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**WEST BALKANS IN THE POLITICAL STRATEGY  
OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (1990 – 2020)**

**Abstract.** *The study is aimed at highlighting the main issues that affect the establishment and implementation of the European Union's strategy for the Western Balkans. **The research methodology** is based on the principles of historicism, impartiality, problem-chronological presentation of the material. The method of comparative analysis of different stages of formation of the EU strategy for the Western Balkans has been used. **The Scientific Novelty.** A comparative analysis of the EU strategy for various countries in the Balkan region, as well as for the Eastern Partnership countries has been carried out. **The Conclusions.** The European Union is not ready for the final acceptance of the countries of the region as members. As of 2020, the problem of the new format of the EU's relations with the United Kingdom remains unresolved. Britain's exit has unbalanced the EU and exacerbated the contradictions between the “old” and “new” EU member states, between the “rich” and the “poor” ones, between the northern and southern EU member states. The EU's Balkan enlargement increases*

*the number of southern member states. Obstacles to the Western Balkan countries' compliance with the political, economic and legal criteria for the EU membership still remain difficult. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, and the Republic of Northern Macedonia must complete the establishment of institutions of functioning and effective democracy, a competitive market economy, and complete the implementation of European law into national law. It is also necessary to leave behind great-power chauvinism, which destabilizes the Balkans. Only in this case, the EU's political strategy towards the Western Balkans can be considered historically successful.*

**Key words:** *Western Balkans, European Union, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Kosovo, NATO, Eastern Partnership.*

## **ЗАХІДНІ БАЛКАНИ В ПОЛІТИЧНІЙ СТРАТЕГІЇ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОГО СОЮЗУ (1990 – 2020)**

**Анотація.** *Мета дослідження* полягає у висвітленні основних проблем, які впливають на формування та реалізацію стратегії Європейського Союзу щодо країн Західних Балкан. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на принципах історизму, неупередженості, проблемно-хронологічному викладенні наукового матеріалу. Використаний метод порівняльного аналізу різних етапів становлення стратегії Євросоюзу щодо країн Західних Балкан. **Наукова новизна.** Проведений компаративний аналіз стратегії ЄС щодо різних країн балканського регіону, а також щодо країн “Східного партнерства”. **Висновки.** Євросоюз не готовий до остаточного включення країн регіону до свого складу. Станом на 2020 р. неврегульованою залишається проблема нового формату відносин ЄС з Великою Британією, вихід якої розбалансував ЄС та посилив суперечності між: “старими” і “новими” країнами-членами ЄС, “багатими” і “бідними”, північними і південними країнами-членами ЄС. Балканське розширення ЄС розширює коло південних країн-членів. складними залишаються перешкоди на шляху до виконання країнами Західних Балкан політичних, економічних і правових критеріїв набуття членства в ЄС. Албанія, Боснія та Герцеговина, Косово, Сербія, Республіка Північна Македонія мають завершити формування інститутів функціональної та ефективної демократії, конкурентоспроможної ринкової економіки і завершити імплементацію норм європейського права до національного законодавства. Також необхідно залишити в історії примари великодержавного шовінізму, який дестабілізує Балкани. Тільки у цьому випадку політичну стратегію Євросоюзу щодо країн Західних Балкан можна буде вважати історично успішною.

**Ключові слова:** *Західні Балкани, Європейський Союз, європейська політика сусідства, Косово, НАТО, Східне партнерство.*

**The Problem Statement.** The newly independent states that emerged in the Balkans after the break-up of Yugoslavia today are still in the centre of the geopolitical confrontation of different world powers. For the European Union, the Western Balkans are a test of the ability to contribute to European democratic values in a strategically important region for the EU. The processes of disintegration and interstate conflicts that took place in the Balkans during 1991 – 2008 challenged the security and existence of the European integration project. The United States, which played a crucial military and political role in resolving the bulk of the Balkan conflicts (the Dayton Peace Treaty for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recognition of Kosovo's independence), handed the region over to the EU at the beginning of the 21st century. However, as NATO's leader, the United States remains a guarantor of regional security. Russia, which is trying to maintain its influence in Serbia, is demonstrating its presence in the Balkans. However, the main political actor in the Balkans naturally is the European Union that determines the pace of progress of the Western Balkan countries towards a united Europe, the degree of economic and political stability in the region. The complexity of the problems facing the EU in the region makes the process of developing and implementing a strategy for the Western Balkans contradictory.

