

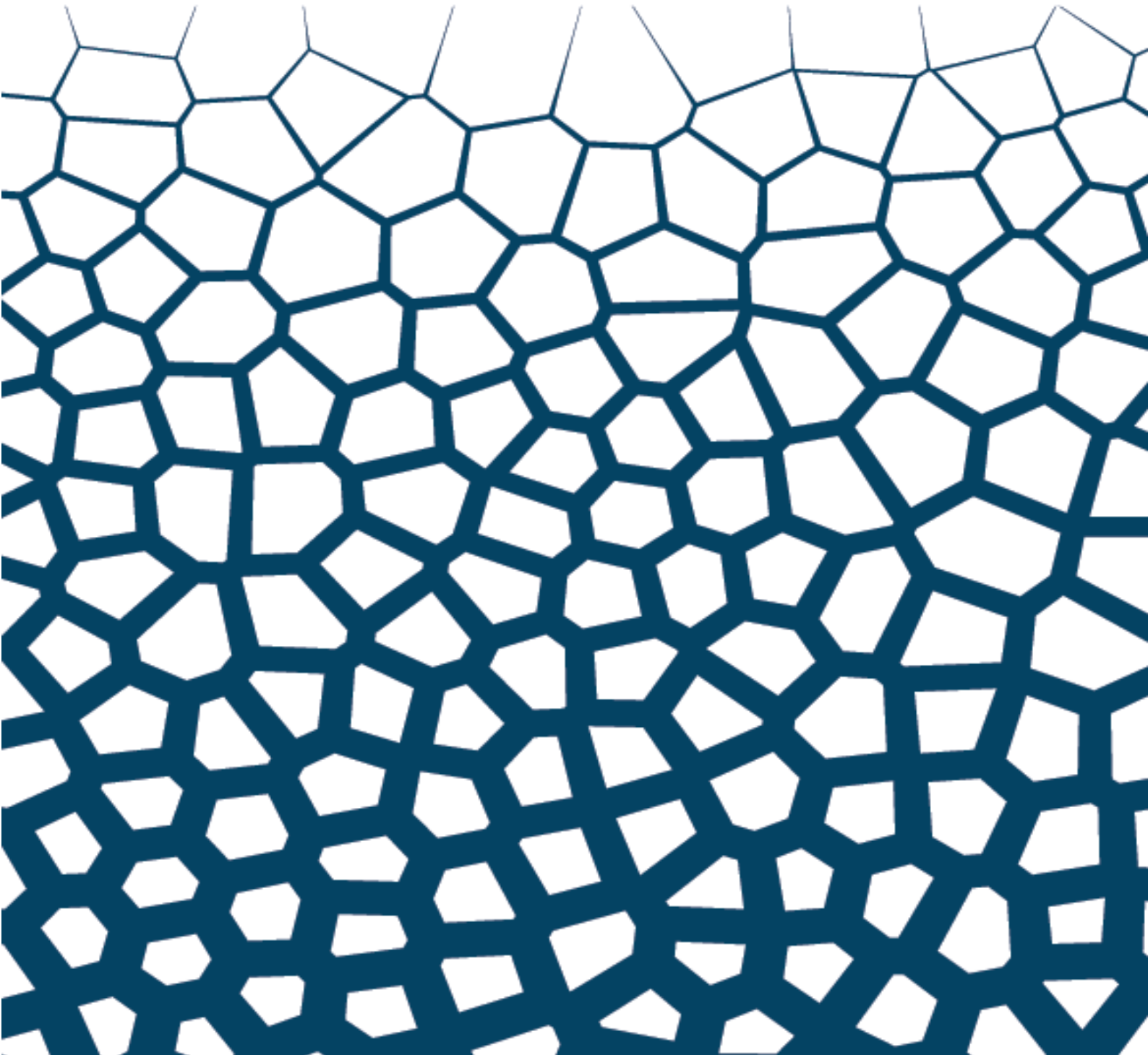


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The revised methodology and the phasing-in approach with the countries of the Western Balkans

by Dusko Lopandic, Andi Balla and Zoran Nechev



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Introduction

In February 2020, the European Commission launched and the Council endorsed the Communication for “Enhancing the accession process – a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans”. The aim of the document was to push forward the EU accession process with the countries of the Western Balkans thereby making the process more credible, realistic, dynamic and predictable. Besides the more technical approach towards advancing the Western Balkans, the enlargement process, according to the methodology, is seen as more political process steered into the direction of an “geopolitical investment into stable, strong and united Europe”.

