

S T U D I A

The Dangers of Halting Enlargement Prospects in the Western Balkans

Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, Laura-Maria Herța

Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

Emmanuel Macron's refusal to grant the EU permission to initiate accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania during the European Council meeting of 17-18 October, 2019, sent a shockwave throughout the EU establishment and the Western Balkans, at the same time calling into question the course of the entire enlargement policy. However, one has to go beyond the mainstream explanations provided to the public by the French President, and analyze in depth the circumstances that lay at the basis of the action. This article attempts to pinpoint the genuine reasons behind this rather unexpected attitude as well as to summarize the most significant reactions it prompted, using an actor-centered analysis. It is the authors' view that halting or significantly breaking one of the most prominent normative tools the EU has at its disposal in the region is rather worrying, which is why some prospects are provided for a better understanding of the likely consequences thereof.

Keywords: EU enlargement policy, normative power, North Macedonia, Albania, Emmanuel Macron

Introduction

On 5 February, 2020, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi presented a much-expected strategic position of the European Union with regard to the lengthy and sinuous enlargement file of the Western Balkans, declaring the rapprochement “a top priority for the Commission.”¹ Such is the positive premise against the background of which we aim to stress the meaningfulness of a more

Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, Phd – Associate Professor, Dean of the Faculty of European Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca; **Laura-Maria Herța, Phd** – Associate Professor, Vice-Dean for Scientific Research of the Faculty of European Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca.

¹ Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi during the presentation of the revised enlargement methodology before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament, Statement, European Commission News, 5 February 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/>

constructive approach of the new Commission towards this highly sensitive area – particularly at a time when the number of EU member states has decreased – in an inglorious premiere for a project that requires concrete revamping measures now more than ever before. It is doubtless that the enlargement policy of the EU has been the most spectacular one, notably after the audacious moment in 2004 when East-Central European Countries started to thicken the ranks of the Union, with the heavy load of historical significance that this entailed.² While the burdensome dossiers of Eastern countries brought to the Union are unquestionably difficult to handle – not to mention the waves and outbreaks of Euroscepticism that became noticeable with the controversies around the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon³ – the importance of the EU as a project to remain appealing does outweigh, in our view, all of the above.

It is quite common for the staff of an institution that is as broad-reaching as the EU Commission to initiate a mandate with a plethora of statements that range from overly-technical to prosaic. While this might be the case for the ceremonial stances sometimes purported by several of the new Commissioners, a tweet by the recently-elected High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, experienced politician Josep Borrell, should serve as a premise for the allegedly rekindled prospects of enlargement,⁴ seen through the lens of the von der Leyen Commission. Published on 5 February, it read: “The EU is not complete without the Western Balkans. The objective of our proposal is to pave the way enhancing mutual trust, making the accession process more credible and effective as well as reward quicker the efforts our partners are doing (sic!) towards EU Membership”⁵ – arguably one more political statement in a series of (too) many, but a curiously expected one.

Methodology

This research focuses on a particularly recent event and its impact on the course of action of one of the most visible policies of the EU. Therefore, it relies on analyses of messages uttered in the public space by actors, i.e. decision-makers of all parties involved, be it EU institutions or countries in the Western Balkans. Most of the materials have been recorded by reputable, unbiased European media, which inevitably turns into our main source of such messages, although we have proceeded to a fact-check process to corroborate the citations with at least two more credible media sources. When

announcements/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-presentation-revised-enlargement-methodology-committee-foreign_en (accessed on 29 December 2019).

² See: E. Gateva, *European Union Enlargement Conditionality*, Berlin: Springer, 2016.

³ A. G. Corpădean, ‘The Lisbon Treaty: A Sinuous Ratification’, in *Centre for European Studies Working Papers*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2011, pp. 31-48.

⁴ A. P. Mureșan and D. G. Reianu, ‘Union européenne: Passé et présent. Une analyse comparative entre la déclaration Schuman et les dix priorités de Juncker’, *Synergies Roumanie*, 2018, No. 13, p. 47.

