

Illiberalising EU enlargement to the Western Balkans

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December 2024

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Note: This publication has been authored by external contributor/s. The contents do not necessarily reflect the opinion or the position of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

This analysis was produced within the Think Visegrad Non-V4 Fellowship programme. Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.thinkvisegrad.org.

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>1. The steady illiberalisation of European politics</i>	3
1.1. The EU's slow illiberal downfall	4
1.2. Beyond stabilitocracy: illiberalism in the Western Balkans	5
<i>2. Illiberalising EU enlargement</i>	6
2.1. A causal model to track illiberalisation	6
2.2. The expected alliance: Serbia and Hungary	8
2.3. A marriage of convenience: Albania and Italy	10
<i>3. Warnings for a new EU mandate</i>	13
<i>4. Conclusions and recommendations</i>	14
<i>About EUROPEUM</i>	16

Introduction

The phenomenon of illiberalism, cornerstone to the increasingly popular concept of illiberal democracy, has steadily gained all the more traction in the global policy discussion. In the European Union (EU), the consolidation of majoritarian, nativist leaderships is leading to many Member States' backtracking on progressive agendas and openly pursuing policies that undermine the rights of minorities and the liberal-democratic system of checks and balances.¹ The illiberalisation of European politics is prompting the reversion of a large share of progressive and social policies and is damaging the credibility of European integration at large. EU enlargement is, namely, one of the fields that is falling prey to this process—as both EU Member States and EU candidate countries are engaging in incremental change away from the liberal-democratic institutions and norms up to a point where the process of EU accession becomes, in itself, a political tool under the parameters of illiberalism through which to advance their agenda.

This paper develops an introductory insight into the process of illiberalisation of EU enlargement as both a policy and a political process. By shifting away from the many institutional accounts that focus exclusively on the role of the European Commission (EC), it awards a stronger agency to candidate countries and Member States—which at times gets diluted or simply goes overlooked—in an attempt to highlight their responsibilities and accountabilities throughout the process. It proposes an exploratory causal model to track illiberalisation, whereby candidate countries and Member States interact with each other in search of leverage and political tradeoffs, ultimately leading to an illiberal manipulation of the EU enlargement policy. It explores two pairs of countries, all illiberal to varying degrees—Serbia and Hungary, and Albania and Italy—which showcase different structural traits, both in their bilateral relations and in themselves, and which reveal that the illiberalisation of EU enlargement is conducted at different speeds and through very diverse channels. The study draws from qualitative data sources featuring a set of six semi-structured interviews with representatives from EU institutions—including the EC and the European Parliament (EP)—and Member States, think-tanks, and academia conducted in Prague, Brussels and online between late October and early December 2024. The documentary analysis is further informed and complemented by a series of written secondary data including news stories, press statements, policy documents, and academic journal articles.

1. The steady illiberalisation of European politics

Located within the broad 'grey area' that separates a full democracy from a full autocracy, illiberal democracy embodies a governance approach that rejects the essential role of independent institutions while undermining the space for disagreement in the public sphere.² Illiberalism seeks its legitimacy upon the rejection of liberalism, including liberal values and the institutions devised to serve as checks on power.³ It is commonly understood as a challenger to liberal-democracy that has built its momentum upon the failures of neoliberalism and the unresponsiveness of institutions, and has successfully channeled citizens' frustration towards political alternatives.

Liberal democracies are enduring a serious decline in many corners of the world, as more governments become increasingly authoritarian and slowly shift away from principles enshrining equality before the law, minority rights and civil liberties. Even leaderships that are not considered illiberal, let alone

¹ Rupnik, J. (2016) Surging Illiberalism in the East. *Journal of Democracy*, 27:4, p. 77-87

² Schenkan, N. (2018) *Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism*. Freedom House: Washington DC

³ Laruelle, M. (2022) Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction. *East European Politics*, 38:2, p. 303-327

authoritarian, are being questioned for policies and practices that are not compliant with human rights standards or overlook citizens' basic rights and freedoms. In this light, it can be argued that the illiberalisation of politics and political processes is unfolding at a steady pace across diverse fields within the EU.

1.1. The EU's slow illiberal downfall

Within the EU, well until the end of the 2010s, the presence of right-wing populist and nativist political parties at the helm of a national government was a phenomenon limited to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as only Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland were holding executive leadership positions. However, the following years saw a substantive rise in their institutional representation, not least in the aftermath of a chain of milestones—including the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic—that undermined the legitimacy and the effectiveness of liberal democracy and in certain countries led to growing mistrust towards the EU as a supranational organisation.⁴ 2022 saw the arrival in power of right-wing radical Giorgia Meloni, whose Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) party topped the polls, and in 2023 populist Robert Fico regained power in Slovakia through his Smer platform.

