



EU Enlargement in a Time of Increasing Geopolitical Challenges: ‘Fresh Momentum’ and Beyond

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**Hall of the Institute of European Studies
Belgrade, Trg Nikole Pašića 11, IV floor, Room 136**

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National Centre for Research on Europe at the University of Canterbury
Faculty of Arts, University of Canterbury
EU's Jean Monnet Chair (EUEL30NZ - 101127485)



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We are pleased to welcome you to the Institute of European Studies and National Centre for Research on Europe, University of Canterbury Conference

EU Enlargement in a time of increasing geopolitical challenges: 'Fresh momentum' and beyond

After the completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round and Croatia's accession in 2013, EU enlargement progressed very slowly, resting on 'life support' (O' Brennan, 2014) until it was de-facto frozen in the mid-2010s. Exclusively focussed on the Western Balkans after the EU suspended accession talks with Turkey (following several years of standstill) in 2018, attempts to re-launch and re-vitalise the EU enlargement process in this region via the adoption of the 'new' EU enlargement strategy in 2018 and the Commission's revised methodology for accession negotiations in 2020 conspicuously failed. Still suffering from post-2004/07 'enlargement fatigue', preoccupied with its internal crises and, more recently, with increasing regional and global geopolitical challenges to peace and security, the EU's political elite and even more so wider public seem to have lost interest in any further enlargement. On the other hand, democratic backsliding and political instability have worsened in the Western Balkan candidates, which have begun to lose faith in the EU and show signs of widespread 'non-enlargement fatigue'.

However, the EU enlargement process was somewhat 're-energised' by the EU's response to the geopolitical challenge which its Member States faced when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Only four months after the Russian invasion the EU decided to grant candidate status to two Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Ukraine and Moldova, although EU membership was not labelled or even announced as a possible outcome of established cooperation in any of the EaP documents, and despite the problematic democratic records of both countries. The following developments - the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022 (17 and 8 years, respectively, after these two countries were granted candidate status), the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (in December 2022) and to another EaP country, Georgia (in December 2023), as well as the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (already) in June 2024 – were labelled by the European Commission as 'a new phase with fresh momentum' in the enlargement process (European Commission, 2024). It seems that this 'fresh momentum' has so far been used most effectively by Montenegro and Albania both of which have made (after many years of standstill) significant progress in the accession negotiation process during 2024 and particularly 2025 and hope to close it by 2028 and 2030, respectively. This hope is further encouraged by some recent optimistic announcements coming from the EU, particularly the European Commission (Von der Leyen, 2025). However, such optimism is not extended to other current candidates for EU membership, especially not to the Western Balkan neighbours of Albania and Montenegro, which have been waiting for an EU future of their own for over two decades now. The answers to the questions of whether, when and how these 'remaining' current and potential candidates can hope to accelerate their accession to the EU remain highly uncertain.

The papers presented at this conference address these, and other questions and issues related to the current prospects for the EU enlargement process and EU relations with the candidates and potential candidates for membership from a broad range of disciplines. The conference keynotes and panels bring together distinguished and widely recognised international scholars alongside promising emerging scholars from the Western Balkans, the UK, Finland, New Zealand and several other countries. We hope you will enjoy stimulating discussions, forge new collaborations, explore new ideas, and experience the unique atmosphere of Belgrade and Serbia in the summer.

We wish you a very successful conference.

Conference Organisers and Programme Coordinators:

Dr Milenko Petrovic, Jean Monnet Chair, President of Australasian Association for Euro-Asian Studies (AAEAS), Senior Lecturer Above the Bar and Deputy Director, National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Dr Milan Igrutinović, Research Associate, Institute of European Studies (IES), Belgrade

Conference Administrative Coordinator:

Mrs. Sonja Dragović, Administrative Secretary, Institute of European Studies, Belgrade

Conference Organising and Programme Committee:

Dr Slobodan Zečević, Professor and Director of the Institute of European Studies, Belgrade, Serbia

Dr Martin Holland, Professor and Director of the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Dr Maja Kovačević, Professor and the Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade

Dr Miloš Petrović, Senior Research Associate, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade

Dr Milenko Petrovic, Jean Monnet Chair, AAEAS President, NCRE, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Dr Irina Milutinović, Senior Research Associate, Institute of European Studies, Belgrade

Dr Milan Igrutinović, Research Associate, Institute of European Studies, Belgrade

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



Professor Dr Richard Whitman, University of Kent, UK

Professor Richard G. Whitman is Professor of Politics and International Relations at University of Kent. At present he is Senior Associate Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

His current research interests include the foreign and security and defence policies of the UK and the EU. He is the author and editor of eleven books and published over sixty academic articles and book chapters on European integration and UK foreign and security policy. His book (with Kamila Kwapińska) *The UK and the War on Ukraine: Status seeking in the European security order* is due for publication in 2026.

Professor Whitman is a regular international media commentator. Recent coverage has included BBC radio and television, Sky, ITV, CNN, Bloomberg, CNBC and he has been quoted by print publications including The Economist, The Financial Times, Newsweek, Reuters, the International Herald Tribune and the Wall Street Journal. He has regularly been called to give evidence to the UK Parliament on UK and EU foreign and security issues.

He was a former Head of the Europe Programme at Chatham House and an Associate Fellow (2006-2023). He was a Senior Fellow on the Economic and Research Council's UK in a Changing Europe initiative and held the British Academy and Leverhulme Michael Dockrill Senior Research Fellowship in British Foreign Policy in 2022. Elected as a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences in 2007 he is a former Chair of the British International Studies Association (BISA) and the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES). He was a co-lead editor of the Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS) between 2017 and 2022.



Professor Dr Emilian Kavalski, Tampere University, Finland

Emilian Kavalski is Professor of International Relations at Tampere University (Finland) and the Book Series Editor of Routledge's "Rethinking Asia and International Relations" series. He has held the inaugural NAWA Chair Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow (Poland) and the Li Dak Sum Chair Professor at the University of Nottingham Ningbo (China), as well as appointments at universities in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, India, Japan, and Taiwan. His research focuses on the worlding of International Relations theory and practice as a result of (i) the growing prominence of post-Western (especially, Asian) normative orders and the ways in which they confront, compliment, and transform established traditions, norms, and institutions;

and (ii) the encounter of International Relations with life in the Anthropocene, especially the conceptualization and engagement of non-human actors. Emilian contends that in both these areas the concept and practices of relationality have important implications for the ways in which global life is approached, explained, and understood.



