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Commentaries

New Series

BEYOND THE RHETORIC: WHY THE *GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVE* HAS NOT UNFROZEN WESTERN BALKAN ENLARGEMENT

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Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU's leadership has repeatedly described enlargement to the Western Balkans as a *geopolitical imperative*. Four years passed, however, the evidence suggests much less institutional change than what Brussels seemed to claim in 2022.

The Western Balkans received a clear accession signal in 2003 with the Thessaloniki Summit, which promised the region a European future. More than twenty years later, that promise yielded only Croatia's accession in 2013. Scholars in the field have become increasingly familiar with the term *enlargement fatigue* as they observed a recurring reluctance among EU Member States to advance accession, resulting in the erosion of credibility. As a fundamental element of the EU's conditionality, without credibility, that is, without rewarding advances in candidate countries, the EU reduced the incentive of Western Balkan governments to pursue costly reforms that would lead them into the EU. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, changed that calculus: Ukraine applied for EU membership and received candidate status alongside Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia. Since the 2022 Tirana Declaration, the EU also reaffirmed its "full and unequivocal commitment" to enlargement in the EU-Western Balkans summits, recalling the promise made in 2003. Looking back, can we characterise the Russian invasion as a turning point – a critical juncture – that moves away from the EU's *enlargement fatigue*?

A Near Miss, Not a Critical Juncture

A *critical juncture* occurs when the shock of a specific event opens a window of opportunity significant enough to displace an institutional path that did not seem to change, in this case, the *enlargement fatigue*. The Russian invasion of Ukraine does not, however, fall precisely into the category of a full critical juncture. The EU's unanimity-based process and conditionality-driven accession remain intact post-2022; instead, what seems to have changed was the political salience and urgency of enlargement that has produced some effects on some of the candidate countries, yet not on all of them.

To illustrate these diffuse effects of what we call the *geopolitical imperative* to enlarge, four country cases help with the analysis: Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia. Albania represents the most significant shift: after years of frozen progress on enlargement and repeated Commission recommendations, Tirana opened all six negotiating clusters and its 33 accession chapters within 13 months. More relevantly, following the positive Interim Benchmark Report (IBAR) in May 2026, Albania started closing chapters, a pace unforeseen prior to 2022. Montenegro tells a similar story of positive achievement, increasing the chapters provisionally closed from three to eighteen as of July 2026 since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

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Serbia, by contrast, has advanced very little as its accession became increasingly linked by Member States to Serbian alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. This is particularly a result of Belgrade's refusal to adopt sanctions against Russia, thus producing a negative effect on its accession process. North Macedonia presents a distinct case where it did not have either positive or negative effects; instead, it produced no effects given that the geopolitical imperative stemming from the Russian invasion had no impact in lifting Bulgaria's bilateral veto over a dispute that precedes 2022.

This divergence scattered into positive, negative and neutral effects reflects the three enabling conditions that allow for the geopolitical imperative to indeed translate into accession progress: alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, active domestic reform engagement, and the absence of unresolved bilateral disputes with an EU Member State. When all three enabling conditions are met, as in Albania and Montenegro, the geopolitical imperative accelerates accession progress based on reform adoption. Where even one of these conditions is absent, as with Serbia's foreign policy stance or North Macedonia's dispute with Sofia, the imperative loses any operational effect beyond general rhetoric in favour of Western Balkan enlargement.

The Investment Dimension: Conversion, Not Creation

But does the opening and closing of chapters accurately predict a successful path towards accession? Observing the closing of chapters seems to be the best institutional proof that a candidate country is progressing in its accession process, but it is unclear whether this commitment is more than *high politics* decided in Intergovernmental Conferences between the EU and the candidate countries. To further analyse the prospects of the 2022 Russian invasion being a turning point, this analysis looks into the investment dimension of the EU in the Western Balkans. In this dimension, the pattern is one of institutional conversion rather than new investments post-2022. The flagship projects most often attributed to post-2022 EU commitment to the Western Balkans, such as the Trans-Balkan Electricity Corridor, the Gas Interconnector between Bulgaria and Serbia, were conceived, funded and in some cases already under construction before the Russian invasion. In these projects, what changed was the political framing and urgency, as the geopolitical imperative provided a new legitimising narrative for investments in the Western Balkan region.

The clearest institutional novelty of the post-2022 engagement with the Western Balkans is the 2023 Growth Plan, which aggregates pre-existing funding instruments – the Western Balkans Investment Framework, the Economic and Investment Plan, and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance – under a single conditionality architecture dependent on reform adoption and CFSP alignment. There is genuine institutional innovation with the Growth Plan given its *ex ante* conditionality mechanism which was absent from previous instruments. Importantly, the Commission states that this redesigned architecture is pushing forward the Western Balkans' gradual integration into the EU without it being a substitute for actual enlargement. That reassurance, however, points to the risk of the Growth Plan succeeding in delivering tangible economic benefits to the Western Balkans which could satisfy the geopolitical pressure for the EU Member States to enlarge in the first place. This stems from the fact that the geopolitical imperative to enlarge is primarily rhetorical and only operational when the three enabling conditions are fulfilled.

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A Conditional Accelerant, Not an Independent Force

None of this means that the geopolitical imperative stemming from the 2022 Russian invasion is in any part irrelevant. The observed changes in opening and closing of chapters for Albania and Montenegro cannot be solely attributed to domestic factors in the candidate countries, namely Albania's anti-corruption reforms and Montenegro's electoral incentives ahead of the 2027 elections. This would understate the role geopolitical urgency played in convincing reluctant EU Member States to translate Commission recommendations into Council decisions at an accelerated pace.

The more accurate description of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is that it functions as a conditional accelerant, that is, it amplifies pre-existing reform trajectories where enabling conditions are met. It does not, however, produce political will from the side of the Member States where those conditions are absent nor does it override a veto based on bilateral disputes between a Member State and a candidate country. This has practical implications for the analysis of enlargement. Simply having geopolitical urgency does not overcome disputes such as the Bulgarian-North Macedonian issue over minority rights and it does not substitute for candidate countries' willingness to align with the EU's foreign policy, as the Serbian case illustrates.

Looking Ahead

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine opened a genuine window of opportunity for Western Balkan enlargement, but four years of evidence show that the accession process is still fundamentally path-dependent. Enlargement remains strictly based on unanimity and conditionality even if the geopolitical urgency has allowed for the process to move forward. Indeed, the process has only progressed because it respected the principles of unanimity and conditionality of the accession process. That said, not every candidate country has succeeded in advancing, thus consolidating the description of the Russian invasion as a near miss critical juncture, not a complete breakthrough in enlargement. Whether this near miss critical juncture will consolidate into lasting change in EU enlargement will depend less on how insistently EU leaders push for further accession, and more on how Member States are willing to pay the political and economic costs of actual accession. It is this distinction between rhetorical and operational geopolitical imperative that will define the credibility of the EU's enlargement policy and, by extension, of its geopolitical position in a contested neighbourhood.

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