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**EU enlargement into the
Western Balkans: a gloomy
prospect gets gloomier**

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Introduction

The European Union, largely relying on the soft power of its core values and norms that were incorporated as normative principles in the Copenhagen accession conditions,¹ has through its eastern 2004/07 enlargement process successfully promoted and supported peaceful development, democratisation and market reforms in post-communist East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics. However, its impact on developments in post-communist countries which received EU accession offers later (in the Western Balkans) or have not received it at all (in non-Baltic post-Soviet Europe) has not been so positive. Outcomes were particularly disappointing for the candidates and potential candidates for EU membership from the so-called Western Balkans² – comprised of Albania and all the post-Yugoslav states excluding Slovenia – none of which (bar Croatia) has been able to accomplish post-communist reforms and meet other accession conditions at the level which the EU deems satisfactory for membership. After Croatia joined the EU in 2013, of the remaining Western Balkan states, only Montenegro and Serbia have so far opened the accession negotiations with the EU, albeit with very gloomy prospects of closing them in the foreseeable future.

- 1 Accession conditions for new candidates for EU membership adopted at the European Council's meeting in Copenhagen of 22-23 June, 1993.
- 2 The term 'Western Balkans' was invented by the EU at the time when it launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (see Section 1 below) for this group of states in order to make a distinction between them and other two (eastern) Balkan states, Romania and Bulgaria which were by then included in the 2004/07 enlargement process.

Such outcomes of the *EUropeanisation*³ of this small part of Europe, which is just a few hundred kilometres away from Vienna, Munich, Rome or Budapest and virtually ‘surrounded’ by EU member states, are all the more disappointing as all the Western Balkan states (excluding Albania) were part of the former Yugoslavia, which was the communist country most open to Western values and norms. It is no wonder that many scholars and experts had expected that this country would be able to go through the process of post-communist reform easier and quicker than any other communist state in Cold War Europe.⁴ After Yugoslavia disappeared from the political map of Europe in the turbulent events of the early 1990s and later its two most advanced successor states – Slovenia and Croatia – managed to accede to the EU, a significant number of scholars⁵ and EU officials argued that slow progress in the post-communist transition and EU accession process of Albania and remaining post-Yugoslav states is a ‘logical consequence’ of these states’ long lasting political and socio-economic ‘backwardness’ and structural incapacity to adopt EU (‘Western’) values and norms. As ‘crucial

- 3 Although it is generally used in a much broader sense and related to the transfer of political, socio-economic and cultural values, norms and attitudes developed in (predominantly Western) European countries to non-European countries, the term ‘Europeanisation’ in the modern political science literature is dominantly used as EU-centric (and therefore is written with a capital ‘U’ above). It primarily refers to the process of transfer (and adoption) of norms, procedures and regulations which exist at the EU level to the political, legal and social structures of the member states or the countries which wish to become EU members. See e.g. Flockhart, Tine 2010. ‘Europeanization or EU-ization? The Transfer of European Norms across Time and Space’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48 (4), 787-810 and Radaelli, Claudio M. 2003. ‘The Europeanization of Public Policy’. In Featherstone, Kevin and Claudio M. Radaelli (eds.) *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford Scholarship Online.
- 4 See e.g. Lampe, John, R. 1996. *Yugoslavia as History. Twice there was a country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Woodward, Susan, L. 1995. *Balkan Tragedy. Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- 5 Particularly those from the ‘structuralist camp’, led by Samuel Huntington’s and Andrew Janos’ definitions of the borders of Western, pro-democratic and Eastern, pro-authoritarian civilisation along the division between Western and Eastern Christianity and Islam. See in particular Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, and Janos, Andrew, C. 2000. *East Central Europe in the Modern World. The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre-to Postcommunism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

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proof' for the validity of this argument, the continuously low level of consolidation of democratic institutions, particularly reflected through persistently high corruption and problems with respect for the rule of law in all these states has often been highlighted. Another support for this argument is found in the claim that the two (also 'backward') Balkan states, Bulgaria and Romania,⁶ which were 'prematurely' admitted to the EU in 2007, are still not able to solve similar issues and fully consolidate their democratic institutions, despite having been EU members for more than 14 years by now. On the other hand, it can be argued (as is this author's stance) that Bulgaria and Romania have made significant progress since joining the EU (from a lower level of democracy and economic development than most ECE and Baltic states) which indeed shows that the Western Balkan states could quickly catch up with their 'more Europeanised' post-communist counterparts, if they received a similar level of EU support and assistance.

There is a lot of undeniable evidence that domestic political developments, primarily caused by decisions and policy choices made by Western Balkan political actors in the 1990s, rather than structural disadvantages of their states negatively impacted the ability of these states to progress in post-communist reform and meet EU accession conditions. However, there is also a very convincing set of evidence that the assistance which the EU has provided to the Western Balkan states (excluding Croatia) to conduct post-communist reform and prepare for accession has been insufficient and incomparably lower to that given to the post-communist states (including Bulgaria and Romania) throughout the 2004/07 enlargement process. The following sections outline this evidence and explain how the EU has changed its positive stance towards Western Balkan accession and made it virtually impossible through indefinitely increasing the number and toughness of accession conditions. The backsliding effects of this change on previously achieved

6 For a critique of the argument of Balkan 'backwardness' in the Western academia and media see Todorova, Maria, 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press and Crampton, Richard. J. 2013. 'Foreword' in Petrovic, M. 2013. *The Democratic Transition...* see next foot note.

post-communist reforms, particularly those related to the functioning of institutions of democracy in the individual Western Balkan states and to general political stability in the region, are also examined.

