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The European Union enlarged from 27 to 36 members? Towards an "Agenda 2030"

The Western Balkans today still confirm Bronislaw Geremek's premonition in 1990: *Three dangers lurk in the post-communist transition: populism, authoritarian temptation and nationalism.*" These three tendencies are converging in ethno-nationalisms that are stalling the process of stabilisation and association of the six countries with the European Union. The pursuit of the rule of law is being made all the more difficult because the Balkans are growing poorer while the European Union is getting richer. In the east, association with Ukraine and Moldova has progressed, but the Russian occupation continues. Russia has shattered the international legal order with its aggression in Ukraine and is fighting against the values that Europe promotes and whose echoes resonate in the Balkans. The European Union has responded by reviving the accession process with the Balkans and by opening negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and perhaps in time it will do the same with Georgia. The complexity of this dual commitment, which would see the European Union grow from 27 to 36 members, requires that its many challenges be openly set out in an "Agenda 2030", with gradual integration forming the core of a renewed process.

THE 'BASICS': THE SISYPHEAN ROCK

In the terms and conditions of membership, "basics" means^[1] the [Copenhagen Criteria](#). [The Commission's assessment](#) is severe: There has been some progress... but in most countries the judiciary remains vulnerable and subject to political pressure; its credibility is low, and there is a feeling of impunity; corruption is still

a cause for concern and state capture persists —hence the importance not only of reforms but also of translating these into a track record. The Commission remains surprisingly moderate about the democratic backsliding that has occurred in certain countries, such as Serbia.

Albania stands out though. The vetting process — an assessment of magistrates' skills and assets — has led to the indictment of ministers and mayors, a rare occurrence in the Balkans. A new generation of magistrates is leading a more independent judiciary. The "*framework for negotiations*^[2]" was adopted at the first Intergovernmental Conference with the Member States in July 2022. But a shadow looms over the second conference: Greece is threatening to block it after the mayor of the Greek-majority municipality of Himara was sentenced to prison for vote-buying in the elections. The political climate would be much better if the opposition were not tearing itself apart in fratricidal battles that are hardly what one might call responsible. They facilitate the rule of Prime Minister Edi Rama, whose party won an absolute majority of seats in the Assembly in April 2021. The Prime Minister's voluntarism, political skill and diplomatic activism seem to make him the current Balkan leader.

Northern Macedonia played this role and was the first country to be granted candidate status back in 2005, but its momentum was shattered by certain Member States. First by Greece, which demanded that it change its name. The 2018 [Prespa Agreement](#) brought this dispute to an end. Then, in 2019, France demanded a prior change

[1] The legislation has been divided into 35 thematic chapters.

[2] Framework document adopted by the Member States, setting out the principles, substance and procedure for accession negotiations with each candidate.

in the accession method. Finally, Bulgaria insisted that Skopje recognise a Bulgarian minority, which would require a constitutional amendment. The framework for negotiations was adopted in July 2022, but their opening will depend on the vote on the constitution, which depends on the results of the presidential elections on 24 April and the general elections on 8 May. Voters of the VMRO, the conservative opposition party, are opposed to the Bulgarian "*diktat*". North Macedonia, a fragile country, is said to be at the mercy of the nationalism of its larger neighbour, which nevertheless boasts in Brussels that it is stabilising the region. Does this mean that the country would have made as much progress towards accession without these obstacles? Of course it would. But that would be to overlook the authoritarian and nationalist drift of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016), who was convicted of corruption and took refuge in Hungary. It would also be to ignore the recent setback in the fight against corruption, of which a mission by European judges painted an unflattering picture. The interaction between external blockages and internal reforms is undeniable and rightly provides arguments for those who blame the member states and the European Union. However, the depth and sustainability of the reforms are questionable, as Montenegro and Serbia have shown, despite the launch of negotiations in 2012 and 2014 respectively.

MONTENEGRO, 28TH MEMBER STATE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Montenegro aspires to become the next Member State in the Balkans. And the European ministers visiting Podgorica are encouraging it to do so. Although negotiations have been underway for twelve years, only three of the thirty-three chapters have been closed. It is the lack of progress on chapters 23 and 24 — on which the overall progress of the negotiations depends — that explains this stagnation. How could Milo Djukanovic — in power for thirty years — reform the judicial system and fight corruption, thereby sawing off the branch on which his DPS party had established itself? His party's defeat in the parliamentary elections in August 2020 opened the door to political instability until [the victory in April 2023](#) of a young president, Jakov Milatovic, and the coalition of

eleven parties under the "Europe Now! (Pokret "Evropa sad!" PES), following the parliamentary elections in June 2023 and the appointment of Prime Minister Milojko Spahic in October. Membership of the European Union is an integral and priority part of its programme.