Professor Dr Biljana Vankovska, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius (ret.), Skopje, North Macedonia

Biljana Vankovska is a Professor Emerita of political science and international relations at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje. She is an executive director of Synergia Orbi: Institute for Global Analysis. Member of the No Cold War collective. She served as a Guest Senior Research Fellow at Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI) in 1997-2000. Faculty staff member at the European Peace University (EPU), Stadtschlaining, Austria (2000-2014). Worked as Senior Fellow at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) in 2001/2002. She is a prolific author and the founding editor of the journal *Security Dialogues*.

Conference Hosts and Convenors:



Slobodan Zečević has been permanently employed at the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade, where he holds the title Principal Research Fellow. As of August 2024, he has been appointed Director of the Institute of European Studies. He recently published his new book *Constitutional Order of the European Union*, an important and thoroughly researched study of contemporary developments within the European Union. He is the author of several books and numerous scholarly articles in the fields of the institutional system, European Union Law, and EU Business Law, as well as academic analyses on Serbian-French relations, the French political system, and French cultural policy. His books have been used as reference literature in the teaching process at the University of Belgrade and at faculties across the Republic of Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska, and North Macedonia. For over fifteen years, he has been continuously involved in higher education teaching in Serbia.



Professor Martin Holland holds a Jean Monnet Chair ad personam and is the founding Director of National Centre for Research on Europe at Canterbury. He is internationally recognised for his work on EU Development policy, CFSP and Perceptions of the EU. In 2002 he initiated the “EU External Perceptions Project” which has been recognized as one of the top twenty “Jean Monnet Success Stories”. He has held a number of notable awards, including an EUI Jean Monnet Fellowship; an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship; a Rockefeller Bellagio Fellowship; and a Bene Merito award from the Polish Foreign Ministry. Professor Holland has managed numerous large EU projects, the most recent being the EU Indo Pacific Strategy Network. Over his 42-year career, he has authored or edited twenty-six books. Since 2000, he has been a regular visiting lecturer in EU programmes across Asia (Bangkok, Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Kuala Lumpur, and Seoul).



Milenko Petrovic is Jean Monnet Chair, and Senior Lecturer Above the Bar at the National Centre for Research on Europe and at the Department of Global, Cultural and Language Studies, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He is the Deputy Director of NCRE and President of the Australasian Association for Euro-Asian Studies (AAEAS). His research and publications focus on problems of post-communist democratisation and socio-economic transition in East Central and South-Eastern Europe and the EU’s eastern enlargement. He is the author of *The Democratic Transition of Post-Communist Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and the co-editor of *A Quarter Century of Post-Communism Assessed* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and *EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: The geopolitical turn or another postponement?* (SI, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:2, 2021). He has authored or (co-)edited several other volumes and numerous journal articles and shorter contributions on comparative politics, post-communist transition, European integration, and EU enlargement.



Milan Igrutinović holds a PhD in history (University of Belgrade), and is currently a Research Associate at the Institut za evropske studije [Institute of European Studies], Belgrade. His research is related to the topics of foreign policy, security and defense of the European Union and Serbia, and the history of Yugoslavia. His recent publications cover the topics of the theory of strategic culture with special focus on contemporary Serbia, and on the development of the foreign policy and defense of the European Union, both in the institutional and practical sense. The topics in historiography that he deals with are the foreign relations of socialist Yugoslavia and the USA and the European Economic Community. His current research focus is on the role of strategic narratives in the conduct of foreign policy, and on the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union.

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Monday, 15 June

9:30–10:00	Registration
10:00–10:15	Welcome and Opening:
	Professor Dr Slobodan Zečević, Director of the Institute of European Studies (IES), Serbia Professor Dr Martin Holland, Director of the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), University of Canterbury, New Zealand Conference Convenors: Dr Milenko Petrovic , NCRE and Dr Milan Igrutinović, IES
10:15–11:15	Session 1: Keynote address
	<i>The EU's enlargement endgame</i> Professor Dr Richard Whitman, University of Kent, UK Chair: Milenko Petrovic
11:15–11:30	Morning coffee break
11:30–13:00	Session 2: Panel 1 <i>The EU's approach to enlargement and geopolitics I</i>
	<i>The European Union as a geopolitical actor and its neighbourhood</i> Prof. Dr Duško Lopandić, University Business Academy, Novi Sad, former Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Portugal and to the EU <i>The EU without a strategic vision for the Western Balkans in a time of wars and major social crises</i> Dr Ognjen Pribičević, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade (ret.), former Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Germany and to the UK <i>Policy priorities in flux: EU enlargement in a continental polycrisis</i> Dr Milan Igrutinović, IES, Belgrade <i>When the wind of change switches its direction: The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans</i> Dr Irena Ristić and Dr Dejana Vukasović, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade Chair: Slobodan Zečević
13:00–14:00	Lunch

14:00–15:30	Session 3: Panel 2 <i>The EU's approach to enlargement and geopolitics II</i> <i>Geopolitical aspects of EU enlargement process: possible implications for Western Balkans</i> Dr Ivan Zarić, Institute of Strategic Studies, University of Defence, Belgrade <i>Where are the borders of the European Union: Beyond Europe, at the intersection with Asia</i> Dr Jasminka Simić, Radio-Television of Serbia <i>EU enlargement in a geopolitical era: Illustrative insights from Serbia</i> Dr Ksenija Marković and MA Marko Mandić, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade <i>Rethinking EU membership - Differentiated integration and the future of enlargement</i> Dr Marko Milenković, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade Chair: Martin Holland
15:30–15:45	Afternoon coffee break
15:45–17:15	Session 4: Panel 3 <i>The EU Enlargement – Legal and Member States Issues</i> <i>EU enlargement versus formalising the peripheral status: what does the current crisis reveal about the nature of the accession dependency</i> Dr Sanja Petkovska, Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade <i>Constitutional limits of phased integration in EU enlargement</i> Dr Jovana Tošić, IDEAS Law, Belgrade <i>Conditionality in the EU accession process: from a normative daydream to the implementation realities</i> Dr Uroš Ćemalović and MA Milica Ilić, IES, Belgrade <i>EU enlargement in the late 2020s: Does the Berlin Process still matter?</i> MA Jialu Chen, University of Canterbury, NZ Chair: Milan Igrutinović

