

THE IMPACT OF EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY IN THE BALKANS

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Following the official dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, seven countries declared their independence: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Balkans—whose political borders were redrawn—re-emerged as an important region in the international system after a long period. The ethnic conflicts that occurred during the process of Yugoslavia’s dissolution not only revealed the fragile structure of the region but also led the EU and NATO to develop various policies aimed at ensuring stability in the region.

In particular, it is significant that newly independent states have adopted closer relations with the EU as a strategic goal in order to strengthen their economic institutions, support their development, and ensure political stability. In addition, the Balkans’ geographical position as a transition zone between the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Asia, as well as its strategic importance in terms of energy routes, trade corridors, and transportation networks; moreover, its role as a key junction point in terms of migration movements and border security, all demonstrate why the region holds a crucial position for the EU. In line with all these factors, the Balkan countries have become one of the most important focal points of the EU’s enlargement policy.

Following Russia’s launch of a military operation against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the ongoing de facto war, a visible shift and acceleration have been observed in the European Union’s enlargement policy. The enlargement process, which had progressed rather slowly and cautiously even after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, has, in the aftermath of the war, placed geopolitical and security concerns at the center of enlargement policy. The perception that Russia poses a threat to European security has increased the EU’s willingness to integrate the Balkan countries more deeply into its political and economic structure. In particular, the EU—placing European security at its core—has sought to strongly revitalize its relations with the Western Balkan countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo—which have long been based on a gradual integration model, and has adopted a comprehensive approach that reprioritizes enlargement policy for the integration of the region into the EU, while developing strategies that promote democratization, the rule of law, and institutional reforms to ensure that this integration proceeds in a healthy manner.

This study aims to reveal whether the change in the European Union’s enlargement policy in the Balkans—particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—seeks to achieve a normative transformation in the region or whether this process is employed as a strategic instrument. In the first section of the study, how the EU is defined as a normative power and how the conditionality mechanism functions within the

enlargement process will be examined theoretically. In the second section, using this theoretical framework, the relationship between the EU’s discourse and its practical implementation will be analyzed; in light of issues such as the sustainability of reforms, the uncertainties of the accession process, and the impact of differing views within the EU, the effects of enlargement policy on Balkan countries and the changes in the EU’s approach

throughout this process will be evaluated. In the final section, through a comparative analysis based on recent developments among the Balkan countries, it will be discussed whether the EU truly acts on a value-based basis in its enlargement policy or whether strategic interests are more decisive.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S NORMATIVE POWER APPROACH AND ENLARGEMENT POLICY

Normative Power Europe

What kind of power the European Union should be considered in the international system is one of the fundamental and enduring debates in the academic literature. In the early 1970s, François Duchêne's "Civilian Power Europe" approach defined Europe as a civilian power with "high economic capacity and relatively limited military forces." Realists such as Hedley Bull, however, criticized this view by arguing that Europe was not in fact a "civilian power," but rather an incomplete military power. According to Bull, being a civilian power was not sufficient. Military capacity was necessary for security, and the EU could not become a serious actor unless it achieved military independence. Bull argued that the EU should possess nuclear deterrence and strengthen its conventional armed forces.

Following the end of the Cold War, developments in the field of security and defense began within the EU. Examples of these developments include the 1991 Maastricht Treaty, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the 60,000-strong rapid reaction force that was brought onto the agenda at the 1999 Cologne Summit. With these developments, the question of whether the EU was transforming from a

civilian power into a military power came to the fore. In this context, Ian Manners, who published the article *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?* in 2002, proposed a more advanced concept instead of civilian power: Normative Power Europe.

The concept of normative power aims to move the analysis away from an empirical emphasis on the institutions or policies of the European Union and to incorporate individual processes into the analysis. In other words, this concept seeks to generate influence primarily through values, principles, and norms rather than through economic or military power. In this respect, normative power is concerned with the processes of the creation, diffusion, and legitimization of certain norms within the international system. The influence of the European Union in the international system is related not to material capacity, but to its ability to shape which values are accepted as legitimate or universal. In this context, the European Union seeks to promote and disseminate the fundamental norms it adopts through foreign policy instruments such as diplomatic dialogue, reform incentives, and financial assistance. In particular, enlargement policy, the conditionality mechanism, and cooperation agreements such as Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) and Free Trade Agreements (FTA) are considered important tools for the diffusion of these fundamental norms to other countries. For this reason, the normative power approach offers a perspective that seeks to explain the European Union's role in the international system not only through traditional power elements such as economic and military capacity, but also through the diffusion of norms that it aims to establish as universal and legitimate,

and through the processes of their adoption.