⁵ Taken from Josep Borrell’s Twitter feed, 5 February 2020, <https://twitter.com/josepborrell/status/1225087464295092224?lang=en> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

the messages have been presented in the form of quotations, the principal source where they were identified has been marked in the critical apparatus.⁶ A literature review has been deemed necessary for explaining the framework germane to the topic at hand, as well as to exhibit the perceptions of the enlargement phenomenon at this time by most scholars that deal with the EU integration. The article includes information extracted from several EU-emitted documents, notably reports that assess the progress made by countries in the Western Balkans on the way to membership, in which case document/text analysis has been the method of choice,⁷ with the extraction of essential data placed in the appropriate context. Some correlations between public statements made by decision-makers and analyses included in such documents have also been established.

Given that most of the factual knowledge included has been derived from speech analysis, chiefly subjected to the tools of deductive reasoning, we have based our approach on a methodology that has been validated by recent literature.⁸ A comparative view has accompanied such analyses, since the core of the research revolves around the perceptions of antagonistic attitudes towards the North Macedonian and Albanian integration bids. It has thus been considered necessary to reveal the outlooks emitted by both sides after the key moment of the October 2019 EU summit, which constituted the trigger of the controversy.

From the standpoint of the research structure, the authors opt for an introductory part, whose aim is to lay down the context of the matter and to present the factual trigger thereof, represented by French President Emmanuel Macron's refusal to give a green light to North Macedonia's and Albania's EU negotiations, with partial support from other member states. Then, a hypothesis is produced, emphasizing what we believe is the principal reason behind such a political statement as well as the potential damage to the EU's reputation and prominence as a normative power in the Western Balkans. A series of arguments is presented to support the assumptions and, in the conclusive part, these are discussed on the basis of facts and scenario-building⁹ endeavors.

Initial Reactions

The way we see it, the enlargement veto put forth by French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of the European Council meeting of 17-18 October, 2019, came as an inopportune power play at a time when a synergy of opinions and cohesion

⁶ W. M. Tellis, 'Application of a Case Study Methodology', *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 1-19, <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol3/iss3/1> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

⁷ The methodology is based on the findings included in: Delia Pop-Flanța, "Challenges in International Negotiations: Cultural Background and Context", Review of the Air Force Academy, No. 3 (30), Brașov, "Henri Coandă" Air Force Academy Publishing House, 2015.

⁸ A. Skolimowska (ed.), *Perceptions of the European Union's identity in international relations*, London: Routledge, 2019.

⁹ As defined in I. B. Neumann and E. F. Øverland, 'International Relations and Policy Planning: The Method of Perspectivist Scenario Building', *International Studies Perspectives*, 2004, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 258-277.

ought to have described the mood within the shaken European family. Whilst Albania was given a rather clear ‘no’ vote not only by reticent France, but also by Denmark and the Netherlands, Macron was alone to voice an objection in the case of the North Macedonia file. Needless to say, slamming the door in the face of countries that went through major political hurdles and faced stiff external pressure to consolidate their pro-Western option is a risky endeavor and would normally require strong backing through arguments, as well as a clear roadmap proposing what there is to be mended. However, by using the shady argument of the EU’s dire need for an overhaul, pro-European Macron did little to appease the astounded voices both within and outside the Union, including the badly-shaken chancelleries of the two nations that were hit by his statement the hardest. The argument itself is little but a leitmotif in a long and rather sterile history of pseudo-scenarios aiming to boldly pave the way for a rebuilding of the EU’s decision-making and overall institutional configuration, so far yielding no more concrete results than what lies within the blurred lines of the Treaty of Lisbon. However, if it prompts a revamped debate on enlargement, which some authors describe as “long overdue,”¹⁰ then the statement by the French President could be more profound than originally expected.

