



FEBRUARY 2024

Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans

This policy brief assesses the EU response after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, asking how the EU can pursue a geopolitical EU enlargement approach while maintaining its transformative objectives. The brief first provides a concise assessment of the instruments that the EU employs to strengthen democratic resilience and to counter Russian influence in the three countries. We argue that the EU has a comprehensive and effective range of instruments available, even if Russia has maintained its ability to project especially 'soft' power. However, when looking at the overall EU political approach towards these countries, we observe negative effects of the manner in which geopolitical imperatives for enhanced engagement are currently converted into strategy and discourse. More specifically, an insufficiently overarching firm and confident EU political approach towards the Western Balkans undermines the transformative potential of the EU's impressive toolbox for the region. The brief concludes that by becoming more confident and upfront, sticking to its values and making use of negative conditionality besides offering positive incentives, the EU can pursue a more effective geopolitical approach on transformative terms towards the Western Balkans.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was widely believed to lead to changing geopolitical dynamics in the Western Balkans. Many thought, or perhaps hoped, that the region would face a geopolitical choice that would lead to a closer bond with the European Union (EU) and a weakened Russian influence. However, a thorough Clingendael examination of Russia's influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina after '24/02', conducted in the first half of 2023, concluded otherwise. Even though Russia's sources of influence in the three countries have been moderately strained, this has not yet

affected Moscow's ability to act as a spoiler in their Euro-Atlantic integration.¹

The EU, geopolitically awakened by the invasion, did revive political energy for the EU accession process of the Western Balkans at large. In the words of European Commission President Von

¹ Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost & Baptiste Henry, "[Little substance, considerable impact - Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro](#)", *Clingendael Report*, August 2023, 46.

der Leyen, “The shock waves sent by Putin’s war of aggression have also reached our six Western Balkan partners. But this has only brought us closer together.”²

Still, the EU has not managed to use the momentum to consolidate the EU path of the three countries and thereby more effectively counter Russia’s presence in the region. For example, whereas the renewed geopolitical circumstances initially motivated the EU to more decisively push Serbia to make a definite turn towards the West, the EU failed to follow up its pressure with tangible repercussions as time went by, leaving Serbia able to continue its balancing act between Brussels and Moscow.³ That is in spite of fact that the EU has a wealth of instruments available to foster resilience against Russia’s meddling in the region, aiming to counter disinformation, malign influence, or energy dependencies.

This policy brief assesses the EU response after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴ It first focusses on the specific instruments that the EU employs to strengthen democratic resilience and to counter Russian influence in the three countries. We argue that the EU has a comprehensive and effective range of instruments available, even if Russia has maintained its ability to project especially ‘soft’ power in the region. However, when looking at the wider EU political approach towards these countries, we observe negative effects of the manner in which geopolitical imperatives for

enhanced engagement are currently converted into strategy and discourse. More specifically, an insufficiently overarching firm and confident EU political approach towards the Western Balkans undermines the transformative potential of the EU’s impressive toolbox for the region.

The return of momentum in EU enlargement

For years, the EU has been developing close and comprehensive ties with the Western Balkans. Contrary to Russia, which focuses mostly on building relations with individual political leaders, the EU set its sights on establishing a sustainable, long-term and institutional relationship aimed towards the full integration of the region into the EU. Engagement from both EU member states and institutions takes place in the political, economic and security fields, accompanied by technical and financial support and frequent political summits. The institutionalised relationship contributes not only to closer integration with the EU, but also aims to curb Russian sources of influence, which vary from political influence through proxies or the Orthodox Church, economic influence through investments and energy links, security influence through the arms trade and military exercises, malign actions such as meddling in elections or cyberattacks, as well as ‘soft’ influence in the media and information domain.⁵

Overall, the EU’s objectives in the Western Balkans are propelled by a triad of intentions: integration, resilience, and securitisation.

Politically, the EU’s agenda towards the integration of the Western Balkans gained renewed significance in the wake of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. While facing internal political divides and a relative standstill on its democratic reform path, Bosnia and Herzegovina received candidate status in 2022 largely for

2 European Commission DG NEAR, “[Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum](#)”, May 31, 2023.

3 Marton Dunai, “[Serbia under pressure to choose EU as Ukraine war raises stakes for Vucic](#)”, *Financial Times*, March 15, 2022; Jon Henley, “[Serbia must choose between EU and Russia, says Germany](#)”, *the Guardian*, November 1, 2023.