The integration of the Serbian party Nova into the coalition and the election of its president, Andrija Mandic, as head of parliament have raised questions. Hitherto close to Belgrade and with openly pro-Russian sympathies, some doubt that he is working towards membership, even though he has signed the coalition's programme. And yet, is this not the best way to heal the [rift created in the wake of the 2006 referendum](#) when 45% of its citizens rejected independence because they saw themselves as Serbs? This division benefited Milo Djukanovic until his conflict with the Orthodox Church turned part of the country against him. The inclusion of the Serbian party could therefore help Montenegro in its quest for its own identity. But the heterogeneous coalition remains fragile. And it will be an uphill task to meet the conditions of the rule of law, with the DPS lying in wait. Should this coalition fail, some already foresee an alliance between the PES and a reformed DPS. Political development since 2020, largely based on an active civil society, is a source of admiration in a region steeped in stereotypes. Many member states are counting on its success, which would lend credibility to the process for the region. Its advantages are obvious: a small country of 600,000 inhabitants with a political culture on the road to pacification, communities living in harmony, at peace with its neighbours and a member of NATO. But apart from the internal risks, could the regime of Aleksandar Vucic in Serbia be tempted to prevent its former territory from becoming the next Western Balkan country to join the Union?

AUTOCRATIC DOUBLE-DEALING BETWEEN BRUSSELS AND MOSCOW IN SERBIA

After [the massacre at a school in May 2023](#) and the heavy-handed response by the authorities, the "Serbia against Violence" (SPN) movement launched weekly demonstrations and secured early elections for 17 December 2023. With this the seventh general election in eleven years, the authorities again adopted

a strategy of tension and tight control of the media. It stirred up fear and apprehension of instability with threats to national sovereignty and neutrality in the face of the war in Ukraine, and pressure from the West to recognise Kosovo. The results were commensurate with the means used: the President's party (SNS) won 128 of the 250 seats with 47% of the vote. The SPN won just 65 seats with 23% of the vote. But at what price? Unprecedented irregularities and massive fraud were reported. Particularly in Belgrade, where the SPN almost drew level with the SNS, with 43 seats to the SNS's 48. [The OSCE-ODIHR](#) has drawn up a long list of reforms that the United States and the European Union are waiting to see implemented. The European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) by 461 votes to 53 and 43 abstentions, calling for an independent investigation into the irregularities and the suspension of aid if the follow-up is not satisfactory. It triggered the ire of the Serbian president in a violent diatribe against the West, which "*constantly demonises Serbia and tries to destabilise it, because of so-called undemocratic tendencies for which there is no proof*[3]". He attributed Serbia's lower score in a [Freedom House ranking](#) to a conspiracy by Serbian civil society with the enemies of the people to recognise Kosovo. Many Serbs recognised the rhetoric of the Milosevic years.

It is the very basis of his criticism of the European Union, which he sees as an attack on national sovereignty. All too happy to point out on his return from Beijing in 2019: "*I have often come under pressure from various countries, but never from China.*" Isn't it time for the European Union to make it clear that the country's voluntary application for membership implies a response on its part when its principles are flouted? Until now, Brussels' silence has been understood as a wish not to further strengthen Serbia-Russia relations. Hence the cautious approach to the sanctions it is not applying. It is also taking it easy in the hope of reaching an agreement with Kosovo. But with these elections and a restricted media, [has Serbia not crossed the Rubicon](#)? Especially since the European Union has to plead for information regarding aid to be disseminated by the media, while China's aid, which is infinitely less, makes the headlines.

Fresh elections will be held in Belgrade in June. Not because of fraud, but because there was no quorum to elect the mayor. And there is no guarantee that they will be any freer. This does not seem to have troubled the EPP congress that Prime Minister Brnabic attended in Bucharest on 6 March. With democracy flouted, the Vucic regime can [no longer guarantee stability](#). His actions have had a very negative impact in the Balkans: relaying Russian disinformation, attacks on "foreign agents", military exercises near Kosovo. The discreet supply of arms to Ukraine has somewhat tempered the country's close relations with Moscow. But the continuation of this double game highlights the contradictions of this apparent non-alignment. It is understandable in the case of NATO, when in 2007 the Serbian parliament declared Serbia "*neutral*". But it undermines the credibility of the European Union, which tolerates this state of affairs. Some believe that putting an end to this would not bring Belgrade any closer to Moscow, because Aleksandar Vucic has learnt the lessons of Milosevic: maximalist opposition to the West only leads to disaster. Indeed, he has often declared that joining the EU was the "*only rational future he could offer the Serbs*[4]".