“Europe is not working well with twenty-seven members. How can we expect that it will work better with more member states?”, “The bigger the toast, the more we have to spread the butter. And we have less butter and not much of a taste of toast,” and “Europe needed more integration, clarity in its choices”¹¹ – here are the three quite allegorical statements accompanying the blunt decision in what is a clear case of strategic ambiguity that provides little to build upon.

Angela Merkel herself stepped in with a classic line aiming to cast doubt on the wisdom of the French President’s attitude by stating that “We must continue to work towards opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania to join the EU. Especially since these countries are NATO member states, and this is where our strategic interest in the Transatlantic Alliance also lies.”¹² Certainly, the geopolitical value of the two nations comes nowhere close to the Copenhagen criteria or to any other formally verifiable set of values or indicators that would justify the progress attained in a country’s talks with the EU. That said, the German Chancellor played this sensitive card to assure both North Macedonia and Albania that the decision would be given a second look at the beginning of 2020, especially amid the resignation of the pro-EU

¹⁰ T. Töglhofer, ‘No Time to Lose for the EU: Overcoming the Accession Stalemate in the Western Balkans’, DGAP Policy Brief, no. 8, Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V., p. 2, <https://nbnresolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssor-66146-8> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

¹¹ A. Robert and C. Stam, ‘Differences between Merkel and Macron are slight but real’, *Euractiv*, 21 October 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/differences-between-merkel-and-macron-are-slight-but-real/> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

¹² A. Sandford, ‘North Macedonia president meets Macron after French veto on EU accession talks’, *Euronews*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/12/north-macedonia-president-meets-macron-after-french-veto-on-eu-accession-talks> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

North Macedonian PM Zoran Zaev. In an interview with *Euronews*, in the aftermath of the French decision, Zaev unsurprisingly drew on the Prespa Agreement and the efforts made by North Macedonia on the way to complying with the EU rules in order to stress the risks that this decision is likely to have on the stability of the country: “If some nationalism appears in my country for example, and that is why I decided to go to a snap election, to bypass this time and period to buy a few months and to send a message to President Macron and the other European Leaders, (that) with this bypass I will avoid a positive soil (breeding ground) of increasing nationalism, radicalism, populism, and (if this happened, this) will provoke for sure our neighbours, especially Greece and Bulgaria.”¹³ This was to be expected as the international community remains well aware of the amount of compromise that eventually enabled the name dispute with Greece to be resolved, and the sensitivity of the subject does engender a dose of inherent support for the North Macedonian integration bid.

A similar reaction came from Albanian PM Edi Rama, who was also quick to play the victimization card by claiming that his country was “potential collateral damage, in the fight between the EU Member States.”¹⁴

Going beyond the political nature of the statements, it remains worrying that any West-driven setback in the already slow and tedious negotiation pace with the Western Balkans may put on hold or, what would be even worse, reverse some of the expected reforms in the region pertaining to the rule of law and the struggle against widespread corruption.¹⁵

Potential Reasons for Macron’s Refusal

It remains puzzling why a political figure with a stark commitment to strengthening the EU would produce such an intransigent stance within the enlargement file. Our hypothesis considers this stance as being more moment-driven and subjected to the particular context of French politics, as opposed to being objective and reliant on concrete acquis or Copenhagen criteria-based facts, and is corroborated with the negative impact this has on the reputation and influence that the EU is enjoying in the Western Balkans.