Today's illiberal challenges to the EU's sovereignty and legitimacy usually encompass multiple threats to the rule of law, the undoing of executive checks and balances, and the discriminatory treatment of national, ethnic, gender or sexual minorities, among others.⁵ The realm of migration is arguably one of the battlegrounds for the Union's illiberals, as they spearhead the protection of the EU's national entities against a perceived uncontrolled invasion by refugees and other migrants from countries in Africa, Asia or the Middle East.⁶

The rise and consolidation of illiberal politics in Europe cannot be detached from its genesis and constitution as a movement of global reach. The leadership of Donald Trump in the US between 2016 and 2020 was a foremost proof of a transformative, up-and-coming global system of values and ideals that was steadily gaining traction—only confirmed by his re-election in 2024. Through his outright rejection of the liberal-democratic architecture, including the multilateral system of institutions, the independence of the judiciary and the neutrality of the media, Trump vouched for economic protectionism and social conservatism while strengthening US bilateral relations with like-minded world autocrats, such as Russia's Putin, Israel's Netanyahu and Turkey's Erdoğan.⁷

Considering the current trends, several symptoms point towards an overall process of illiberalisation of EU politics. First and foremost, parties that question the liberal-democratic order are not being isolated to the extent they used to be, as many are circumventing the firewalls that were formerly put in place by the traditional parties. This not only emerges domestically within Member States—such as in the Netherlands, Croatia and Finland, where mainstream centre-right parties have entered into coalition agreements with illiberal and far-right populist platforms—but also at a supranational level. The newly-

⁴ Landsberger, A. (2024) How Has Trust in the EU Changed Over Time? EconPol Policy Brief, 60.

⁵ Soyaltin Colella, D. et al. (2022) Illiberal challenges to the European Union's legitimacy from within and without: the rule of law and refugee crises. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31:4, p. 1192-1205.

⁶ Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at a Slovak–Hungarian–Serbian migration summit. 22 October 2024. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-a-slovakhungarianserbian-migration-summit>

⁷ Carothers, T. and B. Feldman (2023) Examining U.S. Relations With Authoritarian Countries. Carnegie Working Paper, p. 1-56.

elected EP is a faithful reflection of this.⁸ Furthermore, EU governments and parties are embracing and legitimising illiberal policies and their implementation as a way to tackle political, economic and social problems. This is particularly visible, for instance, in the narratives surrounding the migration discourse—where centre-right, and even centre-left, parties are buying into the radical right’s narrative.⁹

1.2. Beyond stabilitocracy: illiberalism in the Western Balkans

Democratic backsliding and the rejection of the liberal-democratic architecture have also become intrinsic features in a majority of the political systems of the Western Balkans. Though not being an integral part of the EU, the six countries in the region are geographically and politically surrounded by Member States, and are arguably the closest partners of the Union—not least in their ambition to eventually join it as full-fledged members.

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, and following their respective independence processes, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia launched the construction of their state structures and the institutionalisation of their civil and political systems. The countries saw the appearance and consolidation of competitive multi-party systems and the timid developments towards liberal democracy and economic reform, with neoliberalisation and EU integration as the two major vectors of change.¹⁰ However, authoritarian patterns of governance soon began to resurface, chiefly marked by strong and informal executive control over state institutions—interpreted as a consequence of the EU’s diminishing interest and engagement with democratic improvements in the region in the aftermath of the 2007 economic crisis, and those that ensued.¹¹

For nearly two decades, many governments in the region have sought perpetual power through the rejection of liberal-democratic practices and the implementation of illiberal policies, including the crafting of corrupt networks and clientelistic structures. Over the years, current and prior ruling parties in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, to name a few, have engaged in practices aimed at undermining the political opposition and their institutional accountability, resulting in poor judicial repercussions.¹² Electoral manipulation, unbalanced media reporting, public resource control for the benefit of party loyalists, and the overall weakening of checks and balances are all practices that come out of the same illiberal toolbox.¹³

The multi-party political systems of the Western Balkan countries are, to different extents, historically and socially entrenched along defined demographic cleavages, and their fluctuating alternation of

⁸ Wax, E. et al. (2024) Far-right ‘Venezuela majority’ signals new power balance in European Parliament. Politico, 28 October. <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-venezuela-european-parliament-power-imbalance-epp-legislature/>

⁹ Pace, M. (2024) Attempts by European centre parties to outflank the right on migration could be misguided. Chatham House, 21 May. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/attempts-european-centre-parties-outflank-right-migration-could-be-misguided>

¹⁰ Bieber, F. (2018) Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics*, 34:3, p. 337-354

¹¹ Vachudova, M. (2013) EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years on. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52:1, p. 122-138.

¹² Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2021) Deconstructing State Capture in Albania. Institute for Democracy and Mediation, p. 1-44.

¹³ Kapidžić, D. (2019) The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20:1, p. 1-17.

power has tended to seek the parties' control over state institutions.¹⁴ In such patronage-based societies, political parties—including Serbia's Progressive Party (SNS), Bosnia and Herzegovina's Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Kosovo's Democratic Party (PDK), North Macedonia's Internal Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO-DPMNE), and Montenegro's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)—appear as extended networks interlinked with economic agents, local patrons and informal elites. Given the prolonged decline in the democratic quality of the region, some even point towards a systemic transition from stabilitocracy to outright autocracy.¹⁵ In their interactions, the illiberal elites of the EU and the Western Balkans systematically evidence that they need one another—their influence, their connections, their power—in order to advance in the joint dismantling of the liberal-democratic model, both in their own countries and beyond, and to exercise dominance at all costs.

2. Illiberalising EU enlargement

As the illiberal model of governance is slowly infiltrating every realm of EU politics, with Member States and EU institutions alike embracing illiberal and anti-democratic solutions to policy problems, it is worth turning to one of the fields where this appears, arguably, in one of its more salient forms: the EU's enlargement policy. Views are divergent among the 27 around the speed with which the EU should accept new members, or whether it should accept any new members at all. Illiberal populism in the EU, on the one hand, is understood as a major political threat to enlargement as it can sow the seeds of skepticism among the population.¹⁶ On the other hand, the threat can come from illiberal leaderships that lean favourably towards enlargement and are inclined to empower the EU membership candidacies of like-minded allies—a process which, if successful, would entrench the risk of illiberal tendencies among new EU governments.¹⁷

This section will firstly introduce a proposed causal model of illiberalisation of EU enlargement. It will then go on to explore two selected cases to illustrate the model: the first case features candidate country Serbia and its intra-EU proxy Hungary, while the second case features candidate country Albania and its intra-EU proxy Italy.

