

# The Dilemmas of Europe's Future, with Special Regard to the Possibilities of Integrating the Western Balkans

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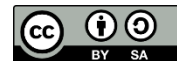
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## Abstract

In recent times the debate regarding the future of Europe seems to be intensifying, raising questions about the direction of European integration and the functioning of the integration organization. The challenges of the 21st century, such as mass migration, the aspirations of Turkey and the predominantly Islamic states in the Western Balkans to join, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, or the proceedings initiated under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union due to violations of EU fundamental values by certain member states, all raise the question of what the goal of the European integration process is, what its real foundation is, and how it is possible to sustain this process.

The possibilities of the expansion of the European Union are a key issue and a determining factor in European integration and geopolitical processes. In my opinion, the future of Europe is greatly influenced by how the EU expansion policy unfolds, where the Western Balkans holds a prominent place, and the future and development directions of Europe are determined by the ongoing expansion processes. In my study, I seek answers to these questions.

**Keywords: Future of Europe, Western Balkans, EU, Expansion Policy, Migration, Security Policy**

## Introduction

Today, the debate on the future of Europe seems to be intensifying, raising questions about the direction of European integration and the functioning of the integration organisation. The question of the enlargement of the European Union is a key issue and a determining factor in European integration and geopolitical processes. In my view, the future of Europe will be greatly influenced by the development of the EU's enlargement policy, in which the Western Balkans occupy a prominent place, and the future of Europe and its development directions will be determined by the enlargement processes that are

currently pending. As János Bóka said at the informal meeting of EU ministers responsible for EU affairs in April 2024: ‘The standards of the rule of law are not developed at EU level, but at member state level, and these standards must be met by the European Union and the European Union institutions’.

According to János Bóka, there was also agreement among the member states that ‘it is not a good idea to make joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office mandatory, as the greatest added value of the body is that it is based on voluntarism. The minister also emphasized that there was a general consensus among the member states that the European Union does not have general competence in protecting its fundamental values.

Regarding EU enlargement, János Bóka stated that the ministers supported the proposal that involving the states furthest along in the accession process - Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia - in the rule of law dialogue could add value. János Bóka also mentioned: ‘We hope that an agreement on this will be reached during the Belgian EU presidency, and the Hungarian EU presidency will be the first to conduct the rule of law dialogue with the participation of four candidate states’ [1].

The Hungarian Presidency of 2024 will also prioritize expansion policy, with a particular focus on aiding and keeping on the agenda the accession of the Western Balkans [2].

Throughout the history of European integration, expansion has occurred in multiple rounds, and one of the objectives of the integration process is the peaceful unification of European states. At the same time, with each round of expansion during the history of European integration, two questions have arisen: how prepared is the candidate country for EU accession, and how capable will the expanded integration organization be in functioning. So far, the 2004 enlargement round was the largest, followed by the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, which introduced numerous institutional reforms aimed at ensuring the functioning of the Union, which grew from the previous 15 members to 25. Since then, the enlargement process has stalled: while Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, followed by Croatia in 2013, no new members have been admitted since then, although in 2020, the United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union.

With the current Union consisting of 27 members, the same fundamental questions arise again regarding its enlargement. Currently, there are three major enlargement directions to the agenda: Turkey, the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia), and some former Soviet republics (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). So far, two accession chapters have been closed with Turkey, to the seems that the accession process with Turkey has stalled. Regarding the Western Balkan countries, there is no target date, but negotiations are ongoing. With regard to the former Soviet republics, enlargement is the most disputed. In the case of Ukraine, although the Commission’s support is demonstrative, numerous concerns have been raised regarding the disorderliness of Ukraine’s (and the other two candidate countries’) relations with Russia, the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, and the costs of integrating the Ukrainian economy.

At the same time, it must be noted that the enlargement process has stalled in all directions, with no new members admitted for the past 10 years. This indicates that the fundamental problem lies not so much with the preparedness of the candidate countries, but with the EU's capacity to accept new members.

There is a lack of agreement on numerous strategic issues between the old and the 'new' member states admitted in 2004. Western European, Mediterranean, and Central European regions face different geopolitical challenges and socio-economic difficulties. Therefore, a unified EU stance would require more extensive coordination processes than before, aligning with EU traditions, considering that important decisions were initially made unanimously.