To test this hypothesis, we would rather depart from the words of Johannes Hahn, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, who, in the aftermath of Macron’s statement, uttered the following: “If all the efforts that North Macedonia has successfully made,

¹³ E. Koutsokosta, ‘Zaev warns: EU accession halt could cause a rise of nationalism in the Balkans’, *Euronews*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/zaev-warns-eu-accession-halt-could-cause-a-rise-of-nationalism-in-the-balkans> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

¹⁴ N. Muçi, ‘Asylum seekers and Macron’s “No” to Albania’s EU accession talks’, *Euronews*, 20 November 2019, <https://euronews.al/en/daily-news/2019/10/18/president-macron-s-no-to-albania-and-the-albanian-asylum-seeker-issue>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

¹⁵ See: Å. B. Grødeland, ‘Public Perceptions of Corruption and Anti-Corruption Reform in the Western Balkans’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 2013, Vol. 91, No. 3, pp. 535-598.

if this is not properly rewarded, there is no incentive for Serbia and Kosovo... to enter into a substantive dialogue about the future coexistence of the two countries, because the only reason to do this is the European perspective.”¹⁶ Far from being a slippery-slope kind of argument, Hahn confirms our point in this meaningful address, namely that the Northern Macedonian file was likely to serve as the example that is in short supply in the Western Balkans’ integration bid. In our view, an attack against one of the EU applicants in the area is just as threatening to the rest, which we will attempt to show below. As it was made apparent once East-Central European integration became a realistic concept, the need to set positive examples, join more states around one integration wave, and dedicate entire tools to groups of countries turned into norms through which the Commission attempted to make the endeavor collective. Take, e.g., PHARE,¹⁷ which is arguably one of the most ambitious financial assistance programs in post-Cold-War Europe, which was originally intended for Poland and Hungary, but whose sponsor was audacious enough to revamp it so as to cover no fewer than ten countries in the area on their way to meeting their accession criteria. On a more symbolic and less pecuniary note, one should remember with how much stubbornness the Romanian and the Bulgarian files were glued together by the Commission once the two countries had missed out on their chance for earlier integration, back in 2004, regardless of the numerous desynchronizations between the two. As Geoffrey Pridham points out,¹⁸ when the Helsinki Summit yielded a favorable accession perspective for both countries, Romania was seen as less ready to satisfy the political and economic criteria. Even post factum, Romania’s safeguard clause was much tougher than its southern neighbor’s, whilst “the decision to activate the clause against Romania would be by qualified majority while that for Bulgaria was to be decided by unanimity.”¹⁹ The same author emphasizes the temporal sinuosity in the progress registered by the two countries: “This illustrated that Romania was the most difficult of the accession countries that joined in 2004 and 2007, although Bulgaria encountered more conditionality problems in the final year before accession.”²⁰

This interlude built around the rather artificially concocted Romanian-Bulgarian integration squad proves the point that regrouping has been key to the integration approach promoted since the openness to the Eastern Central European area was materialized. Of course, one could argue that Croatia serves as a counterexample to

¹⁶ A. Rettman and E. Zalan, ‘Macron warned on danger of Balkans veto’, *EU Observer*, 17 October 2019, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/146302> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

¹⁷ A. F. Tatham, ‘Enlargement of the European Union’, *Kluwer Law International*, 2009, pp. 294-297.

¹⁸ G. Pridham, ‘Romania and EU membership in comparative perspective: A post-accession compliance problem? – The case of political conditionality’, in *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 2007, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 172.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

this theory, but Ana Vizjak and Maja Vizjak²¹ provide some insight into the delays encountered by this country, set against the background of its considerably higher degree of preparedness when compared to the current candidates: “The course of development of the negotiations of the Croatian government with the European Union formally started quite late, in 1995, after the establishment of the Croatian state sovereignty. (...) After numerous delays, on 6/11/1996, Croatia was admitted to the Council of Europe, which should have opened the possibility of further negotiations with the European Union and the conclusion of the Cooperation Agreement.” The size of the country, the extent of its population, and its relatively small economy also account as factors that make Croatia a valid counterexample to our claim, albeit not a very prominent one.

On the other hand, the accession ‘in bulk’ of the Western Balkans’ group of states (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with the possible addition of Kosovo and less likely prospects of Bosnia and Herzegovina) has made its way into the EU jargon and into the strategic documents to such a great extent that they are very often treated as a unit at this time. The allocation of the IPA, the six flagship initiatives,²² and such outputs as the document titled “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”²³ stand as testimony to this. Indeed, the prospects of Albania joining separately from Serbia or vice-versa appear to be purely fictional given that any member state is entitled to block the accession process of another.

