



POLICY PAPER

Towards a new approach in the Western Balkans: a potential reform of EU's enlargement policy?

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TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A POTENTIAL REFORM OF EU'S ENLARGEMENT POLICY?

A few weeks ago, France's, Denmark's and Netherland's decision to block the negotiation process for North Macedonia's and Albania's candidacy to the EU, provoked an outcry among Western Balkans countries but also among other EU Heads of State. This event was followed by French President Macron's virulent comment about Bosnia and Herzegovina, which still has the status of a potential candidate, calling the latter a "ticking time bomb".

This was undoubtedly a way to introduce his proposal on reforming the current EU enlargement policy, an informal paper of a few pages, submitted to EU governments, where he suggests a more "gradual" and "reversible" process. Even if not welcomed by most of the EU member states, arguing that some steps towards European values will be completed by the (potential) candidates only after joining the union, 6 EU member states declared their support for this potential reform.

An unanimity about the reform would lead the European Commission to submit a legal document by January 2020. Although nothing has been decided yet, this paper aims at analysing the reasons which led the French President to make such a suggestion, as well as the impact on the Western Balkans regions as a whole, if such a huge change occurs, almost 20 years after the first conditions of a potential EU accession have been set up.

Background

Western Balkan's long journey towards EU accession started in 1999, when the Stabilisation and Association Process was launched, creating a framework for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans Region. In 2003, at the Thessaloniki Summit, the prospect for EU membership for those countries was announced. In order to join the Union, candidate countries must fulfil two conditions: Copenhagen criteria, and apply the *acquis Communautaire*, in other words comply with the EU legislation.¹

Although two former Yugoslav Republics joined the Union, namely Slovenia in 2008 and Croatia in 2013, others are still far from accession. In 2014, the Berlin process², a German diplomatic initiative, aiming at revitalizing EU accession process for the so-called Western Balkans 6 (the 6 countries that were and are not members yet), was launched. This process involves the governments of the WB6, EU member States involved in the enlargement process, European Commission (mainly DG NEAR, formally called DG enlargement) and the EU Member State holding the presidency of the EU Council.

It was created to help EU's slow and bureaucratic enlargement policies, on three matters: economic growth and connectivity, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, and civil society development and people-to-people connectivity. Since 2014, yearly EU-WB6 Summits have been organised, where specific topics set on the agenda are discussed. This process was initially supposed to end in 2018, but until now, it still exists, and the closing date is not scheduled yet.³

¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>

² [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586602/EPRS_BRI\(2016\)586602_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586602/EPRS_BRI(2016)586602_EN.pdf)

³ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>

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Last year, the EU Commission run by former President Jean Claude Juncker released a report on a new enlargement strategy, announcing an enhanced engagement in the Western Balkans. In this document, the European Commission reminded that

*“the Western Balkans are part of Europe, geographically surrounded by EU Member States. The peoples of the EU and the region have a common heritage and history and a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges. The EU has long been strongly engaged in the region. From the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, it has supported the future of the region as an integral part of the EU.”*⁴

State of play

EU enlargement approaches in the Western Balkans were quite controversial, which has led to a slow and sometimes incoherent process, with the EU changing its strategies in the region several times. Indeed, European Union's merit-based principle applied throughout the whole accession process has not always been as efficient as expected. This lied in the fact that EU's involvement in the Western Balkans was often perceived as too interventionist and asymmetrical by local political elites, resulting in rejections of EU standards in the region.⁵

Furthermore, EU as an institution, was weakened as it had to cope with several sensitive issues such as the Greek financial crisis, the migrant crisis and more recently Brexit. As a result, EU enlargement process was pushed back from the agenda.⁶ In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker announced a freezing of the enlargement process for the upcoming five years.⁷ In fact, this was a symbolic announcement, more than a real will of halting such a process, as no country from the WB6 group was ready to join the Union by 2019. However, it for sure denoted European Union's discontent regarding the lack of achievements in the region, and its faded interest, following a decade of optimism and commitment to the process.

