

### Introduction

**Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit's promise** of EU membership for Western Balkan countries, the vision of enlargement stands at its lowest ebb. **Unjust delays, obstacles, and vetoes have undermined EU credibility and its capacity to drive progressive political transformation.** Instead of a clear vision, the region now faces a proliferation of alternative plans<sup>1</sup> set up to accommodate the hesitations of Member States by offering partial sectorial or horizontal integration. **The core of the EU's relationship with the WB lies in the promise of full accession with equal rights and responsibilities. Anything less threatens to impede the much needed reforms** in the region's fragile democracies. As the EU enters a period of reflection and potential reform<sup>2</sup>, it must reintroduce clarity, determination, and honesty into its interaction with WB6. The geopolitical shift, highlighted by the war in Ukraine, reaffirm the need for the EU to firmly **anchor the future of the WB6 in the Union with a clear timeline. The integration of WB6 countries into the EU should be reinstated as the primary pathway for progress. Member states that employ vetoes should face greater political pressure.** The proposed mechanism of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) is merely a technical solution and should be accompanied by a resolute message from the EU's most influential MS against using bilateral disputes as obstacle in the accession negotiations process.

### The role of bilateral disputes

Amid the protracted integration, bilateral disputes have festered, both within the WB region and between MS and candidates. These disputes often run counter to EU values, such as mutual respect for identity, diversity, and the rule of law. Notably, the veto placed by Bulgaria on North Macedonia and the pressure Greece exerted on Albania<sup>3</sup> have no basis in conditionality but rather stem from negative identity politics. In case of North Macedonia, Sofia's veto along with its policy of denying Macedonian identity and language, coupled with the demand for constitutional changes, have fuelled Euroscepticism, heightened inter-ethnic tensions, and provided impetus to authoritarian tendencies. The resurgence of anachronistic historical demands in the EU membership negotiations jeopardizes core values of EU and tarnishes EU's image. Moreover, inter-ethnic disputes within Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as those related to electoral and constitutional reform, hold the potential to evolve into bilateral disputes between Croatia and B&H. Such developments could have detrimental repercussions for B&H's negotiations with the EU.

### The role of EU delegations

The EU delegations in candidate states are commonly viewed as the primary representatives of the EU, and their communication plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives regarding the integration process. However, in some instances, certain EU delegations have overlooked opportunities to underscore the importance of a merit-based approach to reform processes and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. This silence, in the long run, can erode the EU's credibility.

### Kosovo-Serbia and overcoming conflict legacies

The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has been predominantly affected by the terrorist attack in Banjska, in Northern Kosovo on 24 September 2023. The EU's unbalanced approach toward both parties in the dialogue has raised concerns in the region. While Kosovo has faced several measures, Serbia remains largely 'unpunished' by the EU so far. Recent events highlight the need for political accountability and a more robust approach to prevent recurrences. In mid-October, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the Banjska terrorist attack, strongly condemning it, calling for strong measures against Serbia, if investigations unfold any kind of Serbian state involvement<sup>4</sup>. Following this, a meeting of leaders of both countries with EU Representatives and leaders of France, Italy and Germany took place on October 26. This meeting resulted with a dead end, with parties not reaching any sort of agreement, with Kosovo on one side agreeing to the ASM proposal brought forward by EU and US, and Serbia on the other hand, refusing any kind of agreement.

### The unresolved legacy of interethnic strife


The ongoing impact of unresolved conflicts from the 1990s continue to strain regional relations. The territorial aspirations of Serbian authorities pose a considerable threat to the region's consolidation, especially stimulating separatist tendencies of the authorities in Republika Srpska, B&H. The influence of malign actors, such as Russian (and other, e.g. Hungarian) further exacerbates these tensions. Neglecting to establish a culture of remembrance in Serbia,

<sup>1</sup> Access to single market, staged accession, phasing in are some examples of such alternatives.

<sup>2</sup> 'France and Germany back four-speed Europe', 19.09.2023 <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-germany-europe-enlargement-accession-ukraine/>

<sup>3</sup> Fredi Bejleri was arrested upon charges of alleged vote-buying by the Special Prosecution Office SPAK. This same institution is lauded by the EU as 'one of the key achievements of the justice reform.'

