RE-ASSESSING EU'S WESTERN BALKAN ENLARGEMENT: ETHNO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND THE RUSSIAN REVISIONISM

Asha WAGWARE[*], Priya Vijaykumar POOJARY[**]

Abstract

The European Union is in the process of re-assessing the various challenges engulfing it. Enlargement - a flagship policy of the EU, is now materialising as a challenge, critically testing its competence. The course of Western Balkan enlargement comes with its own tier of difficulties. Complications stem from the very conceptualisation of the six Western Balkan countries as a single bloc and the underlying fragilities that characterise them. This paper attempts to deconstruct the EU's political conditionality applied in the Western Balkan enlargement. It postulates the critical issues of ethno-political conflicts within these territories as one of the major causes behind the delay in accession and highlights the limits of EU's approach to influence these countries. As a result, the geopolitical vacuum gives space for external actors like Russia to become proactive. The growing Russian intervention in these regions, contributes to the construction of salient political discourse in the enlargement.

Keywords: EU enlargement, Western Balkans, political conditionality, ethno-political challenges, Russian intervention

Introduction

In February 2018, the European Commission announced its much awaited Western Balkan Strategy, announcing 2025 as the year of possible accession for all the Western Balkan countries. The European Union's (henceforth EU) enlargement is its flagship initiative and the most successful example of European Integration. Started by just six countries, the EU has achieved a membership of 28-member states in six different waves of enlargement. As the six countries of former Yugoslavia race against each other for a successful accession, the Union is foreseeing perhaps the most difficult enlargement wave after that of the Central and Eastern European Countries (henceforth CEECs). The countries of Serbia,

[*] Asha WAGWARE is master student at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India; email: ashabw1696@gmail.com.
[**] Priya Vijaykumar POOJARY is Associate at Manipal Centre for European Studies, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India; email: priya.poojary@manipal.edu.

Montenegro, Northern Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina form a fragile neighbourhood, with internal ethno-political conflicts and territorial differences, making the Western Balkan Enlargement a challenge for the Union.

Since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, where the EU expressed its intentions to extend its membership towards the Balkan region, several debates have emerged on whether the Western Balkan Enlargement project can turn into a reality. The six countries in the Balkans have a history of unresolved conflicts among themselves posing challenges to the Union's basic values of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Internal instability, underdeveloped economies, ethnic disputes and rise of external influences, are some of the major difficulties facing the Union. Hence, political conditionality appears to be a critical tool to attain Regional Cooperation and prepare the countries for the EU accession. On the contrary, accession is not an easy process. Other than overcoming the internal challenges that the potential and candidate countries face, the EU is also tasked to *Europeanise* them, in order to be able to close the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire.* Following the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), it has increased its budget for funding these candidate and potential countries, making them politically and economically stable to accelerate the pre-accession process. With its 'Carrot-Stick' method, the Union is trying to assert its values necessary for *Europeanisation* of the future members.

Political conditionality emerges as the most successful enlargement tool used by the Union in previous waves, such as that of the CEEC enlargement. The EU introduced a Stabilisation and Association Process, or SAP, in the year 1999, a policy aimed at the Western Balkan countries to establish a free-trade area and maintain regional cooperation and stability[1]. In the year 2018, the EU released its communication on EU Enlargement Policy, highlighting its readiness to provide incentives and guidance to the candidate and potential countries to makes necessary reforms. The paper also established the importance of regional cooperation and need for stronger political relations in order to be eligible for a progressive 'European path'[2]. However, the road to EU accession is very complex for the six countries. Although it is up to the states to implement the necessary reforms, whether the EU can manage the pre-accession process and guide them through their challenges with conditionality remains questionable. It is also worth observing that despite all the ambitious plans relating to enlargement, there is indeed no concrete timeline of accession. Its prophecy for 2025 appears bleak and it is this very indecisiveness which makes space for external actors to intervene and influence the Balkan region. The dominating Russian presence on the Balkan soil, calls for a pressing concern to the EU. This paper attempts to shed light on the

---

[1] See European Commission, Stabilisation and Association Process. Retrieved from ec.europa: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en.
[2] See European Commission. 2018 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. Communication, Strasbourg.

