



THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A LEVIATHAN OR AN ALLIANCE: THE FATE OF THE EIGHTH ENLARGEMENT

*Josip Jambrač*²⁷⁹

Abstract

Beginning the integration process in the 1950s, in the first stage it had the task of deepening, and in the second it was to extend the integration. In the first step of integration, the basis was the economy what led towards political integration. In the second step, enlargement was and remains a political process with emphasized economic goals on the already established relations. Since the transformation of the Union into a Leviathan has failed, the political concept of the establishment of a superstate is sought to be realized by deepening and enlargement of the Union, along increasing the concentration of power in the European Commission. Linking the issue of the functionality of the system with the enlargement process could postpone the negotiation process with the eight candidate states, for an indefinite period of time. The article analyses the position and possibilities of the candidate states in the accession process. Accession process could be an opportunity for solving the initial dilemma between integration and the nation-state. Nations can bring different choices between these arrangements to protect their social contract. Since the enlargement is a political process candidate states should approach to negotiation with clear and firm political support of the nation.

Key words: *Enlargement, integration, candidate state, Alliance, Leviathan.*

Introduction

The process of enlargement of the European Union (EU) in the past seven waves should be seen as a process of (re)unification of the countries of Europe in the political, economic and legal sense. The integration of new countries into the Union has been and remains a major challenge for both new and existing Member States, i.e. established EU institutions. Any enlargement, with political consensus, has been demanding on the institutional framework for the functioning of the Union. In the demanding, eighth wave of enlargement, the enlargement of the EU to eight new members has prompted the opening of a temporarily postponed discussion on the model of functioning (decision-making) in European bodies.

²⁷⁹ Josip Jambrač, PhD, Honorary Academician of IRASA, Think and Act Association, Vrbovec, Croatia, josip.jambراع@gmail.com, ORCID 0000-0002-6396-2982



On a historically proven successful platform – step by step – the Commission has used current opportunities to send a draft reform of decision-making to the European Parliament. The timing of linking the enlargement process to the decision-making model in order to speed up the overall process and the efficiency of the Union is very indicative. Proponents consider it necessary to introduce a majority voting system, while smaller members oppose it. In part, the initiation of this debate in the European Parliament (EP) was based on the Resolution (and Report) adopted by the EP at the end of November 2023, which calls on the Council of the European Union to initiate the process of revising the EU treaties. Also, it is not unimportant to mention that the Report was compiled by five MEPs from Germany and Belgium.

Given that treaties are binding agreements between member states, and contain goals, rules for institutions, decision-making process and defined relations between members, emphasizing the importance of accelerating the enlargement process was a good moment to open a discussion on related reforms. The institutional reforms proposed by the Resolution refer to "strengthening the Union's capacity to act by significantly increasing the number of areas in which decisions are taken by qualified majority voting and the ordinary legislative procedure, strengthening the EP in creating the legislative and financial framework, appointing the Commission, and increasing the transparency of the European Union."²⁸⁰ The existing rules of decision-making in the Council of the European Union (model of intergovernmental cooperation), are based on the number of Member States of the European Union and the total population.²⁸¹ However, with the enlargement of the EU, the increase in the number of Member States, and consequently the increase in the European population, the relations within the decision-making process would change. Therefore, the enlargement process is directly linked to a key institute within the European Union, an institute that will (not) steer the European Union more towards "Leviathan" or towards the "Alliance". In this context, the eight candidates in the European waiting room, despite their commitment to meet the conditions of accession, do not participate. In fact, their *fate* lies in the effort to reform the existing model of decision-making, that is, to make it part of the contract (condition) that they accepted within the enlargement process.