2.1. A causal model to track illiberalisation

The illiberalisation of EU politics, and of EU enlargement in particular, can be illustrated as a multi-agent and self-nurturing mechanism. This model features the stakeholders involved—namely the illiberal Western Balkan governments and the illiberal EU Member State governments—and their interconnections. The networks of influence and power exchange that both groups of stakeholders are involved in lead ultimately to the instrumentalisation of the EU enlargement process in favour of the illiberal elites, which are further empowered to revert democratisation in their countries.

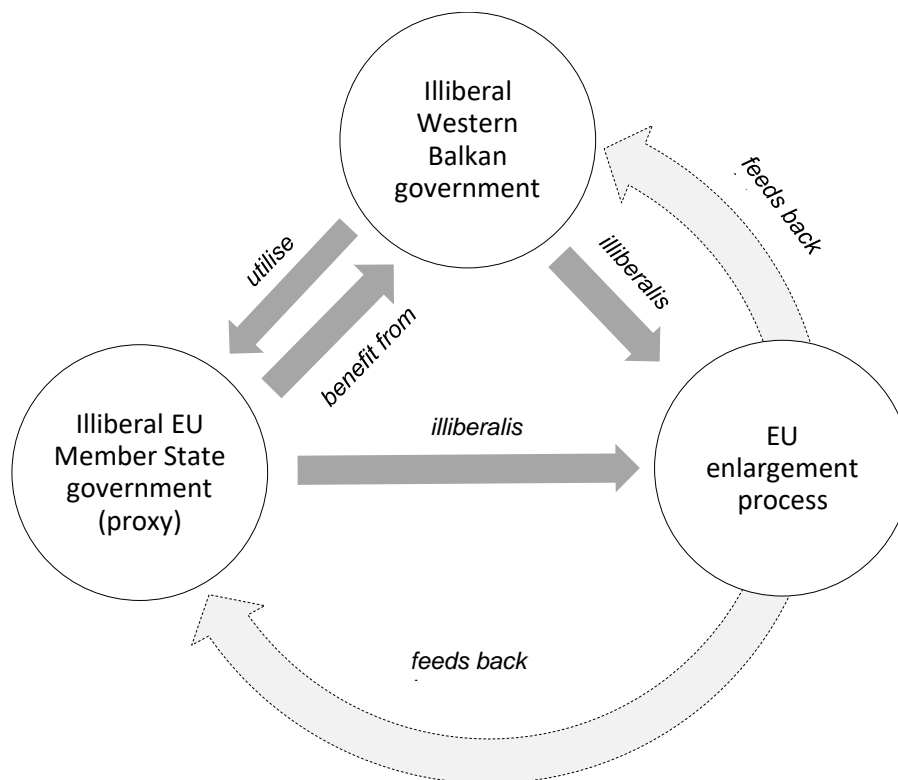
¹⁴ Laštro, C. and F. Bieber (2023) Democratic patterns and party systems in the Western Balkans. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 17, p. 59-75

¹⁵ Kapidžić, D. et al. (2023) Beyond Stabilitocracy: Unveiling the Rise of Autocracy in the Western Balkans. *BiEPAG Policy Analysis*. Belgrade: European Fund for the Balkans, p. 1-18

¹⁶ Buras, P. and E. Morina (2023) Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU. *ECFR Policy Brief*, 517, p. 1-34

¹⁷ Huszka, B. (2017) Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17:4, p. 591-609

The foremost agent in this political relationship is, arguably, the illiberal EU candidate—in this case, a Western Balkan country—which boasts a double role. On the one hand, it has the capacity to directly illiberalise the EU enlargement process, i.e., exercising direct impact and influence upon the EC and the Member States in order to advance their own political and economic interests. On the other hand, it draws from its relationships with the second foremost agent, namely a specific—and likewise illiberal—EU Member State, a carrier or ‘proxy’, which the former utilises as channel for the advancement of its vested interests.



In this context, the role of the illiberal EU Member State is likewise twofold. On the one hand, it engages in the direct illiberalisation of the EU enlargement process with a double load, namely in the advancement of its own interests but also of those of the illiberal EU candidate it is acting as proxy for. In essence, the illiberal candidate country would be exercising indirect impact and influence upon the EC and the Member States by using the leverage of its Member State proxy—who, in turn, would also benefit from specific tradeoffs vis-à-vis the candidate country.

This model argues for the existence of a bilateral and bidirectional relationship of interests that connects illiberal candidate countries in the Western Balkans with their illiberal EU Member State counterparts, whereby their mutual instrumentalisation ultimately contributes to the democratic undermining of the EU’s enlargement process and to its gradual illiberalisation. The model can be likewise understood as a circular and self-nurturing mechanism, since the final output of the agents’ interaction—namely, the illiberalisation of EU enlargement—contributes in itself to further strengthening the position of both the illiberal candidate countries and the illiberal Member States.