Tuesday, 16 June

9:30–9:45	Registration
9:45–11:00	Session 5: The EU and the Western Balkans - Two keynote addresses
	<i>Neighbourhood first: The Western Balkans and the geopolitical remaking of Europe</i> Professor Dr Emilian Kavalski, Tampere University, Finland <i>Who lost the compass? North Macedonia and the EU's shift from the Copenhagen Criteria to geopolitics in enlargement</i> Professor Dr Biljana Vankovska, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius (ret.), Skopje, North Macedonia Chair: Miloš Petrović
11:00–11:15	Morning coffee break
11:15–12:45	Session 6: Panel 4 Candidate States – Issues and Peculiarities
	<i>Could defense cooperation be a fresh momentum in Türkiye's EU-bid?</i> Dr Marian Karagyzov, Institute of Balkan Studies - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia <i>North Macedonia's EU accession: reconciling strategic foreign policy goals with the capabilities of a weak state</i> Dr Mitko Arnaudov, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade <i>Europa Über Alles: On Montenegro's post-democratic condition</i> Dr Feđa Pavlović, University of Montenegro, Podgorica <i>Integration from the bottom: social network analysis of subnational cooperation of Ukraine and EU member states</i> MA Fedor Zolotarev, University of Pecs, Hungary Chair: Uroš Ćemalović
12:45–13:30	Lunch
13:30–14:40	Session 7: Panel 5 Western Balkans and the EU: Topical Issues
	<i>The European Union and secession in candidate states: principles or politics?</i> Dr Jovica Pavlović and MA Nikola Tucakov, IES, Belgrade <i>Security and defense in the Western Balkans: current trends and scenarios in the absence of EU enlargement</i> Dr Igor Novaković and Dr Marko Savković, ISAC Fond, Belgrade

	<i>Germany and the European integration of the Western Balkans in the time of Zeitenwende/Epochenbruch: between normative optimism and (geo)political realism</i> Dr Petar Ćurčić, IES, Belgrade Chair: Milan Igrutinović
14:40 –14.45	Short break
14.45 -15.55	Session 8: Panel 6 <i>Serbia and the EU: Topical Issues</i>
	<i>Role of the Growth Plan in the European integration process of the Western Balkans candidate countries: a case study of the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia</i> MA Aleksandra Baklaja, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade <i>Systemic pressures, state preferences and elite perceptions: A Neoclassical Realist account of Serbia's stalled EU accession</i> MA Petar Milutinović, IES, Belgrade <i>Consequences of non-alignment with EU policy on the Ukraine conflict for Serbia's EU accession</i> MA Uroš Popadić, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade Chair: Jovica Pavlović
15:55–16.10	Afternoon coffee break
16:10–17:45	Session 8: Round table <i>The Western Balkans in the EU: Myth or Reality?</i>
	Participants: Prof. Dr Martin Holland, NCRE Director, University of Canterbury, NZ Prof. Dr Maja Kovačević, Dean, FPN University of Belgrade Prof. Dr Slobodan Zečević, IES Director, Belgrade Dr Milenko Petrovic, NCRE, University of Canterbury, NZ Dr Miloš Petrović, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade Chair: Milan Igrutinović
17.45 – 18.00	Conference Closing Remarks

ABSTRACTS

Session 1: Keynote address

Chair: Milenko Petrovic

The EU's enlargement endgame

Professor Dr Richard Whitman, University of Kent, UK

This paper examines the European Union's current enlargement phase as a strategic "endgame" shaped by geopolitical urgency, institutional fatigue, and normative recalibration. It argues that enlargement is no longer primarily a technocratic process of rule transfer but a political instrument for stabilising Europe's contested periphery in an era defined by war, democratic backsliding, and great-power competition. Focusing on the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the paper analyses how shifting threat perceptions—especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine—have transformed enlargement from a conditional, open-ended pathway into a time-sensitive security project.

The paper develops a three-part framework. First, it traces the evolution from the post-Cold War "transformative" model of enlargement to a resilience-oriented model that prioritises alignment and strategic anchoring over deep convergence. Second, it evaluates the emerging toolkit of staged integration, differentiated membership, and financial pre-accession mechanisms as functional substitutes for full accession in the short term. Third, it assesses the implications of internal EU reform debates—including decision-making rules, budgetary constraints, and the rule-of-law regime—for the credibility of future accessions.

The central claim is that the EU is entering an enlargement endgame in which the question is no longer whether enlargement will occur, but in what form and under what institutional compromises. Enlargement is thus reframed as a process of political settlement between the Union's strategic ambitions and its absorptive limits. By reconceptualising enlargement as an adaptive governance strategy rather than a linear expansion, the paper contributes to debates on European order, sovereignty, and integration under pressure. It concludes by outlining scenarios for a "post-finality" Union in which membership becomes more graduated, yet remains central to the EU's role as a geopolitical stabiliser. These findings illuminate the trade-offs between speed, legitimacy, and cohesion that will define the Union's next phase of expansion and its capacity to shape the continental order future.

Session 2: Panel 1

The EU's approach to enlargement and geopolitics I

Chair: Dr Slobodan Zečević

The European Union as a geopolitical actor and its neighbourhood

Prof. Dr Duško Lopandić, University Business Academy, Novi Sad, former Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Portugal and to the EU

With the evolving dynamics of international relations in Europe and globally - particularly since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the Trump second term presidency - the European Union faces a fundamental dilemma: how to develop its strategic autonomy in relation to major powers, whether allies such as the United States or adversaries such as Russia. This paper argues that the limited achievements of enlargement policy and the shortcomings of neighbourhood policy over the past two decades represent both indicators and drivers of the EU's insufficiently developed geopolitical autonomy. Situated within the broader debate on strategic autonomy, the paper explores how enlargement and neighbourhood policies affect the EU's geopolitical position. It examines the relationship between the EU's proclaimed geopolitical ambitions and the actual outcomes of its enlargement and neighbourhood policies, with particular attention to the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and Mediterranean relations. It also investigates whether the slow pace of enlargement has undermined the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor and whether the limitations of neighbourhood policy are a cause or consequence of the Union's evolving strategic posture. Finally, the paper examines the evolution of the EU's relations with key neighbouring powers—Russia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom—and analyses how these relationships shape the Union's geopolitical position and its capacity for strategic autonomy.

The EU without a strategic vision for the Western Balkans in a time of wars and major social crises

Dr Ognjen Pribićević, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade (ret.), former Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Germany and to the UK

Tectonic shifts in international relations, resulting from the Russian aggression in Ukraine and Trump's election as President of the United States, have created a new international environment in which the EU has become the biggest loser, among other reasons, due to its wrong enlargement policy. Over the past twenty years, the EU's bureaucratic policy of hesitation and conditionality has opened the door for Russia and China to enter the Western Balkan region, and Serbia has seriously lagged behind in its democratic transition. This enlargement policy is the consequence of the fact that EU didn't have a strategic vision for what to do with the Western Balkans, even though it undoubtedly belongs to Europe geographically, historically, and culturally. Not even Russia's aggression against Ukraine has forced the EU to admit Serbia into as a member state and thus protect its southeastern border from Russia and China. Instead of including Serbia and other Western Balkan states into its membership immediately, as was done in the case of Bulgaria and Romania, the EU has continued its policy of non-binding statements and promises. Even the latest initiative on the accession of Montenegro and Albania will not change anything of importance, because Serbia, as the largest country in the region, remains outside its membership. Trump's new foreign policy strategy, as well as the war with Iran, has only further sharpened the question of the EU's ability to take responsibility for its own policy and defense.