The issue of increasing the number of members of the European Union has become a key issue in defining the Union's appearance as a political organization and its future. Insisting on reaching an agreement on the (majority) voting model in a number of areas and bodies of the Union, the decision-making model becomes a key element for agreeing on the strengthening or weakening of *the Alliance*. Indirectly, the question of *an easier* 'leaving' of the Union will inevitably have to be raised. Namely, in addition to semantic, there are also political interpretations of the terms *accession* and *enlargement*. Within the enlargement process, there is an implied (disputed) notion of Messianism in the process. "The enlargement process implies that the existing candidate countries are willing to assimilate towards the existing hub by integrating

²⁸⁰ Available at: <https://faktograf.hr/2023/11/29/do-reforme-odlucivanja-u-europskoj-uniji-dug-je-put/>

²⁸¹ Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>



its model." The countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Western Balkans) believe that they should be recognized as components of the development of the construction of Europe, however, they forget that they have been separated from the rest of Europe for a long time [1]. Landaburu points out: "The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are bringing a 'Slavic' variation to the European construction..." [1]. The European institutions are talking about enlargement, and the countries of the Western Balkans are talking about joining. However, after 1995 and the Maastricht Treaty (EU15), the enlargement process has very little in common with the previous joining process. Until now, in the competition between the policies of deepening or enlargement of the Union, enlargement has been the winner. However, the emphasis on the importance of deepening does not come from one or more members, but from the key institution of the Union – the Commission. Although the previous increase in the number of members led to changes in the institutional framework, the process of enlargement of the Union that has begun must be completed in some way, which has raised the issue of deepening as a key *problem* for the continuation of the enlargement process and the development of the construction of the European Union.

Decision-making process in the Council of the European Union

There are three main institutions in the decision-making process in which they agree on legislation: the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union (representatives of the governments of the Member States) and the European Commission. The Council of the European Union, depending on the area being discussed, has three models of decision-making: 1) a simple majority – 14 members in favour; 2) qualified majority – 55 percent of EU members (15 members), representing 65 percent of the population of the European Union, and 3) unanimously. The Council can take decisions if a majority of member states are present. The Council of the European Union decides by qualified majority on proposals from the Commission or the High Representatives of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. How important this institute is in the decision-making process is shown by the possibility of blocking the decision in the Council of at least four member states. In the event of that three member states oppose the decision, a qualified majority is considered to have been reached, even if the remaining members make up less than 65 percent of the EU population. In this case, the proportion of the population is not relevant for the determination of the qualified majority. A member of the Council can only act on behalf of one member. The 1986 EU12 group of countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and the UK) meet the condition of 65 percent of the population, and with the enlargement of three members in 1995 – Austria, Finland and Sweden (EU15) – the condition of 55 percent of the member states. This relationship has been somewhat disrupted by the UK's exit from the EU.

In cases where the Council votes on proposals that do not originate from the Commission or the High Representative, the proposal is adopted if the so-called "reinforced qualified majority" is reached. Reinforced qualified majority means that at



least 72 percent of the member states (currently 20 out of 27) are needed for the proposal to be adopted, and that the member states supporting the proposal make up at least 65 percent of the EU population. In *special* cases, if not all members of the Council participate in the vote, for certain reasons, the voting rules depend on the nature of the proposal: if the Council votes on a proposal by the Commission or the High Representative, a decision is taken if 55 percent of the Council members present, representing 65 percent of the population of the voting states, vote in favour of it. In this case, to block the adoption of a proposal, the minority must include the smallest number of countries representing more than 35 percent of the population, plus one member. Approximately 80 percent of all legislation is passed by qualified majority voting.²⁸²

A brief overview of the relatively complicated voting system in the Council of the European Union is actually based on the EU12, i.e. EU15 from 1995. Therefore, opening a debate on the future of the European Union by emphasizing *the importance* of enlargement is actually opening a debate or questioning the circumstances for a possible political deepening of the European Union. The entry of the enlargement process into the *final* phase of political agreement on the possible number of new members is much more related to the institutional reforms of the EU than to the progress of the candidates. The treaties concluded by the member states are binding, and the accession of new members changes the internal dynamics: the last treaty, the Treaty of Lisbon, was signed in December 2007.²⁸³