**The Analysis of sources and recent researches.** The scientists considered the political process of forming the European Union's strategy for the Western Balkans in detail in the academic literature. The bibliographic reviews of this issue consist of thousands of monographs and articles. The Balkan 1991 – 1999 wars intensified discussions on the role of the national factor in the further development of the region. The 1991 – 1995 wars (Serbo-Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, and Serbo-Bosnian) completed the process of forming the modern Croatian and modern Slovenian nations. Even after joining the European Union (Slovenia in 2004, Croatia in 2013), the Slovenes and the Croats have preserved a national identity based on Europeanness and a radical rejection of the Balkan syndrome (permanent interethnic wars) (Feith, 2013, p. 32). In this sense, the Macedonian experience is impressive. At the beginning of the 1990s, owing to preventive actions by the United Nations, the introduction of peacekeeping forces on the Macedonian-Serbian border at the end of 1992, it was possible to exclude the Republic of Macedonia from the Balkan wars. The European Union and NATO played a positive role in promoting Macedonia's European identity. Greece, as a member of both unions, adapted its national policy on the Macedonian question to the needs of the European security (Dunay & Lachowski, 2006, p. 18).

Helfried Münkler emphasized the importance of taking into account the historical factor of the influence of empires in the Balkans (Helfried Münkler, p. 34). Paul Welfens shows how Britain's exit from the EU negatively affected the European integration process (Welfens, 2017, p. 67). Ulrika Guerot sees the solution to the Balkan problem in the creation of a European republic (Guerot, 2017, p. 213).

**The Purpose of the Research.** The article aims at highlighting the main issues that affect the formation and implementation of the European Union's strategy for the Western Balkans.

**The Main Material Statement.** Another test for the Balkan region was the pandemic. Sporadic protests against quarantine measures, which negatively affected the state of the national economy, took place in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The European Union had to allocate 3.3 billion euros urgently to overcome the current security threats in the region (Peljic, p. 2). The military and political situation around Kosovo no longer makes it possible to withdraw peacekeepers. KFOR troops remain the guarantor of regional stability (21 years of KFOR, p. 1).

The choice between modern nation-building and integration into supranational European and Euro-Atlantic structures remains a strategic challenge for the Balkan countries. Success in solving this problem of predominantly mono-ethnic Croatia and Slovenia has not yet become a model to follow. Objective reasons can explain it. It is still not possible to resolve, relatively speaking, the Serbian and Albanian national issues. Serbia's defeat in the Balkan wars of 1991 – 1999 over the creation of a "Greater Serbia" led to the country's territorial fragmentation. Former ally Montenegro in 2006 withdrew from the "small Yugoslavian union", i.e., the union of Serbia and Montenegro. In February of 2008, Kosovo declared its independence. It was the Kosovo issue that put the "Albanian dilemma" on the agenda. After all, two national Albanian states de facto emerged in the Balkans. Attempts to create a union of Kosovo and Albania could turn the region into a whirlpool of ultra-nationalist contradictions. After all, a potential "Greater Albania" can claim not only Kosovo but also the Albanian-populated territory of the Serbian Sandzak, the Albanian territories of the Republic of Northern Macedonia and even northern Greece. Besides, the Albanian national question keeps the Serbian national question in a state of uncertainty. Serbia's political elites and people must make a strategic choice between not recognizing the existing territorial and political realities in the Balkans and the European integration. In the event of developments under the

option of non-recognition of existing realities, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina may worsen. Serbian nationalist circles in this Balkan state insist on the self-determination of the Republika Srpska and its accession to Serbia.

However, such a hypothetical fragmentation of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina may override the achievements of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. Bosnia and Herzegovina were then formed as a confederate state of three equal national groups: the Bosnian Croats, the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Muslims. Since then, Bosnia and Herzegovina have been the de facto Balkan protectorate of the European Union. In these circumstances, a favourable option for the integration of all Balkan countries into the EU and NATO is possible given Serbia's pragmatic choice of this path. An additional stimulus for Belgrade on this path was the Montenegrin issue. At the beginning of 2020, the Montenegrin authorities announced the creation of an autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church, separating it from the Serbian Orthodox Church. This decision once again sharpened national feelings in both Serbia and Montenegro. Therefore, the question remains whether the Balkan peoples have overcome all stages of historical development in order to move from the national ideas of the nineteenth century to the modern European national identity.