2.2. The expected alliance: Serbia and Hungary

The deterioration of liberal democracy in Serbia has gone hand in hand with the arrival in power of the incumbent SNS in 2012. The unquestionable leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić—who rose to power as First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence in 2012, became Prime Minister in 2014, and went on to become President in 2017 until today—rests on a tight media control, a grip over the judiciary, an unlevelled electoral playing field, and a narrow relationship with the country’s unreformed security services.¹⁸ Serbia’s political elite, where Vučić remains the overarching figure, long ago dismissed the liberal-democratic system of norms and institutions, and is cementing its authoritarian approach to domestic governance. Recent democracy indices keep placing Serbia as a ‘transitional’ or ‘hybrid’ regime¹⁹ where autocratisation is steadily consolidating.²⁰ The country is at its worst recorded corruption perception levels,²¹ political influence engulfs the appointment process of public prosecutors and judges,²² public broadcasters are highly biased towards the government,²³ and independent journalists and activists are routinely targeted with spyware.²⁴

Serbia has been a candidate country for EU membership since 2012, coinciding in time with SNS’s entry into government. All throughout its gradual descent into authoritarianism, Serbia’s leadership—chiefly President Vučić—has consolidated itself as a reliable and stable partner for the EU, who has tended to turn a blind eye on the declining human rights and freedoms records.²⁵ The country’s political elites have, in the meantime, showcased adaptability across the political spectrum to preserve influence and retain power, while pursuing a dual approach to the EU in domestic versus international contexts.²⁶ Belgrade cherishes its position as a pivotal actor that is strategically key to the EU, as the controversial 2024 agreement on raw materials came to evidence. This deal, signed between the EU and Serbia and overseen by Germany, foresees the development of a lithium mining project in Western Serbia—opposed by many civil society and activist groups in the country due to its expectedly high environmental risks—to secure the production of batteries essential for EU-manufactured electric vehicles.²⁷ The Serbian executive’s unpunished approach has laid bare the EU’s geopolitical bias that is prevailing over its merit-based agenda, evidencing that the pursuit of an increasingly authoritarian

¹⁸ Cvijić, S. (2022) Gauging Democracy: The Case of Serbia. Europe’s Futures, 21 February.

<https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/gauging-democracy-the-case-of-serbia>

¹⁹ Freedom House (2024) Nations in Transit 2024 – Serbia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2024>

²⁰ N1 (2024) Švedski institut: Izborna prevara i zastrašivanje opozicije obeležili izbore u Srbiji. N1, 8 March.

<https://n1info.rs/vesti/svedski-institut-izborna-prevara-i-zastrasivanje-opozicije-obelezili-izbore-u-srbiji/>

²¹ Transparency International (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index 2023. Transparency International: Berlin.

²² Čečen, B. et al. (2018) When Law Doesn’t Rule: State Capture of the Judiciary, Prosecution, Police in Serbia. Transparency Serbia: Belgrade.

²³ BIRN (2023) Pro-govt media make the biggest bucks. Media Ownership Monitor Serbia 2023. <https://serbia.mom-gmr.org/en/findings/local-media-concentrations-below-the-radar/>

²⁴ Amnesty International (2024) Serbia: Authorities using spyware and Celebrite forensic extraction tools to hack journalists and activists. 16 December. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-authorities-using-spyware-and-celebrite-forensic-extraction-tools-to-hack-journalists-and-activists/>

²⁵ Zweers, W. et al. (2022) The EU as a promoter of democracy or ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Western Balkans? Clingendael, p. 1-55.

²⁶ Interview with Aleksandra Tomanić, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB). 21 November 2024. Online.

²⁷ Stroud, L. (2024) Lithium mining deal between Germany and Serbia sparks controversy. Euronews, 8 August. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/08/eu-serbia-lithium-mining-deal-dirty-politics>

programme is acceptable for both the EC and the Member States as long as this helps serve a set of economic, political and security interests. This ultimately diminishes the power of a values-based transformation in candidate countries, as the enlargement process itself is gradually losing this core dimension.

Vučić's Serbia has decidedly found a like-minded EU ally, as well as a peer to learn from, in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Ever since his return to power in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has cracked down on civil liberties, tightened the government's grip on free media and dismantled the system of checks and balances. Successful opposition to his rule has become all the more difficult following his modifications to the electoral law, leading to massive gerrymandering and hindering effective political contestation at the polls.²⁸ This endeavour has been enveloped in an ideology that eyes migration and liberal ideals with skepticism, and that embraces 'traditional', nation-centric values. Orbán's illiberal ambition has led to the subversion of Hungary's relations with Western countries and has channeled fraternal and pragmatic links with the world's autocracies.²⁹ This approach is also followed by Belgrade, which generally rejects severing ties with potential partners and draws very few red lines when international trade and investments are concerned.

