



‘ENLARGEMENT FATIGUE’

A catalyst for EU distrust and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans?

ROXANA IROD



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SUMMARY

When discussing EU's role in the world in the context of the Conference for the Future of Europe, it is important to reflect on the future of EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans. Ever since 1999, with the launch of the Stabilization and Association Process, the Western Balkan (WB) countries were told that they have a clear path for entering the European Union (EU) as long as they fulfil the accession conditionality. As the years passed, the EU seemed more and more reluctant to advance on its promise of enlargement for the troubled region (with the exception of Croatia that entered the EU in 2013) and currently the negotiations are reaching a standstill. How far will the so-called 'enlargement fatigue' go and what could be its costs for the future?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Roxana Irod is a 3rd year student at the Faculty of Political Science (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania.

EDITORIAL TEAM

Marc López (Agenda Pública), Luis Bouza (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Álvaro Oleart (University of Maastricht).

Guest editor: Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă

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BACKGROUND

The People's Republic of China is gaining an increasing amount of influence, both economically and politically in the WB region. Currently it is the third most influential foreign actor after the EU and Russia but things might change in the future considering the interests that it seems to promote in the region. Even though the degree of involvement that China has is spread across unevenly, some WB countries having stronger ties with China while others are relatively untouched, there is a common demeanour found in the way that China deals with in the WB and it shows a trend of engagement with them that sooner or later might lead to it becoming an actual alternative to the EU and the system that it tries to promote in the region, especially considering that membership seems a faraway goal that is perceived as more and more unlikely to achieve.

There are many unsolved issues keeping the WB countries from reaching the same economic or social level as the EU member states. And even when they are on the right track or have progressed enough to take the next step, they are blocked by either changing rules or even by the veto of some EU member states. Almost in every case of resistance against advancing with the EU integration process from the member states, the reasons were connected with domestic interests rather than problems of the WB countries. Such was the case of the French and the Dutch vetoing the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, the ongoing Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia that has been blocking the country from starting the negotiations since 2020 and the constant failure to offer visa liberalization to Kosovo because of lack of consensus between member states even though in all these cases the criteria imposed by the Commission have been met. The setbacks experienced by North Macedonia were not the results of issues related to the country's performance in adopting reforms but on issues such as its name and more recently the origins of its language. The Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama [has declared](#) in that sense that "*We are hostages of EU nationalisms. The path of Western Balkan integration is dependent more and more on EU nationalisms*". The Bulgarian – North Macedonia issue might have a chance to be settled if the French proposal, which seems to involve a change in the North Macedonian constitution, is going to be implemented but if this is actually possible, remains to be seen.

All these actions greatly decrease the credibility of the EU in the region as WB countries might receive a green light from the Commission but then immediately be side-lined by the member states.

The new enlargement methodology, approved in 2020 and backed strongly by some of the member states that are the most reluctant regarding the accession of the WB in the Union, was supposed to address these issues and ease out the process without compromising on the reforms demanded from any candidate country, but in the end, this revision turned out to be by default an agreement that increases the influence of the member states in the accession process. The new enlargement methodology was initially described as more merit based and a credible EU perspective for the WB but with member states being tasked with the monitoring process, advancing the negotiations became more politically and interest based than ever.

Another high critiqued move was that although moving forward with the negotiation process requires unanimity voting from the member states, the enforcement of the newly added disciplinary actions in case of stagnation or backsliding in the WB countries only requires a reversed qualified majority