The European Union has started accession negotiations with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. The success of these negotiations depends on the readiness of the EU and the ability of these Balkan states to adopt European norms and rules. During the second half of 2020, the EU plans to approve the Community budget for 2021 – 2027, and significant expenditures of this budget should be aimed at completing the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU.

The eventual accession of all Balkan nation-states to the European Union must finally close the “Balkan window” of the vulnerability of a united Europe. After all, nation-building in the Balkans based on ethnic nationalism sharply contradicts the purpose and current values of the process of European integration. For more than three decades, the EU has been pursuing a policy of human rights, the rule of law, democracy and economic development in the Balkans. However, the region remains vulnerable to the influence of non-European geopolitical forces: the United States, Russia, Turkey and China.

During the period of 1991 – 2020, the United States made considerable efforts to help the European Union consolidate its policy in the Balkans. This region has taken an important place in the global strategy of the United States. Kosovo is home to NATO's most extensive Bond-steel base, which plays a crucial logistical role in reaching the US military and political forces in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Russia is trying to maintain its position in the Balkans based on the historical Slavophile sentiments. However, it cannot offer anything alternative to European integration to the Balkan states. However, Serbia is trying to use the Russian factor to blackmail the European Union and the United States. Serbia's nationalist circles consider Russia as a guarantor of preventing Serbia from joining the EU and NATO. Nevertheless, Russia's limited influence in the Balkans was demonstrated in 2018, when the Russian private military company failed at carrying out an anti-European coup in Montenegro. This fact proved the ineffectiveness of Russia's conservative strategy in the Balkans. For Gazprom, the region remains attractive for the security of the South Stream gas pipeline. Turkey is also interested in the operation of this gas pipeline. However, Turkish interests in the Balkans are much larger than Russia's. The retreat from the Balkans in 1900 – 1918 ended with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the process of disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the sympathies of Turkey were on the side of the Bosnian Muslims.

The former “core” of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans – Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia – remains a priority area of Turkish interest in the region. At the same time, Turkey is trying to use its influence in the Balkans in its own EU accession talks. Formally, these negotiations began in February of 2005 and have not yet progressed to completion.

On the contrary, the destabilization of the situation in the Middle East influenced by the events of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 and then the refugee crisis in 2015 postponed the negotiation process until better times. Under these circumstances, it seems that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is more likely to demonstrate his intention to implement a neo-Ottoman project than a European one. The transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in May of 2020 created another cause for tension in relations between Greece and Turkey. The material basis of the Greek-Turkish contradictions is the division of the gas-bearing shelf in the Aegean Sea and near Cyprus. However, under these circumstances, the Balkan vector of Turkish foreign policy has receded into the background compared to the Syrian, Iraqi and Libyan vectors.

The US’s global competitor, China, has its interests in the Balkans. Beijing has been waiting for almost three decades until the end of the hot phase of the Balkan 1991 – 1999 wars.

However, Greece’s financial problems in 2008 – 2012 allowed the Chinese to buy several Greek seaports, which play a significant role in China’s “One Belt, One Road” trading strategy. For logistics, the Balkans are becoming an important trade route for China to the European Union. The other scenario of the big Balkan geopolitical game mainly depends on the pro-European national consolidation of the Balkan peoples and the effectiveness of the European Union’s strategy in the Balkans.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace expert M. Samorukov drew attention to the inconsistency of the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans. The unwillingness of the EU to accept these countries into its circle, as well as the unwillingness of the Balkan countries themselves to meet the criteria for EU membership creates a regional geopolitical vacuum (Samorukov, 2019, p. 1). There is an ongoing discussion in the scientific literature about the appropriate enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans (David & Wunsch, 2019, p. 2). This historiographical review reveals the main range of strategic problems facing the European Union in the Western Balkans.