various models of political conditionality employed by the EU in the course of the Western Balkan Enlargement. These models as reflected and debated in the literature are deconstructed to gain better understanding of the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality in the enlargement of the region. It highlights the critical issues of ethnopolitical conflicts within these territories as one of the major causes that has resulted in a delay in the accession process as well as postulates the limits of EU's approach to wield its influence in the Western Balkan countries. We argue that the geopolitical vacuum created in the region paves the way for external actors like Russia to adhere to its realpolitik ambitions. In the first part of the paper, we shall attempt to deal with political conditionality to study the EU's approach towards the six Western Balkan countries. The final analysis will provide insights into the internal conditions of Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (henceforth BiH), followed by discussions on the intervention of new political actors mainly Russia in the region.

1. Dynamics of Political Conditionality and the EU's Strategy towards Western Balkans

European Union's conditionality gained momentum during the late 1990s and the early 2000s during the Central and Eastern Enlargement, or the CEEC (Anastasakis, 2008). Conditionality is understood as a tool used by the European Union to ensure that potential or candidate members reform their policies and structures to adapt to those of the Union's. It is coherently linked to the democratisation of illiberal states that are aspiring to undergo democratic transition. Enlargement as a process would be incomplete and the compliance with the *acquis communautaire* wouldn't be achievable in the absence of conditionality. Such is the importance of the instrument. In practice, the Union's enlargement policy towards the six countries began to take shape under the *Thessaloniki Summit* of 2003. Since then the EU has been steadily prioritising the six states through SAP, *Stabilisation and Association Process,* under which the EU provides funds to the countries to create regional stability and accelerate the growth of their economies. However, significant literature shows a certain paradox. While on one hand the Union has been projecting its intentions and duties towards stabilising the states through constant incentives and EU norms, on the other hand researchers have observed a certain '*Enlargement fatigue.'* It was after a long 15 years that the Union finally declared a date for a possible accession in 2025, which for a long time has created a huge sense of uncertainty about the EU's intentions. This places a focus on how serious the EU is, towards this Enlargement, mainly because the current political scenario, where certain countries, such as Serbia and Kosovo are undergoing a deadlock, hampers the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. Moreover, since these states are at different stages of completing their chapters of the *acquis,* it is highly unlikely that they all can join the EU at the same time. On the contrary, the EU has been taking several state-building initiatives to influence

the region since the time it took over the Western Balkan Stabilisation project from the hands of the UN. For example, in 2003, the EU launched its *Ohrid Border Process*, managed alongside NATO. The main aim of this initiative was to secure and restructure the external border as per the EU's norms (Renner, 2009). Second, was the launch of SAP. Under the Stabilization and Association Process, the EU expects from these countries to restructure their economy and their political structure as per the European model. In short, it asks of them to democratise themselves and in return for compliance provides them for incentives (Renner, 2009). This implies that despite the Union's efforts, there are certain loopholes. This also leads to debates on EU's intentions. Is the EU ready for an Enlargement anytime soon? Or are the incentives a way to carry on the Enlargement talks while it tries to overcome its much criticised 'Enlargement fatigue?'

Political Conditionality hence plays a huge role in these implementations. The following are the models of conditionality discussed widely in the scholarship concerning enlargement in the EU (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004):
- External Incentives Model or the Carrot-Stick approach;
- Social Learning Model;
- Lesson Drawing Model.

The European Union adheres to the Carrot and stick method. Under this model, the Union sets some conditions that are expected of the candidate and potential countries. In return, the Union provides incentives, considered as 'rewards', where the ultimate aim is to attain EU membership. This however, is subject to the size and speed of the rewards as well as their credibility. This is based on the Union's 'bargaining strategy'. Likewise, if the reward is better and there is balance of cost benefit analysis or if there are more benefits, the more would the state try to adapt the values (Trauner, 2009). However, it is possible that not all the costs are related to money. For instance, if a particular state feels that the implementation efforts aren't worth the efforts, it could be counted as a cost (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). Another important task for the Union would be to determine the size and the nature of rewards, so as to attract the states. Furthermore, if the state thinks that the 'carrot' it is supposed to get is on a long term basis or that it is in anyway uncertain, then the process of implementation might be adversely affected (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). The External model also suggests that it's more likely that a candidate country would adapt to the EU rule of law quickly if it knows that the punishment or penalty is stringent. For instance, during the CEEC Enlargement, this model was applied in case of Slovakia, where in the country was blocked during the initial negotiations of enlargement because it failed to implement the levels of democracy that the EU's *acquis* demands. Thus, this proves the fact that it is important for the EU to stay committed to the conditionality policy. Here, we understand that political conditionality can prove to play a huge role to achieve the goals of both parties and failure of which could either lead to non-accession or on the other end, it may lead to lack of credibility towards the EU's norms. It has been observed from the

