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The “Balkan Question”:
Benefits and Challenges of European
Integration Through Enlargement

By

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Abstract

Since the formation of the European Project, the questions of which direction the EU should take and what objectives it should pursue in the face of considerable ongoing challenges have evolved over time. Today the Western Balkan states – the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina – pose a set of considerable challenges to the organization, and how the EU addresses the membership of these countries will stand as a critical test of the organization's competence. As the Union turns its attention to membership consideration for these states, both their complexities and their fragilities have created among EU member states grave doubts regarding the efficacy of membership for all. The critical issues include internal ethnic hostilities, faltering economies, the strain of refugee influx, regional political strains, and Soviet and Chinese economic and political intervention. This thesis assesses both the benefits and costs of enlargement into the Balkan region for both the countries seeking membership and the European Union. This thesis argues that the Union should support enlargement only if it specifically serves the interests of the organization. The Union should promote enlargement when it strengthens measurably deeper integration policies. Successfully adding some or all of the Balkans states would significantly enhance the EU's international standing, broaden the reach of the organization, and demonstrate the strength and sustainability of the its Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Lay Summary

The European Union is at a critical tipping point as it wrestles with the fallout of a series of blows that have called into question the future of the Union. Faced with the rise of Euroscepticism, the departure of one of its most prominent member states, and a number of security threats, the EU must decide how it is going to move forward. Should it look to deepen its political and economic ties in the region or should it seek to expand membership into neighboring countries? By looking at the history of the European Union, this thesis will study the benefits and challenges of European enlargement and its effects on European integration. Additionally, this thesis will utilize the Western Balkan region as a case study to further analyze the practical implications of expanding the European Union.

I. Introduction:

The concept of European integration has long been a part of the European project. Some scholars view European integration as a necessary, almost inevitable, component of the Union's overall success as it helps to foster a sense of cooperation and interdependence among member states. More specifically, both economic and political integration have worked together in an effort to form the "ever closer union" that many officials have been striving to attain— though to what extent integration should supersede national sovereignty remains a major point of contention. As a whole, integration has tended to occur in waves, and has particularly accelerated since the early 1980s.¹

In recent years, however, scholars have raised questions regarding the long-term viability of the European Union (EU). The EU, according to Bieber and Kmezić, has "moved into great uncertainty, and this uncertainty threatens to unravel some of the pillars of stability on the European continent that have been in place for decades".² Faced with the aftermath of the Eurozone Crisis, the rising tension over how to handle the first departure of a major member state, and the uncertainty of the refugee crisis, members worry about the organization's economic and political stability.

Two distinct schools of thought regarding integration contribute to the debate over how to address these current issues. The first group of scholars call for deepening European integration, which essentially means that the Union should focus solely on identifying and solving the problems at hand without expanding integration outward. The second solution—

¹ "Timeline of EU Integration". 2018. *Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society*. <http://www.civitas.org.uk/eu-facts/eu-overview/timeline-of-eu-integration/>.

² Bieber, Florian, and Marko Kmezić. 2016. "EU Enlargement in The Western Balkans In a Time of Uncertainty". <http://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/EU-Enlargement-in-the-Western-Balkans-in-a-Time-of-Uncertainty.pdf>.

which is the focus of this thesis— is to widen European integration by enlarging the EU’s geopolitical stance and solidifying its strength through numbers. In the past, the policy of widening integration has been the most commonly accepted and pursued in European politics. Currently, however, policy-makers and scholars have shifted away from this policy. This has occurred for two major reasons. The European Parliament’s briefing on the issues and challenges of the Western Balkans’ relationship with the EU states clearly states this shift in policy:

“First, the EU itself is in a different situation. In 2014, the European Commission's newly elected president announced a five-year halt to enlargement. In June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU, an event unprecedented in Union history. Second, the Western Balkan countries present a case more complex than previous EU candidates, because apart from making a difficult transition to democracy while struggling economically, they face the legacy of relatively recent armed conflict and have bilateral disputes to resolve...”³

Ultimately, the main goal of the EU is to become stronger, more resilient, and more attractive to potential candidate countries. Therefore, while the EU has affirmed that the integration of the Western Balkans remains a goal of both sides, this complex situation poses serious challenges, and the prospect of future enlargement appears to be no more than a distant dream. Consequently, in a time of crisis, the unanswered question remains: Should the EU double down on its efforts to admit the Balkan states into the Union, or does this region pose too much of a risk to the unity of the other 28 (soon to be 27) member states?

II. Literature Review— a Historical and Theoretical Overview of European Integration:

The EU today is “based on a series of treaties, pacts, and agreements between [sic] member states, which have steadily increased the areas in which nation states in the EU are

³ Lilyanova, Velina. 2018. "The Western Balkans And The EU: Enlargement and Challenges - Think Tank". *European Parliament Think Tank*.
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)58979](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)58979).

integrated”.⁴ In essence, individual states have pooled their sovereignty in order to make certain policy decisions at the European level, rather than at the level of each individual state. The original quite monumental idea of creating a ‘united Europe’ has continued to expand in scope and size since its inception— unifying a continent around a common goal in spite of its fragmented history.

The story of European integration, as it is understood today, began in 1945. In *the Community of Europe: A History of Integration Since 1945*, Derek W. Urwin charts the course of European political and economic integration. He begins his analysis with the European ideal of ending its history of regional political fragmentation by unifying the continent under a single organization. Urwin reviews each of the major EU treaties and integration efforts conducted through 2014. He concludes his book with an assessment of the mood and prospects of Europe and the community today.

The Union initially sought to end the frequent and devastating wars between neighbors that eventually culminated in the Second World War.⁵ In 1950, six countries – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).⁶ In 1957 the six founding countries signed the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community (EEC), or the European ‘Common Market’, and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).⁷ The creation of the EEC marked the first step in creating an integrated economic system. Between 1957 and 1986 six more countries joined the organization. Consequently, the EU markedly enhanced its regional integration, which led to the

⁴ "Timeline of EU Integration". 2016. Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society. <http://www.civitas.org/eu-facts/eu-overview/timeline-of-eu-integration/>.

⁵ "The History of The European Union - European Union - European Commission". 2018. *European Union*. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

signing of the 1986 Single European Act (SEA). The SEA “provided the basis for a vast program aimed at sorting out the problems with the free flow of trade across EU borders” and in turn created the ‘Single Market’.⁸ The 1990s produced two important treaties: the ‘Maastricht’ Treaty on European Union in 1993 and the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999.⁹ These treaties gave rise to the European Union as it is known today and instated the Euro as the official currency of the European Union. Other notable EU policies include the Schengen Agreement which abolished the EU’s internal border checks, and the Treaty of Lisbon which provided the EU with modern institutions and more efficient working methods. Ultimately, each wave of EU integration has been both a response to the needs of the time and an effort to continue creating a unified union within continental Europe.