Enlargement as a value

The enlargement of the European Union to the east of Europe, towards the transition countries, meant something completely new compared to the previous enlargement. In 1995 the Union had 15 members and included almost all the countries of Western Europe. At that moment, the EU was faced with a major challenge. In its immediate surroundings, the transition took place in the newly formed states after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia, states that needed and expected any help. While the association policy within the European Economic Community (EEC) had very clear economic goals, the new enlargement policy encompassed almost all the prerogatives of the nation-state. Transitional states found themselves at the very beginning *of their life* as the nation-state with a political trilemma: the nation-state, democracy and globalization [2].

A country that wants to become a member of the Union must meet certain criteria (the Copenhagen criteria), which encompass three domains of internal policy: the creation of political institutions (institutions that can guarantee democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities), economic institutions (a functioning market and competitive economy) and the necessary organizational structure, which will be able to assume the obligations arising from membership, including *the acquis* and respect for the objectives of the Union. In reality, the countries

²⁸² Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority>

²⁸³ Available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/hr/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-lisbon>



that have applied for membership need to adapt their overall institutional development to the already established values, i.e. the frameworks on which the EU15 operates.

The European Union highlights the benefits (values) that can be achieved by membership. First of all, "political stability" stands out in the first place; in the second place, the "freedom for citizens" to achieve their self-realization anywhere in the EU is highlighted; in third place is "increased trade through access to the single market"; Entry guarantees "increased financing and investment" and the fifth value, which refers more to the area of living conditions, "higher social, environmental and consumer standards" - *pulsate et opekietur vobi*.

In the economic aspect of enlargement, the new members had to implement the overall institutional framework of the free market, which led to a situation in which the level of privatization and liberalization is higher than in the old member states (EU15). The principles of building a type of democratic society, criteria for participation and membership mechanisms have been retained, the continuity of the common market of the "six" adopted in 1958 continues, and enlargement to new members is only one important step in the long-term enlargement policy. There is no alternative to EU policy in the context of ensuring stability on the continent in the long term. Since the enlargement so far has been a success, there is no reason to believe that the next enlargement will not also be a success [1, 3].

Enlargement and governance of the European Union

The process of European integration seeks to be explained from several aspects. It explains *the process of deepening* (most often associated with the phenomenon of *spillover of powers*) of European integration as "a process in which political entities within several different national entities are willing to direct all loyalty, their expectations and their political action towards a new centre, whose institutions have or seek jurisdiction over pre-existing states [4, 5, 6]. The second, the enlargement process is firmly tied to the integration cycles of new members, a process that is partly defined by the process of deepening. In researches, the overall phenomenon of European integration has established itself as a concept of *Europeanization* that can be described in different ways, however, which includes the adoption, harmonization and unification of the political and legal systems of the Member States.²⁸⁴ The concept of *Europeanization* can be approached from the aspect of changing external borders (*enlargement*) – geographical approach [7, 8], versus political *enlargement*. Another approach is offered by Risse, Cowles and Caporaso [9] who see the concept of *Europeanization* as "the emergence and development, at the European level, of distinctive structures of governance, which means political, legal and social institutions linked to a problem-solving process that formalizes the interaction between actors, and equally as a network of public policies specialized in the creation of authoritarian European rules [10]. Olsen [11] sees the third view of the concept of *Europeanization* as "the expansion of the way of life and production, the culture of everyday life, political principles, institutions and identities, leaving aside the