previous wave of enlargement of the Central and East European Countries that the European Union relies on the carrot and stick method not only to undertake state building projects but also to pass its normative values. Hence the carrot stick model or the external incentive model not only acts as a soft-power instrument in those countries where EU intends to assert its influence. The second model would be that of 'social learning', where in the state is assumed to decide based on reasoning whether it should implement EU's norms. The state here would adopt an EU norm because it's the most appropriate one to do so (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). While on the other end, the 'Lesson drawing model' is when a candidate country would be ready to adapt to EU's laws and norms just because the domestic situation demands it and policy change would happen in accordance to the domestic policy (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). While comparing the three models, it is certain that the external model is the one which is widely used and also very closely associated with the process of conditionality since that is the current EU policy. The external incentives model also comes as a poster child for success from the previous wave of Enlargement, which shows that incentives are the driving force of transposition. However, after analysing the models and role of EU's conditionality, it is evident that conditionality comes with both costs and benefits. The instrument of accession definitely has its fair share of setbacks.

EU's conditionality is mainly aimed at achieving accession of future member states. This implies that once the members attain access, the importance of political conditionality loses its pertinence. This comes off as the biggest setback of the instrument. Moreover, if the EU doesn't foresee any future Enlargements post the WB6, political conditionality as an accession instrument would no longer exist. This could explain why the EU has been prolonging the Enlargement procedure and that it expects a total transposition of EU laws. A possible argument could be that political conditionality for future states is also a way to broadcast its normative power in its neighbourhood. One of its strong setbacks is the fact that since the 'carrot and stick' model is highly based on benefits, if the country finds greater costs and low benefits, it may not comply with EU norms to the fullest, making Europeanisation unsuccessful. Conditionality is also seen as an 'elitist procedure', where it does not focus at solving the internal conflicts of the region, which is the root cause of instability in the Western Balkan states.

2. Ethno-political Challenges: Dealing with the Past

The former states of Yugoslavia saw a series of civil wars in the late 1990s. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, regional cooperation has been a major priority of state builders and organisations. Regional cooperation, as a process is more of an external force in the case of the Western Balkans. Since the 1990s, it has been driven by external actors such as the UN, NATO and later EU. The first step towards attaining this measure was the 'Dayton Accord', an initiative taken by the United Nations in 1995, which aimed at ending the Bosnian war and also

stabilising the region, Regional cooperation could hence be understood as an initiative taken by these forces to maintain peace and stability. In case of EU, it also includes the harmonization of the norms as per the *acquis communautaire*. However, regional cooperation has been a huge challenge due to the internal instabilities of the countries. One of the important factors that contribute to this difficulty is that all the countries are at different stages of Enlargement. A lot of literature on the regional instability also shows that these states can be considered as 'minimalist states', often characterised as weak, where there is an external driving force. For example, in case of Serbia, Kosovo and BiH, it is often the Union which acts as a driving force to achieve developmental goals and not the states themselves (Bieber, 2011). This indeed highlights the fact that Western Balkans is a fragile region which has become the latest interest for Russia's realpolitik. If one thinks on regional grounds, the Balkan states could either bend to the left, meaning to the EU or to the right, meaning Russia. The main point of departure for the Western Balkan Enlargement's challenge lies in the fact that EU's conditionality, although helps democratise and develop the states, fails to resolve the root cause of the instability: ethnopolitical issues. On the contrary, Russia's advantage lies in using the internal issues and fragility to its benefits (Bechev, 2018).

