

RSC 2021/70
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
Global Governance Programme-449



WORKING PAPER

**The EU as a geopolitical power. The case of
the Western Balkans region as the periphery
to the core**

Klodiana Beshku

European University Institute

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Global Governance Programme

**The EU as a geopolitical power. The case of the Western
Balkans region as the periphery to the core**

Klodiana Beshku

RSC Working Paper 2021/70

ISSN 1028-3625

© Klodiana Beshku, 2021

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#) International license.

If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Published in September 2021 by the European University Institute.
Badia Fiesolana, via dei Roccettini 9
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
www.eui.eu

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual author(s) and not those of the European University Institute.

This publication is available in Open Access in [Cadmus](#), the EUI Research Repository:



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, created in 1992 and currently directed by Professor Brigid Laffan, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics.

The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and *ad hoc* initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

For more information: <http://eui.eu/rscas>

The EUI and the RSC are not responsible for the opinion expressed by the author(s).

The Global Governance Programme

The Global Governance Programme is one of the flagship programmes of the Robert Schuman Centre. It is a community of outstanding professors and scholars, that produces high quality research and engages with the world of practice through policy dialogue. Established and early-career scholars work on issues of global governance within and beyond academia, focusing on four broad and interdisciplinary areas: Global Economics, Europe in the World, Cultural Pluralism and Global Citizenship.

The Programme also aims to contribute to the fostering of present and future generations of policy and decision makers through its executive training programme: the Academy of Global Governance, where theory and 'real world' experience meet and where leading academics, top-level officials, heads of international organisations and senior executives discuss on topical issues relating to global governance.

For more information: <http://globalgovernanceprogramme.eui>

Abstract

This research paper analyses the European Union's ability to grow into a geopolitical power through the enlargement approach to its immediate neighbourhood, the Western Balkans. The paper explores how this approach – as deconstructed here in the pragmatic enlargement perceptions of EU member states, precisely of France and Germany – may affect both the future of the EU's role in the world and the future of the of the Western Balkans region. Using France and Germany's approach to Albania and North Macedonia as case studies, the paper examines whether the EU's geopolitical approach aligns with that of some of its member states' – Germany and France's – view of the Western Balkans. The rationale for this research lies in the never-ending decision of the European Council (2018-2020) to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and its recent hesitation over starting an intergovernmental conference with them (2021). The paper takes a new perspective on the EU's geopolitical approach by deconstructing it into three elements – securitisation, foreign policy and strategy – contributing to the debate on the EU's actorness' enhancing its power and its contestation in the world. It argues that the EU's role as a geopolitical power might be more threatened by the use of the veto power that the member states have over the European Council, transforming it into an arena for the expression of populism and nationalism, than by the presence of third powers in the region.

Keywords

Securitization, EU Strategy, Geopolitics, Western Balkans, EU actorness, France, Germany.

'The struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart'

Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus

Introduction

Geopolitics, as a pragmatic and realistic approach of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU, appears to have come into fashion in the last two years after the election of new EU representatives and bodies in 2019. Before this new era of EU geopolitics, the EU regarded the Western Balkans (WB) region as a source of political and economic challenges, securitising its main security concern and thus making enlargement provoke an allergic reaction among its member states' leaders and citizens. Despite continually repeating that the WB's future was in the EU – the well-known EU perspective of the WB – until 2003, the region is considered an area from which to be secure rather than to which to enlarge (Abazi 2018).

This research paper starts with a discussion of the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans in terms of securitisation and the type of securitisation of EU enlargement policy. To determine how much the EU can turn into a geopolitical power – acting as a strategically autonomous actor in an area contested by third powers – this first part deals with the extent to which the EU has a strategic common vision of the WB region.

After analysing the EU's vision of the region, the paper inevitably looks at how its narrative on the region has changed. In the last couple of years, especially after the EU's shift to geopolitical 'actorness' in 2019, the narrative has started to alter. The region has been called "the inner courtyard of Europe" (Ruge 2021) and "the missing piece of the puzzle." despite being "a region that fully belongs to Europe as a continent but is still not part of the EU institutional structure" (Mišćević 2021).

The research paper also deals with the degree of unity among the EU member states in a time when the head of the European Commission, Von der Leyen (Von der Leyen 2019), has proclaimed a Geopolitical Commission and High Representative Borrell has been spreading his idea for the Union to make use of the "language of power."¹ It is not a novelty that the EU, an actor made of 27 different states with different interests, is unable to formulate a unique voice in foreign policy matters, but it is of particular interest when it comes to a technical issue – as the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is – to see how this question has become so politicised and instrumentalised within the European Council. The ping-pong game between the European Commission and the European Council over the question has become of high importance for these two Western Balkans countries because of the fact that opening accession negotiations did not mean them becoming EU members but just an upgrade in terms of European integration to aid their struggle to reform and achieve agreements.

Albania has been a candidate country for European Union membership since 2014. It has undergone an extensive judicial reform since 2016 and was expecting this reform to 'pay off' with the opening of accession negotiations. In April 2018, the Commission issued an unconditional recommendation to open negotiations. The Council set out the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019, depending on progress made in key areas such as the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, intelligence services and public administration.

¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190926IPR62260/hearing-with-high-representative-vice-president-designate-josep-borrell>

North Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005. Since October 2009, the Commission has continually recommended opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia. In 2015 and 2016, the recommendation was made conditional on continued implementation of the Pržino agreement and substantial progress in the implementation of 'urgent reform priorities.' A historical agreement was signed with Greece in 2018.

Nevertheless, in June 2019 the European Council blocked the process for both Albania and North Macedonia because of vetoes by France, the Netherlands and Denmark. President Macron linked the enlargement to reform of the whole stabilisation and association process (SAP) and managed to achieve a reconsideration of the whole process. In February 2020 the European Commission approved a revised methodology for accession negotiations and the process seemed to restart. Finally, in March 2020 the members of the European Council endorsed the General Affairs Council's decision to open accession negotiations with both WB countries, but the intergovernmental conference which would be the formal start of the accession negotiations was blocked in June 2021 by a Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia.

Clearly, due to the EU's continual crisis since 2014, welcoming new members would not be one of the greatest necessities, but it is curious that a series of crises came with heightened geopolitical competition in the region by third powers. In this regard, the behaviour within the European Council of some of the EU member states – mainly France and Germany – became the *rationale* for this paper with the aim of determining how much EU members' geopolitical approach matches the EU's, how much they are affected by domestic factors and how this is reflected in the Commission-European Council relationship. Therefore, the aim is to answer these questions by analysing the case of the behaviour of France and Germany in the EU Council towards Albania and North Macedonia in the period 2018-2020 and comparing it with the EU's general approach to the Western Balkans in the same period, considering the dynamics from the perspective of a geopolitical approach.

In the absence of a dedicated theory of the EU's geopolitics, this paper uses the concept of 'geopolitical actorness' to examine the extent of the 'geopolitisation' of EU foreign policy, considering that previous scholarship has dealt mainly with the EU and its eastern neighbourhood (Nitiou 2016; Nitiou & Sus 2019; Cadier 2019), not its southern one. There exists a considerable literature on the EU's geopolitical approach to its eastern neighbourhood and its contestation with Russia in this area (Kazharski & Makarychev 2015; Youngs 2017; Noutcheva 2019; Ademmer, Delcour & Wolczuk 2016; Raik 2019) due to the Ukraine crisis and "Moscow's zero-sum approach and hard power projection in its 'near abroad'" (Cadier 2019) but there are few studies on its geopolitical approach to its south-eastern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans (Petrovic & Tzifakis 2021) and its contestation in the region with third powers: Russia, China, Turkey and gulf countries (Panagiotou 2020; Markovic Khaze & Wang 2021; Feyerband *et al.* 2018). Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by contributing to the literature on the EU's 'actorness' in the region and in the world. In order to achieve this aim, the paper employs an analytical framework made of a triad of indicators – strategy, securitisation and foreign policy – to measure the 'geopoliticisation' of EU foreign policy by comparing its alienation from its strategy in the world. It is based on the existing literature, policy research and media articles that analyse the EU's strategic approach, its foreign policy and that of its member states in the Western Balkans region.