Hungary has traditionally been one of the most fervent supporters of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, not least as a country that lies along the outside borders of the Union and seeks stability guarantees.³⁰ Budapest is pursuing an enlargement agenda towards the Western Balkans in economic, ideological and security terms, where questions of trade, energy, migration and national sovereignty have taken center stage. Within this strategy, Serbia emerges as Hungary's foremost partner in the region and as the country that is reaping the largest benefits from its narrow relationship with the Orbán government.³¹

Serbia succeeds at utilising like-minded Hungary as a proxy to advance its interests and contribute to the illiberalisation of EU enlargement, as Budapest can influence Serbia's accession bid through its veto powers in the Council of the EU and block any initiatives that could harm Belgrade.³² This was rendered evident in late 2023, when Hungary's opposition to sanctioning Serbia following the attack on the Kosovo village of Banjska blocked any opportunity for considering punitive measures against Belgrade.³³ This responds to a more extensive trend in Hungary's diplomatic conduct, whereby Budapest has also held Ukraine's accession process hostage through its own conditionality mechanisms, negatively impacting the EU's capacity to deliver aid and support to Kyiv.³⁴ Because of this, Member States are aware of the challenges of freezing negotiations or applying sanctions against Serbia. This is not only due to economic implications—as countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic would see their own economies impacted, and strategic investment projects, such as the one stemming from the deal on raw materials, could be jeopardized—but also due to their unwillingness to give up on Hungary's

²⁸ Szelényi, Zs. (2022) How Viktor Orbán Built His Illiberal State. *The New Republic*, 5 April.

<https://newrepublic.com/article/165953/viktor-orban-built-illiberal-state>

²⁹ Feledy, B. (2017) Hungary: populism or politics? *CIDOB Report*, 1, p. 45-47

³⁰ RFE/RL (2023) Hungarian Foreign Minister Urges Brussels To Speed Up EU Enlargement Process. 22 March.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-hungarian-minister-szijjarto-eu-enlargement/32329963.html>

³¹ Cvijić, S. et al. (2023) *Balkan Csárdás: Hungarian Foreign Policy Dance*. Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, p. 1-56.

³² Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. 18 November 2024. Prague.

³³ N1 (2023) Hungary's Orban on sanctions against Serbia: Ridiculous and impossible. N1, 6 October.

<https://n1info.rs/english/news/hungary-s-orban-on-sanctions-against-serbia-ridiculous-and-impossible/>

³⁴ Liboreiro, J. (2024) 'It has gone very far:' EU countries voice exasperation over Hungary's vetoes on Ukraine aid.

Euronews, 27 May. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/27/it-has-gone-very-far-eu-countries-voice-exasperation-over-hungarys-vetoes-on-ukraine-aid>

obstructiveness as a main justification for the lack of overall progress in the enlargement process.³⁵

In a mutual and bilateral tradeoff, Hungary benefits equally from Serbia's interest—not only in the prolonged cultivation of strategic economic, security and ideological ties, but particularly in Budapest's opportunity to present itself as the only Member State that has the capacity to effectively negotiate with Serbia in full political alignment.³⁶ Vučić's regime is assured of its impunity at an EU level thanks to Orbán, as their network of mutual protection allows for their roles as spoiler States to go unpunished—while Orbán keeps receiving loyal political support from Belgrade, allowing both partners to engage in joint (and very lucrative) infrastructure and energy ventures.³⁷ This has a clear impact upon the EU's waning transformative power in candidate countries, since the enlargement policy is becoming a political tool through which to **feed back into** Hungary's and Serbia's illiberal interests and to hinder democratic accountability, both domestically and vis-à-vis the other Member States.

2.3. A marriage of convenience: Albania and Italy

Well despite certain recorded progress in the rule of law and anti-corruption fields, and an internationally praised overhaul of the judiciary, Albania shows concerning symptoms of State capture and illiberal governance.³⁸ Prime Minister Edi Rama, in power uninterrupted and virtually uncontested since 2013, has overseen the shrinking and deterioration of Albania's civic space and its slow transition into what key democratic indicators are currently terming as a 'partly free' country.³⁹ Media independence is limited,⁴⁰ corruption is pervasive,⁴¹ citizen distrust in democratic institutions is high,⁴² and the opposition—both centrally and locally—is weak and disorganized, to the extent that some consider Albania a *de facto* one-party State.⁴³ Amid an institutional framework that curbs any attempt for accountability, Rama and his Socialist Party (PSSH) have crushed public dissent and given wings to organised crime—with whom the Prime Minister has been accused of sharing lucrative goals.⁴⁴

Albania was awarded EU candidate status in 2014 and waited until 2024 to officially open accession negotiations.⁴⁵ Since then, the Albanian government's tactics to utilize the enlargement process for its

³⁵ Esteso Pérez, A. (2024) A triangle of (mis)trust: Hungary's enlargement stakes in Serbia and Kosovo. BIEPAG Analysis, p. 1-36.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Stojanović, M. and E. Inotai (2023) Serbia and Hungary Set Up Joint Natural Gas Company. Balkan Insight, 20 June. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/20/serbia-and-hungary-set-up-joint-natural-gas-company/>

³⁸ Kelmendi, T. and Gj. Vurmo (2024). Riding the wave: How Albania can make the most of its EU moment. ECFR, 12 December. <https://ecfr.eu/article/riding-the-wave-how-albania-can-make-the-most-of-its-eu-moment/>

³⁹ Freedom House (2024) Freedom in the World 2024 – Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/freedom-world/2024>

⁴⁰ RSF (2024) Country profile – Albania. <https://rsf.org/en/country/albania>

⁴¹ Taylor-Brace, A. (2022) Albania has highest rates of administrative corruption in region. Euractiv, 9 December. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albania-has-highest-rates-of-administrative-corruption-in-region/>

⁴² Metanj, B. et al. (2023) Opinion Poll 2023: Trust in Governance. Institute for Democracy and Mediation, p. 1-97.