After the 2004 and 2007 enlargement processes, a democratic backsliding has been observed in some of the countries which had joined the Union at that time, becoming later a sort of “burden” for the EU. This has caused to rethink conditionality for further EU enlargement.⁸ As a result, two opinions developed, on the one hand, the leading German position in favour of a “the faster the better” EU membership for the Western Balkans necessary for European Union's stability⁹, and on the other hand, the advocates of a firmly established social, economic and political stability in the candidate states, before joining, an idea particularly backed by France.¹⁰ These positions were also reflected

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁵ Soeren Keil and Zeynep Arkan, *The EU and Member State Building: European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans*, Oxon: Routledge, 2015 p 23- 24

⁶ Europeanisation of the Western Balkans p 62-63

⁷ <https://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29>

For the official document : https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567

⁸ <https://ecpr.eu/Events/PanelDetails.aspx?PanelID=7695&EventID=121>

⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-chancellor-angela-merkel-truly-united-europe-includes-western-balkans/>

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recently, at a Summit of the European Council last October, where EU Member States failed to reach an agreement on North Macedonia and Albania.¹¹

After a 27-years long dispute, Greece, and at that time recognized by the European Union and the United Nations as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, finally reached a common position on Prespa agreement¹², by successfully negotiating a new denomination for FYROM. This occurred at the beginning of this year when Greek Parliament validated the deal on the newly called “Republic of North Macedonia”, after being voted by North Macedonia’s citizens through a referendum process. This historic event broke an almost never-ending cycle, which was preventing North Macedonia to join both the EU and NATO, with negotiations constantly being blocked by Greek veto, precisely because of this name issue.¹³

The agreement was highly encouraged and saluted by the European Union and serves as an example for the rest of the region, strongly divided by historic and political arguments. The North Macedonian and Greek reconciliation is, according to the EU, the proof that the wounds from the past can be healed in the Western Balkans, and that EU membership is not a mirage for the countries from the region.¹⁴

Besides the North Macedonia case, another neighbouring country followed a similar scheme. Indeed, three years from now, Albania engaged in a series of reforms regarding rule of law, fight against organised crime and anti-corruption systems. The reforms achieved in the judicial sector were particularly successful, with the establishment of a High Judicial and a High Prosecutorial Council, and a Justice Appointment Council, allowing an “independent self-governing” justice system. Moreover, an evaluation of Prosecutors and Judges related to professionalism and impartiality of the latter has been initiated, resulting in many dismissals in this sector.¹⁵

As they did for North Macedonia, the European Union and its member states congratulated Albania’s progress on such matters, essential for the country’s path to European integration.¹⁶ At a round table organised by the Centre for International Legal Cooperation in May 2018, Robert Bosch, former head of the OSCE mission in Albania, stated that “The Albanian reforms are by no means cosmetic and can be considered a courageous effort, unique in its field”.¹⁷

It is in this respect that the European Commission released a positive opinion on North Macedonia’s and Albania’s EU perspective, first in April 2018, when it recommended that the Council should open accession negotiations with both countries, respectively holding the candidate status since 2009 and

¹¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191021IPR64717/failure-to-open-accession-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-is-a-mistake>

¹² <https://secureservercdn.net/166.62.109.86/e9f.165.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Athens-Skopje-English.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/historic-name-deal-between-greece-and-north-macedonia-a-victory-for-peace/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/north-macedonia-and-greece-whats-in-a-compromise/a-48805542>

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_19_2775

¹⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/47654/albania-irreversible-path-towards-european-union_en

¹⁷ <https://www.cilc.nl/the-hague-albania-justice-reform-of-historic-and-unprecedented-magnitude/>

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2014. In May 2019, in its annual progress report on enlargement, the Commission reiterated its statement from 2018 and advised the Council to open talks, calling for “the Unions’ concrete and fast action”¹⁸, in consideration of the successful achievements of those two States.