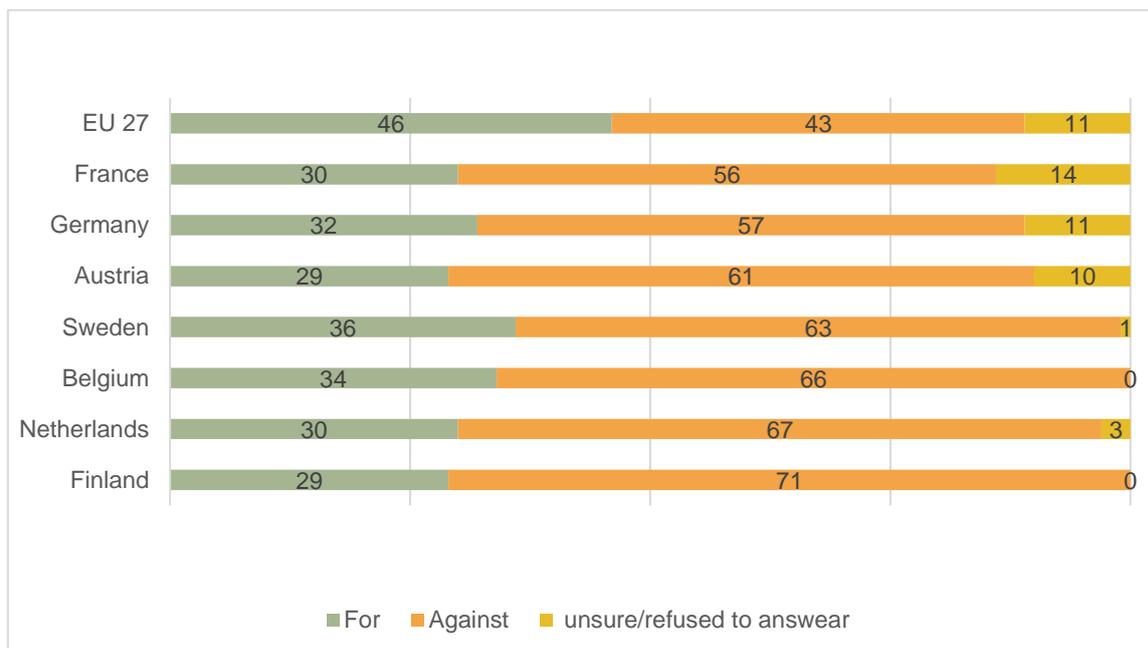


voting. This procedure portrays the EU as an organization primarily focused on ‘punishing’ the candidates who step out of the line rather than rewarding the ones that respect the EU conditionality.

THE EU CITIZENS’ OPINIONS – WHERE DO THE WESTERN BALKANS STAND?

An obvious reluctance of many of the EU member states to let the Balkan countries join in can be observed, the proof lying in their actions in the past years; politicians should not be the only ones who decide what will happen next, as the citizens of the countries that elected them also have the right to have a say in the matter but as it happens in the case of most anti enlargement countries, the public seems to echo the opinions of the most reluctant politicians. From the data gathered by the [Standard Eurobarometer 95](#) in 2021 (Annex QB6.6) we can see that when EU citizens were asked whether they agreed with the further enlargement of the EU by admitting other countries in the future, the most negative opinions were expressed by citizens from Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, Germany and France.

Figure 1: Opinion on further enlargement of the EU in various European countries



Source: Author, based on Standard Eurobarometer 95, 2021, Annex QB6.6

A Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group coordinator, [Florian Bieber](#) predicted that by the ways things are developing, the region might move closer to a fate similar to the Turkish accession process. In this regard, the Graz University researcher declared that *“The attitudes of citizens are based on their unfortunately realistic perspectives that the enlargement is in crisis. The process has*



become unpredictable because of the vetoes. Enlargement process is no longer merit based. There is also a reasonable doubt about Commission's impartiality".

If we look at the case of French citizens specifically, we can draw some conclusions that might apply to all the countries that have reservations regarding the EU enlargement process. First of all, as reported by the [Open Society Foundations](#), even though a majority of French people were against the accession process in the WB, many of these opinions were not firmly held. This is due in part to the overall perception that policies in this direction would not have an impact on their daily lives. This perception however shifts when the respondents are asked about the possible accession of Turkey, in which case over half of the people questioned consider that their lives would be impacted.

Second of all, in the group of countries that were against the enlargement process, the negative perceptions held by the respondents were based on a certain level of distrust held on the process itself rather than the particular case of the WB region. Among these people, there was a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the way the EU is governed, and also a lack of trust in their elected representatives – this indicates that the disapproval of EU citizens is not a result of doubt that the WB countries will meet certain standards by the end of the enlargement process but the failure of the EU to show citizens that its own mechanisms can be trusted.

Thirdly, there were some issues that both analyzed groups agreed on, but, the fundamental difference that split these two perceptions apart was the belief (or lack thereof) that the EU can overcome specific obstacles. Issues such as economic disparities already existing inside the Union, potential labour force migration and its impact on the local economy, as well as problems regarding democratic stability in the Balkan region, as well as in the EU itself, were therefore shared in both groups but the perception of those in favour of the enlargement was that the Union is capable of managing and overcoming them while the other group has less trust in the European institutions to properly overcome these issues. The disapproval level of the second group can be therefore directly linked with the negative perception of the state of affairs inside the EU and less with specific concerns or negative perceptions of the state of affairs inside the Balkan states.

