

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION POLICY OF THE BALKAN COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

ЄВРОІНТЕГРАЦІЙНА ПОЛІТИКА КРАЇН БАЛКАНСЬКОГО РЕГІОНУ В УМОВАХ СУЧАСНИХ ГЕОПОЛІТИЧНИХ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЙ

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Abstract. *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary trends, structural dynamics, and geopolitical contradictions of the European integration policy of the Balkan countries in the context of the deep transformation of the European security architecture after 2022. It examines the unique political, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics of the Western Balkan states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo) that determine the asymmetric pace of their convergence with the European Union. Methodologically based on systemic, comparative, and regional approaches, the study examines the evolution of the EU's enlargement policy from a technocratic process of norm-alignment to a primary geopolitical and security instrument of the Union. The research investigates the strategic competition in the region among the EU, the United States, China, and Russia, showing how Serbia serves as Russia's geopolitical foothold, illustrated by the activities of sanctioned figures like A. Vulin and the involvement of Russian intelligence. It also explores China's economic footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative and its infrastructural investments in projects like the 'Danube Corridor'. It compares the integration paths of the Western Balkans and Ukraine, utilizing the taxonomy of candidate states (the frontrunners, the second-tier eastern candidates, the stagnating states, and the polarized outliers) and reinterpreting the structural difference between Ukraine's existential integration (to survive) and the Balkans' developmental integration (to catch up). Furthermore, it evaluates newly proposed integration models in 2026, such as gradual integration, the 'reverse enlargement' model for Ukraine, and F. Merz's observer status model. The paper concludes that the future of the Balkan states depends on the EU's capacity to balance institutional reforms with geopolitical credibility, ensuring that regional stagnation does not create security vacuums on the Union's external borders*

Keywords: *Balkan region; European Union; European integration; EU enlargement policy; candidate countries; geopolitical contradictions; Western Balkans; international relations; Ukraine; European security.*

Анотація. *У статті здійснено комплексний порівняльний та критичний аналіз сучасних трендів, інституційної динаміки та геополітичних суперечностей євроінтеграційної політики країн Балканського регіону в умовах кардинальної трансформації європейської безпекової архітектури після 2022 року. Детально досліджено політичні, економічні та соціокультурні особливості держав Західних Балкан (Албанії, Боснії і Герцеговини, Сербії, Чорногорії, Північної Македонії та Косово), які зумовлюють виразну асиметричність та нерівномірність їхнього наближення до членства в Європейському Союзі. Методологічну базу*

дослідження сформовано на основі системного, порівняльного, структурно-функціонального та геополітичного підходів, а також дискурс-аналізу офіційних звітів Європейської Комісії, Freedom House та аналітичних матеріалів Balkan Barometer. Автор доводить, що після початку повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну політика розширення ЄС зазнала концептуального зсуву — від суто технократичного інструменту згуртованості до визначального чинника безпеки та стратегічного позиціонування. Проаналізовано запекле суперництво великих геополітичних акторів за вплив у регіоні. Визначено роль США у стримуванні дестабілізації через запровадження санкцій (зокрема проти М. Додіка), економічну експансію Китаю в межах ініціативи «Пояс і шлях» (проект «Дунайського коридору»), а також підривну діяльність РФ, що використовує Сербію як розвідувальний плацдарм (кейс А. Вуліна та залучення ФСБ до придушення громадянських протестів у Белграді). Здійснено концептуальне порівняння євроінтеграційного досвіду Балкан та України за чотирма категоріями кандидатів (лідери, кандидати другого ешелону, стагнуючі країни та країни з проросійською орієнтацією). Розглянуто нові моделі інтеграції, запропоновані у 2026 році (зокрема концепцію «зворотного розширення» та модель спостерігача Ф. Мерца на саміті в Нікосії). Обґрунтовано, що успіх інтеграції Західних Балкан залежатиме від здатності ЄС поєднати внутрішні інституційні реформи з відновленням довіри до розширення, оскільки утворення геополітичного вакууму на кордонах Союзу несе критичні гібридні загрози для всієї Європи.

