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# South Eastern Europe and the EU Enlargement Process

## Towards a Socialist European strategy

When the Ukraine war broke out, the European Commission announced an accelerated enlargement of the European Union (EU) and granted Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan states Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) accession candidate status. The planned second eastward enlargement of the EU is a surprising move because other Western Balkan states have been stuck in candidate status since 2005 without any relevant progress being discernible. For their part, the political and social left have found it difficult to articulate a forward-looking, internationalist critique of the EU. No socialist vision has been set out that goes beyond the romanticization of the 1970s social democratic nation state reproduced in left-wing circles and elsewhere. For a socialist European strategy, it will be essential to involve political allies from the region in the elaboration of a shared European policy. A perspective of this kind can, in turn, only be formulated by a united European left.

### 1 A “Geopolitical Investment” – the EU’s New Integration Model

In November 2023, when the European Commission presented its “Enlargement Package” and recommended accession negotiations with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkan states Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, this step was justified in particular by citing geostrategic motives. The Council of the European Union proclaimed in December 2022 that EU enlargement was a “geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”.<sup>1</sup> Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was quoted in late 2023 as saying enlargement would complete the Union and this had a “strong economic and geopolitical logic”.<sup>2</sup>

In the six candidate countries of South Eastern Europe, by contrast, it has been a long time since the Union was viewed unconditionally as the yearned-for political destination that it still was well into the 2000s, especially in left-liberal milieus. Roughly until Croatia’s accession in 2013, EU membership was regarded by clear majorities of the populations and political elites as a priority and

something unquestionably worth striving for, but the debates about it today almost convey the impression that it is an immoral offer, a political commitment to which, on account of geopolitical realignments, there is claimed to be no alternative, but for which there is no genuine enthusiasm. The European Union’s “democratic promise” has lost its cohesive force, and not because the people of Eastern and South Eastern Europe are uninterested in democracy or even hold undemocratic attitudes.

The term “empire” is now also being used in critical European studies to describe the EU. The suggestion is that it represents a specific form of empire, namely one constituted by nation states, but overlaid with “institutionally, legally, and politically” supranational structures based on various treaties.<sup>3</sup> Within its own borders, the EU is characterized by asymmetrical economic interdependencies. At the same time, it finds itself facing new transnational and geopolitical challenges (“new global geoeconomics”), under which its interests are being subordinated to those of the US. Despite unmistakable democratic deficits, the EU still sees itself as having a political mission to spread democracy, as is also attested by

1 European Parliament (EP), “Report on a European Parliament Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission/ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Concerning the New EU Strategy for Enlargement”, 17 October 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0251\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0251_EN.html) (last accessed 26 November 2025).

2 European Commission, “Statement by President von der Leyen on the 2023 Enlargement Package and the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans”, 8 November 2023, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-2023-enlargement-package-and-new-growth-plan-western-balkans-2023-11-08\\_en?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-2023-enlargement-package-and-new-growth-plan-western-balkans-2023-11-08_en?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (last accessed 24 November 2025).

3 Hans-Jürgen Bieling, “Die krisenkonstitutionalistische Transformation des EU-Imperiums: zwischen autoritärer Neugründung und innerem Zerfall”, in *Neugründung Europas als passive Revolution*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Bieling, Hamburg, pp. 36–37.

some of the Copenhagen criteria,<sup>4</sup> not to mention the much-cited contention that it pursues a “values-based” foreign policy. Yet, at the latest since the global financial crisis of 2007 and the following years, it has no longer been possible to disguise the disruption of what were in any case fragile social policy and democratic regulatory mechanisms, a process that has been disadvantageous to broad swathes of the population and peripheral European states. This begs the question of whether it is actually worth the Western Balkan states’ while striving for EU membership or whether existing economic, social, and political contradictions would gain in intensity as a result of such a step.

## 2 No Alternative to EU Accession?

Despite the Union’s constantly diminishing political and economic significance, the majority of the population in most of the candidate countries would welcome EU accession. According to an opinion poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2024, stable majorities favour membership in North Macedonia (68 percent), Montenegro (79 percent), Kosovo (89 percent), and Albania (92 percent).<sup>5</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a marked disparity between the two entities: A survey conducted in June 2025 found that 82.9 percent of the population are in favour of accession in the Muslim-Croat federation, by contrast to which only 46.1 percent share this view in Republika Srpska.<sup>6</sup> In Serbia, 40 percent of citizens support their country joining the EU, but 34 percent are also opposed to it.<sup>7</sup> Such scepticism crystallizes the legitimacy problem that has built up for the EU: the discrepancy between its normatively charged messaging and its realpolitik-style support for anti-democratic and antisocial actors like the regime around the autocratic Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić.