1. A similar EU approach during the 1990s and the enlargement offer in the early 2000s

Despite some obvious economic and socio-cultural disadvantages that the Balkan states inherited from centuries of Ottoman rule, there is no strong evidence that the pre-communist structural differences could have made these countries significantly different from their ECE and Baltic post-communist counterparts in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of East European communism. As argued by this author in greater detail in his 2013 monograph,⁷ there were no significant differences in the development of the institutions of liberal democracy and market economy between the Balkan countries and most of the countries in ECE (with the only significant exception being Czechoslovakia) and the Baltics during the period from the late 19th century to World War II. During the communist era, the main political-social structures and the general level of economic development were again very similar in all European communist states (with the partial exemption of economically extremely backward Albania and the devastated Romania after 25 years of Ceausescu's tyranny). If there was an impact of past legacies on the troublesome and slow post-communist transition of the Balkan states in the 1990s (including Bulgaria and Romania in the first half of the decade) it was primarily related to their immediate communist past and the fact that the grip on dictatorial power of the Balkan communist leaders was much stronger than of their ECE counterparts.⁸ This, accompanied with a few additional factors (particularly the effects of successful industrialisation and

7 Petrovic, Milenko 2013. *The Democratic Transition of Post-Communist Europe - In the Shadow of communist differences and uneven Europeanisation*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

8 For this argument, in addition to the above cited 2013 book, see also the detailed history of East European communist states in Crampton Richard. J., 1997 (2nd ed). *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century and After*, London and New York: Routledge, and Rothschild, Joseph, 1993. *Return to Diversity. A Political History*

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unresolved national-ethnic disputes and animosities in the case of Yugoslavia) did not allow for the foundation of a genuine liberal-democratic political opposition that could have led these states through post-communist transition and Europeanisation after the collapse of communist rule.

In contrast to the ex-communist countries in ECE and the three Baltic states, in the post-communist Balkans (as in almost all post-Soviet non-Baltic states) political power was not initially taken by political actors who sought 'Western style' full democratisation and economic marketization but instead by (partially or cosmetically) 'reformed' ex-communists or national populist parties. An immediate consequence of this different political setting was a quick start with reforms and closer relations with the West and the EU in the ECE and Baltic states and slow reform and establishment of the systems of imperfect or so-called 'illiberal' democracy in the remaining post-communist states.⁹ Moreover, the selection of the non-reformist pathway, coupled with strong ethnic nationalism (i.e. unresolved or inadequately resolved ethnic relations during communist rule) in post-Yugoslav states and most post-Soviet states, led to the eruption of inter-ethnic conflicts,¹⁰ the most serious of which were the civil/ethnic wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H), the Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and armed clashes between national armies and rebel ethnic groups in Georgia, Moldova and Chechnya.

of East Central Europe Since World War II, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- 9 Petrovic 2013, op. cit; Vachudova, Milada Anna, 2005. Europe Undivided. Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- 10 Brubaker, Rogers. 1996. Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York; Roeder, Philip G., 2007. Where Nation-States Come From : Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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	Democracy score*					Economic Transition**		
	1999	2006	2012	2014	2017	1999	2006	2014×
EU-8 (2004)	2.12	2.03	2.25	2.32	2.48	3.4	3.7	3.9
<i>Hungary</i>	1.88	2.14	2.89	3.18	3.71	3.7	3.9	3.9
<i>Poland</i>	1.58	2.36	2.18	2.21	2.89	3.5	3.7	4.0
<i>Slovakia</i>	2.71	2.14	2.57	2.64	2.61	3.3	3.7	3.9
<i>Romania</i>	3.54	3.29	3.50	3.46	3.46	2.8	3.3	3.7
<i>Bulgaria</i>	3.58	2.89	3.18	3.29	3.39	2.8	3.5	3.7
<i>Croatia</i>	4.46	3.75	3.61	3.68	3.75	3.0	3.5	3.8
North Macedonia	3.83	3.82	3.93	4.07	4.36	2.7	3.1	3.6
Albania	4.75	3.82	4.25	4.14	4.11	2.6	2.9	3.5
Bosnia-Herzegovina	5.42	4.04	4.39	4.46	4.64	2.0	2.6	3.1
Montenegro	5.50	3.93	3.82	3.89	3.93	1.6	2.5	3.3
Serbia	5.50	3.68	3.64	3.68	3.96	1.4	2.7	3.2
Kosovo	N/A	N/A	5.25	5.14	4.93	N/A	N/A	2.9
Ex-USSR 7	4.92	5.46	5.62	5.64	5.69	2.3	2.6	2.9

Table 1. Indicators of post-communist democratisation and marketization

EU-8 (2004): Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Ex-USSR 7: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine

* Freedom House NIT “democracy score” (1 being the highest: full democracy; 7 being the lowest: complete dictatorship) are published annually in June and show the state of play in the respective countries during the previous year. The scores given in the above table for particular years (e.g. 2014) are actually published in the NIT publication for the following year (2015 in this case).

** EBRD economic transition indicators (4.33 = standards of advanced industrial [market] economies; 1 = standards of a centrally planned economy) are published annually in October in the *Transition Report* and refer to the state of play in the previous 12 months.

× The EBRD significantly changed its methodology for calculating indicators of economic transition after 2014 so that the data for more recent years are incompatible to those of previous years and cannot be included in the table.

Sources: Freedom House Nations in Transit, various years; EBRD Transition Report, various years

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The EU offered the former Yugoslavia as well as the countries in ECE, the Baltics and its Balkan neighbours Bulgaria and Romania the same opportunity to link transition reforms to the process of EU association (and later accession) as early as 1990/1991.¹¹ After the peoples of former Yugoslavia, divided by their ethno-national local communist leaderships, did not take this opportunity and after all their post-Yugoslav states (bar Slovenia and partially North Macedonia) sunk in post-Yugoslav wars, the EU, together with its leading member states, was heavily involved in attempts to assist the peaceful (re)resolution of these wars and post-war democracy and state building in the region.¹² However, the real Europeanisation of all the Balkan countries only started in the second half of the 1990s, after the wars in B-H and Croatia had ended in 1995 and after Romania and Bulgaria had elected strongly reformist and pro-EU governments in 1996 and 1997 respectively. While Bulgaria and Romania were able (although with some delay) to join the countries of ECE and the Baltic states in opening accession negotiations with the EU by 2000, the Western Balkan states had a much longer way to go.