Many doubt that the Vucic regime really wants Serbia to join this Union of values that it so often scorns, and which calls for normalisation with Kosovo, something Serbia fears both for its own power and because of pressure from Moscow. A majority of citizens seem to be content with this situation, refusing to align themselves with the sanctions and preferring this "*neutrality*" between Brussels and Moscow. Especially as the average wage has doubled in ten years, unemployment has fallen, and transport infrastructure has improved considerably. But can the European project accept that a country negotiating accession to the EU should stray so far from it without losing its soul? Can it compromise itself in this way in the Balkans?

THE TRIUMPH OF THE "IDENTITY ENTREPRENEURS"[5]

To assert his hold on society and retain power, the Serbian president has built a narrative around the "*humiliation*" caused by the NATO bombings and Kosovo's

[3] Televised speech on 1 March.

[4] Interview to FAZ, 29 April 2019.

[5] Bruno Tertrais in « La guerre des mondes. Le retour de la géopolitique et le choc des empires ». Ed de l'Observatoire, 2023

independence, with the West as the culprit. Serbia has thus become the "victim" of recent wars, whose story has never been told. Bruno Tertrais analyses this perfectly: "*Nationalism feeds on an idealised and instrumentalised past, which leaders and opinion-makers strive to bring out of the dead memory and into the living memory of their peoples (...) Unresolved traumas give rise to anger linked to resentment towards one's own past*". The role of "identity entrepreneurs" plays a key role here: Orbán in Hungary, Vučić in Serbia and leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is the "*revenge of passions*", as Pierre Hassner describes it, in which the pragmatic European project remains powerless while "*the substitution of interests for passions, or of the calm and consensual passions of the economy for the violent and conflictual passions of religion and politics*" has shown its limits^[6]. Throughout most of the Balkans, history is being rewritten in a victim-centred commemoration of mutual massacres and a distortion of the facts that keeps antagonism alive, [thereby affecting the survivors and shaping the young generation to a fantasised past](#). Streets have been renamed after [war criminals](#). Dunja Mijatović, then the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, illustrated the dramatic backward step in confronting the past, whereby politicians, the media and religious leaders disseminate a dangerous narrative, [notably on the eve of the elections](#). The European Commission has given substantial support to transitional justice and to countering these narratives by facilitating reconciliation. European pressure is today little more than the repetition, at summit after summit, of "*the need for additional and decisive efforts to promote reconciliation*", as an old condition the futility of which is well known.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country *par excellence* when it comes to "*identity entrepreneurs*". The latter take advantage of the unfinished [Dayton Peace Agreement](#) with a Constitution that is silent regarding competences between the state and the constituent entities — with the exception of external relations and defence — to try to impose their objectives. On the one hand, there are the Bosniaks, who are trying to recreate a centralised unitary state to erase the internal border of the Republic of Serbs (Republika Srpska), inherited from the war. On the other side, the Republika Srpska claims that all competences can be decentralised since

the Constitution does not impose anything. A tug-of-war has ensued between the President of the Serbs, Milorad Dodik, and the UN High Representative, supported by the Bosnians and the United States. As for the third group, the Croats, led by Dragan Čović, they aspire to a Croatian entity of their own within the Federation, with the ambiguous support of the High Representative, who exercises today a disruptive protectorate. Only the [EUFOR-Althea](#) contingent might succeed in keeping the peace in the event of a serious crisis.