⁴³ Sinoruka, F. (2024) Court Ruling Further Complicates Albania Opposition Leadership Battle. Balkan Insight, 6 March. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/06/court-ruling-further-complicates-albania-opposition-leadership-battle/>

⁴⁴ Bogdani, A. and K. Lala (2024) Albanian Businessman 'Bankrolling Fugitive Ex-Deputy PM', Prosecutors Claim. Balkan Insight, 26 June. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/26/albanian-businessman-bankrolling-fugitive-ex-deputy-pm-prosecutors-claim/>

⁴⁵ Sinoruka, F. (2024) Albania Opens EU Accession Negotiations, Seeks Membership by 2030. Balkan Insight, 15 October. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/15/albania-opens-eu-accession-negotiations-seeks-membership-by-2030/>

own benefit have been concealed behind a screen of unambiguous pro-EU spirit. Tirana has consistently conveyed a cooperative attitude vis-à-vis Brussels, willing to undertake comparatively demanding reforms and rendering Albania a reliable institutional and political hub for many Member States.⁴⁶ In this regard, Edi Rama has used Albania's EU enlargement candidacy to cement the country's increasingly positive image while strengthening his stabilocratic system of governance. As such, despite the several illiberal wrongdoings that Rama and his party may be involved in, what prevails in the eyes of the EU is his Western orientation and his earnest determination for Albania's EU future.

Among the Member States, the Rama government has found a conveniently pragmatic proxy in Italy. Giorgia Meloni and her party FdI won the general election that was held in September 2022, paving her way to take office a month later as the country's first far-right leader since World War II and as its first female Prime Minister. The Meloni government is attempting to advance its illiberal agenda through, above all, a transformation of Italy's cultural and value landscape.⁴⁷ Through the political takeover of the country's cultural institutions and the crackdown on minority rights, the Italian executive is seeking to shift the country's identity outlook towards the protection of the nation and traditional values.⁴⁸

The Italian premier has succeeded to a significant extent to detach herself from other radical figures from the EU's far right, such as Hungary's Orbán and France's Marine Le Pen, managing to fly under the radar as a more moderate force. Her open condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and her pro-EU stances in international fora, added to her domestic rhetoric of ideological repositioning towards the centre-right, have arguably rendered her a figure of pragmatism and restraint—never mind her radical policies at home.⁴⁹

Italy's foreign policy positioning has traditionally eyed EU enlargement under a positive light given the strong political and economic ties it shares with the Western Balkans,⁵⁰ while the Meloni government has showcased a significantly enhanced involvement with the countries of the region. Albania holds particular relevance vis-à-vis Italian interests, not least given the two countries' shared political and historical ties. Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani had hinted at the government's objective to increase exports to the Western Balkans as a means of shrinking Italy's public debt,⁵¹ and he eventually pursued the holding of a National Conference on the Balkans as the starting point of a strategy aimed at maximizing economic profits in the region.⁵² Fabrizio Bucci, Italy's Ambassador in Tirana, stated in 2023 that Albania, once it enters the EU, will be “a bridge for Italy towards the Western Balkans, a market with over 30 million inhabitants”, showcasing Tirana's potential to help channel Rome's influence in the region.⁵³

⁴⁶ Interview with the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). 11 December 2024. Brussels.

⁴⁷ Interview with Giorgio Fruscione, Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). 5 November 2024. Online.

⁴⁸ Clausi, L. (2023) How Giorgia Meloni Made the Far Right Mainstream. Jacobin, 28 December.

<https://jacobin.com/2023/12/giorgia-meloni-far-right-cultural-hegemony-italy>

⁴⁹ Delgado, P. (2024) Ursula o non Ursula: questo è il problema di Giorgia Meloni. Il Dubbio, 10 July.

<https://www.ildubbio.news/politica/ursula-o-non-ursula-questo-e-il-problema-di-giorgia-meloni-y7r2jgm1>

⁵⁰ Frontini, A. and D. Denti (2017) Italy and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: the Europeanization of national interests? Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 17:4, p. 571-589

⁵¹ Marroni, C. (2022) Tajani: «L'export è la chiave per abbattere il debito». Il Sole, 18 December.

<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/tajani-l-export-e-chiave-abbattere-debito-AEghK6PC>

⁵² Bego, F. (2023) Italy Seeks Higher Profile Role in Western Balkans. Balkan Insight, 30 January.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/30/italy-seeks-higher-profile-role-in-western-balkans/>

⁵³ Liverani, L. (2023) Quelli che hanno scoperto Lamerica: «L'Albania ora si merita l'Europa». Avvenire, 22 February.

<https://www.avvenire.it/economicivile/pagine/l-intervistaquelli-che-hanno-scoperto-lamerica-l>

Against this backdrop, the Italian executive announced in late 2023 the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the government of Albania, whereby the latter would host centers managing vast numbers of Italy-bound sea migrants from countries deemed safe. The passing of the deal, which was enveloped in an atmosphere of opacity in both Albania and Italy, was ultimately given green light in early 2024. As the first group of 12 intercepted migrants arrived in the Albanian port of Shëngjin, however, an Italian court ruled against this detention due to incompatible interpretations of ‘safe’ country designations—and again a month later, after another group of seven migrants had been transferred to the detention facilities.⁵⁴