Whether the current time of wars and conflicts between the great powers will help the EU to finally realize that the most important issues are geography, territory and its defense, remains to be seen.

Policy priorities in flux: EU enlargement in a continental polycrisis

Dr Milan Igrutinović, IES, Belgrade

This paper starts from the premise of several existing and medium- to long-term crises on the European continent (polycrisis), that are from the EU's point of view both internal (overdue institutional changes, cascading economic shocks, the advent of new right politics) and external (Russian war on Ukraine, USA's anti-EU overtures, USA and Israel attack on Iran, global economic competition), and argues that the EU enlargement policy has no firm anchoring in Brussels. The author will use the existing literature to elaborate the effects of the polycrisis on the EU's public debate on the enlargement process, having in mind both the EU level and selected member states' level. For this the author will consult public statements, policy documents, polling data on the EU enlargement, and the wider policy debates, using the concept of strategic narratives. The author will then analyse the interlocking effects of the new territorial reality of enlargement in Eastern Europe - on Ukraine and Moldova - on the Balkan area and Balkan states' prospects. The discussion will show a two-tier approach by the EU: proactive in the domain of the EU Commission's enlargement portfolio and restrained at the European Council level where polycrisis erodes the perceived usefulness of the enlargement process. The author will conclude that the EU does not view the enlargement process as a strategic priority nor a necessity, and that any success of the candidate states in the process will be weighed not on their merit but on the EU's ability to project the enlargement as a part of the solution(s) to the ongoing polycrisis.

When the wind of change switches its direction: The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans

Dr Irena Ristić and Dr Dejana Vukasović, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

For almost two decades, from 1989 onward, enlargement was the flagship of the European Union and considered one of its most successful policies. The Big Bang enlargement in 2004/2007, and Croatia's entry in 2013, were meant to mark the beginning of the complete political unification of the entire European continent. It, however, marked the beginning of the longest period of non-enlargement in the EU's history. Within two decades, the enlargement enthusiasm in the European Union, its institutions, member states and among its citizens, was replaced by enlargement scepticism. This scepticism was mainly triggered by economic and regional disparities, political tensions on EU and national levels, perceptions of disempowerment and identity loss within the EU, but directly caused a growing resentment towards new potential members as well. While these are all micro-level consequences, this paper aims to compare the macro-level conditions of enlargement for countries that joined in 2004/2007, on the one hand, and the Western Balkan countries, on the other. To this end it will look at 1) the commitment for enlargement among the political elites in both the EU and the candidate countries through the lens of the respective *Zeitgeist* ("united Europe" vs "Europe of two classes"); consider 2) the existence vs the lack of strong economic interests as a mutual incentive for successful integration; and analyse how 3) the polycrisis starting in 2009 and reaching its peak in 2022, was historically fundamentally different from the period 1989-2007 and how the single crisis impacted both the EU and the Western Balkans in their positioning towards enlargement.

Session 3: Panel 2

The EU's approach to enlargement and geopolitics II

Chair: Prof. Dr Martin Holland

Geopolitical aspects of EU enlargement process: possible implications for Western Balkans

Dr Ivan Zarić, Institute of Strategic Studies, University of Defence, Belgrade

This paper aims to analyse the geopolitical aspects of the EU enlargement process and its implications for the Western Balkans. While internal challenges – both within the EU (e.g., enlargement fatigue, complex decision-making procedures) and among candidate countries (e.g., compliance with accession criteria and the *acquis communautaire*) – continue to shape the trajectory of enlargement, the geopolitical dimension has emerged as a one of the key determinants. Focusing in particular on the post-February 2022 period, the analysis is grounded in a modern realist ontological and epistemological framework. It argues that several significant shifts have occurred in the EU's approach to candidate countries. From a geopolitical perspective, there is a discernible effort to move limes more eastward into Mackinder's Heartland, accompanied by the attempt to establish new lines of demarcation vis-à-vis strategic competitor(s). In this context, enlargement behind the limes (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) has gained greater prominence in both EU discourse and policy action than enlargement within it (Western Balkans). At the same time, differences are evident in the informal conditionality applied to candidate countries, particularly regarding the expectation of prior NATO membership for Western Balkans candidates, as compared to those candidates eastward of limes. This points to a bifurcated approach: on the one hand, toward Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia; and on the other, toward the Western Balkans, with further differentiation within the latter group. Although full EU membership remains uncertain for many of these candidates, a geopolitical approach suggests that the Union's primary objective may be the clearer delineation of spheres of influence vis-à-vis strategic competitor(s), rather than enlargement per se.

Where are the borders of the European Union: Beyond Europe, at the intersection with Asia

Dr Jasminka Simić, Radio-Television of Serbia

In Article 237 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community it is stated that “any European State may apply for a membership in the Community”. Through a series of enlargements, the Community has grown from the “original six” to the “twenty-seven” which is why the enlargement policy is considered the most successful European policy. Candidate countries include Turkey, the countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, Ukraine and Moldova, while Georgia is recognized as having a “European perspective”. The Copenhagen criteria clearly define the accession procedure, although political and geostrategic factors have influenced the accession of Eastern European countries. The EU integration models have been complemented through the concept of “two speeds” and the establishment of a new accession methodology, along with consideration of more efficient majority decision-making process. However, the key question to what extent the European Union is prepared for new institutional reforms to accommodate new member states, and the new geographical reality to expand into Eurasia. By analysing the founding documents on institutional reforms and using the comparative

method of the EU enlargement process, along with a case study of the candidate states, the author argues that the Ukrainian conflict slowed down the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries. It also transforms into a cultural and ideological-political dispute over the accession of countries from the former Soviet Union where the Russian population lives and which Russia considers to be a zone of its interests. The author concludes that the European integration process has significantly changed and the initial Western European project has acquired a pan-European dimension, raising key questions about the nature and direction of the integration process, i.e. its conceptualization (supranational or intergovernmental approach), as well as its relationship with other regional organizations of the Global South, which are gaining an increasingly important place on the world market.