Ключові слова: Балканський регіон; Європейський Союз; євроінтеграція; політика розширення ЄС; країни-кандидати; геополітичні суперечності; Західні Балкани; міжнародні відносини; Україна; європейська безпека.

Introduction. The Balkan region has traditionally occupied an important place in contemporary international relations, remaining one of the most politically sensitive and geostrategically significant regions in Europe. Its importance is determined by a combination of several factors, including its advantageous geographical location at the intersection of major transport, energy, and civilizational routes, a high level of ethno-political and confessional diversity, and a historically rooted potential for conflict that continues to shape contemporary integration processes.

Following the end of the Cold War, the Balkans became a key focus of the European Union's foreign policy, with the EU viewing the region's stabilization as an essential prerequisite for the formation of a coherent European security space. Under current conditions, the Balkans remain an arena of strategic competition among major international actors. Alongside the EU, the United States, China, and Russia exert considerable influence on the region's political and economic processes, significantly shaping the dynamics of European integration.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has further increased the strategic relevance of the Balkan dimension within the European Union's foreign policy agenda. In particular, growing attention is being paid to the political resilience of the Balkan states, their capacity to withstand external informational and political influence, and the effectiveness of democratic reforms. In this context, the Ukrainian factor is also of particular importance, as Ukraine's experience in resisting Russian aggression has substantially contributed to the reconsideration of security priorities by both the EU and candidate states.

Literature review. The issue of European integration policy in the Balkan region occupies an important place in contemporary studies of international relations, European integration, and regional security. One of the key research directions concerns the analysis of Europeanization mechanisms in the Western Balkans. In particular, O. Anastasakis emphasizes the asymmetrical nature of integration processes and the uneven character of political transformations in the Balkan states (Anastasakis, 2008).

A significant contribution to contemporary scholarship has been made by F. Bieber, whose works focus on democratic development in the Western Balkans. The scholar argues that the EU's emphasis on political stability has, in some cases, contributed to the persistence of hybrid political regimes and slowed democratic reforms (Bieber, 2018; Bieber, 2020). The impact of European integration on democratic transformation in the region is also examined by Vienna University

researchers V.Dzihic and A.Wieser, who highlight the institutional contradictions of post-conflict Balkan states (Dzihic & Wieser, 2011).

The problem of "enlargement fatigue" and its impact on the EU membership prospects of Balkan states is explored in the works of J.O'Brennan, who argues that the slowdown of integration processes negatively affects both the effectiveness of reforms and public support for European integration in candidate countries (O'Brennan, 2014). The prolonged and complex process of Western Balkan integration into the EU is also analyzed by Greek researcher E.Dionysiou, who maintains that stagnation in this process creates a geopolitical vacuum and threatens the stability of both the region and Europe as a whole (Dionysiou, 2022).

Contemporary academic literature increasingly emphasizes that the Balkans remain a strategic arena of competition among major international actors. At the same time, the European integration of the region has acquired a distinct security dimension. In this context, I.Zarić and Ž.Budimir examine the Balkans as a space of competing great-power interests, arguing that Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has altered the regional balance of power. The authors stress that intensified geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia has generated new security challenges for the Western Balkans and directly affects the stability of their domestic political trajectories (Zarić & Budimir, 2022).

Since 2022, scholarly discourse has increasingly focused on the transformation of the EU enlargement policy in response to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. These studies emphasize the growing security dimension of European integration and the reconsideration of the role of candidate states in shaping a new European security architecture (Hunter, Wunsch & Bélanger, 2025).

The purpose of the article is to examine contemporary trends in the European integration policies of the Balkan states amid current geopolitical transformations, and to identify the impact of the European Union's renewed enlargement policy on the countries of the region after 2022.