²⁸⁴ Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2019.1622588#d1e230>



dilemma of the extension of the European continent and its borders, which cannot exist as borders separated from other continents, but is a matter of convention, (...) in contrast to the well-known methods of colonization, coercion and imposition, methods that undermined and destroyed the coherence of political communities and provoked social conflicts and prevented or hindered the development of political models of government" [10]. The fourth understanding of *Europeanization* implies "a process in which sovereign states will unite into a single system of government", which should reflect the process of *rapprochement*, raise the level of *unification* [11]. The fifth conception of the *Europeanization* focuses on changes within the institutions, politics and governance of the member states, as a consequence of the production of "political institutions, identities and public policies at the European level" [10]. In other words, this concept strives to explain how domestic institutions react to *pressures* from the European level, given that they are a consequence of voluntary consent to the acceptance of "better examples and practices". The sixth concept, also refers to transition countries: it is a "retrospective Europeanization", which includes "identification with the predominantly traditional cultural and political heritage of Europe, primarily identification with a common history (...) and belonging to Christian Europe. Of all the transition countries, Croatia is the only one in which the process of retrospective Europeanization has taken a long time [12, 13].

In the first phase, Europeanization was investigated with regard to the impact and effects of integration on the Member States: how and to what extent integration changes actors and contributes to the articulation, implementation and transformation [14] of goals and, of course, what is the final outcome. Within the political theory of European integration, we can talk about three approaches. The first, the "bottom-up", according to which integration should strengthen the state-nation – presupposes the existence of intergovernmentalism – a model in which states strive agree within the existing framework of the value system, but try to maintain (retain) control over processes and "gradually dose the strength and powers of supranational institutions and bodies" [10]. Moravcsik [15] believes that the result of this complex system of equilibrium is the strengthening of the nation-state, but no longer on the principles of the Westphalian state, but in the process of interaction from the bottom up and vice versa. The second approach starts from the impact of integration between Member States. Sandholtz and Sweet [16] argue that integrations can create new opportunities, broaden the choice of like-minded people and space to drive change in domestic institutions and public policies. And the third approach [17], which analyses the transformation of the system of government, because integration has not only changed the distribution of power, but has also changed the sociology of society, which has resulted in, in addition to the change of the state as a form, its essence. The enlargement process and institutions of government are no longer under the exclusive jurisdiction of one level of government. The areas of common policies that expanded with the development of Europeanization also carried with them the power of normative imperialism. In other words, the EU has become a normative force that is no longer satisfied with the application of norms in its actions, but the norm is its main, we can even say exclusive, instrument for action [18, 19].

We can say that the vast majority of public policies in the Member States are articulated and shaped at the level of European institutions and that there is almost



no part of the state administration that is not involved in some form of public policy-making at the EU level. Starting from the fact that the normative power has spilled over to the supranational level, the question arises of the willingness of domestic institutions to implement the adopted public policies. In the aspect of the implementation of norms lowered from the supranational level, we are talking about the processes of adoption, harmonization, adjustments and conditionality, which unquestionably affect the "domestic" actors and functioning (neo-functionalism). In other words, it is necessary to identify all actors involved in the creation of public policies, especially their interests and ways of structuring their interaction. Since public policies are created in subsystems, and their interaction takes place in different institutional arrangements, which form the environment of the *policy* process and which affect how actors seek to achieve their interests and ideas and to what extent they will be successful in doing so" [20].

The authors roughly divide institutional arrangements into three categories – the structures and organization of the state, society and the international system – but the central role in their analysis is occupied by *policy* actors [21]. If we approach the analysis of *policy* networks as an analysis of the structured interaction of actors, which best points to the closeness between the state and civil society institutions, as an unavoidable fact of modern political systems, it seems that it is necessary for the European Union to devise a new theory of *policy* networks: how to connect a growing number of actors and direct their interactions. Colebatch [22] uses the term *policy collective* to encompass all aspects of structuring actors' interactions. *Policy* collectives as "relatively stable groups of actors from different organizations, who have found themselves together on a constant basis of asking *policy* questions focused on the same source of the problem. The syntagma *policy collective* encompasses elements of power, connection and trust of actors who are consciously gathered to solve problems in common areas of activity.