According to Manners, Bull's critical approach and Duchêne's "Civilian Power Europe" approach rely on more shared assumptions than is generally assumed. Indeed, both approaches are based on direct physical power grounded in concrete empirical capacities, state-centric thinking, and the logic of national interest. Moreover, Manners argues that the Cold War—which generated most of these assumptions—ended with the loss of legitimacy of regimes in Eastern Europe, the collapse of norms, and the transformation of ideas, that is, through the internal collapse of regimes; therefore, he asserts that the EU's real power lies in its ability to set norms.

According to Göran Therborn, without power support and the willingness to use that power, it is not possible for Europe to become a normative power capable of telling other regions of the world which political, economic, and social institutions they should have. In other words, for normative claims to be effective, material power capacity and the will to use it are required. In contrast, Ian Manners rejects this assumption and the accompanying instrumental approach. According to Manners, normative power is not a guiding instrument based on material capacity; rather, it is a feature that stems from the very nature of Europe.

The normative foundation of the European Union is based on norms that are enshrined in treaties, explicitly expressed in founding documents, and legally and constitutionally entrenched. This normative basis has been gradually constructed since the 1950s through various treaties, declarations, membership

criteria, and conditionality mechanisms. Manners divides this normative structure into two categories: core (primary) norms and secondary norms.

Core norms answer the question "What is the EU?" and are grouped under five headings: Peace, Liberty, Democracy, the Rule of Law, and Respect for Human Rights. Secondary norms, on the other hand, respond to the question "What kind of order does the EU seek?" and, although not as central as core norms, constitute a part of the Union's normative identity. These norms include Social Solidarity, Non-Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities, Sustainable Development, and Good Governance.

From this perspective, the EU is a political entity whose legitimacy is derived from norms; therefore, EU norms are not merely instruments used in foreign policy, but rather constitutive and defining elements of the Union itself. In other words, these norms function as fundamental principles that both shape the European Union's political and institutional structure and influence its foreign policy behavior. For instance, the core norms upon which the Union is based are included among the fundamental conditions within the framework of the Copenhagen Criteria that candidate countries are required to adopt during the accession process. Indeed, the European Union's implementation of various support programs through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), aimed at encouraging candidate countries to carry out constitutional and institutional reforms, can be presented as a concrete example.

The acceptance of the EU's normative foundation does not necessarily mean that it constitutes a source of normative power.

In order for the European Union to be considered a normative power, several key criteria must be met. The first of these is the EU's ability to project the norms upon which it bases its own political structure into the international arena in a way that influences and shapes other actors. Secondly, although the European Union possesses normative foundations, it cannot be said that it always prioritizes normative discourse in its foreign policy. Indeed, in situations where strategic interests come to the fore, foreign policy decisions are determined by the Union's strategic, economic, or geopolitical priorities. For example, the migration agreement signed with Türkiye in 2016 demonstrates that the EU has adopted a security-centered strategy in its foreign policy. For this reason, some scholars such as Adrian Hyde-Price and Richard Youngs criticize the European Union's claim to normative power, arguing that it remains largely theoretical and does not always find reflection in practice. A third reason is that, for the European Union to be genuinely recognized as a normative power, the core norms it adopts must be perceived as legitimate by other societies, states, or international actors, and these actors must shape their own policies accordingly. Therefore, evaluating the European Union as a source of normative power is related to how effectively it can diffuse its core norms in the international arena and to what extent these norms can influence the behavior of actors within the international system. For this reason, it is necessary to question how EU norms are diffused. The following six factors explain how norms spread, how they are adopted by other countries, and how they become effective: contagion (diffusion), informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt (ostensible) diffusion, and the cultural filter.