However, with an expanding Union, this practice would increasingly pose greater challenges and require more flexibility from the negotiating parties, which would result in slower and less efficient progress. Therefore, proposals periodically arise to narrow the consultation obligations, allowing the objectives set by EU bodies or certain large member states to prevail despite opposition from other member states. Recently, a reform plan for a multi-speed Europe has emerged, along with proposals to extend decision-making based on the majority principle. In contrast, several member states advocate for the 'democratization' of goal-setting within EU integration to preserve the union's unity. They propose that the EU should only pursue goals that have the support of all member states and should allow room for national initiatives and different geopolitical approaches in other areas.

This solution would partly signify a return to the classic era of European integration, which prioritized economic integration and cultural cooperation over political integration. At the level of EU institutions, this would entail reducing the roles of the Parliament and the Commission and strengthening the role of the Council. It would be a return to contractual foundations, considering that according to the founding treaties, the main strategic directions of the Union's operation are set by the Council, while the Commission's role is fundamentally limited to implementing the Council's decisions, and the Parliament serves as a consultative body ensuring European democratic oversight rather than a legislative one. The departure from the founding treaties began when the Juncker Commission announced the 'political Commission' doctrine, which posited that the Commission should be the independent engine of integration, separate from the Council. This approach disrupted the previously existing balance between EU institutions as stipulated in the treaties, especially considering that the Parliament, using the institution of no-confidence against the Commission, also sought to play a guiding role in defining EU objectives.

To address this situation, several reform proposals have been put forward. One aims to return to the classical institutional balance by strictly defining the powers of the Commission and the Parliament, and more rigorously separating the competences of the member states and the Union. Another approach, which seeks to make the Union's institutions the driving force of integration, proposes almost completely eliminating unanimity from Union decision-making. In its more radical form, where the European Union transforms into a federal state, the Commission would act as the federal government and the European Parliament as the federal legislative body. In this concept, the member states would operate subordinate to the European Union. A third concept is a Franco-German proposal that links the reform of the Union's institutional system with enlargement. In this model, the states participating in European integration would do so to varying degrees: the member states achieving the highest level of integration, who also set the integration objectives, would function as a quasi-federal state, while those participating at the lowest (fourth) level of integration would engage in a loose political and economic cooperation similar to the current association agreements.

In light of all this, it is worth contemplating the future of Europe, including the issue of the accession of the Western Balkan countries. The Western Balkans, as a region, is of significant security importance for the European Union. The European Union's prominent role as a security provider today is closely intertwined with its enlargement policy [3]. In the past decade, the main direction of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans has been geared towards peacebuilding. Therefore, in our study, we aim to present the importance, roots, and potential future directions of the integration efforts of the Western Balkan region. In my view, the future development of the Western Balkans' integration will be of great importance for the future of all of Europe. Regarding the dilemmas of Europe's future, it is important to mention the concepts of a United States of Europe versus a Europe of Nations. There is currently no complete agreement among member states on this issue, and the debates surrounding it could be decisive for the future of Europe. The realization of Brexit has shaken the belief in the irreversibility of integration, questioning the dominant narrative of integration [4]. In this sense, it can be seen as a turning point in modern European history, potentially setting a new direction for the integration efforts of the EU's remaining 27 member states. From the British perspective, it represents the most significant constitutional shift since the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 [5].

### **The Dilemmas of Europe's Future: United States of Europe or Europe of Nations?**

The debates within the European Union, whether about the sovereignty of member states, Europe's cultural identity, or the desirable developmental paths of EU law, highlight undeniable differences in perspectives that are far from new. From the 16th century, the emergence of absolutist monarchies and the Reformation pushed the idea of restoring the Holy Roman Empire into the background: the former focused on building nation-states, while the latter disrupted the foundation of integration, the common faith. No ideology has been able to fill the integrative role of Christianity; the elitist thinking of Enlightenment Freemasonry, stemming from its secret society nature, and the class struggle perspective of Marxism promoting internationalism, were both unsuitable for integrating all layers of society. Over the next two centuries, Central and Western Europe developed differently. The former entered the age of colonization and rationalist state-building, while the latter, amidst battles with eastern conquerors, preserved many of old Europe's values, such as the estates system, various forms of autonomy, and the prominent role of faith.