### 2.1 Serbia

As the region’s most populous country and biggest economy, Serbia is a key actor for stable development in the Western Balkans. It was granted accession candidate status back in March 2012, but a successful conclusion to the accession negotiations taken up in January 2014 still cannot be foreseen. The unresolved territorial disputes with Kosovo (see section 2.5, Kosovo) are one of the reasons for this.

Political relations between Serbia and the EU are nonetheless stable. Aleksandar Vučić, who has dominated the country’s politics first as prime minister and then, since 2017, as president, may be following a nationalist/authoritarian course domestically but, when it comes to foreign policy, understands how to maintain good relations with all the major powers (EU, US, China, Russia). In fact, all sides benefit from Vučić’s multi-vector foreign policy, as

it is termed. On the one hand, it enhances the standing of Russia and China while, on the other, concessions are to be extracted from the EU by talking up the growing Russian and Chinese influence. For its part, the EU uses this narrative to maintain a presence in the region — without integrating it properly.

Despite their “values-based” foreign policies, neither the EU nor the German Federal Government have ever seriously criticized the restrictions on media freedom or the repressive domestic political climate that are the order of the day in Serbia. One reason for this is likely to be the lithium deal concluded in the summer of 2024.<sup>8</sup> This allows the EU to gain access to Serbian lithium reserves, which are of great significance for the electrification of the European automotive industry and, it is hoped, will reduce dependence on China for the procurement of rare earths. Although the overwhelming majority of the Serbian population are against this project, Vučić and his regime are courted as guarantors for its implementation.

The European Commission’s support for the Serbian government has even met with criticism from the European Parliament. In a debate on EU foreign policy in April 2024, the Parliament expressed its regret at the “appeasing approach of the Commission towards Serbia despite its year-long roll-back on the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights”.<sup>9</sup> More examples of instrumental EU policy towards Serbia could be cited, all of which ultimately strengthen the nationalist narrative in the country itself.

### 2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the course of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina lived through a brutal civil war that came to a messy end in 1995 with the Dayton Peace Agreement. The agreement established an ethno-federal structure consisting of two constituent republics and a special administrative unit, the Bosnian-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbian Republika Srpska having been joined by Brčko District in the country’s north-east. The consequences have been recurrent domestic political stalemates that destabilize the whole region. The political elite of the Serbian entity have exploited the state’s fragile situation to strengthen their own position by pursuing the possibility of secession from the whole state. By the same token, the Croat side clamour again and again for the formation of a constituent republic of their own.

The agreement also created a form of neocolonial foreign rule. The “high representative” appointed by the guarantor powers, the US, Germany, France, and Russia (currently the German Christian Social Union (CSU) politician Christian Schmidt, although he was appointed without Russia’s vote), possesses a wide-ranging mandate thanks to what

4 *EU-Info*, “Die Kopenhagener Beitrittskriterien”, <https://www.eu-info.de/europa/EU-Erweiterung/kopenhagener-beitrittskriterien> (last accessed 14 November 2025).

5 International Republican Institute (IRI), “Western Balkans Regional Poll”, 14 May 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/> (last accessed 24 November 2024).

6 *Sarajevo Times*, “Over 70% of Citizens Support Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Accession to the EU”, 18 July 2025, [https://sarajevotimes.com/over-70-of-citizens-support-bosnia-and-herzegovinas-accession-to-the-eu/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://sarajevotimes.com/over-70-of-citizens-support-bosnia-and-herzegovinas-accession-to-the-eu/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (last accessed 24 November 2024).

7 IRI, “Western Balkans Regional Poll”.

8 Krunoslav Stojaković, “Das weiße Gold vom Jadar-Tal”, *nd*, 11 February 2025, <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1188960.serbien-das-weisse-gold-vom-jadar-tal.html> (last accessed 24 November 2024).

9 European Parliament (EP), “Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy — 2024 Annual Report”, 2 April 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0057\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0057_EN.html) (last accessed 24 November 2024).