The methodological framework of the study is based on a combination of general scientific and specialized methods of political analysis, international relations, and regional studies. The research primarily relies on a systems approach, which made it possible to examine the Balkan region as an integral component of the contemporary system of international relations and European security, where political, economic, security, and sociocultural factors are closely interconnected. The comparative method was employed to analyze European integration processes across EU member states, candidate countries, and potential candidates, enabling the identification of differences in the pace of reforms, adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*, and levels of political integration. A structural-functional approach was applied to examine the role of political institutions, economic mechanisms, and sociocultural factors in the process of European integration. The geopolitical approach was used to analyze the Balkans as an arena of strategic competition among the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union, and to explore the relationship between European integration and contemporary geopolitical contradictions in the region. Discourse analysis was applied to investigate contemporary political and expert discourse on EU enlargement, the security significance of the Balkans, and Ukraine's role in the emerging European security architecture. The empirical basis of the study includes official documents of EU institutions, statistical and analytical materials (Eurobarometer, Balkan Barometer, World Bank, Freedom House), as well as scholarly works by Ukrainian and international researchers on European integration, international security, and the geopolitics of the Balkans.

Main results of the research. *The Balkan Region as a Space of Geopolitical and Integration Interaction.* Over a long historical period, the Balkans have remained a zone of intersecting interests of major powers, which has significantly shaped both the region's political development and the contemporary characteristics of its integration processes. In expert analysis, the term "Balkans" is traditionally used as a historical and geographical category encompassing the states of Southeastern Europe located on the Balkan Peninsula. At the same time, contemporary political discourse increasingly employs the term "Western Balkans," as used in European Union documents, to refer to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo.

One of the key political characteristics of the Balkan region is its post-conflict nature. The consequences of Yugoslavia's dissolution, the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, unresolved territorial

disputes, and the complex system of interethnic relations continue to affect the region's domestic political stability. According to V.Dzihic and A.Wieser, excessive institutional complexity and dependence on external governance significantly complicate democratic transformation and the effective functioning of state institutions in Balkan countries (Dzihic & Wieser, 2011).

Another characteristic feature of the region is ethnopolitical fragmentation, reflected in the high level of politicization of ethnic and religious identities. Many political parties in the Balkan states continue to operate along ethnic lines, complicating the development of inclusive governance models and intensifying domestic political contradictions. In this context, L.Scazzieri argues that "relations between Serbia and Kosovo remain one of the main factors of regional instability and an important element of EU policy toward the Western Balkans" (Scazzieri, 2021).

Experts characterize the economic development of the Balkan region as highly uneven and strongly dependent on external financial resources. States in the region demonstrate different levels of industrialization, economic growth, and integration into the European market. Slovenia and Croatia are the most economically integrated into the EU, whereas the Western Balkan states remain heavily dependent on foreign investment, EU financial assistance, and external credit resources. An important driver of regional economic transformation remains the European Union's policy toward the economic integration of the Western Balkans. Within the framework of the "Growth Plan for the Western Balkans," the EU allocated a €6 billion financial package for 2024–2027 to stimulate reforms, develop a common regional market, and gradually integrate the region into the EU single market (European Commission, 2023). At the same time, the region's economic vulnerability is reinforced by external dependence, labor migration, structural imbalances, and a substantial shadow economy.

The energy factor also represents an important aspect of the region's economic specificity. The Balkans remain one of the key transit routes for energy supplies to Europe, which increases their geoeconomic significance. Since 2022, issues of energy security and the diversification of energy supplies have become strategic priorities for the Balkans, prompting the EU to intensify policies to integrate the region into the broader European energy space.