The main aim of the paper is to determine whether the EU could ever become a geopolitical actor. It compares the EU's idea of geopolitics with those of France and Germany and checks if these positions match. For this purpose, the paper concentrates on analysis of the two key member states in this process: France and Germany. It briefly describes the roles of the Netherlands, Denmark and Bulgaria in the process too, as they were activators of the veto mechanisms within the EU Council. By exploring some of the domestic political drivers in the member states mentioned, this research paper raises a puzzling question. Has the rise of

nationalism and populism within some EU member states produced less EU interest in enlargement in a moment when the EU needs to strengthen its role as a geopolitical power? Is the EU contested more by a lack of consent within its member states or by third powers in the region? Enhancing the EU's power in the Western Balkans region is of high importance as a consequence of the active roles of Russia, China, gulf countries and Turkey in this region where the EU is becoming really 'contested.'

The paper seeks to analyse the EU's approach to the WB from the hitherto neglected perspectives of security and geopolitics towards the Western Balkans and argues that increasing nationalism and populism within some of the EU member states – mainly in France and the Netherlands – which made these countries opt to veto opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, has made the EU show a division between its institutions – the Commission and the Council – and probably harmed it more on the global stage than its competition with the third-country actors in the area.

Are France and its followers undermining the need proclaimed by the EU's newly elected head of Commission and High Representative to strengthen its role as a geopolitical power in the world? Does the French and German type of neo-classical geopolitics towards the Western Balkans correspond with that of the EU? By exploring the EU's approach to geopolitics, enlargement and the Western Balkans region and the roles of France and Germany in this region in the last three years, this paper tries to answer these questions without taking on the burden of judging the member states' attitudes to Albania and North Macedonia, the two main representatives of the whole region in this piece.

The EU's regional strategies and the securitisation of the Western Balkans: enlargement transformed

Dealing with strategy and security unavoidably leads us to an explanation of the level of securitisation of the Western Balkans in the EU's perspective. Looking at securitisation as "an extreme version of politicisation" (Buzan, Waever and Wilde 1998: 23) it is natural to consider the EU enlargement policy a litmus test of its view of the Western Balkans. Given that the region is geographically surrounded by EU member states, it would be a natural extension of the EU and one of its three main peninsulas (Iberia, Appennine and Balkan). Nevertheless, it is often labelled the EU's backyard (Bechev 2018), a periphery, the "periphery of the periphery" (Bechev 2012: 1), a buffer zone (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017) and the overlooked "soft belly" (Bonomi 2019: 15).

Due to this geographical importance, it is of high importance to explore whether "the tyranny of geography" (Blockmans 2017) – a bold characteristic of geopolitical power – is reflected in the EU's approach to the Western Balkans through its enlargement policy. The aim here is to determine whether the EU includes the Western Balkans in its strategic plans. I will try to see whether the WB region has been properly securitised, securitised in a negative way (de-securitised) in the last two decades or not securitised at all, following the Copenhagen School of Security Studies' theory that geopolitical discourse is first of all 'securitising' an issue (Guzzini 2012: 34). The concept of 'securitisation' will be used here in parallel with that of 'territorialisation' to argue that by de-securitising enlargement the EU has de-securitised the Western Balkans as well and, as a consequence, the geographic "EU territorialisation".

If we analyse the EU's approach to geopolitics and to the Western Balkans through its approach to enlargement policy, we see that there is no trace of the use of the term geopolitics in the past. The EU's attitude to the use of the term geopolitics goes hand in hand with the perception of this discipline after the Second World War. Since then it has always had a strong resistance to using the term 'geopolitics' with reference to Europe because it has not been

possible to use the term without “mobilising the guilt-by-association charges so typical of ‘politically correct’ references to geopolitics” (Guzzini 2012: 18) due to the conflation of geopolitics with nazism and fascism. In fact, we barely find the term in any official document concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU until 2019. It does not even appear in the European Union Global Strategy (2016), which prefers to use ‘strategy’ or ‘geographic strategy’ instead of geopolitics. “This long reticence of the EU to admit to being a ‘geopolitical actor’” (Bachmann and Bialasiewicz 2020: 86) talks much not only about the under-development of traditional and critical geopolitical European studies but also about the EU’s self-perception of its power and its perspective on the world. In fact, the EU has framed itself as a global actor by exporting norms not soldiers, by using economic leverage to achieve political consent and by not imposing this consent (Zielonka 2008). “The EU has traditionally denied any type of geopolitical interest in dealing with other states and shied away from *realpolitik*” (Nitoiu and Sus 2018) but tries to export its European core values to its neighbourhood rather than being influenced by geographical factors. Geopolitics has for a long time been exclusively considered a driving force of authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China and Turkey. *Realpolitik* – as a favourite driver of the former countries – was not perceived positively within the EU for a long time. Thus, a long period of de-securitisation of the Western Balkans preceded the changing perception of geopolitics as an approach that strengthens the EU’s role in the global scene, yet without having transferred this positivity to its enlargement policy.

Apart from an initial securitisation of the WB region in 2003 with the Thessaloniki Summit—due to joint Greek-Italian support for the region – the EU has only repeated the ‘European perspective of the WB’ until it turned into a mantra. It has not properly securitised the region as a subject for enlargement but instead as a source of ethnic conflict disruption and border trouble. Therefore, the region was identified as a zone threatening European security after the publication of the European Security Strategy in December 2003 (European Commission 2003): “Europe still faces security threats and challenges. The outbreak of conflict in the Balkans was a reminder that war has not disappeared from our continent” (European Commission 2003: 28). Although the region was included in the EU’s project “to promote a ring of well governed countries to the east of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean” (European Commission 2003: 35), the EU’s discourse mainly focussed on consolidation of democracy and rule of law in the region.

The Western Balkans’ approach to the European Union started to resemble dystopia, especially after 2014. The region arrived at the lowest point of its ‘de-securitisation’ in 2014 when Jean-Claude Juncker declared that no more countries would join the EU during his commission’s mandate. He stated in detail that “The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28” and that “notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years” (Juncker 2014: 11). He did not mention enlargement as one of the ten priority policies of his Commission, which made his approach contrast with wanting a “European Union that is bigger and more ambitious on big things, and smaller and more modest on small things” (Juncker 2014: 3). The following decision in 2015 to turn the DG for Enlargement into the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations was very telling in this sense, despite its symbolic NEAR acronym. Even the European Union’s Global Strategy did not treat EU strategy as a geopolitical approach but only as a vague concept of the EU’s vision of the world, concentrating more on values than on any geopolitical factor (European Union 2016). The Western Balkans together with Turkey are included in the European Neighbourhood Policy and the term ‘resilience’ is linked with EU strategy, again drawing attention to the candidate countries’ internal affairs rather than to the EU’s support for them.

The region's potential EU accession went through a four-year pause (from 2014 to 2018). In this period, the Western Balkans principally emerged in debates about security challenges to Europe (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019). Some signs of change started to be given, however. During the Bled Strategic Forum in September 2017, the High Representative of the EU, Federica Mogherini, stated that the WB were on an "irreversible track" to EU membership. In addition, President Juncker recognised the strategic importance of keeping the Western Balkans under the influence of the EU during his State of the Union address in September 2017 (Juncker 2017). An EU macro-regional strategy which appeared later in 2017 tried to present an EU geopolitical view of the world with its four macro-regional strategies that had been adopted so far:² The EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (2009), the Danube Region (2010), the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014) and the Alpine Region (2015). The Western Balkans are in the Ionian and Adriatic Region³ but among four EU macro-regions encompassing 27 countries with more than 340 million people this does not suggest they have a compelling status.

A year later, President Juncker stated that enlargement towards the WB was "an investment in the EU's security, economic growth and influence and in its ability to protect its citizens" (Juncker 2018), but he once again linked enlargement to the security and stability of the Union: "If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must also maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans" (Juncker 2018), considering in this way the region as a source of trouble, thus de-securitising it. Under these circumstances, Germany, joined by Austria and then by the UK, Italy and later France, had given birth to the Berlin Process (2014-2018), an intergovernmental initiative to engage with the WB as a way of facilitating its alignment with the EU. The Commission's strategy paper 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' (European Commission 2018) brought a renewed focus on the region (Tannock 2018). The Commission's strategy for the region opened with the statement that "the six Western Balkans partners are a part of Europe, geographically surrounded by EU Member States" (European Commission 2018; 1). The wording highlighted the fact that the six countries are geographically part of the EU. The strategy confirmed that the "merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values" (European Commission 2018: 1). The importance of the Western Balkans region was reaffirmed in this EU enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans and although the term 'geopolitics' was not used, the "geostrategic investment" suggested alignment with this term.