EU enlargement in a geopolitical era: Illustrative insights from Serbia

Dr Ksenija Marković and MA Marko Mandić, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the European Union's enlargement policy has gained renewed political significance and dynamics, often referred to as a "renewed momentum." However, this process unfolds alongside continued democratic backsliding and autocratization in candidate countries, raising questions about the nature of contemporary enlargement and its transformative power. This paper argues that, in such a context, the character of the EU itself is changing: from a normative project based on values to an increasingly pronounced geopolitical actor. Using Serbia as a case study, the paper analyses how this transformation is reflected in citizens' perceptions, taking into account the role of domestic political narratives in shaping attitudes toward the European Union. In recent years, Serbia's European integration process has increasingly taken place less in the realm of democratic trust and more through administrative procedures and propagandistic rhetoric. Although a significant portion of citizens still formally support EU membership, their emotional identification with European values is weakening, while the belief that Serbia will ever become an EU member remains limited. The focus is on patterns of ambivalent support for European integration, perceptions of the temporal distance to membership, and perceptions of conditionality, particularly in the context of foreign policy demands such as sanctions on Russia. The empirical insights are based on a descriptive analysis of selected indicators from public opinion surveys conducted in 2018 and 2022. These data are not used as a basis for a comprehensive empirical analysis, but rather as illustrative indicators of broader trends in the perception of the European Union in Serbia. The findings indicate a gradual shift in how the EU is understood- from a community of values to an interest-driven actor, raising important questions about the credibility of the enlargement policy and its impact on democratization processes in the region.

Rethinking EU membership - Differentiated integration and the future of enlargement

Dr Marko Milenković, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

The prolonged and increasingly uncertain EU integration trajectories of candidate and countries have intensified debates about the future architecture of European integration. While political and institutional obstacles to enlargement are well documented, the legal feasibility of alternative forms of integration that fall short of full membership remains insufficiently explored. In particular, questions concerning treaty compatibility and the legal effects of differentiated participation in EU regulatory regimes have not received systematic attention. This paper addresses this gap by examining differentiated integration (DI) as a multilayered approach to EU enlargement beyond a linear accession model. It brings into dialogue two strands of scholarship that are rarely connected: Europeanisation, which assumes full membership as the endpoint, and DI, which

emphasises flexibility and variable participation but is typically analysed within the EU. These approaches rarely engage with one another, especially in the legal scholarship. The paper brings them into dialogue by exploring whether and how the Europeanization of current candidates without full accession can be accommodated within the EU's existing treaty framework. Drawing on doctrinal legal analysis, complemented by insights from political science, the paper explores whether and how forms of partial or multi-circle participation by candidate countries can be accommodated within the EU's existing treaty framework. It analyses the legal implications of such arrangements for decision-making, accountability, and the distribution of competences between EU institutions and non- EU member participants. The paper argues that legally structured forms of differentiated participation may provide a pragmatic response to enlargement fatigue and renewed geopolitical urgency to expand the Union. Rather than treating DI as a purely transitional or second-best solution, the paper analyses it as a mode of governance that produces distinct legal effects and strengthens incentives for reform and compliance in candidate countries.

Session 4: Panel 3

EU Enlargement– Legal and Member States Issues

Chair: Dr Milan Igrutinović

EU enlargement versus formalising the peripheral status: what does the current crisis reveal about the nature of the accession dependency

Dr Sanja Petkovska, Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade

In this paper, I intend to use the centre-periphery metaphor and the discussion on peripheralization of the outside EU countries in order to analyse the actual geopolitical pressures and crisis. The main idea is to counterpose two conflicting aspects of the relation with the core EU countries towards the enlargement process. On the one hand, we have the official language of enlargement and acceptance, while on the other, the inequalities between the countries are perpetuating the problems of dependence and subjugation, enforcing the imperialistic constraints. These constraints reproduce the situation of “arrested development” rather than offer the chance for empowerment and development in any sense (social, political, cultural, economic, etc.). Therefore, by summarising the ongoing debates on decolonisation, my presentation will open the question of what solving this deep structural contradiction between the EU and surrounding countries interested in becoming members would actually mean if presented in the language of political progressiveness, equality and empowering independence of the candidates. Without independence, constraints of the EU enlargement process are only of a weakening, rather than an empowering effect on the position of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries in the process of joining the EU. In conclusion, this analysis will point to the radical positive switches that could happen in the current geopolitical arena in case the accession process is founded on a support and empowerment model, rather than subjugation and conditioning.

Constitutional limits of phased integration in EU enlargement

Dr Jovana Tošić, IDEAS Law, Belgrade

This article examines whether the European Union may lawfully pursue phased integration of candidate countries without revising the founding Treaties. The issue has become urgent because recent enlargement practice increasingly combines accession conditionality with gradual integration, earlier access to selected segments of the internal market, and participation in certain Union policies before full membership. The article argues that the Treaties do not recognise any status of partial membership and that Article 49 TEU remains the exclusive route to accession. At the same time, Article 217 TFEU leaves broad room for deep external integration through association agreements, protocols and joint institutions. On that basis, the article distinguishes phased integration from Treaty circumvention. It contends that substantial sectoral integration is legally feasible without Treaty revision, but only if it remains external in form, limited in scope, reversible in operation, and institutionally subordinate to the accession framework. Special attention is given to supervisory mechanisms, the role of the European Commission, the autonomy of EU law, and the position of the Court of Justice of the European Union. The article further argues that candidate countries cannot simply be inserted into the ordinary preliminary reference mechanism under Article 267 TFEU, but that an association-based functional equivalent may be legally conceivable where the Court retains the final authority over interpretation. The conclusion is that phased integration is not per se contrary to the Treaties, but it is constitutionally sustainable only within carefully defined limits.

Conditionality in the EU accession process: from a normative daydream to the implementation realities

Dr Uroš Čemalović and **MA Milica Ilić**, IES, Belgrade

Legal conditionality is a cornerstone of the European Union (EU) accession process, serving as a powerful tool despite its notable inherent limitations. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of its role during the previous two EU enlargements (2007 and 2013), as well as in Serbia's EU accession process, the paper explores conditionality not only as a doctrinal concept, but also as a multifaceted legal-political instrument. The article's main hypothesis is that the weaknesses the conditionality principle had already shown in the previous two enlargement rounds have further increased when it comes to the EU accession of the Western Balkans (WB) countries, rendering necessary a significant redefinition of the principle. The methodological framework employed encompasses a range of approaches, including systematic and teleological analysis to elucidate the key provisions of legal acts and international treaties; content analysis for interpreting policy documents; comparative analysis to examine the evolving approaches over time; and case study methodology to provide in-depth contextual understanding. In conclusion, the authors argue for an overhaul of the conditionality principle, but also for a more straightforward and effective EU enlargement agenda.

EU enlargement in the late 2020s: Does the Berlin Process still matter?