The European Union's international efforts to abolish the death penalty constitute one of the most concrete examples of how the EU operates as a normative power. The process of abolishing the death penalty was first transformed into a 'normal' and legitimate human rights standard within Europe, and was subsequently projected to the global level by the EU through various instruments. Thus, this process represents one of the cases demonstrating how the EU seeks to transform international politics through its capacity to produce and diffuse norms.

Today, the concept of normative power is both being further developed and seriously criticized within the academic literature. While some scholars argue that normative power remains a valid characterization of the EU, others emphasize that the universality of norms is contested and highlight the EU's dependence on economic instruments as well as its inconsistent practices. In addition, there is a growing tendency to avoid defining the EU's influence solely through normative power; instead, the Union's economic capacity and strategic instruments are also taken into consideration.

EU Enlargement Policy and the Conditionality Mechanism

The European Union is an international actor that possesses various foreign policy instruments such as diplomacy, economic tools, sanctions, security and defense policy, and enlargement policy. Among these foreign policy instruments, one of the most important and effective is the EU's enlargement policy. Enlargement policy does not merely mean the expansion of the European Union's borders. More specifically, enlargement policy refers to the transfer of the European Union's core

norms, principles, values, and institutional structures to EU candidate countries. One of the main instruments used by the European Union in this enlargement process is the “conditionality” mechanism. The conditionality mechanism is a prerequisite according to which the EU requires candidate countries to implement various reforms, and in return, foresees the progress of the accession process if these reforms are fulfilled. Although the concept of conditionality had previously been used in international economic and development policies, two prominent scholars have theoretically grounded the concept within the EU enlargement literature: Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier.

Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier define the EU’s external governance as the process through which EU rules are transferred to non-member countries, and they argue that this process can be analyzed along two dimensions: first, the export of the EU’s own governance systems to external countries; and second, the methods through which EU rules are transferred to these countries (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). The conditionality mechanism falls within this second dimension, which explains the method by which EU rules are transferred to external countries.

Within the framework of governance approaches, two main forms of governance can be identified within the EU: “hierarchical governance” and “network governance.” According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, internal governance within existing EU member states is predominantly network-based; that is, it relies on decentralized, horizontal, and multi-actor processes of negotiation and cooperation (Schimmelfennig &

Sedelmeier, 2004). However, in candidate countries, the process of rule transfer often takes the form of hierarchical governance. Hierarchical governance refers to a mode of governance based on a command-and-control logic determined by central institutions.

The EU acts as a rule-setter by exercising strong bargaining power over candidate countries. In the literature, this situation is defined as “asymmetric bargaining power.” The influence of other governments over the content of the rules is limited. Indeed, the rules have been predetermined by the member states of the EU. The process of transferring these rules to candidate countries is top-down, bureaucratic, and intergovernmental in nature.

EU relations in the Western Balkans have generally been conducted through intergovernmental negotiations, and the influence of local civil society and transnational networks—non-state actors—has remained limited. As an example, in the relations between the European Union and Serbia, constitutional reform processes have largely been shaped in line with the conditions set by Brussels.

The EU’s conditionality policy refers to the Union offering membership or various forms of assistance to candidate countries in return for implementing the reforms expected of them. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, when the European Union uses conditionality policy as a foreign policy strategy, a logic of “reinforcement by reward” is present. Accordingly, the Union offers incentives such as the promise of membership or financial assistance if candidate countries comply with the norms, ideals, and values that the Union considers fundamental. In such cases, a process of mutual bargaining

takes place. Candidate states adopt the rules by making a cost–benefit calculation; if the benefits outweigh the costs, they comply with the rules.

Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier also emphasize the effectiveness of this strategy as another dimension of conditionality. According to them, the size and credibility of the reward, the determinacy and consistency of the conditions, the credibility of threats, and the magnitude of domestic adaptation costs in the candidate country are decisive factors for the success of conditionality policy (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). For example, when membership is offered as a reward to a candidate country, even if the cost of reforms is high, the likelihood of acceptance remains strong. This is because when the conditions offered to the candidate country are clearly, explicitly, and concretely defined, countries can more easily understand what is required of them, thereby reducing the likelihood of operating within the uncertainties of the EU’s commitments.