Albania’s utilisation of Italy for the advancement of its interests in the EU enlargement process appears to be a less systematic exercise, especially in comparison with the Serbian-Hungarian case, and one that follows a more subtle and casual tempo. The bilateral migration agreement, rather than as a one-off act seeking immediate tradeoff, responds to Albania’s long-term strategy of self-consolidation as a reliable and Western-oriented partner that can be seen as trustworthy by the EU. The memorandum of understanding itself, in its preamble, does take into consideration the interest of Italy “in the perspective for EU membership” for Albania,⁵⁵ but there is no explicit evidence that Rome is promoting Albania’s EU bid more fervently among the Member States as a result of this.⁵⁶ It is furthermore likely that the deal was also motivated by underlying economic interests—not least as the improving public perceptions held in Italy towards Albania are suggesting an increasing interest within the Italian private sector to invest in the country. As of 2024, Italy stands as Albania’s second-largest foreign direct investor after Turkey.⁵⁷

Differently from the obvious tradeoffs displayed along the Belgrade-Budapest axis, the tangible benefits that the Italian government has reaped from the agreement with Tirana seem to have very little to do with actual public policy utility or impact. In reality, Meloni achieved a mutation of the European discourse on migration and a serious revisiting of the political and ethical boundaries that each Member State can surpass.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the Italian government has used the two unfavourable court decisions to enhance its rhetorical crackdown against the legitimacy and independence of the country’s judiciary.⁵⁹ Internationally, at the same time, Meloni has slowly mitigated the skepticism around her stance on illegal migration and has become an acknowledged and reasonable figure in the mainstream policy discourse. Meloni’s model was openly embraced and even spurred by EC President Ursula von der Leyen, who invited Member States to take exploratory views into potential return hubs for migrants.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Tondo, L. (2024) Italian judges strike another blow against Meloni’s Albania asylum deal. The Guardian, 11 November. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/11/italian-government-condemns-judges-ruling-to-return-migrants-from-albania>

⁵⁵ Official Publishing Center of the Republic of Albania (2024) Për ratifikimin e protokollit ndërmjet Këshillit të Ministrave të Republikës së Shqipërisë dhe qeverisë së Republikës Italiane për forcimin e bashkëpunimit në fushën e migracionit. Fletorja Zyrtare e Republikës së Shqipërisë. Official Journal of the Republic of Albania, 42, 7 March.

⁵⁶ Interview with the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

⁵⁷ Bank of Albania (2024) Fluksi i investimeve të huaja direkte. https://www.bankofalbania.org/Statistikat/Statistikat_e_Sektorit_te_Jashtem/Investimet_e_huaja_direkte/Pozicioni_i_investimeve_te_huaja_direkte.html

⁵⁸ Interview with Giorgio Fruscione, Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).

⁵⁹ Peretti, A. (2024) Rome court blocks Meloni’s plans to transfer migrants to Albania again. Euractiv, 12 November. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/rome-court-blocks-melonis-plans-to-transfer-migrants-to-albania-again/>

⁶⁰ Rankin, J. and A. Giuffrida (2024) Von der Leyen to ask EU leaders to explore using ‘return hubs’ for migrants. The Guardian, 15 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/15/ursula-von-der-leyen-to-ask-eu-leaders-to-explore-using-return-hubs-for-migrants>

Albania's and Italy's joint manoeuvre reveals a deeper entrenchment of anti-liberal practices linked to the EU's enlargement process which is arguably opening Pandora's box in the medium to long run.⁶¹ Albania has been used as testing ground for a future potential border management model that could be adopted by other EU Member States, as von der Leyen suggested. This ultimately hints at the instrumentalisation of the EU enlargement process, as political support for candidate countries could be mustered as long as such countries can develop the capacities and infrastructure to act as outsourcing spaces.⁶² This ultimately **feeds back into** the interests of Albania and Italy: for Tirana, it provides proof that partnering with an old EU friend is helping cement its image as a reliable Western Balkan ally, and this approach should therefore be pursued further; while for Rome it evidences that implementing openly illiberal policies in the framework of the partnerships crafted within the EU enlargement process are receiving praise and recognition—thus providing encouragement to keep enacting them.

3. Warnings for a new EU mandate

As the new EC begins to take up its duties following the June 2024 EU elections, the prospects for reversion of the ongoing illiberalisation process of EU enlargement are rather bleak. Slovenian diplomat Marta Kos, the new European Commissioner for Enlargement, has the arduous task of credibly upholding the value-based nature of this policy while ensuring the utmost technical accuracy as head of the EC's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The work and impact of the EP, though limited in executive reach, will be likewise instrumental to both keep the critical discussion around enlargement alive and call out the democratic wrongdoings of candidate countries and Member States.

Everything, however, will be ultimately up to the political strategies and decision-making of the 27 Member States, whose geopolitical stakes and bargaining will steer the process in content and form. The potential increase of radical right and illiberal representation across the EU's capitals could likely lead to a deeper search for alternative formulas to EU enlargement—or, perhaps counterintuitively, to an enhanced support for the EU accession of illiberal candidate countries. Special partnerships might start to prevail amid a political landscape that opposes—or is skeptical about—a broadening of the EU's geographical scope, which would only contribute to the further strengthening of illiberal and authoritarian forces in candidate countries. In this regard, the role of mainstream parties must concentrate on the pursuit of policies that hold the values of EU enlargement at its core and on the rejection of ideas that undermine the benefits of a merit-based process. These parties hold the responsibility of laying out an honest domestic groundwork for enlargement, which should be duly reflected in their work in the EP—where the current parliamentary majority of centre-right, centre-left, liberal, and green forces needs to remain strong and unequivocally supportive of this policy.

