

Orbán's illiberal 'tentacles' in the Western Balkans: What implications for EU enlargement?

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Executive summary

Since Viktor Orbán was elected as Prime Minister in 2010, the country has undergone a sharp and unprecedented transformation into an “illiberal state”¹ – just like Orbán had promised in 2014 in a speech given in Romania. In 2020, Hungary became the first non-democratic country² in the European Union (EU).

Over time, Orbán has strengthened ties with other EU far-right leaders.³ But his illiberal ‘tentacles’ extend beyond the Union’s borders. Increasingly isolated in Brussels, Orbán has moved to build his illiberal bloc outside the EU by endorsing and inspiring the authoritarian behaviour of Balkan politicians with questionable democratic credentials and defending their interests before EU institutions. His allies in the region include politicians such as the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić or the President of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik.

Hungary’s growing presence in the Western Balkans has been driven by a set of economic, strategic, ideological, and political factors. Orbán’s illiberalism found a fertile ground in the EU’s misguided policy towards the Balkans, which long prioritised stability over democracy⁴ and overlooked authoritarian tendencies of regional political leaders who promised to deliver peace without a genuine commitment to the rule of law and fundamental rights. The EU must change strategy and prioritise democracy for being the best mechanism⁵ to ensure the security and stability in the region. That means having stronger stance against democratic backsliding and vocally condemn any attacks on the rule of law in candidate countries, while, in parallel, empowering the democratic and reform-oriented civic and political forces in the enlargement countries. In the same line, the EU should also find new and more effective ways to communicate about the steps of the accession process and why reforms are necessary, but also about the relevance of pursuing enlargement in the new era.

Furthermore, the vanishment of the EU membership perspective also spurred the rise of illiberalism in the region. Therefore, to regain leverage and trigger positive

change, the EU must work to rebuild the credibility of the Thessaloniki promise.⁶ Conditionality needs to be the guiding principle of the accession process: The EU and the member states ought to make good on their commitments when aspiring countries deliver without taking shortcuts by allowing countries that fail to implement fundamental reforms to move forward in the accession process.

Orbán’s ideological incursion in the EU aspiring countries and his rapprochement with Balkan autocrats have ultimately proven problematic for the Union. They undermined the democratic centrality and transformative leverage of the enlargement process, undercutting the EU’s strategy towards the region. Moreover, they negatively affected democratic change and consolidation in the Balkan countries, emboldening autocratic affinities throughout the region. In this sense, Orbán has counted on a key ally in Brussels, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi. In the aftermath of the upcoming EP elections, the enlargement portfolio should not be again allocated to a candidate nominated by an EU government with serious rule of law shortcomings.

Furthermore, the EU should adopt a firm response to any attacks on democracy and the rule of law within the Union, particularly in Hungary, and not give in to Orbán’s blackmail. The EU must deploy its full toolkit in defence of democracy and all EU actors should be ready to firmly react on democratic backsliding and put political and economic pressure on rule of law offenders.

The proliferation of illiberal regimes and autocratic leaders with close ties to Russia within the EU and in its immediate vicinity has and continues to challenge the Union’s democratic foundation and geopolitical strategy. Democracy must be reinforced as the central trait of the EU’s identity. As war still rages on Europe’s doorsteps, defending the rule of law in the member states and enlargement countries is not only a moral duty but also a strategic imperative for the EU.

1. How did we get here?

HUNGARY'S DEMOCRATIC DECLINE – BUCKING A GENERAL TREND

The democratic backsliding in Hungary started before Fidesz got back to power,⁷ but accelerated when Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister in 2010. Since then, the country has undergone a sharp and unprecedented democratic reversal, with increasing governmental control of the judiciary and the media, endemic corruption, and frequent attacks against minorities such as migrants or the LGBTIQ community.

Hungary's first steps towards illiberalism did not happen in a vacuum but rather in the context of a global erosion of democracy and freedoms,⁸ documented since 2006. In addition, it was part of a regional trend witnessed after the Union's 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds. According to Freedom House reports, once the countries of Central and Eastern Europe achieved their membership goal, they all began to experience stagnation or setback⁹ in their democratic standards.¹⁰ By 2022, they all had worse democratic scores compared to 2005. The only difference is that, while most regressions tended to be modest and kept the new member states in the same democratic regime category – i.e. consolidated or semi-consolidated democracies – Hungary's backsliding proved far more dramatic. From 2014 to 2020, the country transformed from a consolidated democracy into a hybrid regime.

