

# Strengthening the European Union's credibility in the Western Balkans

## 7 priorities for a European strategic narrative

Over twenty years after pledging full membership to the Western Balkan countries<sup>1</sup>, the European Union has yet to fulfil that promise.

The slow pace of the process, former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's refusal to consider new accessions during his 2014–2019 mandate, and repeated vetoes by several Member States have all fueled profound disillusionment among aspiring members. This disillusionment has resulted in a loss of trust, exploited both by local political elites – thereby undermining reform efforts – and by rival powers eager to erode the EU's credibility and influence in the region<sup>2</sup>.

With the prospect of accession endlessly delayed, doubts over the sincerity of the EU's commitment have taken root in the region. This has undermined not only the transformative power of enlargement, but the EU's geopolitical actions as a whole. How can the EU claim to defend its values and interests on the international stage if it cannot do so in its immediate neighbourhood, through its enlargement policy?

Yet Ukraine's candidacy following the 2022 Russian invasion, soon joined by Georgia and Moldova, has reaffirmed the EU's appeal and its protective role, and put enlargement back at the heart of its geopolitical ambition.

In today's context of shifting global power balances, and with a new Trump administration weakening the transatlantic alliance – thereby threatening the EU's very survival –, the EU must strengthen its message and match its ambition in the Western Balkans with a strategic narrative.

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Couteau, *Rival Influences in the Western Balkans: Hard Facts and Limitations*, Brief, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2023.



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## • Recommendations to support a European strategic narrative

### I 1. FROM WORDS TO ACTIONS: DELIVERING ON OUR COMMITMENTS TO UKRAINE

→ by fully involving the Western Balkans in the collective effort to support Ukraine and fostering cooperation among aspiring EU members

### I 2. PROVIDING SECURITY GUARANTEES TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

→ by including the countries in common procurements under the SAFE instrument and concluding security and defence partnerships with them

### I 3. STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA

→ by maintaining pre-accession support at current levels without linking payments solely to their governments' actions

### I 4. REVIEWING THE STRUCTURE OF THE ACCESSION PROCESS

→ by introducing powerful symbols to generate genuine political momentum

### I 5. ESTABLISHING SECTORAL SPONSORSHIPS BETWEEN MEMBER STATES AND CANDIDATES

→ to better equip future Member States to take an active role in shaping the EU, moving beyond the idea that accession is the final destination

### I 6. MAKING SMART USE OF SANCTIONS

→ as a balanced lever over all regional actors threatening regional stability

### I 7. LEARNING TO SAY NO: THE CASE OF TURKEY'S CANDIDACY

→ to send a clear message: a State that persistently fails to meet accession criteria may lose its candidate status

## • For a targeted and uniting European strategic narrative

The European Union must learn to speak the language of power in the Western Balkans. Controlling the narrative would allow the EU not only to be better heard, but to shape the debate before others do. While its institutions and Member States are shifting their discourse<sup>3</sup>, this must now translate into action, starting with Ukraine (**recommendation 1**).

They must lay the foundations for a **common** strategic narrative addressed to all regional stakeholders – from governments to citizens, including local communities. This narrative must be both assertive and positive, conveying a vision able to bring people together. The EU can no longer simply react to narratives that aim to discredit it; it must **regain the initiative and offer a credible horizon that inspires trust, hope, and buy-in**.

To achieve this, the EU must recognise the dominant position it already holds in the region. The loss of credibility is less due to objective weakness than to a defensive posture towards both rival narratives and the behaviour of some candidate States, for fear of pushing them into rivals' arms. This situation is not unique to the Western Balkans: while citizens of major world powers see the EU as a major power able to rival the US and China, and expect its influence to grow over the next decade, Europeans themselves remain the most sceptical of their own power<sup>4</sup>.

In the Western Balkans, the EU and its Member States are key actors in politics, economics, energy, infrastructure, and security. Recognising and embracing this reality is essential to restoring their credibility and structuring their influence. Local populations must see the benefits and opportunities already offered by EU integration, while governments must be held accountable for showcasing and leveraging them.

**No other power but the EU offers the region such crucial economic and financial support**, with no other conditions beyond compliance with the requirements of the accession process, which these countries have freely chosen to follow – unlike the opaque Chinese loans. **No other power but the EU offers the region a political space that enables it to punch above its weight** in defending its interests, as long as these countries align their foreign policy with the EU. **No other power but the EU offers the region a cohesive force capable of ensuring regional security**, given that the preservation of continental peace is a precondition for its very existence – unlike Russia, which uses any means available to stoke local tensions.