All of the above serve as arguments for the hypothesis that Macron’s stance should be worrying to all the aspiring candidates from the region, which begs even bigger question as to the underlying reasons for this attitude. The pretext for the veto pronounced against opening accession talks with Skopje was clear-cut and revolved around the need for legislation on a public prosecutor, but a wider accession reform was looming in the overall rhetoric. Also, the positions of the Dutch and Danish governments in expressing reservations about the pace of reforms in Tirana – around matters of corruption and organized crime – did little to soften up Macron’s message, which was likely due to the difference in expectations from his administration.

²¹ A. Vizjak and M. Vizjak, ‘The accession of the Republic of Croatia to the EU. The past, the present, the future’, *Dubrovnik International Economic Meeting*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2015, pp. 806-819, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/161669>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

²² Z. Nechev, J. Minić, A. Ćerimagić and K. Seferaj, *The Credible Enlargement Perspective for the Western Balkans through the lenses of the Berlin Process*, Skopje: Institute for Democracy ‘Societas Civilis’, 2018, pp. 15-17.

²³ Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, ‘A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, European Commission’, *COM(2018) 65 final (Annex)*, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

Macron's actions faced mixed, but generally critical reactions for his stance rather than his arguments, from voices such as Austrian Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein, who described the summit failure as "extremely regrettable," adding that: "I have spoken to the two prime ministers to express my great disappointment, and they are also extremely disappointed."²⁴ The attitude was predictably echoed by the EU Council President Donald Tusk, who told reporters that he felt "really embarrassed" and continued by expressing that he had "absolutely no doubt" that Albania and North Macedonia would progress down the path to membership. In a rather uncommon form of criticism of the Council, Tusk added that "they passed their exams, I can't say this about our member states," concluding that "this is not a good sign for the solidarity of the EU or the stability of the region."²⁵

In light of our initial hypothesis, namely that Macron's actions have less to do with concrete accession criteria and more to do with transient concerns – some of which are based on internal French matters – it is important to outline that the March 2019 report of the European Commission on the progress attained by North Macedonia was quite congenial.²⁶ Neither France nor any other country alone can compose new Copenhagen criteria, so although the enlargement decision is, alas, genuinely political, a lucid report needs to rely on facts. Indeed, those pertinent facts from the quoted report mention such progress under the political criterion as the one outlined on page 6: "In parallel to the implementation of the Prespa agreement, North Macedonia has continued to show its commitment to deliver tangible results in implementing EU reforms in key areas such as (i) the judiciary, fight against corruption and organised crime; (ii) intelligence services; and (iii) public administration reform, including through the 'Plan 3-6-9' and 'Plan 18.'²⁷ The culture of compromise among political actors has improved through the government's efforts to reach out to all stakeholders – including the opposition and civil society – in an inclusive and transparent manner. The government has taken steps to restore proper checks and balances, and to strengthen democracy and the rule of law."²⁸

²⁴ 'European Union warned of "historic mistake" as Emmanuel Macron blocks Balkan enlargement talks', *The Telegraph* (from Agence-France-Presse), 18 October 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/18/europe-union-warned-historic-mistake-emmanuel-macron-blocks/>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ North Macedonia 2019 Report, accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, '2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, European Commission staff working document', *SWD(2019) 218 final*, *COM(2019) 260 final*, Brussels, 29 May 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

²⁷ While the former one stresses the months it would take to cross three thresholds of reforms (ensuring the removal of the conditional recommendation for the beginning of negotiations by the European Council, consolidating the international perception of North Macedonia's solid application, and discussing the opening of negotiations with EU member states), the latter one is a longer-term reform agenda that is supposed to implement EU recommendations.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