4 These three countries have been selected as case studies at the start of the research after a preliminary assessment demonstrated that the Russian influence in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most widespread, while Montenegro as a NATO member offers an interesting diverging case study.

5 Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost & Baptiste Henry, “[Little substance, considerable impact - Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro](#)”, *Clingendael Report*, August 2023, figure 2, 19.

geopolitical reasons.⁶ The EU also took several other steps, including the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Boosting societal and democratic resilience has formally remained the linchpin of the EU's technical approach in the Western Balkans. The EU continues to support democratic transformation and convergence with the EU's common body of law, the *Acquis Communautaire*, through *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance* (IPA) funding, technical assistance, monitoring reform processes, based on bilateral agreements (*the Stability and Association Agreements*, or SAAs), and the revised accession methodology of February 2020.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU realised, and openly admitted, that the mere duration of the Western Balkans' accession process in itself had become problematic. Therefore, it revived political attention to the process and sought to insert it with more incentives. For example, the EU sought to create tangible pathways for gradual or 'accelerated' integration before full integration.⁷ In spite of these efforts, the transformative purpose of the accession process is meeting challenging realities.⁸

The EU has also sought to interconnect Western Balkan countries into its economic tapestry by clarifying the concept of accelerated integration, first introduced in the revised accession methodology of 2020, through the November

2023 Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.⁹ Thereby, in the wake of enlargement fatigue in the countries of the Balkans, the EU aims to infuse the connection of the countries with the EU single market and thus make the benefits of EU integration more tangible for citizens. Simultaneously, the Economic and Investment Plan, presented in 2020, was meant to bring about a surge in financial aid, sourced from both the EU and its member states.¹⁰ It aimed at supporting economic development, infrastructure and private sector growth in order to close the diverging gap between the region and the EU member states.

The EU has furthermore sought to diminish the Western Balkans' dependencies on Russia, amongst others in the energy sphere, investing in diversification and renewable energy projects. This strategic move aligns not only with broader environmental goals but also serves as a manoeuvre to mitigate vulnerabilities and guard against external manipulation.¹¹ While progress is slow, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro have committed to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and have started looking for ways to diversify energy imports.¹²

Stronger security efforts after Russia's invasion of Ukraine

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, securitisation has also gained in importance as a cornerstone of the EU's strategy in the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical reality in

6 For example, while recommending candidate status, the European Commission observed no progress in the area of the judiciary and fundamental rights. See: Marika Djolai & Damir Kapidžić, "[BiEPAG's Experts React: EC 2022 Country Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)", BIEPAG, October 14, 2022.

7 European Commission, "[2023 Regulation proposal Reform and Growth Facility Western Balkans](#)", November 7, 2023.

8 Wouter Zweers et al., "[The EU as a promoter of democracy or 'stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?](#)", *Clingendael and Think for Europe report*, chapter EU effects on stabilitocracy formation in the Western Balkans, February, 2022.

9 European Commission, "[2023 Regulation proposal Reform and Growth Facility Western Balkans](#)", November 7, 2023.

10 European Commission, "[Western Balkans: An Economic and Investment Plan to support the economic recovery and convergence](#)", October 6, 2020.

11 See: Giulia Cretti & Aleksandar Macura, "[Stepping up the greenification of the power sector in the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, July 2021; Wouter Zweers, Giulia Cretti & Kristina Naunova, "[Energising EU enlargement? The prospects of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#)" *Clingendael Policy Brief*, May 2021; Giulia Cretti, Ardita Abazi Imeri & Stefan Ristovski, "[A Berlin Process for the energy security of the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Alert*, November 2022.