**The EU must portray itself as a protective power**: a space of opportunity rather than constraint, one that guarantees the independence and security of its members. The Ukrainian and Moldovan candidacies precisely reflect this perception, and it aligns with the fact that EU citizens increasingly view security as the main benefit of membership<sup>5</sup>. The EU should clearly assert its role as the guarantor of its members' national diversity and territorial integrity, by extending security guarantees to the Western Balkans (**recommendation 2**).

This strategic message relies on two key vectors: local civil society and media, which should receive increased support and guidance to give substance to the EU's message following the suspension of US funding (**recommendation 3**), and a structural reform of the accession process (**recommendation 4**).

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<sup>3</sup> European Council, [The Granada declaration](#), 6 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, [Alone in a Trumpian world: The EU and global public opinion after the US elections](#), Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament, [Winter 2025 Eurobarometer survey](#), March 2025.

Such reform aims to restore trust in the process and bring coherence back to the EU's narrative, which has been weakened by the cacophony of Member State vetoes. This cacophony not only muddles the EU's message to candidates, but also empowers outlier Member States, foremost among them Viktor Orbán's Hungary. A complementary approach would be to enhance mutual socialisation between current and aspiring Member States through sectoral sponsorships (**recommendation 5**) based on concrete cooperations in areas of shared interest (defence, demographics, etc.). These sponsorships would also have the benefit of defusing the fixation on a formal accession date, by allowing both sides to progress together immediately.

The EU must also counter the Russian narrative, exploited by some regional leaders to sway the EU's stance towards them. This requires a targeted approach that exposes to each local actor Russia's weaknesses and its inability to offer a credible alternative. This strategy calls for a sanctions regime targeting those who undermine democracy, the rule of law, stability, or security in the region – thereby jeopardising its EU integration – by parroting Kremlin rhetoric (**recommendation 6**).

Finally, if such sanctions prove insufficient to change their course, the EU and its Member States should show readiness to break off the accession process for any candidate State that persistently follows a trajectory clearly incompatible with the accession requirements, starting with Turkey (**recommendation 7**).

These recommendations, *mutatis mutandis*, could prove useful in other contexts (Caucasus, Moldova, Ukraine) and aim to feed a broader reflection on the EU's credibility. While they will inevitably face numerous obstacles and opposition, the current context calls for boldness to prevent the EU's geopolitical ambition from dissolving into inaction.

## 1 • From words to actions: delivering on our commitments to Ukraine

To embody a narrative grounded in power and assert its strategic role, the European Union should first demonstrate its ability to defend its interests and assert its will on its own continent, all the more so when a future Member State is involved.

While the European Council summits of 6 and 20 March 2025<sup>6,7</sup> reflect this ambition, the EU's previous hesitations have done little more than leave Ukraine struggling in the face of Russian aggression. It is now crucial to enable Ukraine to negotiate peace from a position of strength, an essential condition for realising the EU's protective power. A peace agreement favourable to Russia, entailing recognition of its sovereignty over occupied Ukrainian territories and minimal security guarantees for Ukraine – or a Russian military victory if the fighting continues –, would utterly destroy the EU's credibility.

In light of Russia's continued territorial gains since spring 2024 and the intensification of its air offensives since June 2025, a firm and decisive response from Ukraine's EU partners has yet to materialise. Member States should prioritise strengthening Ukraine's air defence – particularly France and Italy, by providing Aster-30 missiles for the SAMP/T batteries already deployed in Ukraine –, follow Denmark's lead<sup>8</sup> in developing joint arms production, and accelerate ammunition deliveries.

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<sup>6</sup> Special European Council, 6 March 2025.

<sup>7</sup> European Council, 20 March 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Zadorozhnyy, "Ukraine, Denmark sign deal to launch Ukrainian military production on Danish soil", *The Kyiv Independent*, 4 July 2025.

Recent commitments are encouraging<sup>9</sup>, but linking, at the 20 March summit, enhanced military support with intensified “support for Ukraine’s reform efforts on its path towards EU membership” is ill-timed. In doing so, Member States risk fueling the idea<sup>10</sup> that an accelerated process is possible and, worse, competition among aspiring EU members at a time that calls for solidarity.

The EU should, on the contrary, **fully involve the Western Balkans in the collective effort to support Ukraine and foster cooperation among aspiring EU members**, turning potential rivalries into a driver of mutual progress. In this respect, initiatives such as the Ukraine–Southeast Europe Summit, which has brought together Member and candidate States from the region every six months since 2023, as well as bilateral agreements aimed at exchanging best practices on the path to EU accession, like the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between Albania and Ukraine or the Memorandum of Cooperation between North Macedonia and Moldova, should be encouraged.