President Juncker started 2018 with a geopolitical tour in February to Belgrade, Podgorica, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tirana, before concluding in Sofia, which held the EU presidency at the time (Rattman, Maurice and Zalan 2018). The Sofia summit that followed in the second half of 2018 between EU and Western Balkan leaders in the framework of the Berlin Process was the first at this high political level since 2003 to deliver an implicit acknowledgment that the lack of attention to the WB was a mistake (Nixon 2018). Afterwards, a London summit in July 2018 that gathered the WB and the EU member states included in the Berlin Process – Italy, Austria, Germany, France and the UK – had the usual focus on the fight against corruption, digitalisation and good neighbourly relations between the countries in the region. Although the UK's hosting of the meeting was intended to show that even for those leaving stability to the southeast was crucial, the Brexit question had already taken up all the European attention. For the first time in its history, the union was negotiating accession with

² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/

³ <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/>

some candidate countries while at the same time working out an exit deal with one of its current members (Bonomi 2019).

The next round of Berlin Process summits (2019-2023) followed in Poznan in July 2019, but the impact of these summits was less imposing on the EU and the WB governments. The rationale for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans started to change during the years 2018-2019. Although 2018 brought a renewed focus on EU enlargement to the Balkans through the so-called 'inclusion approach,' it was not enough for the EU to overcome the Brexit crisis and focus on the WB region. It was the new European Commission and Parliament after the European elections of May 2019 that shifted to real geopolitical attention to the Western Balkans, at least in their discourse. Therefore, 2019 could be labelled the year of EU geopolitics. These new bodies of the European Union reflected what is called "a revival of geopolitical thought" (Guzzini 2012: 19). As part of its strategy as a geopolitical Commission, the President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, emphasised her commitment to enlargement by asking her Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner, Olivér Várhelyi, to work for a credible prospect of Western Balkan enlargement (European Commission 2019). She declared "Europe has to position itself in a world marked by permanent US-China rivalries, persistent conflicts in the Middle East and increased geo-economic competition in Africa. Relations with Europe's southern and eastern neighbourhood will remain tough" (European Commission 2019). The idea of the strategic autonomy of the EU – a concept in use since 2013 – re-emerged soon after these official statements together with an EU geopolitical focus on the region. The WB soon became "The EU's biggest geopolitical test" (Islam 2019) and were from then on officially proclaimed to be "a geostrategic investment" by the EU (European Economic and Social Committee 2020).

In the four years before 2020, the Western Balkans experienced a 'power vacuum' in the region because of the backing away of the Trump administration (2016-2020) from the region in line with the American foreign policy approach of a reduced role in the world. In parallel, this absence was combined with the EU's presence through the Berlin Process, a presence which was criticised for helping kick enlargement off the EU agenda and putting the Western Balkans in a "European waiting room" (Belloni & Brunazzo, 2017). At least, after 2019, consolidation of stability and the full implementation of liberal political and economic reforms were no longer the principal (or sole) arguments cited to make the case for the region's EU accession. European decision-makers were increasingly arguing that the EU should move on to contain the negative influence in the Western Balkans of other external actors, namely Russia, China, Turkey and the gulf countries. These actors' engagement in the region extends from economic investment, particularly in large-scale infrastructure, to political support for governments and parties, and active media engagement (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019).

Despite the change in the discursive approach and the challenge by third powers in the region, for two consecutive years, 2018 and 2019, the European Council blocked the EU integration process to Albania and North Macedonia through vetoes by some of its member states on opening accession negotiations with these countries. Although the Commission had published an EU Enlargement Package containing annual reports on EU accession progress in April 2019 and positive about opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, French president Macron linked enlargement to EU inner reforms and managed to make this linkage succeed. The European Commission approved a revised methodology for accession negotiations in February 2020 (European Commission 2020), a methodology that will make life harder for the accession countries in the WB to become EU member states due to its 'cluster philosophy' and 'reverse mechanism' in the case of a country making no progress (European Commission 2020 a). All this at a time when the EU was increasingly competing for influence with third actors like Russia, China, Turkey and gulf countries in the region, which demanded no conditionality, but just offered geopolitical allegiances.

In the last two years, messages from the EU representatives have become even clearer and more concrete. Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, admitted that the EU must develop an “appetite for power” and must “learn to use the language of power” at the Munich Security Conference (European Western Balkans 2020). A strategic approach to the Western Balkans has become a necessity in his view. He stressed that the EU has to actively fight Russian and Chinese interests in the Western Balkans, as these major powers “use their media to pump up the effect of their aid in order to increase their geopolitical role in the world” and engage in “aggressive politics of generosity” (Borrell 2021: 45). Recently, in his press conference after the Foreign Affairs Council in May 2021 the High Representative stated “the region has a special role in Europe and for Europe. We agreed that the Western Balkans is a region with a key geostrategic role for the European Union. Our commitment to the Western Balkans needs to be very visible and we should leave no doubt in this respect” (Foreign Affairs Council 2021).

Despite the shift to such clear political discourse by EU representatives, the key questions are the following. How much is this approach reflected in the foreign policies and the behaviour of the EU member states? How much is enlargement securitised by them in a positive way? France and the Netherlands voted to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2020 but the process has recently been blocked by Bulgaria, which used its veto power to stop the start of the intergovernmental conference. With the transformation of such mere technical questions – as opening accession negotiations and the start of the intergovernmental conference are – the tendency to revitalise enlargement was decelerated again. By doing so, instead of understanding “enlargement as part of an ongoing process of constituting Europe as a place of attraction rather than conflict, as centred on its own soft security values rather than a hard security enemy template” (O’Brennan 2006: 162), enlargement risks being transformed into a tool to serve the populism or politics of member countries, transforming the whole stabilisation and association process in a simple way to keep the Western Balkans on track but with no advancement on the European path. This has become an added obstacle to the securitisation of the WB region within the EU. Under the assumption that there is not a feeling of urgency or an immediate danger to the EU political project and market integration (Abazi 2018), the WB continue to be linked to the strict technical approach of some of the member states or to the historical past of others in the European Council.

This approach is not new since “from the earliest stages of the eastern enlargement process, EU political representatives sought to securitise and then de-securitise a range of issues deemed to constitute geopolitical problems for the Union as a whole” (O’Brennan 2006). The difference is that this potential enlargement round “follows a geopolitical dimension: to reinforce the stability and the security of both EU member states and candidate countries (Outeda, González and Troitiño: 2020: 299). In such a contested area, enlargement to the Western Balkans seems to be the perfect test of the EU’s capacity to become a geopolitical global power.

The EU’s ability to become a geopolitical actor: The EU Member States’ national foreign policies and their domestic drivers

As has been argued, after a period of securitisation of the WB region (2003-2014), because the EU considered it a threat to its borders, the on/off expression of interest in the Western Balkans produced a de-securitisation of the region in the EU and at the national level this was reflected in some of its member states, especially in the period 2014-2019 and especially where right-wing populist parties had a strong presence – as in France and Netherlands. Enlargement was thoroughly put aside as a wording which could trouble EU citizens if the

leaders of EU member countries showed themselves in favor. The explanation of this reaction is very simple: the EU had for a long time only focused on trouble coming from the Western Balkans region, stressing that it was normally characterised by semi-consolidated democracies and never mentioning its potential, therefore de-securitising it. According to O'Brennan, "The process of securitising an issue begins with the declaration of it as a security issue, essentially as an existential threat to the peace and security of the region, which requires collective action in order to avoid escalation and conflict. The process of de-escalation is achieved through a de-securitising move, one that seeks to stabilise and normalise a state of existing or potential inter-state conflict by elite level discursive interventions targeted at transforming the existential threat into the everyday and normal" (O'Brennan 2006: 161). Therefore, keeping the countries in the region *in billico* or in 'stand by' mode by postponing the upgrade of the single countries to European integration, in addition to the EU's poly-crisis, became a general tendency.