Hungary's first steps towards illiberalism did not happen in a vacuum but rather in the context of a global erosion of democracy and freedoms, documented since 2006.

In the past decade, illiberalism has also spread across the EU, with far-right parties gaining strength in the different member states as well as in the European Parliament. Recent polls predict that the upcoming elections to the EP will cause a sharp shift towards the right in the new legislature and see a surge in support for euroskeptic illiberal parties across the Union. Both the Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups are expected to increase their number of MEPs, accounting for about 25% of the seats in the new Parliament.¹¹

In parallel, more radical populist parties also increased their presence in national parliaments and coalition governments in the member states, alongside traditional

right-wing parties, with implications on policymaking and political discourse. In Italy, shortly after the cabinet led by Prime Minister Georgia Meloni took office, the first laws restricting civic space, hampering the work of NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean, and limiting the rights of same-sex couples were passed.¹² Furthermore, ideas and narratives previously espoused by radical right actors and which used to be regarded as socially unacceptable, mainly related to migration and identity¹³ but also to other topics such as climate,¹⁴ have now become part of the more mainstream public debate.

SERBIA'S ILLIBERALISM – RULING THE EU'S VOID

In the case of Serbia, the majority secured by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in the National Assembly at the 2014 elections marked a turning point, engaging the country in a downward democratic spiral from the status of semi-consolidated democracy to that of a hybrid regime by 2019.¹⁵ Over the years, the SNS deployed a clientelist network of patronage, established control of the security sector, tightened oversight of the judiciary and media, and intensified the politicisation of the public administration – all of which ultimately led to deep state capture in Serbia.¹⁶

The 2014 SNS electoral victory coincided with the opening of EU accession negotiations and the enlargement moratorium announced by the then newly elected President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker.¹⁷ Ensuing questions about the credibility of the EU membership perspective weakened the Union's transformative leverage in the region, including with regards to democratic conditions. Serbia is illustrative in this regard.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – WHEN POLITICAL DYSFUNCTIONALITY BREEDS ILLIBERALISM

Over the past decade, Bosnia and Herzegovina also followed a steady decline in democratic standards. Labelled as a hybrid regime,¹⁸ the country's intricate constitutional set up has allowed ethnic leaders to capture the state and foster a permanent state of political dysfunctionality.¹⁹ The setback has been particularly acute in the Republika Srpska. In recent years, in parallel to the escalation of secessionist rhetoric and acts, the Serb-dominated entity has revealed a strongly repressive tendency, limiting the space for minorities, civil society, and independent journalism.²⁰ Furthermore, in 2023, the entity's National Assembly passed laws to reject the authority of the state's Constitutional Court²¹ and of the High Representative²² – a direct attack on the already fragile statehood of this Balkan country.

A common feature of the rise of authoritarianism in Hungary, Serbia, and the Bosnian entity has been the concentration of power in the hands of their political leaders. Like in the case of Orbán, over the past fifteen years, Aleksandar Vučić²³ and Milorad Dodik,²⁴ once seen by the West as moderate, liberal, and pro-European leaders, experienced an ideological transformation into nationalist right-wing populists. In all three instances, the overlap between the party and the government's activities, the personalisation of political power, and abuse of public institutions have blurred the lines between the state (or the entity in the case of the Republika Srpska), the party, and the leader. As a result, the environment became increasingly hostile for opposition forces, civil society actors, independent journalists, and any other critical voices in the domestic arena. The populist turn of the Balkan leaders has been inspired and supported by the Hungarian Prime Minister, who has legitimised their authoritarian behaviour.