2.1. Serbia-Kosovo: A (un)successful story of Secession?

The relationship of Serbia and Kosovo wasn't always so fragile, considering Kosovo and Metohija were the two autonomous parts of Serbia before Kosovo's secession. Serbia, a major part of the former Yugoslavian state, seems to surround the other states with dominance based on ethnic issues. Before the deadly war, the Yugoslavian states were cordial towards one another. Additionally, Yugoslavia has had a long history of multi-ethnic population with Albanians, Serbians, Croats, Slovenians and several other communities. However, it is argued that in case of Serbia, the political elites enforced an aggressive nationalism and used a strategy of agenda setting to its own benefits, based on ethnic lines in the former Yugoslavia (Gagnon, 1995). This could also explain Serbia's ambitions to protect its national interests and fight for the Serb communities in Kosovo and BiH.

In the year 2008, Kosovo declared its independence by seceding from Serbia. This act of self-determination was not accepted by the latter. Currently, Kosovo and Serbia are both completing their pre-accession procedures in hopes of a better European future. However, a deadlock between the two hinders either parties from joining the EU till it is resolved. Serbia recently came up with banners that said: "Kosovo is Serbia." Serbia under Vucic has a rather staunch position towards Kosovo and sees the seceded region as still an integral part of Serbia. In 2005, under the tenure of Martti Ahtisaari, the then UN envoy, several negotiations were held with regards to the status of Kosovo's independence, which was a consequence of a decade long war. The main idea was to eventually have a

settlement arranged by the UNSC which would not only protect the interests of the Kosovo Serbs but also overall transform Kosovo's status in the international politics. However, this proposal was vetoed by Serbia's ally Russia (Lehne, 2012). What followed further was an unprecedented step by Kosovo, which regardless of all oppositions, decided to declare independence with Pristina as its capital in 2008. The reality today remains that Kosovo has come a long way and even though its legitimacy isn't acknowledged by five EU members and several others, including Russia and Serbia, it still proves to have the power of acting as Serbia's roadblock to EU accession. Kosovo and Serbia's never-ending saga of cat and mouse chase has become one of the biggest challenges to EU's global governance policy. For instance, recently, Kosovo, which is part of CEFTA along with Serbia, BiH and other candidate and potential countries of the Balkans, decided to impose 100% customs fees on both Serbia and BiH, instead of 10% which it imposed initially. This came as a retaliation to the latter countries' opposition to Kosovo joining the Interpol3. While in 2012, the world saw another spat between the two neighbours, as Kosovo wanted to be recognised internationally on its own and without any representation from UNMIK, an initiative under '*UN Security Council Resolution 1244*[4]. A major failure of UNMIK lies, however in the fact that it failed in enhancing any internal cooperation within Kosovo, which would avoid North region and rest of Kosovo's cleavage. Hence, we list two important problems that need attention on the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue:

1. Reluctance to accept Kosovo's independence;
2. Serbia's efforts to create a north-south divide in Kosovo to create instability.

Serbia seems to agree to compromises as long as it receives some credible benefits and it is not Kosovo's recognition. Second, creation of disputes in Kosovo on ethnic lines, draws a parallel with its intentions in BiH with *Republika Srpska.* The EU's first special envoy mission to Kosovo was the UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), followed by NATO-led *KFOR.* EU began its state-building mission through EULEX (EU'S Rule of Law Mission), which was a large-scale initiative comprising of around 14,000 policemen, customs officers, judges and prosecutors. The main aim was to help Kosovo adapt the Rule of Law (Deda, 2010).

However, it seems like the European Union's peace talks have not been very successful in the last decade. Primarily, Kosovo's unrecognition amongst the European Union member states has already started declining the rate of encouragement among the Kosovars. Second, a serious lack in the Union's measures to stop Serbian mediation in the north, along the Ibarra river is another

---

[3] Read more at https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-hits-serbia-bosnia-with-100-customs-fees-after-interpol-snub/.

