RESILIENCE THROUGH EU ACCESSION:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LOCAL PERCEPTIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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REUNIR – D6.4 – POLICY BRIEF ON LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN INTER-REGIONAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND OFFERING RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN EU POLICIES TO BUILD RESILIENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine has dramatically changed the security landscape in Europe. It not only unexpectedly resulted in three new Candidate Countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood but also shifted EU enlargement policies from a technical process to a geopolitical project. While EU enlargement policy has already been 'geopoliticised' in Brussels, it still lacks implications on the ground that would reflect a new paradigm where Candidate Countries are no longer wait-listed recipients of EU assistance but fellow architects of a common resilience infrastructure. In order to effectively tackle external threats, local vulnerabilities in Candidate Countries, as well as administrative shortcomings, need to be addressed from the EU side. Thus, the EU should:

- adjust its programmes in the Candidate Countries to the new reality by making their development, implementation, and assessment more inclusive (CSOs, SMEs, local public authorities), tailor-made, and aimed at long-term impact;

- involve Candidate Countries that align with the EU CFSP in EU military initiatives and cooperation, particularly in the new technologies and defence industry, civil-military cooperation, and cybersecurity;

- establish socio-economic programmes addressing the structural vulnerabilities of local economies through supporting high–value-added production, fostering EU-originated investments, regional development, and creating educational and job opportunities for youth;

- ensure equitable distribution of resources throughout the diverse regions of the Candidate Countries, by making sure to support projects outside urban centres and in the peripheries;

- through strict conditionality, facilitate tangible changes in the judiciary systems while simultaneously developing the capacity of state institutions and political parties;

- co-design communication strategies with local actors in order to create better awareness of EU investments and aid in a way that makes sense to the local population.

1. CONTEXT

Do It or Lose It: Addressing local contexts and critical challenges

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine fundamentally altered the context of the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and the Western Balkans (WB). This has resulted in the 'geopolitisation' of the Union's enlargement policy, including an acceleration of the process and reframing it in geopolitical terms. The first major step was granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and, later, Georgia. At the same time, the long-stalled path for the WB gathered new momentum, where traditional technocratic processes and acquis communautaire compliance had, for many years, failed to create the necessary political dynamics. Given geopolitical considerations and the destructive activity of other external actors, including Russia and China, the resilience of Candidate Countries (CCs) has acquired critical importance not only for the EU's future but also for its present. Thus, an urgent need arose for a fundamental review of the EU's policies towards CCs.

The war has turned security into the central priority. However, should the resilience of EN countries prove insufficient to counter existential threats, the countries in the region may be occupied by Russia or drawn into Russia's sphere of influence. The war has also exposed a critical problem: the EU's existing instruments, designed for peacetime, have proven too slow and constrained by bureaucratic inertia to respond effectively to rapidly evolving wartime threats.

In the WB, years of stagnation in the integration process have created space for destabilising Russian influence, as well as for the economic and cultural expansion of China and Turkey. While their cooperation models often undermine transparency and the rule of law, they can appear more attractive to local elites due to lower bureaucratic hurdles and faster decision-making than EU instruments, and in some cases because they create more opportunities for graft.

EU policies are frequently ineffective due to structural weaknesses in the CCs, such as weak institutions and fragile democracies. These weaknesses are exploited by external actors through state capture, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies—most visibly in Georgia and Serbia. These phenomena have not disappeared as a result of the EU integration process. On the contrary, the nature of EU reforms themselves sometimes calls for centralised decision-making, which also weakens internal accountability mechanisms, whether they be state institutions or the civil society sector. Furthermore, the EU has been reluctant to clearly identify autocratic processes, especially in the WB. There is a need to redesign EU cooperation with civil society in order to strengthen internal cohesion in the CCs, particularly where civil activists are at risk.

Another factor weakening regional resilience is the severe level of brain drain, which erodes the human capital needed to implement reforms. Without rapid adaptation to the new security realities, there is a real risk that the very targets of these policies become so destabilised that European integration becomes hardly possible—significantly deepening security threats to the EU itself.

The urgency of the moment lies in a growing crisis of trust in EU instruments. While European integration remains the preferred direction for the majority of citizens in nearly all of the CCs, the enlargement policy is increasingly perceived as bureaucratic, inconsistent, unpredictable, and slow, creating a strategic vacuum.

Building resilience requires an immediate transformation of the EU's approach: from technical assistance to a strategic, proactive, multidimensional partnership.

2. CURRENT EU POLICIES
'EU integration can't be a checkbox exercise'

The current EU enlargement policy, albeit addressing resilience-related issues, has limited impact due to both administrative and substantive shortcomings.

2.1. Administrative Factors

First, during programme design and planning for a particular country, local voices are not given sufficient consideration. Experts and decision-makers in the CCs criticise top-down frameworks that are insufficiently connected to the needs and processes on the ground. While fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria may require similar actions across countries, the diversity within and between the WB and Eastern trio is so salient that more tailored programmes grounded in the local context and designed with local expertise are needed.