The absence of competing alternative incentives, referred to as “cross-conditionality,” also makes the European Union’s threats more credible. However, these two scholars also note that this formula of conditionality does not always hold and that there are certain exceptions. For instance, if a country perceives the reforms proposed by the EU as solutions to its own domestic problems, it may implement these rules even without any expectation of reward. In addition, norms and values such as democracy and the rule of law promoted by the EU may be persuasive for candidate governments, and in such cases, countries may comply with these norms and values through mechanisms referred to as “social

learning.” Therefore, candidate countries may accept rule transfer not only through a logic of reward, but also through mechanisms such as “social learning” or “lesson-drawing.” For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, certain legal regulations have been implemented not due to a direct expectation of reward, but rather due to the validity of international legal norms or the influence of reforms carried out in neighboring countries.

As mentioned in the paragraph above, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier base conditionality on the “external incentives model,” and according to them, the main proposition of this model is as follows: “A state adopts EU rules when EU rewards exceed the domestic costs of compliance” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). While compliance costs refer to internal resistance, rewards denote clear benefits such as membership or financial assistance.

The balance between costs and rewards depends on four factors: the determinacy of conditions, the size and timing of rewards, the credibility of commitments, and the magnitude of adoption costs. While the determinacy of conditions leaves no room for delay or missteps, the size and timing of the reward determine the extent to which the candidate state is willing to comply. The case of North Macedonia’s accession to NATO can be presented as concrete evidence of this situation. In this process, it was rewarded through positive conditional support provided by the United States. However, since EU membership remained a more distant objective, the process of compliance with EU reforms lost momentum. Credibility, on the other hand, is related to the consistency of the EU’s commitments and its capacity to enforce

them. EU membership promises that have occasionally slowed down or been interrupted since the 1990s have led to a decline in trust toward the EU in various European countries. As an example, some countries that gained independence following the dissolution of Yugoslavia did not find the EU's membership promise sufficiently credible.

Adoption costs and veto players refer to the costs that governments face while attempting to implement reforms. Groups such as labor unions and ethnic communities that can influence government decisions are referred to as "internal veto players." According to the two scholars, "within the framework of the external incentives model, the greater the number of veto players bearing net adoption costs, the lower the likelihood of compliance" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). As an example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the slow progress of the EU's constitutional reform conditions can be attributed to the resistance shown by certain social and political actors against compliance with EU norms.

The membership perspective offered by the EU in the Western Balkans constitutes one of the fundamental conditions for the external incentives model to function. The more strongly and closely the candidate country perceives this perspective, the easier the transfer of EU rules becomes. North Macedonia's decision to change its name in response to the naming dispute with Greece during its EU accession process serves as evidence of this perspective.

Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier also discuss the "social learning model" and the "lesson-drawing model" as

alternatives to the external incentives model (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004).

The social learning model refers to the adoption of rules by governments through internalization based on the EU's normative power and legitimacy. As an example, certain anti-corruption reforms carried out in Albania can be cited. These reforms progressed through the internalization of the EU's rule of law values by local politicians and were realized not through a direct reward mechanism, but rather through the persuasive power of EU norms. The lesson-drawing model, on the other hand, refers to the adoption of EU rules by observing their success in other countries. In other words, when policymakers encounter a problem in their own country, they examine international examples and implement reforms that they believe will be effective in their own context. As an example, Kosovo's adaptation of a new criminal code model—developed by the United Nations institutions and the international community—into its domestic legal system after examining it beyond the EU framework can be cited.

The three models discussed so far—namely the reward-based approach, social learning, and lesson-drawing—are not entirely conflicting mechanisms. In fact, in some cases, these mechanisms are observed to overlap. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, external incentives, that is, the reward-based approach, constitute the generally dominant model in the international system. However, it has also been observed that candidate countries, in certain cases, employ these three models simultaneously.

EU conditionality is divided into two stages: “democratic conditionality” and “acquis conditionality” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Democratic conditionality, since the 1990s, has aimed at the democratization of candidate countries and has included pre-accession, society-based reforms. In this context, although the EU has provided external incentives, the success of the compliance process has largely depended on the domestic costs borne by incumbent governments. Indeed, the periods of Serbia under Slobodan Milošević and Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar exemplify this situation.