In *the Origins and Development of the European Union 1945-1995: A History of European Integration*, Martin Dedman accomplishes many of the same goals as other European scholars. Through a historical analysis of Europe post-1945, Dedman crafts a concise introduction on the history of European unity and integration. Additionally, Dedman looks at the EU through a broader lens and assesses both the political and economic incentives for establishing supranational organizations in the modern age. Dedman’s work, however, falls short of a complete history and analysis of European integration as its timeframe ends in 1995. Consequently, his work has become dated because it concludes before crucial transition period following the Eastern enlargement boom of 2004 and the ensuing 2008 financial crisis.

In addition to the historical analyses of integration, a variety of theoretical perspectives have helped to shape the academic opinions of EU scholars. These theories seek explanations of how and why the European Union came about and how it progresses today. For example, neo-

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid.

functionalism offers the process of political spillover as an explanation of how the self-sustaining policy of integration came about.¹⁰ Intergovernmentalism, on the other hand, emphasizes “the role of the nation-state in integration and argues that the nation-state is not becoming obsolete due to [sic] increased European integration”.¹¹ This theory is particularly important to the future prospects of enlargement because member-state involvement has slowly and continually changed the motivation and criteria for the accession process. Civitas, an independent research organization, compiled a list of the five most dominant theories of European integration—neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, (new) institutionalism, and multi-level governance— and analyzed how they influence individual perspectives on current integration efforts. More specifically, it charts when each of these theories was most prevalent in European history and helps to explain why certain integration efforts have proven to be more popular at certain times than at others.

Another crucial component of the history and theoretical nature of European integration is the concept of European enlargement. According to Stefan Frölich, “enlargement is part of the success story of the EU and has been a key driver of and a triggering factor for further integration efforts”.¹² Therefore, rather than simply looking at European integration and European enlargement as two distinct EU policy platforms, he stresses the importance of analyzing how the two ideas work together to further the goals of the European Union. In *The Future of Europe— Integration and Enlargement*, Fraser Cameron argues that “the EU has progressed since its creation through a mixture of both widening and deepening, in other words it

¹⁰ "Theories of European Integration". 2018. *Civitas: Institute for The Study Of Civil Society*. <http://www.civitas.org.uk/eu-facts/eu-overview/theories-of-european-integration/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Brimmer, Esther, and Stefan Fröhlich. 2005. *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

has taken steps towards closer integration at the same time as it has enlarged”.¹³ Since the 1950s the European community has witnessed seven enlargements: in 1973 Britain, Ireland and Denmark joined; in 1981 Greece; in 1986 Spain and Portugal; in 1995 Austria, Sweden and Finland joined; in 2004 Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary joined; in 2007 Bulgaria and Romania; and in 2013 Croatia.¹⁴ Fraser argues that each round of enlargement has been accompanied by moves forward in the process of integration.¹⁵ For example, the first enlargement was preceded by a common fisheries policy and eventually led to the EU adopting a more cohesive regional policy.¹⁶ The second and third enlargements led to the signing of the Single European Act (SEA)— the first major treaty reform since 1957. The SEA was significant because it laid the foundations for the completion of the single market in 1992.¹⁷ These enlargements also led to a stronger social policy, an increased commitment to solidarity with the poor regions of Europe, and increased powers for the European Parliament.¹⁸ The fourth enlargement “followed moves towards economic and monetary union and new policy areas in foreign policy and justice and home affairs”¹⁹. The fifth enlargement occurred when the EU faced major challenges concerning its democratic legitimacy, its internal cohesion and efficiency, its economic performance, and its external role.²⁰ However, even in the face of these challenges, the EU was able to introduce its single currency (the Euro) on the eve of its largest enlargement endeavor to date. From the moment the EU began to reunite continental Europe and expand into the east, its institutional framework began to change. It has

¹³ Cameron, Fraser. 2004. *The Future of Europe*. London: Routledge.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

caused growing pains, but the push for deeper integration continued without interruption. In fact, in many cases, enlargement has actually been a driving force behind the EU's integration efforts.

Thus, as the Union's current enlargement prospects grow, the inevitable eastward expansion of the EU's borders will continue to shape the Union's very nature and chemistry. It will further intensify the debates on the scope of the European Union, its future, the degree of integration, and its geographical limits.²¹ It will call into question the nature of European identity. But this debate is not new. The conversations have existed since the inception of the European Union. The real issue with Eastern enlargement, according to Ulrike Guérot in his *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*, is the strategic impact of enlargement on the "Old EU".²² More specifically, the 2004 Eastern Enlargement, known as the "Big Bang", no doubt the biggest enlargement in European history, marked a historically unprecedented achievement both in scope and in diversity and reunited Europe into a stronger, more democratic continent.²³ Consequently, it also created a watershed effect within the Union on future enlargement prospects and ultimately opened 'Pandora's Box'.²⁴

Prior to the accession of the ten new eastern member states, discussion about potential new enlargement rounds had already begun. Indeed, only a few months after the "Big Bang", Turkey got green lights for the opening of accession talks in October 2005; the European Parliament adopted a resolution requesting a membership perspective for Ukraine in January

²¹ Brimmer, Esther, and Stefan Fröhlich. 2005. *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cameron, Fraser. 2004. *The Future of Europe*. London: Routledge.

²⁴ Brimmer, Esther, and Stefan Fröhlich. 2005. *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

2005; and other countries like Georgia did not miss a single opportunity to express their perspective for membership.²⁵ Thus, this new fast-tracked view on eastern expansion put into question the very undertaking of European integration, especially the notion of further political integration along the lines of ‘an ever closer union’.²⁶ According to Guérot, many of the “Old EU” member states who never had warm feelings about deeper European integration would now hide behind the new difficulties and challenges to claim the project’s end. And, as time has passed, clearly Guérot’s analysis has proven to be true.²⁷ His chapter argues that Europe as a whole is becoming a scapegoat for domestic frustrations. It is not a “young, dynamic, innovative and rich European Union that is confronted with— cost-generating — enlargement, but an ‘old’ Europe that is over-aging and economically stagnant”.²⁸ With the rise of nationalist tendencies and right-wing movements, many voices in the old member states firmly believe that the end of political integration has come and that the only way forward is to move away from progressive new reform and revert back to a crisis-management model.

Still, while many scholars have argued that the Union has entered into a period of “enlargement fatigue”, the continued prospects of greater international clout is enough to keep the idea of European enlargement at the forefront of any major EU discussion. According to the authors of *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*, the political implications of creating a finite Europe present too many security risks to be a permanent solution.²⁹ Various scholars have analyzed how geopolitical factors affect enlargement and agree on the Union’s prospects both on a regional and international scale. Moreover, while Europe continues to handle

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

its domestic problems, it continues to look for ways to expand its geopolitical stance in the world. The various authors of *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement* define the EU as an organization that desires to be relevant in the international sphere both economically and as a contributor to global security efforts. Two central schools of thought contribute perspectives regarding the relationship between European enlargement and Europe's geopolitical standing in the world. One view—the Euro-optimist school—sees EU enlargement as “an evolutionary step in the making of a prosperous Europe whole and free”.³⁰ For Euro-optimists, successive enlargements are logical extensions of the post-World War II European project. They believe that as the EU expands its role as a critical global actor will grow stronger and more relevant.

