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EU Enlargement Policy Towards the Western Balkans: State Actors, Interests and Strategies

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Summary: While the current EU Commission has shown a clear commitment to Western Balkans Enlargement, member states are divided. Germany and France, the two biggest EU member states have opposite views, whereas Germany is clearly in favour, France has its cpncerns. Throughout this article we assess the advantages (to enhance the geopolitical power of the EU) but also the challenges that this enlargement process entails (EU internal instability due to lack of rule of law). We conclude that differentiated integration could be the best option in finding a common agreement between the ones that support and the ones that oppose further EU enlargement by ensuring the EU influence in the region at the same time that it reduces the possible risks of internally weakening the EU.

Keywords: enlargement, differentiated integration, Western Balkans, Germany, France.

1. Introduction

On July 1st 2020, same day as Germany took over the Council of the EU six-months rotating presidency, the EU Commission launched the framework (guidelines and principles) of the negotiations with candidate states, Albania and North Macedonia, as a requested by the General Affairs Council. Besides specificities, this clarifies the EU willingness of continuing its enlargement towards a specific region: the Western Balkans.

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After the great enlargement of 2004-07 – that leaded to the accession of 12 new member states – the EU entered into a kind of enlargement hibernation phase – with the exception of Croatia in July 2013. Different experts stress that the above mentioned great enlargement lead to "enlargement fatigue". This phenomenon would have started even before the first group of candidate countries joined the EU in 2004, when a negative perception about enlargement was spread at the popular level among old member states[1] – getting worse after Bulgaria and Rumania joined the EU in 2007. This fatigue idea continued being part of the EU political discourse. During the nineties enlargement was understood as an asset, particularly from the geopolitical point o view. However, this enthusiasm gave way, first, to certain discouragement and apathy and, nowadays, to hesitation and even fear. Today there is the suspicion that enlargement might introduce further destabilisation inside the EU, which might explain the slowdown in the enlargement process to the Western Balkans. Even the EU seems to question the usefulness of its enlargement policy.

There are several elements that have intervened in the appearance of this sense of fatigue. One the one hand, the experience from the 2004-07 great enlargement. Overall the increase in the EU heterogeneity (political, social, economic and cultural) had impacted the decision making process. In addition, it has been found that the process of assimilation (adoption and fulfilment of membership criteria) of new member states is more difficult despite the efforts (including pre-accession programs) made in political (fundamental rights, democratic institutions, corruption) and economic (development and cohesion) matters.

On the other hand, the EU in 2020 is completely different from the one of 2004[2]. The institutional innovations brought about by the Lisbon Treaty (generally speaking, an expansion of the powers of the main supra-state institutions or the creation of the EEAS)[3], in addition to the different steps taken to deal with the 2008 economic crisis (banking union, MEDE...), the refugee crisis (2015) (FRONTEX strengthening), Brexit (2016-20) and, currently, the steps taken to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Under this scenario, the EU gives preference to its internal strengthening and stability rather than to enlargement. The EU has greatly evolved during the last decade to the point that, as stressed by the historian Kershaw "after the financial bankruptcy [2008], Europe is another continent"[4].

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1 DINAN, D. *Europe recast. A history of European Union*. Palgrave, 2014, p. 317.

2 BONOMI, M. Off Track. The EU′s Re-engagement with the Western Balkans. *Istituto Affari Internazionali Papers*, 2019, p. 10.

3 LAMOSO, P. Una voz (común) para una UE fuerte en un escenario global incierto. *Revista Aranzadi Unión Europea*, 2020. Nº 4, Año XLVI, Abril, pp. 65–86.

4 KERSHAW, I. Ascenso y crisis. Europa 1950-2017: un camino incierto. *Crítica*, 2019, p. 515.

As we have already pointed out, the EU internal migrations, protected by the EU citizens' right of freedom movement, leaded to the development of negative folk tales, fictitious or real, regarding enlargement – remember the popular case of the polish plumber – that worked as the perfect fuel for the right or populist parties in old member states. In part, Brexit referendum in June 2016 fuelled that hostility toward immigration. Furthermore, enlargement towards Centre and Eastern European countries increased the complexity of the EU's political agenda. The EU had to deal with, for instance, energy safety (many of these countries are highly dependent form Russian gas and fuel) which required designing a common energy policy with serious geopolitical implications and closely linked to other policies such as foreign policy, neighbourhood, investment and innovation or environment. This without forgetting the impact that enlargement has over PAC or structural policies.

The 2004 enlargement was unique due to the reasons that candidate countries had to join the EU. In Lewis's opinion, the main motivation for candidate counties was "the willingness of "security" in material, political and military terms [...]. The primary objective was to anchor into the western structures as firmly and as soon as possible" (NATO included). This can be considered as a particular negative motivation due to, even though they did not want to be left behind, they lacked the positive willingness of following the EU approach (not necessarily federal) characteristic from old member states[5]. In the background, there were also reasons of a historical-cultural or symbolic-political nature (referred to by expressions such as "return to Europe") that conceived accession as a factor of modernization in a broad sense (economic, political, social, cultural)[6].

The EU adjustment to enlargement has not been easy. In addition to the above mentioned "fatigue", the so called (*absorption capacity*) of the EU has also been mentioned as a factor for stopping new adhesions. It is mainly based on the impact that the integration of new member states could have on different issues such as budget, the ability to implement common policies or the effectiveness and responsibility of decision-making[7].

On the other hand, the consequences derived from the 2004-07 enlargement also impacted the individual position of the EU member states. For instance, member states that benefit from cohesion funds like Spain or Portugal were

[5] LEWIS, P. The enlargement of the European Union. In BROMLEY, S. (ed.) *Governing the European Union*. Sage Publications, 2001, p. 230.

[6] CLOSA, C. La ampliación de la Unión Europa y sus efectos sobre el proceso de integración. *Revista de Estudios Políticos (Nueva Época)*, 1995, nº. 90, octubre-noviembre, 1995, p. 152.

[7] SEDELMEIER, U. Enlargement. From rules for accession to a policy towards Europe. In WALLACE, H., POLLACK, M. and YOUNG, A., (eds.) *Policy-Making in the European Union*, OUP, 2010, pp. 426–427.

affected by the cut or even disappearance of those resources. At the same time France perceived it as a loss of political weight, due to it favoured the shift of the gravity centre to the East, in favour of Germany[8].

Currently, as a consequence, among other factors, of the enlargement itself, the EU is more politicised and fragmented.[9] Conflicts or divisions are increasingly noticeable between groups of member states (north-south, west-east, creditor-debtor, the Visegrad group or the Hanseatic group). In this sense, we can stress the measures adopted by the EU institutions for the preservation of the rule of law and fundamental rights in countries such as Poland or Hungary or the proliferation of extreme right-wing and populist forces (authoritarian, xenophobic and Eurosceptic or even anti-EU) in the Centre and Eastern member states[10].