The period of *acquis* conditionality, on the other hand, emerged after 1995 with the initiation of the negotiation process. During this period, the EU required candidate countries to implement comprehensive reforms in line with its internal structures. For example, in Türkiye, during the rule of the Justice and Development Party, the alignment of legislation accelerated with the start of accession negotiations. At this stage, the importance of adoption costs decreased even further, and despite the presence of internal veto players, these costs became less decisive in comparison to the broad benefits expected from membership.

One of the scholars explaining the EU’s enlargement policy is Heather Grabbe. According to Grabbe, the European Union’s enlargement policy directs candidate countries toward a transformation process that produces deep and comprehensive changes in their political and institutional structures (Grabbe, 2006). Grabbe explains this transformation process through the concept of the EU’s “transformative power” over candidate countries. According to her, the European Union uses

various instruments such as the conditionality mechanism, policy transfer, financial assistance programs, and technical support mechanisms in order to ensure the adoption of reforms in candidate countries (Grabbe, 2006). For example, the European Union’s close monitoring of the ongoing judicial reform process in Albania, or the EU’s evaluation of Albania’s judicial reforms during the “Justice, Freedom and Security Subcommittee” meeting held in Brussels on 3 March 2026, can be presented as examples of this process.

Similarly, Milada Anna Vachudova, who examines the impact of the EU’s enlargement policy on the democratization process, argues that the European Union’s enlargement policy functions as a powerful mechanism that encourages the implementation of democratic reforms in candidate countries. Vachudova explains this effect of the EU through the concepts of “active leverage” and “passive leverage” (Vachudova, 2005).

Passive leverage refers to the idea that even the prospect of EU membership creates pressure on candidate countries to implement reforms. Candidate countries feel compelled to undertake democratic reforms in order to join the EU. Active leverage, on the other hand, refers to the EU directly demanding reforms from candidate countries and creating conditionality by stating that progress in the membership process will depend on the implementation of these reforms.

In summary, the European Union’s enlargement policy is not merely a policy aimed at increasing the number of member states. Enlargement policy is also a reform process that leads to comprehensive transformations within countries. The

conditionality mechanism is one of the main instruments used by the EU to achieve this transformation. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's systematization of EU foreign policy through the "external incentives model," Grabbe's explanation of the active and passive effects of enlargement policy through the concept of "transformative power," and Vachudova's analyses based on the EU's impact on democratization constitute the main theoretical frameworks that seek to explain the effects of EU enlargement policy on candidate countries.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AFTER THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR

The European Union's enlargement policy has, since the establishment of the EU, been one of the fundamental policies used to ensure and sustain stability on the European continent, to disseminate the core values, norms, and ideals adopted by the Union, and to deepen and expand the scope of economic integration. Through its enlargement policy, the European Union aims to strengthen European security by projecting its normative values into the surrounding regions. From this perspective, enlargement policy constitutes one of the EU's most important soft power mechanisms.

The Western Balkans, on the other hand, represent one of the critical regions where the European Union's enlargement policy has at times gained momentum, at times lost momentum, and even reached a point of stagnation. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992, the political instability among the newly independent states, various tensions—particularly ethnic ones—and economic vulnerabilities have

led the Balkans to become a strategic intermediary region in terms of European security. The Balkans have been characterized not only by inter-state tensions but also by challenges stemming from the internal structures of states, such as weak state institutions, economic fragility, high unemployment rates, and ethnically driven political competition. All these developments have made both inter-state and intra-state fragilities in the Balkans increasingly significant for European security; therefore, since the 1990s, the European Union has initiated various regional initiatives toward the Balkans and has developed the integration of the region into the European integration process as a long-term project.