The second school of thought—the Euro-pessimist view – stresses the challenges associated with EU enlargement.³¹ Most proponents of this school argue that reconciling national interests of an ever-growing number of member states with that of the organization as a whole will become increasingly difficult.³² Moreover, they argue that the difference between and small and large member states and unequal economic development within the union will lead to increasing friction and minimalist EU policies— thus decreasing the role of the EU as a global actor.³³

In *A Larger EU: A More Effective Actor in the United Nations*, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat makes a case for an alternative third view—the Euro-pragmatic view. This perspective argues that the “push for successive EU enlargement is unstoppable and at the core of the European

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

project”.³⁴ This project seeks to promote liberal democracy, “not as a monopoly of West Europeans but as [a] strongly to be preferred system to be defended against competing models in the immediate neighborhood”.³⁵ Thus, while enlargement inevitably complicates decision-making processes and raises collective-action problems, the challenge is not whether or not the EU should abandon enlargement prospects, but rather how to make the best of an “inevitable, inherently difficult, but potentially transformative situation”.³⁶

Through an analysis of European integration from both a historical and a theoretical perspective, a clear link exists between “deepening” integration efforts and “widening” the Union through enlargement. The literature on this particular topic is expansive, and European scholars have analyzed each of the past enlargements in relation to their effects on the European Union as a whole. Significantly fewer scholars, however, have examined the future effects of potential enlargement opportunities— particularly in regard to the Western Balkan region. While many scholars have speculated regarding the future relationship between this region and the EU, few have assessed the question of how enlargement into the Western Balkans could potentially shape the organization’s push toward deeper social and political integration. This thesis will begin to fill that scholarly gap by assessing the benefits and challenges of European integration through enlargement by conducting a case study on the organization’s enlargement prospects into the Western Balkans. More specifically, this thesis will critically assess the current enlargement process and evaluate the Balkans both as a geographical region and as individual states in terms of how they can aid Europe— economically, politically, and socially— in its most recent push for a more integrated and “ever closer” union.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

III. The Enlargement Process— Mapping the Way to European Accession:

The EU enlargement process is tedious and technical, and it involves so much more than just territorial expansion of EU membership rights, privileges, and obligations to other European states. According to Christophe Hillion, “enlargement also triggers new policy demands on the Union, alters its institutional functioning, and affects its legal corpus”.³⁷ Thus, the process is highly politicized and requires the organization to operate under “comprehensive approval procedures that ensure new members are admitted only when they can demonstrate they will be able to play their part fully”.³⁸ Future member states must comply with all of the EU’s standards and rules. Additionally, future member states must have the consent of the EU institutions and other EU member states, and they must have the consent of their own citizens— gained through expressed parliamentary approval or a state-wide referendum process.³⁹ Still, a willingness to abide by the rules and the expressed consent of all parties involved is not enough to grant a country access to the European Union.

More specifically, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) sets out the conditions (Article 49) and principles (Article 6(1)) to which any country wishing to become an EU member must conform.⁴⁰ In 1993 the Copenhagen European Council established these criteria, known as the Copenhagen Criteria. Two years later the Madrid European Council further strengthened these criteria.⁴¹ They include:

³⁷ Hillion, Christophe. 2011. “EU Enlargement”. Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.

³⁸ "Conditions for Membership - European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission". 2018. *European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria) - EUR-Lex". 2018. *Eur-Lex.Europa.Eu*. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html.

⁴¹ Ibid.

1. stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities;
2. a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;
3. the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards, and policies that make up the body of EU law (the ‘acquis’), and adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union.⁴²

Most importantly, the EU needs to have the ability to absorb new members into the organization without sacrificing the momentum of integration. Therefore, in the case of some countries, such as the candidate countries of the Western Balkans, additional conditions for membership were outlined in the “Stabilization and Association Process” (SAP). The SAP sets out “common political and economic goals”, but progress evaluation is based on each country’s own merits.⁴³ SAP put these conditions in place in order to facilitate regional cooperation and good neighborly relations among the Western Balkan countries with the long-term intention of stabilizing the region politically and establishing a free-trade area.

Once a country has been offered the prospect of membership and has satisfied the first criterion, the country officially becomes a candidate country and accession negotiations can be launched. Throughout the negotiation period, the conditions and timing of the candidate’s adoption, implementation, and enforcement of all EU rules are established.⁴⁴ These rules are then divided into 35 different chapters— such as transport, energy, and education — and negotiated separately. The European Commission keeps the EU Council and the European Parliament

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ "Conditions for Membership - European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission". 2018. *European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

informed throughout the process and monitors the candidate state's progress in applying EU legislation and fulfilling any benchmark requirements.⁴⁵

The EU enlargement process, however, has evolved over time— influencing not only how a country can join the EU, but also which countries are allowed to join. What was once hailed as “the most successful EU foreign policy”, enlargement has been marked with shortcomings that have weakened its credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy.⁴⁶ Motivated by the past experiences of some candidate states’ “lack of preparedness for admission, mounting doubts about the systemic sustainability of further expansion, and increased demands for democratic accountability”, adjustments have been made in recent years.⁴⁷ On the whole, these changes have entailed the strengthening of member states’ control over the conduct of the policy. While not always a bad thing, this newfound control has caused the enlargement process to be dominated, and in some cases held hostage, by national agendas. Thus, instead of analyzing potential candidate prospects from a purely objective set of criteria, the nationalization of enlargement has introduced a whole host of legal and political hurdles to the accession process. This new development has not only slowed down the accession process, but it has also raised new questions as to the credibility of the EU commitments towards aspirant states, and consequently the effectiveness of the enlargement policy’s “acclaimed transformative powers”.⁴⁸

In addition, the EU has expanded the role of conditionality at all stages of the enlargement process. More specifically, in an effort to mitigate concerns related to ill-prepared candidate states and public disenchantment, both the Commission and the Council agreed to an

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶ Hillion, Christophe. 2010. "The Creeping Nationalization of The EU Enlargement Policy". *Sieps.Se*. http://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2010/the-creeping-nationalisation-of-the-eu-enlargement-policy-20106/Sieps_2010_6.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

“enlargement strategy based on consolidation, conditionality, and communication”.⁴⁹ This conditionality has manifested itself in a variety of ways, but one of the most notable manifestations is the creation of a “benchmark” criteria. On the basis of a Commission recommendation, the Council may define “benchmarks” that the candidate state has to meet in order for the EU to open and/or close a particular negotiating chapter.⁵⁰ According to the 2006 Commission document:

“Benchmarks are a new tool introduced as a result of lessons learnt from the fifth enlargement. Their purpose is to improve the quality of the negotiations, by providing incentives for the candidate countries to undertake necessary reforms at an early stage. Benchmarks are measurable and linked to key elements of the acquis chapter.”⁵¹