Progress in European integration can be achieved based on a combination of long-term, medium-term and short-term factors. One of the main long-term factors in the success of European integration is the European idea of the territorial and civilizational unity of Europe, consolidated by the commonality of historical destiny, which requires institutionalization. Receptions of Europe’s geographical boundaries have changed as political ideas have been transformed into which peoples can be considered European and which cannot. We are witnessing a change in the value content of the concept of “Europe”. Until recently, it was combined with the concept of Christendom, and in the postmodern era began to be identified with the idea of the centre of global post-industrial civilization. Before the UK’s exit from the EU, London was the biggest supporter of the EU enlargement, seeing it as a means of preventing the formation of a consolidated federal European Union. After all, Brexit has become an exception, not a trend, and the UK is losing out, not the EU.

On May 1, 2004, 10 new member states joined the EU at once: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Cyprus, and Malta. A new treaty was prepared to establish the preconditions for the institutional reform. Until 2004, Greece, Ireland, Spain, and Portugal received funds from the consolidation fund (for the development of backward regions). On January 1, 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined

the EU. Since then, Ireland has not received funds from the Consolidation Fund, but Greece, Spain, Portugal and all “newcomers” have received funding from the old member states.

On December 1 2009, following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Community transferred its rights and responsibilities to the EU. However, EU documents on security and defence and the common foreign policy are not of obligatory force but a political one. The entire array of existing EU rules and regulations, including unwritten rules and regulations, is the *acquis Communautaire*. Accordingly, the EU legal order is the rights and obligations of the EU system and its institutions, as well as the existing EU law as it is interpreted and applied by the Court of Justice. The EU cannot create new areas of its activities that distinguish it from a federal state. The EU international agreements with the third countries are part of the EU law. They are acts of direct action. On January 1, 2003, the EU officially took over the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU contingent was to train Bosnian police and border guards. The first Concordia military operation was launched on March 18, 2003, in Macedonia to ensure the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement between the Macedonians and the Albanians. The largest contingents were sent there by France, Italy, Belgium and Germany.

In 2013 (before Britain left the EU on the 28th), Croatia became a member of the EU. The official contenders for membership are the Northern Republic of Macedonia (since 2019), Montenegro, Turkey (since 1999), Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 1995 under the actual protector of the EU), possibly Kosovo (February of 2008). Iceland abandoned the idea of joining. The main goal is to stabilize and consolidate the EU on the achieved positions.

The EU is a union of developed countries with a high standard of living. In the wealthiest country, Luxembourg, the standard of living is seven times higher than in Bulgaria and Romania. For less developed regions are characterized by high unemployment, low educational development, lack of infrastructure development. The EU enlargement prompted the improvement of regional policies aimed at equalizing the level of regional development in order to bridge the gap between the richest and poorest EU countries. As the number of member states increases, the EU space becomes less homogeneous. So far, only Ireland was able to close the gap successfully. In terms of living standards, the Irish caught up with the Dutch, the Danes and the Austrians.

The EU regional policy is designed to consolidate the regions into a single integration complex, to ensure a rational combination of common interests with the interests of individual states. There is no goal to completely equalize all regions because inequality is a characteristic of a market economy and a stimulus for development. Within the EU, there is no redistribution of funds among regions, as federal states do. Regions in need can benefit from the EU structural funds. In 1975, the European Regional Development Fund was established, in 1960 – the European Social Fund, in 1993 – the Consolidation Fund and the European Investment Bank. The principles of work of structural funds: 1) subject and territorial concentration of efforts on the choice of a limited number of directions of activity and selection; 2) multi-annual program approach, 3) partnership of authorities at all levels, 4) supplementation of national and regional policy resources by the EU funds. The main directions of regional policy are convergence, i.e., promoting the development of areas with low welfare, competitiveness – assistance to areas with structural problems, human capital development, the fight against long-term unemployment, the creation of retraining centres. Socio-economic convergence is the second-largest item in the EU’s joint budget

after agricultural policy. In the 2007 – 2013 budget, € 300 billion was spent on these needs (David & Wunsch, 2019, p. 3). After the accession of new countries to the EU in 2004, 2007, 2013, it was decided that the amount of financial assistance may not exceed 4% of gross domestic product; otherwise, it is possible to disperse inflation and create imbalances in the national budgets of the new EU member states. As a result of the expansion, Poland became the primary recipient of these funds. Large expenditures go to Italy, East Germany, Portugal, Greece, the Czech Republic and Hungary also received significant funding.