**Looking West**  
The EU candidate countries of South Eastern Europe



are referred to as the “Bonn Powers”.<sup>10</sup> The guarantor states justify the necessity of having a high representative in place by pointing to the tensions between the ethnic groups and the consequent blockade mentality.

In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was officially granted EU accession candidate status, even though the country had not achieved any noteworthy progress in the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria up until this point and, according to its constitution, is an ethno-national state that very largely denies political participation to all population groups who do not belong to its three constituent peoples.<sup>11</sup> Under these conditions, domestic political crisis has remained a constant. In March 2025, the BiH Prosecutor’s Office issued arrest warrants for

the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and two other top politicians on account of their assaults on the country’s constitutional order. Dodik thereupon fled

**The Bonn Powers:** The Bonn Powers go back to an international conference held at Bonn in 1997. They bestow sweeping authorities upon the high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina to intervene in the state’s domestic political affairs, if they conclude the Dayton Peace Agreement is being violated. Among other things, the high representative is able to introduce and annul legislation and dismiss political office-holders.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the High Representative (OHR), “OHR Introduction”, 16 February 2012, [https://web.archive.org/web/20150908163222/http://www.ohr.int/ohr-info/gen-info/default.asp?content\\_id=38519](https://web.archive.org/web/20150908163222/http://www.ohr.int/ohr-info/gen-info/default.asp?content_id=38519) (last accessed 27 February 2025).  
<sup>11</sup> German Federal Foreign Office, “Bosnien und Herzegowina: Politisches Porträt”, 1 October 2024, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/BosnienundHerzegowina-node/politisches-portraet-207724> (last accessed 24 November 2024).

to Moscow and, since his return, has been able to avoid arrest for the time being. Meanwhile, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina has officially confirmed Dodik's one-year prison sentence. Despite this, he attended an official remembrance ceremony in Serbia on 3 August 2025 alongside the Serbian president.

In view of the country's economic decline and weak state structures, it is hard to assess the risk posed by the domestic political conflicts. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the place in the Western Balkans where the new geopolitical lines of conflict are manifested most clearly. In March 2022, for instance, the Russian ambassador, Igor Kalabukhov, threatened the Bosnian government openly with a Ukrainian scenario if the country joined NATO.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3 Albania

In the 1990s and 2000s, Albania was looked on as a failed state where central functions such as the provision of health services or the state monopoly on the use of force could only be guaranteed to a limited degree. The commencement of EU accession negotiations in July 2022 appears all the more remarkable against this background. The consolidation of state authority is closely connected with the course taken by Albania under Prime Minister Edi Rama (in office since 2013), who has sought to forge it into a model neoliberal state that, among other things, provides cheap services for EU corporations. This model is underwritten by the prime minister's Socialist Party, which is pressing ahead with deregulation and attacks on the welfare state. Local representatives of the party have repeatedly deployed gangs of thugs against striking workers and political activists in order to combat political resistance in workplaces and society.

For a long time, the policy of far-reaching deregulation has not been limited to the economy, but has been the standard approach to asylum and migration issues and the justice system as well. Following the electoral victory of Giorgia Meloni, for instance, the Rama administration declared it was prepared to cooperate extensively with Italy's post-fascist prime minister. Under what it called the "Albania Model", the Italian government planned to operate extraterritorial camps in Albania, where civil servants would use fast-track procedures to take decisions about asylum applications from refugees before they set foot on Italian territory. Problems concerning the rule of law and organized crime have also been highlighted by the European Parliament.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.4 Montenegro and North Macedonia

Candidate status long ago became a permanent condition for both Montenegro and North Macedonia. Montenegro has been an accession candidate since December 2010, with the European Council approving the opening of

accession negotiations two years later. North Macedonia was actually granted accession candidate status as far back as 2005. Not until four years later did the Commission recommend starting accession negotiations, but it made them conditional on the progress of reforms. After political agreement was reached about the commencement of accession negotiations in March 2020, their start was postponed once again until July 2022 on account of vetoes from Bulgaria and the Netherlands. In the meantime, both countries have spent the majority of their independence as EU accession candidates. Although a real prospect of EU membership is not to be anticipated, particularly in the case of North Macedonia, accession is seen as the only option.