One of the main elements which will contribute to reinvigorating of EU accession process is its predictability by providing “clear and tangible incentives of direct interest to citizens” which are directly related to the implementation of structural reforms in the accession countries. The methodology envisages two

modalities to achieve this: 1) accelerated integration and “phasing-in” to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes; and 2) increased funding and investments. This is the fundament on which the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen presented the new Growth plan for the Western Balkans on the recently finished GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum.¹

In the Council conclusions of December 2023², the Council looks “forward to exploring its full potential, in particular “phasing-in” to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes, while ensuring a level playing field and being subject to progress on reform priorities”. In addition, it recalls the European Council conclusions of June 2022, in which it “encourages the further advancement of gradual integration” and takes note “of the mapping of the existing and potential integration measures and looks forward to examining proposals for further implementation of such measures”.

¹ Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_23_2993

² Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – Council conclusions
<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15935-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

Phasing-in approach in national negotiation frameworks

The New Methodology provides the general framework for the Negotiation frameworks for North Macedonia³ and Albania. If we took the Macedonian one as an example, the sufficient progress on reform priorities agreed in the negotiations should lead towards: 1) **closer integration** with the EU, through accelerated integration and “phasing in” to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes [...] in particular by removing technical barriers to trade, while ensuring a level playing field. Two areas are prioritized. Those in which 1) candidates have the capacities and expertise for exports to the EU and on areas of mutual strategic interest where the candidates have significant production but needs to meet EU norms and standards (e.g., production of critical raw materials), 2) there is a vast untapped potential (e.g. digital/ green economy). 2) **increased investments and funding**, including IPA

Accelerated integration

The pretext of the policy of accelerated integration is to obtain certain rewards from the process of EU accession that until now, came at the end of the process once the country becomes an EU member. As the negotiation process was not imagined to last for more than a decade, certain

funds and a closer cooperation with relevant IFI to leverage investments and support with the aim to establish a strong European preference and a strong local economy in full compliance with the EU *acquis*.

The EU adopted the negotiation framework for Serbia's accession on January 9, 2014. while the position regarding the application of the revised methodology to the negotiations with Serbia was adopted on May 6, 2021. In the document, the European Commission pointed out, among other things, that the accession process can be accelerated through key sectors by working on the “possibility of engaging in an exercise to identify areas of interest for accelerated sectoral alignment and integration will be offered, with common roadmaps to be agreed and followed-up in the SAA sectoral sub-committees”.⁴

policy changes need to be done in order to provide some intermediate incentives for the accession countries to maintain the necessary pace of reforms to progress in the EU accession process.

Therefore, in principle, the accelerated integration should include areas whose

³ Conference on accession to the EU of North Macedonia: Ministerial meeting opening the IGC on the accession of North Macedonia to the European Union, General EU position https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_general_eu_position.pdf

⁴ Application of the revised enlargement methodology to the accession negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/S-T-8536-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

implementation would imply: 1) increasing economic convergence; 2) addressing acute socio-economic problems and 3) supporting developments of key EU policy areas related to the development of new technologies, economic security and the green transition.

In this sense, the EU should exercise this approach in policies and policy areas that will achieve full horizontal integration of the Western Balkan countries in the EU such as: Single Market, including the specific solutions for free movement of people, goods and services, Energy Union, transport and infrastructure, rural development, social policies and the Digital Agenda. Apart from the above areas, where the accelerated integration approach may be applied identically and horizontally to all WB countries, measures of accelerated integration and phasing-in could also be implemented to individual

Conclusion

The application of the accelerated integration by phasing-in of the Western Balkan countries in EU policies, programs, market and agencies requires both sides, the EU and candidate countries to initiate a frank and open discussion about the points of mutual interest. Furthermore, based on the level of capacities in candidate countries and absorption capacities on the side of the EU, both sides need to agree on a shopping list with

countries, in accordance with the needs, interests and degree of progress in the accession process.