A full read of the enlarged chapter, while it does continue with regular, even mainstream recommendations, falls short of justifying a negative stance like the one put forward by the French President. As for the second criterion, one pertaining to the existence of a functioning market economy, the report indeed adopts a more critical line: “North Macedonia has made some progress over the last 12 months and is at a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy. Economic growth resumed after a year of stagnation, though investment remained subdued. The government took measures to improve public finance management and transparency. It adopted reforms of income taxation and the pensions system. However, the composition of spending worsened, and fiscal consolidation needs to be more ambitious in order to put public finances on a sustainable path. The functioning of the labour market is impaired by persisting structural problems.”²⁹ However, the detailed analysis does not provide any solid ground for outright rejection based on economic reasons, nor does Macron lean on such considerations to justify his veto.

In light of the above, what could have been the contextual reasons prompting the French President’s stance? Even if one casts aside – and it would be quite shallow to do so without another attempt at examination – the dire Brexit negotiations and the difficulties in picking suitable candidates for the new Commission (both matters were on the Council’s agenda at the time,) the moment of the decision remains problematic. It may well be postulated that the Council had bigger – and thornier – fish to fry, with the need to keep nationalist parties at bay, which has been constant not only in Denmark and the Netherlands, but also in France. Forum Réfugiés places Albanian asylum seekers in France in 2018 at a staggering number of 9,690, with a rejection rate of 88.1%, in second place after Afghanistan.³⁰ Macron built his argument pertaining to Albania on clearly national grounds, admitting to the following: “How do I explain to my constituents that the country where most asylum seekers are coming from is Albania, yet many EU Ministers believe that Albania is improving and that we should launch EU accession talks?”³¹ Since France considers Albania to be a safe country,³² the chances of its citizens being granted asylum by the Paris administration are minimal.

Indeed, Macron’s vote was in all likelihood more driven by the internal situation of his country and by his dwindling popularity, where right-wing votes remain a hard gamble for the next presidential election. Marine Le Pen’s populist Front National still draws heavily on irate voters over the migration phenomenon, building upon recurrent nationalist

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

³⁰ Forum Réfugiés – Cosi, Statistics, France, 2018, available at: <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/france/statistics>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

³¹ N. Muçi, *art. cit.*

³² An EU ‘safe countries of origin’ list, European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_safe_countries_of_origin_en.pdf, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

trends,³³ as shown in a survey³⁴ conducted not long after the October 2019 Summit. While the survey still put Macron ahead in a hypothetical second round of the presidential election against arch-nemesis Marine Le Pen (by an estimated 55%), the latter one was still credited with an advantage in the first round. The response was swift. “We want to take back control of our migration policy,”³⁵ such were the words of Prime Minister Edouard Philippe at that time, marking a clear shift of policy towards the right side of the political spectrum amid the need to regain some of the political momentum that the French administration had lost following the disturbing Yellow Vests movement.

Furthermore, a key element in this shift of attitude exhibited by Emmanuel Macron should also be judged through the lens of his blunt approach towards the current role of NATO in the European security realm. It is to be emphasized that his famous “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO”³⁶ line came no later than the 21st of October, 2019, in the midst of the integration file saga. Strengthening the geopolitical role of Europe amid the edgy ties with the Trump administration is an outcome that the French President believes he is entitled, and able, to champion, but to do this requires first and foremost the support of the Union, which is clearly far from unanimous (if one looks at the reluctance of Chancellor Merkel’s response to Macron’s message or the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s use of the term “dangerous” to refer to Macron’s comments on NATO.)³⁷

The contention that Macron’s stance on enlargement is about keeping up with his new outlook on the EU–Russia relations is perhaps the most risky and speculative view that one could resort to in an attempt to explain the peculiar move. Starting from his own statement in the now famous interview for *The Economist*, in the furtherance of the previously evoked claim about NATO, Macron added: “And secondly, we need to reopen a strategic dialogue, without being naive and which will take time, with Russia. Because what all this shows is that we need to reappropriate our neighborhood policy, we cannot let it be managed by third parties who do not share the same interests.”³⁸

³³ For an example thereof, see: G. Gherasim, ‘The “Crisis of European Humanity” revisited’, in V. Naumescu (ed.), *The New European Union and Its Global Strategy*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, pp. 308–323.