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution on the recent developments in the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities of Kosovo, 18 October 2023. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0437\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0437_EN.html)



rooted in objective narratives, provides an opening for the infiltration of Russian malign influence. Unfortunately, the opportunity to pressure Serbia into creating a framework for a culture of remembrance, based on the verdicts of the Hague Tribunal, a fundamental requirement for reconciliation, has been missed. Hence, a more comprehensive and dedicated effort is needed to strengthen the human rights and civic values in the region.

### **Montenegro – from front runner to a disturbing narrative**

Montenegro serves as a cautionary example of the declining influence of the EU and its Western partners, contrasted with the resurging, malign influences of Russia and Serbia. Once considered a frontrunner committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, its trajectory has taken a disheartening turn. The deficiencies of the previous government led to its replacement. However, a flawed political transition and the susceptibility of the new leadership to detrimental Serbian influence, particularly through various political figures, media outlets, and, most significantly, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), have resulted in polarization, instability, and the dysfunctionality of institutions. This has also caused a significant setback in EU negotiations. The new parliamentary majority, further exacerbates the situation, resulting with the appointment of a President of the Parliament aligned with pro-Putin and pro-Vučić factions and the Government with a politically dependent Prime Minister and a cabinet whose commitment to the Euro-Atlantic path is questionable. Furthermore, most mainstream media outlets in Montenegro have Serbian ownership, while the political leadership influences the public broadcaster RTCG. Meanwhile, critically oriented civil society remains under the threat of smear campaigns, especially those vocal about the misuse of public resources by the new authorities and their deviation from the EU agenda. An essential coming issue will be the position of the new Government regarding the planned census, where Vucic's clear intention is ethnic engineering. The EP Resolution has already recommended postponement until conditions are met to conduct it without political interference and pressures. On overall, these developments have further dimmed the prospects of Montenegro's EU accession. At this point, it represents a victory for regressive forces, necessitating immediate and more effective action.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Reframing the EU integration of WB6 countries:**

- Instead of investing significant energy, efforts, and resources in exploring alternative arrangements, MS and the countries in the region should engage in a **process of profound honesty** to ensure that EU enlargement remains a viable prospect. A consensus should be reached on a timeline and roadmap.
- Bilateral disputes unrelated to the integration process should not be allowed to evolve into impediments. **The EU bears the primary responsibility of safeguarding its credibility** by mitigating these challenges.
- **EU delegations** in candidate states should enhance their communication by **consistently placing strong emphasis on a merit-based approach** and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.
- **The EU should allocate additional resources to strengthen support for credible civil society actors dedicated to EU values and principles**, normalizing relations between the countries in the region, and advocating for the genuine democratic consolidation.
- **The EU should proactively promote and facilitate peace-building and intercultural programmes**, measures of trust, and a culture of remembrance. **Integration of these initiatives into educational systems and instructional cultural policies is vital.**

### **Resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue:**

- **The EU must address concerns of asymmetric treatment in facilitation and mediation**, which often favour the interest of Belgrade. This situation is also reflected in the sequencing plan for the implementation of Ohrid Agreement.
- The EU should issue a clear and unequivocal reaffirmation of its commitment to solutions concerning **collective rights for the Serbian community**, within the framework of Kosovo's Constitution and in accordance with decisions by Kosovo's Constitutional Court. This reaffirmation should explicitly exclude the establishment of new governance layers with executive powers.
- **The EU should promptly clarify its position on the legality of the Agreement reached in Ohrid.**
- **An initiative must be launched to engage the five EU member states that do not recognize Kosovo within the framework of the dialogue** to secure their endorsement of the aforementioned agreements.

### **Targeted Engagement with Montenegro:**

- **The EU should prioritize direct engagement with progressive forces in Montenegro** to prevent the government from further aligning with malign factions and work on returning the country to the EU track.
- **On a more specific scale, the EU should make it unequivocally clear at all levels that the census cannot be conducted until all the conditions are met.** These should encompass both technical and political requirements and political safeguards to ensure an impartial count, free from political interference, particularly from Serbia.