Second, EU programmes and initiatives are overconcentrated on national-level changes (mainly legislative), while people outside the capitals do not feel that the EU is becoming closer to them. From infrastructure projects to reforms, changes implemented within the accession process usually do not reach citizens in regions (particularly rural or marginalised areas) due to a lack of state capacity, political will, and/or oversight from the EU. Additionally, since all expert discussions, roundtables, and other communication activities are held primarily in the capital cities, people do not associate change with EU accession.

The third challenge is a derivative of the previous one. Being overly focused on national-level changes, EU programmes also rely heavily on state institutions (often weak or captured) and lack direct cooperation with non-state actors, such as local public authorities, SMEs, and civil society. Such limited cooperation leads to inadequate results. The EU not only underestimates non-state actors' role as co-implementers alongside state institutions but also as a source of alternative expertise and communication ambassadors at the local level.

Additionally, there are some challenges in the monitoring and assessment phase. Since legislative changes are essential to the accession process and can be easily monitored and quantified, the EU focuses on acquis communautaire compliance rather than on real long-term results. As a result, well-designed laws, particularly those related to the rule of law and anti-corruption, can be poorly implemented and have little impact. This creates negative attitudes towards the EU and the local national government, who are viewed as mere slogan-makers.

Building on this point about attitudes, in almost all CCs, experts and citizens emphasise poor local EU delegation communication about EU-funded programmes and their impact. As mentioned above, people do not recognise the EU's contribution to their country's development due to a lack of communication explaining the changes, how they relate to EU accession, and how the EU supports them.

Finally, different combinations of these factors can cause frustration among the most active parts of the population. External disinformation campaigns, propaganda and misinformation by local authorities and the media have undermined trust in the EU across the WB. This has resulted in enlargement fatigue among

citizens in some countries, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, with an increasing number no longer expecting EU accession. This has raised susceptibility to malign influence from external actors, particularly disinformation.

2.2. Security Factors

In terms of security, EU policy towards CCs is based on the understanding that NATO is expected to play a key role, while the EU's role is supplementary. Similarly to internal discussions within the EU, the geopolitical turbulence and America's new foreign policy under the second Trump administration have heightened CC demands for closer, more intensive military cooperation, including participation in EU security initiatives launched after 2022.

2.3. Socio-economic Factors

As most acquis chapters concern socio-economic issues, the volume of necessary change in this sphere is huge. Local experts from the CCs acknowledge that implemented reforms do not address the underlying structural vulnerabilities of their economies: a weak production base, particularly in high-value-added sectors, and the outflow of the working-age population. Limited regional outreach of reforms, driven by administrative and political factors, also contributes to the problem.

2.4. Political Factors

Though the EU's engagement in local political affairs through conditionality is noticeable, its transformative power remains limited due to monitoring and assessment mechanisms that focus on short-term results rather than impact. Furthermore, some democratic standards, particularly the rule of law and anti-corruption measures, are sometimes ignored for the sake of stability or due to geopolitical considerations, particularly in Serbia and Georgia. On the one hand, the EU declares adherence to democratic values, while on the other, driven by geopolitical considerations, it either continues to cooperate with governments (Serbia) or remains cautious about imposing sanctions (Georgia). Pro-European citizens consider such a situation an example of double standards. As an expert from the focus group in Serbia put it: *"It hurts us more when the EU says Serbia is going in the right direction".*

Another challenge in the political sphere is reliance on local state institutions with weak implementation capacity. Such institutions are unable to perform comprehensive reforms or monitor their impact. That is why, in almost all CCs, experts emphasise the need for public administration reform.

Additionally, EU policy lacks support for political party capacity building. Since the consolidation of democracy in most CCs is underway, party institutional development is essential to the political process accompanying EU accession.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To tackle vulnerabilities and challenges exploited by non-EU external actors, the following measures should be implemented.

- CC security should be seen as part of the EU's security architecture. Security and defence sectors of CCs that align with the EU CFSP should be involved in EU military initiatives and cooperation, including in new technologies and the defence industry. The mechanism of the EU-Moldova Security and Defence Partnership should be replicated.

- Non-state actors, such as civil society, business representatives, and local public authorities, should be considered crucial co-implementers of EU-supported initiatives and a source of local expertise to consult on the different stages of these initiatives, including their design and assessment.

- Greater attention and funding should be directed to communication, both at the level of specific programmes and local EU Delegations. Communication campaigns should target not only knowledgeable audiences but also citizens from rural areas and youth. These should include joint efforts by the EU and CCs to fight disinformation and targeted campaigns by malign external actors.

- To address the challenge of brain-drain, education reform, vocational training, and youth entrepreneurship projects, as well as brain circulation projects for EU-based diasporas, should be designed and funded by the EU.