Despite these facts officially set and supported by both European Commission and Parliament, the Council of the European Union could not reach any agreement. On the contrary, the issue faced strong opposition, from France, Denmark and the Netherlands. While Denmark and Netherlands were reluctant to start dialogue with Albania, France was opposed to negotiations with North Macedonia as well.¹⁹

This deadlock was perceived as a betrayal, and as a frustration, mostly by North Macedonia’s Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev²⁰, who had to cope with concerns inherited by former heads of government, and who, however, successfully conducted the major issue the country was facing, despite many of North Macedonia’s citizens were not completely convinced with the name deal. For them, it was a “price to pay” for EU integration, which was the only acceptable solution after such a reform.²¹

After this failure, Zaev’s government lost credibility and, therefore, citizens will be invited to poll on April 2020, as Mr Zaev called for anticipated elections.²² Reactions in the rest of the region were quite similar, filled with hopelessness, feeling that the European Union gave them faded promises, and, given the internal troubles occurring in the EU itself, there is a feeling that the organisation cannot cope anymore with the Western Balkans.²³

Shortly after the end of the EU Council’s discussion on the matter, former president Jean-Claude Juncker disputed the final decision; calling it a “historic mistake”, emphasizing his opposition by using French language on purpose, as the main initiator was President Macron.²⁴ Most EU leaders followed the Commission’s point of view, namely arguing that the two countries were asked to undertake reforms, and they did their part of the job. On the opposite, the promise of the EU did not follow.

Moreover, after the Union presented itself as the guarantor of peace in the region, which had to be ensured by EU membership, blocking the negotiations for enlargement discredits such a role. As a matter of fact, it might shake stability in South Eastern Europe.²⁵ One of the leading supporters for such a theory was German Chancellor Angela Merkel who did not hesitate to confirm backing for

¹⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy.pdf> p2

¹⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-deadlock-over-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia-albania/>

²⁰ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/zaev-warns-eu-accession-halt-could-cause-a-rise-of-nationalism-in-the-balkans>

²¹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/macron-blocks-north-macedonia-albania-eu-membership-by-christopher-r-hill-2019-11>

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-macedonia-eu/north-macedonian-pm-urges-snap-election-after-eu-declines-to-launch-accession-talks-idUSKBN1WYOB6>

²³ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/macron-blocks-north-macedonia-albania-eu-membership-by-christopher-r-hill-2019-11>

²⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-claude-juncker-eu-north-macedonia-albania-rebuff-historic-mistake/>

²⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eus-balkan-breakdown-reveals-split-among-leaders/>

accession talks for the Western Balkan countries several times, even earlier this year at the Poznan summit in July.²⁶ On the other hand, while not marking any opposition regarding North Macedonia, Netherlands was more sceptical about Albania, which was asked to first improve fight against corruption and organised crime, before aspiring to join the “group”. Nevertheless, Netherlands’ Foreign Minister Stefan Blok announced before the Council meeting in October, that his country would align with the majority, if the question did not face any other opposition.²⁷

President Macron strongly refused to undertake any further steps, justifying his decision by outlining the incoherence of today’s enlargement procedure, and arguing that thorough revision was needed, to ensure real progress. However, he claimed that he is still in favour of enlargement, but things need to be done following a “right order”. He took the visa liberalisation in the Western Balkans as an example, considering it a nonsense to open the European borders to countries which are not even about to become a part of the Union.²⁸

1. Early stages of a potential reform: Macron’s suggestions

With his stance, President Macron probably intended to introduce what followed. Indeed, a couple of days after his “veto”, the French President submitted a two-pages “non-paper” on suggestions about a potential reform of European Union accession process. The idea was not new but was drafted in a written document for the first time. Though, he affirmed that this is not a measure intending to stop Western Balkans from joining the EU, declaring that these countries “belong to Europe, by virtue of their history, culture and geography”.

Furthermore, he argued that such a change is a necessity to boost the process, given the scarce overall progress that has been done throughout the Western Balkans regarding matters such as rule of law and democracy, essential for stability in the region. President Macron added that “closer ties” need to be developed between both sides, and thus, a gradual accession process should be established, with a strong commitment of the European Union itself, to help the candidate countries comply to the so-called European acquis.

Therefore, President Macron suggests an enlargement process based on four principles: gradual association, stringent conditions, tangible benefits and reversibility. In practice, it means that the accession process should not be composed of two stages as it is the case now: the first representing the opening of the negotiations and resulting in simultaneously opening 35 chapters and the second matching with accession itself²⁹

Instead, Emmanuel Macron proposes a 7-stage accession process, after the opening of negotiations, each representing “policy blocks”. After fulfilling requirements for a stage, candidate countries would be rewarded by being able to take part to the EU policies they succeeded to implement. After completing all the 7 stages one by one, the candidate would be able to become a full-fledged member of the EU. Criteria for completing a stage would be precisely defined and their application would be

²⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/07/05/reforming-eu-wont-block-balkan-enlargement-merkel>

²⁷ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/09/netherlands-welcomes-eu-talks-with-north-macedonia-not-albania/>

²⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-urges-reform-of-bizarre-system-for-eu-hopefuls/>

²⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf> p1

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verified on a basis of several criteria set by EU institutions, evaluated by European Commission and reviewed by the Council. As already mentioned, candidate countries would be rewarded by participating to successfully implemented EU policies and programmes but also by being provided with financial support.