The de-securitisation of enlargement was due to another reason. The EU's long-lasting "poly-crisis" (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019)—starting with the eurozone financial crisis (2008) and going through the refugee crisis (2015-2016), the Greek debt crisis (2010-2016), the Ukraine crisis after Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and the Brexit referendum and its aftermath (2016-2020) – "has tested the endurance and survival of the EU polity to its limits" (Bressanelli, Koop and Reh 2020: 330). The retrenchment of the enlargement policy was probably one of the best illustrations of how "the contestation of the EU's policies and institutions became an ordinary fixture of domestic politics across the member states" (Bressanelli, Koop and Reh 2020: 330). However, there is still another element to be considered in the overall panorama of the matter: the relations between the European Commission and the European Council over the EU institutional architecture. There have repeatedly been discrepancies and overlaps between the two institutions and the case of opening accession negotiations is one of them. It was a technical question and the Commission had recommended opening "due to the countries' progress" (European Commission 2018, 2019) made up to that time, but the question was turned into a political one linked to the EU's internal reform of past historic legacies, as if the applicant countries were to immediately become EU members after the opening of accession negotiations. Therefore, it was not by chance that France (2018 and 2019), the Netherlands (2019), Denmark (2019) and Bulgaria (2021) exercised their veto despite the European Commission's crystal clear positive answer to the technical question, having these countries had a strong presence of right-wing populist parties (France, Netherlands and Denmark) or a nationalistic interest (Bulgaria). In the following table one can see the Commission's approach to the issue, how it was translated within the European Commission and the overall atmosphere in the EU regarding the WB.

Commission/Council: EU enlargement to Albania and North Macedonia:

Years	The EU State of Play	Opinion of the European Commission	Decision by the European Council
2014-2018	<p>The Juncker Commission (2014-2019) decided that no more countries would join the EU during its mandate.</p> <p>The approach began to change</p> <p>At the end of his period as President of the Commission, Commissioner Juncker recognised the strategic importance of keeping the Western Balkans under the influence of the EU</p>	<p>In April 2018, the Commission issued an unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania.</p> <p>In the light of the progress achieved, the Commission repeated its unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations in April 2018.</p>	<p>In June 2018 the European Council pushed the opening into the following year after France, supported by Denmark and the Netherlands, voiced concern about the rule of law in both countries.</p> <p>The Prespa agreement in June 2018 and Albania's efforts in an extraordinary judicial reform were not sufficient for the EU Council to praise these countries.</p>
2019	<p>The EU Commission made a political decision</p> <p>The EU Council made a technical decision regarding Albania and North Macedonia</p> <p>The Commission and Council swapped places. Nevertheless, there was a revival of strategic thinking within the EU</p>	<p>The Commission reiterated its recommendation to open accession talks in the Enlargement Package adopted in May 2019.</p>	<p>The EU Council did not make a decision on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.</p>
2020	<p>A renewal of the strategic autonomy approach</p> <p>As part of the strategy of a geopolitical Commission, the President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen (2019-2023), emphasised the EU's commitment to enlargement.</p>	<p>A revised methodology 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' was presented in February 2020 after France's refusal to entertain any further enlargement until a new negotiation methodology was agreed.</p>	<p>October 2020: the EU Council said "yes, but" to Albania and North Macedonia.</p> <p>In March 2020 the members of the European Council endorsed the General Affairs Council's decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.</p> <p>In July 2020 the draft negotiating framework for both countries was presented to the Member States.</p>
2021	<p>A new geopolitical era for the EU</p> <p>The region of the Western Balkans is regarded as a "strategic investment"</p>	<p>Geopolitics starts to be mentioned clearly as a driving force for the EU in the region in the European Commission's press release</p>	<p>During the FAC in May 2021 Borrell clearly encapsulates the notion of geopolitics.</p> <p>June 2021: Bulgaria vetoes the start of the intergovernmental conference with Albania and North Macedonia in the European Council</p>

Source: Own elaboration based on <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries>

The EU's ability to become a geopolitical power is linked to its performance as a global leader on the global stage. Smooth relations between its institutions and a final general consensus of its member states on questions of enlargement and foreign policy have influence in this direction. Therefore, in a moment when the EU is asked to act as a geopolitical power, exploring the domestic drivers that may have led to France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Greece and Italy's foreign policy inclinations in the European Council is of very high importance for this study.

The biggest victim of the blatant 'use of asymmetric powers' to block the accession process has always been the Republic of North Macedonia, a country that was held hostage on its EU accession path due to the Greek veto in the European Council (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) for more than two decades because of unresolved bilateral disputes with this EU member state. After the Prespa agreement reached between the two countries in June 2018, the situation seems to have changed very favourably for North Macedonia, putting it in the frontline of the Council's decision of June 2019 to open accession negotiations, leaving Albania behind despite the country's efforts in an extraordinary judicial reform. "Instead of recognising these efforts, the European Council of June 2018 pushed the opening into next year after France, supported by Denmark and Netherlands, voiced concern about the rule of law in both countries. At a time when the EU was heaping praise on Serbia and Montenegro, despite their autocratic tendencies, the signal could not have been clearer" (Vogel 2018). History repeated itself in 2019. The European Council put at risk the geopolitical balance in the Western Balkans region in view of the expressed interest of Russia and China in using their influence in the region and the stepping back of the US in those years.

It is interesting to examine through the lens of their foreign policies and their domestic drivers the positions that some EU member states— France, the Netherlands and Bulgaria — have taken towards the Western Balkans. On the other hand, it is curious that Germany, Italy and Austria have had a completely different approach to this question as the main supporters of EU enlargement towards the region. Most of these approaches can be deduced from op-eds and analysis following the development of EU-WB relations, but also from a special issue of the Southeast Europe and Black Sea Studies journal (Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, Balfour & Stratulat 2017).

Regarding France, it has always been in favour of deepening European integration rather than enlarging the EU. Especially after the exit of a supporter of enlargement, the UK, France feels that enlargement to the Western Balkans could harm its influence in the EU in favour of Germany (Outeda, González and Troitiño, 2020: 319). In fact, Germany has always been a supporter of the Western Balkans as was demonstrated by it leading the Berlin Process, in which France was not initially involved. Whereas Germany would be one of the main beneficiaries, France, thinking in purely domestic terms, considers it of little strategic relevance (Outeda, González and Troitiño 2020: 302). Without expressing itself against enlargement, in line with its glorious colonial past France was always for "controlled enlargement" (Wunsch 2017). Also, as a great power it would not invest much time and energy in countries where the contemporary historical links are weak, as in the case of the WB, as the community of France's Balkan residents is relatively small (Wunsch 2017). Despite this, the existence of Front National, a populist right-wing party and a big oppose of enlargement towards the WB, is determinant. The current president of France, Emmanuel Macron, would certainly not be challenging its support by supporting the cause of the WB. The French mass media does not help. The region is not given much media attention. "Where it does receive attention, the focus is often negative" (Wunsch 2017).

The presence of a strong populist right-wing party hostile to the Western Balkans seems to be the case in the Netherlands too. The Netherlands has for a long time favoured a "Strict but fair approach" to the enlargement process, but it has been more strict than fair. The Party for

Freedom has managed to link enlargement to the issue of asylum seekers coming from the WB, thus making the whole political system hostile to the Western Balkans. French and Dutch leaders fear following the example of Greece in this direction. Although, the reason for Syriza's failure to stay in power after the Prespa Agreement in 2019 was not the concessions Greece made in this agreement but probably 'austerity fatigue,' which "critically influenced the outcome of all parliamentary elections that took place during the entire period" from 2009 to 2018 (Panagiotou and Tzifakis 2021: 85). Nevertheless, the political end of the Tzipras government is seen as a sword of Damocles over the heads of states weakened by a lack of internal support. Moreover, unlike many other EU members like France, where enlargement policy is firmly in the hands of the government, in Germany the parliament has extensive powers to shape the process. This makes enlargement truly political in a way that has rarely been the case elsewhere. Domestic politics and EU enlargement are closely linked (Töglhofer and Adebahr 2017), but Germany does not seem to panic over its citizens' perceptions like France does. The fear of losing citizen support seems unfounded, especially in the case of France. A recent study has found that a large majority of French citizens give far less importance to the WB region than was believed, partly due to a considerable lack of information on the region (Cvijić, Hübner, Eichhorn & Molthof 2021).

