

# The Franco-German European reform proposal's impact on EU enlargement

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## THE FRANCO-GERMAN EUROPEAN REFORM PROPOSAL'S IMPACT ON EU ENLARGEMENT

From a group of six in 1957, the European Union has since grown into a group of 28 diverse nation-states. As things now stand, the group is to be cut down for the first time due to Brexit and another critical enlargement is being bred. As external pressures mount, relations with key ally United States are strained and nationalist movements rise internally, French President Emmanuel Macron put forth a proposal on how to thrive forward.

In his 26 September 2017 speech in Paris, Macron asserted that “the Europe that we know is too slow, too weak, too ineffective; Europe’s problem is not a lack of public money, but a lack of reforms. (...) The only path that assures our future is the rebuilding of a Europe that is sovereign, united and democratic”<sup>1</sup>. It thus triggered restoring discussions on how the EU itself needs to reform before the Balkans enlargement takes place, which is in turn linked to how the relations of the six Balkan countries as future fellow Member States will affect the, as-of-yet anticipated, EU33.

### The proposed reforms, from Macron to Merkel

Macron’s viewpoint rests in the belief that Europe is a unique project that needs to improve its integration reality as is before expanding borders and welcoming more countries into its democratic institutions or single market. The *New York Times* examined his speech in considering that “rather than retrenchment, he [Macron] sees a revived European Union as the best antidote to increasing nationalism, populism and Euroscepticism”<sup>2</sup>. The plan outlined by the French President calls for deeper cooperation and structured centralization on fields such as the environment and defense but, primarily, on matters pertaining to the 19-country single currency bloc. He envisions more economic and banking convergence in the Eurozone, a proposal warranting of German backing in order to jointly lead the reforms into success<sup>3</sup>.

Both Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have since reached an informal agreement on how to proceed with the reforms – on 19 June a joint declaration on EU reform and budget convergence was released, entitled ‘Renewing Europe’s promises of security and prosperity’. The document is clear in its overall aim, stating in the introductory paragraphs that “France and Germany are strongly committed to not only preserve the achievements of the European Union but also to further strengthen their cooperation within the European Union, with the constant preoccupation to ensure both the unity of its Member States and its efficiency”<sup>4</sup>. The joint declaration sets a framework for the delineation of reforms for the stabilizing of the Eurozone from 2021, yet with no details on size, funding and centralized governance structure were given

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Macron’s speech at the Sorbonne, 26 September 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, ‘Emmanuel Macron’s Lofty Vision for Europe Gets Mixed Reviews’, 28 September 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/world/europe/france-macron-european-union-reforms.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, ‘France’s Emmanuel Macron pins pro-EU reforms success on ‘Germany’s ambitions’’, 19 January 2018, available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/frances-emmanuel-macron-pins-pro-eu-reforms-success-on-germanys-ambitions/a-42229093>.

<sup>4</sup> Meseberg Declaration - Renewing Europe’s promises of security and prosperity, 19 June 2019.

in this preliminary paper. The subsequent steps are expected to be consultations with the other Eurozone countries so that a comprehensive roadmap can be set up for the implementation of the reforms.

## The enlargement sidelined?

In consideration of the above, it is clear that the priorities of key EU actors, arguably the two leading figures in the European Union, currently lie in reforming and rehabilitating the Eurozone - not in the candidate countries. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, welcomed the initiative to take the helm of a competitive EU, saying "I am very pleased with the German-French paper. It allows European progress and the Commission is very pleased with what is being developed"<sup>5</sup>.

However, in parallel to putting forth such an ambitious plan for a reinvigoration of Europe, European progress and European future also pertain to the enlargement and integration of the Western Balkan countries. In point of fact, when examining the eight-page joint declaration, the text addresses cooperation issues ranging from migration, climate, digital space and the Eurozone, yet matters of enlargement or the Balkan candidate countries are not present. Foreign policy, security and defense are similarly addressed yet entirely related to the EU's standing as an actor in the international arena. This development comes just weeks before the upcoming EU-Western Balkans summit and at a time when hopeful EU sentiments in candidate countries are fading, as integration expectations linger on as much as promises do.

The priority of the Franco-German axis is clear in aiming to rebuild trust and rehabilitate the Union. In fact, Jyrki Katainen, European commissioner for jobs and growth, was recently quoted as saying "the main issue is trust among member states, which is not as good as it should be"<sup>6</sup>. Macron, elected President of France after running a fervent pro-European campaign, has set the tone for what this new EU generation of cross-border issues must entail institutionally and strive for in terms of cooperation and policy harmony. Reads the *New York Times* that "If populism and nationalism surged with the impact of the financial crisis, Mr. Macron argues, the best answer is a more integrated European Union that protects and benefits its citizens and a more sustainable Eurozone, with its own budget, banking protections and financial management"<sup>7</sup>.

As a leading and founding Member State, France has been vocal regarding its hesitation toward enlargement, offering a cautious approach to expanding European borders - "I don't want a Europe that, functioning with difficulty as 28 and tomorrow as 27, decides that we can gallop off to be 30 or 32 with the same rules"<sup>8</sup>, argued Macron in May 2018 in the context of the Sofia

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<sup>5</sup> Reuters, "Merkel, Macron back eurozone budget in 'new chapter' for bloc", 20 June 2018, available at :

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-france-eurozone/merkel-macron-meeting-is-moment-of-truth-for-europe-french-minister-idUSKBN1JF1L8> .

<sup>6</sup> New York Times, "Macron Had a Big Plan for Europe. It's Now Falling Apart", 19 April 2018, available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/world/europe/emmanuel-macron-eu-reform.html> .

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Politico, "Spain, France upset Brussels' Balkan plans", 16 May 2018, available at:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-mariano-rajoy-emmanuel-macron-balkan-enlargement-spain-france-upset-brussels-balkan-plans/> .

summit on EU-Western Balkans relations. Nevertheless, amidst this eager proposal to reorient the EU down a path of effectiveness, convergence and integration, President Macron also argued in his speech last September that “In the same way, we should not define a closed club for those who could be members of it, let’s define the way forward, the method, and all those who have the ambition, desire and power will be in it, without blocking or stopping the others”<sup>9</sup>.

Ultimately, the Balkan countries are not necessarily being sidelined as a priority of the EU and its key leaders – rather, the Balkan enlargement is encompassed in the larger strategic objective of bettering the European Union as a sustainable group of integrated nation-states. As the most recent EU Enlargement Strategy in February showcased, there is a unified interest in expanding the Union. The core difference lies in how certain Member States want to carry out the enlargement with regards to the EU27 itself, as this Franco-German reform proposal showcases. Certain Member States privilege fortifying the Union before expanding it, in an effort to avoid the risk of internal divisions wreaking havoc on the assimilation of new members into group and the respective common policies.

## Concluding remarks

In light of the fact that the European Union has faced serious integration and cooperation hurdles in the last years, a Franco-German push for a generalized EU and/or Eurozone reform should be incentivized and welcomed. It directly concerns solidifying the project, which indirectly and eventually benefits candidates looking to accede to a Union of prosperity and harmony. All six Western Balkan countries are expected to one day be side by side with their fellow 27 Member State - in turn, the reforms President Macron put forth and Chancellor Merkel supports look to a long term future based on sound institutions and trust, both elements that make for a successful enlargement.

While the reform proposal may push enlargement matters one item down the EU priority list, it intends to make for a stronger Union, one that will be more capable to accommodate new Member States in a mutually fortuitous manner.

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<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Macron’s speech at the Sorbonne, 26 September 2018.

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