MA Jialu Chen, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

After the European Union slowed down the enlargement process due to internal challenges, Germany initiated the Berlin Process in 2014, which was later joined by several other EU member states. (Such as Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and a former

EU member state the United Kingdom.) The Berlin process aligns with the EU's strategic interest in advancing the accession of the six Western Balkan countries and in integrating the region more closely into the EU before it falls under external influences. The process has helped to sustain political momentum for these six countries to join the EU. It has strengthened regional cooperations and trust building dialogues, as well as promoted economic integration and infrastructure connectivity through a range of economic, political and security, social and ecological transition projects. It involves annual summits aimed at advancing regional cooperation and supporting the European integration of the Western Balkans. However, the Berlin Process has not significantly accelerated or enabled any country to become an EU member state. Its implementation has been limited, as many projects have been delayed or remain underfunded, and progress on key political reforms has been slow, particularly in the areas of the rule of law and anti-corruption. This paper aims to address the main reasons why the Berlin Process has thus far failed to bring the Western Balkan countries closer to EU membership, and whether rising geopolitical challenges in the 2020s may alter this trajectory.

Session 5: Two keynote addresses

The EU and the Western Balkans

Chair: Miloš Petrović

Neighbourhood first: The Western Balkans and the geopolitical remaking of Europe
Professor Dr Emilian Kavalski, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

What is the “geo” of geopolitical Europe? While the answer to this question is neither straightforward, not simple, the claim is that in a continent which has lost its Atlantic anchor, the enlargement towards the Western Balkans becomes a key test of the European Union's ability to define its own strategic orientation. Far from being a technocratic exercise, enlargement has become a relational geopolitical strategy through which the EU co-produces a shared security space with its neighbours. In a region shaped by unresolved legacies, external rivalries, Russian disruption, Chinese infrastructure and technological footprints, and widening pressures on the EU's credibility, the enlargement of the Western Balkans is not merely an accession policy, but a geostrategy of investment in the continent's strategic autonomy. The contention is that a "neighbourhood-first" Europe would treat the Western Balkans not as a residual problem, but as key to the remaking of Europe's boundaries, agency, and geopolitical purpose.

*Who lost the compass? North Macedonia and the EU's shift
from the Copenhagen Criteria to geopolitics in enlargement*
**Professor Dr Biljana Vankovska, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius (ret.),
Skopje, North Macedonia**

Macedonia's accession journey since obtaining candidate status in 2005 offers a revealing lens to examine the changing nature of EU enlargement and the broader transformation of the European Union itself. For two decades, successive governments in Skopje have undertaken demanding reforms, alongside unprecedented externally driven political compromises, in pursuit of membership. Most notably, the country amended its constitution following the Prespa

Agreement, presenting these steps as evidence of commitment to the European project, although such measures fell outside the traditional scope of the Copenhagen criteria and previous enlargement practice. Yet despite these efforts, the accession process has remained stalled and increasingly subject to political considerations extending beyond the framework of merit-based conditionality.

The Bulgarian veto, grounded in disputes over history, identity, and language, represents a critical turning point in perceptions of enlargement credibility. It exposes the vulnerability of the accession process to bilateral interests and raises fundamental questions about the consistency, predictability, and fairness of EU conditionality. More broadly, it coincides with a period in which the European Union has increasingly redefined itself less as a normative project centred on peace, reconciliation, democracy, and the rule of law, and more as a geopolitical actor responding to intensifying global rivalries and security challenges.

Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, enlargement has increasingly been framed as a geopolitical necessity rather than a normative undertaking. Strategic alignment, security considerations, and geopolitical resilience have moved to the forefront of the EU agenda, while the transformative logic of the Copenhagen criteria appears to have receded in importance. This development raises a central question: who has lost the compass in the enlargement process? Is the persistent stagnation of candidate countries primarily a consequence of their domestic shortcomings, or does it reflect a deeper crisis within the European Union itself—a growing gap between its proclaimed values and its political practice?

Using the Macedonian case as a critical case study, this presentation argues that the EU's geopolitical turn has altered the very rationale for enlargement. The shift from rules-based conditionality to strategic imperatives has weakened the Union's normative authority and undermined the credibility of its membership promise. As a result, candidate countries increasingly face uncertainty not only about when they might join but also about what kind of Union they are being asked to join. The paper therefore explores whether enlargement still represents accession to a peace project grounded in shared values and mutual trust or whether it has become a mechanism for incorporating states into a geopolitical and security-oriented bloc shaped by the demands of an increasingly multipolar and conflict-prone international order.

Session 6: Panel 4

Candidate States – Issues and Peculiarities

Chair: Uroš Ćemalović

Could defense cooperation be a fresh momentum in Türkiye's EU-bid?

Dr Marian Karagyzov, Institute of Balkan Studies - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 led to a securitization of EU policy. The willingness of Donald Trump and its administration to reduce the US commitment to European defense and the quarrels between the allies on the two sides of the Atlantic over the fate of Greenland further reinvigorated the debate on strengthening European defense. Against the backdrop of thawing relations between the EU and Türkiye since 2023, these developments are stimulating debates about Türkiye's inclusion in the European defense projects, given the size of its army (the second largest in NATO) and the growth of the Turkish military industry in recent years. At the same time, however, a number of challenges to possible cooperation remain. Currently, Türkiye is not part of the EU defense cooperation mechanisms: the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense, the

European Defense Agency, the European Defense Fund, the European Peace Facility, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and ReArm EU. Türkiye's potential participation in these mechanisms would require either their complete restructuring (opening those solely for member states to third countries) or the negotiation, signing, and ratification of special rules or agreements to allow Ankara's participation in mechanisms, that are open for third-party participation. Even if this were to happen, Türkiye would most likely not agree to replace NATO, of which it is a member, with an EU-centred security architecture. In addition to this, there are other impediments, such as political issues, concerns about Türkiye's democratic backsliding, and practical issues of technology and know-how sharing. Therefore, it is most likely that in the mid-term, Türkiye will develop bilateral military cooperation with individual member states, such as Spain, Italy, Poland, and Romania.

North Macedonia's EU accession: reconciling strategic foreign policy goals with the capabilities of a weak state

Dr Mitko Arnaudov, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade

With the exception of Turkey, North Macedonia's EU accession process has been lasting the longest of all candidate states. The state has lost the geostrategic "momentum" for membership it had in the 1990s. Despite the fact that current trends also allow for similar geostrategic "momentum", the country is failing in terms of institutional readiness. Taking this into account, the main purpose of this paper is to explain the foreign policy opportunities and positioning of small states with the case study of the EU integration process of North Macedonia. Bearing in mind the behaviour of North Macedonia's leaders regarding the EU integration process on the one side, and the national interest on the other, the theoretical debate will focus on the differences between realists - favouring *raison d'état* in foreign policy strategies - and neoclassical realists - seeing the perceptions and behaviour of state leadership as a leading variable in foreign policy strategic choices. The leading research question is if small states could benefit from the geostrategic "momentum" in foreign policy positioning regardless of domestic matters? Hence, the leading hypothesis is: that the positioning of small states in international relations depends on two parallel processes of similar intensity: regional and international circumstances; and domestic political and institutional trends.

