

THE EFFECT OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

The Case of the Balkans

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-Abstract-

Russian aggression of Ukraine has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of Europe and brought changes in international policy. The conflict has had far-reaching consequences for both Ukraine and Europe but it also stirred the world economy and global policies. The conflict's impact on the process of European integration extends beyond security and energy concerns. The large number of displaced people along with the increasing death toll and war crimes add to the complexity of the humanitarian crisis the conflict imposed. The war in Ukraine has certainly raised immense international attention and highlighted the urgent need for conflict resolution. European leaders have been actively engaged in trying to reach diplomatic solutions and have supported various mediation efforts, recognizing that a stable and peaceful Ukraine is crucial for regional stability and integration. The EU nowadays stands across an important decision - it must carefully consider the new geopolitical complexities concerning the potential member states. Countries in fragile regions such as the Western Balkans may require additional attention and diplomatic efforts in order to maintain stability and prevent destabilization that may be caused by any of the existing historical disputes and open issues. Recent EU policies and strategies do encourage broader efforts for speeding up the process of EU enlargement. The EU perspective offered to Ukraine and Moldova creates an additional impetus in the euro integration process for the countries of the Western Balkans. A stable and secure Europe aligns with the strategic policies of the USA, NATO and EU respectively. In this context, the current geopolitical changes caused by the Ukrainian conflict could trigger stronger enlargement efforts by the EU within the scope of the joint security and defense strategy. It seems that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made EU enlargement a geopolitical imperative.

Key words: Ukraine, Europe, integration, conflict, invasion

I. INTRODUCTION

On February 24th 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The conflict was preceded by months of rumors and unofficial information indicating that Russia was deploying armed forces on the borderline with Ukraine. There were many attempts and diplomatic efforts to prevent possible escalation but with no avail. The attack on Ukraine has its roots in the long-term conflict between Russia and

* Katerina Buckovska, PhD in Political Science (International Relations); e- mail: k_mukaetova@hotmail.com

Ukraine since 2014 and the annexation of Crimea. The “special military operation”¹ announced by Russian president Putin was intended to support the breakaway republics Donetsk and Lugansk whose paramilitary forces supported by Russia have been fighting in the Donbas conflict since 2014.

President Putin has publicly denied Ukrainian sovereignty in several occasions. In February, 2022 in a televised interview addressing the nation, Putin stated that “Ukraine had never had “real statehood” and that “the country was an integral part of Russia’s own history, culture and spiritual space”.² He also stressed his strong belief that Ukraine is essentially Russian, that it has an incoherent existence of three decades as a nation-state and that Ukraine existed thanks to a series of mistakes made by former Soviet leaders.

In his essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukraine” published July 12th, 2021, President Putin refers to Ukraine as an “anti-Russian project” and would say that “I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.”³

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe, with a total of 44 million population. It gained its independence in 1991, following a referendum in which 92.3% of voters said they would prefer to see their country independent rather than part of the already collapsing Soviet Union. What has internally remained the “apple of discord” is the picture of future Ukraine as a nation, having into consideration the significant divide between the west of Ukraine and the eastern part of the country which borders with Russia. Throughout history, the Russian influence and culture was pretty much strong in this region.

Following the Maidan revolution or known as “The Revolution of Dignity”⁴ (2014) and the massive protests against the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine has presented itself to the world in a renewed picture as a country that is oriented towards EU and the Western values of democracy and freedom as protesters rejected Russia’s supremacy and sought a path to join EU. Very often referred as a “victory of Ukrainian nationalism”⁵ the Maiden actually leads us to better understand the actual Russian-Ukrainian conflict that goes much further beyond its borders. It actually turned into an international conflict, economic distress worldwide and political turmoil between the strongly divided blocks of the West and the East.