The same is true for Montenegro, which even put its traditionally good relations with Russia and Serbia at risk in order to join NATO in 2017. Montenegro, which has just over 600,000 inhabitants and uses the euro as its official currency, is the only country in the Western Balkans that, in our assessment, has a real chance of EU membership in the foreseeable future. This is, however, not due to the reformist fervour with which the country has adhered to the line laid down by the European Commission, but to its political insignificance. Montenegro's integration could be represented effectively in PR terms as evidence the EU is capable of enlarging, without this requiring decisive interventions in the Union's fragile tectonics.

### 2.5 Kosovo

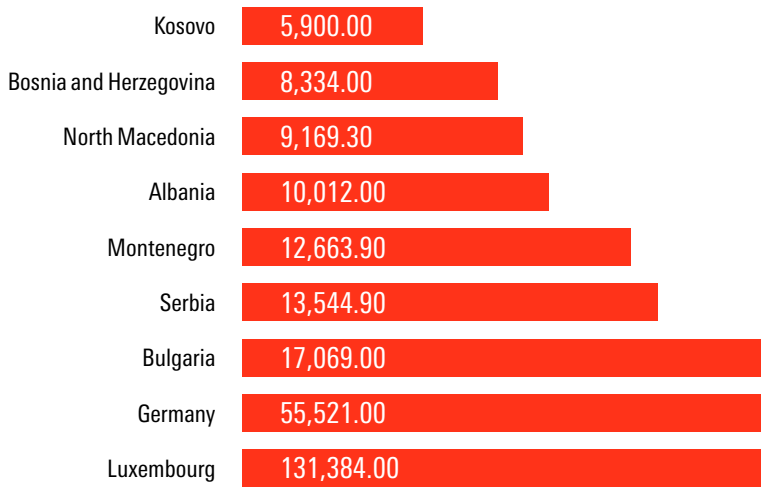
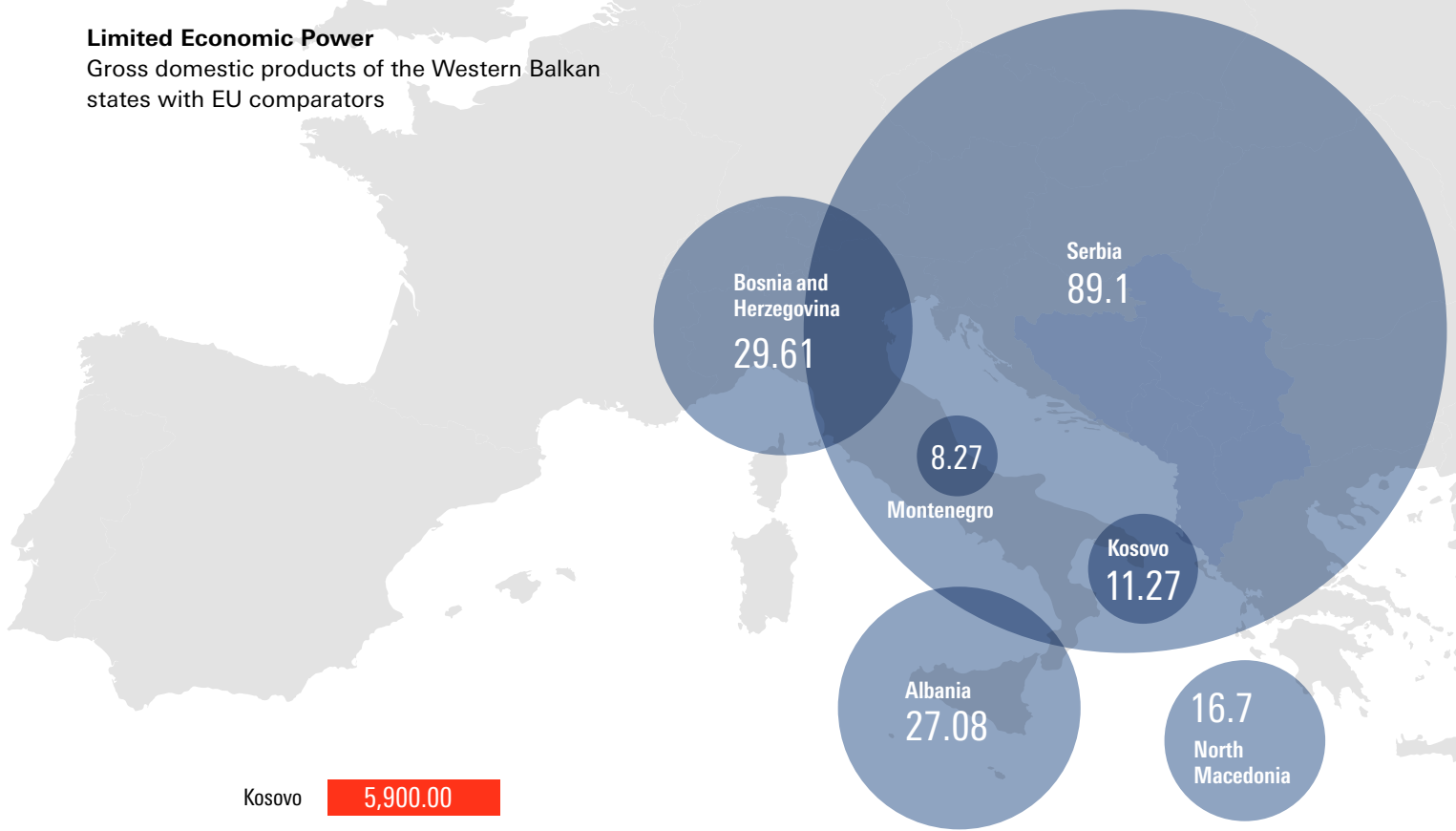
Kosovo is the only country in the region not to have accession candidate status, although it submitted an application for EU membership in December 2022. Previously having been a province of Serbia, it declared its independence in 2008 as a consequence of NATO's attack on Yugoslavia in 1999. Although the conflict is regarded as frozen — not least on account of the NATO military presence — there is no peace settlement in sight because the Serbian government has still not recognized Kosovo's independence. The speed with which the conflict could flare up again was made apparent by the events of May and June 2023. When the appointment of Albanian mayors in predominantly Serb-inhabited North Kosovo sparked severe unrest, the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, ordered his country's army to be put on high alert. Particularly since the idiosyncratic, US-critical Prime Minister Albin Kurti came to power, targeted provocations and attacks on the Serbian population in North Kosovo have also been carried out by Kosovan actors, illustrating how this still-unresolved territorial conflict is being instrumentalized for domestic political purposes in both countries. However, it is not just these unresolved disputes with neighbouring Serbia that make any rapid commencement of accession negotiations appear unlikely. To date, there are five EU Member States — Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Cyprus — that have not recognized Kosovo's independence as a state either.