To be credible, the EU’s narrative as a guarantor of the independence and security of the Western Balkans should, however, go further and include concrete security guarantees for the region.

## 2 • Providing security guarantees to the Western Balkans

Building on its efforts to enhance its own defence capabilities, the EU should urgently give substance to the ‘Western Balkans’ pillar of its strategy and position itself as the region’s true shield. Tangible commitment is crucial for three reasons: it strengthens the credibility of the EU’s narrative, counters the Russian narrative among targeted populations – which claims that only Moscow can guarantee their security and protect their interests –, and anticipates the consequences of a potential US disengagement, which would immediately worsen the security situation.

The uncertainty surrounding US commitment – exacerbated by the stance of the new Trump administration and the upcoming UN Security Council vote in November on extending the mandate of the EU peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea) – makes it urgent for the EU and its Member States to step up their presence in the region. They must demonstrate their capacity to ensure regional security on their own – and make this known. The European Commission’s recent White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, adopted in May 2025 and built around the SAFE instrument, represent a decisive first step in that direction.

Relying on the “Partner” pillar of the Strategic Compass<sup>11</sup>, SAFE allows “acceding countries” (*sic*), candidates and potential candidates, and countries having signed a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) with the EU to participate in common defence procurements with at least one Member State and contribute to aggregated demand – eligibility that can be further extended through specific agreements<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Foreign Affairs Council, 23 June 2025.

<sup>10</sup> *The New Union Post*, “Commissioner Kos plans to strengthen the ‘soft power’ of the EU enlargement process”, 14 January 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Website of the Council of the EU and the European Council, *A Strategic Compass for security and defence*.

<sup>12</sup> Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument.

Albania and North Macedonia have already strengthened cooperation with the EU by signing SDPs in late 2024. These partnerships reflect the EU's contribution to regional security while usefully adopting a tailored approach, focusing particularly on fighting foreign information manipulation and interference. **The EU and its Member States must now include Western Balkan countries in their common procurement projects and conclude an SDP with them** – or at least offer such a prospect to all, thereby compelling their government to take a clear stance. Moreover, the scope of these SDPs, including those with Albania and North Macedonia, should be expanded to cover areas such as critical infrastructure resilience or consular cooperation, following the model of the SDP between the EU and Norway.

The individual engagement of Member States alongside the EU is essential. Given its military strength and deterrent force, France has a central role to play. In this regard, the definition of the European dimension of France's vital interests – consistently emphasised by the President of the Republic since his first term<sup>13</sup> – should suggest that these extend to the Western Balkans, a region Emmanuel Macron describes as “at the heart of Europe.”<sup>14</sup> To give substance to such a strategic ambition, however, these declarations will only be credible if backed by tangible support for strengthening local defence capacities. The recent acquisition by Albania and Serbia of French military equipment – from GM400 air surveillance radars to Rafale fighter jets<sup>15</sup> – should thus pave the way for similar agreements with other countries in the region, provided their political and strategic alignment is ensured and communication is carefully managed.

To convey this message and ensure popular ownership, the EU cannot do without local civil society and media. With the US also retreating from this arena, the EU must step up its support, as these are the actors that will ultimately bring the European narrative to life.

### 3 • Strengthening support for civil society and media

In the Western Balkans, civil society and independent media are the most effective bulwarks against disinformation and the most natural allies of those working to promote a European narrative. In the face of proliferating competing – even hostile – narratives, frequently spread locally for political purposes, the EU must ensure it remains audible. As a Trump–Putin axis emerges and US funding dries up, the EU must therefore take responsibility for safeguarding the survival of local civil society and media outlets.

In the very short term, the EU must rethink its financial support for civil society organisations (CSOs) in countries aspiring to join the Union, and therefore in the Western Balkans. The suspension of US funding has created a vacuum: between 2020 and 2024, such funding amounted to \$1.7 billion for the region<sup>16</sup>. Currently, 4 out of 5 civil society actors in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans are

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13 Nicolas Barotte, « *Macron : 'Les intérêts vitaux de la France ont désormais une dimension européenne'* », *Le Figaro*, 7 February 2020.

14 Conférence de presse du Président de la République : présentation de la présidence française du Conseil de l'Union européenne, Paris, 9 December 2021.

15 *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, “*In Major Upgrade Of Serbian Air Force, Vucic Agrees Jet Deal With France*”, 9 April 2024.