¹ Simmons, Ann M., “Putin Announces Special Military Operation in Eastern Ukraine”, The Wall Street Journal, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news/card/putin-announces-special-military-operation-in-eastern-ukraine-BBbiFSHMKssPMTur01Vh>, accessed November 24th, 2022

² Billy, Perrigo, “How Putin’s Denial of Ukrainian Statehood Rewrites History”, The Times, <https://time.com/6150046/ukraine-statehood-russia-history-putin/>

³ Putin, Vladimir, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukraine”, published 12.07.2021, President of Russia, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/154

⁴ Shveda, Yuriy, Park Jonig Ho, “Ukraine’s revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan” Journal of Eurasian studies, Volume 7, Issue 1, January 2016

⁵ Shore, Marci, “The Ukrainian Night- An Intimate History of Revolution”, Yale University Press, 2018

II. RUSSIAN INVASION AND ITS IMPACT ON EU SECURITY POLICY

Following the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the EU has rung the bell of alert. From security aspect, it actually presented a conflict on European soil and a war that borders an EU country – Poland. The Russian invasion is perceived as a threat not only to democracy and European values, but a serious danger to European security. The conflict has so far produced the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the World War II.⁶ Currently, there are more than 3.7 million internally displaced people⁷ and more than 6 million who fled their homes and left Ukraine to search for shelter mainly in Poland, but also in Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia and Romania. The volunteers and international humanitarian organizations are making everyday efforts on ground to provide medical care for the wounded, to mitigate disruptions to essential services like access to water and electricity supply and obtain protection of civilians and respect of humanitarian law. According to UNCHR, there are currently 17 million of Ukrainians who are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁸ As Russian military death toll rises to 315 000⁹, in the meanwhile the Ukrainian side counts more than 9,600 civilian deaths from the onset of the conflict and even greater number on the military side.¹⁰ According to an US official statement for “The New York Times”: “The total number of Ukrainian and Russian troops killed or wounded since the war in Ukraine began is nearing 500 000”.¹¹ The numbers are difficult to estimate because Moscow is believed to routinely undercount its death toll and the Ukrainian officials do not disclose the official figures for the public. On the other hand, the conflict has stirred a serious energy crisis. Russia supplies 1/3 of Europe natural gas. The imposed sanctions on Russia and the following global energy crises have reshaped the energy world. Russian invasion in Ukraine has led to increase in energy prices, creating shock waves in global energy markets leading to price volatility, security issues, supply shortages and economic uncertainty. It also means that the poor countries will bear the brunt of the energy crisis and its negative consequences. Having into consideration that 1/4th of world wheat exports come from Russia and Ukraine, it is quite reasonable to conclude that the cost of food prices spiked due to the Russian - Ukrainian conflict. Known as the “Breadbasket” in the world, Ukraine has a fertile soil due to its abundance in grains like wheat, barley, corn, soybeans and other food including sunflower oil and poultry. Ukraine has been a top producer and exporter in world food markets for decades due to the fact that an estimated 70 percent of land is used for farmland.

⁵ “Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine and Neighboring Countries”, International Committee of the Red Cross, <https://www.icrc.org/en/humanitarian-crisis-ukraine#Emergency%20Relief>

⁷ Ukraine Internal Displacement Report, International Organization for Migration (IOM), https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/IOM_Gen%20Pop%20Report_R14_Displacement_Final.pdf

⁸ USA for UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, available at, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

⁹ Landay, Jonathan, “U.S. Intelligence Assesses Ukraine War Has Cost Russia 315,000 Casualties”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-intelligence-assesses-ukraine-war-has-cost-russia-315000-casualties-source-2023-12-12/>

¹⁰ Statista, <https://statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/>

¹¹ Cooper, Helene, Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, Schmitt, Eric, Barnes, Julian E., “Troop Deaths and Injuries in Ukraine War Near 500 000, Us Official Say”, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/us/politics/ukraine-russia-war-casualties.html>

III. THE ROLE OF EU

Since the conflict began, the EU policy was strictly supportive of Ukraine territorial integrity and sovereignty denouncing Russia's aggression and violation of international law. European leaders have been actively engaged in finding diplomatic solutions and have supported various mediation efforts for resolving the conflict. The unity of Ukraine, according to EU, is a precondition for stable and peaceful Ukraine and crucial for the European stability. However, EU has to consider the new geopolitical complexities concerning its common foreign and security policy.