This phasing-in should be accompanied by appropriate institutional agreements including financial aspects that would allow the countries in the negotiation process, among other things, to attend as observers (i.e., possible participation in the debate without the right to vote): 1) at meetings of working and expert groups of the European Commission that deal with the above-mentioned policies; 2) at the points of agenda of the meetings of the Council of Ministers related to the above-mentioned policies; 3) at the appropriate meetings of the working and expert groups of the Council of Ministers, which include the aforementioned policies; 4) at other formal and informal EU gatherings that would discuss and/or deal with the above-mentioned policies.

determined timeframe in which these countries will be integrated in the specific EU policy areas and institutions from the shopping list, and the modalities of their inclusion. To push this agenda forward, the Western Balkan governments should create a demand for inclusion in specific policy areas, programs and agencies individually, based on their national interest and jointly, based on the interest of the entire region.

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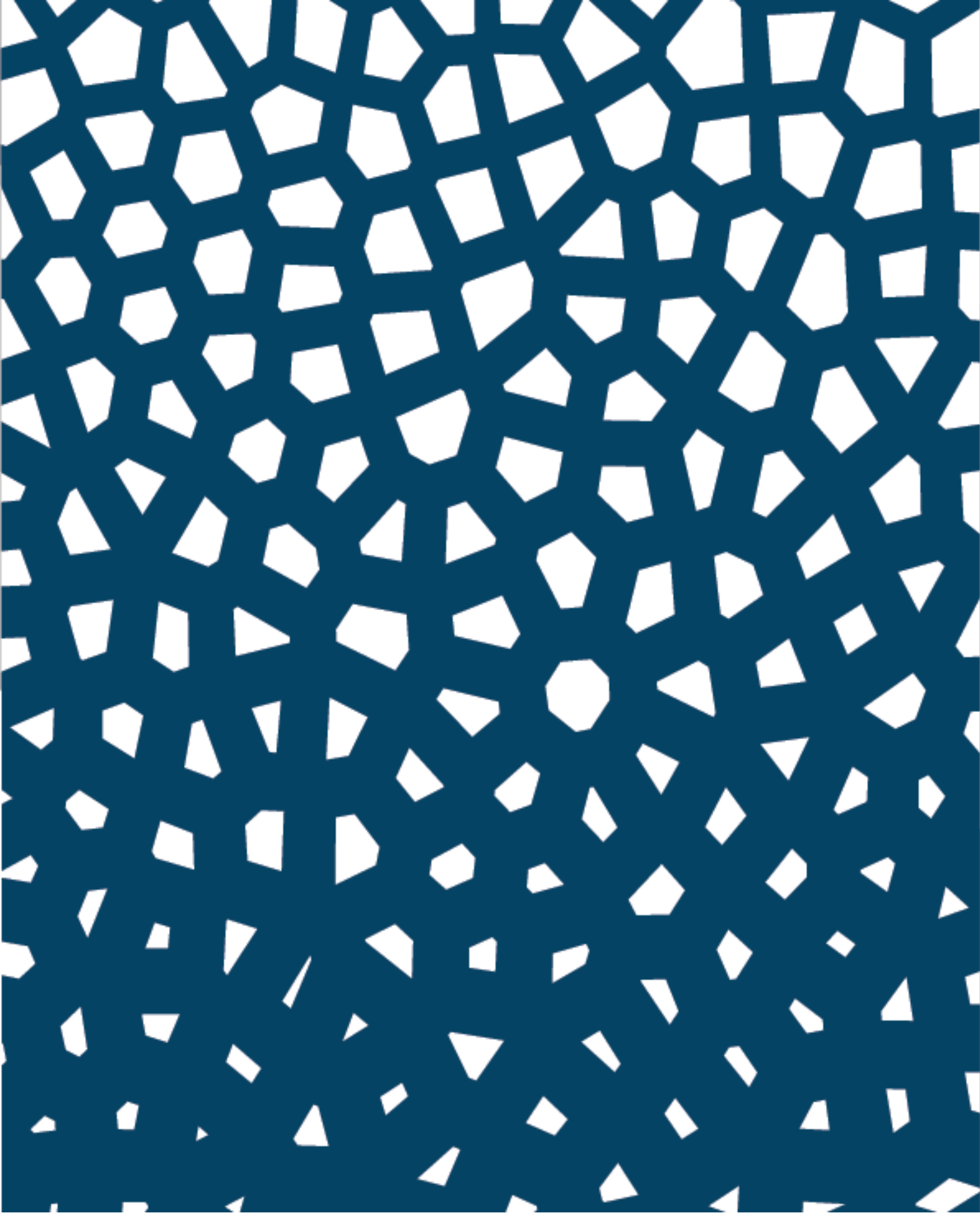
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