16 Azem Kurtić, Siniša Jakov Marušić, Fjori Sinoruka & Milica Stojanović, “*Trump's Suspension of US Foreign Aid Hits Hundreds of Balkan Projects*”, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, *Balkan Insight*, 30 January 2025.



reportedly directly affected by the freezing of these funds<sup>17</sup>, threatening the very survival of local civil society and its capacity to act as a democratic counterweight.

An urgent reallocation of unspent pre-accession funds earmarked for local CSOs – or even an emergency fund, as was done for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, a key media outlet on the continent, and particularly in the Western Balkans<sup>18</sup> – is essential to prevent the widespread collapse of local organisations due to lack of funding. The EU must rise to the occasion and step in to replace US support: this is a unique opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to defending values and interests shared with its future Member States.

In the longer term, the EU should fundamentally rethink the way it funds and structures its relationship with local CSOs and media, whose development and funding are already hampered in the region – often to the benefit of public or private actors close to those in power, as is the case in Serbia<sup>19</sup>. As early as 2022, the European Court of Auditors highlighted the mismatch between EU funding and local needs<sup>20</sup>. Despite the allocation of over €250 million to such organisations and media between 2014 and 2020 under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for candidates and potential candidates (including Turkey)<sup>21</sup>, their situation remains precarious and their actual impact on fundamental rule-of-law reforms in the region limited.

The EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034, the negotiations for which are soon to begin, should clearly **signal the Union's commitment to supporting civil society and media<sup>22</sup> by maintaining pre-accession support at least at current levels** without linking all disbursements solely to the implementation of internal reforms – at the risk of penalising CSOs and media for their governments' inaction. This support must, of course, remain pluralistic and non-partisan: the aim is not to build a propaganda machine, but to safeguard the existence of democratic checks and balances. The EU's credibility depends on the consistency between its values and its actions; it must therefore lead by example in the allocation of funding to local actors, lest its efforts become counterproductive.

The EU should also better structure its relationship with these local actors, who are best placed to help tailor its narrative to their region. On the ground, EU delegations should be tasked with identifying, country by country, priority areas of action to support this narrative (such as countering disinformation, training journalists or promoting media literacy) and with engaging CSOs active in these areas to translate the Union's strategic narrative into local realities. At the EU level, it should simultaneously continue to expand the space it offers to these CSOs. The initiative launched by the European Economic and Social Committee in 2024, which involves

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17 Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, “US aid freeze is leaving a void. Europe must fill it.”, Shout Out, Strasbourg, 20 February 2025.

18 *Al Jazeera*, “EU to sustain Radio Free Europe with emergency funding after Trump cuts”, 20 May 2025.

19 See for example: *Le Dauphin Libéré*, “À Belgrade, les étudiants se mobilisent contre la ‘propagande très sale’ des médias pro-pouvoir”, 29 March 2025; Jelena Tomić, “Médias en Serbie: entre propagande et désinformation”, *Radio France internationale*, 5 April 2025.

20 European Court of Auditors, *EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist*, Special Report 01/2022 – Rule of law in the Western Balkans, 2022.

21 *Replies of the European Commission to the European Court of Auditors Special Report: “EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist”*, 2022.

22 Eulalia Rubio, Cinzia Alcidì, Romy Hansum, Tina Akhvediani, Iain Begg, Johannes Lindner & Benjamin Couteau, *Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements*, Study prepared at the request of the Committee on Budgets (BUDG) of the European Parliament, 2025.

civil society from candidate countries in parts of its work<sup>23</sup>, should not only be made permanent but also extended to potential candidates, with greater visibility given its concrete outcomes on the ground.

In sometimes hostile political environments, this opening offers key actors of local democracy both a platform and a form of gradual integration into the EU – a tangible expression of its deepening ties with the Western Balkans.

#### 4 • Reviewing the structure of the accession process

The credibility of the EU's strategic narrative must be grounded in a structural reform of the accession process. Its length, complexity, and the self-serving demands of certain Member States have, among other things, fostered a sense of injustice among long-standing candidates and undermined trust in the EU discourse. Three priorities should therefore guide reform: deepening the gradual integration of candidate countries, elevating the *External Relations* cluster (negotiating chapters 30 and 31) to the same status as the *Fundamentals* cluster in determining the negotiation pace, and restricting the use of unanimity in the accession process.

The idea of gradual integration for countries aspiring to join the EU has already gained traction within EU institutions, based on multiple contributions<sup>24</sup>. Beyond the initiative of the European Economic and Social Committee, Western Balkan countries are already participating in various EU programmes (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, etc.), reflecting closer ties. However, these efforts remain too technical and largely unknown to the general public, making them ineffective in generating popular support. To address this, **powerful symbols are needed to create genuine political momentum – “quick wins”<sup>25</sup>** –, such as granting an Associated State status that would allow at least partial representation in EU institutions<sup>26</sup>.