As the conflict escalated, EU has undertaken several steps in order to reiterate its position that it does not accept a violent, full-scale aggression against a sovereign state. On March 10th, the EU leaders adopted a declaration in Versailles, repeating the EU's commitment to take more responsibility for its own security and enhance its capacity to act autonomously while acknowledging the significance of collaboration between the EU and NATO. The EU Member States agreed to invest more in defense capabilities and innovative technologies by boosting defense spending, engaging in collaborative investments such as joint procurement, enhancing military capabilities, fostering research and innovation, and advancing the EU's defense industry on 21 March, the EU leaders endorsed the Strategic Compass that represents an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defense policy by 2030.¹²

The Strategic Compass qualifies Russia's aggression against Ukraine as a 'major geopolitical shift' that challenges EU interests. It commits the EU-27 to invest in and cultivate defense capabilities, collaborate with partners, manage crises and bolster resilience thus increasing the EU's ability and readiness to take action and provide stable collective defense system.¹³

It is more than clear that the conflict has had a far-reaching consequence on the future strategic policies not only of EU but also of NATO. Ukraine has been promised membership in the NATO Alliance for 20 years, but due to the possible damage to Western-Russian relations, NATO membership was in mode of calculation. When talking about Ukraine and NATO, one must be aware that the Russian "red lines" have been signaled. Russia opposes NATO bases near its border and has asked for written guarantees that NATO will not expand eastwards. For Kremlin, Ukraine should never be part of NATO as it is seen as a threat for Russia's national security. In the meantime, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenski, is tirelessly looking for the international support as his army is fighting back the Russian forces from their strongholds. The US President Joe Biden, the UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the French President Emmanuel Macron have joined global forces and have unanimously condemned the Moscow's "unjustified" attack.

The Russian aggression on Ukraine has made a profound effect not only on EU economy but also on the spending and budget. The EU institutions provide both humanitarian and military aid. The EU countries, in parallel, designate part of their budgets to support Ukraine. Regarding the overall spending, I have used the analytical data from the Kiel Institute on World Economy, a German economic think tank organization that follows the numbers of Ukrainian aid since the start of the conflict. According to their latest research, the numbers in overall funding are as follows:¹⁴

¹² The European Council, Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>

¹³ The European Council, Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>

¹⁴ "The Ukrainian Support Tracker", Kiel Institute on World Economy, available at: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

Government support to Ukraine: Type of assistance, € billion



Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to Oct. 31, 2023. Data on 42 donors ; scroll to see more donors