The sociocultural specificity of the Balkan region is shaped by its civilizational multidirectionality and the coexistence of diverse historical and cultural traditions. Over the centuries, the region was influenced by the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and other European political centers, resulting in a complex cultural and religious structure. The coexistence of Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim traditions characterizes contemporary Balkan societies. For this reason, experts note that the formation of a common European identity in the Balkan states remains a contested issue. While the majority of the population supports European integration and perceives EU membership as a guarantee of economic development and security, strong nationalist sentiments, historical memories of conflicts, and skepticism toward certain aspects of European integration continue to shape political processes in the region (Greïčevci, 2025).

Differentiation of the Balkan States by the Level of Integration into the European Union. Within the framework of the EU enlargement policy, a functional typology of Balkan states has emerged based on the degree of their integration into the European political, legal, and economic space. This classification distinguishes between EU member states, candidate countries, and potential candidates. Such differentiation is reflected in the European Commission's analytical approaches and demonstrates progress in meeting the Copenhagen criteria (European Commission, 2024a).

The group of EU member states in the Balkan region includes Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Slovenia. Although these countries have different historical experiences with European integration, they are united by full participation in the European Union's institutional system and by their involvement in shaping common EU policies. According to Eurobarometer data, public support for EU membership remains relatively high: approximately 80% in Slovenia, 70–75% in Croatia, around 65% in Romania, and 55–60% in Bulgaria (Eurobarometer, 2025). These states are integrated into the mechanisms of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the single market, which positions them as a stabilizing element within the regional political architecture.

The group of candidate countries includes Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These states are at different stages of the accession negotiation process, reflecting uneven institutional reforms and varying levels of political convergence with the EU.

According to the Balkan Barometer, an average of 59% of citizens in the Western Balkans support EU membership, although only 35–40% consider accession realistic in the medium term (Balkan Barometer, 2024). Albania demonstrates the highest level of public support for EU membership, exceeding 80%, which reflects the country's stable pro-European orientation (European Commission, 2024b). Support in Montenegro reaches approximately 75%, corresponding to its status as the most advanced candidate country. In Serbia, support for European integration has declined to 46–50%, indicating growing political polarization and the influence of alternative foreign policy orientations (Balkan Barometer, 2024). In North Macedonia, support remains relatively high at around 65%, though the integration process has slowed due to political disputes. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, support reaches approximately 72%, yet reforms remain constrained by institutional fragmentation and weak governance structures (Freedom House, 2025). Democratic transformation in these countries remains uneven. As Florian Bieber argues, the formal implementation of European standards is often accompanied by limited institutional effectiveness (Bieber, 2018).

A special position is occupied by Kosovo, which holds the status of a potential candidate. Its European integration policy is shaped by its specific international legal status and only partial recognition by EU member states. At the same time, according to the Balkan Barometer, Kosovo has one of the highest levels of public support for European integration in the region, with approximately 90% of citizens supporting EU membership (Balkan Barometer, 2024). Nevertheless, institutional limitations, weak governance capacity, and dependence on external assistance continue to create structural barriers to integration.

Geopolitical Contradictions of European Integration in the Balkan Region. It should be noted that the European integration processes in the Balkan region are unfolding amid intense geopolitical competition, in which domestic transformations are closely intertwined with the external influence of major international actors.

Expert analyses indicate that the United States, which historically played a significant role in ending the wars in the former Yugoslavia, continues to remain an important, though not always consistent, factor of regional stability. U.S. policy is primarily aimed at preventing destabilization, countering Russian influence, and supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Western Balkan states. One of the principal instruments of American policy is the use of sanctions against political leaders perceived as undermining regional stability. According to expert assessments, the case of M. Dodik, former President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is particularly illustrative. In March 2026, a group of influential U.S. senators, including J. Shaheen, C. Grassley, and E. Warren, called on the administration to reintroduce sanctions against M. Dodik, arguing that his "separatist rhetoric, coordination with foreign actors, and attempts to undermine the Dayton Peace Agreement threaten to destabilize the Western Balkans at a critical moment" (Shaheen et al., 2026).