[4] United Nations (2012, Feb). Serbia-Kosovo dialogue eases tensions, but challenges remain. Retrieved from UNMIK: https://unmik.unmissions.org/serbia-kosovo-dialogue-eases-tensions-challenges-remain-%E2%80%93-un-official

reason why the Union needs to concentrate on the internal conflicts in Kosovo and also the ethnic conflict of both these states with their minorities. Despite having a series of peace-building initiatives, the European Union is lacking in achieving the regional cooperation, which is necessary for a stable Western Balkan region.

A much-criticised strategy of the EU is that it acts as a peace-negotiator and not a mediator. It is important to take into account that this wave of enlargement is unlike any other, and that the Central and Eastern European Countries' Enlargement cannot act as a model for state-building initiatives in the Western Balkans as the region comprises of newly formed states whose frontiers have never been constant.

In case of Kosovo, despite the ICJ (International Court of Justice) declaring Kosovo's secession as "no breach of international law", there is a good amount of countries who haven't respected this decision as mentioned above, mainly because they have a history of regions wanting to separate and form a new state, such as Spain. Other than the differences on international level, and the problem of northern Kosovo, there is also the case of the city of Mitrovica. The Union has attempted to take some state-building measures. However, mere bridge-building initiatives aren't sufficient.

Despite of its shortcomings, the Union has managed to achieve some success as well. EU's missions in Kosovo have been able to help establish some stability in Kosovo as is seen today. However, the downfall of EU's missions lies in the problem of internal differences. The post 2008 scenario has seen the EU maintain its position as a 'negotiation organiser' and not as a 'negotiator' itself. For instance, during the tenure of the first *Higher Representative of EEAS*: Catherine Ashton, there were some major arrangements made at Brussels in 2013, for both the countries to resolve their disputes which weren't successful. Brussels Agreement was then followed by the Berlin Process which was a flagship initiative of the Merkel Government to encourage and accelerate the Western Balkan Accession talks. This initiative was primarily made to blast through summits of Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Trieste and London, between 2014 and 2018 (Kmezic, 2017). In the year 2018, under EU's Sofia Summit, Serbia expressed its intentions to be flexible for a future dialogue, provided it wouldn't have to recognise Kosovo's separation. On the other end, Kosovo had just celebrated 10 years of self-proclaimed independence. Although EU's state building projects and peace building initiatives have helped stabilise the region to an extent, they are merely peace initiatives. The current situation demands high level of negotiations. This is also challenged by a lack of pressure from the EU's side. For instance, in 2019, the Romanian presidency announced Western Balkan Enlargement as one of its key priorities. However, the deadlock has not been resolved, nor have the parties been put under enough pressure. We argue that unless European Union takes a role of a negotiator itself, this deadlock between Kosovo and Serbia shall not get better. Furthermore, Kosovo has to fight its battle in the international community to legitimise its claim as a separate nation. Although almost a half of UN members recognise its status,

there are countries, including some EU members themselves, like Spain, Serbia, Russia, India and China, who do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. Hence it becomes important first for Kosovo to not just implement the EU norms and close the 35 chapters, but to also achieve an accord from the other EU members. Most of the states which are against Kosovo's recognition are the ones who have an internal history of regions wanting to secede, and a successful Kosovo Story would emerge as an ideal example of 'Self-determination'.