The EU enlargement has made some adjustments to the EU social policy. Social policy should contribute to the conditions ensuring public welfare. The welfare states, which developed in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, are traditionally divided into four types. The first type, Scandinavian, is typical of Denmark, Sweden and Finland. There, active social policy is funded by a progressive income tax scale. At the beginning of the 1990s, they somewhat liberalized their labour markets to improve the competitiveness of their national economies. The second type, liberal Anglo-Saxon, is typical of Britain and Ireland. The social system of this type is financed mainly by insurance premiums. The third type of social policy, corporate, is used in Germany, France and the Benelux countries. Social insurance is dominant here, but the state also regulates market relations. Finally, the fourth, southern European type, is typical of Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. Here the level of social protection is relatively low. The EU sets only minimum social standards, although the EU's common agricultural policy can be considered socially oriented. The countries of the Western Balkans belong instead to the fourth type of development of the welfare state. However, it should be noted that the Balkan wars of the end of the twentieth century, significantly limited the possibilities to carry out the efficient social policy. The global economic crisis of 2008 and the 2020 pandemic also have a negative impact.

The European Social Fund provides structural assistance for the member managing unemployment. After the establishment of the Common Market, the national welfare regime works not only for the citizens, for example, in Germany, but also for all those who work legally in that country. In July of 1996, the EU adopted the first joint directive on social policy for the care of infants. However, the EU abandoned the goal of harmonizing national social protection systems due to its incredible diversity. Left-wing political forces believe that this is due to the dominance of liberal market ideology in the EU. However, Article 136 of the Amsterdam Treaty states that social policy is a joint responsibility of the national member state of the EU and EU bodies. Owing to this treaty, the creation of new jobs has been added to the EU's goals. In this sense, the countries of the Western Balkans are an example of a deep European periphery, where nation-states have limited opportunities to pursue active social policies.

All EU countries implement national transport policies. However, a trans-European transport network is emerging. There is a redistribution of load on specific modes of transport. Joint infrastructure projects are funded. There is a question of increasing transport safety. In 2001, 30 joint trans-European transport projects in this sphere were approved for 20 years. The strategic goal is to create a common market for transport services, and the Western Balkans play an essential role in the transport networks of the EU. Instead, the countries of the new Eastern Europe still need to prove the realism of their ambitions to achieve this level of association with the European Union. It will be recalled that as a result of the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, the European Union reached the border with the post-Soviet states. It was proposed to develop a 'ring of friends' along the borders of a united Europe. On March 11, 2003, the European Commission's report "An Enlarged Europe – New Neighborhood: A New Format for Relations with Our Eastern and Southern Neighbours" was

published. On May 12, 2004, the European Commission's report "European Neighborhood Policy. Strategic Report". On October 24, 2006, the regulations on the establishment of the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) were approved. These documents set out the principles, composition of participants, content and mechanisms for implementing the European Neighborhood Policy. Of course, the EU is interested in ensuring that there are no problems along its borders related to armed conflicts, weak public administration and organized crime. The EU enlargement should not have led to new dividing lines in Europe. The main principle of selecting participants in the European Neighborhood Policy is respect for the values of democracy and respect for human rights. The role of political cooperation is growing significantly. The content of the European Neighborhood Policy concerns all three pillars of European integration (Emerson, 2006, p. 1).

As of mid-2010, 16 states were involved in the European Neighborhood Policy: 10 from the Mediterranean and six from the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan since November 14, 2006, Armenia on November 14, 2006, Belarus (in case of the lifting of sanctions), Georgia since November 14, 2006, Moldova since February 22, 2005, Ukraine on February 21, 2005, Algeria (conditional), Egypt, March 6 2007, Israel, April 11 2005, Jordan, June 2, 2005, Lebanon, January 1, 2007, Libya (conditional), Morocco, July 27, 2005, Palestine, May 4, 2005, Tunisia On July 4, 2005, Russia refused to participate in this project (Marchetti, p. 2). The Balkan countries were not included in the programme because, in December of 2002, the EU confirmed to them the possibility of gaining full membership in the EU. It was confirmed that the European Neighborhood Programme and the EU enlargement are different processes. The mere fact of the participation of European states in this policy does not predetermine their future relations with the EU.