Non-fulfillment of these pre-defined benchmarks may lead to the suspension of negotiations and can stall the negotiations for an indefinite amount of time. The connection between conditionality and negotiations is not entirely new to the enlargement process.⁵² In fact, the start of the accession negotiations is almost always subject to the fulfillment of specific conditions—many of which are now enshrined in the TEU. However, the introduction of specific benchmark requirements significantly strengthens the overall use of more stringent conditionality in the benchmark process and calls into question whether candidate states are making actual progress in embedding EU norms into their societies, or if they are simply ticking off check boxes to appease the other side. From the perspective of EU member states, this process works as an emergency brake for potential enlargement growing pains. It gives them more control over who gains access to the Union, and it affords dissenting states the opportunity to stop negotiations until the organization meets their concerns. However, this control has led to unpredictability in

⁴⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

the process and an abuse of power by many current member states. In some cases, member states using their relative power have high-jacked the enlargement process in order to settle a bilateral dispute.⁵³ For example, in the case of Greece and (the former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia, Greece prevented the opening of accession negotiations, despite the favorable recognition of the Commission. Ultimately, evidence from research supports neither the current benchmark approach to conditionality nor the nationalization of the enlargement process as effective mechanisms for encouraging and measuring real and sustainable change in candidate countries.⁵⁴ Regardless of the effectiveness of the evolving enlargement process, however, these are the parameters that the Western Balkan countries— and any future candidate country— will have to contend with as they seek access to the European Union.

IV. The EU & the Western Balkans— From Yugoslavia to EU Candidate States:

The Balkans have been the major testing ground of the European Union's developing international role and in particular its common foreign and security policy (CFSP).⁵⁵ Though the Western Balkans have long been plagued with regional conflict and strong ethnic divisions, the violence that ensued between 1991-1999 in the Balkan peninsula created the largest death toll and the worst refugee crisis that Europe has seen since World War II. While Europeans viewed this conflict as a test of their ability to resolve security crises, they lacked the cohesion, determination, and instruments to bring the crisis under control.⁵⁶ Thus, as the bloodshed worsened, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led by the US, intervened and resolved the conflict. In 1995 the United States bombed Serbia into acceptance of a peace deal

⁵³ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Blitz, Brad K. 2006. *War and Change in the Balkans: Nationalism, Conflict and Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

signed in Dayton, Ohio.⁵⁷ Four years later the EU again failed to play a determining role in the Kosovo conflict.⁵⁸ Although the EU's overall cohesion had improved, the EU lacked the military capabilities to end the conflict and was forced to watch as NATO, once again headed by the US, took control of the situation. By all accounts, the EU's reaction to the Yugoslav wars embarrassed its leaders; however, following the end of the conflict, the EU's Balkan policy "became more coherent and proactive and the US-European relationship in the Balkans shifted towards greater equality".⁵⁹ In 2000 the European Union crafted a comprehensive new policy approach for the Balkan region known as the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Simply put, this process not only continued to deploy the EU's foreign policy and crisis management strategies in order to promote the stabilization of the region, but it held out the promise of future association and membership opportunities for the Balkan states.⁶⁰

In June 2003, in Thessalonica, the EU reemphasized its commitment of association by bringing together all of the respective parties at the EU-Western Balkans Summit. With this meeting, the EU declared that the future of the Balkans would be in the EU, and stated that the region's future candidates for membership must affirm fully their commitment to the goals of the EU by advancing down the road to reform. The purpose of the 'enriched' EU partnership with these countries was to "establish clear benchmarks to assess progress and lay the basis for a policy of conditionality in relation to increased financial assistance and the prospect of accession negotiations".⁶¹ It also linked the step-by-step implementation of the SAP to the EU's influence

⁵⁷ Ibid. 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Cameron, Fraser. 2004. *The Future of Europe*. London: Routledge.

in the region— affording the organization the opportunity to reduce the likelihood of conflicts and shaping the Balkan peninsula into future members of Europe.

Since the EU asserted this new commitment to the Western Balkans, however, it has faced a variety of institutional challenges, including the 2008 financial crisis, the looming departure of Britain from the EU, the rise of nationalist parties in EU member states, and the ongoing refugee crisis. This tipping point has forced EU officials to reevaluate their future goals. In 2014 European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced a five-year halt on enlargement. This distancing of the membership prospects in favor of enhanced regional and economic integration efforts forced German Chancellor Angela Merkel to create the 'Berlin process' in an attempt to salvage the EU's relationship with the Balkan region and keep the hope of membership alive. Consisting of yearly high-level meetings between the six Western Balkan governments and several EU member states between 2014 and 2018, this process aims to reaffirm the region's EU perspective by improving cooperation and economic stability within it.⁶²

Currently, Merkel's "Berlin Process" appears to be working, but many observers contend that time is running out for the EU to make a tangible move in the Balkans. Overcoming a decade of "enlargement fatigue" the latest plan unveils the Union's new strategy for the region and projects that it might be able to offer some states membership by 2025. The frontrunners to join are Montenegro and Serbia, with Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia lagging. All Western Balkan states have expressed impatience

⁶² European Parliament. 2016. "The Western Balkans' Berlin Process: A New Impulse for Regional Cooperation - Think Tank". *Europarl.Europa.Eu*.
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)586602](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)586602)

and annoyance at the EU's putting expansion on hold.⁶³ Moreover, EU officials broadly disagree over the executive's push to expand into the Western Balkans. Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, for example, recently warned that it was "now or never for expanding the EU into the Balkans" as concerns grow about Moscow's influence in the bloc's eastern backyard.⁶⁴ Hungary's Peter Szijjarto was "very much disappointed" by that 2025 target, arguing that the first two countries from the Western Balkan six should be admitted by 2022.⁶⁵ Both of these officials stressed that EU entry would help relieve tensions between neighbors in a region that sits on the bloc's doorstep.⁶⁶ To make matters more difficult for the Western Balkans states, Germany, the EU's leading power, has expressed reluctance to commit to any timeline on account of rule-of-law shortcomings in some of the current newer member states of the organization. Sharing the same hesitant opinions of France and Slovenia, Germany holds that much work needs to be done before the Western Balkans can be seriously considered for membership.

Overall, the EU currently has a stronger profile in the Balkans than ever before. Years of the SAP process and financial contributions have produced significant progress to validate the overall policy approach. Opening the perspective of EU membership to the region has had some important successes— including increased economic growth and overall stabilization. All of these countries, however, continue to face significant structural challenges. The stability of the region remains intrinsically linked to the European Union, and the organization's credibility as an international actor depends on its success in the Balkans. Therefore, it is critical that the EU

⁶³ "EU Split Over Expansion into Western Balkans". 2018. *Euractiv.Com*.
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-split-over-expansion-into-western-balkans/>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

continues to look for ways to fulfill its commitment to the Balkans in a timely fashion without compromising its membership standard or the effectiveness of reforms.