The EU also bears responsibility for consolidating of autocratic leaders in the Western Balkans. Since the end of the Yugoslav wars and especially over the past decade, ensuring regional stability defined the West's

engagement with the Balkans. To that end, the EU and the US have at times endorsed governments in those countries that promised to ensure peace but fell short of delivering democracy or respect for the rule of law. Relevant EU leaders like the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel or former President of the European Council Donald Tusk²⁵ supported Aleksandar Vučić,²⁶ whose Serbian Progressive Party is an associate of the European People Party (EPP) family. In a visit to Belgrade in 2021, President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen praised Vučić for the progress made in fundamental reforms: "This is enormous. You have done a lot of hard work. This hard work pays off. It is amazing to see the progress".²⁷

This was a misguided strategy for the EU and some of its members because it facilitated the emergence of undemocratic regimes in the Balkans, which scholars have labelled 'stabilocracies'.²⁸ As it turns out, stabilocracies do not provide real stability but only a false sense of security. Stabilocrats need to create tensions to reinforce their legitimacy,²⁹ so the risk of conflict outbreak is, in fact, always present and high in such contexts.

2. A strategic, economic, political, and ideological partnership

When it was founded in the early 1990s, Fidesz's main foreign policy goal was Hungary's Euro-Atlantic integration. However, since its return to power in 2010, its foreign policy started to shift eastward.³⁰ The party began strengthening ties with Russia, China, Turkey, and ex-Soviet Republics such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in an alleged attempt to act as a bridgehead between the East and West.³¹ This geopolitical reorientation also included the Western Balkans, where Orbán sought to establish Hungary as a political and economic regional power.

Prime Minister Orbán and President Vučić have nurtured close political and personal ties to the extent of describing themselves as "friends".

But it was only in the past five years that Hungary's presence in Serbia and Republika Srpska really took off, as political leaders in these contexts strengthened their relationships. Prime Minister Orbán and President Vučić have nurtured close political and personal ties

to the extent of describing themselves as "friends".³² In a video message supporting Dodik ahead of the October 2022 election, the Hungarian leader recognised the Bosnian Serb entity as an "honourable neighbour".³³ Dodik thanked him for his support and for being a "great statesman and friend of the Serbian people". During the 2024 celebration of the Day of the Republika Srpska, a festivity declared unconstitutional by the BiH Constitutional Court in 2015,³⁴ the Bosnian Serb leader awarded Viktor Orbán with the Order of the Republika Srpska,³⁵ the highest decoration of the entity.

The intensification of relations between these leaders coincided with the 2019 suspension of Fidesz from the EPP³⁶ and the appointment of the then Hungarian Ambassador to the EU, Oliver Várhelyi, as EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. At that time, enlargement was not high on the Union's agenda, so Orbán managed to place a close associate of his in a post he considered strategic, overseeing the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans. The Hungarian Prime Minister recognised that this move was his biggest diplomatic success of the last decade and hoped it would increase Hungary's influence in European politics.³⁷

In June 2019, Orbán met for the first time with the then Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency, Milorad Dodik. Following the encounter in Budapest, the Hungarian leader announced his intention to boost ties with the

Republika Srpska. He did exactly that, with multiple meetings in Budapest and Banja Luka, taking place ever since.³⁸

The number of meetings between Orbán and Vučić tripled in 2019.³⁹ In 2021, the alliance was sealed with the signature of an Agreement on cordial relations and strategic partnership between Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán and Ana Brnabić,⁴⁰ a close ally of President Vučić. A year later, after being re-elected as President in 2022, Vučić confirmed this strategic partnership.⁴¹ In June 2023 the two countries formalised the liaison with the establishment of the Hungarian-Serbian Strategic Cooperation Council,⁴² aimed at bolstering bilateral relations. During the first meeting of the Council, the two governments signed 12 bilateral agreements in a variety of areas, including energy, infrastructure, European integration, and security.

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The alliance between Budapest, Belgrade, and Banja Luka has been driven by a set of (I) strategic, (II) economic, (III) ideological, and (IV) political factors – all closely interlinked. In effect, these considerations can be regarded as both reasons for the rapprochement as well as consequences of the close relations between the protagonists. The Western Balkans are of strategic and economic importance for Hungary, and this has incentivised Viktor Orbán to strengthen political ties with these regional leaders. At the same time, the ideological proximity between the three allowed the Hungarian leader to increase his economic power in the region.