Germany, in contrast, has always considered the region a very strategic zone both for itself and the EU, although in recent years there have been criticisms of Chancellor Merkel for taking too long to respond to Macron's proposals for the EU and for preferring a "muddling through" approach towards EU policy rather than following a long-term strategic vision" (Greubel and Pornschlegel 2021). Nevertheless, Germany continues to maintain close relations with the WB. Almost one and half million people in Germany originate from the region. German businesses are active in the Western Balkans (Colibasanu 2017) and Germany is the first trading partner of Serbia, Albania and Northern Montenegro. Germany is a huge aid donor. It has also played a strong role in peacekeeping missions and has taken an increasingly active political role in the region (Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina), considering also that along with Britain and France it was at the forefront of efforts to support Kosovo (Töglhofer and Adebahr 2017). Moreover, WB is a domestic issue in Germany due to the main migratory route towards Germany passing through it (Outeda, González and Troitino, 2020: 302).

Brexit was a set-back for the Western Balkans in terms of EU support and allies. The EU lost its focus on the Western Balkans for much of the last decade and the Brexit question contributed much in this sense, as the UK had been one "of the main supporters of the WB within the EU" (Vogel 2018). Although it is believed that the UK was supporting enlargement to prevent political union within the EU (Ker-Lindsay 2017), the UK left an empty seat in the European Council for Germany's allies on WB issues. London and Berlin were the frontrunners helping Bosnia and Herzegovina to recover from the political crisis in 2014 (Töglhofer & Adebahr 2017) and major supporters of Kosovo as an independent country. Enlargement seemed to belong to another planet while the EU had to deal with the consequences of the Brexit referendum. Since 2008, subsequent crises have continued "relegating the region to the outermost circle in a multi-speed Europe" (Bechev 2012).

The Greek crisis influenced much too, first because the Balkan states were not the best option for enlargement of the EU. "Greece's failed Europeanisation (in the field at least of fiscal economics) strengthened 'enlargement fatigue' in the EU member states and diminished the EU accession chances of the Western Balkan countries" (Panagiotou and Tzifakis 2021: 72). Overnight, the country was transformed from a success story of a Balkan country that had been smoothly integrated in the EU into a counterexample (Panagiotou and Tzifakis 2021: 72) and this was influenced by its own nationals' and European perceptions of the Western Balkans.

EU foreign policy is based on an intergovernmental decision-making process within the European Council with the EU member states exercising their asymmetric powers while holding on to their veto power. This decision-making procedure entails that a member state that *a priori* does not obtain any benefit from enlargement would not support it but at the same time would not obstruct it. However, this is not always the case. Bulgaria's last move suggests that when a member state sees that no one is going to use the veto, it opts for it in order to maximise its political gain. It is believed that EU member states base their decisions on national priorities and strategies. In this case, turning a technical process –as the opening of accession negotiations is– into a political one gives them more benefits but at the same time hinders the process. The first signs of how a country is going to vote are given during discussions in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), where member states give their views on different questions. It is after this forum that all the calculations are done. It has become normal that in “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” (Outeda, González and Troitiño 2020:300). The EU member states may have reserved the veto even for technical decisions that do not imply huge EU internal changes, so an examination of the EU Commission's and Council's roles should go in parallel with re-considering the voting process in the EU Council. This analysis suggests another important driver of the behaviour of the EU member states: earning domestic support through expressing populist views in the European Council arena. By vetoing the opening of accession negotiations –despite the positive opinion of the European Commission – France, the Netherlands and Bulgaria did not have any direct national benefit but were calculating their populations' perceptions and showing them that they had control in EU foreign affairs.

What happened in the European Council had to do with what is called the ‘domestic politicisation of Europe’– the fact that European integration triggers increased contestation and polarisation within member states –which is easily translated “into pressures that travel ‘bottom-up’” (Bressanelli, Koop and Reh 2020: 330). In view of an anti-immigration campaign and stigmatisation of ‘the other’ by the radical right-wing Front National party in France and the conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy in the Netherlands, probably supporting Albania and North Macedonia on their European path does not seem a very clever way to gain people's support. “Functional pressures confront EU-level actors with unprecedented expectations to manage and address the policy challenges of the ‘polycrisis’” (Bressanelli, Koop and Reh 2020: 330). This pressure has made some member states more sceptical about enlargement, making the EU offer less geopolitical support to the immediate neighbouring region of the Western Balkans, instead of the opposite. The rise of strong member state opposition within the European Council to opening accession negotiations with Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2018-2020– a very technical decision at the end of the day which was somehow linked with France's insistence on reforming the EU itself –produced a weakening of the EU's role as a geopolitical power by putting the credibility of the enlargement process in doubt in a long run perspective.

The ability of the EU to become a geopolitical actor: Do national geopolitics towards the WB coincide with the EU's?

Here, geopolitics is understood as a distinct theory of a version of realism, a theory which shapes the foreign policy of a given entity because it can be de-constructed into the supranational and national interests of the entity – the EU, to be precise. On the one hand, the supranational interest of the EU can be translated – in systemic determinism language – into its aim to preserve the ‘balance of power’ threatened by the entry of China, Russia and gulf countries in the Western Balkans region. On the other hand, the national interest of some

member states does not coincide with that of the EU, as in the case of small powers like the Netherlands and Denmark and medium powers like Bulgaria. The biggest discrepancy appears in the cases of France and Germany, both great powers in the EU, which appear to have different views on the region of the Western Balkans. The first favors its national *realpolitik* in which the region is not a priority, while the second seems attached to its traditional *Ostpolitik*, in which the WB appear to be a part of its region.

In terms of strategy and enlargement policy, from 2003 to 2019 the EU's geopolitical approach to the Western Balkans was confusing, as I argued in the first part of this research paper. On the one hand, despite being a natural extension of the EU surrounded by EU member states, the region of the Western Balkans continues to be perceived as an 'other,' a conflict-bringer and oriental. This perception offers a perfect ground for right-wing populist parties of some EU member states to rely. On the other hand, there is not a widespread European consideration of the Western Balkans as a natural extension of Europe, even though geographically they are part of it. Thus, enlargement to the WB does not work as an "important instrument for extending the existing security community eastward" (O'Brennan 2006) but instead as a factor bringing destabilisation if it is let in. Moreover, "the European Union for years has been trying to transform the Balkan region ontologically, starting with its name" and by dividing the Balkan region into sub-regions (Tulun 2018). The sub regions correspond to the progress of the countries towards the EU. Therefore, we have Greece, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, which are ex-Balkan but now European countries, giving the name Balkans with the connotation of 'other' to Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro as the Western Balkans and Turkey as the eastern Balkans, according to a Turkish author.

Geopolitics means considering geography to be the political, societal and historical shaping of space. 'Western Balkans' is an EU-shaped concept as a consequence of a European view of the region, which explains the negative use of the term 'Balkans' and its negative extension, to such an extent that the term 'southeast Europe' is suggested by some supporters of the WB instead. "The space of socio-political orders is not given but constructed by will and/or process" and wherever there is not equality between entities "some of the positions in the geometry in and around them (and/or in and around the field of effects created by their presence) will be *central*, and some *marginal*" (Parker 2008: 5). The constructed idea of the Western Balkans explains the EU's associated perception of the region with Turkey and other peripheries of the EU without taking into consideration that the countries of the Western Balkans occupy a strategic geographical position and represent a natural extension of the EU towards Greece, another EU member state. Although "the EU has always had geography (understood as geographical spaces) and power at the centre of its design" (Nitoiu and Suus 2018), this does not seem to be correctly addressed in the case of the WB. Geographically it is an area surrounded by EU member states, so considering it a periphery or talking about EU enlargement does not make sense. Instead, it is an EU completeness and achievement of EU territorialisation as a continent, in line with EU membership with a strong geographical component.

As I have argued, the EU has de-securitized the region, persistently relating this to its economic underdevelopment, corruption, non-consolidated democratic systems and tendency to ethnic conflicts. 'Balkanisation' is a term used with a negative connotation in Europe and the Balkans represent 'the other.' This has been reflected in the foreign policies of some of the sceptics among the EU member states, as I argued above, and it has not been easy to change this tendency after the EU's geopolitical shift in 2019. Considering that geography "conditions the perspectives of a state's leaders or rulers and, thereby, affects their decision-making in matters of foreign policy" (Parker 2008: 5), the EU's approach to the Western Balkans seems a clear example of its Common Foreign and Security Policy continuing to under-deliver.