Due to their involvement in the wars in Croatia, B-H, and the later Kosovo conflict of 1998/99, along with the very slow introduction of post-communist reform and the lack of economic growth in all the Western Balkan states in the 1990s, the EU designed for them the so-called “coherent strategy” of “conditionality” and “[a] gradual approach” in offering EU cooperation and assistance for “peace and stability, economic renewal, democracy ... and [mutual] cooperation”.¹³ The positive impact of this new EU strategy, which

- 11 Lavigne, Marie 1999 (2nd ed). *The Economics of Transition: From Socialist Economy to Market Economy*, Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York; Mayhew, Alan 1998. *Recreating Europe. The European Union's Policy towards Central and Eastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- 12 Cohen, Lenard J., 1995 (2nd ed.), *Broken Bonds: Yugoslavia's Disintegration and Balkan Politics in Transition*, Boulder: Westview Press; Woodward, op. cit.
- 13 EU General Affairs Council, 1997, 'Council Conclusions on the Application of Conditionality with a view to developing a Coherent EU-Strategy for the Relations with the Countries in the Region', Council Conclusions, Annex III, Brussels, 29/30 April 1997. See also: Pippan, Christian, 2004. 'The Rocky Road to Europe: The EU's Stabilisation and Association Process for the Western Balkans and the Principle of Conditionality', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 9 (2), pp. 219-245.

by 1999 had been turned into the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkan states, rapidly became obvious. Not only did the two largest countries in the region, Serbia (then with Montenegro) and Croatia, almost simultaneously replace their post-communist authoritarian regimes with strongly pro-reformist and pro-EU governments during a 10-month period in 1999/2000,¹⁴ but all the countries in the region (with the sole exception of North Macedonia) succeeded in significantly accelerating their post-communist political and economic transformation in the first half of the 2000s (see Table 1).

However, although these positive trends were strongly supported and further boosted by the conclusions of several EU Council and European Council meetings on the bright prospects of all the Western Balkan states for an ‘EU future’ which culminated in the adoption of the *Thessaloniki Agenda* in 2003¹⁵, the progress of these countries in developing contractual relations with the EU was comparatively much slower than those achieved by the accession aspirants during the 2004/07 enlargement round. This development became particularly slow after the completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round and the emergence of the global financial crisis and the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis a few years later, when the EU decided to tighten accession requirements for the Western Balkan states.

2. *The changed EU approach to enlargement after 2006*

Although they have never been as high on the EU enlargement agenda as the post-communist states of East Central and Baltic Europe, the prospects for the accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU started to deteriorate almost immediately after the 2004 mega enlargement was complete. When

14 After the death of Croatia’s authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of Serbia’s post-communist dictator Milosevic in October the following year.

15 Which declared that all the Western Balkan states “will [ultimately] be an integral part of united Europe” (EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003. The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration, Council Conclusions, Luxembourg, 16 June 2003, Annex A).

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the EU in 2006, pressured by emerging *enlargement fatigue* and fears for its ‘absorption capacity’ in key member states, decided to “renew [the] consensus on enlargement” it de facto tightened the accession conditions and made the accession process more demanding and complex for new applicants.¹⁶ From that moment on, the basic objective of EU ‘enlargement’ policy towards the Western Balkan states was not to speed up the accession of these states, but rather to try to avoid ‘mistakes’ from previous enlargement rounds, particularly those related to the ‘premature’ accession of Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁷ The key points of this “renewed consensus on enlargement” considered an increase in the total number of acquis chapters from 31 to 35, a tightening of requirements for the closure of each chapter, and the introduction of a clause, which defines accession negotiations as an “open-ended process whose outcome cannot be guaranteed beforehand”.¹⁸

In the years following the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis of the late 2000s/early 2010s the EU also began to prioritize the importance (and early opening) of the three ‘key chapters’ on the rule of law, institution-building and economic governance,¹⁹ and to further tighten criteria for their successful completion. While Croatia, whose accession became definitive

- 16 European Council, 2006. Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, 14-15 December 2006, point 4. For further reading see Petrovic 2013, op. cit. (chapter 5) and Phinnemore, David, 2006. ‘Beyond 25—the changing face of EU enlargement: commitment, conditionality and the Constitutional Treaty’, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 8 (1), pp. 7-26.
- 17 However, more thorough analyses show that there is no real evidence that the post-accession trajectories of these two countries have significantly differed from those of their post-communist counterparts who joined the EU in 2004. See e.g. Pop-Eleches, G. and Levitz, P. 2010. ‘Monitoring, Money and Migrants: Countering Post-Accession Backsliding in Bulgaria and Romania’. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62, (3), 461-79 and Sedelmeier, U. 2014. *Anchoring Democracy from Above: The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania after Accession*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52 (1) 105–21.
- 18 European Commission, 2005. *Negotiation Framework [with Croatia]*, Luxemburg, 3. October, 2005 (http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/st20004_05_HR_framedoc_en.pdf)
- 19 European Commission 2014. *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2014–15*, COM(2014) 700 final, Brussels 8.10.2014; Grabbe, Heather 2014. *Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52, 40-56.

when it closed accession negotiations in June 2011, was spared this new ‘three pillar’ approach to accession negotiations, it was imposed on the remaining Western Balkan states as a de facto further tightening of the Copenhagen accession conditions (which had already been tightened in 2006). In addition to the tightened Copenhagen 1993 accession conditions and the SAP conditions regarding post-war reconciliation and peace-building in the region,²⁰ the new approach to EU enlargement after 2006 also included the additional conditions related to compliance with the EU’s initiatives for resolving the contested statehood status of some of the Western Balkan states. In this way, candidates and potential candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans have had to cope with several sets of additional accession conditions which were imposed after the EU offered them an ‘EU future’ in 2003.²¹ In comparison, the post-communist states, which joined the EU within the 2004/2007 enlargement round only had to meet the Copenhagen conditions defined in 1993.