V. A Closer Look— an Individual Analysis of Each Prospective Balkan State:

The Western Balkan states present the EU with a unique situation. Given the region's long history of conflict, the EU has designed policies that foster a sense of regional cooperation. Hence when the EU implements strategies in the Balkans it tends to do so in a sweeping manner and under the pretense of uniting the region with a common goal. Still, while Europeans tend to discuss the Western Balkan states as a collective unit, it designs policies and responses to each individual Balkan state on its own merits. Unlike the 2004 enlargement, the EU will likely avoid a situation in which it would admit all six remaining Balkan countries at one time. Indeed, the European Union is not looking toward a "Balkan Boom" in which a single enlargement would be dramatic and sweeping. Each Balkan country is reforming at a different pace, and each one will join the EU only when it has met all of the necessary criteria. Thus, to understand the implications of Western Balkan enlargement for the European Union, it is essential to analyze each prospective country individually, as each one brings its own benefits and challenges to future EU integration efforts.

Montenegro

Made up of a population of only 633,000, Montenegro is largely considered the front runner in the EU accession race.⁶⁷ Despite not emerging as a sovereign state until 2006, Montenegro applied for full membership to the EU in 2008 and was confirmed as a candidate

⁶⁷ "EU Enlargement: The Next Seven". 2014. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11283616>.

country in 2010— although official negotiation talks did not begin until June 29th, 2012.⁶⁸ While Montenegro still has a long way to go before its negotiations with the EU are complete, the country is recognized with making significant strides to acquiesce the demands of the European Union. With 30 chapters open and widespread support among EU officials, the Montenegrin Foreign Minister expects that the country could join any time between 2022-2025. In fact, in its 2016 assessment of the accession process, the European Commission has identified Montenegro as having the highest level of preparation among the candidate states.⁶⁹ However, in order to gain admission, the EU says that Montenegro must, “intensify its efforts to consolidate the rule of law, fight organized crime and corruption, and protect freedom of expression”.⁷⁰

The accession of Montenegro would have little overall impact on the EU— which is why, out of the remaining Balkan states, it is forecasted to gain access to the EU first. Not only does the country already use the Euro, but its small population size would mean that the country would have minimal institutional influence particularly in the European Parliament. The addition of Montenegro’s economy would have a positive, albeit minor, effect on the EU’s overall GDP, and in comparison with the remaining Balkan states it has few bilateral disputes that would lead to future tensions in the region. Additionally, the Montenegrin people are largely Euro-positive, and are very excited about the prospects of their country joining the EU. According to a recent public opinion poll, more than three-quarters of Montenegro's citizens (76.5 percent) would turn out to vote in a referendum on joining the European Union.⁷¹ Of the total number of decided citizens who would vote – those who at the time of the poll had a clear position on this issue –

⁶⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Delegation of The European Union to Montenegro | Positive Attitude Towards the European Union Grows". 2017. *Delmne.Ec.Europa.Eu*.
<http://www.delmne.ec.europa.eu/code/navigate.php?Id=3973>.

80.9 percent would vote YES, while only a quarter of that number (19.1 percent) would opt for NO.⁷² This is particularly relevant because at a time when the EU is faced with the rise of Euroscepticism and the departure of one of its largest member states, it is increasingly important to offer membership to states that want to be a part of the EU.

Serbia

Following Montenegro, Serbia is predicted to be the next Western Balkan country to join the EU. However, Serbia's progress has been sluggish and greatly hindered by its stance on Kosovo. While Serbia applied for membership in 2009, the EU granted it candidate status until 2012. Negotiations commenced two years later. Incentivized by its desire for membership, the Serbian government has made strides in its tense relationship with Kosovo. Although it still refuses to recognize the sovereignty of Kosovo, the country did reach a landmark deal that allowed for the normalization of ties. Additionally, Serbia continues to cooperate with the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Serbia will unlikely gain admission to the EU prior to 2020— in fact the current trajectory date is 2025— but the Serbian government has carried out a number of reforms that have moved it closer to meeting the requirements of the EU.

Serbia is a uniquely important candidate country. Although its economic contribution will have minimal impact on the overall GDP of the EU, its population size makes it one of the largest prospective Balkan countries. Thus, its institutional impact will be greater than that of Montenegro. In addition, its fragmented past— namely the independence movements in Montenegro and Kosovo— ensures that rivalry will continue to characterize the Balkan states. While this might appear to be a problem, Serbia's commitment to EU membership demonstrates that it is willing to compromise on certain issues. Moreover, Serbia has always had a unique

⁷² Ibid., 22.

historic tie to Russia. To this day, the country still views Russia in a positive light, and Russia uses this channel to their advantage. However, if Serbia willingly chooses to pursue the EU its membership will greatly disrupt the Russian attempt to regain a sphere of influence in the Balkan peninsula.

Albania

Albania submitted its application for EU membership in 2009 and gained official candidate status in 2014. Negotiation on formal accession has not yet begun, and though Albanian officials are hopeful that they will start up soon, the EU has set no official timeline. In the words of Albanian Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, “we know very well that it will take time, and we want to use this time to further transform our country in every sense and to bring citizens close to Europe”.⁷³ In 2016 Albania sat at a crucial crossroads. Forced to choose between its historical legacy of corruption and the EU, the Albanian government implemented sweeping judicial legislation that has been called the one of the most important ongoing reforms in any of the enlargement countries. The next step will be to wait for the Commission to recommend the beginning of accession talks, but until then the EU Commissioner for Enlargement noted that Albania has to continue to “deliver the reforms in five key areas, identified as public administration, corruption, rule of law, organized crime and fundamental rights”.⁷⁴ Albania has a long road ahead before it gains admission to the EU, and its track record is not helping. However, the EU’s willingness to keep the door to enlargement open and to

⁷³Velebit, Vuk. 2018. "2018 as a Crucial Year for Albania on its European Path - European Western Balkans". European Western Balkans. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/01/12/2018-crucial-year-albania-european-path/>.
<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/01/12/2018-crucial-year-albania-european-path/>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

continue pushing the Albanian government to crack down on corruption and implement reforms has proven to be a positive outcome of the process.

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) applied for EU membership in March 2004. The Commission issued a favorable opinion in November 2005, and in 2005 the Council agreed to grant the country candidate status. In spite of the ongoing need for reform, the European Commission reported that FYROM had made significant progress in “police reform, tackling corruption, and bolstering human rights”.⁷⁵ The Macedonians had hoped that negotiations for EU accession would commence in 2008, but election violence and a subsequent boycott of parliament by ethnic Albanian opposition parties derailed this plan.⁷⁶ In October 2009, the Commission finally recommended that accession negotiations be opened, but since this recommendation no chapters have opened or closed.

The biggest barrier to FYROM membership in the EU is its disputes with the EU member states of Greece and Macedonia. In the case of Greece, the two countries disagree over Macedonia’s name. While the United Nations admitted Macedonia in 1993 using the temporary name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece holds that the name “Macedonia” cannot be monopolized by one country. The Greek government argues that using the name “Macedonia” implies a territorial claim over the northern Greek region of the same name. In a 2008 interview, however, Macedonian Foreign Minister Antonio Milososki said, "it is important that 125 countries worldwide have recognized Macedonia's constitutional name," and added: "we remain firm on our stance that only the Republic of Greece has a problem with Macedonia's

⁷⁵ "EU Enlargement: The Next Seven". 2014. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11283616>.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

constitutional name".⁷⁷ To complicate matters, the country of Bulgaria refuses to recognize "Macedonians" as a distinct ethnic group and therefore continues to block FYROM's attempts to join the European Union. Simply put, these deeply rooted political issues present few solutions, particularly given the unwillingness to compromise on the part of the states party to the disputes. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is making great strides to conform to the requirements of the EU, and the EU wants this country to join. Thus, it is imperative that the EU encourage membership as a means to mediate some of these disputes. Though there is no target date for FYROM accession, both the EU and Macedonia could benefit greatly from the accession of Macedonia to the European Union.

Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH)

Bosnia-Herzegovina remains one of the most troublesome Balkan states. Divided into two autonomous regions— the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosniak-Croat) and the Republika Srpska— the country is still plagued with ethnic tension and systematic corruption. Little progress has been made to meet the accession requirements of the European Union and it remains one of the poorest countries in the region. Moreover, while BiH was recognized as a potential candidate country in 2003, it did not apply for EU membership until 2016. The European Commission holds that Bosnia is "an unstable political climate" and the European Court of Humans Rights ruled that Bosnia's judicial system is plagued with discriminatory policies that must be reformed.⁷⁸ Ultimately, the domestic politics of BiH are the greatest barriers to EU membership, and without serious reform and commitment the Bosnian government will not be able to petition the EU to move forward on negotiations.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Although the accession of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the EU is not going to happen for quite a while, EU member states are concerned about the ongoing ethnic tensions and the increased levels of inter-European migrations that the West could see from Bosnia. Still, it is critical that the EU keep trying to influence the transformation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ravaged by the years of mass violence in the Yugoslav Wars, BiH has been left war-torn and divided. Given the long road to recovery, the EU could play a critical role in helping to reshape the economic and political relationships across the region. Moreover, as Serbia gets closer and closer to EU membership, Russia is looking for another Balkan state from which to assert its influence. Recently Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader, called for the break-up of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The separatist praised the friendly, financial support of Russia and China without political attachments— unlike the EU— and argued that a break from the West is in the best interest of Bosnia.⁷⁹ While Dodik’s rhetoric has gained little widespread support, the EU must aggressively implement a strategy of integration that asserts the organization’s positive influence across the Balkan peninsula, particularly in BiH. Bosnia has a lot to gain from EU membership and, in spite of the recent setbacks, it must not give up on the country.

Kosovo

The Balkans breakaway territory of Kosovo is the last in the queue to join the EU because the international community remains split over its 2008 declaration of independence.⁸⁰ While many countries have recognized the sovereignty of Kosovo, the countries of Serbia, Russia, and China— along with 5 EU member states (Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and

⁷⁹ Gavin, Harvey. 2017. “Are the Balkans about to Explode into Violence? Bosnia Bid to Join EU in Doubt”. *Express.co.uk*. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/880405/bosnia-european-union-bid-in-doubt-milorad-dodik-serb-republic>.

⁸⁰ “EU Enlargement: The Next Seven”. 2014. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11283616>.

Cyprus)— have refused recognition. For more than a decade, the hostility between Belgrade and the Kosovan authorities in Pristina have held up consideration of a Kosovan EU bid.⁸¹ However, a 2013 deal brokered by the EU initiated the first steps in thawing the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo. In this deal, both sides pledged that they would not try to block the other's EU bid. Still, the Serbian government refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of Kosovo. Overall, the Commission has praised Pristina's co-operation with the EU law-and-order mission in Kosovo, called Eulex, but it has also called for further efforts to tackle human trafficking in Kosovo and the smuggling of drugs and illegal weapons by gangs.⁸² In addition, protection of minority rights and freedom of speech are also significant challenges that Kosovo must address in order to gain consideration for EU membership. The Kosovan leadership has made significant strides in implementing reforms into the political, economic, and legal systems of Kosovo, but its membership is still contingent on a resolution with Serbia regarding its independence.

Kosovo is perhaps the keenest of the Balkan states to join the EU. A small, landlocked country with few natural resources and a newly acquired independence, the country has explicitly stated that it wishes to become a fully integrated member of the European Union. Its population has remained broadly supportive of EU membership. Nevertheless, Kosovo faces many challenges, including border issues, charges of war crimes, and a sovereignty dispute with Serbia. Kosovo will need to satisfy each of these demands before the process can really move forward. Unfortunately, Kosovo sits at the crux of many key issues for two of the Balkan frontrunners for EU membership— Serbia and Montenegro. Thus, its membership prospects are plagued with politics and special conditions. Despite the fact that Kosovo is the most excited of the Balkan Six about EU membership, it is likely that it will end up being the last to join.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Unresolved bilateral disputes have been persistent hurdles for all of the Western Balkan governments on their path toward EU accession, and each dispute poses a risk of renewed instability and further delays domestic reforms. The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) organizes the region's bilateral disputes into three categories: border disputes, political disputes, and minority-rights disputes.⁸³ While border disputes in the region primarily concern the demarcation of borders after the break-up of Yugoslavia, political disputes and minority-rights disputes concern national identity and are thus highly sensitive issues that need to be handled accordingly. The most prominent examples of political disputes are those involving Kosovo and Serbia as well as the longstanding name dispute between FYR Macedonia and Greece.⁸⁴ Still, the general consensus among the Western Balkan states is that these bilateral issues pose little risk to regional stability but continue to derail the Balkan accession process and democratic transformation. Therefore, in the spirit of good neighborliness and shared commitment to EU integration, the governments of the Western Balkan states agreed to “not block, or encourage others to block” the progress of neighbors on their respective EU paths.⁸⁵ In spite of this agreement, quite a few bilateral disputes remain that have yet to be resolved, and the EU has stuck by its declaration that the Union would not import these problems into its organization. However, the commitment to regional cooperation by the Balkans remains a step in the right direction and serves as further encouragement that with some help from the EU, the future of the Western Balkans in Europe looks promising.

⁸³ European Parliament. 2016. "The Western Balkans' Berlin Process: A New Impulse for Regional Cooperation - Think Tank". *Europarl.Europa.Eu*.
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)586602](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)586602)

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

VI. A Case for Continued European Enlargement— What the Balkans Can Contribute to Europe:

The current debate for European enlargement comes at a critical time for the Union. As stated previously, the EU is at a tipping point. While many promote extensive and rapid enlargement as a means for strengthening and legitimizing the organization at a time when many question its long-term viability, others argue for more cautious. They contend that a focus on greater ties and not on broader membership is a more prudent approach. Both EU officials and EU citizens are concerned about the future direction their organization will take. Is now the appropriate time for another enlargement? For the past decade, the EU has endured what some scholars have labeled “enlargement fatigue”. Negotiations in many areas have stalled, prospects have dimmed, and the once enthusiastic future members were told that it was unlikely they would gain access to the EU anytime soon. However, as Europe sits at the crossroads of its future, there is a clear argument for enlargement, particularly cautious interest-driven enlargement into the Western Balkans, that should be made. More specifically, enlargement into this region is ultimately in the best interests of the EU for three key reasons. First, it demonstrates the strength of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy through successful state-building and regional security efforts. Second, it introduces valuable partner states in the ongoing refugee crisis. Finally, it secures Europe’s geopolitical stance in the face of encroaching Russian/Chinese political influence in the region.