I. STOPPING MIGRATION AND STRENGTHENING SECURITY

The stability of Southeast Europe is of great strategic importance for Hungary as a means of stopping illegal migration and preventing conflict on Hungary's borders. In this sense, Orbán has praised Vučić and Dodik's key roles in maintaining regional stability and used this argument to justify his push for a fast-track enlargement towards the Balkans. In 2019, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria signed a deal in Belgrade to bolster the efforts to curb illegal migration entering the EU through the Balkan route.⁴³

Given the geographical proximity, preserving stability in the Western Balkans has been identified as a priority for the Hungarian government. In a recent visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Hungarian Defence Minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky stressed the need to

strengthen military cooperation to ensure the security of the European continent.⁴⁴

II. ECONOMIC AND ENERGY COOPERATION

Hungary has economic interests in the Western Balkans, specially in Serbia, where investments have increased in a number of sectors, including media, infrastructure, and energy, particularly in the country's autonomous province, Vojvodina. In December 2020, after a visit to Budapest, the then Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Selaković announced that Hungarian companies would invest 130 million euro in Serbia in the next period.⁴⁵ Few months later, former Minister of Economy Anđelka Atanasković said that the Hungarian government allocated 25 million euro to support Hungarian companies investing in the Balkan country.⁴⁶

Trade between the two countries was also boosted.⁴⁷ Imports from Hungary to Serbia have increased by 83.6% between 2016 and 2021. During the same period, exports in the opposite direction grew by 166%, making Hungary the fifth biggest destination for Serbian goods.

Hungary is one of the EU countries most dependent on energy from Russia, with more than 90% of oil and natural gas imports coming from Russia before the war.⁴⁸ Therefore, diversifying its energy sources to increase energy security has been one of the main goals driving Hungary's foreign policy. During the Hungarian-Serbian Strategic Cooperation Council meeting, Belgrade and Budapest agreed to establish a new joint company for natural gas, SERBHUNGAS, as well as to build an oil pipeline from Novi Sad to Hungary, to be finalised by 2028.⁴⁹ The energy crisis created by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, led the two countries to agree in May 2022 on strengthening cooperation in the energy sector to ensure stable energy supply.⁵⁰

III. ILLIBERAL LIKE-MINDED LEADERS

The exclusion of Fidesz from the EPP and the voting out of office of Orbán's Eastern European peers like the former Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic (Andrej Babiš), Slovenia (Janez Janša), and Poland (Mateusz Morawiecki) further isolated the Hungarian leader in Brussels. Since then, he turned to Southern Europe in search of like-minded illiberal partners, who share the same ideological traits: Illiberalism, conservatism, nationalism, ethnicism, euro-scepticism, and closeness to Russia.

In 2021, Orbán signed a full-page advertisement in several tabloids and conservative newspapers from across the EU promoting his vision for the future of Europe.⁵¹ In his proposals, apart from rejecting what he called the "European Empire", demanding more national sovereignty instead of further European integration, and warning against the threat that "mass migration" poses to Europe, he called for advancing Serbia's EU membership bid.

This vision of Europe's future, that disregards EU fundamental values such as freedom, rule of law and democracy, is also shared by the Balkan illiberal strongmen. They have adopted a similar narrative, critical with Western Europe for allegedly wanting to "force their views" on Eastern countries.⁵²

IV. THE TRIANGLE OF AUTOCRATS

Orbán, Vučić, and Dodik have also supported each other politically. Viktor Orbán backed Milorad Dodik ahead of the 2022 elections⁵³ and was the first to congratulate the Bosnian Serb leader that year for becoming the President of the Republika Srpska.⁵⁴ The same happened in the 2023 Serbian Parliamentary elections: Orbán sent a letter of support to Vučić praising his work and leadership,⁵⁵ even though the Serbian President was not officially running in the election. The Hungarian Prime Minister was also the only EU leader to applaud the Serbian President for his party's electoral win,⁵⁶ despite the vote being marred by irregularities and fraud allegations.

The year before, during the campaign for the April 2022 Serbian general elections, Orbán participated in the opening ceremony of the high-speed railway between Belgrade and Novi Sad, a section of the longer Belgrade-Budapest railway, which is mostly funded by China. The ceremony, which was also attended by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, was a campaign rally for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and was attended by hundreds of party supporters. The image of the two leaders greeting each other that day on an empty platform in Belgrade went viral.