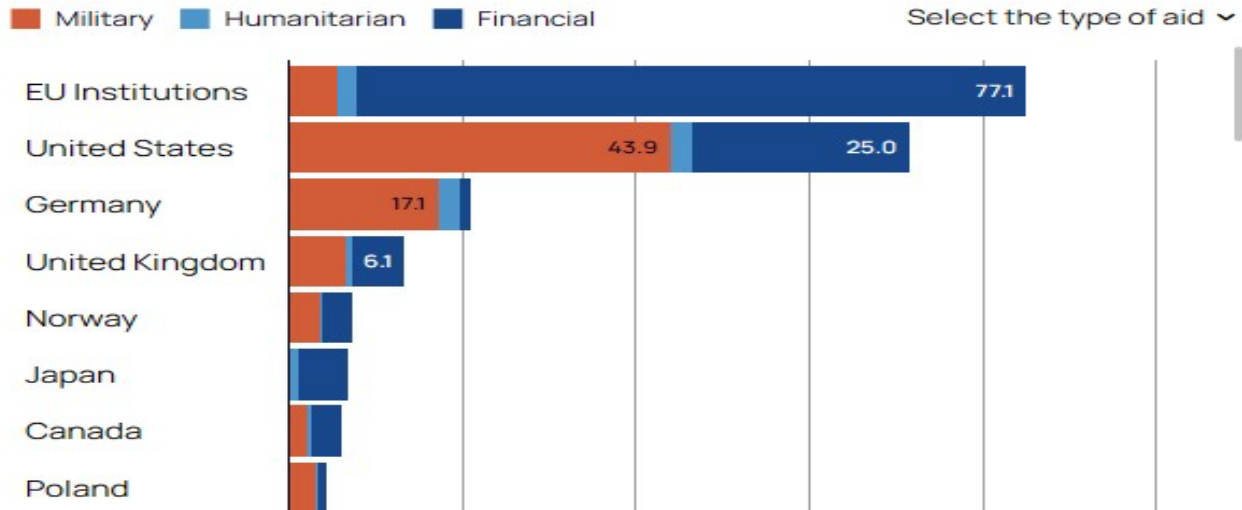


Table 1. Government support to Ukraine in billions, source: “The Ukrainian Support Tracker”, Kiel Institute for the World Economy

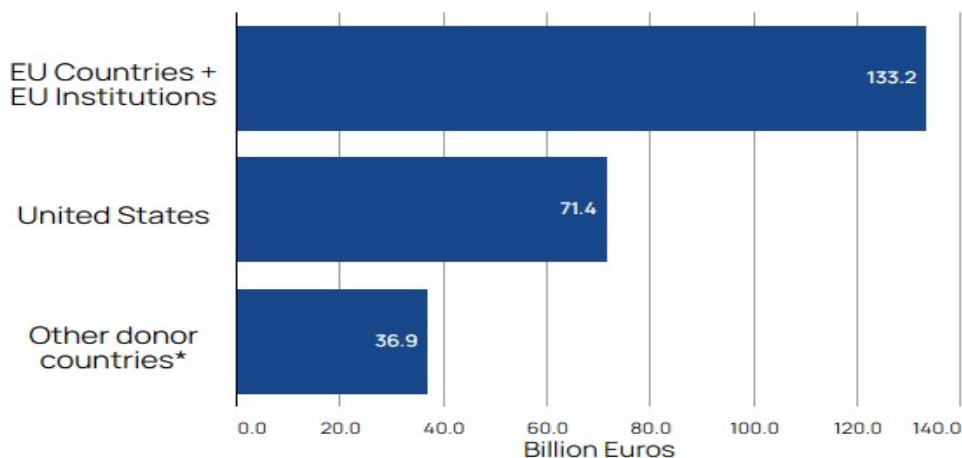
According to the latest data on the EU and USA spending on Ukraine, we may conclude that roughly the numbers are close. The EU has spent less on military aid and more on financial aid. On the other hand, USA has provided more military aid amounting to 43.9 billion. The biggest donor from the EU countries is Germany with 17.1 billion in military spending.

Government support to Ukraine: By country group, € billion



Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to Oct. 31, 2023

■ Total aid (€ billion)



Source: Trebesch et al. (2023) “The Ukraine Support Tracker” Kiel WP

ifw-kiel.de/ukrainetracker

Table 2. Government support to Ukraine by country/group in billion euros, source: “The Ukrainian Support Tracker”, The Kiel Institute for the World Economy

In the second table, we have the overall aid of Europe, both the EU Institutions and the EU countries with the numbers exceeding 133 billion of euros of total aid. Having into consideration that these are huge amounts of funds, the policy of EU on Ukrainian war has dramatic effect on the EU budget and spending.

IV. THE EFFECT OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Ukraine has been knocking on the door of the EU for almost two decades since the 2004 Orange Revolution. But the EU member countries did not generously open the door for enlargement, citing corruption and relations with Moscow as the main argument. Nevertheless, the Russian aggression to Ukraine has changed everything as now, the peace and stability of all Eastern Europe is under assault with serious consequences for European continent as a whole. At the moment, EU enlargement has popped up high on the agenda and presents a window of opportunity for the aspirant countries starting from Moldova to the Western Balkan countries.