Point #1— Enlargement into the Western Balkans demonstrates the strength of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Widely recognized as an international actor, the EU has played a crucial role in defining the future path for the Balkans. However, the EU does not simply want to be a global actor, it wants to be a global leader. To do this, the EU needs to not only assert dominance in its region,

but it also needs to demonstrate the strength of its foreign policy. The Western Balkans are located in a prime spot to demonstrate this strength. Since its inception, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the precursor to the European Union, sought to prevent European wars through economic interdependency and multilateral cooperation. The inability for cohesive military action in the once ethnically fragmented and war-torn Balkan peninsula was a source of great embarrassment for the EU in the early 1990s. However, since the EU has committed itself to the Western Balkans, it has witnessed a serious and focused commitment to cooperation within the region. The threat of future conflict is minimal, and for the most part each of the remaining Balkan Six are working together under the common goal of joining the EU. If and when the EU fulfills its promise of enlargement into the Western Balkans it will have not only united another key area of Europe, but also succeeded in stabilizing the region. Moreover, this endeavor will demonstrate to the world that the European Union has the capacity and the will to create and carry out a cohesive foreign-policy plan.

Point #2— Enlargement into the Western Balkans introduces valuable partner states in the ongoing refugee crisis.

The ongoing refugee crisis remains one of Europe's most significant unresolved problems. The sudden influx of migrants has left EU leaders scrambling for solutions and has resulted in the closure of numerous internal borders. The Western Balkans are crucial actors in this situation. During the peak of the European migration and refugee crisis, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and migrants arrived in the European Union via the Western Balkans.⁸⁶ Key components of crisis management fell to non-EU states along the "Balkan

⁸⁶ Greider, Alice. 2017. "Outsourcing Migration Management: The Role Of The Western Balkans In The European Refugee Crisis". *Migrationpolicy.Org*.

Route”, primarily Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which consequently were not consulted on broader, European-wide responses.⁸⁷ While the Balkan countries first opted to facilitate the safe movement of refugees through their territories to the north to pass on the responsibility, the pressure from EU member states ultimately resulted in a series of border controls and increasing restrictions on the flow of movement. This led to a sudden drop of immigrants entering Europe from the “Balkan Route”, and migrants still wishing to travel north were pushed into more dangerous and irregular channels. Additionally, thousands of migrants were left stranded in under-resourced camps and reception centers along the borders, primarily in Serbia and Bulgaria.⁸⁸ Though this practice has little effect on the European Union, for countries still consolidating democratically and developing the rule of law, it has devastating implications. More specifically, the movement of hundreds of thousands of people has renewed dormant tensions between and within individual Balkan countries, while exacerbating strains between the Balkans as a region and the European Union.⁸⁹

By enlarging into the Western Balkans, the EU faces an unparalleled opportunity to partner with the Balkan countries to implement a cohesive strategy and secure the “Balkan Route”. This policy would not only ensure that the Balkan states did not suffer setbacks from the pressure of increased migration, but it would also mitigate a humanitarian crisis by finding safer and more controlled passageways for refugee and migrant travelers. Rather than sending financial aid and expecting the newly developed Western Balkan states to handle the issue on

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/outsourcing-migration-management-western-balkans-europes-refugee-crisis>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

their own, enlargement creates an important partnership that equally shares the problem and the burden of finding a feasible solution.

Point #3— Enlargement into the Western Balkans secures Europe’s geopolitical stance in the face of encroaching Russian/Asian political influence in the region.

The Western Balkans occupy a special place in Russian foreign policy. For years Russia has continuously worked to exert influence in Southeast Europe, utilizing Serbia to “establish a friendly pocket on a hostile continent”.⁹⁰ In addition to its cultural and historical ties with local Orthodox Slavs, the Russian leadership is still haunted by the Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia. Currently, Russia is trying to align itself more closely with the region in order to diminish the growing influence of the European Union. Serbia, Montenegro and the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, traditionally have ties with Russia. Over the years, natural gas supplies, infrastructure projects and Russian investments have reinforced these links⁹¹. While Europe remains the largest financial contributor in the Western Balkans, the subtle push by Russia to utilize a soft-power strategy to regain a sphere of influence in the region is a cause for concern. There is no answer to the deepening-widening matrix of the EU, but the EU “can only become a global player if it actively takes part in shaping the European neighborhood, and builds a geo-strategic dimension by giving the border countries a perspective for membership”.⁹²

⁹⁰ Stojanovic, Dusan. 2018. "EU and Russia Vie for Influence in Volatile Balkans Region". *Defense News*. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/02/24/eu-and-russia-vie-for-influence-in-volatile-balkans-region/>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Brimmer, Esther, and Stefan Fröhlich. 2005. *The Strategic Implications of European Union Enlargement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

Ironically enough it was the Russians and their policies in the Balkans that triggered the alarm bells that spurred the European Union into action.⁹³ While negotiations had at one point significantly slowed, the EU has recently pushed the Western Balkans to the top of their agenda and implemented a new campaign to incentivize the Balkan region. However, the European Union will not be able to reduce Russia's influence in the region until all of the Western Balkan states are full members of the EU. Thus, it is critical that the Union continue its push for future enlargement into the Balkans to cement their geopolitical influence in the region and reclaim the Balkan peninsula as a vital part of Europe. As President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, stated, "investing in the stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans means investing in the security and future of our Union".⁹⁴ Simply put, it is imperative that the Western Balkans do not become so disillusioned with the West and its inability to match exaggerated expectations that many of them are willing to be attracted or lured by any alternative.⁹⁵ The future of the Western Balkans is with Europe, and the EU needs to ensure that this promise becomes a reality.

Furthermore, undoubtedly the EU is committed to the idea of enlargement into the Western Balkans. In fact, just recently the European Commission released the 'the six flagship initiatives' to support the transformation of the Western Balkan region.⁹⁶ However, the changed approach towards enlargement in the Western Balkans has resulted in varied perceptions of the EU's actions. More specifically, the addition of further political conditions and the emphasis on

⁹³ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Samorukov, Maxim. 2017. "Russia's Tactics in the Western Balkans". *Carnegie Europe*. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/74612>.

⁹⁶ European Commission. 2018. "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with The Western Balkans". *Ec.Europa.Eu*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans_en.pdf.

the journey rather than the outcome of accession has affected the credibility and consistency of the strategy.⁹⁷

Ultimately, these perceptions are crucial to the overall enlargement prospects because “a credible perspective of EU membership creates a powerful incentive for fundamental reform of these societies”.⁹⁸ Thus, while it is important to note that the ultimate responsibility lies with the countries of the Balkans themselves and their will to introduce the necessary reforms, it is in the interest of the EU to facilitate good relations and ensure that their promises of accession are perceived as credible. Agreed objectives, common criteria, individual merits, and accession target dates are possible only once it is clear that progress has been achieved— but progress is more likely to occur when clear rewards and incentives are made available along the way. The Western Balkans are motivated to action by the prospect of one day becoming official members of the European Union, but this enthusiasm will only last for as long as their goal remains in sight. While there is no time limit on the accession process, the longer these countries go without seeing any reward for their efforts, the less political motivation they will have to keep making changes.