Furthermore, Hungary is supporting Serbia's diplomatic efforts with regard to Kosovo. Despite having recognised Kosovo's statehood shortly after its declaration of independence in 2008 and in spite of having an embassy in Pristina, Hungary was one of the seven countries that voted against Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe in April 2023.⁵⁷

3. A friendship that causes trouble

Orbán's efforts to increase Hungary's presence in the Balkans have granted him considerable soft power and influence in the region, particularly when enlargement policy was not a political priority for the EU.

Moreover, his friendship with Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik converted Orbán into an interlocutor between Brussels and the two Balkan strongmen as the Hungarian leader sought to demonstrate his ability to mediate over sensitive issues. Last summer, amid an escalation in tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, Orbán took credit for convincing Vučić to release three Kosovo police officers after they had been detained in Serbia for about ten days.⁵⁸

Instead, Orbán's support for the Balkan's European perspective and his rapprochement with Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik ended up undermining the transformative leverage of the EU's strategy towards the Western Balkans. The illiberal triangle between these autocratic leaders in Budapest, Belgrade, and Banja Luka has proven problematic for the EU on three main grounds: (I) it sabotaged the EU's strategy towards the Balkans, circumventing the democratic centrality of enlargement, (II) it undermined the EU's democratic values and strengthened the illiberal block within and beyond the Union's borders, and (III) it challenged regional stability, posing a security threat for the EU, especially in the current geopolitical context.

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The Hungarian Prime Minister emerged as one of the most vocal advocates for a fast-track enlargement of the Western Balkans. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this position. In fact, Orbán's enthusiasm for enlargement, together with his increased presence in the Western Balkans and his good relationship with domestic leaders in the region, could have helped to relaunch the enlargement policy, bridge the gap between Brussels and Balkan capitals, and encourage a positive dynamic in the dossier.

I. ENLARGEMENT POLICY HARM

One of the reasons why Orbán's enthusiasm about enlargement has become troublesome is because he instrumentalised the policy for his own narrow interest. In December 2023, he opposed the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine – in fact, he left the room to avoid taking part in the decision,⁵⁹ which the other 26 EU leaders went on to reach. Later, he demanded Brussels to unblock funds for his country,⁶⁰ which had been frozen due to Hungary's attacks on the rule of law, as a condition to lift his veto on the new aid package for Ukraine. Meanwhile, he pushed particularly strongly for Serbia's EU membership bid, despite a serious deterioration in democratic conditions in that country.

As such, Orbán's approach to enlargement has circumvented the centrality of democratic criteria in the process, undermining the already fragile transformative

character of the whole policy and the EU's leverage in the region. In these efforts, Orbán was able to count on an indispensable ally in Brussels: Oliver Várhelyi, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. The Commissioner is known for his loyalty to Orbán, has been accused of pursuing the agenda of the Hungarian government rather than that of the Commission,⁶¹ in breach of his mandate.⁶² In 2022, the European Parliament, as well as individual political groups and MEPs, called for an investigation into the Commissioner's policy decisions.⁶³

In 2019, Várhelyi's appointment was welcomed by authorities in Belgrade and Banja Luka. Meanwhile, civil society and other observers raised concerns about the risks of giving this portfolio to Orbán's candidate,⁶⁴ arguing that a nominee from a country with a dubious democratic track record cannot promote the EU's fundamental values and rule of law in the accession countries,⁶⁵ all of which already displayed at that time illiberal tendencies.

During his mandate, Várhelyi tried to water down the rule of law and human rights concerns in the enlargement countries,⁶⁶ condoning autocratic behaviours in the region. He emerged particularly favourable to Serbia's EU membership aspiration, despite the country's serious democratic and rule of law shortcomings.⁶⁷

Ultimately, this strategy did not help the EU integration process of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, it slowed down these countries' fulfilment of EU membership conditions. Moreover, it negatively impacted the credibility of the EU in the eyes of citizens, who saw that Brussels seemed willing to tolerate or even to praise undemocratic acts and attacks against the rule of law and fundamental rights instead of improving them.