The idea of restoring the Roman Empire thus remained off the agenda for a long time, reappearing only in attempts like Napoleon's French Empire or Hitler's Third Reich. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the recurring thought of European integration was driven not by the dream of imperial restoration but by the desire for peace among European peoples. Two notable practical realizations of this idea emerged: the Holy Alliance, which established a balance and peace among European monarchies after the Napoleonic Wars for nearly half a century, and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which reorganized the Habsburg Empire on a constitutional basis. The latter created a Central European integration based on economic division of labor and certain common affairs (foreign policy, military, finance) while preserving the distinctive constitutional identity of Hungary.

The dilemmas of Europe's future - whether it leans towards a United States of Europe or a Europe of Nations - continue to reflect long-standing historical and ideological differences among its members.

Not surprisingly following World War II, the idea of integration based on cooperation among states emerged again in the interest of European peace. This integration had a dual purpose: firstly, to rebuild

Europe after the war by establishing a natural economic division of labor within the Community, and secondly, to protect traditional European values by containing Soviet expansion. This latter objective explains why the founding fathers of European integration were predominantly European Christian Democrats. Following the emergence of the ecumenical movement in the early 20th century, Christianity's integrative power in Europe grew again, standing against both the neopagan national socialist and the atheist communist regimes [6].

The legacy of Christian Democratic politicians is that, rejecting the idea of imperial unification, they refrained from building a political union and instead focused the integration on economic and cultural cooperation. When elements of political union did appear, as in the Maastricht Treaty, common foreign and security policy, and cooperation in justice and home affairs were established as intergovernmental cooperation. Article 1 of this treaty also established the principle of subsidiarity alongside the creation of the European Union. Although the Nice Treaty, the failed European Constitution, and subsequently the Lisbon Treaty made significant strides towards political integration, it is important to note that Article 4(2) of the Treaty on European Union, as amended by the Lisbon Treaty, states that 'the Union shall respect the ... national identities of its Member States, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government.'

Cultural-based integration presupposes a common identity. However, the question arises whether such a common identity can still be found in 21st-century Europe [7].

Regarding the content of the concept of Europeanness, it is telling what we consider to be the reason, ultimate goal, and final boundary of European integration. It is important to mention as a precursor to the idea of European unity that William Penn, an English politician, suggested in his 1696 work that in the interest of European peace, there was a need to establish a common European parliament instead of the fragmented European states. His plan on the present and future of European peace emphasized the responsibility of the leading great powers in the formation of European unity. Penn proposed dividing Europe into German, French, and English spheres of influence and then emphasized the importance of their unification. According to him, for the sake of Europe's unity and long-term peace, in the second phase of expansion, it would also be necessary to integrate Russia and Turkey.

Regarding the objections raised about the plan, Penn said the following: 'I have come to the last obstacle: the rulers and states would lose their sovereignty, and this would be unacceptable to them. This is also a false assumption because they would remain just as powerful in their own territories as before. Neither the extent of their sovereignty nor their revenues would decrease, and furthermore, the war budget would not burden them, and according to my idea, this amount could be used for the common good. Therefore, the sovereignty of the states would not be diminished, but none would have authority over the others. If the states perceived this as a limitation of their sovereignty, it is because the big fish would no longer be able to swallow the smaller ones; thus, individual countries would be protected from attacks and would themselves be incapable of aggression' [8].

Another significant precursor of the idea of integration is Count Richard Nicolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi, who published his book *Pan-Europe* in Vienna in 1923, in which he articulated the ultimate goal of establishing the United States of Europe [9]. His most important insight, which also touches on identity, is that the concepts of nation and state must be separated from each other. The political

significance of the nation should be minimized, essentially transforming it into an ‘educational community’ that is expressed through a common language [10].