12 See for example: APnews, "[Bulgaria and Serbia diversify energy supplies](#)", February 1, 2023.

Europe has led to a broader awareness in the member states and EU institutions that in the EU accession process of the countries in the region, more emphasis should be placed on adherence to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including on aligning with sanctions against Russia.¹³

It also spurred the EU to revive its facilitation of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue with a new normalisation agreement and annex, concluded in Brussels and Ohrid in the spring of 2023. Orally accepted on both sides, but not undersigned as a result of Serbian reluctance, the agreement has so far failed to alter the status quo. Since then, violent protests in North Kosovo in May and an armed insurgency in September have attested to ongoing volatility.¹⁴ The EU has remained committed to the facilitation of normalisation talks, even if there is room for improvement in the EU's engagement when it comes to ensuring impartiality and transparency, as well as good cooperation between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Member States.¹⁵

These developments have built on a more long-standing EU security presence in the Western Balkans that aims to enhance the region's capacity to withstand both external and internal threats. More than 20 years after the end of the Yugoslav wars, an escalation of (ethnic) conflict in either North Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be fully ruled out. Therefore, through the EU-led EUFOR ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), to which several EU

countries contribute, the EU steadily contributes to stability on the ground. As outlined in its Strategic Compass, the EU also seeks to develop tailored partnerships with the Western Balkans, leading countries like Montenegro not only to align with the EU's CFSP, but also to make active contributions to EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, e.g., by Serbia and Montenegro in Somalia and Mali.¹⁶

Considering the active combating of serious crime and bolstering the rule of law as a serious prerogative, the EU has furthermore continued a variety of initiatives on these topics. Cooperation in combating organised crime and corruption, as well as irregular migration, takes place bilaterally and through EU agencies and programmes like Europol, Eurojust, Frontex, EMPACT, CEPOL, OLAF, and the EMCDDA.^{17,18} Moreover, the EU EULEX mission in Kosovo, as well as programmes such as the EU's Justice programme, seek to bolster the rule of law through targeted assistance.¹⁹

Lastly, in response to the growing threat of cyberattacks, the EU has made bolstering cybersecurity capabilities one of its top priorities. The EU is actively working to develop and implement effective measures to protect critical infrastructure, prevent cybercrime, and safeguard personal information, also by cooperating with NATO.²⁰ One of the most vital concerns is the development of capabilities that

13 Alexandra Brzozowski & Alice Taylor, "[Serbia should align with sanctions and foreign policy, EU Commission report says](#)", *EURACTIV*, October 12, 2022; Wouter Zweers, "[Dutch parliament demands geopolitical alignment in EU enlargement](#)", *Clingendael op-ed*, February 2, 2023.

14 Recently, Serbia has issued a written statement that it does not consider the agreement to be legally binding, see: Jelena Nikolić, "[Serbia formally refuses to abide by EU-brokered agreements with Kosovo](#)", *EURACTIV*, December 15, 2023; Engjellushe Morina & Majda Ruge, "[Violence in North Kosovo: How the EU and the US can break the cycle](#)", September 27, 2023.

15 Wouter Zweers & Myrthe de Boon, "[Overcoming EU internal dividing lines in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, April 2022.

16 United Kingdom Parliament, "[Chapter 4: Third country participation in CSDP missions and operations](#)", accessed 10 December 2023.

17 Alban Dafa & Wouter Zweers, "[Together or Alone? The need for increased Albanian–Dutch cooperation to fight transnational organised crime](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, August 2020.

18 See Eurojust, "[International agreements](#)"; Camino Mortera-Martínez, Zoran Nechev and Ivan Damjanovski, "[Europol and Differentiated Integration](#)", January 2021; AED, "[EMPACT Task Force Western Balkans](#)", 2021; OLAF, "[What we do](#)"; EPPO, "[Mission and tasks](#)". CEPOL, "[WB PaCT](#)"; EMCDDA, "[EMCDDA's work with candidate and potential candidates to the EU](#)".

19 EU Za Tebe (EU for you), "[Justice Programme](#)", accessed December 10, 2023.

20 Marie Brethous & Nad'a Kovalčíková, "[Next level partnership - bolstering EU-NATO cooperation to counter hybrid threats in the Western Balkans](#)", *EUISS Brief*, February 22, 2023.

will allow local actors to resist the growing threat of Russian malign information and cyberattacks, to which the Western Balkans, given their moderate to low levels of media literacy and low cyber capabilities, are relatively prone.²¹

A failure to face geopolitical realities undermines the EU's comprehensive toolbox towards the Western Balkans

Overall, the EU's toolbox for the Western Balkans is all-encompassing and impressive. In navigating the intricate tapestry of the Western Balkans, the EU, with its triad of objectives – integration, resilience, and securitisation – crafts a strategic mosaic where each element is not merely standalone but is intricately interwoven. What is more, the EU has stepped up engagement and efforts in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its geopolitical effects as they reverberated through the Western Balkans.