While the EU’s request for the fulfilment of the Copenhagen 1993 accession conditions has greatly assisted all post-communist states, which were included in any of the EU enlargement rounds, through providing them with advice and valuable guidelines for building democratic institutions and a market economy, many of the additional accession conditions later imposed on the Western Balkan states were often a ‘pure burden’. Neither the 2006 ‘improved’ Copenhagen conditions nor the ‘three pillar’ approach, introduced several years later, have contributed to significant improvements in the democratisation of any of the Western Balkan states (Table 1). However,

- 20 Although necessary for overcoming the negative legacies and consequences of the 1990 wars, the SAP conditions, particularly those related to cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague [ICTY] were sometimes very difficult to comply with as they involved ‘high political costs of compliance [for] the targeted governments’ (Schimmelfennig, Frank, 2008. ‘EU political accession conditionality after enlargement: consistency and effectiveness’. *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (6), 918-937).
- 21 For more details see Petrovic, Milenko 2017. ‘Post-Communist Transition under the Umbrella of Univen Europeanisation: East Central Europe, the Baltic States and the Balkans’. In Fish, Steven, M., Gill, Graeme and Milenko Petrovic (eds.). *A Quarter Century of Post-Communism Assessed*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41-74.

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they have increased the burden on these states in acceding to the EU. Moreover, as Petrovic and Smith argue²² (and as is visible from the data presented in Table 1) the level of democratisation reached by the most advanced current Western Balkan candidates for EU membership – Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro by the early 2010s was not much below that in the neighbouring Balkan EU member states – Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. From that point of view, it can be argued that despite the obvious necessity for further improvements in the work of democratic institutions in all the Western Balkan states, their levels of democratisation (particularly of the above three countries) did not require such ‘dramatic improvement’ as one could conclude reading the European Commission’s reports and other EU documents on the state of play in these states.²³

In addition to the ever increasing number of new demands regarding the improvement of democracy standards and practices, even more burdening for the Western Balkan countries’ accession ambitions have been the EU’s demands for compliance (in order to progress in the SAP and accession process) with its state building incentives and proposals for solving intraregional disputes. Among these, particularly demanding were the EU’s requirements related to the resolution of the contested statehood status of several Western Balkan states.²⁴ As argued in a number of studies,²⁵ most of these proposals

- 22 Petrovic, Milenko and Nicholas Ross Smith 2013. ‘In Croatia’s Slipstream or on an Alternative Road? Assessing the objective case for the remaining Western Balkan states acceding into the EU’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 13 (4), 553-573.
- 23 The lack of improvements in democracy standards in this region over the last decade can also be seen as reflections of broader European and global trends following the global financial crisis. Not only have various populist and pro-authoritarian political groups and parties become popular in many states with well-functioning democracies in Europe and around the world, but they were even able to seize power in some of these states; the two former frontrunners in post-communist democratisation – Hungary and Poland– being the most notorious examples.
- 24 Of all the Western Balkan states only Croatia, Montenegro and Albania were spared this ‘layer’ of accession conditions which was related to the disputed statehood status of B-H, Kosovo (and Serbia) and North Macedonia.
- 25 Bieber, Florian, 2011. ‘Building Impossible States? State-Building Strategies and EU membership in the Western Balkans’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63 (10), pp. 1783-1802; Börzel, Tanja A. and Sonja Grimm 2018. ‘Building Good (Enough) Governance in Postconflict Societies & Areas of Limited Statehood: The European Union & the

and incentives, especially those regarding the centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the resolution of the Greek – North Macedonian dispute regarding the latter's name, did not only put 'high political costs of compliance on the targeted governments'²⁶ but were also inappropriately formulated (or not formulated at all, with regards to the Greek-Macedonian dispute), with very little respect for the countries' specifics and realistic chances of meeting them. EU members (particularly through the Council and the European Council where they have veto power) have often used these proposals to advance their own national interests. Some of these interests have been pursued through insistence by EU member states on using the accession process to favour their stances in bilateral disputes with the candidate countries (as had Greece in its 'naming dispute' with North Macedonia or earlier Slovenia in its border dispute with Croatia)²⁷. National interests, particularly of the most powerful EU member-states, have also been expressed through pressure on the candidate countries to accept their proposals (and meet related conditions) for the resolution of bilateral disputes and statehood issues in the region (such as those regarding the Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order or resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute). Although some of the EU initiatives for maintaining peace and stability in the Western Balkans have in some respects been successful,²⁸ they have very often, particularly when trying to solve disputes over the statehood status "...neglect [ed] the rational interests of domestic actors and the dynamics of two-level game negotiations."²⁹ As such, these initiatives have been insupportable to the Western Balkan parties involved. Nevertheless, compliance with the EU's views of how to maintain peace and

Western Balkans', *Daedalus*, 147 (1), pp. 116-127; Noutcheva, Gergana 2009. 'Fake, partial and imposed compliance: the limits of the EU's normative power in the Western Balkans'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16 (7), 1065-1084; Petrovic 2013, op. cit, chapter 5 and Petrovic, 2017.

26 Schimmelfennig 2008, op. cit.

27 Petrovic, Milenko and Garth Wilson. 2021. 'Bilateral relations in the Western Balkans as a challenge for EU accession'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29 (2), 201-218.

28 E.g. in initiating and facilitating the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue over the Serbia-Kosovo dispute or in maintaining peace (but not so much political stability) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

29 Börzel and Grimm, op. cit, 124.

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security in the region has become a sine qua non for progress in the accession process of the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for EU membership.

3. Prioritisation of the EU's security-stability goals in the region

The official EU rationale behind the introduction of all its additional accession conditions for the Western Balkan states since 2006 has been to better prepare them for the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* and (incorporated) core EU value norms on democracy, good governance and the rule of law. As stated in the European Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy, “[c]ore issues such as the rule of law, fundamental rights, strengthening democratic institutions public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness remain key priorities in the enlargement process”³⁰ However, despite these declarative commitments, the building of democratic institutions and a market economy has never been (and especially has not been after 2006), the most important accession requirements for the Western Balkan states. Compliances with the SAP conditions and other requirements raised from EU strategic visions on the stability and security in the region (primarily defined by the EU's stances on and incentives for the resolution of the ‘hot political stability issues’ in the region noted in the previous section) has always been at the core of the EU's accession conditions for the Western Balkan States. Both the opening of Croatia's accession negotiations in October 2005 and the signing of Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008 were postponed (and Serbia's SAA also frozen immediately after it was signed in April 2008) due to these two countries' lack of cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague in delivering their citizens accused of war crimes to the Court. Similarly, the Council postponed its response to the Commission's recommendation to grant official candidate status to Serbia from December 2011 to March 2012

30 European Commission. 2018. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. COM (2018) 65 final. EN. Strasbourg, 6 February, p. 6

due to Serbia's unsatisfactory progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, on issues arising from its refusal to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008³¹. However, the cases of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are even more telling.