This could result not only in an increase of pre-accession funds countries already benefit but besides, access to structural funds, increasing with the stages they pass, but only available after joining. However, one of the major innovations in French approach is the principle of reversibility, which could be applied not only if European Union's fundamental values are challenged, but also simply when the country no longer applies the criteria defined by the stage it passed.

This would result in deleting the advantages (participation to EU policies) provided previously (or in the worst case, suspension of the process). President Macron also argued for a more important involvement of the Council in these matters, suggesting annual meeting with Heads of States of the Western Balkans region.³⁰

2. Reactions to the non-paper

France's recommendation is perceived by some European diplomats as a halt to further enlargement, believing that opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania would have given better results regarding continuing reforms implementation. Moreover, EU integration being always pushed back from the agenda and being a strong divisive issue for many years, coming with a national initiative will not help in reaching consensus and putting the matter on top priorities, which might harm the process.³¹

The first stage of the process concerns rule of law, fundamental rights, justice and security, which might be harder sectors to reform. In that perspective, some of the EU diplomats wonder how such a complicated process such as rule of law reform, being the first of this 7-stage process, could encourage further steps. They also share the opinion that President Macron's refraining on the matter of enlargement is linked to political matters, accepting economically undeveloped states could make populism and Euroscepticism arise.³²

In a letter addressed to Jean-Claude Juncker last November, 6 countries supported the idea of a review of the enlargement process. Italy's, Austria's, Slovenia's, Slovakia's, Czech Republic's and Poland's European and Foreign affairs ministers although stressing the flaws of the process, were not supportive of any lengthening or delay for opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. They call for a consensus in March 2020, this being the condition for them to take any change into consideration. Even though a need for reform is clear, these countries suggest engaging in changes that would improve the process in order to effectively achieve the main goal.

³⁰ <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf> p2-3

³¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process/>

³² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-18/macron-seeks-to-slow-eu-expansion-in-latest-sweeping-reform-push>

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Despite the 6 States reminded that this was not a declaration in line with President Macron's proposition, the French President considered this letter as a consent. Those countries repeated that the most important for the EU is to keep its promises in order to avoid losing its face in the Western Balkans, and that the terms of further enlargement politics can be discussed later.³³

Future prospects

Considering that democracy and freedom already declined in the Western Balkans, according to the Freedom House Report 2019,³⁴ many in Brussels are in opinion that further setback might be expected. As President Macron's position can easily be linked to what is happening in Eastern Europe now, especially in Hungary and Poland, many pundits in Brussels fear that by slowing European integration in South Eastern Europe, might induce counter-productivity, rather than advancements. As the potential 2025 deadline for integration is being debated, enthusiasm for overhaul has become moderate in the region.³⁵

This, in fact, is also a door open for populist and Eurosceptic politics to maintain. Undoubtedly, a longer integration process might be perceived by Western Balkans citizens as a lack of will from European Union's part to stay committed to the process³⁶. In turn, local politicians might take advantage of the situation, by claiming that the region cannot rely on the EU and that this announces the end of the integration perspective.³⁷

Consequently, a rise of Euroscepticism among the Western Balkans citizens would result in even stronger support for these ethnic politics, which the citizens might turn to, without any tangible results. According to RCC Balkan barometer 2019, it is now the first time that more than half of the respondents are in favour of EU integration.³⁸ Predictably, it is to expect that a longer process might undermine such a statement in the future. If nationalist politics rise again in the Balkans, this might be a threat to stability not only inside the region but for European Union too, as they share common borders, the worst scenario being the resurgence of tensions similar to what happened in the 90's³⁹.