Yet, the net effect of these efforts towards current aspiring members has been below par. On the technical level, as well as in its discourse and in terms of political attention, the EU has stepped up its game. However, politically, the EU has had difficulties in developing a coordinated, confident, and self-conscious approach in line with the EU's proclaimed norms and values. Effectively, longer-term transformative objectives have been caught up by shorter-term stability considerations and a fear of driving countries away from the EU, and into Russia's hands. This has harmed the EU's comprehensive transformative toolbox that could also serve

to counter malign Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

Problematic in that respect is that the EU has difficulty in seeing eye to eye concerning the geopolitical realities on the ground, at least publicly. The European Commission and EU member state officials often claim that there is “no alternative” to the EU future of the countries in the Western Balkans.²² This may be an international frame to showcase commitment to the cause of enlargement and thereby to boost EU credibility, but by using it, the proponents fail to acknowledge that alternative paths, in reality, do exist.

Geopolitically, Serbia continues to foster relations with Russia, with its President Aleksandar Vučić recently mocking neighbouring countries over their alignment with EU foreign policy.²³ When it comes to democracy, the Serbian parliamentary elections on 17 December 2023 took place under “unjust conditions” and were “marred by harsh rhetoric, bias in the media, pressure on public sector employees and misuse of public resources”, according to the OSCE ODIHR election observation mission – a notoriously more explicit criticism compared with previous elections, echoed by amongst others the European Commission.²⁴

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska (RS) leadership, led by President Milorad Dodik, has continued to diverge from the EU path by introducing problematic laws, such as on the criminalisation of defamation, by making threats

21 The Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) evaluates the cybersecurity performance of countries. In 2020, Montenegro scored 52.23 (ranking 87), while BiH scored 29.44 (ranking 110), the lowest score in the Western Balkans. Serbia ranked 39 (89.8 score), North Macedonia ranked 38 (89.92 score) and Albania ranked 80 (64.32 score). See: International Telecommunication Union, “[Global Cyber Security Index, 2020](#)”, accessed December 10, 2023; Dragana Bajić & Wouter Zweers, “[Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia](#)”, *Clingendael Report*, July 2020.

22 For example, Commissioner Várhelyi when presenting the 2022 enlargement package, see: European Commission, “[2022 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses reforms in the Western Balkans and Türkiye and recommends candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)”, accessed December 10, 2023.

23 See Jelena Nikolić, “[Serbia formally refuses to abide by EU-brokered agreements with Kosovo](#)”, *EURACTIV*, December 15, 2023.

24 See “[Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions](#)”, OSCE ODIHR, December 18, 2023; see European Commission, “[Joint Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell and Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi on the parliamentary elections in Serbia](#)”, December 19, 2023.

against the Office of the High Representative, and by continuous secessionist statements.²⁵ Through disinformation employed by the very same politicians who ought to bring their countries into the EU, citizens increasingly turn away from the EU and towards Russia and others in the emerging illiberal global axis.²⁶

As the 2023 European Commission enlargement package testifies, EU interlocutors receive ample signals about undemocratic developments and a lack of positive developments in various candidate countries. It is therefore unlikely that they do not realise that alternative realities exist. Rather, the denial of such realities resembles a lack of ideas on how to respond to them. That becomes especially clear from the EU's political posture. The EU, also after 24/02, has interpreted a geopolitical approach as offering more incentives for, and politically supporting rent-seeking, nationalist elites openly flirting with Russia. At the same time, it has had difficulty in being upfront towards such elites about negative developments when necessary.

In other words, while formally pursuing a “carrot and stick” approach, the EU has mostly resorted to offering “carrots”, leaving the stick largely behind the door due to a fear of pushing countries away from the EU and into the hands of Russia. For example, the EU delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina called out the “threats made by RS President Dodik to an N1 journalist” as “the latest incident in a worrying trend of publicly attacking journalists as well as attempting to silence journalists through retrograde legislation”.²⁷ It is a positive step that such events are being called out by the EU. However, the

failure to apply negative conditionality, be it by setting deadlines to reverse backsliding, by personal sanctions, or by stalling the accession process, while continuing support for agents of change in civil society, is striking. It also contradicts the approach of the United States, which has been more inclined to apply sanctions against destabilising actors that continue to nurture close ties with Russia.²⁸ On the EU side, member states like Austria are now calling for accession negotiations to be opened with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024, even if the Commission noted in the 2023 enlargement package, with a sense of understatement, that “it is also important to preserve the constitutional order of the country.”²⁹