Another instrument of influence was the adoption, in December 2025, of the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2026. As analysts from the Institute of Regional and Country Studies at Peking University note, the legislation is particularly notable for its strong focus on Serbia, whose policies are subjected to "unprecedentedly explicit criticism" (Li, 2025). The Act refers to the OSCE report on the December 2023 electoral process. It identifies corruption among senior political elites as "the greatest obstacle to the economic and political development of the Western Balkans."

As emphasized in contemporary expert analysis, a growing concern within the EU is the possibility that the United States, as the principal guarantor of European security within NATO, may become an unreliable ally. According to the study "Global Risks for the EU" (2025), the withdrawal of U.S. security guarantees for European allies is considered one of the most probable and potentially destructive scenarios for EU security in 2026 (European Experts, 2025).

In contrast to the United States, China pursues a "soft power" strategy in the Balkans, focusing on economic cooperation and infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Experts note that Serbia serves as China's key regional partner and follows a policy of "strategic hedging" (Tzifakis & Vasdoka, 2025). Contemporary media and expert analyses also emphasize that Chinese investments are primarily infrastructure-oriented and function as an instrument for strengthening Beijing's regional influence. A notable example is the "Danube Corridor" project, a 68-kilometer expressway from Požarevac to Golubac constructed by Shandong High-speed Group

(European Times, 2026). During a visit to the construction site in December 2025, the President of Serbia stated that the project would "provide a strong impetus for the development of eastern Serbia" and reaffirmed Serbia's support for the "One China" policy, which constitutes an important political signal for Beijing.

As emphasized in expert analysis, China's deep economic involvement creates several challenges for the EU. In particular, it increases the dependence of Balkan states on Chinese capital, which may conflict with the rules of the EU internal market, while also indirectly strengthening the position of pro-Russian elites that use the Chinese factor as leverage in their relations with Brussels. According to N.Tzifakis and E.Vasdoka, Western Balkan leaders encourage the involvement of external actors in order to strengthen their bargaining position with traditional partners (Tzifakis & Vasdoka, 2025).

Numerous studies conducted by security policy think tanks emphasize the problem of Russian influence on the European integration policies of EU candidate and potential candidate states in the Balkans. Expert analyses indicate that the Russian Federation has preserved and, in some areas, intensified its influence in the region. Serbia remains the primary focus of Russian policy, particularly because it has refused to join the EU sanctions regime against Russia. According to experts from the Center for Security Studies (CENSS), Russia uses Serbia as a "foothold in the Western Balkans," enabling it to conduct operations not only within the region but also across Europe (CENSS, 2025).

Analysts argue that cooperation between Serbia and Russia extends across multiple sectors, including intelligence activities, the defense industry, and internal security. A particularly illustrative example is the presence of pro-Russian politicians, especially A.Vulin, in key national security positions. Having previously served as Minister of Defense, Minister of the Interior, and head of the Security Information Agency, A.Vulin was sanctioned by the United States Department of the Treasury in July 2023 for "supporting Russia and facilitating its malign activities that undermine security and stability in the Western Balkans" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023). Despite these sanctions, he has continued to hold senior political positions, demonstrating the deep institutional penetration of pro-Russian influence within Serbia's political system.

Particular concern among European policymakers is generated by the use of Serbia as a "safe haven" for Russian intelligence personnel expelled from other European states following the invasion of Ukraine. According to data from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the number of Russian diplomats in Serbia increased from 54 in February 2022 to 64 by January 2025 (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025, cited in CENSS, 2025). As noted in expert assessments, some of these individuals were reportedly linked to the 16th Center of the FSB, which specializes in cyber operations, as well as to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, and were transferred to Belgrade after expulsions from Croatia and Poland.