Although the Commission had already recommended to the Council to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia in 2009³², the Council has continued to block the opening of the accession negotiations with this country until the present day. The main reason for this initially was the Greek veto over North Macedonia's former constitutional name 'the Republic of Macedonia.'³³ However, after it officially changed its name in 2019, Bulgaria's veto over North Macedonia's national/ethnic identity and language became the primary obstacle to opening accession negotiations (see the next section). On the other hand, the EU itself (represented by both the Commission and the Council) has contributed to the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has been unable to meet the basic (pre) conditions for getting the status of a candidate country for years. In order to overcome "a complex institutional architecture that remains inefficient and which is subject to different interpretations"³⁴, the EU imposed a (pre)condition on B-H in the form of a demand for the country's constitutional change towards greater centralisation and strengthening the role of federal institutions. Despite very strong opposition by leaders (and wider public) of two (of three) constitutive B-H national/ethnic groups, the EU continuously demanded this constitutional change as a *sine qua non* for any significant progress in the accession process from the second half of the 2000s until the mid 2010s.³⁵ Not only did this accession

31 European Council, 2011. Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, 9 December, 2011, point 13.

32 European Commission, 2009. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010, COM (2009) 533 final, Brussels, 14.10.2009.

33 Thus it was admitted to the UN and called in the EU documents and documents of other international organisations by its provisional name 'the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' until the two parties finally reached the deal on 'North Macedonia' by the Prespa agreement of June 2018.

34 European Commission. (2015) Bosnia and Herzegovina Report. Commission Staff Working Document, SWD(2015) 214 Final, Brussels, 10.11.2015, p.7.

35 See European Commission, Annual Progress Reports on Bosnia-Herzegovina for all years in the period 2007-2015 available from the Commission's website as well as Bieber, 2011, op. cit; Noutcheva 2012, op.cit. and Petrovic 2017, op.cit.

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requirement have zero chance of being unanimously adopted (which is the constitutional requirement) and as such it blocked any progress in B-H's Europeanisation, but it became an additional source of ethnic animosity and political conflict in this country.³⁶ Similarly negative were the effects of the EU's de facto accession demands on North Macedonia to solve its 'naming problem' with Greece, more or less by themselves (which they were unable to do for almost three decades).³⁷ In the absence of any progress in EU accession (which has always been unanimously supported by all political groups and parties in the country), ethnic mistrust between the large Albanian minority (around a quarter of the total population) and the Macedonian majority, coupled with deep animosity between the increasingly authoritarian national-populist government of Prime Minister Gruevski and the largest opposition party had completely paralysed political life in the country in the course of 2014 and early 2015.³⁸ The situation was normalised only after negotiations led by EU Commissioner Hahn brokered an agreement between the four major Macedonian parties on a 'tender truce' and early elections in April 2016.³⁹

That the EU has largely prioritised regional and national political stability (as understood and defined in the respective EU policy incentives and proposals) rather than democracy standards and progress with necessary socio-

36 Petrovic, 2017, op. cit. See also Reuters, 'UK and Germany Offer Plan to Break Bosnia's EU Deadlock', 11/5/2014 (<https://www.newsweek.com/uk-germany-offer-plan-break-bosnias-eu-deadlock-282459>).

37 The two countries had agreed already in 1995, when they formalized bilateral relations to negotiate this problem under the auspices of the United Nations; however, these negotiations have been very occasional and informal and (until very recently) without any resolute political incentive which could have moved them forward.

38 Bechev, 2015. 'Breaking Macedonia's vicious circle', LSE blog, May 11th, 2015 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2015/05/11/breaking-macedonias-vicious-circle/>); Petrovic, 2017, op.cit.

39 Marusic, Jakov. 2015. 'Hahn Brokers Deal Ending Crisis in Macedonia', *BalkanInsight*, July 15, 2015 (<https://balkaninsight.com/2015/07/15/macedonia-warring-leaders-struck-crisis-deal>). After the elections were eventually held in November 2016 and several months of negotiations afterwards, Gruevski was finally removed from power by the coalition government led by Prime Minister Zaev, the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM).

economic reforms in the Western Balkans can also be seen from the accession pathways of the two regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia. While Serbia's progress was primarily determined by its cooperation with the ICTY in the second half of the 2000s and then by progress in the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue throughout the 2010s until the present day, Montenegro has largely been spared additional EU requirements related to the SAP and/or regional political stability. As a result, it is ahead of Serbia and any other Western Balkan states in the accession process although its progress in post-communist democratisation can hardly be assessed to be better. As measured by the internationally respected indicators (shown in Table 1) Montenegro has reached an about similar level of post-communist democratisation and economic marketization as Serbia and North Macedonia.⁴⁰ Regardless, it opened its accession negotiations with the EU much earlier than its neighbours and by the end of 2020 opened all 33 negotiation chapters (*acquis communautaire*) with the EU (though it has only been able to close three of them so far). On the other hand, Serbia started its accession negotiations three years later than Montenegro (Table 2) and has opened only 18 of 34 chapters⁴¹ closing only two to date. North Macedonia, as noted above, is (as of

40 This, at least in terms of the country's democratisation, seems to be even exaggerated, as the presented indicators obviously ignore the fact that Montenegro is the only post-communist state in Europe which until the last parliamentary elections in August 2020 had never experienced an electoral change of ruling party or leader (even 'last European dictatorship' Belarus changed its political leadership in the early post-communist years). The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (DPMS - formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its leader, Milo Djukanović were in power throughout the whole period of the first 29 years of post-communist (and even the last few years of communist) history of the country. While the DPMS lost its parliamentary majority (by only one seat) in the August 2020 elections, Djukanovic, however remained the country's President with significant control over the army, police and foreign policy. Since 1990 he has served six terms as prime minister and two as president of the country (for more details see e.g. Jelena Džankić & Soeren Keil 2017. 'State-sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 19 (4), 403-418 and Vachudova, M.A. 2014. 'EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On.' *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52, 122-38.