³⁴ C. Ollivier, ‘Sondage. L’écart se resserre entre Macron et Le Pen en cas de 2e tour à la présidentielle’, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1203520/macron-news-poll-rating-latest-marine-le-pen-france-election>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

³⁵ ‘France “takes back control” with non-EU migrant quotas’, *BBC News*, 6 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50317442> (accessed on 29 December 2019).

³⁶ ‘Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead’, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

³⁷ R. Momtaz, ‘Macron torn between Poland and Putin. Paris sees Warsaw as a potential post-Brexit military ally, but also wants to keep Moscow onside’, *Politico*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-poland-russia-moscow-policy/>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

³⁸ L. Baker, ‘On Russia and EU enlargement, Macron pushes a radical agenda’, *Reuters*, 14 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-macron-geopolitics/on-russia-and-eu-enlargement-macron-pushes-a-radical-agenda-idUSKBN1XO2P9>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

Whilst such views are generally frowned upon in chancelleries from both ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Europe,³⁹ it is doubtless that – as we postulated when attempting to formulate our main hypothesis – there is much more to the so-called enlargement veto (in fact, an act of postponement) than the reasons put forward by the French President during the 17-18 October 2019 European Council meeting. Enlargement in a time of distress for the Union – with Brexit, migration, and populism being just a few of the ailments festering in its very core – is unpopular in France, as is the case with other ‘experienced’ member states, too.

Rekindling Support for the Integration of the Western Balkans

That being said, we firmly support the need to rekindle the prospects for at least a technical form of advancement in the Western Balkans’ complicated integration file. There is, however, an inherent contradiction in the process that goes all the way down to the core of the manner in which decision-making on EU integration is enshrined: while the work is (unevenly) shared between the aspiring country – which is supposed to undergo major reforms and yield to the EU’s normative power – and the European Commission as the most technically-savvy EU institution, with the occasional feedback from the European Council, the decision lies elsewhere. The European Council President Charles Michel may well say that he looks “forward to a frank, intense, and open discussion”⁴⁰ with the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries while expecting a summit in Zagreb this May, which is unlikely to give rise to any decisive statement given the unprecedented medical emergency that the EU is forced to handle at this time. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU, may well have pronounced as prosaic a declaration as: “We are going to work today and tomorrow for the next European Council [summit] to open the door to the European perspective of the Balkan countries,”⁴¹ on 16th February, 2020. He may well be credited with tweeting that: “The EU is not complete without the Western Balkans. The objective of our proposal is to pave the way enhancing mutual trust, making the accession process more credible and effective as well as reward quicker the efforts our partners are doing towards EU Membership.” The Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković may well have taken advantage of the opening of his country’s Council Presidency to announce that: “We want to introduce a new dynamic and, if possible, break the deadlock on opening

³⁹ In the sense cultivated by scholars such as Judi Sedivy and Marcin Zaborowski in their study “Old Europe, New Europe and Transatlantic Relations”, published in: K. Longhurst and M. Zaborowski (eds.), *Old Europe, New Europe and the Transatlantic Security Agenda*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-28.

⁴⁰ ‘EU Says Accession for Balkan Countries Still Possible’, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 17 February 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-says-accession-for-balkan-countries-still-possible/30437871.html>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania,⁴² as he does have the tool of a EU summit for this in his very capital.