After 2019, the EU experienced a revival of geopolitics within its main executive body, the Commission, and in the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Geopolitics, the consideration of geography as the political, societal and historical shaping of space, relegated the region of the Western Balkans to a strategic periphery. The revival of geopolitical thought in Europe has much to do with a return to the determinism of geography and to a new power configuration in the world. Stefano Guzzini sees the revival of geopolitics as an “attempt to invigorate a kind of environmental determinism, whether openly or in an implicit way” (Guzzini 2012: 20). For him, it is “that particular feature that makes geopolitics so appealing in times of foreign policy identity crisis” (Guzzini 2012: 20). And the EU is certainly having such a crisis regarding the Western Balkans region, and elsewhere too.

After this revival of geopolitics within the EU, it is interesting to see the extent to which it has been reflected in some of the member states, taking France and Germany as the main drivers of the EU's geopolitical power.

French geopolitics

In describing the French school of geopolitics, Stefano Guzzini claims that it is not “tainted by determinism, but it moves down to the level of cognition.” “According to this line of thinking, geography matters, but only through the representations that people and/or foreign policymakers have of it” (Guzzini 2012: 38). He bases this assumption on the approach of Carlo Jean – a well-known French geopolitician – who affirms that there is no objectivity in geopolitics and that borders are natural but very dependent on the connotation people or policymakers give them.

Therefore, the political elite usually links the WB with the importance of bilateral issues within the EU: ethnic conflicts, fear of immigrants due to a great number of asylum seekers and the possibility of Muslim recruitment (fear of terrorism), which has also led to no visa liberalisation with Kosovo.

German geopolitics

Saul Cohen defines geopolitics as “combining spatial theory with geographical content in its application to foreign policy-making” (Cohen 2003: 3). He sees the discipline as being the result of interaction between geographical positions, national perspectives and the international system. For him, there is “a strong relationship between a nation's foreign policymaking and geopolitical structure. Structures reflect such geographical dimensions as distance and access, patterns of resource use, trade, capital and migration flows, levels of technology and cultural/religious differences. As these dimensions change, foreign policy must adapt to them” (Cohen 2003: 7).

Does the EU's geopolitics match with France's and Germany's?

My first hypothesis is that Germany's geopolitics towards the region resembles more the neo-classical geopolitics relying on ‘space determinism’ while France's neo-classical geopolitics relies on the ‘interpretation of space.’ It appears that the EU's concept of geopolitics in the last three years – at least judging from the High Representative – is far more similar to Germany's one, while those of the Netherlands and Bulgaria are more similar to France's. In order to create more homogeneity, all that is needed is to make them coincide. If these three main approaches to geopolitics do not coincide then it is likely that the EU's CFSP towards the region will continue to be non-coherent, the region will not be securitised at the EU level and vetoes will continue to obstruct the entrance of these countries to the EU even if they could do an amazing job at improving the level of their democracy.

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy continues to disappoint. This policy is not considered to be linked to the EU's strategy and interests, but whenever it suits a member state it becomes exclusively linked with European values. This is exactly what seems to be happening with the Western Balkans. Although the strategy of the European Commission (2017) gave an approximate date for Serbia and Montenegro to join the EU (2025), this was not the case for the other Western Balkan countries, which are faced daily with a lack of economic development and foreign investment, which produces instability. In some of them, the struggle to reform, like Albania with its judicial reform, or the struggle for bilateral relations, as in the cases of Kosovo and Montenegro, has not paid off. In the case of Bosnia, with its particular history, its institutions and its difficulties in reforming, it is not incentivised in any way by the EU's conditionality. The risk of a loss of EU credibility and consent within these countries if the further upgrading step towards EU accession is denied will be considerable, as in the case of Turkey. "Support in Turkey for EU membership has dropped from close to 80 percent a few years ago to lower than 40 percent today (Pace 2008: 163). These countries have demonstrated that they are unable to emulate European rule of law, good governance, fight against corruption and innovation. Nevertheless, they are making efforts to do so. Therefore, another EU approach to them not based strictly on conditionality but on political enlargement could begin to be conceived.

Conclusions

The Western Balkans only emerged as a relatively peaceful region after 2000, considering that after the fall of communist regimes other conflicts in the area occurred: the conflicts due to the dissolution of former Yugoslavia (1991-1995), the civil conflict in Albania (1997) and Kosovo crisis (1999). Thus, until 2003, the WB region was securitized mainly as a threatening area of conflicts and trouble. In fact, only after 2003 the region's perspective was seen in the EU and after that, except of Slovenia and Croatia which are already part of the EU, the other countries are stuck. Looking at Enlargement through a strategic lens, we can say that before 2019 the WB region was de-securitised in terms of an EU future enlargement. By de-securitising the Western Balkans, the EU has failed to securitise the 'EU's territorialisation' since due to their geographic position, integrating the WB into the EU would be an 'encapsulation' or a completing of the EU, rather than an enlargement of the EU.

It was only after 2019 that the Western Balkans re-emerged as one of the European Union's most pressing security challenges, mostly as a result of the growing influence of third countries in the region. In this arena of competition and realpolitik, the EU has taken the role of a more geopolitical actor. For a geopolitical actor to become stronger a common vision of the world is needed, together with clear and common ideas about allies and an excellent performance on the global stage. In this regard, enlargement becomes one of the most important policies, and strategic enlargement is even more necessary. "Realist perspectives also suggested that enlargement presented an enormous challenge to the task of preserving the balance of power in Europe" (O'Brennan 2006: 156). As I have argued, putting the region in the waiting room by politicising some technical questions like opening accession negotiations was a decision reducing the EU's credibility in the region and the world. As Bechev warns, "Putting enlargement on hold allows other actors to seize on business opportunities, score political points and carve out niches of influence – in part, free riding on the tremendous investment in stability already made by the EU" (Bechev 2012: 7). Moreover, the option of non-enlargement could lead to destabilisation in the EU neighbourhood, avoiding which is a primary objective in the current global strategy of the EU Commission (Outeda, Gonzales et al.2020). It could weaken the EU's power in the world to the benefit of other global actors which are interested and already have a direct influence in the region such as China, Russia, Turkey and gulf countries.

The fact is that the EU is in an age of “permacrisis” in which political insecurity and challenges remain permanent companions (Zuleeg, Borges de Castro and Emmanouilidis 2021). Under these circumstances, will the Western Balkans be relegated to the periphery forever? To become a geopolitical actor in a world of realpolitik and strong competition between powers, the EU has to increase its strength on the global stage. After the 2019 geopolitical turn, the EU seems to agree on the WB being a strategically important region. The region stands like ‘rimland’ to the ‘heartland’ – the latter formed by France-Germany block- but it is more the extension of Germany than France. It is a belt, a buffer zone, a backyard and a front yard. For most, it is a strategic zone for the US. If we label the Europe-Asia continent as the *Heartland*, then, we could say that there is an important Region in its borders from its strategic perspective: Western Balkans, situated in the *Rimland* of the continent.

In order to deliver this strategic importance of the region also to the member states to make both geopolitical visions – EU’s and members’ states match. To achieve this, first of all there should be a change of narrative on the Western Balkans. This will only become possible if the EU starts considering the region not only a source of conflict and problems but also a region of opportunities, not only risks (Bonomi 2020). The region might be attractive because of its renewable energy sources, transit routes for gas and world commerce, young labour force, 18 million consumers, its effervescence in creating small and medium enterprises and start-ups, agricultural potential (Ruge 2021) and in global supply chains to the EU due to its proximity (Nechev & Kirchner 2021), an issue that came into light especially during the Pandemic of the last two years. In addition, it can be stressed that in the case of the WB their ‘Europeanness’ is not questioned, unlike what has been the case of Turkey (Outeda, González and Troitiño, 2020:300).