41 Differently than Montenegro, it has an additional chapter to negotiate, specifically focussed on its relationship with Kosovo, i.e. progress in the Pristina –Belgrade Dialogue.

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time of writing) still waiting to open its accession negotiations and has not yet opened any negotiation chapters.

As seen from the above cases of North Macedonia, B-H and Montenegro (which has partially been followed by Serbia in recent years), the EU's prioritisation of its stability-security goals in the region over the consolidation of democratic institutions has not accelerated the EU accession of these states, but has weakened their democracies and caused some of their earlier achieved reforms to backslide. Some authors argue that the EU has, through its insistence on stability/security goals, supported the establishment of semi-authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans (most notably in Montenegro, in North Macedonia during Gruevski's rule and in Serbia under President Vucić in recent years) which they labelled 'stabilitocracies'.⁴² In the ethnically heterogeneous and politically weak states of B-H and North Macedonia the EU's demands for solving political-stability issues (as defined by the EU) before they can make any progress in accession, have not only damaged the achieved level of democratisation but contributed to further political destabilisation of these states.

Becoming aware of the negative effects of its 'stability over democracy' approach towards Western Balkan accession,⁴³ the EU launched the so-called 'Berlin Process' in 2014, aiming to deliver more practical policies that could speed up the accession of these states. Regular high-level meetings between the heads of six Western Balkan states and their counterparts from several

42 The term tries to explain that these regimes, differently than 'standard' semi-authoritarian or 'hybrid regimes' which are positioned between consolidated democracy and full dictatorship, enjoy external legitimacy and support from advanced democracies (foremost from the EU and its member states) due to their '(false) promise of [securing] stability'. See e.g. Florian Bieber, 'The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development, No. 10, 2018, pp. 176-185.

43 Further on this approach and its 'neither democracy nor stability' outcomes see in Bieber, Florian 2020. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, and Nicholas Ross Smith, Nina Markovic Khaze & Maja Kovacevic 2021. 'The EU's stability-democracy dilemma in the context of the problematic accession of the Western Balkan states', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29 (2), 169-183.

EU Member States involved were the cornerstone of the process. The process also included Civil Society, Business and Youth forums in which representatives from all of these states would discuss the project and initiatives that could advance “regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and... [their] integration...into the European Union”⁴⁴ Following this initiative the European Commission and the Council also tried to be more pragmatic. As above stated, in North Macedonia via Commissioner Hahn they directly contributed to the resolution of the 2015 political crisis and the consequent replacement of the national-populist Gruevski government with the more moderate Zaeu government which was able to finally solve the ‘naming issue’ with Greece in early June 2018. In addressing the developments in B-H, the EU council initiated a change of approach in December 2014 to focus on solving the ‘outstanding socio-economic challenges [B-H] faces’ rather than changing its constitutional order.⁴⁵ This resulted in the quick adoption of the so-called ‘Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015 – 2018’ by all three levels of the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 2015 which initiated common reform actions and some legislative changes which were supported by the leaderships of all three major ethnic groups.⁴⁶ After the EU decided to reward the country for these positive steps by allowing it, after so many years spent in limbo, to finally submit its application for membership in February 2016 (Table 2) it seemed that the Western Balkan accession may not be such a distant prospect.

44 Berlin Process Info. Berlin Process Information and Resource Centre at <https://berlinprocess.info/about/>. See also Juncos, Ana and Richard Whitman, 2015. ‘Europe as a Regional Actor: Neighbourhood Lost?’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53 (annual review), 200-215 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jcms.12281>).

45 EU Foreign Affairs Council (2014), Council conclusions on Bosnia and Herzegovina Luxembourg, 14 April.

46 Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015), Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015 – 2018 (<http://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Reform-Agenda-BiH.pdf>).

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4. Some positive signals in 2018, but no real change since...

Accession hopes among Western Balkan political elites increased after European Commission President Juncker indicated that the EU might expect to enlarge its membership by 2025 in his 2017 State of the Union speech,⁴⁷ and particularly after this was included in the Commission's 'new' Enlargement strategy of February 2018 as a 'best case scenario' for the frontrunners.⁴⁸ However, although designed to give new credibility and revitalise the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans and to encourage current candidates and potential candidates to continue with reforms, the 2018 Enlargement strategy also included a new and fairly challenging accession condition.

It was a requirement that the Western Balkan candidate states have to find "definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours" (p. 3) and solve them "as a matter of urgency" (p. 8) as the EU "will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail" (p.3). While the insistence on re-establishing good neighbourly relations has been at the core of the SAP since its very beginning, such a firm request for the resolution of disputes between the candidate countries and their neighbours as the de-facto accession precondition had never been imposed on any candidate country in any of the previous enlargement rounds. When Cyprus was admitted into the EU in 2004 it was not asked to solve its (still) unresolved dispute with Turkey over its partition on the northern (Turkish) and southern (Greek) part, nor was Croatia asked to resolve its (also still ongoing) dispute with Slovenia over their maritime border before it joined the EU in 2013. Although obviously inspired by the necessity for a resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute over the latter's statehood, the EU's request for "definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours" included in the 2018 strategy document clearly refers to all possible existing disputes between a candidate country and its neighbours:

47 European Commission (2017). President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017, Brussels, 13 September (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm).

48 European Commission. 2018, op.cit.

“[all] countries must unequivocally commit... to...solve [their] open issues well before their accession to the EU, in particular border disputes” (p.18). As Petrovic and Wilson argue, this accession pre-condition has “in contrast to all other Copenhagen and post-Copenhagen accession conditions broadened the scope of its fulfilment beyond the capacity and competency of the [candidate] country governments”.⁴⁹ In fact, it allows an EU member state that has a bilateral dispute with an EU candidate, to hold up the latter’s accession process until their dispute is resolved to the former’s satisfaction. North Macedonia’s above mentioned experience with its disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, and Serbia’s more recent experience regarding several border and other disputes it has with Croatia (which has already tried on several occasions to block Serbia’s accession negotiations) clearly confirm the real risk of this outcome.⁵⁰

In addition to the inclusion of these new accession requirements in the 2018 Strategy itself, another cold shower on the Western Balkan hopes for a more speedy accession raised by Juncker’s announcement and the optimistic tune of the Commission’s February strategy, came only a few months after the strategy was launched. First, with the highly discouraging outcomes of the Western Balkan-EU summit held in Sofia in May 2018,⁵¹ and then by the European Council’s decision in the following month to reject the Commission’s recommendation to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The latter was particularly disappointing, as North Macedonia had solved its name dispute with Greece by then.