Expert studies also emphasize the ideological dimension of Russian influence in the Balkans. Public statements made by Russia's president at the Valdai Forum in October 2025, as well as the rhetoric of the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service regarding a supposed "Kyiv Maidan" in Serbia, were aimed at discrediting pro-Western civic movements and legitimizing domestic repression. The establishment of a branch of the Russian Historical Society in Serbia, focused on shaping historical narratives, indicates, according to I.Bandović, "an attempt by Russia to consolidate its influence in the long term" (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2026).

Expert analyses suggest that, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European integration process of the Western Balkans has continued to slow because of the phenomenon of "enlargement fatigue." The EU requires candidate states to implement complex reforms, particularly in the fields of rule of law, anti-corruption policy, and the normalization of bilateral relations, especially between Serbia and Kosovo, while simultaneously demonstrating limited readiness for rapid enlargement. This reluctance is partly linked to the unwillingness of several member states, including France and the Netherlands, to assume additional financial obligations. As noted in professional analytical reports, the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue, regarded as a key prerequisite for the EU progress of both countries, remains stalled (BGNES, 2026).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly transformed the European security environment and reshaped EU perceptions of the Balkan region. Whereas enlargement had previously been viewed primarily as a project for promoting stability, democracy, and the rule of law,

the security dimension has now become central. The integration of the Western Balkans is increasingly seen as a means of preventing the emergence of zones of instability along the EU's borders that could be exploited for hybrid operations.

Analysts identify hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure as one of the most probable security threats facing the EU in 2026 (European Experts, 2025). In this context, the Western Balkans, characterized by complex political structures, weak institutions, and significant Russian and Chinese influence, are increasingly viewed as a potential source of such threats. A study by European Experts (December 2025) classifies a potential conflict in the Western Balkans, either through escalation between Kosovo and Serbia or separatist actions by Republika Srpska, as a low-probability but high-impact scenario for European security. As stated in the report, "the Balkans remain a potential source of instability" (European Experts, 2025).

Particular attention should also be paid to Russia's use of frozen conflicts and weak state institutions for conducting hybrid operations. As an illustrative example, experts from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy cite the decision of the government of A.Vučić to invite the Russian FSB to "investigate" the alleged use of a "sound cannon" against peaceful demonstrators on 15 March 2025, instead of conducting an independent national investigation. The incident was subsequently addressed by the European Court of Human Rights, which issued an interim measure requiring the Serbian authorities to clarify what device had been used (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2026). Serbian authorities refused an independent investigation and instead relied on FSB conclusions, which, according to analysts, demonstrate the transfer of sovereign state functions to an external actor outside both the EU and NATO.

Ukraine and the New EU Enlargement Policy: The Balkan Dimension. The decision to grant Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022 transformed the logic of the enlargement policy, as for the first time in the history of the European Union, this status was granted to a country engaged in a full-scale war and lacking control over part of its territory. According to experts from Internationale Politik Quarterly, by early 2026, the ten candidate countries could be divided into four categories. The first category, described as the "Balkan frontrunners," includes Montenegro and Albania, which have made the greatest progress in accession negotiations. The second category, the "second-tier eastern candidates," consists of Ukraine and Moldova, which lag behind the Balkan frontrunners in formal negotiations but surpass them in political mobilization around the European integration agenda. The third category comprises states experiencing stagnation because of domestic political problems, including North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The fourth category includes Serbia, whose relations with the EU have deteriorated due to its pro-Russian orientation. Turkey and Georgia remain outside these categories, as their accession processes are effectively frozen (Morina & Nič, 2026).

A comparison of the Ukrainian and Balkan experiences reveals both common patterns and significant structural differences that are relevant to future EU enlargement. Matteo Bonomi, a scholar at the Italian Institute for International Affairs (IAI), argues that for Ukraine, gradual integration has become "an essential instrument of state resilience under conditions of war" (Bonomi, 2026). For the Western Balkans, by contrast, "the credibility of full membership remains the EU's most powerful instrument for political reform and regional stability." According to the analyst, the fundamental difference is that "Ukraine integrates in order to survive, whereas the Balkans integrate in order to catch up" (Bonomi, 2026).

