European Union's Western Balkans Policy Adjustments and Strategic Metaphors in the Context of Geopolitical Crisis

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Abstract: The European Union has been in a period of enlargement fatigue for a long time since its explosive eastward enlargement, with a corresponding deceleration in its enlargement policy for the Western Balkans. But since 2018, and especially after the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, the European Union has begun to try to adjust its policies in the Western Balkans and try to change the deceleration of its enlargement. On the basis of constructivism theory, this paper analyses the reasons for the adjustments mainly using comparative and textual analysis. On the one hand, the European Union constructs its own perceptions on the basis of environmental feedback. On the other hand, the European Union has a normative basis for its next expansion, and the Western Balkans have also developed a certain degree of normative internalization through a number of subregional cooperation mechanisms. The European Union recognized the process of gradual convergence between the two sides, which promoted policy adjustments. The current strategic logic of the European Union presents a predominantly security logic, with a prominent geopolitical discourse. There are still challenges in the accession process of the Western Balkans, and the European Union still needs to further explore the optimal path for the development of relations between the two sides.

Keywords: the Western Balkans, the EU, regional integration, geopolitical crisis.

1. Introduction

The trend towards regional integration is intensifying, and the question of how to integrate regional powers has become an important issue in the field of regional cooperation. The European Union (EU), as the relatively most mature organization in terms of the degree of regional integration, has become a key object of research in the relevant fields, while the enlargement of the EU has become an important topic. After the EU's explosive eastward enlargement in 2004, the focus of the EU's enlargement has begun to shift to the Western Balkans. However, with the exception of Croatia's successful accession in 2013, the accession process of the Western Balkan countries has been postponed for a long time. During this period, the EU has continuously experienced various crises, including the European debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the Brexit crisis. In 2020 the EU attempted to introduce a new Western Balkans strategy. It is in an attempt to adjust Western Balkans policies, accelerate the region's accession process, and reshape its influence in the region. This tendency towards policy adjustment became more obvious after the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, when the EU's

regional strategy demonstrated the logic of practicing geopolitical ideas. This leads to the research question of this paper, namely: in the context of the geo-crisis, why has the EU attempted to change the slowdown of its enlargement in the Western Balkans, and started to adjust its policy in the region to try to accelerate its enlargement? And the paper tries to further discuss a shift in the logic of the EU regional strategy on the basis of the discussion of the enlargement process.

By consulting the existing research, it can be found that there are some limitations. Firstly, the research on the EU's Western Balkans policy is mainly based on the interaction between countries and fewer studies have focused on the discussion of the Western Balkans policy since the Ukrainian crisis. Secondly, current research lacks a theoretical perspective on explanation, focusing more on empirical examples. Thirdly, current research has paid less attention to other subregional cooperation mechanisms in the Western Balkans.

This paper attempts to explore the EU's Western Balkans policy from a more theoretical perspective based on the established literature, and uses mainly comparative and textual analysis. In terms of theoretical significance, this study allows for a deeper understanding of the enlargement process of the EU, and a better analysis of the strategic logic of inter-regional cooperation of the EU in the Eurasian region. In terms of practical significance, this study can provide inspiration for other regional integration, and provide referable facts for the construction of regional strategy and regional cooperation paths.

2.   Adjustments in the EU's Western Balkans Policy

The EU's Western Balkans policy is divided into three main phases. From 1991 to 2002, this was the first phase. In 1991, the EU formally included the Western Balkans in the "PHARE program" for the CEE countries, which is a program of economic support and economic reforms[1]. In 1993, the Council of the EU introduced the "Copenhagen Criteria" to measure whether a candidate country meets the requirements for accession. This was followed in 1995 by the launch of the "Royaumont Process." After the Kosovo War in 1999, the EU formally launched "the Stabilization and Association Process." Together with the "Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe," the two became the main framework for the second half of the first phase of the policy. The countries of the Western Balkans were mentioned as potential candidates by the EU in 2000[2].

