Although there are exceptions, a number of countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) are turning away from the EU. At the same time, geopolitical players such as Russia and China are exerting greater influence in these regions. Their activities risk setting back reform processes; at worst, they could jeopardize stability and peace in countries that neighbor the EU. So far, the EU and Germany have failed to find strategic approaches to address this and, instead, are getting bogged down in the EU’s internal disagreements. However, Germany must make the Western Balkans and the EaP a higher priority, press for this at EU level, and find ways out of the impasses that exist in enlargement policy. Germany should also invest in strategic communication and credible cooperation to counter the activities of illiberal players in these regions.

Geopolitics in Europe’s Neighborhood

New Strategies for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership

By Serafine Dinkel and Laura Gelhaus

There are significant differences between the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia) and those of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) – not least in terms of their institutional relationship with the EU. Even so, German and EU foreign policy face similar challenges in both neighboring regions.

Worryingly, a growing shift away from European values is unmistakable. In 2020, the candidate countries of Serbia and Montenegro were downgraded from semi-consolidated democracies to hybrid regimes by the NGO Freedom House for reasons that included corruption, abuses of power, and attacks on the independence of the media and judiciary. Disregard for human rights has not only continued in Azerbaijan and Belarus, but there have also been examples of it in supposedly exemplary countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). In Georgia, for example, media representatives were subjected to severe violence in July 2021 in connection with the Tbilisi Pride parade, which was ultimately called off.

The geopolitical situation is another reason why current policy cannot continue unchanged. Russia and China have both become more active in the region. The EU’s draw-out approach to enlargement in the Western Balkans, as well as the limited number and scope of new offers for the EaP, are proving to be obstacles to further key reforms. The EU enlargement process, which has currently ground to a halt due to vetoes, highlights the dividing line between skeptical and pro-integration member states and also reveals the lack of any sense of urgency. But disagreement should not mean the process comes to a standstill because illiberal players are exploiting this vacuum. The Western Balkans and the EaP are regarded as success stories for European foreign policy, but they could also become a touchstone: Should the EU prove to be incapable of taking action in regions in its neighborhood with which it has close economic and societal links – via large diaspora communities and often pro-European populations – then its identity as a credible player in foreign policy will be in jeopardy. Consequently, it is also in Germany’s interest to become more active and innovative. In 2021, various opportunities exist to accomplish that, for example the next EU-Western Balkans summit that will be held in October. In addition, the EaP summit will be held in December and will determine the policy objectives for the next five years. These opportunities should be seized.
Determining Factors

Western Balkans

Germany’s policy toward the Western Balkans is firmly embedded in the EU enlargement process – which is stagnating. The longer the process takes, the more the conditionality that is intended to spread EU norms loses its effectiveness. This has dramatic implications for the EU’s capacity to act and its external credibility. The region is, after all, considered a textbook example of the EU’s transformative power.

Out of the six Western Balkan countries, Montenegro and Serbia are engaged in accession negotiations. For North Macedonia and Albania, the opening of negotiations had seemed within reach but, since 2019, has been on ice due to vetoes. The failure to reward countries for reforms and concessions sends a negative signal to the region. At the same time, the willingness to undertake reforms continues to decline there – including in Serbia and Montenegro. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, candidate status remains a distant prospect due to unresolved status and security issues.

In recent years, Germany has sought to strengthen economic and civil-society cooperation within the region with the “Berlin Process” initiated by Chancellor Angela Merkel and, in this way, make an indirect contribution to the enlargement process. Despite some partial successes, progress has been mixed. Intra-regional cooperation is no substitute for the incentive of EU integration: the willingness of countries to undertake reforms remains tied to a credible prospect of EU accession.

Eastern Partnership

Although the EaP policy likewise aims to export the acquis communautaire (the common body of EU rights and obligations), the EaP partner countries have no prospect of EU accession. Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova have concluded association agreements with the EU and are seeking closer ties. The relationship with Armenia suffered a setback in 2013 with Russia’s de-facto vetoing of the signing of the association agreement. In the case of Azerbaijan, negotiations on a new framework agreement have been ongoing since 2017. In Belarus, relations with the regime of Alexander Lukashenko have broken down since his illegitimate re-election in 2020, which is not recognized by the EU, and the human rights violations committed in this context.
The EaP is not a priority in German policy. Rather than taking a strategic approach to the region, two ways of thinking dominate. First, the region is viewed primarily through the lens of policy toward Russia. This is, in view of Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, understandable and even desirable, especially in light of the undermining of Ukrainian security policy by Nord Stream 2. Yet this approach falls short when it comes to understanding local contexts. Second, the attention given to the region is often limited to crises and fleeting in nature. Although the crises in Belarus and Nagorno–Karabakh penetrated media reporting and the political discourse to a limited degree, this still did not lead to new strategic approaches.