Another surprising finding of the study was that once presented with the map of the EU and WB, a number of participants showed surprise at their geographic location and proximity to the member states. The visual representation even led to an overall agreement across the groups that from a geopolitical perspective, the place of WB is inside the Union and their membership would be advantageous for the entire Union in this specific area. This does not only show the lack of knowledge that people have on the region, but also that on some particular issues, citizens are open to rethink their initial stance once they receive relevant information on the topic.

The question which stems from this fact is why national elected representatives didn't make more efforts to inform and educate their electorate on such an important topic for the future of the EU, especially as some of them use the very disapproval of (uninformed) citizens in public opinion polls as an excuse for not advancing the negotiations in the WB countries. A former Adviser to the EU's High Representative, [Robert Cooper declared](#) that *"it would be good to concentrate on policy and not on the opinion polls"* and that *"You change the opinion polls by acting, by doing something. And there are always opportunities if you look for them"*. Therefore, if national representatives are not willing to fulfil the task of informing and showing European citizens how the enlargement process is conducted and its implications, then the EU should take on this responsibility. The lack of political will and



inaction on behalf of the EU is exactly the reason that brought on this stalemate and a continuation of this can only lead to more negative consequences.

As stated in the [2021 Balkan Barometer](#) expectations of WB citizens themselves for European accession decreased even though the EU membership continues to be seen as something positive by 62% of them. Currently, only 24% of citizens remain optimistic about EU accession by 2025 and 22% believe it will never happen at all. These beliefs may lead to an increase in radical nationalism and it might further encourage foreign powers to get involved in order to exploit the situation.

Table 1: Opinion of Balkans' citizen about the year of the accession of their economy to the EU

	By 2025	By 2030	Never	DK/refuse
Albania	39	40	16	5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	15	41	32	12
Kosovo	30	48	7	15
North Macedonia	21	31	31	17
Montenegro	27	42	16	16
Serbia	12	38	32	18
Region	24	40	22	14

Source: *Balkan public barometer, rcc.int, 2021*

CHINESE INFLUENCES – FILLING THE EU GAP

The WB countries have a pivotal role in showing the world the leadership capacities of the EU in managing issues outside its border. In order for the EU to be taken seriously as a global power and exporter of values and good practices, the Union should look past its economic performances and have an honest reflection on its achievements in securing peace and prosperity on the entire European continent as well as the overall influence that it has outside its borders. The reluctance of the EU to take a clear leadership position in the region (as highlighted in the previous section) may encourage other countries to step in and fill that void

China and Russia specifically are trying to get as involved as possible in the region's affairs. A particular country where their efforts were met with success is Serbia, where according to a public opinion survey conducted by the [Belgrade Centre for Security Policy](#), in 2020, Serbian citizens identified Russia and China as their greatest friends and more than half of the citizens do not support Serbia's membership in the EU. The positive public opinion on China has increased significantly due to the implications of COVID19, as it is shown by the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic 75%



of respondents believed that China provided the most assistance to Serbia in the fight against the pandemic, 10% thought that Russia offered the most aid, while only 3% thought that it was the EU, even though, according to available data, [the largest donor was the EU](#). These results were due to the fact that initially the European Commission decided to limit exports of medical equipment outside of EU and had a strict policy of sharing the available vaccines between EU member states so the WB felt left out and turned towards China. The EU later corrected that mistake and sent substantial aid to the region, but it had less of an effect because of the delay while China's contribution, even if it was mostly in the form of medical supplies, the promptness through which it reacted and the favorable media coverage that soon followed turned it into a symbolic gesture that was a lot [more visible](#) to the public.

Multiple studies seem to support this trend of WB countries having closer and closer relations with foreign powers while at the same time losing trust in the EU institutions and mechanisms. Although nowhere else is as obvious as in the case of Serbia, the other WB countries' situation is shifting in the same direction and may follow Serbia's lead if the EU doesn't become more proactive in the region.

China's involvement in the WB is most noticeable through the 'Belt and Road' initiative and more specifically the 16+1 forum that targets the region and offers to lend money to the WB countries for infrastructure projects. According to an ECFR paper concerning [China's rise in the Western Balkans](#), Montenegro borrowed almost 1 billion dollars from China's EXIM Bank, which represented almost a quarter of its GDP. [The Central Bank of Montenegro Annual Report from 2020](#), shows that China was the second largest foreign investor in Montenegro, behind only Russia, with investments of over 71.2 million euros euro, while Russia invested 98 million euro. Although if put together and add the value of investments from all EU member states, they surpass the amount of money invested by either China or Russia, the strong presence that these countries already have in Montenegro should not be ignored. The loans that were given by Beijing, for example, were specifically built in such a way that if the country was unable to pay them back, China was entitled to seize the infrastructure that it helped build. In 2021, Montenegro has narrowly avoided a debt trap towards China thanks to help received from the EU and the United States, but the situation is far from settled. The issue regarding Chinese loans and influence isn't as bad in any other WB country as in Montenegro, but political and economic relations should be approached with caution.