The second phase of the policy began in 2003, when the EU's accession commitments to the Western Balkan countries were announced at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003[3]. From 2004 to 2009, the Western Balkan countries successively became candidates. The relevant countries have also joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement to promote the matching degree. But the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans has slowed down. In 2014, the President of the European Commission stated that there would be no new accessions in the next five years[4]. But Germany launched the "Berlin Process" at the Western Balkans Economic Forum in 2014, and since then, the "Berlin Process" has been an influential regional cooperation mechanism between the EU and the Western Balkans. It utilizes a combination of hard and soft connectivity to promote national development in the Western Balkans, focusing on infrastructure development and cultural exchanges.

In 2018, the EU launched a new Western Balkans Strategy to build a more comprehensive and systematic policy. The 2018 Western Balkans Strategy states that the Western Balkans are an integral part of the EU[5]. In 2020, the EU published the "Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans" and "Green Agenda for the Western Balkans", which indicated that it would promote the region's economy and bring it closer to EU standards. After the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, a new adjustment has emerged, showing the forward movement of the accession process as well as a further increase in the EU's involvement in the Western Balkans. The EU has put forward a new proposal for the phasing of accession, outlining the new accession mechanism. And the EU has begun to re-accelerate the accession process. For example, the EU has reopened accession negotiations with

Albania and Northern Macedonia. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been granted the status of an EU candidate country, and Croatia has joined the eurozone and the Schengen zone[6]. In 2023, the EU presented the "Western Balkans Growth Plan" at the annual summit of Slovak think tanks, which will further encourage the reforms of the Western Balkans[7]. The EU has also made adjustments in other aspects to enhance the EU's influence, including the construction of new oil and gas pipelines, with related projects such as the construction of the Balkan Peninsula Spur. In addition to this, the EU tried to accelerate the resolution of regional conflicts in the Western Balkans, such as the internal conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and tried to promote domestic reforms with some accession benefits.

3.   Causes of adjustments in the EU's Western Balkans Policy

In exploring the causes of adjustments, this paper attempts to make the explanatory factors abstract and relate them to systematic theories, i.e., constructivism theories, which will be applied to the theoretical framework of this paper. This paper argues that there are two main factors influencing the adjustments of EU policy in the Western Balkans. Firstly, there is the factor of "environmental feedback and cognitive construction", which constructs the EU's perception of the need for balances of power. Secondly, there is the factor of "normative internalization and meaning construction", which involves a two-way process of preparation and even gradual integration between the EU and the Western Balkans. The combination of the two factors culminated in the restructuring of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans.

3.1.   Environmental feedback and cognitive construction

According to constructivism, in a given situation, individuals will consider the interaction with the environment, and the interaction will provide a channel for the environment to influence the cognition and behavior of individuals. Individuals will gain new perspectives and understanding through interaction with the outside world, which will support the constructive role of the environment on individuals' cognition and behavior. Then it can be seen that the interaction between the EU and its environment, such as geopolitical crises and systemic pressures, will have a corresponding constructive impact on the EU's cognition and behavior. It may perceive itself as being in an insecure, threatened state, which gives it a perception of a need for power checks and a need for protection. At the same time, interaction with the external environment also constructed and strengthened the EU's positive attitude towards regional cooperation. And it led to the rapid emergence of the perception that strengthening regional cooperation as a means of maintaining regional influence or counterbalancing the influence of other countries in the region. After the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, the geopolitical pressure on the EU has risen rapidly, and it is worried that the Western Balkans will become the center of turbulence in Europe. The democracy crisis, the financial crisis, and the refugee crisis have made all problems of the Western Balkans even more prominent, and the Ukrainian crisis will likely lead to the continued escalation of instability in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the influence of other actors, such as Russia, exerts systemic pressure on the EU, with the emergence of factions that reject EU sanctions against Russia after the Ukrainian crisis, such as Serbia's acceptance of Russia's energy management and military maneuvers. The EU believes that this will affect the pre-existing power structures in the Western Balkans[8]. Such an interactive situation has led the EU to reconceptualize the post-Ukrainian crisis environment in the Western Balkans. It needs to stabilize the unstable situation to maintain EU security on the one hand, and to reduce Russia's influence in the region to strengthen the EU's sense of security on the other.

