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Enlargement or Impasse: The Politics of EU Expansion and the Western Balkans

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Introduction

The European Union's promise of enlargement to the Western Balkans has oscillated between strategic imperative and procedural stalemate. For over a decade, leaders and citizens across the region have been told that rigorous reforms, alignment with EU norms, and sustained political will would open the door to membership. Yet, despite periodic breakthroughs, the pathway has too often narrowed into an impasse shaped by domestic politics in member states, geopolitical headwinds, and an overreliance on process rather than outcomes. This book takes that tension as its point of departure: enlargement as both a vital security and economic project for Europe and a credibility test for the Union's ability to deliver on its word.

At the core of the analysis are the accession criteria and how they function in practice. The Copenhagen benchmarks—democracy, rule of law, human rights, and a functioning market economy—remain sound, but their application has sometimes drifted toward formal compliance over substantive change. We examine what it means to prioritize the rule of law as the first principle, not merely the first chapter: building independent judiciaries, prosecutorial integrity, and safeguards against state capture. We also dissect economic convergence and single market readiness, looking beyond aggregate growth to the fine-grained capabilities required to participate fully in a highly competitive, rules-based economic area.

Geopolitics has returned to Europe with force, and it has reshaped the context of enlargement. The Western Balkans sit at the intersection of influence from Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf states, even as the EU remains the region's largest investor, donor, and trade partner. Energy security, sanctions alignment, migration management, and information resilience are no longer peripheral to accession—they are central tests of strategic compatibility. This book situates the enlargement debate within these security realities while avoiding fatalism: credible conditionality and clear incentives can tilt choices toward European integration when they are designed and communicated effectively.

Member states are not passive observers of this process; they are decisive actors. Their domestic politics, electoral cycles, and bilateral disputes have too often turned enlargement into a hostage of unanimity. We analyze patterns of veto use, coalition-building among "friends of enlargement," and the evolving role of the European Parliament. At the same time, we highlight how the European Commission can calibrate methodologies—grouping chapters into clusters, front-loading rule-of-law benchmarks, and creating meaningful reversibility—to restore trust on both sides of the table.

Because policymakers need tools, not just diagnoses, this book offers negotiation tactics, conditionality frameworks, and granular benchmarks to revive a credible process. We lay out roadmaps with measurable milestones—judicial clearance rates, public procurement transparency, energy market coupling, and digital interoperability—that tie reforms to tangible benefits such as access to programs, funding, and segments of the single market prior to full membership. The aim is to shift incentives from box-ticking toward demonstrable improvements in citizens' lives, thereby strengthening domestic coalitions for reform.

Finally, we present realistic scenarios for the Western Balkans. Rather than a binary of “in or out,” we map pathways of phased integration and staged membership that sequence access and obligations over time while preserving the end-goal of full accession. Each scenario addresses risks of backsliding, safeguards against politicized vetoes, and mechanisms for mid-course correction. Throughout, our premise is pragmatic but firm: enlargement is not charity, and it is not automatic. It is a mutual commitment to shared rules and institutions that will shape Europe's stability and prosperity for decades.

Readers will find here a strategic examination of why enlargement has stalled and how it can restart on credible terms. By combining institutional analysis with practical playbooks for negotiators, ministers, and civil society leaders, the chapters that follow argue for a renewal of conditionality, smarter incentives, and better sequencing. The Western Balkans have agency; so does the Union. If both exercise it with clarity and discipline, “enlargement or impasse” need not be a permanent choice.

CHAPTER ONE: The Promise and Peril of Enlargement

The concept of European enlargement has always been a double-edged sword, brimming with both the tantalizing promise of stability and prosperity, and the inherent peril of overextension and internal strain. For the Western Balkans, this duality is particularly acute. The prospect of joining the European Union has served as a powerful magnet, drawing countries through arduous reforms and often unpopular political decisions. It offered a vision of a future integrated into a community defined by peace, shared values, and economic opportunity, a stark contrast to the tumultuous past of the region. This promise, however, has frequently been shadowed by a creeping sense of disillusionment, as the path to membership has stretched into what often feels like an unending odyssey.

From its inception, the European project was about more than just economics; it was a grand experiment in overcoming historical animosities and building a shared destiny. The initial success of the European Coal and Steel Community, and later the European Economic Community, demonstrated the transformative power of integration. The eventual collapse of the Iron Curtain presented a monumental opportunity and a profound challenge. The enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries in the early 2000s was hailed as a historic reunification of the continent, embedding democratic governance and market economies in former communist states. This "big bang" enlargement instilled a belief that the EU was an irresistible force for positive change, capable of absorbing diverse nations and lifting them to its standards.

The Western Balkans, scarred by the conflicts of the 1990s, looked to this model with hope. The Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003 formally affirmed the European perspective of the region, explicitly stating that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union." This declaration was more than just diplomatic nicety; it was a strategic commitment intended to foster reconciliation, consolidate democracy, and prevent a relapse into conflict. It provided a clear framework, albeit a demanding one, for nations emerging from conflict and authoritarianism to rebuild and reorient themselves towards a common European future. The promise was that adherence to democratic principles, economic liberalization, and regional cooperation would inevitably lead to full membership.