The Western Balkan enlargement adds other risks, such as: the presence of minority groups and ethnic hatreds in the region that can be easily exploitable,[11] or even geopolitical, derived from the meddling of global superpowers such as China, Turkey, Iran or Russia.

While during the last decade the EU has focused the attention on internal issues (managing the economic-financial crisis, the refugee crisis, or Brexit) these global superpowers have got influence in the region. This justifies the reticence' expressed by some member states (Holland, Austria, France or Spain ...) regarding this future enlargement as well as the uncertainty and low enthusiasm generated[12]. In short, this enlargement follows a geopolitical dimension: to reinforce the stability and security of both EU member states and candidate countries.

Western Balkan candidates present, among other obstacles[13], low economic indexes and a high dependence on the commercial relationship with the EU. However, although to a varying degree, they seem to have reached certain

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8 DINAN, D. *Europe recast. A history of European Union*. Palgrave, 2014, p. 319.

9 CANCELA-OUTEDA, C. (2020) The Post-crisis European Union Before the Political Union: Coordinates and Keys of the Future Institutional Architecture. In RAMIRO TROITIÑO, D., KERIKMÄE, T., DE LA GUARDIA, R. M. & PÉREZ, G. A (Eds) *The EU in the 21st Century Challenges and Opportunities for the European Integration Process Architecture*, Springer, pp. 117–133, pp. 120–122.

10 MARTÍN DE LA GUARDIA, R. (2020). Nationalist Populism: New Political Parties in Europe. Their Ideas, Governments and Support for a Less-Integrated Europe. In RAMIRO TROITIÑO, D., KERIKMÄE, T., DE LA GUARDIA, R. M. & PÉREZ, G. A (Eds) *The EU in the 21st Century Challenges and Opportunities for the European Integration Process Architecture*, Springer, pp. 29–41.

11 JUDT, T. ¿Una gran ilusión? Un ensayo sobre Europa. Taurus, 2013, pp. 79–81.

12 DINAN, D. The European Council in 2018. Overview of decisions and discussions. *European Parliamentary Research Service*, PE 621.824 – June 2018, pp. 39–40.

13 "Nevertheless their membership prospects seemed remote, partly because of 'enlargement fatigue' in the EU, and partly because of difficulties that were both common to the region and specific to each country, ranging from weak governance, to economic underdevelopment, to high

stability at the same time that they have manifested their political willingness of being part of the EU. In addition, we can stress that its "Europeanness" is not questioned, different from what has been the case with Turkey.

In the different enlargement processes the political motivations are decisive, although at first sight the fulfilment of political and economic criteria, plus the monitoring of the negotiating procedure conducted by the European Commission seem central. In this regard, we can stress as examples: the De Gaulle veto to the UK[14] adhesion, the Greek support in favour of the adhesion of Cyprus – even though this meant adding a politically divided state since 1974- or the Slovenian blockade due to a border conflict on the occasion of the Croatian EU adhesion, which allowed sending encouraging signals to the Western Balkans.

Enlargement to the Western Balkans is not an exception. After the EU leaders remarked, in March 2007, their "unequivocal support for the European perspective for the Western Balkans', the Bulgarian Council of the EU six-months rotating Presidency – first half of 2018 – established the future enlargement of the Western Balkans as one of its priorities. As underlined in an EU Parliament report, "the purpose of EU enlargement policy is to promote economic development and strengthen security and stability in the Western Balkans, as preconditions for those countries eventually to become Member States. Enlargement policy allows the EU to leverage the prospect of membership in order to push badly needed reforms in the region. But conditionality can only work if there is a credible possibility of membership. The remoteness of that possibility had reduced the EU's influence in the Western Balkans, where ethnic tension and national rivalries were again on the rise by 2018. A main goal of the Bulgarian Presidency was to focus EU attention on the region, and breathe new life into enlargement policy"[15].

The experience of episodic enlargements suggests, indeed, that, in general, reluctant Member States ended up accepting it through a rational calculation (cost-benefits, compensations ...). By the end of the Cold War, the EU had to design an enlargement policy that occupies a remarkable place in its agenda[16], although with variable intensity. Following Sedelmeier, according to Lowi's typology, this policy is, on one side, a constituency policy that affects the

crime and corruption." See, DINAN, D. The European Council in 2018. Overview of decisions and discussions. *European Parliamentary Research Service*, PE 621.824 – June 2018, p. 37.

[14] RAMIRO TROITIÑO, D., POLESE, A., BRAGHIROLI, S. De Gaulle y Europa. Nacionalismo frente a integración en la construcción europea. *Revista de Occidente*, 2018, Nº 443, pp. 87–101.

[15] DINAN, D. The European Council in 2018. Overview of decisions and discussions. *European Parliamentary Research Service*, PE 621.824 – June 2018, p. 38.

[16] SEDELMEIER, U. Enlargement. From rules for accession to a policy towards Europe. In WALLACE, H., POLLACK, M., YOUNG, A., (eds.) *Policy-Making in the European Union*, OUP, 2010, p. 406.

institutional structure, rules and decision making. On the other hand, at the same time it also presents elements characteristic of a redistributive policy, particularly, regarding those areas that receive budget funds[17]. Consequently, it is a complex and controversial policy where both member states and EU Commission are the centre actors.

Therefore, we can talk about an enlargement policy. This is, according to some academics, the most effective tool of EU Foreign Policy (Peterson y Gottwald, 2015)[18] due to its influence is significantly higher over the countries that are part of an enlargement process rather than over those member states that are already part of the EU or over third countries. Since 2003, the EU is involved into what could be the last EU enlargement process, the Western Balkans. Enlargement towards the Western Balkans presents two fundamental problems: One the one hand they have not reached a sufficient and adequate development of the rule of law and, on the other hand, the serious yet asymmetrically effects that the multiannual debt crisis have provoked in the EU since 2008; which currently is expected to worsen due to the health emergency resulting from COVID-19 pandemic.

The Juncker Commission (2014-2019) decided that no more countries will join the EU during its mandate. However, at the end of its period as President of the Commission, he recognized the strategic importance of keeping the Western Balkans under the influence of the EU. Following this logic, and as part of its strategy of a Geopolitical Commission, the current President of the EU Commission, Úrsula Von der Leyen (2014-2019), emphasized her commitment to enlargement by asking her Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner, Olivér Várhelyi, to work for a credible perspective towards the Western Balkan enlargement[19]. Currently, the Balkan countries that are part of the enlargement process are four: Montenegro (2012), Serbia (2014), North Macedonia (2020) and Albania (2020). Kosovo and Bosnia remain as potential candidates as they still do not meet the entry requirements.