2.2. Bosnia-Herzegovina: Limited Statehood

The Dayton Peace Agreement of '95 finally ended the Bosnian Conflict and with it there was an emergence of two separate internal entities: The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and The *Republika Srpska*. While the Republika Srspska is a unitary state sort of structure, the federation of BiH is highly decentralised and comprises of 10 cantons (Noutcheva, 2007). The system of decentralisation is perhaps one of the most important factors behind BiH's instability. Second, legitimising the *Republika Srpska*, which has Pro-Serb inclination, is also an equally important factor. Post-Dayton Process, Bosnia had gained all the focus by the US and eventually by the EU, to change the conditions. There were three major upliftment tools, the first being Dayton Agreement itself, which enabled the refugee return which was necessary to re-establish the multi-ethnic BiH. The second was the NATO-EU incentives system and the third was financial support, which was complex as it didn't have a well-functioning central government. Nonetheless, by 2000, about €2.4bn were promised for upliftment projects. The whole organisation was distributed among institutions like OSCE, CIVPOL, UNHCR and the PIC. Although the situation in the country isn't at its best, one could agree that things are certainly better than they were in 1995 (Overcoming Obstacle to Peace, 2013). Regardless of the efforts, steps to democratise and bring stability in the region haven't been as successful. After taking over from NATO, the EU wasn't in a very strong position to successfully prevent any conflicts that would further complicate the internal situation. As for the initial conflict settlement, the EU had no role to play. It wasn't until the 2000s with the entry of SAP, that it began providing incentives to the political elites. The peacebuilders expected the situation in BiH to be better and become more "westernized". However, the current scenario says quite contrary. Political scene in BiH is run by three nationalist parties who have a mutual distrust and dislike for each other. The Federation of BiH consists of just a bit more than half of the population. The third entity here is the Brcko District, which is neither under the federation nor under the RS as it runs through a local government (Juncos, 2005). The Bosnians officially applied to the EU in 2016, due to their need of the EU membership for innumerable reasons, some of them being easy migration for jobs, peace and prosperity and better opportunities. As for the current status in BiH, the *Republika Srpska* has expressed to be separated from the rest of the country. According to the *Human*

Rights Watch report of 2017, the country has still not made any progress to get rid of ethnic discrimination and problems between the Serb, Croat and the Bosnian communities. Political elites such as Milorad Dodik, have expressed their hopes for a separation for the Bosnian Serbs. In a scenario where, political elites have played active roles in separatist movements in a nation with an already fragile ethnic identity, puts light on how there a constant imbalance in the national politics has been, putting the collective identity of BiH at risk. The irony here is that the *Republika Srpska* feeds from the funding provided by Serbia, which at the same time opposes the separation of Kosovo.

Despite this spiral of internal ethnopolitical conflicts, the EU's stand remains pretty constant. EU's main strategy includes peacekeeping missions, encouraging the states to implement the rule of law in and Europeanise themselves in exchange for the incentives and other perks, with the ultimate treasure being 'EU accession'. There are however two sides of the story:

First, that EU's strategy remains an elite strategy, which hasn't been successful in resolving the conflicts in these regions. Second, even if it is willing to bridge all gaps, the ethnic differences, sparked by political ambitions are so strong and complicated that it would take more than just financial incentives and developmental aids to repair the damage done in these candidate and potential countries of the Former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. As a result of the political chaos, the Western Balkan region has influenced external powers such as Russia to use their realpolitik.

3. Russian Revisionism: A Game-Changer

The Western Balkans is of a very strategic importance not only for the EU but also for Russia. The region's relations with the Soviet Union go decades back. The region is seen as a "chessboard" for major powers and Russia already has strong partnerships, aside from the fact that the Kremlin is also one of the major trade partners of the European states. When the Yugoslavian war ended, Serbia's defeat was also seen as a drawback for Russia. In the current geopolitical context, Russia's interest in the Western Balkans lies in its dynamics with the EU and NATO. Post-Crimea, Russia began looking at the area from a better strategic standpoint, as a way to keep its western counterparts away. Although Russia doesn't have a very overt policy towards the region, it certainly uses some strategies in this 'sphere of influence'. But is the region of any actual geopolitical importance to the Kremlin?

The Western Balkan nations remain significant for some key reasons: One, it is a sphere where Russia can compete against the West and influence the states by using a divide and rule policy. Unlike the EU, which focuses on its normative influence or an 'incentive based' policy, Russia focuses on using the existing divisions and instability between the states to increase its own influence (Bechev, 2018). The other reason being, the Balkan region is important for the energy supply

route, which gives Russia a leverage (Szpala, 2014). Russia's movements in the Western Balkan region is highly driven by realpolitik ambitions. Unlike a steady policy, Russia believes in taking advantages of the ongoing political cleavages, and considering the already fragile state of the region, there's little Russia would have to do. From the 1990s, Russian energy firms have been prominent in the Balkan region, which makes the states dependent on Russia for economic reasons. Russian energy giants like Lukoil and Gazprom have their strong presence in the Balkan region. It also uses political and economic relations as a channel to carry its strategies towards the states. For instance, in 2008, Gazprom took over Serbia's NIS, and got a major hold over the energy sector. Another example would be that of the Belgrade-Moscow FTA, against the EU's CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement). However, CEFTA remains the biggest partner for Serbia (Szpala, 2014).