However, one of the major turning points in the European Union's enlargement policy in the Balkans has been Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022. The war that started with Russia's attack on Ukraine has revealed the need to reshape Europe's security architecture and has assigned a geopolitical role to the EU's enlargement policy. Particularly in the period following the outbreak of the war, EU leaders have frequently and explicitly emphasized that the Western Balkans hold strategic importance for the security of European countries, and the security crisis that emerged with this war has led to a renewed momentum in the European Union's enlargement policy toward the Western Balkans. In this regard, the statements made by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 6 December 2023, emphasizing that the Western Balkans should become part of the European Union, constitute a concrete example of this shift. While EU leaders and Western media have conveyed clear and explicit messages aimed at accelerating integration into the EU in the Balkans, the

fact that the membership process in practice is still subject to numerous conditions and obstacles reveals the contradiction between discourse and implementation.

The Shift Toward a Geopolitical Perspective in EU Discourse

With the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, the discourse on enlargement has undergone a noticeable transformation not only outside the EU but also within it. From published joint policy documents to leaders’ statements, it is evident that the EU now considers the Western Balkans as a region that must be integrated with greater strategic priority. For example, as of January 2026, the messages of EU leaders were reported in the newspaper *Gazeta Tema* as follows: German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, in his speech in Zagreb, stated that EU enlargement should not be slowed down and added that Southeast Europe must not be left vulnerable to destabilizing external influences. According to Chancellor Merz, the Balkans are vital for Europe’s security, and therefore the European Union should provide more investment, funding, and support to the region. Such statements demonstrate that defining EU enlargement solely as a normative project is insufficient; rather, EU enlargement constitutes a security investment aligned with Europe’s strategic interests.

Similarly, in March 2026, European Council President Antonio Costa called on EU member states to prepare for the enlargement process. Costa stated that Ukraine’s application for membership has generated new momentum in the context of negotiations and that, together with Moldova, six Balkan candidate countries are now on the EU agenda. According to

Costa, enlargement is a fundamental geopolitical investment. For this reason, he emphasized that the EU must act faster than it currently does. Some EU officials have even begun to discuss whether there are ways to integrate candidate countries more rapidly into EU structures before they obtain full voting rights.

All these statements provide clear evidence of how the security concerns generated by the war have been reflected in the EU’s enlargement discourse. In summary, in the post–Russia–Ukraine war period, EU enlargement discourse has foregrounded concepts such as geopolitical concerns, security priorities, and the necessity of accelerating integration. Many European leaders have emphasized that keeping the Balkan countries within the EU process would limit, or even reduce, the influence of external actors—primarily Russia—and have framed enlargement not as a normative project but rather as a project of security and stability. These developments, statements, and actions indicate that EU media and leaders consider the prioritization of the Balkans’ integration into the EU to be in Europe’s strategic interest.

It should also be noted that some Western analysts argue that calls for the European Council to prepare for enlargement are driven both by the increasing interest of certain EU member states—particularly Germany and Poland—in the Balkans, and by the growing international visibility of the continued instability in the region following the war. Accordingly, EU enlargement has emerged as a strategic instrument aimed at both limiting Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans and sustaining the security cooperation developed in parallel with Ukraine.

When we turn to the academic literature, studies that discuss enlargement within the framework of security emphasize that ensuring stability in the Balkans is in the EU's interest. For instance, a study focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights the rapid increase in war and crime rates in the Balkans during the disintegration of Yugoslavia and emphasizes that EU enlargement policy is important in terms of both economic and security concerns. Another study discusses whether the EU can support the enlargement process through its soft power instruments and finds that academic works generally argue that enlargement is not merely a matter of normative reform, but that regional security is also a crucial component of the process.

These perspectives in academia complement the discourses conveyed by governments through the press. In other words, both academic circles and policy analysts emphasize that enlargement has a geopolitical dimension. However, the same sources also underline that the steps planned and envisioned in theory must be concretely supported in practice. Otherwise, it is suggested that the paradox of strong theory but weak practice may become inevitable.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to examine the current situation not only from the perspective of the European Union but also from that of the Western Balkan countries. In particular, news reports in the regional media indicate

that political leaders and media outlets in the region hold various expectations and concerns regarding EU membership. To provide a country-specific example, in Kosovo, Speaker of the Assembly Glauk Konjufca, in a statement published in February 2026, called for accelerated integration by stating that "now is the right time to move forward on the European path."¹ Like Konjufca, other leaders in Kosovo have also, from time to time, emphasized the importance of the EU perspective and have stated that Kosovo's integration into the EU is inevitable, and even necessary, in terms of the country's security and economic stability.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, there are more divergent views regarding the European Union; more precisely, there is a lack of political consensus.