II. EU DEMOCRATIC VALUES HARMED

The regimes in Budapest, Belgrade, and Banja Luka share their rejection of liberal values, which are intrinsic to the EU's identity. Aleksandar Vučić has been a regular participant at the Budapest Demographic Summit, the bi-annual gathering of conservative far-right leaders, also attended by Milorad Dodik and the current Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency, Željka Cvijanović. Other populist EU leaders such as Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, former Prime Ministers of Slovenia, and the Czech Republic, Janez Janša and Andrej Babiš, have also participated in different editions of the summit. There, Viktor Orbán has been acknowledged as the ideological leader against the 'Brussels tyranny' and Western liberalism.⁶⁸

Orbán, Vučić, and Dodik have adopted a similar anti-establishment narrative, presenting themselves as the people versus the elite – including the 'Brussels elite'. At the same time, however, they developed a clientelist network in their domestic arena to benefit a specific

circle of individuals against the common good. They also adopted ethnicist and nativist stances, in the case of Hungary especially by exploiting the anti-migration discourse. This ideological turn away from the EU has coincided with a move closer to the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin.

The current governments of Hungary, Serbia, and Republika Srpska also converge in their authoritarian manners, including *inter alia* restricting space for the opposition, controlling the media, creating a hostile environment for civil society, attacking journalists, and capturing institutions.

The current governments of Hungary,⁶⁹ Serbia,⁷⁰ and Republika Srpska⁷¹ also converge in their authoritarian manners, including *inter alia* restricting space for the opposition, controlling the media, creating a hostile environment for civil society, attacking journalists, and capturing institutions. Over the years, they have followed similar tactics of state capture and dismantling democratic institutions, in line with Larry Diamond's specified steps towards autocracy.⁷² Since 2014, Serbia has been considered an electoral autocracy.⁷³ Such a regime type regularly holds multiparty elections, but these fall short of meeting freedom and fairness criteria due to, for example, insufficient levels of freedom of expression and association. Together with Albania and Ukraine, Serbia is the worst-performing EU candidate in this regard. Ever since 2018, Hungary falls in the same category and is the first EU member to have received such a poor qualification.

III. REGIONAL STABILITY HARMED

Viktor Orbán has endorsed and inspired the authoritarian behaviours of Balkan leaders. He has stepped in to support Milorad Dodik politically and financially on several occasions when the Serb leader escalated his secessionist threats. As such, he validated these irredentist decisions, blocking any attempt by the EU to punish them. Last summer, Hungary took over several infrastructure projects in the Republika Srpska, which were abandoned by Germany in response to the destabilisation crisis created by Dodik. In a similar vein, in 2021, following Dodik's announcement that he would pull Republika Srpska out of the state-level military, judicial, and tax systems, Orbán offered €100 million in financial support to the Serb-majority entity and publicly opposed any EU sanctions.⁷⁴

The Hungarian leader has been vocal not only against the idea of sanctioning the Republika Srpska for the entity's secessionist threats. He also opposed sanctions against Serbia, if the country's involvement in the Banjska attack that killed one Kosovo police officer in the North of Kosovo in September 2024 would be proven, as requested by some MEPs.⁷⁵

Orbán usually refers to Serb leaders as key figures for stability in the Balkans. Maintaining regional stability has also been Orbán's public argument to justify his opposition to sanctions against Serbia and Republika Srpska, claiming that they could lead to an escalation of regional tensions. However, paradoxically, by armouring Dodik's secessionist moves that threaten Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity, Orbán has contributed to creating the biggest political crisis in the country since the end of the war in 1995.⁷⁶

In the current geopolitical context, the existence of autocratic regimes in the Balkans and within the EU compromises the stability and security of the whole continent. It also undermines the Union's support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia as the war continues, given the close links between these leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin. After all, Viktor Orbán has threatened to block EU's support for Ukraine on several occasions.⁷⁷

In January 2023, Putin was awarded with the Order of the Republika Srpska. In his turn, a few months later, the Russian leader decorated the Bosnian Serb with the Order of Alexander Newysk. Similarly, in October of the same year, Vučić skipped a meeting of the Berlin Process to attend the third forum of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There, he met with Putin, confirming that the two leaders maintain a friendly relationship.⁷⁸