In recent years, Russia has managed to increase its influence over Serbia. The Russian-Serbian dynamic is almost like a love affair, with Serbia relying the most on Russia's support in the international community to veto Kosovo, while the Kremlin plays on its strategies through Serbia. Although Serbia declares its intention to join the European Union and adapt to the norms in the *acquis communautaire,* its allegiance is highly disputed. At the other end, Russia has a special place for its European ally Serbia, which helps it control the regional politics. It manages to strengthen its hold in Serbia through its soft power diplomacy. Russia aims at creating a positive image of itself in Serbia and has so far succeeded in creating institutions or instruments which would help attain this goal. For example, in 2013, Russia set up a cultural centre in Belgrade and Russian Institute of Strategic Research. In the year 2014, Russia Today began broadcasting a program in the Serbian language, *Sputnik Srbija*, to influence the Serbians against the EU and its allies (Szpala, 2014). This shows that the Kremlin has already begun its strategies towards shifting the Balkans' mindset on Europeanising themselves. Influencing Serbia is a key to manipulate the shifting balance of power in the Western Balkan Region. In case of Kosovo, the Kremlin seems to have dual powerplay. First, Russia, as discussed, has played a significant role as a UN permanent member who has veto powers against Kosovo, mainly because it relates Kosovo's attitude to that of Crimea. A second side to it is that by maintaining a deadlock between Serbia and Kosovo, it hampers both the states' entry into the European Union, as resolving conflicts is one of the pre-requisites of the membership criteria. Thus, by rejecting Kosovo's legitimacy in international politics, the Kremlin is not only creating a blockage for both the countries, but also keeping NATO away from entering these Balkan states.

In case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Kremlin has been a partner to Serbia, and supported the Serb minority in Bosnia, and indeed *Republika Srpska*. Moreover, it has been encouraging the latter's independence. For a significant amount of time, Russian interests in the BiH were directly linked to the those of Milorad Dodik, a very significant name in the politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina

(Mujanovic, 2017). By asserting this very influence on a pro-Serb entity of *Republika Srpska*, Russia succeeds in asserting its influence in Bosnia. Moreover, Bosnia-Herzegovina, like its neighbours is equally dependent on Russia when it comes to the Energy sector. For instance, in *Republika Srpska*, the refineries of oil are led by Russia (Bierri, 2015). A very significant sign of a strong allegiance for Russia, further lies in the fact that the *Republika Srpska* is against moving towards a membership to NATO, also called as the *NATO Membership Action Plan, or the MAP*. Additionally, the fact that Dodik has had strong ties with Moscow, shows how easily Russia has succeeded in implementing its *Realpolitik* and keeping the opposite influences at bay[5]. Thus, like Serbia and Kosovo, the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, also proves to be a chessboard in the hands of Russia, where it becomes significantly easier for the Kremlin to manipulate the geopolitics of the region, there by emerging as an active threat to the EU's ambitions.

From the above arguments, it is evident that Russia's moves in the region have been very tactful. Furthermore, this rising Russian revisionism would easily exploit the enlargement fatigue of the EU, if it does not overcome its structural challenges. It is in fact in the EU's biggest interests, to strengthen its hold on these 'minimalist states', to save its backyard from a future geopolitical crisis. One of the major challenges of the Union is the power and effectiveness of political conditionality. Although it is a very successful tool used in the previous enlargement of Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), its usage in the Western Balkan enlargement may not be sufficient enough for the countries to meet the pre-accession requirements. In 2017, the European Union expressed its concerns regarding an increasing influence of Russia, which is responsible for destabilising the region (Galeotti, 2018). This would imply that, other than the funding and guidance these states have received under the SAP, the EU needs to focus even more on acting as a negotiator or working on the internal disputes, in the absence of which, the region could become a geopolitical battleground between the Kremlin and the EU. Moreover, a rising Russian intervention would directly pose a huge threat to European security. Russia's influence causes some important concerns in the region. First, Russia has been mediating in the internal affairs of the Western Balkan region, which would destabilise the states, as it supports Serbian separatist groups in BiH and Serbian minorities in Kosovo. Second, a growing power of Russia could also be dangerous for NATO. But even more difficult for the EU states as the EU doesn't have its own army. If Russia gains back its strength in the backyard of EU, it could get a leverage in the EU-Russia strategic relations. Russia is the EU's primary energy partner and their dynamics depend on the geopolitical situations with respect to each other. In a situation where Russia takes over the Balkan region, it would not only hamper EU's interests strategically, but could also affect the energy supply to European countries. Lastly, amidst the