3.2. Normative internalization and meaning construction

According to Professor Gao Shangtao's definition of norms as "collectively shared rules of behavior", this paper argues that norms are an abstracted meaning of rules and institutions, belonging to the concepts and beliefs that are commonly recognized among various subjects[9]. The degree to which the subjects accept the binding and coordinating effects of these norms on themselves is the degree of internalization of norms in the subjects. Jeffery Checkel's normative socialization theory mentions that actors passively take on new roles due to some environmental factors, shaping their own preferences once again through the persuasion and convincing of others[10]. Achaya discusses the mechanisms of norm internalization and the subject constructs external norms through multiple channels while also emphasizing autonomy and non-dominance[11]. The "normative internalization and meaning construction" in this paper is not only concerned with one side as mentioned above, but also with the two-way process of integration between the integrator and the integrated, i.e., the gradual process of normative integration in the EU and the Western Balkans. The interactions between the EU and the Western Balkans have led to a certain degree of normative internalization and convergence, which has resulted in a certain degree of policy activism. In the process of internalizing norms, some subjects find it easy to accept new norms and internalize them in their own systems, but some subjects find it difficult to promote the internalization of norms, and such differences will also affect the degree of internalization of norms between countries in the same region.

On the one hand, for the EU, after the last explosive expansion, it needs time to "digest," that is, to reach a certain degree of normative internalization within itself, thus confirming that it has completed the normative uptake of the eastward enlargement and laid down the normative foundations for the next enlargement. For the EU, the possibility of eastward expansion is based on a certain degree of the two-way normative readiness, which can be referred to as "degree 1". "Digesting" this eastward expansion may require a higher degree of normative internalization, i.e., "degree 2", and if such internalization has not been completed, the groundwork for the next expansion is not ready. This is reflected in the fact that a number of CEE countries in the EU, such as Estonia and Slovakia, have adopted the euro and joined the Schengen area, which means that the degree of norms internalization has reached "degree 2".

On the other hand, for the countries of the Western Balkans, they need to internalize to a certain extent the norms required by the EU and construct a sense of belonging to the EU, which will provide the foundational conditions for its accession. Its normative preparation is driven by a number of subregional cooperation mechanisms in the region, not only those advocated by EU member states, but also by extraterritorial actors, such as the United States and China, for example, the "Adriatic Charter" and the "China-CEE Cooperation Platform". There are also cooperation mechanisms initiated by the members of the Western Balkans, such as the "Open Balkans Initiative" and the "Western Balkans Quadrilateral". These subregional cooperation mechanisms compensate for some supply shortfalls of the EU framework, while also providing a complementary role to the integration. Relevant EU Commissioners have also suggested that subregional cooperation mechanisms that are not based on EU norms or that resist EU participation will affect the process of integration of the Western Balkans[12]. It follows that these subregional cooperation mechanisms have perhaps laid a certain normative foundation for the integration. The EU recognizes this degree of internalization of norms and adjusts the policies. But the lack of a regional identity may make the process of construction of "meanings" absent, which explains to a certain extent the dilemma of the integration of the Western Balkans into the European integration.

4. Changes in the logic of the EU regional strategy

Observing the acceleration of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans, we can go on to explore the shift in the logic of the EU's region strategy. Previously, the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans has always been oriented towards values. After several crises, there is a clear shift in the EU's discourse-practice tendencies. Starting from the transformation of the European Commission into the "Geopolitical Committee" in 2019, it can be observed that the geopolitical dimension of the EU's practice has become stronger, with the consolidation of the security space as the leading strategy. The EU's Western Balkans strategy released in 2018 clearly defines the integration of the Western Balkans as a "geostrategic investment", stating that the policy for the Western Balkans will be a geopolitical priority[13]. The impact of geopolitical factors is re-emphasized in the 2020 EU document on credible accession prospects for the Western Balkans[14]. In addition, the EU has increased its own political engagement in the Western Balkans, and the EU has indicated that "Montenegro and Serbia could join the EU in 2025 if they implement sustained reforms and finally resolve their disputes with neighboring countries"[5].