**CHALLENGES**

**Deadlocks Within the EU**

Deadlocks within the EU are a fundamental challenge when it comes to policy toward the Western Balkans and the EaP. Policy toward these regions is caught up in a vicious circle. If the EU does not offer something in return for implementing its norms, their willingness to undertake reforms declines. This, in turn, leads to a decline in the EU's engagement.

The question of which approach to take to the countries of the Eastern Partnership has always been contentious. Initially, there were disagreements about whether the European Neighborhood Policy should pertain only to the EU’s eastern or also to its southern neighbors. Today, there is disagreement on additional offers to the countries at the forefront of the EaP. While the Baltic countries and Poland are open to the idea of offering the prospect of accession, this remains out of the question for other member states, including Germany.

The stagnation of EU enlargement policy reflects how unanimity voting allows member states to undermine common goals in EU (foreign) policy. For example, successive vetoes in the European Council blocked the planned opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. First, France demanded a revision of the enlargement methodology; now, Bulgaria is calling for bilateral concessions from North Macedonia and thereby blocking the opening of negotiations for both countries. Yet, although the vetoes have been criticized by Germany and others, they do suit some member states. The Netherlands and Denmark, for example, are skeptical about admitting some countries from this region to the EU, due to concerns relating to the rule of law, corruption, and organized crime. It is questionable whether this problem would be solved by a reform of the unanimity vote, which hardly seems achievable.

**Geopolitical Challenges:**

**Russia and China**

Geopolitical players such as Russia and China are pursuing their interests in both regions. During the coronavirus pandemic, they have run targeted disinformation campaigns, made high-profile aid deliveries, and engaged in vaccine diplomacy.

Russia remains one of the most important players in the region; in particular, it regards the EaP partner countries as its natural sphere of influence. In addition to military aggression, it exerts pressure through policies on issues including energy, migration, or trade. It influences election campaigns, for example by funding illiberal parties; cooperates with secessionists; and
spreads disinformation. Anti-EU pro-

propaganda promoted by Russia, such as on LGBTIQ+ rights, is proving to be very persistent, for example in Georgia or Ukraine. In spite of this, Russia’s de-

structive policies are not succeeding in binding the region’s countries to it willingly on a long-term basis. This of-

fers an opportunity for the EU and Germany to recognize the civilian pop-

ulation's preferences and help to shape the future of these countries.

In recent years, China has been in-

vesting more heavily in infrastruc-

ture projects. Major projects in the

Western Balkans are intended, among other things, to strengthen the trans-

portation link from the Greek port of

Piraeus, which is managed by China, to

the EU. With the exception of Kosovo,

all of the Western Balkan countries

are part of the Belt and Road Initiative

and the “17+1” format. These proj-

ects often leave countries with a high
debt burden. Montenegro, for exam-

ple, borrowed around €900 million

from the Chinese investment bank

for the Bar-Boljare highway project and

now owes around a quarter of its

public debt to China. Furthermore,

Chinese companies invest in proj-

ects that do not comply with the en-

vironmental standards desired by the

EU – such as coal-fired power plants

in Bosnia and Serbia. The investment

flows are often opaque and can further

exacerbate the problem of corruption.

In addition, technology cooperation

with China could be used to strength-

en authoritarian tendencies. For exam-

ple, although Serbia has excluded the

Chinese technology company Huawei

from its 5G network in response to

pressure from the United States, thou-

sands of cameras in Belgrade have

been fitted with Huawei facial recogni-
tion software since 2019.

Despite these usually loan-based in-

vestments, the EU remains the most

important economic partner of the

Western Balkans – in terms of both

trade and investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooperation and Communication

Germany should make these regions a

higher priority. This requires including

the Western Balkans in the coalition

agreement beyond EU enlargement

policy and discussing the Eastern Part-

tnership in its own right as well.

Internal EU disagreements should be

bypassed by also pursuing coopera-

tion outside of enlargement structures. This can include additional political di-

alogues, in particular on hybrid threats

and external influence. To restore the

EU’s credibility in these regions, dead-

locks in enlargement and EaP poli-

cy should be acknowledged – without

engaging in blame-shifting. Additional

instruments and formats should, how-

ever, make a clear contribution to the

overarching goal of accelerating the

EU accession of the Western Balkans.

Germany should invest in strategic

communication. This includes com-

municating more proactively via a wide

range of media that Germany and the

EU are reliable, long-term partners in

comparison to other geopolitical play-

ers. Germany should also press for an

expansion of the EU East StratCom

Task Force set up by the European Ex-

ternal Action Service to tackle disin-

formation in the EU’s neighborhood. This

means investing in financial and

human resources to at least double the

Task Force’s current capacities.

While other geopolitical players only

pursue their own interests, Germany

and the EU can gain credibility by en-

gaging in genuine cooperation in these

regions. The practical implementation

of EU policy concepts such as “local own-

ership” requires more than a foreign

policy based on EU blueprints; a more

cooperative approach is necessary.