Yet, as the years turned into decades, the initial enthusiasm began to wane. The complexities of post-conflict reconstruction, deeply entrenched corruption, and the lingering shadow of unresolved bilateral issues proved to be far more intractable than initially anticipated. Each step forward was often met with two steps back, or at least a significant pause. The promise of enlargement, once a potent catalyst for reform, started to feel more like a mirage, perpetually receding into the distance. This shift in

perception has had tangible consequences, contributing to reform fatigue within the aspirant countries and a growing skepticism about the EU's commitment to the region.

The peril of enlargement, particularly concerning the Western Balkans, lies in this protracted uncertainty. When the goalposts appear to shift, or when the process itself seems to lack a credible endpoint, the incentives for difficult reforms diminish. Political leaders in the region, facing domestic pressures and often short electoral cycles, find it increasingly difficult to justify unpopular measures if the reward of EU membership remains elusive. This dynamic can create a vicious cycle: reform stagnation in the Western Balkans fuels skepticism among existing EU member states, which in turn leads to further delays in the accession process, further eroding the credibility of the enlargement promise.

Furthermore, the "stalled enlargement" creates a vacuum that other geopolitical actors are increasingly eager to fill. While the EU remains the region's largest trading partner and investor, the perception of its diminished commitment can open doors for external influences. Russia, with its historical ties and strategic interests, and China, with its growing economic footprint through infrastructure projects, have both sought to expand their presence and influence. This competition for influence introduces new complexities and can further complicate the Western Balkans' trajectory toward European integration, adding another layer of peril to an already intricate process.

The internal challenges within the European Union itself have also contributed to the stalled enlargement. The "big bang" enlargement, while strategically successful, brought with it lessons about the challenges of integrating new members, particularly regarding the rule of law and the absorption capacity of the Union. The financial crisis, the migration crisis, and Brexit have all consumed significant EU attention and resources, pushing enlargement further down the political agenda. These internal preoccupations have made some member states more cautious, even reluctant, to embrace further expansion, leading to a more stringent application of accession criteria and a greater emphasis on domestic reforms before any significant progress can be made.

The peril, therefore, is not just about the Western Balkans becoming a geopolitical playground. It is also about the erosion of the EU's own transformative power and credibility. If the promise of membership, once held up as the ultimate incentive for democratic transition and economic reform, loses its luster, what then becomes of the EU's foreign policy tools? The perception of a hollowed-out promise can undermine the very foundation of the EU's soft power and its ability to shape its immediate neighborhood. This would be a strategic loss not only for the Western Balkans but for the entire European project.

The journey of enlargement has, at times, felt like a Sisyphean task for the Western Balkans, pushing a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down. Each reform effort,

each legislative alignment, each regional cooperation initiative is undertaken with the distant peak of EU membership in sight. Yet, the ever-present gravity of domestic political challenges, the shifting sands of EU internal politics, and the looming shadows of external actors continuously threaten to thwart progress. Understanding this intricate interplay of promise and peril is crucial for deciphering the current impasse and charting a credible path forward.

For the Western Balkans, the promise of enlargement represented a chance to turn a new page after decades of conflict and instability. It offered not just economic betterment, but also a guarantee of democratic values and human rights, a sense of belonging to a larger European family. This aspirational pull was powerful, fostering societal transformation and encouraging difficult compromises. Without this promise, the motivation for deep-seated reforms, particularly in areas like the judiciary and anti-corruption efforts, would be significantly diminished, if not altogether absent.

However, the peril lies in an overreliance on this promise without commensurate, tangible progress. If the path to membership becomes too circuitous, too unpredictable, or too prone to political blockades, then the enthusiasm for reform will inevitably wane. The risk is that citizens in the Western Balkans, particularly the younger generation, will lose faith in the European project and seek opportunities elsewhere, contributing to further brain drain and social instability. This erosion of faith can have long-term consequences for the region's stability and its alignment with European values.

The history of EU enlargement is replete with both successes and challenges. The integration of countries like Spain, Portugal, and Greece demonstrated the EU's capacity to absorb nations emerging from authoritarian rule. Later, the seamless incorporation of the Central and Eastern European states showcased its ability to bridge historical divides. However, each wave of enlargement has also brought with it new lessons and new complexities, leading to a more cautious and demanding approach in subsequent rounds. The Western Balkans, unfortunately, find themselves in an era where the EU is more introspective and less outwardly expansive than it once was.

This shift in the EU's internal disposition has directly impacted the pace and nature of the enlargement process for the Western Balkans. The emphasis has moved from a broad political gesture to a meticulous, almost forensic, examination of each applicant's readiness. While this increased rigor is understandable from the EU's perspective, it can feel like a moving target for the aspirant countries, especially when political decisions by member states seem to override technical preparedness. This perception of unfairness or inconsistency only deepens the sense of peril associated with the stalled process.

Ultimately, the narrative of enlargement for the Western Balkans is a delicate balance

between hope and frustration. The promise of a shared European future remains a potent force, capable of inspiring profound societal changes. Yet, the persistent perils of a protracted process, the influence of external actors, and the internal challenges within the EU itself threaten to undermine this promise. To overcome the current impasse, a renewed understanding of this dynamic is essential, one that acknowledges both the strategic imperative of enlargement and the practical difficulties of its implementation. The following chapters will delve into these complexities, dissecting the criteria, constraints, and pathways that define this critical juncture for Europe.

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