As we have already highlighted, even though the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans entails great threats and risks, particularly linked to the protection of the rule of law, the option of non-enlargement could lead to destabilization in

[17] SEDELMEIER, U. Enlargement. From rules for accession to a policy towards Europe. In WALLACE, H., POLLACK, M., YOUNG, A., (eds.) *Policy-Making in the European Union*, OUP, 2010, p. 402.

[18] PETERSON, J. & GOTTWALD, M. The EU as a Global Actor. In KENEALY, D., PETERSON, J. & CORBETT, R. (eds). *The European Union. How does it work?* Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 208–228.

[19] European Commission. Ursula Von der Leyen. Mission Letter. Commissioner-designate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. Brussels, 10 September 2019.

the EU neighbourhood, which is a primary objective within the current Global Strategy of the EU Commission. At the same time that it could weaken the EU power in the world at the expense of other global actors which are interested and already have a direct influence on the region such as: China, Russia, Turkey or the Gulf Countries. Even though the great geopolitical relevance that the Western Balkans have for the EU, there is the risk that this enlargement process would not be completed. This because France and Germany, the two member states that are at the driving seat of the EU integration process, have opposite views about it. Whereas Germany is one of the main benefited, France, thinking in purely domestic terms, considers it as little strategic relevance. Besides, we cannot forget that the UK, traditionally the member state that has supported enlargement the most, is no longer part of the EU, complicating the options for the candidate countries.

The main aim of this piece is precisely to examine, from the lenses of policy analysis, the position that the two biggest EU member states, Germany and France, have towards the Western Balkan enlargement. Specifically, we aim to introduce the complexity (interests-strategies) that the Western Balkan enlargement involves. In so doing, we will assess the advantages and disadvantages of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, in short: Who wins and who loses with the Western Balkans enlargement? Is it a matter of interests or strategy? This article concludes by stressing that differentiated integration could be the perfect option in order to find a common agreement between the most favourable and the most reticent member states. At the same time that it ensures a high influence of the EU in the region.

2. Enlargement Through Rational Lenses

Enlargement is one of the EU foreign policy instruments and, therefore, it follows an intergovernmental decision making process. Member states pursue their domestic interest in intergovernmental conferences where they hold on veto power and where asymmetries of power condition the results of the negotiation (Moravcsik, 1998). Taking into account that the final decision reflects the biggest member states preferences, it is essential to analyze what are their priorities and strategies. Following logic of consequences or cost benefit, Member states will favour enlargement as long as it provides long term economic or geopolitical benefits[20] (greater stability in the neighbourhood, greater geopolitical impact or

[20] MORAVCSIK, A. & VACHUDOVA, M. National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement. *East European Politics and Societies*, 2003, Vol. 17, Nº. 1, pp. 42–57; p. 43.

better immigration control ...). This would imply that those member states that a priori do not obtain any benefit from enlargement would support it as long as they think they have the enough negotiating power in order to make those member states that will win the most with enlargement compensate them through other means[21].

Currently, the major obstacle that Western Balkan enlargement faces is the weakness of their democracies. Therefore, we understand that, in order to strengthen their relationship with the Western Balkans, member states would contemplate different possibilities: full membership or even differentiated integration. Schimmelfenning underlines that EU integration can only be understood through the logic of differentiation (Curtin, D.: 2020, 3)[22]. Following a rational logic, the degree of differentiation in the integration of the new members will be determined by the differences regarding the preferences and power of member states (Moravcsik, 1998). Finally, last decision would be based on the major benefits that going for one of those options would mean before any other possible alternative (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Schimmelfening stresses that when taking decisions, Member States seek to reduce the costs that a non-decision entails such as transaction costs, policy costs and autonomy costs[23]. Following Schneider, enlargement processes always create tensions between member states where the most economically developed are, usually, the ones that are more in favour of adding new member states, contrary to the ones that are institutionally weaker or, as it is the case of France, have a large agricultural sector. Finally, he remarks that enlargement would only be possible in case the redistribution of gains compensate the relative costs[24].

This article main hypothesis is, therefore, that member states would favour future enlargements (Western Balkans) in case they think it will bring economic or geopolitical benefits. Notwithstanding, our second hypothesis is that member states would try to minimize the enlargement costs as much as possible by likely opting for differentiated integration formulas.

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[21] SCHIMMELFENNIG, F. & SEDELMEIER, U. Theorizing EU enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2002, Vol.9, Nº4, pp. 500–528, pp. 512–513.

[22] CURTIN, D. From a Europe of Bits and Pieces to a Union of Variegated Differentiation. *EUI Working Papers*; *RSCAS* 2020, Nº 37. [online]. Available at: < https://cutt.ly/LuPR3kT>

[23] SCHIMMELFENNIG, F. & SEDELMEIER, U. Theorizing EU enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2002, Vol.9, Nº4, pp. 500–528, pp. 510–511.

[24] SCHNEIDER, C. J. Enlargement processes and distributional conflicts: The politics of discriminatory membership in the European Union. *Public Choice*, 2007, Nº 132; pp. 85–102, p. 86.

3. EU – Western Balkans: What Has the EU Done so Far?

Eurostat[25] data shows that Western Balkans is an underdeveloped area: Albania's GDP represents 31% of the EU average, North Macedonian's 38%, Serbian's 40% and Montenegro's 48%; In addition to highly conflictive. The Balkan wars took place less than 30 years ago and there still are tensions to resolve regarding borders. Because of this, the EU is strongly interested in maintaining a close relationship with this area in the aim of promoting cross-border regional cooperation and ensuring stability in its neighbourhood.

Official Candidates	Territorial Extension Km2	Population	GDP growth 2019 (%)	Inflation 2019 (average %)	Public Debt (% GDP)	Life expectancy	Youth Unemployment rate (15-24) (%)	Major Religions
Montenegro	13.812	622.182	3.0	1.0	89	73 (M) / 77 (F)	30,7	Christianity / Islam
Serbia	88.499	7M	3.3	2.0	52	72 (M) / 77 (F)	30	Christianity
Turkey	783.562	82 M	0,2	15,7	30,8	73.3 (M) / 79.8 (F)	23,7	Islam
Albania	28.748	2,9 M	3.0	1,7	66	74 (M) / 80 (F)	28,1	Islam / Christianity
R. North Macedonia	25.713	2,1 M	3,1	1,5	51	73 (M) / 77 (F)	39,1	Christianity / Islam
Potencial Candidates	**Territorial Extension Km2**	**Population**	**GDP growth 2019 (%)**	**Inflation 2019 (average %)**	**Public Debt (% GDP)**	**Life expectancy**	**Youth Unemployment rate (15-24) (%)**	**Major Religions**
Bosnia & Herzegovina	51.129	3,5M	2,8	0,8	33	74,8 (M) / 79,8 (F)	39,7	Christianity / Islam
Kosovo	10.887	1,8 M	4,2	2,68	17,5	70 (M) / 74,5 (F)	Above 50	Islam / Orthodox

Source: own elaboration with data from: Coface for trade, BBC countries profile, World Bank, UN, Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and global security.