A future agenda of policy attention and research should likewise focus on the idea that the illiberalisation of EU enlargement can also be conducted by (or via) Member States that might not immediately qualify as illiberal. The instances of Germany, whose government oversaw with interest the signing of the memorandum of understanding with Serbia on raw materials, and Denmark, whose centre-left coalition

⁶¹ Interview with Marco Tarquinio, Member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee. 9 December 2024. Online.

⁶² Liboreiro, J. (2024) 15 EU countries call for the outsourcing of migration and asylum policy. Euronews, 16 May. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/16/15-eu-countries-call-for-the-outsourcing-of-migration-and-asylum-policy>

signed a treaty with Kosovo to relocate 300 inmates serving sentence in Denmark to Kosovo’s Gjilan prison,⁶³ reveal that mainstream parties are equally pursuing offshoring practices in the Western Balkans—at the expense of human rights. This showcases a clear ambition from many EU parties to discharge responsibilities legally endowed upon them but that they do not want to manage while in government. In this light, it is safe to argue that the EU’s future policy discussions around migration, border management and energy security will likely consider the opportunistic externalization of such policies, and that the upcoming years might see more instances of similar offshoring practices. This issue, far from undermining the proposed model, provides solid grounds for its potential development to cases that go beyond illiberal Member States—evidencing the pervasiveness of practices and policies that run counter to liberal-democratic standards. This model helps us better identify the wirings of specific bilateral relations of interest that emerge and consolidate between a candidate country and a Member State within the framework of EU enlargement—proving that many institutional approaches that hold the EC at the core of the analysis fail to award enough agency to State actors.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The proposed mechanism of illiberalisation of EU enlargement—as illustrated by the cases of Serbia and Hungary and of Albania and Italy, respectively—shows that the illiberal takeover of this policy is taking place at different speeds and across different structures. While the Serbia-Hungary partnership features constant exchanges and tradeoffs, remarking its structural and possibly mutually indispensable nature, the Albania-Italy relationship is grounded on a more subtle yet systematic support that only manifests itself explicitly in an *ad hoc* fashion. The EC’s and the Member States’ approach to either partnership also differs in the way the agents are perceived: while the Belgrade-Budapest axis is seen with suspicion and a degree of wariness, which partly fuels the evident geopolitical interest in keeping Serbia close, the Tirana-Rome link is not perceived as a threat to the EU’s legitimacy as their two leaderships have unambiguously pledged their commitment to the Union. The analysed cases offer an exploratory insight into the robustness and applicability of the proposed model, where agency is granted to candidate countries and Member States as defining actors in the EU enlargement process. While channels of political and economic exchanges vary in content and form, as the cases have shown, the model presents a strong mechanism that highlights not only the strategic alignment of illiberal leaderships and systems of governance, but also the self-nurturing character of illiberal politics. Last, the model likewise provides a blueprint for potential expansion beyond the EU’s textbook illiberals, namely other Member States that are engaging in dubiously liberal-democratic practices in partnership with candidate and potential candidate countries. Everything considered, this study puts forth the following recommendations:

1. **Taming the illiberal agenda is a political imperative.** The illiberal radical and extreme right is an ideological stream that has well infiltrated European democracies and that is here to stay. Pro-European policymakers, parties and governments in the EU supportive of liberal-democratic norms and institutions must make this explicit and must detach themselves from policies and narratives that help propagate the illiberal discourse. At an EU level, a good example should be set by the EP, where the parliamentary majority that voted EC President Ursula von der Leyen into office—the centre-right, the centre-left, liberals and greens—should be kept alive and strong in the realm of EU enlargement. No cooperation should be pursued with political parties

⁶³ Ministry of Justice of Denmark (2023) Treaty between the Kingdom of Denmark and the Republic of Kosovo on the use of the Correctional Facility in Gjilan for the purpose of the execution of Danish sentences.

belonging to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Patriots for Europe (Pfe), or the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), as tempting as this might look for the mainstream right. The EP's pro-enlargement coalition must, furthermore, step up their communication efforts to convey awareness of their alliance to the general public.

2. **The EC must walk the talk on a merit-based enlargement.** The new European Commissioner for Enlargement must unconditionally convey the need for a merit-based and highly technical accession process for all candidate and potential candidate countries. All tools at the EC's disposal must be used to ensure a fair and accountable accession procedure in (potential) candidate countries, and the EC should step up its negotiating force vis-à-vis those Member States that are compromising the viability and credibility of the process for geopolitical reasons. The withholding of EU funds and the freezing of accession negotiations, as enshrined in the revised enlargement methodology of 2020, should be contemplated on a more systematic basis, activating the mechanism against Serbia in earnest. The likely Hungarian veto could be circumvented if Member States enacted political and economic measures of a bilateral nature vis-à-vis Serbia, which would also strip Budapest of one of its main bargaining chips at the EU level.
3. **Going beyond the usual suspects.** The EC should lead the talk on a humane and secure border management policy. It should actively dissuade Member States from considering policy solutions that not only undermine human rights, but that also exempt them from tending to their international legal obligations. Potential future agreements with Western Balkan countries that pursue energy or industrial independence, such as those on raw materials, should not be formalized with governments that cannot guarantee the attainment of EU standards, let alone with those that are in a process of outright democratic backsliding.

Note: This is a second corrected version of the paper. In the first version, there was in the second paragraph on page four a list of countries with openly illiberal parties in the government that was not sufficiently supported by evidence.

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EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.



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