12 Mirad Odobašić, "Russischer Botschafter in Sarajevo droht Bosnien im Falle eines NATO-Beitritts", *Kurier*, 18 March 2022, <https://kurier.at/mehr-platz/russischer-botschafter-in-sarajevo-droht-bosnien-im-falle-eines-nato-beitritts/401941825> (last accessed 24 November 2024).

13 EP, "Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy — 2024 Annual Report".

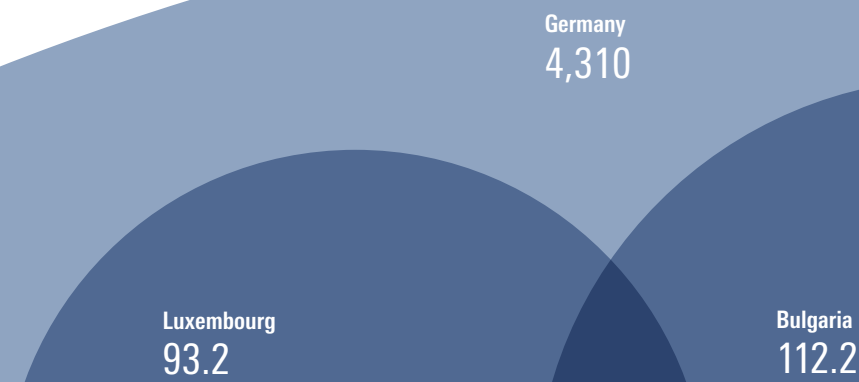
### Limited Economic Power

Gross domestic products of the Western Balkan states with EU comparators



Source: [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

● GDP 2024 (billion US dollars)  
 ■ GDP per capita (US dollars)



### 3 Socialist Perspectives

The position of Die Linke and the majority of the social left on the EU has evolved over the last few years into one of critical affirmation. In this spirit, the Die Linke manifesto for the 2024 European elections stated, “As democratic socialists, we therefore oppose both the advocates of a radical free-market EU and the nationalist concept of a ‘Europe of fatherlands’.”<sup>14</sup> The logical implication of this professed commitment to internationalism is that the populations of the Western Balkan states should be supported in joining the EU.