[25] Eurostat. GDP per capita in PPS. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/tuPYW19>

In the aim of ensuring a more secure neighbourhood the EU has put in place various instruments or strategies to build a closer relationship with Western Balkans. In this sense, the first step towards a possible Western Balkans enlargement was the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) launched in 1999 and reinforced during the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. The main purpose behind this initiative was to build an ever closer relationship regarding different areas in order to ensure more stability through common political and economic goals, which have leaded to the establishment o a free trade area. It is based on contractual, commercial, financial assistance and regional cooperation relationships[26]. Regional cooperation regarding numerous and various social and economic areas has also been enhanced. Finally, an accession process has been launched. However, since member states stressed its interests in adding Western Balkan countries to the EU during the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), Slovenia (2004) and Croatia (2013) have been the only ones that have joined the EU to date; whereas Montenegro (2012), Serbia (2014), North Macedonia and Albania (May 2020) are, currently, part of the adhesion process.

As part of the accession process, the EU provides financial assistance to help candidate countries carry out the reforms that are necessary to implement and comply with EU law. This through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, whose program runs until 2020, including performance indicators in order to assess whether the objectives have been achieved (European Commission, 2015)[27]; but also technical assistance tailored to the needs of the candidate country. The latter is provided through the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument, which is aimed at sharing good practice experiences and knowledge[28]. The EU also provides aid for counter-terrorism, security, rule of law, migration and humanitarian aid programs[29], in addition to contributing to the protection of press freedom as an essential element of a democratic and legal state (European Parliament 2017)[30]. Besides, Economic relations between the Western Balkans and the EU are very close. EU companies make large investments in the region, being its first trading partner in

[26] European Commission. Stabilisation and Association Agreement. 2016 [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/Ca0qAja>

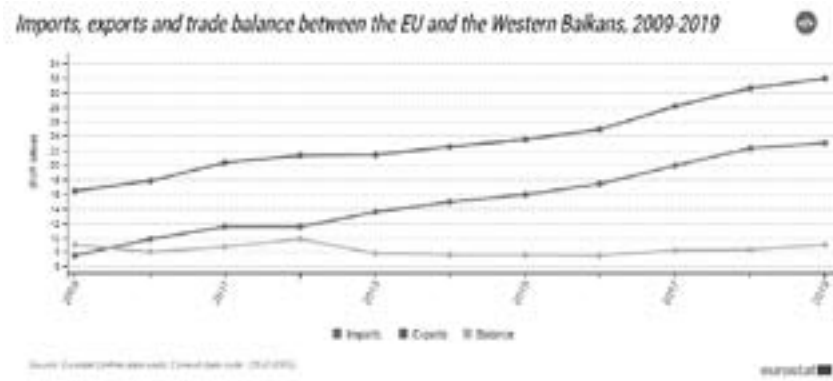
[27] European Commission. Overview – Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. 2015. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/4uPYSG6>

[28] European Commission. TAIEX. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/muPY22g>

[29] RRUSTEMI, A., WIJK, R., DUNLOP, C., PEROVSKA, J. & PALUSHI, L. Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans; *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuPUlex>; p. 13.

[30] European Parliament. Media freedom trends 2017: Western Balkans. At a glance. 2017. [online]. Available at: < https://cutt.ly/0uPUm6V>

both imports and exports 72.8%, followed by China, 5% and Russia, 4.8% (Council of the EU 2018)[31].



Source: Eurostat

These countries have also a high participation in various EU programmes such as Erasmus +, Horizon 2020, Creative Europe or COSM. In addition, two security and defence missions are present in the region (EEAS 2017)[32]. Finally, the EU Commission launched a digital agenda for the Western Balkcans aimed at providing assistance to transform the economy of the region into digital (European Commission 2018)[33].

4. New Enlargement Policy Towards the Western Balkans

Following Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004, p. 664), the effectiveness of EU conditionality regarding third countries accession negotiations depends on the credibility of its threats and rewards. In this sense, the EU Commission has proposed a new accession process characterized for being more predictable and credible, as well as more dynamic and subject to greater political

[31] Council of the EU. Infographic - EU and Western Balkans intertwined. 2018. [online]. Available at:< https://cutt.ly/FuPUIRb>

[32] EEAS. EU Engagement in the Western Balkans. Factsheet. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/kuPUVnu>

[33] European Commission. European Commission launches Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans - EU monitor. 2018. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/QuPIk0Y>

control[34]. In order to make the enlargement process more credible, the European Commission has proposed it to be based on mutual trust and clear commitments between the EU Member States and the Western Balkans. The EU Commission has also emphasized the necessity of "a stronger political steer and engagement at the highest levels". In order to achieve this objective the EU Commission has proposed to increase the frequency of high level summits between the EU and the Western Balkans, at the same time that ministerial contacts are also intensified. The EU Commission has also proposed Member states to be much more systematically involved in monitoring and reviewing the process[35].

In order to make this accession process more dynamic, the EU Commission has proposed to group the negotiating chapters in six thematic clusters: fundamental rights, internal market, competitiveness and inclusive growth, green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; external relations. Each cluster negotiations' will be opened as a whole, after the open criteria are fulfilled, instead of an individual chapter basis. Fundamental rights negotiations will be open first and closed last. The progress being made in this area will condition the negotiations path. The period of time between opening a cluster and closing the individual chapters will be limited, preferably within one year. Besides, to make this process more predictable the EU Commission compromises to make more clear what it expects from the candidate countries along the different stages of the process. In particular, the EU Commission compromises to clarify what are the rewards that reforms can bring and what the negative consequences if there is not progress. Among the benefits we can find accelerated integration or access to internal market or to EU programmes, in addition to an increase in funding and investments. Negotiations could be stopped regarding specific areas or, in most complicated cases, stop the whole process. Besides, the EU Commission stresses the possibility of reopen individual chapters that had already been closed.[36].

In particular, EU institutions demand progress regarding three priority areas: first of all they want to ensure Rule of Law based on a strict division of powers and an independent judicial system that fights against public corruption and organized crime, progress towards free market without state intervention or power structures

[34] European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans. 2020. [online]. Available at <https://cutt.ly/FuPJX0U>

[35] European Commission. A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process – Commission lays out its proposals. 2020. [online]. Available at <https://cutt.ly/RuPKaXD>

[36] European Commission. A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process – Commission lays out its proposals. Press Release. 2020. [online]. Available at https://cutt.ly/2uPX2VY

that allow accumulation of power and limit the development of private initiative, as well as the solution of territorial disputes that affect some neighbour countries[37].