According to the same study, Albania also has close economic ties with China and we can even distinguish a *'gradual economic Chinese penetration of the Albanian economy'* through well calculated steps such as the creation of economic and investment zones, the fact that a Chinese firm acquired the concession for a major oil extraction field in the country, or that another Chinese enterprise secured the Tirana Airport concession. Chinese support in Albanian media also witnessed an increase in the past few years, but the level of economical involvement seems to have slowed down lately, as shown by the fact that Tirana Airport's ownership was transferred back to an Albanian company in 2020 and that there weren't any other major Chinese investments since; so the situation seems stable for the time being.

For Bosnia-Herzegovina, most of the Chinese involvement in the country can be summarized in the 800 million dollars borrowed by the government for the construction of a thermal powerplant as well as different projects for the construction of road infrastructure. All things considered, in this particular case, with or without foreign influences from non-European powers, the social and political instability



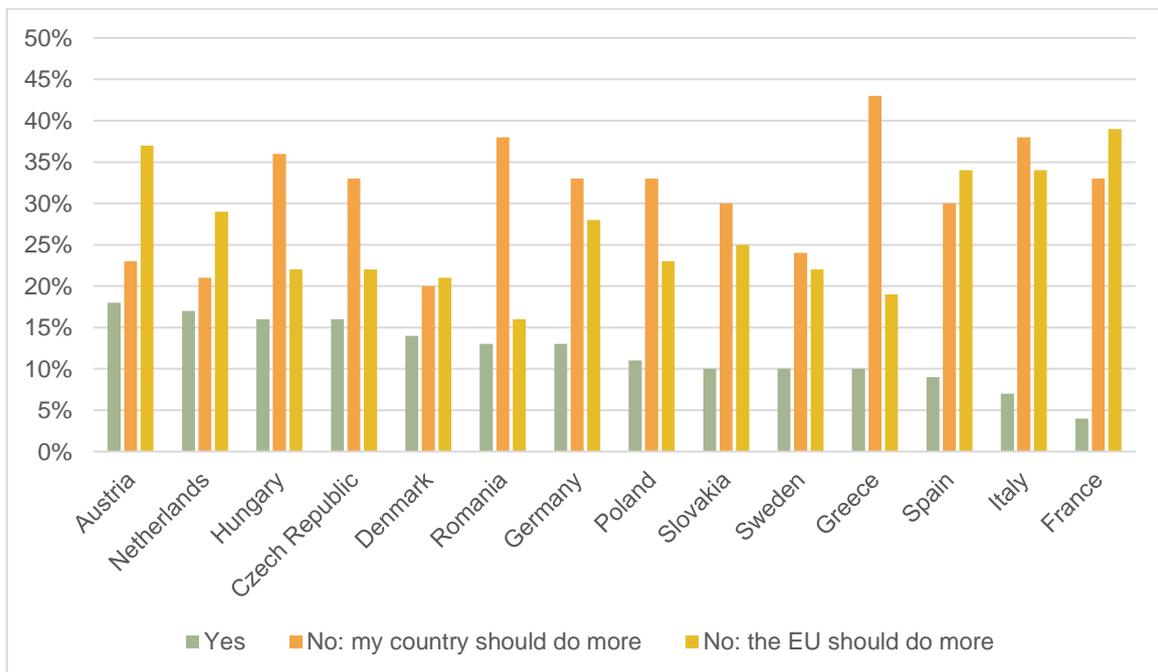
of the country due to ethnical divisions should be of greater concern for the EU than any actions that China (or other non-EU actors) could take inside of it.

In the case of Kosovo, the ties between the two countries are pretty weak, especially as Serbia, the key ally of China in the region has a rough history with Kosovo and doesn't even recognise it as an independent state. There are some moves undertaken by Chinese companies inside of the country but by now they didn't achieve any significant results, Kosovo maintaining a strong pro EU and pro NATO stance.