Each ethnic group exploits the past and amplifies the risks of the present in an absurd race for victimisation... by seeking the support of the parent state: Serbia for the Serbs, Croatia for the Croats and Turkey for the Bosniaks. Power in Banja Luka has been radicalised by regular meetings between Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik — who even exchanged decorations — and by close relations with Viktor Orbán, who saved the Serbian party from bankruptcy with a €110 million loan in 2022. As in Belgrade, there is a double-edged sword between criticism of the European Union and the desire to become a member. Added to this is the tension of recurring threats of secession, followed by just as many denials, in this Republic of Serbs set up as a besieged fortress. The radicalisation of elements in Bakir Izetbegović's Bosnian party, SDA, is a response to this. The European Union and the United States have failed to make the country functional as a result of the obstacles created by the political elites. In July 2022, Naser Nabil, President of the SBB party, wrote to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, that "*the tribal leaders do not want Bosnia-Herzegovina to join the European Union because the rule of law would land them in prison*". He therefore called for Bosnia-Herzegovina to be granted candidate country status so that it could begin the reform process. And this is what the Council [decided in December 2022](#), specifying the fourteen conditions for opening accession negotiations. Although not all the conditions have been met, [the Commission suggested this on 12 March](#), with the European Council validating the decision on 21 March 2024. It was becoming too difficult to contain the increased frustration in Bosnia-Herzegovina caused by the acceleration of the process with Ukraine and Moldova. However, the framework for negotiations could only be adopted if progress was made.

[6] La revanche des passions. Métamorphoses de la violence et crises du politique. Fayard, 2015.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is emblematic of this uncertain and pernicious oscillation between stability and conditionality policies. Strict conditionality has failed, since the European Union has suspended it at every stage. Its flexible application may give its leaders hope of a gradual path towards the Union, while at the same time fostering a feeling of impunity and having an obvious impact on the other candidates.

IN INDEPENDENT KOSOVO, THE QUEST FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Independent since 2008, Kosovo is still struggling to establish its sovereignty and is formally under the protectorate of the United Nations ([UNMIK](#)). Its sovereignty is disputed in the North, which has a Serbian majority, and internationally due to non-recognition by Belgrade, Moscow and five Member States of the European Union[7]. [Dialogue with Serbia](#), launched under the aegis of the EU in 2011, is all the more difficult. More than forty agreements have been reached, nearly half of which have been fully or partially implemented. But this mixed record has undermined confidence. A case in point is the association of Serb-majority municipalities, agreed in 2013 with the aim of offering them a degree of autonomy (health, education, economy), but which Pristina has so far refused to create. The EU is advocating a "normalisation" of relations in a legally binding agreement. This is the proposal that President Vucic and Prime Minister Kurti verbally accepted in Ohrid on 27 February 2023, but without signing the agreement. Ulterior motives, criticism from both sides and successive crises have prevented the agreement from being implemented.

In Pristina, a rushed decision regarding car number plates in November 2022 led to the resignation of all Serb civil servants who had agreed to work under Kosovar sovereignty. Serbs boycotted the municipal elections in the north of the country. In February 2024, the Central Bank banned payments in dinar, provoking a new crisis. On the Serbian side, a group was violently arrested by the Kosovar police in Banjska on 24 September 2023, while in possession of a formidable stockpile of weapons of war. The leader of the group, a notorious criminal, parades around in Belgrade and

the government seems in no hurry to investigate. This is fuelling rumours of a plot to stir up violence in the North, on the pretext of discrimination against Serbs... to the advantage of Moscow?

Instrumentalisation in Serbia, radicalisation in Kosovo. In Pristina, decisions taken without coordination with the European Union and the United States run counter to their tireless efforts at dialogue. This strategy of tension, in which the protected escape their protectors, is undermining their credibility. Under their pressure, Albin Kurti had to agree last March to the transfer of 24 hectares to the Decani monastery, in application of court rulings, which successive governments had refused since 2016. This could open the doors of the Council of Europe to Kosovo. There is no alternative to the application of the Ohrid Agreement for normalisation. Without this, and without substantial progress towards the rule of law, the path to the European Union will remain closed to Serbia. The same goes for Kosovo, which applied for membership in December 2022, but has no illusions about the outcome. Is it not by breaking the taboo of limited sovereignty through difficult compromises that Pristina will be able to make its European prospects more secure and less remote?

THE WESTERN BALKANS ARE MAKING THE EUROPEAN UNION RICH!

385,000 people have left Serbia since 2011, according to the Belgrade Statistical Office in 2020: 170,000 for Bosnia in 2021 and 61,000 Kosovars in the first half of 2022. All the Balkans are experiencing a demographic haemorrhage due to low fertility rates, in addition to this migration. This haemorrhage is enriching the host countries - led by Germany and Austria, and Italy in the case of the Albanians - but impoverishing the countries of origin. Remittances represent 10% of GNP according to the OECD, but for investments that are not very productive. It is the current or potential middle class that is leaving, strengthening the existing powers. Villages are emptying. The situation is such that employers are turning to Asian labour in Kosovo, Serbia and Northern Macedonia.