‘When drafting Article 98 of the ECSC Treaty, Schuman emphasized that the conditions for accession should not be exclusionary but should instead reflect the openness of the community. The term ‘European state’ was borrowed from the membership condition of another international organization, the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe sends invitations for accession to European states that are ‘able and willing to accept the ideals and principles that constitute the common European heritage, namely the rule of law, respect for human rights, and pluralist democracy.’ Schuman suggested that compliance with the criterion of ‘Europeanness’ should not be examined solely from a geographical perspective. Accordingly, only a state that embodies the spirit of European traditions and, in accordance with them, has an institutional setup based on the principle of freedom and respect for human rights should become a member of the community’ [11].

Winston Churchill, the former Prime Minister of Britain, who passionately supported the idea of European integration and was among the first to advocate for the creation of the ‘United States of Europe.’ As he put it, ‘We must create a kind of United States of Europe’ [12]. According to the research conducted by the Századvég Europe Project, it has been revealed that there are significantly more citizens living within the European Union who wish to maintain the community of sovereign member states on the continent. Based on the survey conducted in 2022, it can be concluded that according to the international public opinion research of the Europe Project, the public opinion of 22 out of the 27 member states leaned towards the sovereigntist position [13].

### **The Situation of the Western Balkans in the European Geopolitical Region**

To understand the dilemmas of Europe’s future – among which the issue of Western Balkan integration occupies a prominent place – I find it important to outline the role of the Western Balkans in the European geopolitical context. This reveals the significance of the region and why it is also crucial for the European Union. Understanding this key role necessitates exploring the historical roots to see how far the countries of the region have come on the path toward European integration.

The Western Balkans is a geopolitical concept referring to the Southeast European countries that were not EU candidate countries in the early 2000s but aimed for accession. Originally, the region included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. After 1945, the Western Balkan countries came under communist rule, with each country, except Albania, being a republic of Yugoslavia. In 1948, Tito broke away from Stalin and became one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement along with Egyptian President Nasser and Indian Prime Minister Nehru. After 1950, Yugoslavia developed its unique decentralized model, allowing for the strengthening of Western market orientation. Albania broke ties with the Soviet Union in 1962 but chose a completely isolated planned economy model unlike Yugoslavia.

Following the dissolution of the Yugoslav state in 1991, the region was plagued by ethnic conflicts, war devastation, a flood of refugees, and the strengthening of organized crime. Armed conflicts in the region were only quelled by the intervention of UN and NATO forces, as well as promises of EU membership. However, the future prospect of European integration significantly contributed to the initiation of



economic and political reforms – albeit at varying paces across countries – and the normalization of political relations in the region [14].

The legacy of bloody conflicts continues to overshadow regional politics in the Western Balkans to this day, posing obstacles to effective EU integration. Ongoing territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, and the unresolved situation in Kosovo significantly hinder the region's progress.

However, geopolitically, the Western Balkans has remained a priority for the European Union, especially in terms of security policy, trade and transit routes. Geographically, the Western Balkan countries form a unique connecting bridge between the EU's south-eastern wing (Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania) and the Central European 'core' countries (Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria). Economically, these countries are among the EU's most significant trading partners, major sources of foreign investment, and primary destinations for outward labor migration. The importance of the Western Balkans as a transit zone was further highlighted by the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 [15].

Serbia and five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) still do not recognize Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008. The new country has not been able to establish constructive relationships between the Albanian majority and the Serbian minority living in the north, and thus the presence of international peacekeeping forces remains necessary. The region was burdened by severe ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, the negative political and economic consequences of which are still felt today. In the early and mid-2000s, the prospect of EU accession spurred economic and institutional reforms, but the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 and the subsequent European financial crisis of 2010–13 (which particularly affected the EU's southern wing) significantly slowed down the pace of growth and exacerbated high unemployment among local youth.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, where only the 1995 Dayton Agreement could put an end to the civil war, is a loose and conflict-ridden confederation of three ethnic communities (Serb, Croat, and Muslim-Bosniak). Here, serious problems arise even at the level of central authority, further exacerbated by Serbian separatist efforts supported by Belgrade.

North Macedonia's EU and NATO accession was delayed for more than a decade due to Greece's dispute over the country's name, which lasted until 2017, and Bulgaria's veto over the non-recognition of the Macedonian language. Additionally, the country is burdened by internal conflicts, having repeatedly suffered from ethnic tensions between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, which have often escalated into civil war [16].