5. A matter of national interest.

Enlargement to the Western Balkans is the perfect test for the EU capacity to influence global governance[38]. EU member states favourable to enlargement stress that the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is in the EU interest. As we have already highlighted, the EU is the largest trading partner of the Western Balkans (72.8%) in terms of both imports and exports (Council of the EU 2018).[39] However, trade ties with the region are very different between member states and regarding each Western Balkans country.

Even though *Eurobarometer* (2019) shows that, for the first time since 2009 EU citizens are largely in favour of enlargement, more people are in favour rather than against[40], whereas German and French citizens are largely contrary of keep enlarging the EU. Besides, Germany and France have diverging positions regarding enlargement to the Western Balkans. Germany is the leader of the negotiating accession process, supported by countries such as Austria, Italy or Poland; while France has positioned itself against it, like Denmark and the Netherlands, mainly due to the weakness of their rule of law[41]. Countries favourable to enlargement are the ones who enjoy the closest ties with the region, whether because of high presence of diaspora, economic relationship or due to geopolitical or security reasons. Therefore, we can confirm that Member States preferences are in directly connected with their national interests.

5.1. Germany, in Favour

In most member states, enlargement process is a "high policy" issue that is essentially limited to the government, although it depends on the national constituency

[37] GINÉ DAVÍ, J. El dilema de la UE en los Balcanes. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/luPLuN1>

[38] BRUDZIŃSKA, K., GUBALOVA, V., KUDZKO, A. & MUZERGUES, A. Making Flexible Europe Work? European Governance and the potential of differentiated integration. *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*. (2020) [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/DuPZoAx>; p. 36.

[39] RRUSTEMI, A., WIJK, R., DUNLOP, C., PEROVSKA, J. & PALUSHI, L. Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans; *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuPUlex>

[40] Standard Eurobarometer 91. Spring 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/auPZM8Y>

[41] SZPALA, M. & FORMUSZEWICZ, R. EU split over enlargement policy. Centre for Eastern Studies. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/muPXH9q>

of each member state. In the case of Germany, the procedure is a bit more complicated. The National Parliament has big powers in shaping the process, which makes it a truly political debate. Germany and Western Balkans are closely tied. Almost 1,5 million of German inhabitants come from the Western Balkans. Germany is also one of the EU biggest inverstors in the region[42]. Germany is the first trading partner in imports and exports with Serbia; first commercial partner in imports and second in exports with North Macedonia; second trading partner in imports and third in exports with Albania and second trading partner in imports with Montenegro. This makes Berlin its greatest ally within the EU[43].

At the same time, Germany is one of the largest contributors of development aid in the region. In addition, it has participated in peacekeeping operations in its conflicts, which made it to play a more relevant political role. However, although Germany supports enlargement, based on the large number of benefits that this would bring, its maximum objective is not undermining the EU integrity[44].

The Western Balkan countries are located in a privileged geographical enclave and Germany is particularly interested in the EU controlling it[45]. Evidence of Germany's great support for the Western Balkans enlargement was the holding of the Western Balkans Summit in August 2014 and the launch of the Berlin Process[46]. Through the Berlin Process Germany stressed that Serbia was the most important country in the region due to its geostrategic location. Furthermore, Germany has made particular efforts to facilitate relations between Serbia and the EU, but also to facilitate dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo[47], key for the possible accession of Serbia to the EU.

In the case of Germany, enlargement to the Western Balkans is also a domestic issue due to the main migratory route towards Germany goes through the Western Balkans. The two most important refugee flow routes to the EU from Turkey and Greece go through the Western Balkans. Specifically, one goes through North

[42] KER-LINDSAY, J., ARMAKOLAS, I., BALFOUR, R. & STRATULAT, C. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº. 4; pp. 511–522, pp. 515–516.

[43] COLIBASANU, A. Germany: Keeping an Eye on the Balkans. *Geopolitical Futures*, 2017. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/5uPVPzM>

[44] KER-LINDSAY, J., ARMAKOLAS, I., BALFOUR, R. & STRATULAT, C. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 2017. Vol. 17, Nº. 4; pp. 511–522, pp. 515–516.

[45] VON DER BURCHARD, H. M. Albania, North Macedonia should get green light for EU talks in March. *Politico.com/Europe*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/VuPBlgi>

[46] TÖGLHOFER, T. & ADEBAHR, C. Firm supporter and severe critic – Germany's two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 523–539.

[47] COLIBASANU, A. Germany: Keeping an Eye on the Balkans. *Geopolitical Futures*. 2017. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/5uPVPzM>

Macedonia and Serbia, and the other through Albania and Montenegro; merging in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the aim of reaching Croatia[48] and from there travel to the north of the EU. This is the main reason for Germany in considering Western Balkans as sensitive topic for its internal security and, consequently, it is one of the major supporters of Western Balkan enlargement. Enlargement to the Western Balkans is an essential piece of Angela Merkel's government to control migration[49]. In this regard, at the European Council of June 5th 2020, the EU called for closer collaboration with the Western Balkans in order to achieve a more efficient migration policy and border management, at the same time that it remarks the necessity to continue improving their asylum systems and cooperation on readmission and return[50].

However, the Western Balkan enlargement support of other German political parties, elite and general public is decreasing. Following *Eurostat* 57% of German citizens is contrary to add more countries to the EU[51]. At the same time, that they consider that immigration is the most severe challenge that the EU currently has[52]. In short, German opposition is questioning both the Western Balkan enlargement to reach European standards and the expected benefits from its accession[53].

5.2. France, suspicious

French opposition to the enlargement process is also directly linked to its domestic interests, in addition to their understanding of the EU integration project. France understands the EU enlargement process as the best way of expanding its power and influence. However, despite the historical ties that bind France to the region, the Western Balkans enlargement is currently of little interest. Evidence about the French lack of interest in keep adding more countries to the EU project is the introduction, after the Croatia accession to the EU in 2013, of the referendum requisite for accepting new members[54]. As regards the specific case of Western

[48] DÉRENS, J-A. Dans les Balkans, la situation désespérée des migrants et réfugiés. *Rfi.fr.* 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/EuPMps6>

[49] COLIBASANU, A. Germany: Keeping an Eye on the Balkans. *Geopolitical Futures*. 2017. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/5uPVPzM>

[50] European Council. Western Balkans: Council calls for enhanced cooperation in migration and security. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/qa0abfs>

[51] Standard Eurobarometer 91. Spring 2019. Factsheets, Germany. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuP1vGo>

[52] Standard Eurobarometer 91. Spring 2019. Factsheets, Germany. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuP1vGo>

[53] SZPALA, M. & FORMUSZEWICZ, R. EU split over enlargement policy. Centre for Eastern Studies. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/muPXH9q>

[54] WUNSCH, N. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017, Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 541–554.

Balkans, political and economic ties are not significant, except for Serbia, country with which trade has increased over the last years and it is expected to continue doing so. France is the twelfth largest supplier and tenth largest buyer of Serbia, while at the same time more than 100 French companies are present in this country, including: Michelin, Société Générale o Crédit Agricole[55]. On the other hand, the presence of diaspora from the Western Balkans in France is not very large.