Second, the classic Franko-German binomial should have the same inclination towards the region. General uncertainty and disagreement among EU member states about the future of the integration project may undermine the coherence and consistency of EU action, also in the Balkan region (Bonomi 2019). The issue becomes more complicated when we consider the fact that France and Germany, the two member states that are in the driving seat of the EU integration process, have opposite views about it. If Franko-German views on the region do not converge, if the ‘embedded bilateralism’ understood as a bilateral bond that shapes European politics (Krotz and Schild 2013: 8) does not have a common view on the *polity* of the Western Balkans, then the EU will fail to have a common geopolitical approach to the region. France and Germany can realise many political achievements for the sake of EU empowerment, like monetary unification at the beginning of the 1990s. “Kohl was ready to give up the symbol of Germany’s strength, the Deutschmark, for unification. The French-German duo was the engine of the EU, and thus their agreement became decisive” (Berendt 2019: 159). Together they can make the WB really matter for the EU.

Considering that geography “conditions the perspectives of a state’s leaders or rulers and, thereby, affects their decision-making in matters of foreign policy” (Parker 2008: 5), the EU’s approach to the Western Balkans seems a clear example in which the Foreign Common and Security Policy continues to fail. It is not considered to be linked to the EU’s strategy and interests but whenever it suits a member state it becomes exclusively linked with European values. Political changes in eastern and central Europe before and in the Balkans now are seen merely “as a learning process in which the locals come into contact with Western norms and thereby learn to behave in a more European manner. Within this process, accession countries are taught the community values and norms and must prove their willingness and ability to internalise them” (Parker: 28). In this way, in alignment with the Rome Treaty, future membership of a state in the EU is not denied but postponed for an unknown period of time. “Europe thereby becomes a temporal as opposed to a spatial category – everyone can be

European at some later stage of development. This later stage is crucial, as becoming European always happens at a later stage” (Weaver 2000 :263).

The EU’s opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has poured fire on the recent debate within the EU on deepening vs. widening, or integration vs. enlargement. President Macron’s idea was highly centred on the EU’s architecture and reform, on how to better control WB integration, but not on the decision procedure of the European Council and the EU Commission. The EC has become a theatre where the member states are exposing their nationalistic resentment of the WB – as in Bulgaria’s case– not the constructivist hub of a stronger EU. An overhaul (total examination) of decision procedures is needed– not only for the election of the EP or the Head of the Commission, but also for some procedures that are really technical – as the opening of accession negotiations is – the veto power of the EU member states could be removed. Europe’s increasing strength could be enhanced by further integrating its member states but also by completing its territory. Therefore, the WB countries should be considered future EU members for real.

The Western Balkans region is seen as an important bridge between west and east by many other international actors such as Russia, China and Turkey, an idea reflected in their attempts to include the region in their spheres of influence. On the other hand, because of ethnic tensions, unresolved border disputes, pervasive organised crime and the growing influence of third countries in the region, the Western Balkans has re-emerged as one of the European Union’s most pressing security challenges, letting go the geopolitical importance of the enlargement towards the WB issue. Although Russia exploits its soft power in the region, presenting itself as a strategic partner, often seemingly caring more about the region’s interests than the EU (Panagiotou 2020), the EU prefers to distance itself from blunt power politics. As an actor attached to legalism, the EU wants European principles to stretch to non-European spaces. Beyond that, “the EU considers itself involved, against its will, in a traditional geopolitical game of influence in a European periphery where its competitors allegedly strive to redefine the rules of the game, to the disadvantage of the Western Balkan region and the EU” (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019). Its own idea of strategic autonomy encourages states to remake themselves in Europe’s liberal international image (Tocci 2021). Apart from Russia, the EU is challenged by other actors in the region like China, Turkey and gulf countries. The gulf countries are strengthening their investments (in tourism, construction, agriculture and military technology) in the region. Like China, they regard the Western Balkans as a gateway to the European market (Feyerabend et al. 2018). These actors provide access to means without conditionality. This paper does not support the idea of the EU geopolitics to substitute EU conditionality during the democratisation and Europeanisation process of the WB, but the idea that by reinforcing the geopolitical importance of the WB to the EU, the time for the region to be integrated in the EU could be accelerated and the path could be more tailored made. What this research paper argues instead is that if the EU wants to become a global power, it has to take sides and complete itself with the Balkans by securitising its territorialisation as a whole entity. EU enlargement policy is based on Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union. The enlargement process strengthens peace, democracy and stability in Europe and puts the EU in a better position to address global challenges (EU official website). This implies an empowering of the EU. “The successful integration of the Western Balkans would represent an important step forward in the process of territorialisation of the EU – namely of consolidating the Union as a political space in both its functional and symbolic dimensions – thus ratifying an aspect that was largely overlooked during the early days of enlargement enthusiasm (Bonomi 2019: 14-15).

Bibliography

- Abazi E. 2018. EU's Balkan's Test. Geopolitics of a Normative Power. *Europe Now* at: <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/25/eus-balkans-test-geopolitics-of-a-normative-power/>
- Ademmer, E., Delcour L. and Wolczuk K. 2016. Beyond geopolitics: exploring the impact of the EU and Russia in the "contested neighbourhood. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57:1, 1-18, DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2016.1183221.
- Elbasani A. 2008. EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: strategies of borrowing and inventing. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 10 (3).
- Bachman V. and Bialasiewicz L. 2020. Critical geopolitics in Bigo, D., Diez T., Diez, Fanoulis E., Rosamond B. and Stivachtis Y.A. 2020. *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 85-97.
- Bechev D. 2012. The Periphery of the Periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro Crisis. Policy Brief, ECFR, available online at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_periphery_of_the_periphery_the_western_balkans_and_the_euro_crisis/
- Belloni R. and Brunazzo M. 2017. After Brexit: The Western Balkans in the European Waiting Room, *European Review of International Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2017), pp. 21-38.
- Berendt, I. T. 2019. Out of the crisis or between crises? The EU of the future in Berendt I. T. 2021. *Against European Integration. The European Union and its Discontents*, London: Routledge.
- Bieber F. and Tzifakis N. 2019. The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options, BiEPAG.
- Blockmans S. 2017. *The Obsolescence of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, CEPS, London, Brussels: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Bonomi M. 2019. Off Track. The EU's Re-engagement with the Western Balkans, IAI Papers, available online at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/track-eus-re-engagement-western-balkans>
- Borrell J. 2021. *European Policy in times of Covid-19*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, available online at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/630ef499-8d1b-11eb-b85c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- Bressanelli E., Koop Ch. and Reh Ch. 2020. EU Actors under pressure: politicisation and depoliticisation as strategic responses, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27:3, 329-341, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1713193
- Cadier D. 2019. The Geopoliticisation of the EU's Eastern Partnership, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, 71-99, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2018.1477754
- Outeda C. C., Celso, González P. L. and Troitiño D. R. 2020. EU Enlargement Policy towards the Western Balkans: State Actors, Interests and Strategies. *European Studies, the Review of European Law, Economics and Politics* 1: 296-324.
- Colibasanu A. 2017. Germany: Keeping an eye on the Balkans. *Geopolitical Futures*, available online at: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/germany-keeping-eye-balkans/>
- Cvijić S., Hübner Ch., Eichhorn J and Molthof L. 2021. It's The EU, not Western Balkan Enlargement. French public opinion on EU Membership of the Western Balkans, Open

- Society European Policy Institute, available online at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/86b64122-f094-4576-a747-f493cbd86f8b/it%E2%80%99s-the-eu-not-western-balkan-enlargement-20210201.pdf>
- European Commission. 2003. European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better world, available online at: www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf
- European Commission. 2017. What is an EU macro-regional strategy? Brussels, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_fa_ctsheet_en.pdf
- European Commission. 2017a. Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU sets out new flagship initiatives and support for the reform-driven region. Press Release, 6 February, available online at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-561_en.htm.
- European Commission. 2018. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Strasbourg, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf
- European Commission. 2019. Mission Letter. Ursula Von der Leyen, Commissioner-designate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. 10 September, Brussels, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/mission-letter-laszlo-trocsanyi_en.pdf
- European Commission. 2020. A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process – Commission lays out its proposals, February, Brussels, available online at: [file:///C:/Users/kbeshku/Downloads/A_more_credible__dynamic__predictable_and_political_EU_accession_process_-_Commission_lays_out_its_proposals%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/kbeshku/Downloads/A_more_credible__dynamic__predictable_and_political_EU_accession_process_-_Commission_lays_out_its_proposals%20(3).pdf)
- European Commission. 2020a. Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans. February, Brussels, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf
- European Union. 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. June, European Union Global Strategy, available online at: <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en>
- European Western Balkans. 2018. EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia: Connectivity is the priority, available online at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/04/20/eu-western-balkans-summit-sofia-connectivity-priority/>
- European Western Balkans. 2020. Borrell: The EU needs to act, not just comment when it comes to foreign policy, available online at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/02/17/borrell-the-eu-needs-to-act-not-just-comment-when-it-comes-to-foreign-policy/>
- Feyerabend et al. 2018. The Influence of External Actors in the Western Balkans. A Map of Geopolitical Players. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, available online at: https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_52333_2.pdf/e467e3a-487f-0def-4303-2e87b755598f?version=1.0&t=1539647526531
- Foreign Affairs Council. 2021. Highlights of the Foreign Affairs Council. May, Brussels, available online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2021/05/10/>