49 Petrovic and Wilson, 2021, op cit., p. 202.

50 In addition to several ongoing disputes with Serbia (from bitter clashes over differing interpretations of the events that led to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the outbreak of the Croatian 1991-1995 war, to the border delimitation on the Danube river) Croatia has ongoing border disputes with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina and has already tried to resolve them in its favour using its EU membership as leverage (see Petrovic and Wilson, op. cit).

51 Petrovic, Milenko and Nikolaos Tzifakis 2021. ‘A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another postponement? An introduction’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29 (2), 157-168.

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The mix of positive-negative signals regarding Western Balkan accession continued in the second half of 2018 when it seemed that the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue might still produce the final resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and remove this serious obstacle to both countries' paths towards EU membership. Strongly encouraged by High Commissioner Mogherini (who facilitated the Dialogue), Commissioner for Enlargement Hahn, and the Austrian government (which presided over the EU Council at the time and organised a meeting in Vienna in late August between Serbia's and Kosovo's presidents Vučić and Thaçi), the two parties seemed to have come very close to a mutually acceptable compromise. The most important point of the deal included an exchange of territories or border correction as compensation for Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence.⁵² While such a deal was optimistically supported by Mogherini, Hahn, Austria, some other EU member states and the USA, it was strongly opposed by a group of member states led by Germany and the UK who claimed that any deal between the two parties that includes border corrections or territorial swaps would set a precedent that may further destabilise the region.⁵³ As a result, Mogherini's hope that the Vienna talks between the two presidents would lead to the finalisation of the deal "in the coming months, before the end of the mandate of this commission..."⁵⁴ was never realised. The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue has completely stalled since then and Kosovo and Serbia seem further from resolving their dispute now than they did when they started the Dialogue in 2013.⁵⁵

If the enlargement optimism awoken by the 2018 strategy document started eroding in the following months of 2018, it almost completely evaporated in

52 Gray, Andrew and R, Heth, 2018. 'Serbia, Kosovo presidents broach border changes for historic deal.' Politico, 25 August (<https://www.politico.eu/article/aleksandar-vucic-hashim-thaci-serbia-kosovo-balkans-eu-enlargement-alpbach-forum/>).

53 Emmot, Robin 2018. 'Germany warns on Serbia-Kosovo land swap idea', Reuters, August 31 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo-eu-idUSKCN1LG18C>).

54 Rettman, Andrew. 2018. 'EU eyes Kosovo and Serbia enlargement deal.' Euobserver, 1. September (<https://euobserver.com/enlargement/142709>).

55 For more details see Petrovic and Wilson, 2021, op.cit.

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the course of the following two years. The regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia – continued their accession negotiations at an extremely slow pace, being able to open only a few new negotiation chapters. Serbia has not been able to open any new chapters since opening just two in 2019. Montenegro was pleased to open its last chapter in June 2020 but, like Serbia, it has not been able to close any new chapters since the adoption of the 2018 Strategy.

Country	SA/Europe Agreement		Application for EU Membership	Official Candidate Status	Accession Negotiations	
	Signed	Entered into force			opened	closed
Albania	12/06/ 2006	1/04/2009	28/04/2009	27/06/ 2014	NO	NO
Bosnia-Herzeg.	16/06/ 2008	1/06/2015	15/02/2016	NO	NO	NO
North Macedonia	9/04/2001	1/04/2004	22/03/2004	16/12/ 2005	NO	NO
Montenegro	15/10/2007	1/05/2010	15/12/2008	17/12/2010	16/06/2012	NO
Serbia	9/04/2008*	1/09/2013	22/12/2009	1/03/2012	14/01/ 2014**	NO
Kosovo	27/10/ 2015	1/04/2016	NO	NO	NO	NO
<i>Croatia</i>	<i>9/04/2001</i>	<i>1/02/ 2005</i>	<i>20/02/2003</i>	<i>18/06/2004</i>	<i>5/10/ 2005</i>	<i>30/06/2011</i>
<i>Bulgaria</i>	<i>9/ 03/1993</i>	<i>1/02/1995</i>	<i>14/12/1995</i>	<i>12/12/ 1997</i>	<i>15/2/ 2000</i>	<i>16/12/2004</i>
<i>Romania</i>	<i>1/02/1993</i>	<i>1/02/1995</i>	<i>22/06/1995</i>	<i>12/12/ 1997</i>	<i>15/2/ 2000</i>	<i>16/12/2004</i>
<i>2004 EU-5</i>	<i>btw. 1991-96</i>	<i>btw. 1994-99</i>	<i>btw. 1994-96</i>	<i>btw. 1994-96</i>	<i>31/3/1998</i>	<i>12/12/2002</i>
<i>2004 EU-3</i>	<i>btw. 1993-95</i>	<i>btw. 1995-98</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>15/2/ 2000</i>	<i>12/12/2002</i>

Table 2. Progress in EU Accession

2004 EU-5: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia

2004 EU-3: Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia

* frozen pending further Serbian cooperation with the ICTY from 29/04/2008 to 7/12/2009

** provisionally/officially opened; the first chapters (35 and 32) were opened only on 14 December 2015

Source: European Commission, various documents.

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The countries have, as earlier stated, closed only three (Montenegro) and two (Serbia) accession negotiation chapters by the time of writing (September 2021).⁵⁶ The two other official membership candidates: Albania and North Macedonia, and two potential candidates: B-H and Kosovo, felt even more abandoned by the EU as virtually nothing substantially changed regarding their accession bids during this period (Table 2).