Historically, France's main interest in relation to enlargement policy is for the EU to become bigger and more powerful because it would result in a bigger and more powerful France[56]. However, support for enlargement is declining sharply in the French domestic political debate[57]. Following last *Eurostat* (2019) 58% of French citizens are contrary to adding more countries to the EU[58]. This scepticism about enlargement is fundamentally based on the fear that the admission of less developed countries to the EU could lead to economic disadvantages[59]. French political parties are neither interested in continue enlarging the EU. This is not only the case of the Front National, but also the Republicans[60]or even Enmanuel Macron who stresses that, while France proposes a strategic discussion on the future of the EU, Germany puts economic interests first[61]. The French main purpose is to keep the EU as a political project, which would be hampered by the entry of new member states. In this sense, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs stresses that France will work for a "controlled enlargement"[62].

Another reason that France uses to be sceptical of future enlargement processes is the experience derived from the great enlargement to the East in 2004. Paris understands that Berlin was one of the big winners, as it has expanded its area of influence and, therefore, increased its power. France considers the Western Balkans as part of Germany's area of influence[63] and, as a consequence, they

[55] France Diplomatie. Serbia. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/psaxNGP>

[56] KER-LINDSAY, J., ARMAKOLAS, I., BALFOUR, R. & STRATULAT, C. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017, Vol. 17, Nº. 4; pp. 511–522, p. 519

[57] WUNSCH, N. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 541–554.

[58] Standard Eurobarometer 91. Spring 2019. Factsheets, France. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuP1vGo>

[59] WUNSCH, N. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 541–554.

[60] SULZER, A. & LAURENT, Q. (Le 28 mars 2019) Élargissement de l'Europe: Wauquiez assume ses variations. Leparisien.fr. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/fuP21hz>

[61] DEMPSEY, J. Europe's Enlargement Problem. *Carnegie Europe*, 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/9uP9bla>

[62] WUNSCH, N. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 541–554.

[63] TREGOURES, L. By blocking enlargement decision, Macron undercuts France's Balkan goals. *Atlantic Council*. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/YuP8d3Z>

possible accession to the EU would benefit the hegemonic power of Germany and weaken France'. In summary, from a purely rational point of view aimed at maximizing domestic interest, for France, unlike Germany, the political and economic relevance of the Western Balkans enlargement is low. France, from a domestic point of view, lacks a vital interest in the region and, therefore, understands that this enlargement will not bring it any direct benefit. Contrary, it fears that the reinforcement of German hegemony in the EU club, particularly after Brexit. UK has been the main German ally regarding EU enlargement, contrary to the France resistance. Without any doubt, Brexit will make more difficult the entry of new countries into the EU[64]. That being said, further EU enlargement would send a message of strength, influence and democratizing capacity of the EU to the rest of the world[65]. The German and French approach towards Western Balkans accession is still contradictory since both countries are aware about the problems of enlargement but also about the risks of not doing so.

6. With Clear Positive, but Also Negative Consequences.

Enlargement to the Western Balkans constitutes a great dilemma for the EU. First, these countries are still far from meeting the minimum standards of rule of law protection[66], fight against corruption, organized crime, etc. that are necessary to be able to belong to the community club. In the second place, adding six new members to the EU would weaken the EU capacity to take decisions in an effective and efficient way. Notwithstanding, an eventual EU abandonment or disengagement of the enlargement process could seriously jeopardize the stability of the EU's neighbourhood and, at the same time, weaken its geopolitical power. It would mean leaving the Western Balkans in the hands of other powers such as Russia, China or Turkey that would clearly benefit from the EU vacuum in the region[67]. This is precisely the dichotomy that divides EU member states in advancing the accession process.

[64] JANO, D. Brexit implications on EU enlargement is it make or break time? *EU Policy Hub. Policy Brief*, 2016. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/ruP81SI>

[65] IVKOVIĆ, A. (February 2nd 2020) [EWB Interview] Wunsch: There is a good chance France will consent to opening of talks with the new methodology. *European Western Balkans*. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/uuP4RIW>

[66] CSAKY, Z. Nations in Transit 2020 Dropping the Democratic Facade. Freedomhouse.com. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/TsyH9Ww>

[67] ABELLÁN, L. (18 de mayo de 2018) La cumbre de la UE en Sofía evita dar perspectiva de adhesión a los Balcanes. *Elpaís.com*. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/fuP7wpW>

6.1. Geopolitics

In an increasingly geopolitical world in which the future of citizens depends on great power struggles and where the objective is to create ever greater spheres of influence through the instruments of political power, the EU cannot stay behind[68]. Commission Juncker (2014-2019) highlighted that there would be no further enlargements during his mandate while stressing that first the EU needs to be internally strengthened. However, by the end of his mandate, Juncker underlined its awareness about stability in the EU neighbourhood would necessarily mean a Western Balkans credible accession process[69].

Ursula Von der Leyen has defined its Commission Presidency term as geopolitical[70] with the utmost purpose of increasing the EU power in the world – which necessarily mean to ensure the stability in the EU neighbourhood. The current EU Commission understands that enlargement to the Western Balkans is in the EU political, economic and security interest; in addition to a geostrategic move in order to make the EU more stable, strong and united[71]. During her first speech as President of the EU Commission, Von der Leyen made particular emphasis on a strategic enlargement to the Western Balkans[72]. Nevertheless, the most important challenge that the EU Commission faces in making the EU a relevant geopolitical actor remains to be the lack of unity among member states towards its immediate neighbourhood. The fact that France refuses to make any progress towards Western Balkans enlargement allows external competitors to exert greater influence in the region[73].

The EU Commission has emphasized that promoting enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans would be essential to ensure the credibility, success and influence of the EU in the region, especially taking into account the current global scenario characterized by great geopolitical rivalry[74]. Over the past few years, favoured by the

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68 STEINICKE, S. Geopolitics is back — and the EU needs to get ready. *International Politics and Society*, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/KuP5yIP>

69 European Commission. President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017. Speech. 2017. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/OuP5SmH>

70 European Commission (November 27th 2019) Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/LsyLScu>

71 DABROWSKI, M. Can the EU overcome its enlargement impasse? *Bruegel.org.* 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/JuP6uBE>

72 European Commission (November 27th 2019) Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/LsyLScu>

73 TEEVAN, C. Geopolitics for dummies: Big challenges await the new European Commission. *ECDPM blog*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/ouP6DCP>

74 MEĐAK, V. New methodology will put political will to the test. *European Western Balkans. com*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/duAqkR8>

vacuum left by the EU and the US, there has been an increase in the presence and influence of other world powers such as Russia, China, Turkey or the Gulf countries in the Western Balkans, mainly through soft power or investment strategies[75].