In actuality, the decision on as sensitive a topic as the future of the tumultuous yet so culturally and historically enriching Western Balkans remains inherently political. By that, one can only mean that it depends on the twists and turns of a political landscape that ever so often fails to see the broader picture of how spectacular the enlargement policy is for all parties involved and how broad a transformation it fosters, at least in the new member states. Instead, this potentially key asset of the EU's proud stance as a unique game changer and norm-setter in the history of the region (to say the least) has ceaselessly been marred by puny political calculations, indulging transient national alliances, and taming nationalist tendencies that actually damage the whole construct.

Concluding Remarks

The EU often finds itself under a barrage of criticism regarding its cross-border ambitions, also in its immediate neighborhood. To give but one example, Gabriel Gherasim summarizes Robert Kagan's view on this by stating that he "lists the most problematic aspects with which the European Union is confronted and which represent decisive obstacles to the assertion of its solid global posture: loss of self-confidence, a strategy of 'turning inward', increasing pessimism, egoistic interests, procedural difficulties in the areas of immigration and assimilation, disunity and a visible lack of capabilities in the military field and on the issue of leadership."⁴³

Any unbiased observer may attempt to look at the new image of the Western Balkans from all angles, turn them upside-down, and notice that the profound and clearly still ongoing transformation of this fragmentary area – scarred and battered by both recent and more distant history – has not been short of remarkable. As we have emphasized in some of our earlier research, Europe is very much at home in the region and one does not need to artificially rain it down from the heavens.⁴⁴ There is nothing inherently anti-European lurking or festering in the local spirit, but this is a space that requires healing and tangible assistance, and while it can take a hit, as it so often did in its conflict-ridden past, a clear prospect of integration is in everyone's best interest.

North Macedonia and Albania cannot afford to have too long temporal gap between the decision to open accession negotiations with them and that pertaining to Montenegro (June 2012) and Serbia (June 2013), because this will almost certainly account for

⁴² 'Enlargement policy supported at the opening of Croatian Presidency of the Council', *European Western Balkans*, 10 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/10/enlargement-policy-supported-at-the-opening-of-croatian-presidency-of-the-council/>, (accessed on 29 December 2019).

⁴³ G. Gherasim, "Ideological *Realpolitik*", 'Euroscpticism and American Exceptionalism in Robert Kagan', *Romanian Review of Political Sciences & International Relations*, 2017, Vol. 14, No. 1, Bucharest, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁴ L. M. Herța and A. G. Corpădean, 'The European Union's Conflict Resolution Mechanisms and Their Impact on the Serbian-Kosovar Reconciliation', in R. Moldovan (ed.), *The European Union: Policies, Perspectives and Politics*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2020, pp. 317-318.

a disjunction between two pairs of countries, one which is likely to solidify. A seven- or eight-year gap already indicates an imminent desynchronization in matters of accession time, with Jean-Claude Juncker's 2025 rather generic hypothesis crumbling down with every delay assumed by the European Council. No emphasis or repetition is too great if one is to remember the intrinsic threat that Serbia and Albania would not be able to make their way into the European Union in any other way than simultaneously. Such a negative scenario would put an immense strain on the future of the enlargement process, which is, theoretically, but also geographically or geo-culturally, a finite endeavor. The boundaries to the East are complicated and the EU needs to maintain its appeal if it is to thrive.

Alternatives to EU integration are often regarded as taboo in some candidate and potential candidate countries as well as, all too often, in the EU itself. That said, while North Macedonia's commitment to the West and its values appears to be solid, and Albania's Soviet inheritance and Kosovo-related drama remains an open wound, if there is one thing that the European political landscape has taught us in recent years is that U-turns do happen. The unexpected ones can resolve conflicts or disputes that had once been deemed borderline-irreconcilable, such as the Macedonian name dispute. But even more expected actions, prompted by changes of government – and paradigm – can put other forms of economic and perhaps even political closeness in the limelight. Russia, with a leader whose grasp on power evokes a clear desire for perpetuity and a complacent polity, is unlikely to cease hindering the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of countries such as North Macedonia and Albania.