The European Union Special Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ambassador Luigi Soreca, stated in a declaration made in February 2026 that "the EU door is open for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but progress depends on political will."² However, in contrast, the stance of ethnic leaders within the country differs. Disagreements among Croatian, Serbian, and Bosniak leaders are leading to a political deadlock. According to statements published in the Bosnian media, it is observed that the reforms required by the EU are progressing quite slowly in the country, and that there are weaknesses in areas such as the fight against corruption and judicial independence.

¹ KOHA. (2026, 26 Şubat). Orav-Konjufce: Avrupa yolunda ilerlemenin tam zamanı. <https://www.koha.net/tr/arberi/orav-konjufces-momentleri-per-te-avancuar-ne-rrugen-evropiane>

² N1. (2026, 26 Şubat). Soreca poručio Bećiroviću na sastanku: BiH su otvorena vrata EU, napredak

zavisi od političke volje. <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/soreca-porucio-becirovicu-na-sastanku-bih-su-otvorena-vrata-eu-napredak-zavisi-od-politicke-volje/>

In Serbia, the stance of President Aleksandar Vučić generally reflects a more cautious approach. According to reports in the Serbian media, Vučić criticized the EU negotiations, stating that “the same messages are repeatedly conveyed and no progress is being made.”³ On the one hand, Serbia considers EU membership as a strategic goal; on the other hand, the government seeks to maintain its relations with Russia and delays addressing the deficiencies in the reforms required by the EU.

In Montenegro, leading officials—particularly the Prime Minister—have, from time to time, expressed their demands for accelerating the EU accession process. For example, in a statement made by EU representatives, it was noted that the country has taken significant steps toward economic integration; however, it was also emphasized that further efforts are needed to ensure alignment of domestic legislation, particularly in areas such as constitutional amendments.

Evidence suggests that Western Balkan leaders generally consider EU membership to be important; however, there are various debates regarding the accession process. Based on developments reflected in the regional press, it can be observed that rather than the question “Will we join the EU?”, the questions “When will we be able to become members?” and “How will we be able to become members?” are more prominent on the agenda.

Each country in the Balkans demonstrates different approaches to EU accession in line with its own internal structures, dynamics, and historical ties. For example,

Kosovo and North Macedonia favor rapid accession to the EU, whereas Serbia seeks to pursue a balancing policy by maintaining its relations with Russia. At the same time, it attempts to expand its room for maneuver by engaging in various investments with actors such as China, Europe, and the United States in areas including energy, economy, and infrastructure. Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, progresses more slowly in the accession process compared to other countries due to its complex internal political dynamics.

There are certain inconsistencies between the discursive messages delivered by the European Union and the steps taken in practice. First, the continued rigidity of reform conditions stands out. Although the EU emphasizes acceleration in its discourse, EU officials state that the conditions set for enlargement will not be relaxed. For example, in Costa’s statement, it is emphasized that candidate countries must still meet democratic standards in line with EU norms. Similarly, in its annual progress reports, the European Commission frequently highlights the shortcomings of countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in areas such as corruption and institutional weaknesses. This approach reinforces the perception in Balkan countries that “we are still not sufficiently ready to join the EU” and is considered one of the factors slowing down the enlargement process.

Secondly, divergences of opinion within the EU come to the fore. While some EU members support enlargement, others prefer a more cautious approach. For example, Dutch politicians have taken a

³ N1, “Vučić i Rama predlažu: Brže u EU tržište i Šengen, bez prava veta,” 28 Šubat 2026,

<https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-i-rama-predlazu-brze-u-eu-trziste-i-sengen-bez-prava-veta/>

distant stance toward enlargement proposals in 2023, arguing that the doors should not be opened before reforms are completed. Despite the call made by European Council President Antonio Costa in March 2026, disagreements among members within the Council of the European Union have not been resolved. This situation introduces uncertainty into the current process. In the Western Balkan press, calls by German leaders for rapid enlargement and the cautious stance of countries such as France and the Netherlands are frequently highlighted. In summary, the inability of EU member states to take or sustain a unified step toward acceleration leads to a loss of motivation among candidate countries.