- Frontini A. and Denti D. 2017. Italy and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: the Europeanization of national interests? *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17:4, 571-589, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2017.1403153
- Greubel J. and Pornschlegel S. 2021. *More of the same but different. Why Laschet should reform the CDU's EU policy?*, Commentary, European Policy Centre, available online at: <https://epc.eu/en/publications/More-of-the-same-but-different-Why-Laschet-should-reform-the-CDUs-E~3ab164>
- Guzzini S. (Ed.). 2012. *The return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hackaj A., Madhi G. And Hackaj K. 2015. Albania and the Berlin Process. Current Achievements and challenges of the Paris Summit. Policy brief. Cooperation and Development Institute.
- Islam Sh. 2019. Geopolitics begins at home: Europe's challenge is in the Western Balkans, *Friends of Europe*, available online at: <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/geopolitics-begins-at-home-europes-challenge-is-in-the-western-balkans/>
- Juncker C. 2014. A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session. Strasbourg, 15 July, available online at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker---political-guidelines.pdf>
- Juncker C. 2018. *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Strasbourg, 6.2.2018 COM (2018), available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf
- Juncker C. 2017. State of the Union Address, available online at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm.
- Kazharski A. and Makarychev A. 2015. Suturing the neighborhood? Russia and the EU in conflictual intersubjectivity. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 62(6):328–39.doi:10.1080/10758216.2015.1057077.
- Ker-Lindsay J. 2017. The United Kingdom and EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: from ardent champion of expansion to post-Brexit irrelevance. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17 (1). ISSN 1468-3857
- Ker-Lindsay J., Armakolas I., Balfour R. and Stratulat C. 2017. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17:4, 511-522, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2017.1424398
- Lilyanova V. 2016. The Western Balkans' Berlin process: A new impulse for Regional Cooperation. Briefing. European Parliamentary Research.
- Markovic K., Wang N. and Wang W. 2021. Is China's rising influence in the Western Balkans a threat to European integration? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:2, 234-250, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340.
- Miščević T. 2021. EU strategic autonomy and Western Balkans economic integration: The missing piece of the puzzle in Bonomi M. (Ed.). 2021. *In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?* Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), available online at: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893682008.pdf>

- Nechev Z. and Kirchner M. J. 2021. *Time to Move to the Western Balkans: How Diversification of Global Supply Chains Can Benefit EU Resilience*. IDSCS Policy Papers, no. 9/2021, available online at: <https://idscs.org.mk/en/portfolio/time-to-move-to-the-western-balkans-how-diversification-of-global-supply-chains-can-benefit-eu-resilience/>
- Nitoiu C. and Sus M. 2019. Introduction: The Rise of Geopolitics in the EU's Approach in its Eastern Neighbourhood. *Geopolitics*, 24:1, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2019.1544396.
- Nitoiu C. 2016. Increasingly geopolitical? The EU's approach towards the post-soviet space. *Journal of Regional Security*, 11(1):9–32.
- Nixon S. 2018. The three Challenges the EU faces in the Western Balkans. Brussels has offered EU membership to bring stability to its neighbourhood, but will that work this time? *The Wall Street Journal*, available online at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-refocuses-on-western-balkans-with-sofia-summit-1526272200>
- Noutcheva G. 2018. Whose legitimacy? The EU and Russia in contest for the eastern neighbourhood. *Democratization*, 25:2, 312-330, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2017.1363186.
- O' Brennan J. 2006. Bringing Geopolitics Back in Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19:1, 155-169, DOI: 10.1080/09557570500501911
- Panagiotou R. and Tzifakis N. 2021. Do Small Powers Retrench? Greece in the Western Balkans during the Era of SYRIZA Governance. *Southeastern Europe*, 45 (2021), 64-92.
- Parker N. 2008. A theoretical introduction; Spaces, centers and margins" in Parker N. (Ed.). *The Geopolitics of Europe's Identity: centers, boundaries and margins*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Petrovic M. and Tzifakis N. 2021. A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another postponement? An introduction. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:2, 157-168, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2021.1891028.
- Pomorska K. and Noutcheva G. 2017. Europe as a Regional Actor: Waning Influence in an Unstable and Authoritarian Neighbourhood. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55: 165–76.
- Pridham G. 2007. Change and Continuity in the European Union's political conditionality: Aims, approaches and priorities. *Democratization*, Vol. 14, Issue 3.
- Radosavljevic Z. 2017. *Trans Europe express. Will the EU ever get the Western Balkans right?* July 2017, available online at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/trans-europe-express-will-the-eu-ever-get-the-western-balkans-right>
- Raik K. 2019. The Ukraine Crisis as a Conflict over Europe's Political, Economic and Security Order. *Geopolitics*, 24:1, 51-70, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1414046.
- Rattman A., Maurice E. and Zalan E. 2018. Juncker to go on Geopolitical Balkans tour. *EU Observer*, available online at: <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/140854>
- Ruge M. 2021. Six simple principles for EU action in the Western Balkans in Bonomi M. (Ed.). 2021. *In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), available online at: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893682008.pdf>
- Sempa F. P. 2002. *Geopolitics from the cold war to the 21st Century*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction publishers.
- Tannock Ch. 2018. There is renewed focus in the EU Enlargement in the Balkans, *The Parliament Magazine*, available online at:

<https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/there-is-renewed-focus-in-eu-enlargement-in-the-balkans>

- Töglhofer Th. and Adebahr C. 2017. Firm supporter and severe critic – Germany’s two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17:4, 523-539, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2017.1397961
- Tulun T. E. (2018). Why is Macron sceptical about playing Ode to Joy for the Balkans? *Hürriyet Daily News*, 01.05.2018, available online at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/teoman-ertugrul-tulun/why-is-macron-skeptical-about-playing-ode-to-joy-for-the-balkans-131101>
- Vogel T. 2018. *Out of focus. The EU’s relations with the Western Balkans*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, October, 2018, available online at: <https://eu.boell.org/en/2018/10/09/out-focus-eu-relations-western-balkans>
- Von der Leyen U. 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. November, Strasbourg, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408
- Wæver O. 2000. The EU as Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders in Kelstrup M. and Williams M. C. (Eds.), 2000. *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Welsh J. 2016. *The Return of History: Conflict, Migration and Geopolitics*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Western Balkans Summit. 2015. *Final Declaration by the chair of Vienna Western Balkans Summit*, 27 August 2015, Vienna, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828_chairmans_conclusions_western_balkans_summit.pdf
- Wunsch N. 2017. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 17:4, 541-554, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2017.1390831.
- Youngs R. 2017. *Europe’s Eastern crisis: The geopolitics of asymmetry*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaragoza-Christiani J. 2017. Containing the refugee crisis: how the EU turned the Balkans and Turkey into an EU borderland. *The international spectator: Italian journal of International Affairs*, vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 59-75.
- Zeitlin J., Nicoli F. and Laffan B. 2019. Introduction: The European Union beyond the polycrisis? Integration and politicization in an age of shifting cleavages. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(7), 963–979.
- Zielonka J. 2008. Europe as a global actor: Empire by example? *International Affairs* 84 (3):471–84. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00718.x.
- Zulee F., Borges de Castro R. and Emmanouilidis J. 2021. Europe in the age of permacrisis. Commentary. European Policy Centre, available online at: <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c>

Author contacts:

Klodiana Beshku
Department of Political Sciences of the Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Tirana

Bulevardi Gjergj Fishta
Tirana
Albania

Email: klodiana.beshku@unitir.edu.al