In the complex space of the power game in the Eurasian region, geo-politics and geo-economics are intertwined and are becoming increasingly complex[15]. The EU's strategy for the regions is oriented towards containment and prevention, and the relevant strategies become more security-centered, with a prominent geopolitical discourse. This may be due to the changing geopolitical environment and the return of great power competition. Therefore, its strategy has been more competitive and interventionist, with an increased frequency of the use of "geopolitical space" and "geopolitical investment". This represents a clearer shift from its previous normative and values-oriented strategies. The escalation of the Ukrainian crisis has instead led the EU to weaken the application of normative power and project an image of a "geopolitical Europe", but how to re-achieve the application of normative power is still to be discussed.

The EU has re-accelerated its enlargement process in the Western Balkans, which will in fact have some regional implications. The first is that the governance dilemma within the EU will be further exposed. The EU has faced multiple crises in recent years, and is confronted with problems of incapacity and legitimacy[16]. While it provides some preparation for the next enlargement, the accession of the Western Balkans will likely deepen the complexities and imbalances within the EU and magnify the possibility of an internal governance crisis. The second is that it also promotes a strong geopolitical focus in the EU's regional strategic logic, which could intensify the geopolitical game in Europe and instead increase insecurity.

But it needs to be recognized that the EU's Western Balkans policy also brings certain lessons. By promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, the EU contributes to the peace process in the region, and the economic assistance and development funds can reduce poverty in the Western Balkans. And the EU's incentive mechanism for the Western Balkans helps to drive internal reforms and ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the aid. These lessons are not only applicable here but can also be applied to other areas with similar situations.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it can be seen that the motivation for the EU's adjustments of its policy towards the Western Balkans stems from two main sources, namely "environmental feedback and cognitive construction" and "normative internalization and meaning construction". The issue of accession of the Western Balkans is not only related to the decision-making of the EU member states and its coherence, but also to the degree of normative internalization and identity construction of the countries of the Western Balkans. In the context of the current geopolitical crisis, the EU has further adjusted its Western Balkans policy and attempted to accelerate its enlargement in the region, and a

number of subregional cooperation mechanisms in the Western Balkans have laid down a certain normative basis for its accession to the EU. But there are still certain obstacles and challenges to the advancement of the EU's Western Balkans policy, and the accession process in the region is still facing a number of problems. There is not only the problem brought about by the inconsistent positions of the major EU countries, such as the lack of consensus between France and Germany on the EU enlargement process and programs, and France's multi-speed European program has not been actively supported by Germany. There are also cases where the problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina are difficult to resolve in a short period of time, as well as cases of conflicts between the Western Balkan countries and the EU countries, such as disputes over the delimitation of maritime borders between Albania and Greece, and ethnic disputes between Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria. These circumstances will likely affect the accession process of the countries of the Western Balkans from a particular perspective.

The challenges of globalization and regionalization are still not to be underestimated, and medium-sized and small countries such as the members of the Western Balkans are facing a contradiction between their strong development needs and their inability to adapt to the challenges of reality. The advantages of European integration for the countries of the Western Balkans are obvious, but with the increase in uncertainty of the geopolitical situation and the intensification of internal polarization problems, the incentives for the Western Balkans to join the EU may still fluctuate. If the EU wants to move forward with the accession process in the Western Balkans as soon as possible, it still needs to alleviate the crisis of trust in the Western Balkans, and it also needs to persevere with development and gain new momentum in the crises in order to achieve a real internalization of norms in the region and to explore the optimal path for the development of benign relations between the two sides.

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