Over the past years, Russia too, has increased its presence in the region,⁷⁹ and has strengthened its relationship with Balkan autocrats, taking advantage of stagnation in the enlargement dossier and the weakening of the credibility of the EU membership perspective. Viktor Orbán is the only EU leader who has not severed ties with Vladimir Putin since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In fact, over the past months, both leaders have cultivated ties and met bilaterally for the latest get together of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing.⁸⁰

4. Where to from here?

Over the past years and under Viktor Orbán's rule, Hungary underwent a sharp regression in democratic and rule of law standards, becoming the first non-democratic country in the European Union. In parallel, Hungary's presence in the Western Balkans has increased, driven by a series of strategic, economic, ideological, and political interests. Orbán has emerged

Historical and cultural ties gave Russia soft power among the Serbian population and political leaders, which Putin exploited to fuel ethnic tensions, maintain political instability, and halt the region's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations.⁸¹ Since the early 2000s, Moscow has capitalised on the Serbs' resentment over the 1999 NATO bombing, exploiting the old narrative of the Slavic brotherhood to sow anti-Western sentiment across the region. Furthermore, Belgrade relies on Russia's diplomatic support to defend its interests vis-à-vis Kosovo and to secure its energy supplies. In turn, the Kremlin uses this leverage to trip the West in the Balkans and try to keep the region away from the EU.

The spread of Orbán's ideological model threatens the continuity of the EU's support for Ukraine as the war continues.

The spread of Orbán's ideological model threatens the continuity of the EU's support for Ukraine as the war continues. Since the start of the war, Hungary has tried to maintain a neutral stand between Ukraine and Russia, disregarding the EU's position and exploiting the narrative that Kyiv will not be able to win the war without making concessions to Putin.⁸² Despite having joined the rest of the EU members in sanctioning the Kremlin, Hungary has manifested its disagreement with punitive measures against Russia,⁸³ considering that they are harming European countries.

Both Serb leaders also refused to align with the EU in response to the Russian war in Ukraine. Serbia said no to sanctions against the Kremlin,⁸⁴ and its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy has dropped from 64% in 2020 to 45% in 2022.⁸⁵ Furthermore, despite the EU countries still being the main destination for Serbian migrants,⁸⁶ most citizens in Serbia believe that Russia is the country's closest foreign ally and back the rapprochement between Belgrade and Moscow.⁸⁷ In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Dodik announced that he would block any attempt by Bosnia and Herzegovina to sanction Russia.⁸⁸

as one of the most vocal advocates of the fast-track enlargement of the region.

Increasingly isolated in Brussels, the Hungarian Prime Minister has sought like-minded allies in the Balkans, who share similar populist ideological traits and undemocratic behaviours. The alliance with regional

autocrats like Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, as well as his enthusiasm for enlargement in general, has proven problematic for the European Union, as it has bolstered illiberalism in EU aspiring countries and circumvented the centrality of democratic criteria in the accession process.

Having a close associate as European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement has helped Orbán to seek greater influence over this portfolio, allowing him to also try to spoil the transformative power of the accession process. Democracy and the rule of law are and should remain cornerstones of the EU enlargement policy. Therefore, in the aftermath of the upcoming EP elections, **the enlargement portfolio should not be again allocated to a candidate nominated by an EU government that has a poor record in terms of respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law, and even less so to one which is not even considered a democracy.**

Hungary's illiberalism found fertile ground in the Balkans, where the EU itself has misguidedly prioritised stability over democracy, supporting regional autocrats who promised to deliver peace without a genuine commitment to the rule of law and fundamental rights. However, **stability should no longer be prioritised at the expense of democracy**, since ultimately autocracies only give a false sense of security. Instead, democracy should systematically be prioritised for being the best mechanism to ensure the security and stability in the region.

Stability should no longer be prioritised at the expense of democracy.

Therefore, the EU should take a **stronger stance against democratic backsliding and vocally condemn any attacks on the rule of law**, as well as any attempts to restrict the civic space in the EU and aspiring countries. To this end, the call of the European Parliament for an independent international investigation into the irregularities of the December 2023 Serbian elections⁸⁹ is a step in the right direction. Making financial assistance conditional on the implementation of fundamental reforms, the logic behind the recently announced Growth Plan for the Western Balkans,⁹⁰ is also the right way to go.