As noted by Ukrainian scholar O.Tankovsky, "Ukraine demonstrates a high level of political mobilization around the European integration agenda, which constitutes its competitive advantage compared to the Balkan countries," where reforms are often hindered by domestic political contradictions, oligarchic ecosystems, and, in the cases of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, pro-Russian influence (Tankovsky, 2026).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine became a catalyst that accelerated the EU enlargement policy as a whole, including the Balkan track. Researchers at the International Center for Defense and Security, S.Blockmans and M.Emerson, argue that "the EU enlargement process received a renewed impulse of energy after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine" (Blockmans & Emerson, 2026). In their view, the impact of the war on the Balkan states has been multidimensional, as enlargement ceased to be perceived merely as a technocratic process and increasingly became an instrument of

geopolitical positioning. At the same time, the war has also generated new risks for the Balkan candidate states. S.Blockmans and M.Emerson argue that countries experiencing stagnation, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, may be pushed to the periphery of the enlargement agenda, potentially contributing to deeper Euroscepticism and stronger pro-Russian sentiments.

In the context of Ukraine, the EU has intensified discussions on new models of integration. In early March 2026, the European Commission presented several options for reforming the enlargement methodology. According to experts from Internationale Politik Quarterly, these options include maintaining the status quo, introducing gradual integration packages requiring a new legal framework, and the model of "reverse enlargement," designed primarily for Ukraine, which envisages phased accession before the formal completion of all technical requirements (Morina & Nič, 2026).

F.Merz proposed an alternative approach based on observer status within EU institutions, allowing regular participation in EU summits and Council meetings without voting rights. According to F.Merz, the initiative received "broad support" during the informal summit in Nicosia on 24–25 April 2026 (Merz, 2026). It is noteworthy that F.Merz also acknowledged the possibility of territorial concessions by Ukraine as part of a future peace settlement. This issue directly resonates with the Balkan experience, particularly the unresolved questions surrounding Kosovo and Republika Srpska, which, for decades, have complicated regional integration processes. As emphasized in the report "Global Risks for the EU," "enlargement without reform risks paralysis; reform without enlargement risks irrelevance" (Moreira de Sá et al., 2026).

Conclusions. The contemporary European integration policy of the Balkan states is shaped by multilayered political, security, and geoeconomic transformations that have significantly altered the logic of the European Union's enlargement policy after 2022. The analysis in this study demonstrates that the Balkans remain a key region of strategic interaction between the EU and major international actors.

One of the defining trends of the current stage is the asymmetrical character of integration processes within the region. EU member states - Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Slovenia - are fully integrated into the European Union's institutional system and participate in shaping common EU policies. Their political role is increasingly associated with supporting the stabilization of the Western Balkans and contributing to the formation of the EU's renewed enlargement policy. At the same time, candidate countries - Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina - remain at different stages of adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*, reflecting uneven reforms, institutional fragmentation, and varying levels of political convergence with the EU (European Commission, 2024a).

The study also confirms that integration processes in the Balkan region remain closely connected to geopolitical competition. The United States continues to act as the principal security actor in the region, supporting the stabilization of the Western Balkans and their Euro-Atlantic integration. China is expanding its economic presence through infrastructure and energy projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, Russian influence primarily manifests through political and informational mechanisms, particularly in Serbia. As a result, the Balkans remain a space where competing geopolitical strategies intersect, complicating and slowing integration processes. At the same time, after 2022, the EU enlargement policy underwent a substantial transformation, with the security dimension becoming a defining component of integration policy.

Thus, the contemporary European integration policy of the Balkan states is developing under conditions shaped by the interaction of internal transformations and external geopolitical competition. The future integration of the Balkans will largely depend on regional states' ability to ensure institutional stability, implement effective reforms, and adapt to the EU's evolving security priorities.

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