Nevertheless, we should take into consideration the reasons which led to such a suggestion by the French President. Despite a few accomplishments, if we consider that the Thessaloniki summit was held in 2003, still too little has been done by Western Balkans countries on their path to the EU. Regardless of a major disagreement among EU States concerning the French President's suggestion, the EU members acknowledge that reforming the way conditionality is applied, is seriously needed.⁴⁰ As important as it is for the EU to gain trust from these states, it is equally relevant that these countries prove that the EU can trust them in further and deeper negotiations.

³³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/6-countries-write-to-juncker-to-support-eu-enlargement-reform/>

³⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>

³⁵ <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/macrons-equation-reforms-enlargement/>

³⁶ <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/macrons-equation-reforms-enlargement/>

³⁷ <https://balkaneu.com/serbia-should-give-up-from-eu-integration-radulovic-says/>

³⁸ RCC Balkan Barometer 2019

³⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/zaev-warns-eu-accession-halt-could-cause-a-rise-of-nationalism-in-the-balkans>

⁴⁰ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>

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According to Soren Keil and Zeynep Arkan, the reason why local political actors “resist the EU’s push for standardized models in contested policy areas”, is because they are norm driven and technical, not based on practical consideration.⁴¹

However, Macron’s non-paper is even more norm driven than the initial enlargement process and might be a threat to democracy and rule of law. This would result in a possible stagnation at economic, social and political level in the region. The question would then be whether the European Union would still be supportive of EU accession for those countries.⁴² In the worst scenario, this might freeze the relations with the European Union, as it is the case with Turkey nowadays.⁴³ Moreover, because of the enlargement fatigue, Eurosceptics have a great influence on enlargement debates. Such a reversal in Western Balkan’s perception as described, would probably foster debate among these Eurosceptics and harm this bilateral relation.⁴⁴

Since 2014, as a response to broad public dissatisfaction linked to inefficient policies and disastrous economic situation in the region, Western Balkan’s governments progressively turned to alternative support found in foreign authoritarian powers of mostly Turkey, Russia, China and United Arab Emirates, whose clientelist approach to the region is slowly alienating the European perspective.⁴⁵

Indeed, developing a further partnership with those countries certainly means damaging the application of democracy and rule of law, as stated by Mr Zoran Zaev Prime Minister of North Macedonia.⁴⁶ According to various experts, this shift towards other perspectives is to be assign to the lack of EU’s engagement on the question of integration, rather focusing on other priorities on the agenda, such as migrant crisis or Brexit.⁴⁷

It is important to note that despite their influence, those geopolitical contenders are not against EU membership of Western Balkans States, as it could advantage them too, for economic but also political reasons. However, it becomes a problem in the context that local political actors with nationalist politics are encouraged by economic support of such powers, seeing in them an alternative to EU funding for instance and consequently, a way to stay in power.

This means in practice that there is no need to continue the reforming process as financial support is provided by other actors than the EU.⁴⁸ Regarding political support of foreign actors, who often rely upon historic or religious ties, it has a clear impact on democracy in the region. Indeed, this fosters

⁴¹ Soeren Keil and Zeynep Arkan, *The EU and Member State Building: European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans*, Oxon: Routledge, 2015 p 7

⁴² Balkan Futures Three Scenarios For 2025

Marko Čeperković-Florence Gaub-Donika Emini-Zoran Nechev-Isidora Stakić - European Union Institute For Security Studies – 2018 p 21

⁴³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/18/council-conclusions-on-enlargement-and-stabilisation-and-association-process/>

⁴⁴ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf> p20

⁴⁵ https://www.global-focus.eu/2019/05/time-monsters-danger-losing-western-balkans/?fbclid=IwAR3kHGx16_I3R2OWIaTnl86UzzTKGy4GthFsSv3Z5lh9QXdvMa5kOqvrUB8

⁴⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/zaev-warns-eu-accession-halt-could-cause-a-rise-of-nationalism-in-the-balkans>

⁴⁷ http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The_Western_Balkans_as_a_Geopolitical_Chessboard.pdf p 8

⁴⁸ http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The_Western_Balkans_as_a_Geopolitical_Chessboard.pdf p 16

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nationalist rhetoric and encourages political parties sharing such ideas to stay in power, destructing democracy and rule of law. Not letting this region become a part of the EU for a longer time than expected by Western Balkans countries, might undoubtedly encourage “brotherhood” of the countries in the region with those powers.⁴⁹