However, the idea of *policy* networks has different meanings, so we can talk about a cluster of concepts. Rhodes [23] distinguishes three areas of the concept of *policy* networks: 1) networks as interest intermediation; 2) networks as interorganizational analysis and 3) networks as governance. The same term is used by other researchers who deal with the creation of public policies implemented by the government through the theory of power dependence. The second combination would be rational choice and actor-centred institutionalism, and the third as a precursor – as an instruction for the formation or reform of public governance. Currently, the concept of *policy* networks is in use, which is used in the European Union as a theory for the analysis of public policies [21]. However, to talk about a *policy* network in the European Union means to talk about a) the (in)stability of membership; b) the openness or closure of the network itself, and c) the interdependence of membership with regard to resources. Since the EU is a very differentiated policy in which there is considerable variation (disagreement), even of the dominant actors in individual *policy* areas, the approach is derived from sectoral *policy* areas that are characteristic of communities. Within the EU, actors who pursue their own political goals act, the concept enables actions to coalitions of the willing and unwilling, all those who are capable of effective political action. Peterson describes the interactions in EU *policy* networks as follows: "If governance in the EU is understood as taking place in a multi-level system in which



policies emerge after relatively standardized sequences of different types of decisions, it is convincing to look at governance in the EU at the sub systemic level (in space) and in the phase of shaping public policies (in time) as mostly as a competition between epistemic communities and/or advocacy coalitions... To direct or control the policy network..." [24]. The complexity of the European Union's governance system is also shown by the researchers' conclusion: the analysis of *policy* networks is not suitable for the analysis of all EU decisions [21]. Of course, there are a number of objections to the application of *policy* network theory to the analysis of public policies in the EU. One of the remarks points out that the creation of European public policies is very fluid, unclear, influenced by numerous changes (both institutions and actors), with a lack of boundaries between *policy* areas, with a large number of actors; it ignores the theory of power and, lastly, that the literature on *policy* networks is often vague and hermetic, mainly points to the disagreements of scholars about terminology. However, Peterson [24] argues that a fundamental virtue of the European Union is governance through networks and that it is likely to become even more significant [21].

In mid-2025, the European Parliament debated the issue of reforming the decision-making system again. In the political and organizational aspect, in the current model of governance, the European Union is often used and confronted with concepts that are the hallmarks of both a state/empire and a community/alliance. This frequent ambivalence in governance (Table 1) creates a certain negative perception and encourages claims about the democratic deficit of the European Union, i.e. pointing to possible authoritarian (selective use of the methods and mechanisms of the empire or alliance) action within the community/alliance.

Table 1: Comparison of some features

Leviathan	Alliance
single market	treaty
currency	national currency
army	exits
normative power	rules
enlargement	joining
majority	consensus
sovereignty	solidarity
concentration of power	equilibrium

The fundamental and highly successful policy of the Union – the enlargement policy – is a typical policy of an empire [25]. However, it was created on the foundations of the EU15 from 1995. The fundamental question of the development of the construction of the European Union relates to two areas: the policy of enlargement (in Europe and beyond) or the reduction of the number of members, i.e. the size of the EU and the governance model of the European Union. In the current circumstances and relations among actors, probably no one is ready to open a discussion and propose a different concept of the organization (of the future) of the Union.



