

The Balkans: Frontier or Fault Line?

Evaluating potential EU accession of the Western Balkans states

By

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Abstract

The European Union is currently at a critical point in its history, facing the fallout of major recent challenges such as a migration crisis, the exit of one of its oldest member states, the rise of populist movements across the union and the recently announced exit of Angela Merkel, one of the EU's longest-serving leaders. Accompanying these events are questions of the future of the organization, particularly in terms of enlargement. Enlargement has been a core tenant of the European Union throughout the organization's history, although the fundamental ethos and purpose of enlargement initiatives has at times seemed vague and inconsistent. Today, the formally declared frontier of the next EU enlargement is the Western Balkans, a region containing the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia (Macedonia), Montenegro, and Serbia. However, in light of the EU's recent challenges and uncertainties, as well as concerns of "enlargement fatigue," the logic and feasibility of such an expansion in the near future has come into question. This thesis examines the potential benefits and challenges of EU accession by the Western Balkans states. This thesis argues that while the Western Balkans states are often discounted due to narratives of recent violence and backwardness, in actuality the biggest barrier to EU accession by the Western Balkans states at present is not fundamental and insurmountable unsuitability for membership, but timing. While it is true that the Western Balkans countries still have necessary reforms to implement before being fully suitable for European Union membership, the inadvisability of EU accession by the Western Balkans states at this time is also due to current uncertainties and challenges within the union itself. This thesis suggests the European Union delay plans for integration of the Western Balkans states for the short term, and instead focus on the development of engagement strategies with the region outside of promises of imminent accession.