Recommendations

In last May's progress report on enlargement, the Commission outlined that *“The Union must live up to its commitments and give credit where credit is due. Failure to reward objective progress by moving to the next stage of the European path would damage the EU's credibility throughout the region and beyond. A tepid response to historic achievements and substantial reforms would undermine stability, seriously discourage much needed further reforms and affect work on sensitive bilateral issues like the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Strategically, it would only help the EU's geopolitical competitors to root themselves on Europe's doorstep.”*⁵⁰

Earlier this year, the Council of the EU encouraged Western Balkan countries “to seize the historic window of opportunity to firmly and unequivocally bind their future to the EU”.⁵¹ With President Macron's proposal, the EU is once again sending mixed signals to the Balkans. Suggesting a reform which might make the accession process longer than it should have been, means closing the “window of opportunity” initially suggested by the Council and contradicting the Commission's statement, as well as the idea that Western Balkans are a part of Europe. The so-called “EU fatigue” might not be solutioned by a step-by-step process and might be even worsened. The EU should regain trust in the region and in this respect, should finally address the issue “in unison”.

Florent Marciacq, a senior fellow at the Centre international de formation européenne, suggests that instead of competition among the countries, which was until recent believed it would foster the process, the accent should be put on EU integration as a regional and common goal rather than a “national priority”. In order to achieve that, the EU should also envisage being more committed to the reconciliation process in the post-conflict context of the region.⁵²

According to RCC's 2019 Balkan Barometer, 45% of the respondents agree that the relations in the Western Balkans are better than the previous year. However, this number remains the same as last year's. Moreover, 74% agree upon the fact that regional cooperation could boost the economic, political and security situation of their own country.⁵³ When interpreting these statistics, we can easily link them to Marciacq's suggestions outlining that even public opinion is in favour of such a measure.

In an informal letter addressed to President Macron, Corina Stratulat and Milena Lazarevic argue that although a major review of the current enlargement process is necessary, President Macron's

⁴⁹ http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The_Western_Balkans_as_a_Geopolitical_Chessboard.pdf p 17-18

⁵⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy.pdf> p 2

⁵¹ <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/yes2019.pdf>

⁵² <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/05/24/failure-in-the-western-balkans-means-a-failure-of-the-european-project/>

⁵³ RCC Balkan Barometer 2019

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suggestion is neither clear enough, nor suitable for the objectives it is supposed to reach. As already stated, the failure of the countries to speak with one single voice regarding the issue has put the EU's credibility in doubt, the positions being influenced by the member countries' national politics.

In order to consolidate dialogue between Western Balkan countries and the EU, member States must show stronger support and must include Western Balkan's governments and citizens in further debates regarding their own future.⁵⁴ According to Marciacq, to fill the vacuum left by distrust in WB6 governments, the EU should address citizens directly, on social policies, democracy and rule of law, by relying on civil society actors. This would benefit this initially elite-driven process by giving concrete results rather than *statu quo*.⁵⁵

Rather than focusing on what needs to be achieved, the two analysts recommend suggesting ways to reach the "ultimate goal", which were not defined by President Macron in his "non-paper". The rewards provided after the accomplishment of each stage of Macron's proposal should not be limited to accession to EU programmes, but they should benefit the countries in a more visible way, for the governments but for the citizens too, proving them both that the process is worth the price. They suggest as examples "gradually opening the European Structural and Investment Funds [...] or enabling circular migration".⁵⁶

Marciacq argues that the EU's expectations from the Western Balkans to align with the *acquis Communautaire* and other prerequisites for accession is a nonsense if those countries are not involved in such laws and programs in order to comply with them. He sums up EU-WB6 relations as a monologue rather than a dialogue. As an example, the UK is leaving the Union, but will certainly be engaged in EU sectorial policy in the future, that is what Marciacq advises for Western Balkans-EU relations.⁵⁷

In line with Ms Stratulat's and Ms Lazarevic's recommendations, Alexandra Stiglmayer from ESI, argues that Western Balkans countries received little financial help to catch up economically with the EU members. This is an important factor for joining as the EU does not want the future membership of WB6 countries to be a burden economically speaking. Ms Stiglmayer suggests that the EU should extend this financial support. She takes the example of Slovenia, Romania or Latvia, which were poorer at the very begin of their membership.