Candidate states and the enlargement process

Currently, eight countries there are in *the EU waiting room*: North Macedonia since 2004, Montenegro and Serbia since 2008, Albania since 2009, Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2016, and Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine since 2022. After years of expectations, the start of negotiations began in 2012 with Montenegro and Serbia; in 2022 with N. Macedonia and Albania and in 2024 with Moldova and Ukraine. Experience teaches us that the start of negotiations cannot indicate the timing of the end: the candidate countries *have spent* more or less years in the accession process. The Union's effort to facilitate the enlargement process, i.e. to help candidate countries meet the criteria, a specific enlargement process has been designed for the Western Balkans – the "Stabilisation and Association Process", which includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. With the aim of strengthening the process, an initiative was launched on a conference in support of the enlargement process. In Berlin in 2014, six Balkan countries participated in the conference on the launch of the enlargement process: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, with *the support of* ten EU Member States: Germany, Austria, Italy, Greece, Poland, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Great Britain, Croatia and France, as well as a number of international institutions, representatives of civil society, youth and companies. At the founding meeting were Greece and Bulgaria, which (still) dispute the 'existence' of N. Macedonia as a nation and state. The plan was for *the Process* to last four years; however, it was only ten years after its establishment that conferences on economic cooperation began. The process was supposed to make it easier to resolve mutual, primarily political disagreements, in order to expand and increase mutual economic cooperation [26]. However, the political problems of cooperation between CEFTA members (primarily Serbia and Kosovo) are additionally burdened by the nationalist demands of the 'guarantors' (Greece and Bulgaria) towards North Macedonia, which, in fact, return the Process to the field of resolving relations within the ten member states of the European Union. The failure of the concept of *the Berlin Process* is the political dimension of cooperation, for which the responsibility, primarily lies in the 'guarantors' of *the Process*²⁸⁵ [4]. Almost ten years after the Berlin Summit, the Commission adopted a resolution at the end of 2023. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans", which contains four objectives: 1) integrate the Western Balkan partners into the EU's single market; 2) advance regional economic cooperation; 3) deepen EU-related reforms and 4) increase pre-accession funding in view of accelerating socio-economic convergence of the Western Balkans to the EU. End of 2024 Commission approves Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. However, the structure of the Plan is based on economic reforms: „Boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans through the Common Regional Market, based on EU rules and standards; the Common Regional Market (CRM) is vital to overcome small fragmented markets, make businesses competitive, attract investors and retain workers. Based on EU rules, it is a stepping-stone to the opportunities of the EU's

²⁸⁵ Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/balkans-what-is-cefta-and-why-it-matters/a-70493529>, <https://cefta.int/about/>



single market; substantial opportunities for integration in the EU's Single Market will happen only if the region delivers on regional economic integration.²⁸⁶

Becoming a candidate for a member of the European Union is only the first step of 'voluntary coercion' towards resolving internal relations (political and economic) in order to be able to resolve problematic issues, primarily relations with their neighbours, the member states on which the dynamics and success of the negotiations depends.²⁸⁷ Perhaps North Macedonia's status is the clearest example of the burden of 'history': a candidate since 2005; in 2020, a decision was made to open negotiations; in 2023, the Commission submits a Report to the European Council setting out the basic benchmarks for the negotiations.

The failure of enlargement to the countries of the Western Balkans in the areas of democratization, security, prosperity and well-being, economic development and transitional justice and reconciliation, contains completely different elements according to which the enlargement process itself has taken on a bad perception. The countries of the Western Balkans were faced with a completely different picture of European institutions. The second problem relates to political life and cooperation. Namely, recent events in the former Yugoslavia strongly burden all other relations within the countries and the accession process. Third, and not least, the size of the market and the financial potential of countries depend on foreign investment and financial assistance from the Union in the design and implementation of reforms [27]. At the political level, questions remain whether it is possible to talk about an enlargement strategy even in circumstances where it stretches for a number of years, and there is no end in sight? Regardless of the terminology used to present progress in the enlargement process, the candidates are nowhere near EU membership. In addition, the issues of stability and security that stand out are particularly important for the countries of the Western Balkans given the geostrategic interests for the region. No less important are the facts about the faster and slower progress of the candidate countries, and it seems, different political evaluations of progress. On the other hand, they must not lose sight of the cultural aspects of integration. Candidate countries approach a culturally very diverse community, burdened by the inner burden of socialism and the transitional period, with the ambition to become "someone else". Talking about the world in which "I want to live" is not, nor can it be, only a question of economic progress. It becomes a key question of identity, which, like the question of the name of Macedonia, can steer the enlargement process in a completely different direction [29].