In parallel, the EU should **empower and support to an even greater extent than at present the democratic and reform-oriented civic and political forces in the enlargement countries.** The accession process should become more inclusive of civil society, understanding that democracy-building needs to be

domestically driven and that an active civic sector is essential for a vibrant democracy. The EU should streamline the communication channels with civic actors in the Western Balkans and make engagement more regular and less dependent on the will of the EU capitals. The pilot project launched by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to include representatives from candidate countries in its activities can help connecting Balkan CSOs to EU decisionmakers. Such initiatives should also be taken up by other EU institutions and bodies.

The EU should work on rebuilding the credibility of its EU membership promise to the enlargement countries.

The wavering of the EU on enlargement, at least until the war in Ukraine, has facilitated the spread of malign influences and democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans. The EU should work on **rebuilding the credibility of its EU membership promise to the enlargement countries.** To that end, the EU must prove that it is serious about expansion, including by starting to look into its own internal reforms needed to prepare it for 30+ members. By doing its own homework, the EU can inspire enlargement countries to do theirs and demonstrate that it is serious about widening.

In the same vein, the coherence of the path towards EU membership should be strengthened, and **conditionality should be the guiding principle of the accession process.** In this sense, the EU and the member states should make good on their commitments when aspiring countries deliver on the required reforms and meet the established criteria. Instrumentalising the accession process to pursue their own domestic interests or solve bilateral disputes, does not bode well for the EU's foreign policy ambitions.

At the same time, **the EU should not take shortcuts by allowing countries that have not delivered, especially on fundamental reforms, to move forward in the accession process.** A firmer and more consistent position from the EU on the democratic conditions for membership can serve as a tool of political pressure in the hands of civil society and other democratic forces in the aspiring countries to hold their governments to account. Doing so can also contribute to enhancing the credibility of the Union in the region and the coherence between its actions and messages. Moreover, it will send a strong signal to EU citizens that the EU is serious about EU enlargement, and that this process is strictly merit-based.

The EU should also find **new and more effective ways to communicate about enlargement to people in the aspiring countries and the member states.**

Communication should include explanations about the steps of the accession process and why reforms are necessary, but also justifications for the importance and relevance of pursuing enlargement in the new era.

Finally, the **EU should adopt a firm response to any attacks on democracy and the rule of law within the Union and enlargement countries.** Autocratic trends do not only have negative impact on the quality of democracy in the member states and aspiring countries. They also challenge the EU's geopolitical strategy. Giving in to Orbán's blackmailing tactics is not a sustainable strategy for the EU in its efforts to help Ukraine and restore peace on its borders, but it risks encouraging blackmailing tactics also in the future and from others.⁹¹

Instead, when these critical issues are on the table EU leaders must find the way to politically outmanoeuvre Orbán, like they did in the February 2024 special European Council meeting.⁹² There, the Hungarian Prime Minister was left totally isolated, as there was a strong consensus among the EU26 that it was crucial to get an agreement on the revised budget and the financial aid package for Ukraine without having him on board. This, together with the pressure put on Orbán by key Heads of Government and State to agree on a compromise, and the real contemplation to use the Article 7 procedure, as well as cutting Hungary off from further EU financial support allowed for Viktor Orbán to give in and get on board with the final agreement.

If attacks against the rule of law and fundamental rights continue, the **EU should deploy its full toolkit in defence of democracy and all EU actors should be ready to firmly react on democratic backsliding and put political and economic pressure on rule of law offenders.** The search for new instruments to correct democratic backsliding has to be a priority for the new leadership after the European Parliament elections.

The EU should explore ways to channel its support to pro-democratic actors that are fighting for democracy and the rule of law in Hungary, including, for example, through more funding allocated directly to civil society.

The EU should adopt a firm response to any attacks on democracy and the rule of law within the Union and enlargement countries.

Democracy must be reinforced as the central trait of the EU's identity. Defending the rule of law and democracy in the Union and making this the cornerstone of the EU's policy towards the enlargement countries is particularly important in the current geopolitical context when democracy is on the line.

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