Albania and particularly North Macedonia suffered the greatest disappointments as the Council, ‘high jacked’ by France’s veto (supported by one or two other EU members)⁵⁷ has continued to reject the Commission’s recommendation to open accession negotiations with these two countries. After the Commission, relying on a French proposal/non paper, adopted a new methodology for accession negotiations in February 2020 (which in fact makes the negotiations more demanding and tougher for the candidate states)⁵⁸ and the Council finally gave the green light to the opening of accession negotiations with these two countries, came new hurdles.

While the Council's decision to open accession negotiations with Albania was conditional on further progress in the fields of electoral reform, justice reform and the fight against organized crime and corruption,⁵⁹ the formal start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia was this time blocked by Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria’s objections regarding the existence of a unique Macedonian nation and language have a long history dating to the

56 In comparison, the ECE and Baltic states which joined the EU in 2004 (Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia were just slightly slower) opened and closed all the 31 chapters which they negotiated in 2.5 - 4.5 years (Table 2).

57 This was imposed by President Macron’s firm and frequently repeated stance that the EU cannot further enlarge before having made a ‘real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union’ (Gray, Andrew. 2018. ‘Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes.’ Politico, 17 May (<https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>)).

58 Petrovic and Wilson, op. cit; Vankovska, Biljana. 2020. ‘Geopolitics of the Prespa Agreement: Background and After-Effects.’ Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 22 (3): 343-371.

59 EU General Affairs Council. 2020. “Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process”, Brussels, 25 March. (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>)

early post-World War II years, they were formally raised to the level of objection to any further progress in North Macedonia's accession negotiations after the Council's March decision, and have not been removed since.⁶⁰ After the Greek veto over the naming issue blocked this country's accession process for over a decade, its other Balkan neighbour has now 'assumed the mantle'. While this is not so surprising considering the history of relations between the two countries, it is surprising (or maybe not so, considering what was discussed on the previous pages of this text) that the most influential EU member states are 'unable' to do anything about it (as they did not for so many years about the Greek veto) beyond expressing regret and 'condolences' over North Macedonia's EU aspirations.⁶¹

Even more worrying for the EU accession bids of the Western Balkan states is the fact that the EU, after adopting the Commission's 2018 Enlargement strategy, has 'forgotten' to issue a more specific timetable about the accession of individual Western Balkan states.⁶² Moreover, it started to avoid using the words 'enlargement', 'accession', and 'membership' in related documents. This already began with the adoption of the declaration from the disappointing Sofia summit in May 2018 and continued at the virtual EU-Western Balkan summit in May 2020 where these terms were replaced with 'European perspective'. The Commission's latest paper on enlargement in October 2020⁶³ uses the above terms but not much in the sense of highlighting the ultimate goals of the EU's engagement with the Western Balkan

60 For more details on what exactly Bulgaria demands from North Macedonia in order to unblock its accession negotiations see Petrovic and Wilson, *op. cit.*

61 Rettman, Andrew. 2020. 'Germany apologises to Skopje for Bulgaria fiasco' *Euobserver*, 9 December (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/150323>)

62 When e.g. at its Copenhagen meeting in December 2002 the European Council made a decision on the accession of eight ECE and Baltic states (+ Cyprus and Malta) on 1 May 2004 it also expressed the expectation that Bulgaria and Romania would be able to follow by 2007. This appeared to be a political decision and commitment as Bulgaria and Romania indeed joined the EU on 1 January 2007 although many thought that it was premature and the European Commission was asked to develop a number of safeguard measures and the so-called 'Co-operation and Verification Mechanism' for these two countries (EU General Affairs and External Relations Council 2007. Council conclusions, Brussels, 23 June).

63 European Commission 2020. Communication on EU enlargement policy. COM(2020) 660 final, Brussels, 6 October.

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states. The document primarily relies on these terms when referring to the obligations which the “enlargement countries” have to meet during the “accession/enlargement” process if they wish to be able to one day “meet the requirements” or “assume the obligations of membership”⁶⁴ After highlighting the importance of the new accession methodology adopted in February 2020 (which should “enhance the accession process”), and the EUR 3.3 billion Covid assistance granted to the Western Balkan states at the May EU-Western Balkan summit (that was rather symbolic in comparison to the amounts given to EU member states for the same purpose),⁶⁵ the rest of the document mainly lists problems the Western Balkan aspirants for EU membership needed to solve. These were more or less copied from the Commission’s previous reports without any specifics on what the Commission (or the EU in general) plans to do in assisting (apart from advising and providing some technical support) the Western Balkan states to overcome these problems. Neither were targeted dates given for the resolution of these problems nor expected dates for opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia or closing negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia. The expectation that any acceleration of the accession process of any of the Western Balkan states can occur in the next year or two is very low.⁶⁶ The expectation that any of the current candidates and potential candidates for EU membership will join the EU in the foreseeable future hardly exists.

*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has definitely increased the EU’s continuous preoccupation with internal issues⁶⁷ but its lack of genuine interest

64 Ibid.

65 In fact, half of this 3.3 billion was assistance in ‘preferential loans’ from the EBRD and the other half of real aid was four times less than Croatia alone was granted from the EU’s (immediate relief) Covid package of EUR 750 billion adopted in July 2020 for the member states. See European Commission.2020. Recovery and Resilience Facility – Grants allocation per Member State (2018 prices, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/ab_out_the_european_commission/eu_budget/recovery_and_resilience_facility_.pdf).

66 Rettman, Andrew, ‘Enlargement in limbo despite EU-Western Balkans summit’. EU-observer. 9 September 2021 (<https://euobserver.com/world/152857>).

67 After Brexit these were primarily related to the question of the future and modes of its internal cohesiveness and the distribution of Covid assistance.

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in effectively assisting the Western Balkan states to overcome their internal problems and obstacles for accession was very strong much before the emergence of COVID-19. The attempts by the previous European Commission to revitalise the accession process by launching the 2018 enlargement strategy and by encouraging Western Balkan political leaders to solve (or nearly solve) two serious regional bilateral disputes which were paramount obstacles for North Macedonia's, Serbia's and Kosovo's accession, ended in vain before the end of 2018. The new Commission and new EU leadership which took over in November 2019 have not been able to do virtually anything to overcome the obstacles to Western Balkan accession coming from the opposition of (at last) several member states. The gloomy prospects for the accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU throughout the 2010s, have become even gloomier in the early 2020s.

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