To boost investment, the regional common market project was launched in 2016 as part of the [Berlin](#)

[7] Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia.

[Process](#) with the aim of securing the "four freedoms" of the European single market. The action plan signed in 2020 has led to some progress. But Kosovo has refused to be represented by UNMIK and Bosnia has been unable to reach an internal agreement. The Albanian, Macedonian and Serbian leaders therefore decided to move forward in 2019 under the [Open Balkan Initiative](#), where progress has been made in harmonising rules.

As for [economic integration](#) with the European Union, two figures sum it up: first investor with 61% of FDI, and first trading partner with 66% of bilateral trade, according to Eurostat. By comparison, China accounts for 7%, Turkey 5% and Russia 3%. The trade balance is very favourable to the European Union, with an average of €9 billion a year over the last decade. The free trade area established by the association agreements has therefore not been as successful as it was with Central Europe in the 1990s. These hopes have been dashed by erratic policies, a weak rule of law, obsolete infrastructure, small markets and a slow accession process. Doesn't European aid make up for this transfer of resources?

[Budgetary aid from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for 2021-2027 \(IPA\)](#) is €14.2 billion, including €9 billion for investments and a €1 billion guarantee fund. The financial irony is that this €9 billion for the Western Balkans as a whole corresponds to what Bulgaria will receive over the same period! It also corresponds to the Union's positive annual trade balance. To this must be added the specific aid received during the Covid pandemic and €1 billion to compensate for the rise in energy costs following the sanctions against Russia. In addition, a €6 billion growth plan (€2 billion from the budget and €4 billion in loans) proposed by the Commission should facilitate their integration into the [common regional market and the Union's Single Market](#). Despite this, the ratio of budgetary aid between the Western Balkans and their EU neighbours remains at 1 to 8. The economic gap is widening and convergence is moving further away. Combined with mass migration, these are two sources of potential instability that are more worrying than external interference.

UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA: WHAT KIND OF EU MEMBERSHIP?

[Ukraine](#) applied for membership on 28 February 2022. [Moldova](#) and Georgia on 3 March. The Council and Commission took the first steps with unusual speed, culminating in the European Council's decision to open negotiations with Kyiv and Chisinau on 15 December 2023, subject to further reforms. In view of the progress made, the European Council of March 2024 asked the Council for a rapid adoption of the negotiating frameworks with the two countries. [Georgia](#) was granted candidate status in December 2023.

The European Union, its member states and international financial institutions have mobilised €82.6 billion in support of Kyiv since February 2022, including €25 billion in military aid. A "[Facility for Ukraine](#)" of €50 billion for 2024-2027 (€17 billion from the budget and €33 billion in loans) was decided on 29 February. The question now arises of the European Union's capacity to integrate Ukraine and Moldova and the consequences of their accession, since the Commission's opinion did not contain an impact study. This question can be approached from three angles: accession criteria, financial costs and security[8].

The Commission's assessments point to substantial progress in the rule of law and the fight against corruption. And as the war rages, the Ukrainian president has not hesitated to sack senior officers for corruption. But decades of weak governance and endemic corruption are not going to go away quickly, particularly when colossal amounts of aid are pouring in. In 2023, the EBRD ranked the country among the continent's worst in terms of governance. Ukraine will have to demonstrate the sustainability and results of its reforms over time. However, the excesses of Hungary and Slovakia could give rise to fears of similar developments. Strong budgetary conditionality and a solid reversibility clause are essential. A powerful asset, however, is a vigilant civil society. As for European legislation, the implementation of the 2014 Association Agreement, coupled with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), should facilitate recovery. European exports should increase

[8] « Institutional and Policy Changes for a Union of up to 36 Members », to be published in the *European Law Journal*, April 2024, as part of the report of the Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform : "Sailing on High Seas: reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century", 2023

considerably for reconstruction, but investment will depend on stability and a peace agreement.