Thirdly, a coordination problem is observed in the field of security. Although security is emphasized in discourse, a clear roadmap for cooperation between NATO and the European Union is not evident in practice. For example, while the security gap in Bosnia is being debated, NATO continues its training activities, whereas the EU's security mission remains limited. Similarly, EU defense initiatives in response to the threat posed by Russia still remain overshadowed by NATO. In addition, although increasing investments is frequently emphasized in the statements of leaders and the media, in practice, the level of investment is still considered insufficient. While existing EU funds and foreign investments are important for the Balkans, some of these resources have been redirected to countries such as Ukraine. From the perspective of regional economies, the situation still appears fragile, and infrastructure projects such as Corridor VIII either progress very slowly or are not prioritized for certain periods. This situation has led to criticisms in the Balkan media, where it is often argued that “we

are promised support through investments in discourse, but in reality, sufficient resources are not provided.”

Finally, the influence of Russia and other actors in the region is noteworthy. Although the intention to limit Russia's influence is clearly expressed in EU discourse, the geopolitical maneuvers of Russia and China in the Balkans continue. For example, Russian propaganda persists through media networks extending from Serbia to Bosnia, while China seeks to establish influence through investments. Therefore, in this competitive environment, the EU has not yet been able to establish a stable balance, and a perception has emerged in the media that the EU is losing its influence in the region.

To reinforce the gap between discourse and practice with concrete examples, despite statements by leaders such as Merkel emphasizing the need to accelerate EU enlargement, in practice the status of Serbia and Montenegro in accession negotiations remains uncertain, and political reform processes in these countries are still ongoing. Although negotiations with these countries began in 2022, progress reports indicate that the process is still continuing. Another discourse emphasizes the need to increase EU investments for the security of the Western Balkans. However, in practice, EU security mechanisms are either limited or have shifted their focus from Balkan security to other crises. Another example is the discourse that candidate countries must meet the required standards, while the EU should also accelerate the process. For instance, although progress in Albania has been acknowledged, additional demands—such as electoral reform—continue to be put forward by the EU. This situation creates a perception that, despite

meeting the standards, candidate countries are not fully satisfied with the process. In terms of accelerating the process, no significant development—such as the opening of a new negotiation chapter—has been observed.

In these examples, a situation described in the academic literature as a discourse–practice gap becomes evident. In other words, while EU leaders demonstrate verbal commitment to enlargement, expectations regarding structural reforms remain unchanged, and steps aimed at accelerating the enlargement process often remain at the level of discourse.

In summary, it is clear that the EU’s enlargement policy has gained momentum in the Western Balkans following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war. EU leaders, the media, and certain academic perspectives have developed strong discourses aimed at integrating the Balkans into the European Union. Within this discourse, attention is drawn to the geopolitical risks that have emerged with the conflict, and it is argued that the stability of the Balkans and their contribution to security are important for the EU. However, in practice, a cautious approach to enlargement still persists. Candidate countries are still required to comply with the EU’s core norms. This situation leads candidate countries to express that reform expectations sometimes slow down the process and, in certain cases, become burdensome. Indeed, statements such as “governments are implementing the necessary changes, yet the EU still indicates that there is insufficient progress” are frequently voiced.

Differences of opinion among member states further increase the uncertainty of

the current situation. For example, while there are calls from Germany to accelerate the enlargement process, some EU countries adopt the position that “conditions must first be fully met.” In some reports in the Western Balkan media, this situation is highlighted, and reactions are reflected suggesting that Germany has become a victim of political pressures within the EU process. Such statements indicate that differing positions within the EU create disappointment among Balkan countries and their populations.

In conclusion, the discourse–practice gap in the European Union’s enlargement policy continues to persist. In order to close this gap, it is becoming increasingly important to strengthen internal EU cohesion and clarify a common enlargement strategy, to provide concrete incentives and support for reforms in candidate countries, and to develop a balanced competition policy with other actors, particularly Russia. With the implementation of these steps, a more consistent enlargement process—both in terms of discourse and practice—is expected to emerge.

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