Table 2: Eight states in the „European waiting room“

State	YR	YC	YN	YA
Montenegro	2008	2010	2012	?
Serbia	2008	2010	2012	?
Georgia	2022	2023	?	?

²⁸⁶ Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/growth-plan-western-balkans_en

²⁸⁷ Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/north-macedonia_en?prefLang=hr



N. Macedonia	2004	2005	2022	?
Albania	2009	2014	2022	?
Moldova	2022	2022	2024	?
Bosnia and H.	2016	2022	?	?
Ukraine	2022	2022	2024	?

Source: EU enlargement²⁸⁸; YR-year of request; YC-candidate; YN-negotiation start; YA-year of accession

In the past period, the enlargement policy has undergone several changes based on previous experiences, institutional and political challenges in the functioning of the European Union, i.e. depending on the political developments in the candidate countries. The accession process of the Western Balkan countries is marked by a number of institutional solutions, which, in the end, did not contribute to improving the performance of the enlargement policy. The process so far shows that the countries of the Western Balkans have not built institutions that would bring them closer to membership, while at the same time a new set of requirements has been created in the accession process. It is difficult to say whether the reorientation of the enlargement policy from the rule of law to the common foreign and security policy can help progress in the accession process, or whether these changes have arisen as a result of global circumstances, which are related to the countries of Eastern Europe [30]. The fact remains that the enlargement process to the Western Balkans is lengthy, inconsistent, subject to current political and economic interests and relations, political relations within and outside the EU, which calls into question the existence of an enlargement strategy [31].

There should be no doubt, the prospects of the new Member States depend on their ability to sustain the competitive pressures within the EU that go with full membership [32]. The other two elements are the political criteria relating to the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, and the adoption of *the acquis*, i.e. adherence to economic and political objectives and monetary union. It should be noted that the Copenhagen criteria also contain institutional elements that require candidate countries to make significant achievements in liberalization and monetary and fiscal discipline. We can say that the accession process recommends a pre-accession phase in which economic progress will be achieved as a benchmark (of transition) for EU membership [33].

Conclusion

In the first half of 2020, the Commission published a new enlargement methodology with the aim of making the enlargement process more credible, predictable and dynamic (32). After a long period of political negotiations, negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia began, and Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine were granted candidate status. Georgia was granted candidate status in 2023, and negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine began in 2024. At the end of 2023, the Commission presented "The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans", which is entirely dedicated to economic achievements: accelerating economic integration with the

²⁸⁸ Available at https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_hr



European single market, strengthening economic cooperation and exchange through CRM (Common Regional Market), based on European rules, and accelerating "fundamental reforms", which relate to creating conditions for foreign investment and strengthening stability, and creating the conditions for financial support for the implementation of convergence.

In October 2024, ten years after the launch of the Berlin Conference, the Berlin Process Summit was held. The Commission underlines its commitment to enlargement, which "today (ten years ago was not) is at the top of the agenda", and highlights two preconditions: compliance with fundamental European values: respect for democracy and the rule of law, and early economic integration, through the promotion of the "Six" market (CMR).²⁸⁹

At the summit in Skopje in July 2025, a commitment to "The Growth Plan for Western Balkans" was expressed. In order to realize the possibility of support, the leaders of the Western Balkan countries have developed a program with more than 600 ambitious reforms for which the EU has provided financial support.²⁹⁰

The Western Balkan countries have a long way to go to access the European Union. However, on this journey, it is much more important to establish institutional frameworks that will be appropriate to the society that needs and implements them, and from which the community will benefit in the long run. The concept of a political approach to the convergence process should be reversed – the success of a candidate country is the success of the enlargement process. Everyone like successful countries – they are desirable members of every club.

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²⁸⁹ Available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-berlin-process-summit-2024-10-14_en

²⁹⁰ Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/western-balkans-leaders-meeting-skopje-reaffirms-commitment-swift-delivery-growth-plan-2025-07-01_en



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