Substantially, the European Neighborhood Policy provides for the observance of democratic norms, the formation of regional security systems, a gradual movement towards the free movement of goods, capital, labour and services under the EU law. In May of 2009, the EU approved the Eastern Partnership programme as a particular dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy. Its goal was to intensify the movement of Eastern European and Caucasian countries towards political association and economic integration with the EU. The first Eastern Partnership summit took place on May 7, 2009, in Prague with 27 EU countries, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Russia believes that the Eastern Partnership has become a "partnership against Russia".

Negotiations on the EU accession are underway with the Northern Republic of Macedonia, which received candidate status in December of 2005, and negotiations with Turkey began in June of 2006. Albania signed an Association and Stabilization Agreement on June 12, 2006, Montenegro signed a similar agreement on October 15, 2007, Serbia on April 29, 2008, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – on June 16, 2008. To promote the process of European integration of the Balkan countries in 2001, a particular financial programme Community for Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization – CARDS was developed, which provides for the development of state institutions and legislation, strengthening democracy, the rule of law and human rights, civil society and independent mass media, ensuring the functioning of a market economy, carrying out structural reforms. By 2010, € 5 billion had been spent on this programme. Nevertheless, so far, there is no clear understanding of when the Balkan countries will meet the criteria for the EU membership (EU-Western Balkans, 2020, pp. 1–2). As a result, the European Union's strategy for the Western Balkans is flexible and has vague chronological boundaries for achieving the goal of full integration of all countries in the region into the European Union.

**The Conclusions.** The development of the EU's political strategy for the Western Balkans at the beginning of the 2020s has gone through at least three stages. The first one was related to the active phase of the Balkan wars of 1991 – 1999 when the core of the EU strategy was attempting to pacify a region whose destabilization posed severe threats to European security. The second phase of 2000 – 2013 was driven by the need to resolve the Kosovo conflict and prepare Slovenia and Croatia for the EU accession (joined respectively in 2004 and 2013). Finally, the third period began after Croatia acceded to the EU and continues to this day. The structural crisis of the European Union and the economic problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic harm the implementation of the EU strategy for the Western Balkans. Before the June 23, 2016 referendum on Britain's exit from the EU, Britain was an active supporter of the process of intensive EU enlargement. The British motives for such policy included the desire to maximize the number of EU member states in order to make it impossible to create a federal format of the European Union.

However, the prospect of completing the UK's exit from the EU necessitates compensation for the Common Market from London's decision. Of course, even all the countries of the Western Balkans cannot replace Great Britain either demographically or economically. Nevertheless, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU should help solve the problem of the "geopolitical vacuum" in the region and strengthen the security of the European Union in all its dimensions. However, there can be no straightforward way to achieve this goal. Even NATO's military and political alliance has gradually expanded its influence in the Western Balkans. The members of the North Atlantic Alliance are Albania, Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro. Existing territorial, ethno-political, military and political problems still prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo from becoming members of NATO (the independence of this country is not recognized by all members of NATO and the EU – Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Romania oppose recognition). The Republic of Northern Macedonia embarked on the path of joining the EU and NATO after the settlement of disputes with Greece. NATO remains an insurance policy for the EU in the Western Balkans. It is not easy to approve the EU budget for 2021 – 2027. The structure of this strategic EU financial document does not provide for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. Therefore, it may take the entire decade of the 2020s to complete this process. The obstacles to the Western Balkans' compliance with the political, economic and legal criteria for the EU membership remain difficult. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, and the Republic of Northern Macedonia must complete the establishment of institutions of functioning and effective democracy, a competitive market economy, and complete the implementation of European law into national law. It is also necessary to leave in history the ghosts of great-power chauvinism, which destabilizes the Balkans. This situation refers to abandon projects to establish a "Greater Albania" or "Greater Serbia". Only in this case, the EU's political strategy towards the Western Balkans can be considered historically successful.

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