They succeeded in catching up in less than 20 years. The share for the Western Balkans should be at least doubled than the budget announced. Member States with larger GDP than Western Balkans countries receive much more consequent amounts of money, and it is that money the benefit for more than a decade that helped those countries to align with European economic standards. In the same logic, European single market should be opened to Western Balkans Countries before accession.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Letter-to-Macron-Details-matter-for-enlargement-reform~2cfba0>

⁵⁵ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf> p 22

⁵⁶ <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Letter-to-Macron-Details-matter-for-enlargement-reform~2cfba0>

⁵⁷ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf> p 19-20

⁵⁸ <https://c4ep.eu/cfepwb/?fbclid=IwAR1-mNcVK-TsU9PEWrBMJM1829vS4GASnYu3nKtE3QwuuDv5sgRs2Och74>

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Nevertheless, when it comes to evaluating implementation, the EU possesses some objective indicators but those could not be used for more “pragmatic” issues. The EU should help those countries to build tools in order to tackle issues such as reconciliation or corruption. Moreover, a second problem is the imprecisely defined roles of both the Commission and the Council of the EU on this matter, and the tendency of the Council to block the process as it was recently seen with the cases of North Macedonia and Albania, regardless of the Commission’s positive “avis”.

This turns EU enlargement into a political issue rather than a settled process. Once again, EU’s credibility and thus, the process itself, are threatened.⁵⁹ Marciacq also warns about member State’s abuse of power and the creation of an asymmetrical relation when building verification mechanisms. To avoid that, these mechanisms should be based on democratic standards and rely on the recommendations of consultative “impartial third actors” (such as the Venice Commission).⁶⁰

Mr Marciacq outlines that there is a serious need of development for conditionality tools after accession, which is also missing in President Macron’s paper according to Ms Stratulat and Ms Lazarevic. These tools should be applicable to all member States and would be a solution to the democratic backsliding happening in Eastern Europe. Indeed, this backsliding impacts on the promotion of reforms in the Western Balkans.⁶¹

Conclusion

More than 15 years after the Thessaloniki Summit, that opened European perspective for the Western Balkan countries, no substantial steps towards European integration have been done by those countries. In this respect, Emmanuel Macron suggested a “non-paper” dealing with a renewed EU enlargement process. Despite such a reform had already been envisaged and discussed by other EU States, President Macron’s methodology appeared to be far than convincing.

In parallel, France was the only country that was in favour of halting negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania. Ever since, a few member States agreed upon a need for reform, but without any prejudice to opening the negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania. Most recently, nine EU member states countries suggested an alternative reform to President Macron’s proposal.⁶²

Indeed, the fragmentation of such a process in 7 steps as well as the reversibility method might result in a longer enlargement procedure and might seriously harm relations between the European Union and the WB6, leading in the worst case to a catastrophic scenario that might awake the ghosts from the 1990’s, or end the integration process. In this regard, Western Balkan countries might engage more with other powers that already have a strong presence in the region, namely China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf countries. Political analysts suggest a stronger participation of Western Balkans governments and civil society in the process and a focus on stronger rewards when applying

⁵⁹ <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Letter-to-Macron-Details-matter-for-enlargement-reform~2cfba0>

⁶⁰ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf> p 20

⁶¹ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf> p 20

⁶² <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>

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conditionality, such as allowing more funds in for those countries to catch up with the European economic standards or allowing participation of those countries in EU programs and policies before joining or achieving reforms on those matters.

Many experts also believe that an emphasis on reconciliation is much needed, as well as envisaging EU integration as a common goal to the WB6, in order to encourage cooperation in the region. The EU should also work on evaluation tools, as some more pragmatic stuffs are less measurable, and as it might allow abuse of power by member States. Conditionality tools should however be applied after membership too, to all the member countries, in order to prevent backsliding in important fields such as democracy and rule of law.

Moreover, attention should also be paid to the Council's role, whose members often block decisions based on protection of national interests. It is finally argued that President Macron's non-paper lacks providing guidelines for achieving what is expected from those countries. The European Commission is expected to deliver a document based on President Macron's suggestions and other EU Member State's opinions next January.

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