Therefore, even if member states reluctances about enlargement would discourage to continue the accession process, doing so would have severe consequences for the EU mainly because Western Balkans could end up under the influence of China, Russia or Turkey. China, as part of its One Belt One Road initiative is making large investments in the region. Furthermore, the governments of the Western Balkans are particularly attracted to Chinese investments because, unlike those from the EU, they are not conditional on any kind of reform nor do they require extensive bureaucratic procedures for which their public administration is not adequately prepared[76].

Serbia is the Western Balkan country with the closest relations with the EU. However it also enjoys a tight relationship with Russia, mainly focused on political and religious aspects, that has led to an agreement on a Eurasian economic union[77]. Similarly, China's largest investments in the region are concentrated in Serbia[78]. Furthermore, as part of a soft power strategy, both China and Russia have provided military equipment and made investments in the region to promote their culture among Western Balkans citizens, at the same time that they have also strengthen its ties with the political elites of these countries. On the other hand, Iran and Turkey have focused their influence in the religious sphere through Muslim communities[79].

6.2. Rule of law

Rule of law is the key problem in the Western Balkans accession to the EU[80]. While region's elites have been successful in creating a false appearance of democracy through, for example, the periodic holding of elections, enacting laws

[75] VUKSANOVIC, V. Serbia's deal with the Eurasian Economic Union: A triumph of foreign policy over economics. *LSE Blog*. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/huAwPg9>

[76] MARCIACQ, F. & REICHARDT, I. (May 24th 2019) Failure in the Western Balkans means a failure of the European project. *NewEasternEurope.com*. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/WuAepNM>

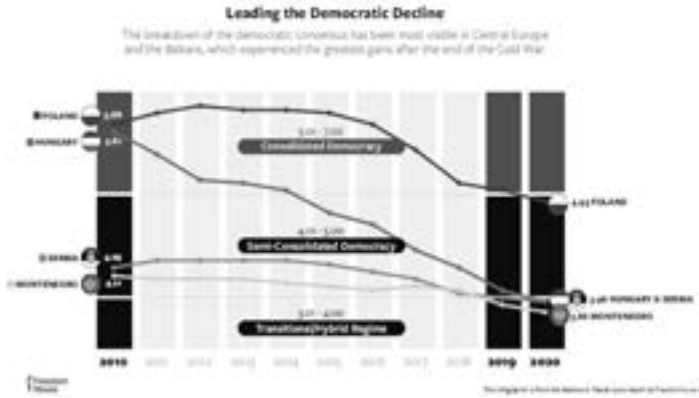
[77] CADÈNE, B. (Le 6 Mai 2020) Les Balkans occidentaux sont-ils les bienvenus dans l'Union européenne? *Franceculture.fr*. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/4uAeJ6Y>

[78] MARDELL, J. China's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. *Bertelsmann-stiftung.de.* 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/UuArf3O>

[79] RRUSTEMI, A., WIJK, R., DUNLOP, C., PEROVSKA, J. & PALUSHI, L. Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans; *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuPUlex>

[80] European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

that guarantee freedom of expression or constitutionally guaranteeing a system of counterweights; The reality is that these Balkan elites impede the effective enjoyment of individual rights, calling into question rule of law[81]. Western Balkans socio-political context is characterized by low levels of respect for the rule of law and high levels of corruption. To which we must add security risks derived from social unrest, political instability and ethnic-nationalist or extreme right and religious extremisms. In addition to a weak economic context that means that, taking into account the geographical proximity of the Western Balkans to the EU if its presence is not reinforced, it will suffer from the external negative consequences (Bonomi and Reljic 2017)[82]. One of the *sine qua non* requirements for a candidate state to finally join the European project is its firm respect for the rule of law. In this regard, EU Commission stresses that Western Balkans have to carry out major reforms regarding respect for the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime, economic and competitiveness as well as regional cooperation and reconciliation[83]. According to *Freedomhouse.org*, none Western Balkan countries is currently considered as full democracy[84].



Source: Freedom House

A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. COM(2018) 65 final. 2018. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/ZsyB20j>

81 KMEZIĆ, M. Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: addressing the gap between policies and practice. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 2020, Vol. 20, Nº1; pp. 183–198, p. 186.

82 RRUSTEMI, A., WIJK, R., DUNLOP, C., PEROVSKA, J. & PALUSHI, L. Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans; *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/CuPUlex>

83 European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. COM(2019) 260 final. 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/nuAy9V5>

84 *FreedomHouse.org* Countries and Territories. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/NuAuc4X>

Political parties have captured the state through corrupt and patronage networks ranging from the political to the judicial sphere through control of the media. Generally speaking, political forces with strong representation support the accession to its country to the EU. In particular, with regards to Montenegro, the political party with the strongest representation in the EU Parliament is pro-EU. However, the alliance of right-wing populist and conservative parties "Democratic Front", the main opposition party, with 17 seats out of 81 in Parliament (2016), consider itself eurosceptic while defending anti-NATO and pro- Russian positions[85]. In the case of the Serbian President, even though it is in favour of the accession to the EU, he is committed to Russia, keeping it as its traditional geopolitical partner. In 2019 Serbia and Russia signed a Eurasian economic agreement. Another fundamental actor in Serbia is the "Serbian Radical Party", a eurosceptic radical party that seeks to unite all Serbs under a single State[86]. In Albania, all political forces defend integration into the EU and strengthening relations with the United States[87] and NATO. Finally, North Macedonia's party system is divided around the representation of different ethnic groups, which favours nationalist tendencies. However, they all share their commitment to European integration and NATO[88].

Once the EU and the Western Balkans begin a closer relationship through the accession process, the EU will have to make considerable efforts to establish the necessary guidance, check the reforms and condition the funds particularly to the advances in this matter[89]. As the EU Council stresses: "Increased EU assistance will be linked to tangible progress in the rule of law and in socio-economic reforms, as well as on the Western Balkans partners' adherence to EU values, rules and standards"[90]. However, several academics stress that it might take several years before Western Balkans are able to are able to endorse EU law requiring even more time for them to guarantee compliance with EU norms and values[91].

[85] Balkaninsight.com (October 11th 2016) Montenegro: Key Political Parties. 2016. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/HuAt7Dn>

[86] Party Passport. Serbia. European Party Monitor.*KU Leuven. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/WuAyieZ>

[87] Party Passport. Albania. European Party Monitor.*KU Leuven. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/uuAyhGn>

[88] Party Passport. North Macedonia. European Party Monitor.*KU Leuven. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/FuAyvN2>

[89] TOCCI, N. (May 6th 2020) Los Balcanes Occidentales pertenecen a Europa. *POLITICO. HEAVEN32.com.* [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/QuAu5Ud>

[90] EU Council. Zagreb Declaration, 6 May 2020. Press report. 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/Ysy2aUj>

[91] MARCIACQ, F. & REICHARDT, I. (May 24th 2019) Failure in the Western Balkans means a failure of the European project. *NewEasternEurope.com*. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/WuAepNM>

Therefore, Western Balkan accession to the EU will depend, to a large extent; on the reforms they are capable of implementing.

