

Challenges and Prospects of European Integration for the Western Balkans



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Summary

The European integration of the Western Balkans remains a complex and protracted process, marked by structural impediments, inconsistent policy approaches, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. While the European Union (EU) has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to the region's accession, the process has been hindered by both internal EU challenges and regional governance deficiencies. This lecture critically examines the structural barriers and theoretical implications of EU enlargement, exploring the interplay of institutional inertia, geopolitical recalibration, and the evolving nature of conditionality.

A fundamental challenge lies in the region's persistent governance deficits, characterized by weak institutional frameworks, endemic corruption, and unresolved bilateral disputes. Despite formal commitments to democratic consolidation, many Western Balkan states continue to exhibit patterns of state capture and clientelism, calling into question the efficacy of EU-led democratization efforts. The accession process, initially envisioned as a transformative mechanism, has increasingly become a bureaucratic exercise, where compliance with technical benchmarks does not necessarily translate into substantive democratic progress.

Economic stagnation and structural dependencies further complicate integration efforts. Despite economic convergence strategies and instruments such as the Berlin Process, the Western Balkans remain economically peripheral within Europe, facing deindustrialization, youth emigration, and limited access to EU structural funds. The economic dimension of integration raises questions about the sustainability of enlargement without more substantive economic restructuring and investment in productive sectors.

The war in Ukraine has reframed EU enlargement as a strategic imperative rather than a meritocratic process. The rapid advancement of Ukraine and Moldova toward candidate status has exposed inconsistencies in the EU's enlargement approach, revealing a shift from a normative, rule-based accession model to a geopolitical calculus aimed at countering external influences, particularly from Russia and China. This shift has heightened perceptions of double standards among Western Balkan states, many of which have adhered to EU directives for years without tangible progress. The securitization of enlargement, while increasing EU engagement

with the region, risks reinforcing a transactional approach to integration, where political alignment with EU foreign policy is prioritized over long-term institutional development.

A critical issue in the enlargement process is the EU's inconsistent conditionality and the emergence of so-called "stabilitocracies" in the Western Balkans. The original Copenhagen criteria emphasized democratic governance, economic stability, and respect for human rights. However, in practice, the EU has tolerated illiberal governance in exchange for regional stability, leading to a dilution of its normative power. This pragmatic yet contradictory approach has weakened incentives for genuine democratic reform and has allowed semi-authoritarian leaders to consolidate power under the guise of EU-aligned rhetoric. The erosion of accession credibility has, in turn, fueled Euroscepticism and political disengagement among Western Balkan populations, further weakening democratic consolidation.

Meanwhile, enlargement fatigue within the EU itself presents another fundamental obstacle. Political fragmentation, internal disputes over the future of the EU, and concerns about institutional overstretch have led to a more restrictive enlargement policy. The revised accession methodology, while intended to introduce greater flexibility and reversibility in the process, has instead prolonged uncertainty, reinforcing the perception that full membership remains an elusive goal. The divergence between rhetorical commitment and practical stasis has engendered frustration and diminished the EU's ability to act as a transformative actor in the region.

Despite these structural and strategic challenges, prospects for integration remain contingent on re-conceptualizing the enlargement process. A recalibrated approach that balances geopolitical imperatives with a renewed commitment to democratic norms and economic inclusion is necessary. Strengthening institutional resilience, enhancing regional economic integration, and fostering a more transparent and consistent conditionality framework could restore credibility to the accession process. Without such recalibration, the EU risks further alienating the Western Balkans, eroding its own normative influence, and undermining the foundational principles that originally defined the enlargement project.