#### Pros and Cons of EU Accession

The political balance of power in the new Member States would, above all, strengthen the conservative and authoritarian-right block within the European Parliament, at least during the initial phase. This raises the threat of a scenario in which anti-integration forces would be bolstered further by enlargement. The socialist left would, however, be confronted with the problem of the turn to the authoritarian right regardless of any such new set of circumstances, so this would be a relatively weak argument against these countries’ accession.

The situation is similar with regard to the possible socio-economic consequences. The candidate countries reformed and upended their economies and welfare systems in accordance with Brussels’s neoliberal requirements some time ago. Large parts of their labour legislation have also been amended and liberalized. However — as previously when the first round of eastward enlargement went ahead — allowing the Western Balkan states into the EU could increase the pressure on the other Member States to speed up the dismantling of their own welfare systems. At the same time, this tendency towards neoliberal authoritarianism is already on the political offensive, irrespective of any possible new members.

A more-substantial argument against these countries’ accession would, from our perspective, be its potential to accelerate the depopulation of South Eastern Europe. Although most people in the Western Balkans can now leave their countries relatively easily, and targeted efforts are being made to recruit skilled workers in order to plug workforce gaps, for example in the ailing German health system, the prospect of general freedom of movement could exacerbate this highly problematic development.<sup>15</sup>

Even so, there are also a number of reasons that speak in favour of the Western Balkan states joining the EU. Although, under the existing association agreements, they are already aligning their economic, social, and migration policies with EU requirements to a great extent, they have no opportunities to directly influence decision-making processes within the European Union. Were they to join the EU, they would be able to assert their interests directly in negotiations.

Accession would also enable the candidate countries to benefit from the EU’s various funding pots. In the Western Balkan states, infrastructure policy initiatives are mainly confined to the economically prosperous urban conurbations. Resources from the EU Cohesion Fund could make it possible for peripheral regions to be developed within certain limits.

However, the possibility of EU membership for the Western Balkan states depends not only on the situations of the various countries, but also on the condition of the EU. The disparate levels of economic development found in the Western Balkan states and the EU mean targeted redistributive programmes will be required and should already be launched during the accession process. Given the disparities in development, programmes like the EU Growth Plan, which provides for investments worth 6 billion euros over the period from 2024 to 2027, are no more than drops in the ocean, especially as the allocation of the funds is tied to a neoliberal reform agenda dictated by the European Commission.

Against this background, we anticipate the following scenario for the decade to come: The Western Balkan states are unlikely to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria. There is just as little likelihood of the EU acting purposefully to reduce disparities in development by implementing redistributive policies. In consequence, the prospect of accession will

- Involvement of relevant socialist actors from the region who are open to cooperation in Europe-wide left structures
- Promotion of cooperation between socialist and left-ecological actors in the Western Balkans
- Creation of a structured, internal training programme within Die Linke targeted at fostering expertise in international policy issues
- Reinforcement of institutional structures concerned with international politics in order to secure channels of communication and ensure continuing dialogue with international political actors on the left
- Championing of the Western Balkans’ shared concerns by the socialist and left-ecological parties and MEPs sitting in the European Parliament, and establishment of sustainable working structures focussed on the Western Balkans and the enlargement perspective
- Development of a political and economic perspective for South Eastern Europe

14 Die Linke, “Programm zur Europawahl 2024: Zeit für Gerechtigkeit. Zeit für Haltung. Zeit für Frieden.”, <https://www.die-linke.de/europawahl/wahlprogramm-zur-europawahl/> (last accessed 24 November 2024).

15 United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results*, New York, 2024, pp. 55–56.

increasingly become an instrument of geopolitical power used to tie the Western Balkan states to the EU over the long term — although without any concrete timetable.

In order to make a contribution to the development of a socialist perspective for Europe — and therefore for the Western Balkans as well — it will be indispensable to involve relevant actors from South Eastern Europe who are open to cooperation in the debates conducted by the European left, and to integrate them into existing organizational contexts.

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