---

[5] Read more at https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bosnian-serb-leader-i-have-dear-friends-both-in-moscow-and-brussels/.

political chaos caused by the Brexit negotiations, external sanctions, elections and other such international issues, the European Union cannot ignore the Enlargement of the six candidate and potential countries and must strengthen its credibility towards accession procedure.

Conclusion

The EU in today's times is behest with numerous challenges with democratic backsliding in some of its member states and institutional weaknesses that have crippled the region. The Western Balkan enlargement poses and will continue to pose challenges to the European Union and it would be worth observing how EU as an organisation will address the membership of these countries. Challenges include internal ethnic tensions, poor economic conditions, internal political pressures as well as influence of external actor in the region. Russia's growing revisionist foreign policy will continue to dominate the EU's integration project. It continues to exert itself as a dominant actor in the international politics of Western Balkans region which comes across overbearingly strong on EU's 'transformative agenda'. Moreover, the Western Balkan Enlargement challenges the framework of political conditionality, questioning the European Union's way to deal with a region with a terrible war history and ethnic conflicts.

As Europe sits at the crossroads of its future, there are clear hopes for future enlargement. This enlargement is in the interest of the EU as it would demonstrate its ambitious Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as secure the European Union's geopolitical interests in the region. The unenthusiastic approach of the EU towards Balkan enlargement has also resulted in producing varying perception towards the EU in the Balkan countries. These perceptions hold significant importance because, "*credible perspective of the membership creates a powerful incentive for fundamental reforms in the society*" (Cameron, 2004). It is indeed imperative that the EU does not shy away from its previous commitments.

References

Anastasakis, O. (2008), The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*.

Bechev, D. (2018), *Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkans,* The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.

Bieber, F. (2011), Building Impossible states? State-Building strategies and EU membership in the Western Balkans, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63(10), pp. 1783-1802.

Bierri, M. (2015), The Western Balkans between Europe and Russia, *ETH Zurich*.

Cameron, F. (2004), *The Future of Europe,* London: Routledge.

Deda, I. (2010), The View from Kosovo: Challenges to Peace-building and state-building, *Connections,* 9(3), pp. 87-92.

Dobbins, J., Miller, L., Pezard, S., Christopher, S., Chivvis, J. *et al.* (2013), *Overcoming Obstacle to Peace*, RAND Corporation.

Gagnon, J. V. (1995), Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia. *International Security,* 19(13), pp.130-166.

Galeotti, M. (2018), *Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian Storm?,* European Council on Foreign Relations.

Juncos, A. E. (2005), The EU's post-Conflict Intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina: (re)Integrating the Balkans and/or. *Southeast European Politics, VI*.

Kmezic, E. A. (2017), *Western Balkans and the EU Fresh wind in the sails of Enlargement,* Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group.

Lehne, S. (2012), Kosovo and Serbia: Toward a Normal Relationship. *Policy Outlook.*

Mujanovic, J. (2017), *Russians Bosnia Gambit.* Foreign Affairs (retrieved from: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2017-09-06/russias-bosnia-gambit).

Noutcheva, G. (2007), *Fake, Partial and Imposed Compliance*, CEPS Working Documents.

Renner, E. A. (2009), Creeping EU Membership in South-east Europe: The Dynamics of EU Rule Transfer to the Western Balkans, *Journal of European Integration*, (retrieved from doi:10.1080/07036330902919988).

Schimmelfennig, F. and Sedelmeier, U. (2004), Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*.

Szpala, M. (2014), *Russia in Serbia- soft power and hard interests,* Centre for Eastern Studies.

Trauner, F. (2009), From membership conditionality to policy conditionality: EU external governance in South Eastern Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp. 774-790.