

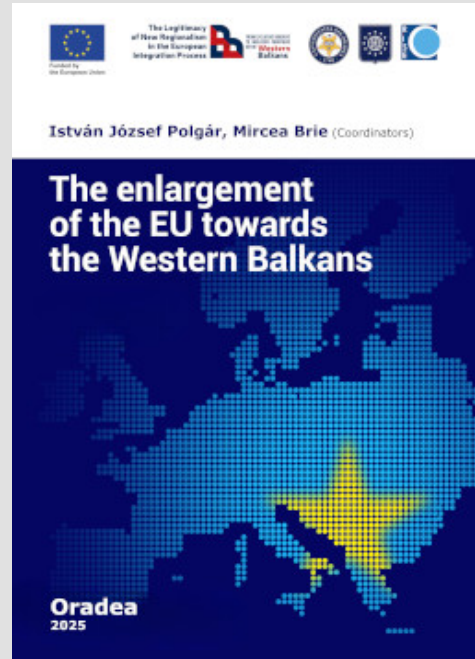
Book Review of: Istvan József Polgar and Mircea Brie (Coordinators)

The Enlargement of the EU Towards the Western Balkan

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The volume edited by Istvan József Polgar and Mircea Brie, “The enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans”, explores a range of topics that invite a deeper analysis of the future and the nature of the European integration process in the Western Balkans. The importance of this field must be viewed within the current geopolitical context, as seen through the lens of European studies and international relations, where the major challenges are represented by enlargement fatigue, democratic resilience, and regional stability. Drawing on the existing academic literature, which examines how the European Union can extend its political and institutional framework to the Western Balkans, one observes hesitation regarding the limits of Europeanization as well as the weight of the conditions imposed by the European Union (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020: 1–20).

In this context, the volume contributes to a broader academic debate centered on the legitimacy of regional cooperation and the mechanisms through which the European Union promotes integration, setting aside current borders. The strategic and geographical positioning of the Western Balkans contributes to gradual institutional convergence which is a

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necessary element for European Union accession, shaped by both historical fragmentation and post-conflict reconstruction.

Moreover, the authors emphasize that the Western Balkans have long been perceived as an area where competing political influences intersect, making the region particularly vulnerable to both internal fragmentation and external pressures.

Meanwhile, researchers have highlighted that European integration in the Western Balkans is not merely a geopolitical strategy, but a project grounded in the stabilization of democratic institutions and regional promotion (Vachudova, 2019: 63–76). In this regard, this volume also aligns with Liridon Lika's (Lika, 2023: 1–16) argument that the term "Western Balkans" is not strictly geographical, rather, it represents a political-strategic construct of the EU capable of producing both inclusion and exclusion.

Thus, the contributions to this volume address essential questions in the academic field through an effort to analyze the relationship between European integration, regionalism, and the transformation of political and social structures in the candidate states.

Structured into thematic sections that address the key stages and obstacles in the European integration process, the book places the legitimacy of the new regionalism and the concept of inclusive borders at the center of its analysis, thereby combining studies of identity, public policy, security, and legal-political analysis, it brings to the forefront a fundamental dimension of the discussions regarding the dynamics of the European Union's enlargement process.

The first section of the volume, titled "Challenges and Milestones in the European Integration Process", focuses on the stages and challenges encountered in the European integration process. The authors' contributions focus on important aspects such as identity formation, social cohesion, and policy alignment in candidate countries.

The analysis by researchers Mircea Brie and Angela Solcan on North Macedonia, which convincingly presents the path of Euro-Atlantic integration, strongly influenced by internal and external tensions, particularly those associated with Macedonian-Albanian relations, the conflict with Greece over the country's name, and the persistent conflict with Bulgaria regarding language, history, and the constitutional status of minorities (Brie & Solcan, 2025: 8–20). The authors' emphasis on public perceptions illustrates how EU accession is shaped by factors such as social fatigue, resentment, and divergent ethnic perspectives, including a more favorable attitude toward European integration among the Albanian

population compared to the Macedonian one. This interpretation aligns with that of Jelena Subotic, according to whom the process of Europeanization progresses where “Europe” is viewed as a shared societal value capable of offsetting immediate domestic costs; however, in the absence of such a convergent identity, Europeanization tends to stagnate (Subotić, 2011: 309–330).

The second section of the book “Cooperation and Public Policies Towards the EU” analyzes the role of cooperation and public policy frameworks in supporting enlargement. The included contributions highlight the importance of regional collaboration, arguing that the experiences of Central and Eastern European countries can serve as a useful model for the Western Balkans. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania underwent sweeping political, institutional, and socio-economic transformations during the accession process, characterized by institutional reforms, economic restructuring, and the consolidation of democracy. Such comparative analyses offer valuable lessons for countries currently engaged in accession negotiations (Vachudova, 2014: 122–138).

The final section of the book, “Security versus Openness of Borders: Socio-Economic Features and Differences,” addresses EU enlargement by highlighting the border both as a space of vulnerability and as a space of opportunity. In studies on borders, researchers have long argued that borders should not be understood as lines separating state jurisdictions but as a social framework in which security practices, economic imbalances, and identity narratives of local populations and European actors are shared (Milicevic, 2025: 87–105). A significant strength of this volume lies in the fact that it does not limit the process of expansion solely to the dimension of identity. By examining topics such as human trafficking, the use of European funds, and territorial cooperation, the volume expands the research perspective and demonstrates that concrete forms of cooperation can serve as engines of European integration.

This approach is also consistent with the view expressed by Milica Uvalic, according to whom, beyond the pace of formal accession between the European Union and the Western Balkans, there is already a considerable degree of economic interconnection, evidenced by trade, investment, financial flows, and legislative alignment, while acknowledging the existence of structural vulnerabilities that hinder the convergence process (Uvalic, 2019: 207–235). Thus, this section situates the Western Balkans within a broader debate centered on the transformation of borders in the context of integration, security, and regional fragmentation.

Overall, the book successfully demonstrates that the enlargement process should not be understood solely in terms of institutional and legal

frameworks, but also involves political reforms and changes in administrative capacity. The success of the European project in the Western Balkans depends on stability, democratic governance, and the development of efficient state structures, which the EU seeks to foster through Europeanization (Keil, 2013: 1–18). At the same time, regional cooperation initiatives can serve as a catalyst for the political, social, and economic progress essential to European integration.

In conclusion, this publication stands out for its rigorous approach, presenting the challenges and opportunities that define the next phase of the European Union's enlargement. By bringing together diverse academic perspectives, it captures the complex dynamics between domestic reforms, regional cooperation mechanisms, and European institutional constraints.

As Karl Aiginger points out in a comprehensive analysis of populism in Europe, contexts characterized by insecurity, inequality, rapid change, and the shortcomings of public policy foster the emergence of radicalization and liberal tendencies (Aiginger, 2020: 38–42). This observation is central to the volume presented, whose case studies find that when European integration loses credibility, populist dynamics begin to fill this void.

At the same time, the book demonstrates a coherent approach capable of connecting theoretical reflection on European integration with concrete analysis of policies and regional realities. An important analytical contribution of the work lies in its exploration of the relationship between institutional reforms and societal transformation. Several chapters argue that successful European integration depends not only on the adoption of EU legislation but also on the strengthening of administrative capacity and democratic institutions. Weak governance structures, corruption, and political polarization continue to pose significant obstacles to the integration process. As such, the volume represents a valuable contribution to the literature on European integration and serves as an important reference for researchers interested in the future of the Western Balkans within the European project.

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