This status should, among other things, be conditional on full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a criterion that has gained new importance in light of the current threats to continental security. Thus, the *External Relations* cluster should jointly determine the overall progress of negotiations alongside the *Fundamentals* cluster. While most candidates would be strengthened by their full alignment with the CFSP, Serbia – whose alignment has been at its lowest levels since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see Graph 1) – would be forced to make a choice, as already suggested by the European Commission<sup>27</sup>: either uphold its commitments and move forward in the accession process, or diverge from EU positions and see its candidacy halted.

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<sup>23</sup> Website of the European Economic and Social Committee, [Enlargement Candidate Members' Initiative](#).

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Lukáš Macek, [Advocating gradual accession to the European Union](#), Policy paper, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2023.

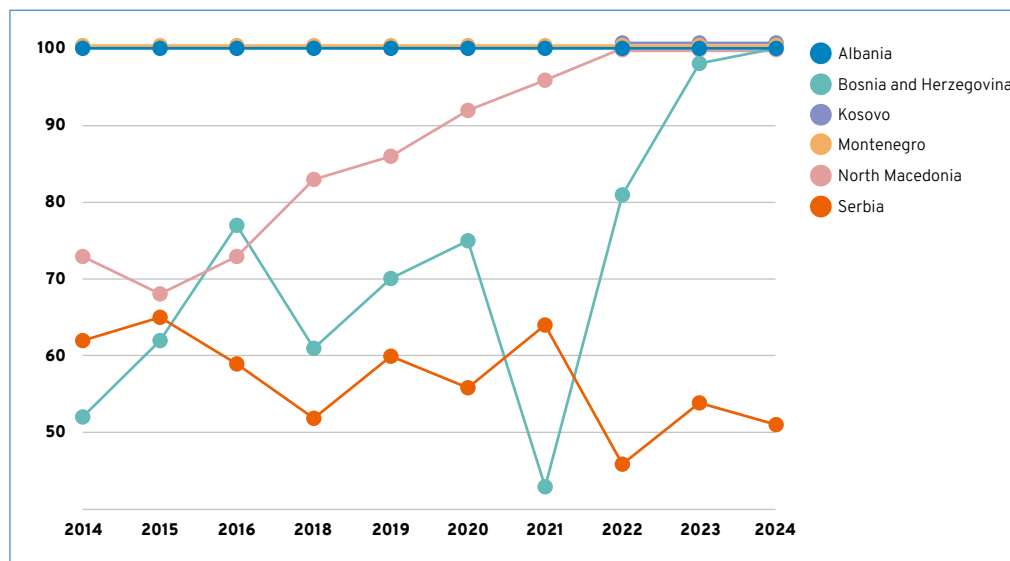
<sup>25</sup> Enrico Letta's report presented to the European Council, [Much more than a Market](#), 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Sébastien Maillard, [Enlargement needs an Associated State status](#), Policy paper, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> [2024 Communication on EU Enlargement policy](#), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2024) 690 final, Brussels, 30 October 2024.



**GRAPH 1.** Alignment rate of Western Balkan countries with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2014–2024, in %)²⁸



Beyond its persistent and increasingly severe assaults on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights of Serbian citizens, as documented once again by the European Commission<sup>29</sup>, and which, in themselves, should suffice to halt the accession process due to the primacy of the *Fundamentals* cluster, the Serbian government should be clearly told that any failure to fully align with the CFSP – particularly with EU sanctions against Russia – would carry the same consequences. The EU must simultaneously support this shift with a strategic narrative aimed at Serbian society, publicly demonstrating Russia's inability to support its so-called "allies," as evidenced by Armenia's defeat at the hands of Azerbaijan.

To ensure the effective implementation of these recommendations and prevent the accession process from once again being held hostage to bilateral disputes or domestic political agendas, Member States should finally resolve to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting for intermediate stages of accession negotiations – at the very least, a "suspensive veto" should be introduced<sup>30</sup>. The current cacophony, which undermines the EU's credibility and collective influence, would then give way to a coherent narrative and a more merit-based approach capable of restoring trust in the process. This would not mean ignoring bilateral disputes between Member and candidate States; rather, a parallel mediation mechanism should be established to prevent such issues from derailing the entire process.

