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The Russia-Ukraine war must be the impetus for a new EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy

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EU enlargement has stalled since the accession of Croatia in 2013. Vedran Džihić and Paul Schmidt argue that following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is time for the EU to reassess how its enlargement and neighbourhood policies can respond to the new realities faced by Europe.

On 24 February, Europe woke up to a new reality. The course of Russia's war in Ukraine and the propaganda articulated by the Kremlin show the extent to which the free world is now under attack.

Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a turning point for European history. In the first weeks of the war, the West and the European Union presented themselves as being unexpectedly determined and united. However, with every passing week and month, this western unity will be increasingly tested. The

latest debates over a ban on Russian energy imports are only the beginning of this process.

As much as we hope that the human suffering of Ukrainians will end as soon as possible, we have to accept that the dissolution of the European post-war order has started. The impact of the war is changing our continent and there is a clear need for the European Union, its member states, and its partner countries to see the bigger picture, adjust to the new realities swiftly, and realign.

One topic which has now returned to the top of the EU agenda is the enlargement of the Union. The EU's enlargement process has been caught in a bureaucratic and technocratic stalemate for quite some time. Yet the **recent applications for EU membership** by Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia provide evidence that the geopolitics of enlargement is gaining importance.

Ukraine is pushing for a clear European perspective, rightly arguing that the country is now on the frontline in the defence of European values against Russia's invasion. The countries in the Western Balkans that have already lingered for far too long in the waiting room of the Union are also an important part of this geopolitical equation.

Non-democratic great powers such as China and Russia represent a clear challenge to the EU and the West. This is visible in countries like Serbia, where Aleksandar Vučić continues to manoeuvre between pressure from the West to join sanctions against Russia, the supposed sympathy of large parts of the Serbian population for Putin, and his personal preference for the Chinese state model.

Meanwhile, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the pro-Russian leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, is playing with fire. His secessionist rhetoric has become a permanent threat to the stability of the country. This is undoubtedly not the time for EU leaders to fall asleep at the wheel. It is high time to prioritise the European integration project and radically reevaluate the EU's enlargement process and neighbourhood policy.

A new enlargement and neighbourhood policy

For years, people in the Western Balkans have been waiting for progress on EU integration. This has resulted in authoritarian tendencies gaining further ground in several countries across the region. The blocking of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has damaged the population's trust in the EU. The latest opinion polls in Serbia show that for the first time since the country's accession process started, a majority of Serbs are no longer in favour of EU membership.

The deadlock on both sides is a major risk to political stability. This is why a more credible EU accession perspective is needed. It will be necessary to overcome the obstructive actions of individual member states and attempts by nationalist politicians to use the enlargement process to win concessions, as the Bulgarian government has sought to do in the case of North Macedonia. Serbian acceptance of Russian narratives on Ukraine must be strongly condemned, and there must be a strong response to the ongoing attempts to undermine the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The EU is still learning how to use its considerable economic power to exert political influence, and these lessons should feed into a new and forward-looking policy stance toward the Western Balkans to avoid any destabilising developments in the region. The next Western Balkans Summit would be a good opportunity for this. It will provide a long overdue chance to start EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, and to establish visa liberalisation for Kosovo.

A time for courage

A credible commitment from Brussels is needed. Russia's invasion should act as a wake-up call for the Union to shift from the technocratic rigidity that has come to characterise the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies. The EU needs clarity of what can be achieved with the enlargement process. There must be recognition that allowing the Western Balkans to drift further away from Europe would be entirely counterproductive in the current context.

A common geopolitical Europeanisation of the countries in the Western Balkans, together with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, must become a priority for the EU. A key element in this should be to abandon the current model, where

political rewards are only gained at the very end of the process, and instead establish a step-by-step system for EU integration. This does not mean abolishing conditionality, but rather frontloading incentives while also increasing pressure for reforms.

European integration will not happen overnight. All of the countries aiming for EU membership will require time to reach their final goal. While membership in a European confederation, **as proposed by Emmanuel Macron**, could be offered rapidly and result in deeper cooperation with the EU, the potential for actual EU membership at the end of the road should still be preserved, if and when countries choose to pursue this and meet the criteria.

On this road to EU membership, it will be necessary to demonstrate visible and tangible results that can improve people's lives. It will also be vital to promote political courage to take the right steps leading to further integration in the European single market and the participation of states in selected EU programmes and structural funds.

Today, the EU is learning the hard way that close trade relations do not automatically turn states away from illiberalism. Economic power must become a political tool, and a value based political vision must be promoted more decisively. At the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, people believed that Europe's 'greatest hour' had come, but in fact it never did. In light of the most serious threat to peace in Europe since the Second World War, Europe's hour finally needs to arrive. The current momentum for an independent, democratic, and geopolitical Union, that welcomes its neighbours with open arms, should not go to waste.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. The authors are part of the **WB2EU network**, co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme. Featured image credit: **European Council***

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