

Illiberalising EU enlargement to the Western Balkans

Alejandro Esteso Pérez*

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* *The author was visiting fellow at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Prague*

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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.

2. 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.

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

² Schenkkan, 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

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 stabilocracy 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.

3. 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.

3.1. A causal model to track illiberalisation

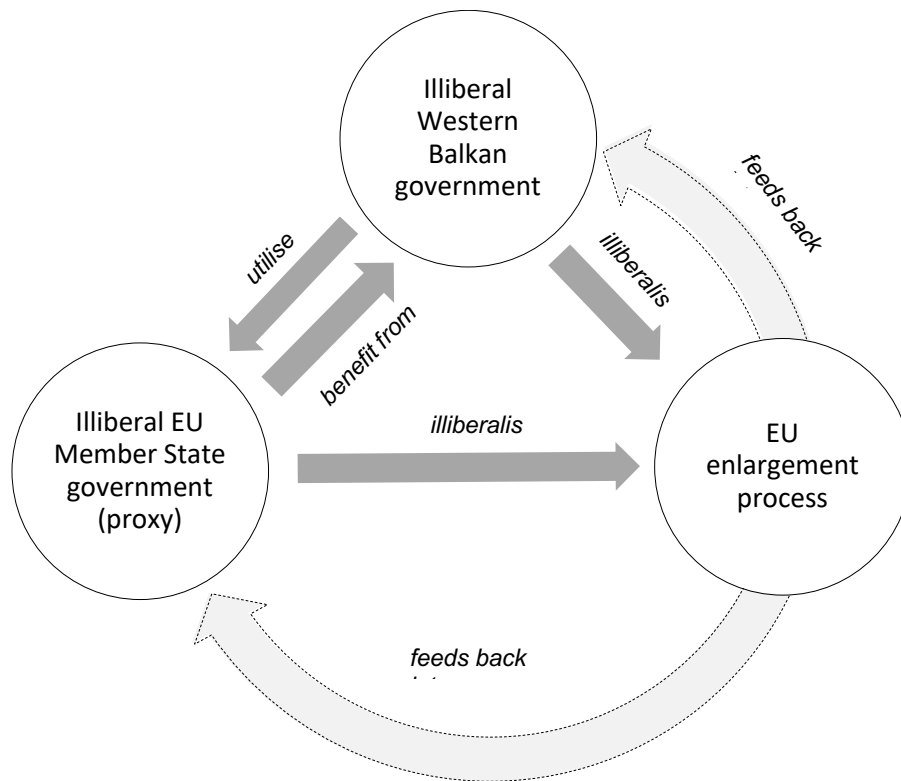
The illiberalisation of EU politics, and of EU enlargement in particular, can be illustrated as a multi-agent and self-nurturing mechanism. This model features the stakeholders involved—namely the illiberal Western Balkan governments and the illiberal EU Member State governments—and their interconnections. 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.

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.

¹⁵ Kapidžić, D. et al. (2023) Beyond Stabilocracy: 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



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.

3.2. 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

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 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

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>

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.

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.

3.3. 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 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 stabilitocratic 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

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-Braçe, 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/>

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

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

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,

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-AEqhK6PC>

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 L'America: «L'Albania ora si merita l'Europa». *Avvenire*, 22 February. <https://www.avvenire.it/economici/pagine/l-intervistaquelli-che-hanno-scoperto-l-america-l>

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>

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

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

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>

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>

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.

4. 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 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

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.

approaches that hold the EC at the core of the analysis fail to award enough agency to State actors.

5. 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 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.

About EUROPEUM

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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