<sup>28</sup> The data for the candidate countries come from the European Commission's annual enlargement reports, available on its website. For Kosovo, a potential candidate country, the data come from the following sources: [European Parliament resolution of 10 May 2023 on the 2022 Commission Report on Kosovo \(2022/2201\(INI\)\)](#), C/2023/1066, 15 December 2023; Benjamin Couteau, *Rival Influences in the Western Balkans: Hard Facts and Limitations*, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Serbia 2024 Report*, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying the document *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*, SWD(2024) 695 final, Brussels, 30 October 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Lukáš Macek, Sébastien Maillard & Pierre Mirel, *Towards an Agenda 2030 for Enlargement*, Brief, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2024.

Predictability and clarity regarding the merit-based nature of the process are essential to reinforcing its credibility. Such reforms would enhance the EU's agility on the continental and international stages, key to protecting its strategic interests. This dynamic could be further strengthened through greater mutual socialisation, notably via sectoral sponsorships by Member States.

## 5 • Establishing sectoral sponsorships between Member States and candidates

To demonstrate the sincere and credible commitment of Member States at the bilateral level ahead of full membership and to strengthen the dynamic of gradual integration, the EU should encourage the establishment of sectoral sponsorships with Western Balkan countries. These targeted partnerships would help deepen cooperation around shared areas of interest, involve Member States less engaged with enlargement, showcase the concrete contributions of the Western Balkans to the European project – especially in view of national debates on enlargement within the EU – and **equip these future Member States to take an active role in shaping the EU, moving beyond the idea that accession is the final destination.**

The ongoing rapprochement between Member and candidates States must take on a more political and strategic dimension. Given its increasing presence in the Western Balkans (see recommendation 2), France could lead the way in launching a strategic dialogue with the region, leveraging in particular the opening of the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (WB3C) in Podgorica, which it established jointly with Slovenia. In response to the massive emigration affecting the region<sup>31</sup>, the countries could also initiate a strategic dialogue with Lithuania for example, which is now seeing more Lithuanians return than leave<sup>32</sup> and could share best practices on return and reintegration policies. Such partnerships, involving at least two Member States each, would also help counterbalance certain privileged ties between Member and candidate States based on ideological or ethnic considerations.

These cooperation formats could also inspire more ambitious initiatives to address today's key challenges while full EU membership remains pending – for example, relations with China. Given the asymmetric relationship between the Western Balkans and China and the resulting vulnerabilities, the EU could propose creating a new joint cooperation platform (replacing the 14+1 platform by bringing together the EU, the Western Balkan countries recognised by China, and China itself) to support its future Member States in monitoring the economic viability, transparency and quality of Chinese-funded projects or in protecting critical local infrastructure.

Such an approach, however, may be rejected by some regional leaders who use their ties with China – as well as with Russia, Turkey, or the United Arab Emirates – as effective tools to showcase to their voters not only their alleged successes on the international stage but also the supposed inability of the EU to defend their interests. In response to such discourses, the EU and its Member States should embody their strategic narrative by sanctioning those who undermine their countries' full EU integration.

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<sup>31</sup> Isabelle Marchais, *Depopulation in the Western Balkans*, Policy Brief, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, [Twice as many people came back to Lithuania as those who left](#), 31 January 2025.

## 6 • Making smart use of sanctions

The EU and its Member States must skillfully wield not just the carrot, but also the stick, to support the credibility of their strategic narrative. They need to set aside policies of appeasement and moderation towards regional leaders who ultimately undermine the very credibility of the European project. The EU should especially embody its capacity to act as a cohesive force for the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the diverse communities of North Macedonia, or Serbian society. It should reaffirm its role as guarantor of these States' independence and sovereignty, in the face of a lethargic Russia in the region – one that nevertheless remains quick to ignite even the smallest spark.

The EU and its Member States can no longer tolerate being discredited by the manipulation, particularly by Serb leaders, of their ties with Russia – which are based on a selective reading of history and staged for purely opportunistic purposes – as well as with other rival powers. By highlighting such privileged relations, Aleksandar Vučić's regime has consistently overshadowed the concrete benefits of EU integration since coming to power<sup>33</sup>. Fearing Serbia's further rapprochement with Russia, the EU has been reluctant to raise its voice against Vučić's abuses, allowing him and his ally Milorad Dodik, President of Bosnia and Herzegovina's *Republika Srpska*, to pose as key figures of regional stability while being the primary sources of its instability, repeatedly undermining democracy and the rule of law, and engaging in actions that threaten regional security<sup>34</sup>.