The fact that the EU is foregoing agents of change for the sake of progress in the accession process became clear during a recent event in Brussels, where various Bosnian experts claimed that the EU Delegation in Sarajevo is “pushing for rushing through incomplete and low-quality legislation”, e.g., the law on the transparency of the government. In the view of these Bosnian experts, this has led to the sidelining of parliamentary procedures and civil society engagement, and has mainly served to show progress and thereby to justify last year's decision to grant candidate status.³⁰

This exemplifies how the accession process is momentarily not always congruent with a transformative process. On the contrary, the approach risks disempowering domestic agents of change, putting the EU's transformative power under serious strain. It leads to a dichotomy between geopolitical and transformative imperatives towards enlargement.

25 See Azem Kurtic, “[Bosnian Serb Assembly Criminalises Defamation Despite Free Speech Concerns](#)”, *Balkaninsight*, July 20, 2023; Also see RFE/RL, “[Dodik Tries To Bar Bosnia's International Envoy From Meetings In Republika Srpska's Presidency](#)”, September 12, 2023.

26 See for example the 2023 Balkan Barometer of the Regional Cooperation Council, which recorded a drop of 3 percentage points in support for the European Union in the Western Balkans at large between 2021 and 2023, with larger drops in, amongst others, Serbia and North Macedonia. See RCC, “[Balkan Barometer 2023 - public opinion](#)”, 38.

27 See X: “[EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)”, posted November 17, 2023.

28 Ivana Stradner & Elaine Dezenski, “[The Russia-Serbia Nexus – EU Has to Step Up and Do its Part](#)”, *Kyiv Post*, July 25, 2023.

29 See European Commission, “[Commission adopts 2023 Enlargement package, recommends to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to grant candidate status to Georgia and to open accession negotiations with BiH, once the necessary degree of compliance is achieved](#)”, November 8, 2023.

30 Off-the-record roundtable at Brussels thinktank, September 2023.

Reconciling the geopolitical and transformative imperatives for enlargement and facing geopolitical and democratic realities

Reconciling the geopolitical and transformative imperatives for enlargement is, however, possible. It starts with calling a spade a spade concerning the lack of democratic performance and geopolitical inconclusiveness in the Western Balkans. That means, as the German Foreign Minister Baerbock has recently done, “lashing out at Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić for cozying up to Russia”³¹ when required. In order to do so, the incoming European Commission should feature a Commissioner on Enlargement about whom, unlike the current Commissioner, there can be no doubt of his or her commitment to democratic values.³²

It also means resisting the temptation to show progress in the accession process for the sake of retaining a sense of overall progress. In practice, Bosnia and Herzegovina is hardly ready to start accession negotiations, meaning that the EU should not decide to move forward therewith, or at least should not defend such a step with praise for reforms that in reality have hardly been achieved. Should the EU want to move forward with Bosnia and Herzegovina for strategic or geopolitical reasons, it would be better to be sincere towards citizens concerning such considerations. Being firm and clear on the accession criteria in the long term enhances citizens’ awareness that in order to improve their freedom, their socio-economic status, and their political system, ethno-nationalist politics or turning towards Russia are not the answer.

Empowering citizens will be crucial to making use of the transformative imperatives that lead to a region being more resilient and stable and, thereby, less prone to Russian influence.

31 Hans von der Burchard, “Germany’s Baerbock chides Orbán and Serbia in fiery remarks”, *Politico Europe*, December 5, 2023.

32 Zosia Wanat & Lili Bayer, “Olivér Várhelyi: Europe’s under-fire gatekeeper”, *Politico Europe*, October 5, 2021.

As we have argued in earlier research also in the context of the Eastern Partnership, compromising on its values out of short-term geopolitical considerations risks undermining the EU’s very own democratisation agenda.³³ As research has shown, such an agenda is more likely to be effective if democratic pressure from outside (from the EU) is accompanied by empowered domestic democratic demand.³⁴

Finally, in order to play a transformative role, the EU also needs to look inward. Rule of law deterioration in several EU member states and bilateral blockades unrelated to the EU accession requirements in the accession process by EU member states have harmed the credibility of the EU at large. Strengthening the rule of law mechanisms within the EU and ensuring a better implementation of the more-for-more principle in the accession process will be key in reviving EU credibility.