The legacy of conflicts from the past significantly contributes to the slowdown in the EU accession process. Additionally, the severe financial crisis years (2007-2013), the growing Balkan Euroscepticism and nationalism, and Britain's exit have also reduced the EU members' inclination towards further enlargement. A positive development, however, was the acknowledgment of the importance of further enlargement by the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in his speech on September 13, 2017, once the candidate countries meet the accession criteria. Delays in EU membership could make other global players, primarily Russia and China, more active in the region. Beijing is increasingly financing infrastructure investments in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkans. Russia's involvement is mainly focused on geopolitical objectives, aiming to deter Western

Balkan countries from joining NATO as much as possible, and is not enthusiastic about their EU membership either.

The old partner, Serbia, is one of the main targets of Russian efforts, supported by the historical and cultural ties between the two countries. Nevertheless, Belgrade does not follow all directions set by Moscow and is reluctant to take steps that would jeopardize its future EU accession prospects. Russia was proven to have been involved in the failed October 2016 coup in Montenegro, organized by the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists to prevent the country's NATO membership. Turkey is primarily active in economic, cultural, and religious spheres in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Muslim population is more significant [17].

Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania aim to achieve EU enlargement 'as soon as possible, but no later than 2030.' The Union is also fully committed to the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. The 1993 Copenhagen summit defined the so-called 'Copenhagen criteria,' which provide fundamental guidelines for countries wishing to become members of the Union, such as the implementation of the rule of law, human rights, and a market economy [18].

Following the 1999 Kosovo conflict, the European Union established a new type of contractual relationship with the countries of the region: within the framework of the so-called Stabilization and Association Process, it concluded Stabilization and Association Agreements with these countries. These agreements provide economic assistance and trade facilitation to them. The aim is to promote the democratization of the region's countries, overcome instability, and achieve reconstruction [19].

## Conclusion

As outlined in the introductory reform plans, the future of European integration is at least questionable. The idea of a United States of Europe faces significant resistance in many member states, and due to the differing geopolitical, social, and economic situations, pushing for it could trigger a wave of exits similar to Brexit, thus threatening the future of European integration. Therefore, enlargement policy will play a crucial role in the future, with special attention to the integration of the Western Balkans. The lessons from Brexit - analysing the reasons leading to it and the experiences of the exit process - could decisively influence whether European integration continues in the form of intergovernmental cooperation, a confederation, or a federal state. The debates around the two models of EU integration (the idea of a United States of Europe and a Europe of Nations), which intensified in the context of the migration crisis and Brexit, will be pivotal in shaping the EU's future and its integration goals.

The concept of a multi-speed Europe - although under the EU flag - actually implies not the expansion and deepening of European integration but rather its partial disintegration. The most reliable approach to expanding and deepening integration would be a concept that aims to restore the previous balance of EU institutions as outlined in the treaties. This would enhance cooperation for genuinely common goals while maintaining the obligation for consultation and allowing different problems to be addressed in different ways, rather than enforcing uniform action across the Union for issues that primarily concern specific member states or EU bodies.

The 18-month program of the Council's rotating presidency also highlights the importance of enlargement, stating that the presidency trio will advance the EU enlargement process based on the



European Commission's reports and a merit-based approach, while considering the EU's capacity to integrate new members. Special emphasis will be placed on further developing regular political dialogue with enlargement countries and assisting them in making progress towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria' [20].

Regarding the integration of the Western Balkans, the most challenging aspect for the countries involved is the adoption and implementation of the EU's legal framework, as well as compliance with EU standards [21]. Both the EU and the Western Balkans are currently facing the same security challenges, in which the Western Balkans can play a supportive role. Therefore, the issue of integrating the Western Balkans is a priority and crucial for the future of the EU. Given that the goal of the EU's enlargement policy is to establish peace, democracy, prosperity, security, and stability, the relationship with the Western Balkans is particularly important.

Concerning the future of Europe, I would like to conclude my study with the words of one of Europe's 'founding fathers', Robert Schuman: 'Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity' [22].

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