In regard to Moldova, the country is in process of EU accession and is on the current agenda for future enlargement of the EU. Following an application in March 2022, the country was officially granted candidate status by EU on June 22, 2022. Moldova has a target to become full-fledged member of EU by 2030. Georgia, on the other hand, goes to a more slippery path towards EU due to its democratic backsliding, problem with corruption and the so called “de-oligarchisation”. Moreover, concerning relations with Russia, Georgia has roughly 20% of its territory under de facto Russian occupation following the 2008 invasion when Russia stationed forces in the partially recognized states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On December 2023, the EU officially granted candidate status to Georgia.

In reference to the Western Balkan, we have quite a different situation. The Balkan states have been waiting in front of the EU doors for a very long time. It was 20 years ago at the Thessaloniki Summit when the Balkan states were promised the EU perspective, but since then only Croatia joined the club, doing so in 2013. The progress of other countries was impeded by various factors, including bilateral disputes, a lack of significant reform initiatives, and notably, the EU's hesitant approach toward the enlargement process and its lack of consistent policy. This has contributed to a loss of momentum and has put EU credibility in the region in question. Prolonging the time for EU accession has resulted in authoritarian tendencies gaining further ground in several countries across the region.

However, the Russian invasion in Ukraine has reshaped the political and security dynamics of Europe leading to reevaluating the EU enlargement process and neighborhood policy and prioritizing the European integration project. This new position presents a realistic chance for the Balkan countries to expedite their path toward EU membership and finally, if possible, bridge the gap.

In addition, President of EU Council, Charles Michel, gave an encouraging speech on the future of EU enlargement during the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2023. He emphasized the fact that “states waiting in the EU membership queue for over 20 years deserve a clear goal”, underlining the need of clarity and motivation for these countries as they continue the path towards EU

integration. His vision that EU should be ready for enlargement by 2030 has been received with positive reaction by the aspiring counties.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Balkan countries have been going through different stages of EU accession, each confronting distinct economic and security challenges. The fight against corruption and organized crime, establishment of an independent judiciary, rule of law and governance, public administration reform and freedom of the media are crucial topics for all Balkan countries aspiring to join the European Union. These areas are considered fundamental prerequisites for EU membership, as they ensure uphold of democratic principles and safeguard the integrity of institutions. Consequently, all aspirant countries must demonstrate significant progress in these areas to advance their accession process and ultimately become EU members.

Serbia started accession negotiations with EU in 2013 but definitely cannot complete them without finding a solution concerning the final status of Kosovo. This issue has persistently acted as a stumbling block for many years despite numerous efforts to address it, significantly impacting Serbia's prospects concerning its EU perspective. The country is faced with political polarization in the aftermath of the recent parliamentary elections where the opposition has expressed discontent with the final results alleging election fraud as the cause. Following the crisis in Ukraine, President Vucic has declined to impose sanctions or flight bans on Russia which furthermore added to the tensions in the relations between Serbia and EU.

Montenegro on the other hand, initiated the accession process in 2012, yet the country is faced with political tensions and polarized political climate that hinders the progress of reform implementation. The prolonged wait for the formation of a new government has not only halted progress but has also heightened political destabilization.

Bosnia and Herzegovina received candidate status in December 2022 and the country has been faced with significant challenges on its path to EU integration. One of the primary obstacles has been the country's complex political structure, which includes two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. This complex system often leads to political gridlock and difficulty in reaching consensus on crucial reforms necessary for EU accession. Republika Srpska, on the other hand, presents security threat to the region, following a secessionist rhetoric by its leader, Milorad Dodik.¹⁶ The ethical divisions and nationalist sentiments are slowing down progress of necessary reforms and the country will not be ready to join EU by 2030.