Conclusions and recommendations

While a comprehensive analysis of all instruments the EU has available to enhance stability, security, democracy and societal resilience in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro falls outside the scope of this policy brief, our brief assessment shows that the EU’s toolbox is all-encompassing, institutionalised and overall impressive.

The substandard democratic state of affairs in the Western Balkans, and the continuous ability of the Russian Federation to undermine stability in the region and impact politics in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, are, as such, not the result of a lack of meaningful EU instruments. While further expanding EU

33 See Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers & Iris van Loon, “[The Eastern Partnership, Three dilemmas in a time of troubles](#)”, chapter 1: Dilemma 1: Fostering democratic reform amidst geopolitical realities, *Clingendael report*, January, 2021.

34 See for example: Antoaneta Dimitrova & Geoffrey Pridham, “[International actors and democracy promotion in central and eastern Europe: the integration model and its limits](#)”, January, 24, 2007; Amin Saikal, “[Democracy and Democratization](#)”, *Princeton University*, accessed 10 December 2023.

instruments or increasing financing to support media freedom, promote green energy, enhance cyber capabilities, or strengthen institutions in the region may be opportune, it will not be sufficient to challenge status quo dynamics.

Rather, continuous instability is the result of a lacking drive for reform and the prevalence of ethno-nationalist politics and state capture dynamics in the region itself, exacerbated by an insufficiently coordinated, confident, and self-conscious EU political approach. The geopolitical imperatives after the Russian invasion of Ukraine to revive attention for EU enlargement have brought renewed attention to the Western Balkans but also risk further suppressing transformative processes. This policy brief has argued that it is however possible to reconcile geopolitical imperatives with the transformative objectives of the accession process. While this may sound superficial, such an approach can be translated into practical and tangible steps.

Member States like the Netherlands, which are serious about the transformative purpose of EU accession, will need to remain actively politically engaged to ensure that EU decision-making does not predominantly follow short-term geopolitical considerations. While not necessarily the most prominent item on the Dutch agenda for the EU, positioning the Netherlands as an even more active supporter of citizens in the Western Balkans can diminish the reputation of the Netherlands as a 'sceptical' country – a perception that does not fit the realities at least in the last few years. It will thereby be key to devise a discourse not based on narrow Dutch rule of law interests, but on a broader vision of how the rule of law can strengthen the EU and Europe at large.

In order to work towards a solid EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans, we articulate the following recommendations:

- In order to translate geopolitical imperatives for EU enlargement into a more effective transformative approach, the EU could better incorporate its institutionalised and comprehensive technical and financial support towards Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, in a more confident and sincere political approach that closely adheres to the EU's norms and values.
- The EU could, when calling out misalignment, backsliding, or political steps that go against EU membership criteria and spirit, better communicate clear deadlines to reverse such steps, and enforce such measures if deadlines are missed. In other words, it could articulate and enforce more tangible consequences when faced with undemocratic, or geopolitically undesirable steps by Western Balkan leaderships, making use of available negative conditionality options.
- The EU should be wary of rushing accession decisions for the sake of demonstrating progress. While positive developments are to be adequately recognised and rewarded, a relative standstill on Chapters 23 and 24, as largely identified in the 2023 Enlargement package, should be reflected in EU political decisions to avoid bogus reforms and a bogus process.
- EU representatives, be it from the member states or the institutions, would do well to come clean concerning geopolitical and democratic realities and to showcase to citizens in the Western Balkans as well as domestically that EU enlargement is not being rushed for the sake of further enlarging the EU. When moving forward in the accession process of individual countries for strategic or geopolitical reasons, the EU could publicly communicate the motives for such decisions in a more sincere manner.
- The EU and its member states would do well to continue sectoral projects that foster resilience against Russian influence in the Western Balkans, be it by supporting energy diversification and renewable energy production, a pluralistic media landscape and investigative journalism, or boosting cybersecurity capacities and combating disinformation.
- In its public communications towards citizens in the candidate countries, but also within the EU itself, the EU could moreover more explicitly counter Russian disinformation and better articulate the imperatives for EU enlargement, on which the intra-EU debate, especially in member states like the Netherlands, is now predominantly focussed on perceived risks and costs.

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