Yet the Union must not be mistaken: the ostentatious ties some regional leaders display with Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, or Donald Trump are more about political posturing than reality<sup>35</sup>. None of these global actors has forged strong enough alliances with Western Balkan countries to consider the region a strategic priority or to present a credible alternative to the European project. Regional leaders are well aware of this and know that jeopardising their country's EU future would come at a high electoral cost. The EU must therefore toughen its message, not only to preserve stability and security, but above all to actively defend our shared values, democracy, the rule of law – at the heart of the region's EU integration.

In light of the obsolescence of the EU sanctions regime targeting individuals or entities aiming to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina – which has never been applied in nearly 15 years due to the Hungarian veto – Member States should promptly follow the lead of Germany, Austria<sup>36</sup>, Lithuania<sup>37</sup>, and Poland<sup>38</sup>, the first EU States to have sanctioned Milorad Dodik and two other *Republika Srpska* senior officials, by adopting similar measures themselves. In the medium term, **a broader sanctions regime covering the entire Western Balkans should be introduced to provide leverage over all regional actors threatening regional stability**. To ensure its effectiveness, this regime should be accompanied by a wider reform of decision-making in the Council of the EU allowing for qualified majority voting in matters of CFSP<sup>39</sup>.

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33 *Demostat*, “The importance of the EU is swept under the carpet”, 6 April 2024.

34 See for example: Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović, “Face à Vučić, l'Europe doit accompagner le printemps serbe”, *Le Grand Continent*, 28 February 2025; Nelly Didelot, “Bosnie : les Serbes au son de la sécession”, *Libération*, 4 July 2024.

35 Benjamin Couteau, *Rival Influences in the Western Balkans: Hard Facts and Limitations*, *op. cit.*

36 Oliver Towfigh Nia, “Germany urges EU member states to back sanctions against Bosnia's Republika Srpska”, *Anadolu Agency*, 4 April 2025.

37 *LRT*, “Lithuania sanctions Bosnian Serb leader, his allies”, 14 May 2025.

38 *Reuters*, “Poland to ban Bosnian Serb leader Dodik from its territory”, 13 May 2025.

39 Report by the independent Franco-German group of experts on EU reforms, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*, Paris-Berlin, 2023.

At the same time, the EU should immediately and unconditionally lift the “measures” imposed on Kosovo in June 2023 – sanctions in all but name – which fuel a strong sense of injustice and block any credible reboot of the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue. Applied unilaterally against a State historically aligned with the CFSP (see recommendation 4), they stand in stark contrast to the leniency shown toward Serb leaders. This asymmetry seriously undermines the EU’s credibility in Kosovo<sup>40</sup>, especially as Member States recognising its independence, starting with France, support such measures. The only viable path forward lies in applying balanced and simultaneous pressure on both parties to the Dialogue: this is the condition for sincere commitment to normalising relations, and a prerequisite for any progress by Kosovo on its accession path.

Finally, if this activism does not serve as a sufficiently credible lever to secure genuine commitment to EU integration, the EU should demonstrate its readiness to bring the accession process to an end for any country that fails to meet its requirements.

## 7 • Learning to say no: the case of Turkey’s candidacy

Knowing how to say “yes” with high standards also means knowing how to say “no.” **The European Commission must propose to the Member States that they formally end Turkey’s accession process in order to send a clear message: a candidate State that persistently fails to meet the fundamental requirements of the process – particularly regarding democracy, the rule of law, and CFSP (see recommendation 4) – can and must lose its candidate status, temporarily or permanently.**

The failure of Turkey’s candidacy does not stem from a fundamental mutual rejection, but from an increasingly insurmountable gap between the requirements of the accession process and Ankara’s political trajectory. More than seven years after acknowledging that negotiations with Turkey had “come to a standstill”<sup>41</sup>, maintaining such a diplomatic fiction with no credible prospect of success only undermines the EU’s credibility. By formally recognising these divergences, especially as the waves of mass arrests and the removal of Istanbul’s mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, illustrate the country’s alarming shift towards a “fully authoritarian”<sup>42</sup> regime, the EU and Turkey could clean up a toxic relationship now built on mutual mistrust. Beyond President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s thunderous rhetoric, Turkey’s political class also appears ready to move on from the candidacy, as do some EU Member States. Notably, Germany’s new government coalition agreement no longer refers to Turkey as a candidate, a first in three legislative terms<sup>43</sup>.

In the face of the Russian threat and the volatility of the transatlantic alliance, current times call for unity to safeguard the continent’s security. Overcoming the deadlock of Turkey’s candidacy in the short term holds the key to a more pragmatic and mutually beneficial relationship, enabling the defence of interests imposed by geography. To meet the moment, a strong and credible offer should in return be made to Turkey, in the form of a broad strategic partnership encompassing security, economic, and migration issues.