The Western Balkan country that was first granted status of candidate country of EU in 2005 was North Macedonia. However, over the years, North Macedonia has faced delays in its EU accession process due to unresolved issues with neighboring countries. Initially, there was the bilateral dispute with Greece concerning the use of the name "Macedonia," which led to 30 years of negotiations mediated by the UN. The signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018 resolved this longstanding issue by changing the country's name to North Macedonia, marking a significant milestone. However, shortly after overcoming this challenge, another setback occurred in its EU journey with the Bulgarian veto. Under the auspices of the French EU Presidency, North Macedonia agreed to make constitutional changes by adding Bulgarians to the Preamble of its Constitution, naming them as one of the constitutional peoples in the country. If the act of voting

¹⁵ Speech by President Charles Michel at the Opening Session at the Bled Strategic Forum, European Council, Council of the EU, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/01/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-opening-session-of-the-bled-strategic-forum/>

¹⁶ Dzihic, Vedran, Schmidt Paul, "The Russia-Ukraine War Must Be The Impetus For a New Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy" LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/05/24/the-russia-ukraine-war-must-be-the-impetus-for-a-new-eu-enlargement-and-neighbourhood-policy/>, accessed October 23th, 2023

in Parliament doesn't take place in a very near future, North Macedonia will be faced with a difficult and time-consuming path to the EU membership.

Albania applied for EU membership in April 2009 and was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. The EU held its first intragovernmental conference with Albania in July 2022. The opening of the chapters for EU membership is threatened by a veto from Greece, due to an imprisonment of an Albanian citizen of Greek minority. The EU and USA, as supporters of Albania's path towards membership and joining EU, have been using diplomatic means to assist the process and find a solution between the two countries.

V. CONCLUSION

The Russian invasion has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of Europe and had a profound impact on international policy. The conflict has not only redrawn the geopolitical map but has also prompted a deep reevaluation of the strategic priorities, both of EU and the USA. In this uncertain time, the threat of conflict is significant, affecting how power is balanced and how it is impacting the changing global issues. As countries decide what to do next, the consequences of Russia's invasion are felt worldwide, leading to more uncertainty and shifts in how nations plan their security strategies.

The USA and EU are investing substantial funds to aid Ukraine in its battle against Russia. This isn't merely a clash between two nations; it symbolizes a broader rift in global distribution of power as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine highlights the divisions among countries worldwide.

The war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on EU stability and its common foreign policy, bringing the enlargement process into sharp focus. The conflict has highlighted political divisions within the EU, with member states trying to find a unified response. Additionally, it has highlighted the urgency of addressing security concerns in Europe's Eastern neighborhood. As the EU navigates this crisis, there is a heightened emphasis on strengthening cohesion and solidarity among member states while pursuing a more assertive and coordinated approach to foreign policy challenges.

The momentum behind Ukraine and Moldova's enlargement presents a promising opportunity for the Western Balkans countries. However, the extent to which each nation will embrace this opportunity remains uncertain. The Western Balkan countries have grown increasingly impatient as they await entry into the doors of the EU—a promise made two decades ago at the Thessaloniki Summit. They urgently require a more focused and dependable enlargement policy initiated by the EU to enhance credibility and trust in the process. Feeling neglected in the process has led to the rise of autocratic and authoritarian regimes within these countries. It's imperative to recognize that the security and stability of Europe cannot be fully realized without the inclusion of the Western Balkan countries. Prioritizing this issue is paramount for the EU to foster prospects of a stable, peaceful, and integrated united Europe.

EU must also address its internal challenges in view of the upcoming enlargement process among its member states, particularly in discussing the necessary reforms to accommodate the process of accepting more members by 2030, as officially stated by President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

Reforming EU institutions to adapt to the enlargement process will be a formidable task, particularly concerning questions of representation and decision-making. With a bloc of more than 35 members, unanimity in decision-making becomes impractical. Therefore, finding solutions to

streamline decision-making processes while ensuring fair representation for all member states will be crucial for the EU's future effectiveness and cohesion.

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