7. Differentiated Integration Towards the Western Balkans?

Holzinger & Schimmelfennig (2012) share the Grabitz (1984) conception about Multi-speed Europe underlying that it implies "the introduction of a federal political union in several steps, whereby some states co-operate closer at an earlier point in time while others follow suit later"[92]. Differentiated integration is part of the EU project since the Maastricht Treaty. At this point, the concept used was flexibility. During the Amsterdam Treaty the concept used was closer cooperation, reformulated by the Treaty of Nice into enhanced cooperation. Finally, the Lisbon Treaty introduced, particularly regarding defence, permanent structured cooperation. Furthermore, with the aim of making unanimity in decision-making more flexible, Amsterdam Treaty introduced the possibility of constructive abstention[93]; in addition to the popular *opt-outs* with regards to Schengen.

The main objective of enlargement policy is that candidate countries become full member states. This means that they have to add to their domestic law the entire *acquis communautaire*. Nevertheless, since the EU already applies differentiated integration within the EU, it could also be very advantageous to do so regarding candidate countries in order to strengthen relations with those that aspire to have a closer relationship with the EU but either do not want, or are not prepared to be full members. However, we should also have into account that differentiated integration could foster inequalities between member states, leading to first and second class member states[94].

Enlargement process towards the Western Balkans, unlike previous enlargement processes, is particularly linked to cross compliance. There are major questions surrounding this process regarding security, migration and freedom

[92] HOLZINGER, K. & SCHIMMELFENNIG, F. Differentiated Integration in the European Union: Many Concepts, Sparse Theory, Few Data. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2012, Vol. 19, Nº 2, pp. 292–305, p. 294.

[93] JOKELA, J. Introduction. In JOKELA, J. (Ed). Multi-speed Europe Differentiated integration in the external relations of the European Union. *Finish Institute of International Affairs*. 2014. REPORT 38; pp. 9–16, p. 11. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/0uAandG>

[94] RAIK, K. & TAMMINEN, T. Inclusive and exclusive differentiation: Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy. JOKELA, J. (Ed). Multi-speed Europe Differentiated integration in the external relations of the European Union. *Finish Institute of International Affairs,* 2014. REPORT 38; pp. 45–63; p. 46. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/0uAandG>

of movement (Grabbe 2014; Ker-Lindsay 2017)[95]. Germany is a strong supporter of the Western Balkans enlargement, not only as a way of democratically transforming these countries but also as a way to convince and engage both domestic political actors and citizens as a whole[96].

Given that Western Balkans must undergo major reforms before they can become full Member States, it would be appropriate to consider as an option the establishment of intermediate steps prior to full integration. As we have indicated, their accession is subject to the fact that these countries manage to reform their institutions and the development of rule of law, so it is likely that, if this is not achieved, certain economic sectors would opt for establishing an association with the internal market instead of full integration[97].

Both Germany and France are among the member states more favourable to the introduction of closer collaboration mechanisms between Member States that further EU integration,[98] which means differentiated integration or Multi-speed EU. Germany remarks the idea that multi-speed EU does not mean a divided EU, and understands that introducing flexibility mechanisms will allow the EU to effectively respond to the different challenges that will arise. France maintains that the only way for the EU to function is through the introduction of flexibility in its policies. Furthermore, France hopes that a Multi-speed EU will consolidate France power as part of the EU's hard core as it considers that it has been weakened as a result of successive enlargements[99].

Despite its reluctances, France understands that the strategic relevance of the Western Balkans to the EU is inevitable. However, it is also necessary to consider several member states concern about the problems that this enlargement would bring. As Stefan Lehne (Carnegie Europe) highlights, resorting to differentiated integration formulas that would lead to a multilevel system of European governance could undoubtedly facilitate the integration of the Western

[95] KER-LINDSAY, J., ARMAKOLAS, I., BALFOUR, R. & STRATULAT, C. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº. 4; pp. 511–522, p. 519.

[96] TÖGLHOFER, T. & ADEBAHR, C. Firm supporter and severe critic – Germany's two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2017. Vol. 17, Nº 4, pp. 523–539.

[97] TCHERNEVA, V. Europe's new agenda in the Western Balkans. *European Council on Foreign Relations* 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/fuAd8i0>

[98] BRUDZIŃSKA, K., GUBALOVA, V., KUDZKO, A. & MUZERGUES, A. Making Flexible Europe Work? European Governance and the potential of differentiated integration. *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*. 2020; p. 12. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/DuPZoAx>

[99] BRUDZIŃSKA, K., GUBALOVA, V., KUDZKO, A. & MUZERGUES, A. Making Flexible Europe Work? European Governance and the potential of differentiated integration. *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*. 2020; pp. 47–48. [online]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/DuPZoAx>

Balkans[100]. Furthermore, opting for differentiated integration formulas, in line with the proposal of French President Enmanuel Macron, would allow the EU to ensure stability in its neighbourhood without directly linking it to a promise of enlargement[101]. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the offer that the Commission has made to the Western Balkans entails full Membership, so changing the rules the game could affect the credibility of the EU in the region.

8. Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have focused on the different understanding that Germany and France have towards the Western Balkan enlargement, stressing that they follow a rational approach based on the pursuit of their domestic interests. In terms of who wins and who loses with the Western Balkans enlargement it is clear that Germany enjoys a closer relationship in both economic and political terms than what France does. France feels the enlargement to the Western Balkans could harm its influence in the EU, in favour of Germany, particularly after Brexit. In addition to the economic disadvantages, that adding less developed countries to the EU could bring in terms of distribution of its funds. Not to mention the danger that these weak democracies could cause to the heart of the EU project. Nevertheless, France could very much benefit from the geopolitical power and influence in the global arena that the EU could obtain because of this enlargement.

Western Balkans' enlargement is a crossroads between the problems that it could bring into the EU in terms of democracy and respect of rule of law and the risk of losing geopolitical influence if not strengthening the relationship among these two political areas. This article concludes that differentiated integration seems to be the best answer in order to strengthen the links with third countries that either do not want to be part of the EU (Brexit) or that do not fulfil the necessary criteria to join the EU project (Western Balkans). Moreover, as we have already stressed both France and Germany are among the member states more favourable about introducing formulas of differentiated integration. Therefore this article emphasizes it could be the best strategy to find a common agreement among the EU member states. In short, differentiated integration could allow the EU to take advantage of a closer relationship with the Western Balkans in

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increasing its influence in the region, at the same time that reduces the risk of the down sides that adding these countries to the EU could cause in the future strengthening of the integration project.

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