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<sup>40</sup> See for example: *The New Union Post*, “How cuts to Kosovo’s oldest cinema expose the boomerang effect of EU measures”, 26 June 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Council of the European Union, [Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process](#), 10555/18, Brussels, 26 June 2018.

<sup>42</sup> European Parliament, “Türkiye’s EU accession process must remain frozen”, Press release, 7 May 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Guillaume Duval & Pierre Mennerat, « *Contrat de coalition allemand : le texte intégral traduit et commenté* », Archives et Discours, *Le Grand Continent*, 15 April 2025.

On security matters, Turkey remains a major partner<sup>44</sup>. A member of the “Coalition of the willing” in support of Ukraine, and designated a “like-minded country” following the European Council on 20 March<sup>45</sup>, Turkey has a defence industry aligned with NATO standards and capable of swift and substantial deliveries – not only to Ukraine but also to EU Member States. Its capacity, in particular, to produce and deliver *Bayraktar* TB2 tactical UCAVs at record speed – drones being among the EU’s priority areas for action identified on 6 March – and at low cost, could play a key role in the swift strengthening of the EU’s defence capabilities, especially following the recent partnership between the TB2 manufacturer and Italy’s Leonardo for drone production<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, diplomatically, Turkey should be encouraged to help shape the European Political Community into a true forum for strategic dialogue at the continental level.

Such a partnership could also be structured around longstanding points of friction that the current circumstances urge to address, starting with the modernisation of the customs union – proposed as early as 2016 by the European Commission – including its extension to the agri-food and services sectors<sup>47</sup> – both sensitive in the context of a looming trade war with the United States<sup>48</sup> –, and with visa liberalisation, with priority given to entrepreneurs and students. Finally, the relevance of the 2016 agreement aimed at ending “the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU”<sup>49</sup> could also be reconsidered in light of the evolving situation in Syria.

Such cooperation is essential for Turkey, which is facing a delicate situation – strategically, economically, and monetarily. The EU, for its part, shares with Ankara the goal of containing the Russian threat, both in the Black Sea and on land, especially in the Western Balkans. Turkey’s political capital in the region, strengthened by its participation in all peacekeeping initiatives on the ground, notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, represents a valuable lever of influence. By deepening our interdependent relations, we would render any destabilisation of the region undesirable.

Still, the economic and political integration of the continent’s States remains the condition for lasting peace, and it therefore falls to the EU to reiterate that no rupture is irreversible. A resumption of the accession process may be envisaged in the medium term, once Turkey demonstrates a sincere commitment to meeting its requirements. In a fragmented and multipolar world, European unity is more necessary than ever – but it can only be built on a common foundation of values and principles. Without the shared adherence to and promotion of these values and principles, accession is not an option.

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Couteau, *EU-Turkey relations in the age of Trump II: between blocked accession and forced cooperation*, Infographic, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2025.

<sup>45</sup> European Council, *Read-out of the online meeting between European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen with the leaders of Iceland, Norway, Türkiye and the United Kingdom*, Press release, 21 March 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Website of Baykar Technologies, *Baykar and Leonardo sign partnership agreement for unmanned technologies*, 6 March 2025.

<sup>47</sup> European Commission, *Commission proposes to modernise the Customs Union with Turkey*, Press release, 21 December 2016.

<sup>48</sup> See for example: Camille Gijs & Giovanna Coi, “Brussels eyes 25 percent tariffs in response to Trump”, *POLITICO Europe*, 7 April 2025; Peggy Corlin & Romane Armangau, “Von der Leyen ready to hit tech and services in US-EU trade war”, *Euronews*, 11 April 2025.

<sup>49</sup> European Council, *EU-Turkey statement*, 18 March 2016, Press release.

## • Conclusion

Faced with the emergence of a more fragmented international order and the erosion of certain alliances, the European Union no longer has the luxury of ambiguity – nor unlimited time. For the Western Balkans, this ambiguity – which they themselves also perpetuate – has come to resemble duplicity. To remain a credible and influential actor in the region, the EU must now strengthen its internal coherence, assert its protective role, and craft a clear, unifying strategic narrative.

In this fragmented world, the EU can only be credible externally if it is credible internally. Faced with the rise of extremist and Eurosceptic parties, it must therefore simultaneously develop the internal dimension of its narrative, to better explain what it protects, what it transforms, and what it offers – and to whom.

Finally, this internal dimension must imperatively address the public opinions of Member States, particularly in France, to explain the meaning of future enlargements. The credibility of the Western Balkans' accession also depends on it.

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