- Issues related to corruption and rule of law, particularly judicial reform, should be addressed through strict conditionality, with the involvement of civil society and monitoring of on-the-ground changes. These issues should be understood as systemic challenges that cannot be treated in isolation from the larger state of democracy in the country.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research findings indicate that the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy requires a fundamental reset. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has definitively proven that instruments designed for peacetime are incapable of adequately responding to today's existential challenges. Bureaucratic inertia and the toleration of autocracy for the sake of perceived stability ('stabilitocracy') have not only failed to guarantee security but have critically deepened the regions' vulnerability.
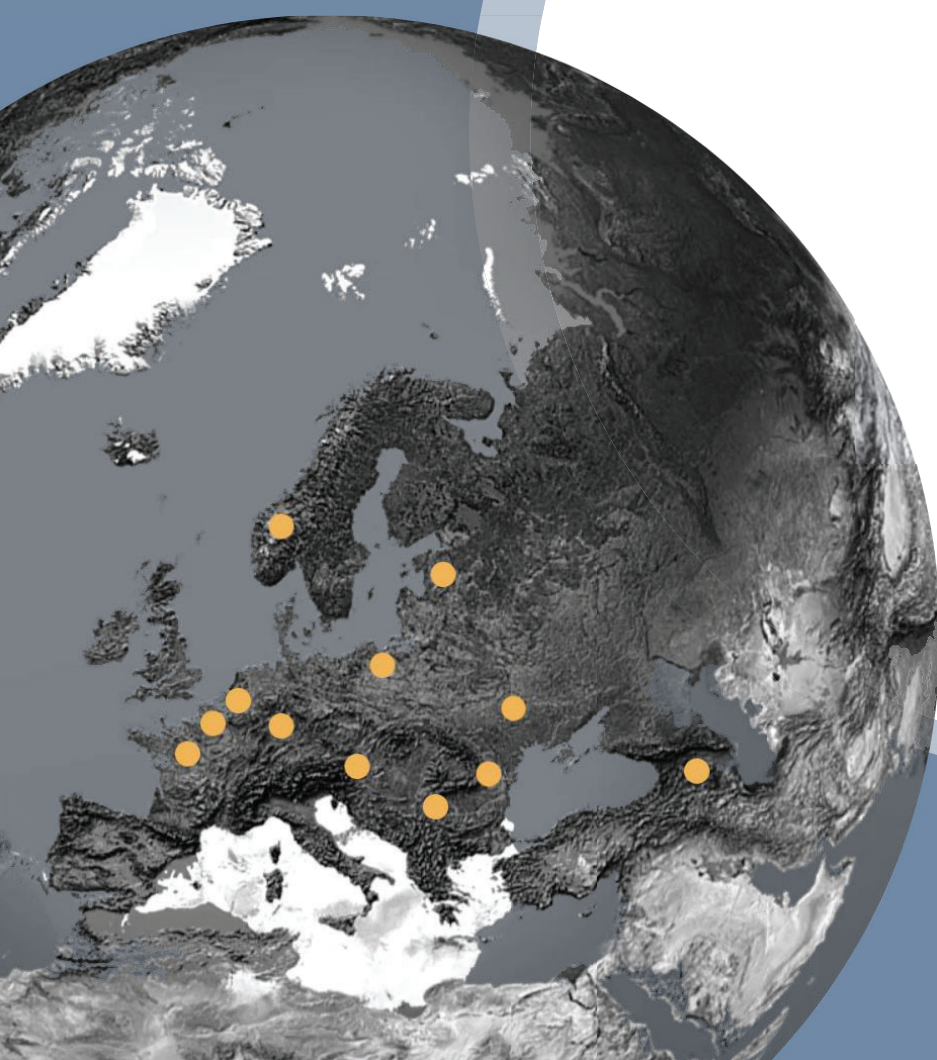
The comparative analysis reveals a dangerous divergence: while EN countries view rapid integration as a vital contribution to their survival (most notably Ukraine), WB countries are suffering from 'integration fatigue', creating fertile ground for malign influence. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach is no longer viable. Moreover, strategies must differ significantly even within the EN and WB regions themselves, as the security needs and political trajectories of individual states are too distinct to apply universal instruments (Serbia and Georgia stand out in particular).

A common challenge is that a significant portion of obstacles stems from within the CCs (state capture, corruption, institutional weakness), while external malign actors (Russia, China, Turkey) instrumentalise these weaknesses to undermine the European future.

In response, the EU must change the very philosophy of its engagement. Building genuine resilience is impossible without inclusivity: the EU should move away from a formal 'top-down' approach and get local voices meaningfully involved. Ignoring the expertise and needs of local stakeholders leads to the alienation of citizens and turns European integration into a 'paper process'.

The stakes in this game are critically high for Europe itself. If the EU does not offer the region an effective strategic partnership, it risks ending up not with a zone of stability on its borders, but a bridgehead for hostile forces. The destabilisation of CCs due to internal degradation or external aggression would become a direct and immediate threat to the EU's security and political integrity. Thus, delaying decisive action could result in projecting regional insecurity into the Union.