

## ***European Strategies of Expanding Spheres of Influence***

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For more than a decade, the EU membership perspective has been the most powerful political asset to enhance stability and good-neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans: It has worked as a carrot to initiate and sustain reforms; it represented a framework for conflict settlement; and an effective incentive to improve regional co-operation. 'Europeanization' has been understood as promoting genuine European values that lay at the core of the European integration project: the respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Member states are also expected to share the commitment to pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men.

Since 1999, the so-called European perspective (enlargement policy) served as the primary EU policy tool towards the Western Balkans in order to promote 'Europeanization'. But granting the Western Balkan states the perspective of full membership was only the result of a painful learning process. During the course of the war and in light of massive human rights violations member states understood that developments in the EU's South-eastern neighbourhood represented a threat to their vital interests: peace and stability; European values, but also economic and institutional interests.

Bosnia and Herzegovina teaches the lesson that the European perspective in itself does not guarantee an appropriate reform process. Conditionality has in a way supported state building efforts, but institutional building and democratization are moving slowly. Some of the instruments applied had mixed results. E.g., Autonomous Trade Preferences granted by the EU have had a minor effect on increasing exports from the region, but instead helped increasing imports from the EU to the Western Balkans, making the EU the primary beneficiary of trade liberalisation.

Recent events – the crisis in Ukraine, the Greek economic crisis, the Brexit, and the non-handling of the refugee crisis – question the role and the ability of the EU to bring about peace, democracy and welfare to its neighbouring countries. The EU has even been seen as an importer of instability and new challenges to the region, in particular through "contagion" by the Greek crisis, non-resolution of the refugee crisis. In addition, political developments in member countries (Hungary, Poland) seem to seriously undermine the very basis of the EU's normative framework. Both within and outside the Union Euroscepticism is growing.

What 'Europeanization' shall mean under these circumstances needs to be discussed anew. And yet, there seems to be no viable alternative to the Western Balkans eventually becoming full members of the European Union.