Europa Über Alles: On Montenegro's post-democratic condition

Dr Feđa Pavlović, University of Montenegro, Podgorica

Since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the European Union has been widely treated as the principal state-building agent in the Western Balkans. In light of the region's experience of decades of instability and competitive authoritarian rule, the framework of EU accession negotiations is treated as a master-framework for 'EU Member State building', encompassing institutional capacity development, rule-of-law reform, economic and socio-political stabilisation, inter-ethnic reconciliation and democratic consolidation. Yet this assumption that accession, Europeanisation, and democratisation naturally reinforce one another sits uneasily with a growing body of critical scholarship, which has pointed to the democratically constraining effects of top-down conditionality, asymmetrical dependency, and the TINA ("there is no alternative") logic often built into accession politics.

This paper examines these tensions through the case of Montenegro. It asks: how does the dominant discourse underpinning the EU accession process in Montenegro construct the meaning of democracy and democratisation, and with what consequences for democratic deliberation, political pluralism, and self-determination? Moving beyond analyses focused

primarily on institutional mechanisms of conditionality, the paper shifts attention to the field of discursive meaning-making: to the ways in which key political concepts are defined, stabilised, and hegemonised in the public sphere.

I argue that, particularly after Montenegro's turbulent political transition of 2020-2023, EU accession came to operate not simply as a policy framework, but as the pre-eminent meta-framework through which institutional reform, political competition, and public legitimacy were organised. In this context, a discourse I call peripheral Europeanism achieved a hegemonic position. This discourse constructs 'democratisation' as coterminous with 'Europeanisation', while 'Europeanisation' itself is equated with the guided implementation of EU legislation, norms, and policy priorities. EU membership is thus elevated into the eschatological horizon of Montenegrin statehood, while integration is framed simultaneously through urgency ("window of opportunity"), civilisational hierarchy, and TINA-style closure.

The paper contends that the hegemony of peripheral Europeanism has generated a specifically post-democratic condition in Montenegro: one in which democratic deliberation is narrowed, ideological alternatives are delegitimised, and popular self-determination is subordinated to an externally validated reform telos. In this way, the Montenegrin case opens up a broader line of inquiry into the democratic contradictions of EU accession and the political costs of "EU Member State building" in the Western Balkans.

Integration from the bottom: social network analysis of subnational cooperation of Ukraine and EU member states

MA Fedor Zolotarev, University of Pecs, Hungary

This study aims to investigate the structure and dynamics of city-to-city international partnerships between Ukraine and EU member states. The research addresses how urban paradiplomacy contributes to the development of the EU enlargement policy and integrates a candidate state via networking. Given the growing significance of subnational diplomacy, understanding the network of city partnerships becomes essential for grasping the broader landscape of international urban cooperation. The research employs Social Network Analysis (SNA) to examine dyadic partnerships between Ukrainian cities and their international counterparts. Data was collected from official websites of Ukrainian cities, focusing on formal partnership agreements. The study reconstructs a network where nodes represent cities, and edges signify partnership relations. Key network metrics such as centrality, density, clustering coefficients are utilized to analyse the structure and characteristics of the network, while betweenness and harmonic centrality are used to outline the most prominent brokers in the Europeanisation of Ukraine from the bottom. The analysis reveals several significant trends. Firstly, the network demonstrates a high level of centralization, with certain Ukrainian cities acting as hubs. Secondly, the partnerships are not uniformly distributed geographically, showing a concentration of connections with specific subregions. Thirdly, the network exhibits a modular structure, indicating the presence of distinct clusters based on historical, cultural, and economic ties. The findings suggest that Ukrainian urban paradiplomacy follows specific patterns influenced by historical, geographical, and geopolitical factors of the Russian invasion in February 2022. The centralization of partnerships around key cities indicates a hierarchical structure within the network, which may reflect resource distribution and diplomatic capabilities. This work contributes to the understanding of subnational diplomacy by providing empirical evidence of how city partnerships form and evolve. The findings have implications for urban policymaking and can inform strategies for enhancing international cooperation among EU and a candidate state.

Session 7: Panel 5

Western Balkans and the EU: Topical Issues

Chair: Milan Igrutinović

The European Union and secession in candidate states: principles or politics?

Dr Jovica Pavlović and **MA Nikola Tucakov**, IES, Belgrade

As of 2026, several European Union (EU) candidate states are confronted with secessionist entities within their borders. Serbia, Georgia, and Moldova represent cases of protracted post-conflict stalemate in which neither mutual recognition nor meaningful reintegration has been achieved. Ukraine, by contrast, presents a case of irredentist secessionism that has escalated into full-scale foreign invasion. Cyprus provides a further point of comparison as a former candidate state that acceded to the EU despite an unresolved territorial division, with the non-recognized entity in the north remaining outside the effective control of the central government. Taken together, these five cases capture a spectrum of secessionist dynamics in acceding states to which the EU has responded in different ways. While it has consistently upheld policies of non-recognition and strong support for territorial integrity in Georgia, Moldova, and Cyprus, in Serbia accession conditionality has centred on the “normalization” of relations with the seceding entity, and in Ukraine the EU has adopted a more assertive stance in response to external aggression. This variation raises the question of whether any underlining norms of conduct can be identified in the EU’s handling of secessionist challenges in its potential member states.

By relying on the comparative analysis approach, this article concludes that, rather than adhering to a single norm (i.e., respect of state sovereignty and territorial integrity), the EU operates through a flexible and context-dependent framework shaped primarily by the degree of consensus among member states. Where consensus is strong, the EU adopts clearer and more consistent positions; where it is weaker, its approach becomes more adaptive and ambiguous. By tracing these variations, the article contributes to a more precise understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor and clarifies the conditions under which its external conduct acquires normative coherence.