Finally, looking at North Macedonia, although it previously held closer ties to China, the country has reoriented its foreign policies toward the EU and concentrated most of its efforts on the accession process, even if that meant losing out on Chinese investments. For now, at least, the stagnation of the enlargement process didn't derail Skopje's efforts toward Europeanisation but if the EU doesn't start putting the negotiations in motion, the situation might take a significant turn for the country, as well as for the EU.

In turn, EU citizens don't only see China as a competitor on the global stage, but also on the regional and even national level as shown by the following [ECFR graph](#) that clearly shows a the clash of interests between the EU and China and an overwhelming perception that not enough political action is taken in this area.

Figure 2: Are your country's economic interests well protected vis-à-vis China?



Source: ecfr.eu, 2019



WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF EU'S ENLARGEMENT IN THE BALKANS? – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I have argued that the failure to deliver on the enlargement promises made by the EU in the WB is mostly caused by member states' direct immixture in the accession process, a manifestation of personal and national interests. The representatives of the most reluctant European states on the issue of enlargement – Germany, Austria, France, Netherlands and Denmark – often quote public opinion polling results to justify their actions in blocking the advancement of the enlargement process. Nevertheless, significant data shows that at least in the case of France, the citizens that hold a negative view on letting the WB join the EU are not particularly firm in their beliefs and that the source of these beliefs isn't so much the result of the political or economic issues in the Balkan region but stem from the lack of trust in European institutions and their capacity to overcome those issues. This fact shows above anything else that the current efforts undertaken by the EU in the WB do not only concern foreign affairs policies, but also internal issues and disagreements inside its own border, as well as a lack of confidence from its own citizens, which in turn makes the success of the enlargement project an issue of consolidating its reputation for the EU.

The most striking discovery during the case study on French citizens was that once they were presented with more information about the enlargement process and the benefits that the integration of the region could bring to the Union, many citizens were willing to change their initial views on a number of elements. Even so, considering that reasons for disapproving of the enlargement process in the WB were from the very beginning not based on negative information on the countries in the region, but linked with a negative view of the EU in general and a lack of understanding of the EU mechanism required to advance the negotiation process, it is important to note that information shared with the public should also address their institutional and governance concerns regarding the Union.

Another worry of EU citizens was represented by the economic interests advanced by China in their own national states, as China (and to some degree, Russia), has a noticeable presence in the WB region. It has been shown that even though their influences in the WB aren't yet of major concern (except for Serbia), the situation can easily change and the EU should be concerned about the way this issue is unfolding as its action or inaction in the matter will determine how the future of the entire region will look like.

Considering the level of expectations regarding the enlargement process, EU's current internal issues and China's influence in the WB region, some suggestions of actions that the EU could take towards the WB are:

- Modifying the treaties in order to change the voting procedure of the European Council in matters regarding foreign affairs, particularly in the issue of enlargement, by introducing qualified majority voting instead of unanimity, up to the point when candidate countries actually finish the negotiation process and there has to be a final vote to let them join inside the EU. In this manner, national states could still have the final say on the enlargement matter, but it would also ensure that while the process is ongoing there will be no unnecessary disturbances along the path; this in turn would give the candidate countries the chance to progress at the agreed pace and then be judged by the final result of their Europeanization effort.



- Organizing informational campaigns in all the member states and ensuring that citizens have the appropriate information to form an opinion on the enlargement issue and the efforts that the EU and WB countries make in that direction. During these campaigns, rather than appealing to the moral responsibility of the Union to cultivate its values in its own vicinity and other ethically centred arguments, there should be a bigger, more pragmatic focus on the geopolitical argument, the strengthening of democratic processes within the European continent as a mean of ensuring peace and stability, protecting the region and the EU from foreign influences, as well as highlighting potential opportunities in fields such as trade and tourism for the EU. The citizens should therefore be made aware of the actual costs as well as the opportunities that a new wave of enlargement would offer, not only because that would benefit the WB countries that suffer the consequences of political indecisiveness at the EU level but also because it would help improve the reputation and credibility of the EU among its own citizens
- Organizing informational campaigns in the WB region with the help national state actors and CSOs, where citizens will be made aware of the benefits of joining the EU, the way that the enlargements process actually works and the advancements done by their countries and in case there haven't been any, it is important to clarify the reasons of this lack of progress in order to know who to hold accountable. Another important topic that should be included in the discussions with the citizens is the influence of foreign powers in the region and what role do they play. From an economic perspective, it is relevant to cover the risk of a country falling in a debt trap if national governments borrow money carelessly and how citizens can recognise this type of behaviour early on so they can boycott any policy or attempt to jeopardise their country's financial security.