VII. A Case for Continued European Enlargement— How Europe Must Frame the Process:

While it is crucial to analyze what the Balkans can contribute to the European Project, it is also important to understand the factors that Europe should prioritize when shaping their final decision: the growing influence of China in Eastern Europe, the role of public opinion in the

⁹⁷ Anastasakis, Othon. 2008. "The EU'S Political Conditionality in The Western Balkans: Towards A More Pragmatic Approach". *Southeast European And Black Sea Studies* 8 (4): 365-377. doi:10.1080/14683850802556384.

⁹⁸ Cameron, Fraser. 2004. *The Future of Europe*. London: Routledge.

European Union, and the potential negative impact further enlargement might have on the EU's ability to implement a cohesive foreign policy strategy.

First, the European Union must not underestimate the increasing role of China when they make their final decision. Although Europe appears to be more concerned by Russia's historical influence in the Balkan region, the evolution of Sino-European relations is something that Europe must take note of. In many ways, this developing new relationship has the potential to become one of the most dynamic international relationships of the 21st century, but it is not without its flaws. More specifically, China's recent push to involve itself in Europe's regional politics through their "One Belt, One Road" initiative— offering money to rebuild roads and infrastructure in some of Europe's poorest countries— has received caustic reviews from EU officials. At a time when the EU is facing an uphill battle between nationalist movements, growing Euroscepticism, and an east-west divide, the last thing the Union needs is a third-party actor coming in and exploiting these problems. Though China argues that this has never been the country's goal, many in the EU are skeptical— especially with China's recent interest in Eastern Europe. One such example of this is China's 16+1, "a grouping of 16 central and eastern European countries led by China".⁹⁹ While countries like Hungary, Serbia, and Poland are hailing the approach as a "tremendous opportunity" and an "Eastward Opening", EU officials are concerned that it could lead to an exploitation of Europe by Beijing.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the European Union must carefully assess the risks of allowing China to continue influencing the Balkans states financially and politically as it moves forward in the accession process.

⁹⁹ Kyngé, James, and Michael Peel. "Brussels rattled as China reaches out to eastern Europe." *Financial Times*. November 27, 2017. Accessed March 05, 2018.

<https://www.ft.com/content/16abbf2a-cf9b-11e7-9dbb-291a884dd8c6>.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Next, the EU must find a way to balance the desires of the organization with the views of the public. Since its creation, the European Union has been criticized for its lack of democratic legitimacy. Its formal decision-making process is insulated from the ebbs and flows of popular opinion, but that does not mean that it shouldn't be aware of the overall public opinion of member states, particularly in regard to the enlargement process. As enlargement and integration efforts become more heavily dominated by the individual agendas of EU member states, the role of public opinion becomes crucial in implementing successful policies. If the Union does not find ways to mitigate rising fears and Euroscepticism around Europe, then it will not be able to fully integrate the Balkan states into the European Union. There is no general consensus in the EU about whether or not the EU should continue its enlargement push into the Balkan states; however, EU officials must be aware of the growing divide between the top and bottom of its organization or face the consequences of future fragmentation.

Finally, the European Union must acknowledge the overall risks of enlarging into the various Balkan states. More specifically, while enlarging into the Balkans might immediately enhance Europe's global standing as a world player, the sudden increase in member states might hurt the organizations ability to enact cohesive foreign policy strategies in the future. Sometimes, bigger isn't always better. More members inherently means more voices, more national interests, and more opinions to consider. The Union of 28 is already a slow-moving organization when it comes to wide-sweeping decisions, and adding six new members— each with their own problems and rivalries— might do little to help the overall foreign impact of the EU in the future. Thus, it is important that the European Union ease into this transition with careful consideration to ensure that the new Balkan member states have the ability to fully integrate into the Union without weighing it down.

Enlargement into the Balkans presents the European Union with a very delicate situation that must be handled with a keen sense of diplomacy and statesmanship. If the EU is successful, this particular enlargement has the power to reshape Europe's standing in the world. It would demonstrate the evolution of the Union's commitment to a cohesive and effective foreign policy as well as its ability to resolve regional tensions and contribute to the state-building process of post-conflict states. However, if the European Union fails, it will be another blow to the Union's already fracturing influence. The European Union promised the Balkans that their future was with Europe without fully considering the lasting implications of this promise, and now, in spite of the problems enlargement into this region presents, the EU must find a way resolve the Balkan question to both maintain its credibility and maintain its own sense of regional security.

VIII. Conclusion:

As a whole, enlargement is both a driver of integration and an integral part of the European Union's security policy. Though the EU sits at a critical tipping point, it is imperative that the Union does not shy away from its previous commitments to further enlargement, particularly regarding the Western Balkan states. For years, the leadership of the European Union has reaffirmed its commitment to the Balkan region, but it has failed to follow through on these promises with anything other than financial support and political strategies. In the 2017 State of the Union, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated:

“If we want more stability in our neighborhood, then we must maintain a credible enlargement prospective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready. But thereafter the European Union will be greater than 27 in number Accession candidates must give the rule of law, justice, and fundamental rights utmost priority in the negotiations.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ European Commission. 2018. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for And Enhanced EU Engagement with The

Clearly, European perspective of the Western Balkans is full of hope and promise, but up until recently the intent has been lacking. While it is up to the regional leaders to implement political and economic reforms within their respective countries to meet the criteria for EU membership, it is also up to the EU to take every possible measure to aid these countries in the transition. The enlargement cannot be a one-sided endeavor. Not only does the EU need to strike a balance between regional cooperation and individual progress within the Balkans, but it also needs to strengthen its commitment to the region by setting out reasonable target dates for accession and facilitating a working partnership with the Western Balkans. There is a lot of work to be done on both sides, but if the EU truly wishes to begin reforming the institutional and political framework of the Union, it can heed its own advice and “assume responsibility for making this historical opportunity a reality”.¹⁰²

The Western Balkans are a part of Europe. They share a common heritage and history with the people of Europe, and their future is defined by shared opportunities and challenges. However, the prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is so much more than geographical proximity and cultural necessity. Enlargement is a geostrategic investment, and the Western Balkans fulfill very distinct political, security, and economic interests. The EU has an opportunity to make up for their failed intervention in the 1990s and utilize its newfound influence to promote democracy, the rule of law, and the respect for fundamental rights. They have an opportunity to promote stability and further unite continental Europe, and the Balkans are excited to one day join the EU— but this sentiment may not last forever. Thus, it is imperative that the EU not miss an opportunity to use this region as a part of a larger strategy to

¹⁰² “Western Balkans”. *Ec.Europa.Eu*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

strengthen the Union. Simply put, the Western Balkan states are not ready to join the European Union at this time, but that must not deter the European Union utilizing this enlargement opportunity to reshape the direction of Europe and push for deeper integration policies.

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