Security and defense in the Western Balkans: current trends and scenarios in the absence of EU enlargement

Dr Igor Novaković and **Dr Marko Savković**, ISAC Fond, Belgrade

This article analyses contemporary security and defense dynamics in the Western Balkans, focusing on several structural trends: the steady increase in defense expenditures across the region; the emergence of new regional initiatives and bilateral security arrangements, most notably the Tirana Declaration involving Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo; as well as the recently strengthened defense cooperation between Serbia and Hungary; and the persistent deficit of trust among regional actors, which continues to reinforce the security dilemma. Particular attention is given to the accelerated procurement of advanced weapon systems, NATO’s evolving defense-spending expectations (including projections of a 5% GDP benchmark by 2035), the European Union’s initiatives on “Defense Readiness” and the SAFE framework, and the long-standing challenge of institutional opacity in national defense sectors.

Against this backdrop, the article examines two potential scenarios that may emerge if the European Union refrains from offering a credible pathway toward systemic regional integration. We identify and assess the security implications of two possible trajectories: “fragmentation” and “controlled competition” – each carrying distinct risks for regional stability, defense cooperation,

and civil-military governance. The findings draw on research conducted by the author between September 2025 and January 2026, based on primary and secondary sources, expert interviews, and a closed-door expert workshop.

Germany and the European integration of the Western Balkans in the time of Zeitenwende/Epochenbruch: between normative optimism and (geo)political realism
Dr Petar Ćurčić, IES, Belgrade

Germany's engagement in European integration across Eastern and Southeastern Europe has been both sustained and strategic. In the late 1990s, it emerged as a central architect of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, embedding itself in post-conflict reconstruction and regional cooperation. Following Croatia's EU accession—strongly supported by Berlin—Germany recalibrated its approach. Amid growing enlargement fatigue within the Union, it sought to preserve influence in the Western Balkans through the Berlin Process, a multilateral framework aimed at fostering cooperation and advancing integration. Yet, despite modest gains in regional normalization, the Berlin Process initially fell short of accelerating EU accession, exposing a tension between political commitment and institutional inertia. This dynamic shifted markedly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war catalysed a strategic rethinking within Germany and across the EU, prompting renewed support for enlargement—particularly toward Eastern Partnership countries—and reopening questions about the Western Balkans' place in Europe. Concurrently, Germany intensified its economic and diplomatic engagement in the region, prioritizing integration into emerging supply chains and securing access to critical raw materials. Serbia occupies a pivotal position in this regard, especially following the EU memorandum on critical resources initiated by Germany. However, this initiative has provoked ambivalent domestic responses, reflecting broader tensions between economic opportunity, environmental concerns, and geopolitical alignment. At the same time, accession dynamics have accelerated elsewhere in the region, suggesting a reconfigured enlargement landscape. This paper therefore examines how Germany conceptualizes the integration of the Western Balkans, focusing on the interplay between geopolitical urgency, economic interests, and institutional limitations.

Session 8: Panel 6

Serbia and the EU: Topical Issues

Chair: Jovica Pavlović

Role of the Growth Plan in the European integration process of the Western Balkans candidate countries: a case study of the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia
MA Aleksandra Baklaja, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade

While the stagnation of the Western Balkans in the accession process had often been attributed to enlargement fatigue within the EU, persistent shortcomings in the implementation of reforms across candidate countries have also played a significant role. The renewed momentum in the EU enlargement policy is reflected in the adoption of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in November 2023, aiming to accelerate reforms and reaffirm the credibility of the EU membership perspective for the region. The Plan is structured around four pillars: gradual integration into the EU Single Market, regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market, acceleration of fundamental reforms via the Reform Agenda 2024-2027, and increased financial

assistance. This paper addresses the research question to what extent does the Growth Plan represents a substantive shift in the EU enlargement approach, and how effectively it is linked to the accession process through national Reform Agendas. The first part of the paper examines the role of the Growth Plan in the overall European integration process of the Western Balkans candidate countries, using content analysis in the research of primary and secondary sources. In the second part, the case-study method is applied to the analysis of the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia, to explain the link between the reforms envisaged in the Reform Agenda and those required within the accession negotiation process. The paper concludes that the Growth Plan has provided a new impetus to the EU integration process. However, it has not yet fully delivered on all of its intended components. The Reform Agenda aligns with and supports the negotiation process, as it emphasizes key reforms necessary for accelerating progress across negotiation chapters. Nevertheless, insufficient commitment and implementation on the part of candidate countries continue to limit the full realization of its potential.

Systemic pressures, state preferences and elite perceptions: A Neoclassical Realist account of Serbia's stalled EU accession

MA Petar Milutinović, IES, Belgrade

This paper develops a neoclassical realist explanation for the persistent stagnation of Serbia's EU accession process in a context where Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has ostensibly generated renewed geopolitical incentives for EU enlargement. Building on core neoclassical realist assumptions, the paper posits three interrelated hypotheses: (H1) heightened systemic pressures and security competition push the EU to re-prioritise enlargement as a strategic tool, but their translation into concrete accession progress is filtered by EU-level perceptions of candidate reliability and reputational risk; (H2) Serbia's domestic regime characteristics and foreign policy hedging behaviour distort the transmission of systemic incentives, producing a misalignment between EU expectations and Serbian policy responses; and (H3) elite perceptions within both the EU and Serbia act as key intervening variables that can either amplify or dampen structural pressures, thereby generating path-dependent patterns of "managed ambiguity" rather than decisive movement towards membership. Methodologically, the paper combines theory-guided process tracing of post-2022 enlargement decisions with an interpretive analysis of elite discourse in Brussels, key member state capitals and Belgrade. In doing so, it refines neoclassical realist theorisation of how state preferences are formed and adjusted under conditions of competing external and internal constraints. The findings suggest that Serbia's EU trajectory is best understood not as a simple failure of conditionality but as the outcome of a multi-level preference formation process in which systemic incentives, domestic power structures and elite threat perceptions jointly shape the scope for enlargement as a foreign policy instrument.

Consequences of non-alignment with EU policy on the Ukraine conflict for Serbia's EU accession

MA Uroš Popadić, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade

The conflict in Ukraine has transformed the relationship between European Union (EU) enlargement and foreign and security policy alignment, making alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) a significantly more important condition for candidate states. The article examines Serbia's foreign policy in relation to EU integration and argues that its repeated lack of alignment during the conflict is likely to have lasting negative consequences for accession even after the conflict ends. It conceptualises strategic alignment as an identity-

signalling practice through which the EU assesses trust and strategic compatibility, so that non-alignment is perceived not as a temporary or limited disagreement but as evidence of Serbia's strategic identity. Based on a constructivist framework, the article examines Serbia's non-alignment through the interaction of identity narratives, role performance, and external recognition, showing that declaratory pro-European commitment is outweighed by practical foreign-policy behaviour and justificatory discourse. The analysis is based on Serbian policy behaviour, elite-level political discourse, and EU discourse and reports from 2022 to 2026, using interpretive process tracing supported by discourse analysis.