[Bruegel](#) estimated the cost of accession at €136 billion, or €110 billion if the occupied territories were to remain occupied: €32 billion for the cohesion policy and €85 billion for the CAP. In comparison, Poland receives €76 billion for an equivalent population. The Financial Times quoted a bill of €186 billion, according to an unpublished Commission study. Not to mention the cost of reconstruction, estimated to date at some €500 billion. All Member States would suffer a significant reduction in European budgetary aid, and the current CAP would be called into question. The blocking of agricultural imports by Poland has already shown the extent of the impact that accession would have. And the Commission had to limit the effects in March. It is therefore hard to imagine accession under the terms of the current process, even with long transition periods. The [Communication of 20 March](#) underlines the challenges of economic and social convergence in a European Union with more than 30 members. The cost of this expansion will have to be included in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

It is in the area of security that the risks would be most serious, a point curiously overlooked by Bruegel. Article 42.7 of the Treaty states: "*Should a Member State be the object of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall afford it aid and assistance by all the means in their power*". This is certainly not the collective defence clause in Article 5 of NATO, but how can we expect the current exceptional military support to be renewed in the long term if Russia were to widen the conflict? Short of relying on the goodwill of NATO, and therefore the United States, in a definitive loss of autonomy? The text of the Communication is very ambiguous in this respect: "*An enlarged Union should not introduce the new challenges of bilateral disputes*".

Secondly, the occupation of territories in the three candidate countries by "*structures created and recognised*" by Moscow is an obstacle^[9]. To integrate these countries while ignoring this situation would be to accept the Russian coup de force. To refuse because

they are divided would make the Union a hostage, as it is of Turkey in Cyprus. It is therefore questionable whether accession is feasible without peace. This is especially so since public opinion is likely to oppose it. It would be risky to play down the increased role of public opinion in external relations, lest we forget that a Dutch NGO forced the government to hold a referendum against the association agreement with Ukraine in 2016 for fear that it would lead to accession and the supply of arms!

AN ALTERNATIVE: GRADUAL INTEGRATION WITH A CONSOLIDATION PERIOD

Clearly, the current accession methodology cannot be applied to Ukraine, Moldova and a fortiori Georgia. The same applies to the Western Balkans, with the probable exception of Montenegro. The past twenty years have shown that uncertain membership on a distant and indeterminate horizon does not encourage reform. Gradual integration is a realistic alternative, as already presented [in 2019](#) and [in 2022](#). The three principles are: to put an end to the binary system of limited pre-accession aid, followed by massive post-accession funds; to progress towards accession in stages, with each reform giving access to increased funds as well as to the programmes and institutions of the policies concerned; to establish a period of consolidation and probation leading to full accession. This pragmatic approach would commit the candidates to a concrete path with tangible and progressive benefits depending on the reforms. The European Council, Commission and Parliament have taken up this approach.

The idea of integration into the single market has been taken up by the Commission, which has linked it to the growth plan on condition that the candidates adopt a reform agenda and open up their markets to the regional common market, an excellent incentive to establish the latter. As this approach is too simplistic, we subscribe to the recommendations [included in the Bourlanges report](#) or the study by [Lukas Macek](#), for which the first step should be strong political commitment, such as alignment with the CFSP and adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. A more elaborate approach has been proposed by the

^[9] Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine.

[CEPS](#), with accession in stages, horizontally (all sectors taken together) rather than sector by sector, based on a rating that allows the next stage to be taken. Although more complex, it could be combined with the sectoral approach. Many sectors could be prioritised to give credibility to the process, such as energy and transport, which are already covered by a treaty with the European Union. This is what the Communication suggests, citing energy and the Green Plan for the Balkans in addition to the single market.

The central element of our approach remains the consolidation/probation period, which is essential to verify the implementation of commitments, reduce the risks of backtracking and prepare public opinion. In the penultimate stage, the country would thus be an "associate member" with most of the benefits of integration, but without a commissioner or a right of veto in the Council. This phase would be crucial, particularly for countries in conflict: for example, moving from normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo to its recognition, or from a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia to a peace accord. A two-speed Europe? Yes, if geopolitics or a country's unpreparedness demand it. Because the European Union's rapid response to Russia's aggression to date cannot be perpetuated by

hasty or haphazard decisions without jeopardising the European project. The Communication also envisages "differentiation" as a response to the accession of more than 30 members.

Above all, it emphasises the need for a policy review. It is up to the Commission to set out openly the constraints, costs and risks of moving to 36 members, as well as the advantages and benefits for the European Union, in a comprehensive proposal with gradual integration. The Commission did so with a view to the fifth enlargement with [the Agenda 2000](#). At a time when the European Union needs more than ever to convince its citizens of the merits of its proposals, a comprehensive document with impact studies is essential. Indeed, if enlargement is "a *geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity*[10]", we still need to persuade our citizens. The Union cannot be enlarged without Europeans. So, the time has come to adopt the "Agenda 2030"!

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[10] [Grenada Declaration](#), 6
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