**Strategic autonomy**

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The Western Balkans states – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Kosovo – are all eager to carry their ties with the EU to the next level. These days, however, the idea of enlargement elicits little enthusiasm in old Europe. Supporting the ‘European perspective’ of ‘the Western Balkans partners’, vague though it sounds – or rather, precisely because it sounds vague – comes a lot easier to most EU leaders than uttering the word ‘enlargement’.

But the fact that Slovenia perceived the Brdo declaration as a big victory against enlargement-sceptics shows that the EU enlargement process is in crisis. That adding a word or two in an official communique is perceived as a significant achievement shows how low the bar is set.

Indeed, there is little appetite within the EU to bring in new members. The Slovenian presidency of the EU Council reportedly wanted to insert a commitment that there will be at least one country joining by 2030. It hit a wall. 'I don’t really believe in setting dates, I believe in making good on our promises,” outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters after the summit. “Once the conditions are met, the accession can take place,” she added. The “making good on promises” part does not sound convincing, unfortunately. For all intents and purposes, the EU has put the process on halt.

Serbia, negotiating its accession since 2014, has not opened any new chapters since December 2019. Montenegro, the frontrunner, is now carrying out talks on all EU dossiers, but there is no end in sight for that country either. Then, there is North Macedonia, which has been blocked from launching membership negotiations by its neighbour Bulgaria over a dispute about history and language. Albania, another hopeful, is a collateral damage because it is bundled together with the Macedonians. Bosnia and Kosovo are even further behind in the queue. Kosovars are frustrated that despite meeting all technical conditions they are still denied visa-free travel to the Schengen zone, unlike those living in the rest of the Western Balkans as well as post-Soviet republics such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Europe, it seems, is keeping the region at an arms-length, while continuing to occasionally pay lip service to demands for enlargement.

It is not difficult to grasp why the EU has become introvert. The order of the day is internal consolidation, not expansion. As it worries about the fate of the eurozone, tries to move forward with the European Green Deal and battles COVID-19, the EU has very little time and energy for other issues. Furthermore, some influential member states such as France see the generous recovery plan adopted last year to combat the pandemic-caused economic downturn as a stepping stone towards increased ‘strategic autonomy’ and a higher degree of ‘European sovereignty’.

The EU, the argument goes, needs to strengthen its institutions and deepen integration between its members if it wishes to thrive in a growingly competitive world dominated by the United States and China. Adding new countries to the fold complicates such plans.

In the eyes of critics, the cases of Hungary and Poland, enlargement’s one-time poster children turned dyed-in-the-wool Eurosceptics, stands as a cautionary tale too. Many believe the EU may find itself vulnerable to many more Orban-like troublemakers with dubious democratic credentials if it admits the Western Balkans into the bloc.

Enlargement-sceptics calculate that the Western Balkans have nowhere else to go, and even if they are denied membership to the bloc they cannot afford to turn their backs on the EU.

After all, the EU remains the top economic player in the region, accounting for about 73 percent of foreign investment and 70 percent of trade there. Balkan people travel, study, and work in the EU. Moreover, regardless of the hype surrounding the help offered by Russia and China, it is largely the EU footing the bill for the West Balkans’ post-COVID-19 recovery. The EU, together with the European Investment Bank, mobilised 3.3 billion euros ($3.8bn) to support the six countries in the region during the pandemic.

Just like it is the case in the EU, there is also a significant appetite for ‘strategic autonomy’ in the Western Balkans. At a conference in Skopje last week, for example, I heard several Balkan ministers cheering for ‘nearshoring’, that is bringing in manufacturing supply chains back to Europe and away from China or elsewhere in Asia.

All in all, the EU and the Western Balkans have similar goals and aspirations and their fates appear to be tied together on many fronts.

This, however, does not mean the EU is calling all the shots in the region. Many local power players do not hesitate to shun EU’s demands pointing to the lack of progress in their countries’ membership bids.

Some of them, such as Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic, have no qualms about bashing the EU for its double standards and untrustworthiness in order to boost their popularity at home.

Excerpted: ‘The Western Balkans leaving the EU dream behind’

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