the EU and the Western Balkans exceeding EUR 54 billion in 2019.<sup>82</sup> In 2019, EU imports from the Western Balkans were EUR billion 22.951, while EU exports to Western Balkans were EUR 31.944 billion. In the last 10 years there was a 49% increase of EU exports to the region. However, total EU trade with the Western Balkans comprised in 2019 only 1.4 percent of its total trade with different partners in the world, and exports to the Western Balkans comprised 1.5 percent of EU exports globally. This is similar to 2009, when EU's exports to the Western Balkans comprised 1.4 percent of its exports globally. To compare, the 10<sup>th</sup> trade partner where EU had the most exports in 2019, was Canada, where EU exported over EUR 38 billion, which represented 1.8 percent of EU total exports.

#### European Union, Trade with Western Balkans 6

Key Figures						
Indicator	Unit	Period	Imports	Exports	Total trade	Balance
Last year	Mio euros	2019	22,951	31,944	54,895	8,992
Share in EU trade	%	2019	1.2	1.5	1.4	
Annual growth rate	%	2018 - 2019	3.1	4.4		
Annual average growth rate	%	2015 - 2019	9.6	7.9		

Imports 2019

Exports 2019

*Figure 1. EU Trade with Western Balkans in 2019 (Source: EU)*

<sup>82</sup> European Commission. Trade Policy: Western Balkans. <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/western-balkans/>

### 3.2. Security Gains in the Western Balkans

The EU membership perspective has improved the security in the Western Balkans, as the membership offer provided incentives for governments in the region to seek agreements with their neighbours.<sup>83</sup>

EU integration prospects attracted Serbia and Kosovo to begin talks between the two on normalization of their relations, initially in 2011. Serbia was lured with the Candidate Status and Kosovo with the SAA agreement and the visa free travel to EU's Schengen Area. A number of agreements were signed since then, beginning with issues of integrated border management and regional cooperation, between Serbia's and Kosovo's representatives, all under EU mediation. As a result, the EU rewarded Serbia with the Candidate Status in 2012. The EU integration process is now again in 2020-21 being used as the main driver to bring Serbia and Kosovo to the negotiating table, under the mediation of the EU, to discuss a final peace agreement.

The EU used its membership carrot to resolve the border demarcation issue between Kosovo and Montenegro in 2018. The EU conditioned the recommendation to the EU Council to lift the EU travel visa requirement for Kosovo's citizens, with Kosovo's agreement to the demarcation deal, which was being resisted by opposition parties in Kosovo over the claim that Kosovo territory was being given to Montenegro.

EU managed to have North Macedonia implement the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which ended the internal conflict in 2001, in exchange for giving North Macedonia the EU candidate status in 2005. The agreement ended the inter-ethnic conflict that could have intensified further and prevented the des-integration of the country along ethnic lines.

EU's promise of start of accession negotiations also ended the dispute between North Macedonia and EU member Greece, which was causing political instability in North Macedonia and preventing the country from joining NATO. Attracted by the prospect of EU accession, North Macedonia agreed to concessions to Greece with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018.

Over the years, the EU has also tried to use its membership carrot to overcome the institutional deadlock in Bosnia and Hercegovina but without much success.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

EU's offer membership to the countries of the Western Balkans is made not so much because of economic interests, but because of security or political interests. The research used the official EU trade statistics data and reports of different international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The research found that although EU trade with Western Balkans has grown over the years, with EU exports to the Western Balkans doubled in the last 10 years, it still is not a significant element in EU total trade with other trade partners as it is only 1.4 percent of EU's total global trade. On the other hand, EU has recorded significant gains in the security and stability of the region, pressuring the Western Balkans countries into agreements using the carrot of EU accession, as in the cases of Kosovo-Serbia, Kosovo-Montenegro, North Macedonia-Greece.

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<sup>83</sup> Beata Huzska. The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans. ECFR Policy Note. 7th January, 2020. [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the\\_power\\_of\\_perspective\\_why\\_eu\\_membership\\_still\\_matters\\_in\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans)

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