

THE FORTHCOMING NEW EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION MANDATE AMIDST THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA: how will the geostrategic interests of Kosovo factor into

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The forthcoming new European Parliament and European Commission mandate amidst the international arena: how will the geostrategic interests of Kosovo factor into it

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THE FORTHCOMING NEW EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION MANDATE AMIDST THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA: HOW WILL THE GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS OF KOSOVO FACTOR INTO IT

Introduction

2019 will be a decisive year for the European Union (EU) and for Kosovo's integration prospects. In May 2019 the European Parliament (EP) elections will take place and are expected to lead to a different, more right-leaning, design of the plenary. Come October of the same year, the current European Commission (EC) ends its mandate, with Federica Mogherini finishing her term as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and passing the torch to her successor in leading reconciliation efforts related to Kosovo and Serbia. For this reason, the European political landscape is expected to change substantially and the effects it will have for the geostrategic interests of Kosovo, particularly hot topics such as visa liberalization or accession, are yet to be determined. What is the position the main right and far-right parties in the EU have towards Kosovo? How likely is it that new coalitions in the EP will change the rules of the game with regards to enlargement and visa liberalization for Kosovo? How does the presidency of the Council of the EU factor into the equation?

This report seeks to analyze the current and forthcoming political landscape in EU Member States and in EU institutions from the angle of Kosovo's interests, image and path in the European Union. In parallel, global actors with an important role, namely the United States and the United Nations, will also be examined given their soft or hard power influence over Kosovo's international standing. The report will start by dissecting the late-2018 and early-2019 EU priority agenda and, from there, tie the ongoing political moves in Brussels to Kosovo and this country's own geostrategic agenda. Linked to this, a broader perspective is given by looking into the latest meetings held in the United Nations regarding the situation in Kosovo, in order to better pinpoint the standing Kosovar interests currently hold in the main international stage among both American and European countries.

1. Internal EU hurdles countervail enlargement priorities

More than 60 years after its implementation as an economic project of just six member countries, the European Union has evolved into a regional powerhouse of sovereign states bound together by common laws and values. It embodied the globalized world order of the 21st century finds in its advocacy and realization of a single market, no borders and regional integration – nevertheless the mounting transnational challenges that also arose with the 21st century have started to erode its sustainability. The Union of 28 is now preconized to become one of 27 Member States in April, several governments are breaching core EU laws and political parties are questioning the validity of the unified European project. Additionally, the backdrop to all this is the looming cloud of upcoming elections to appoint the Members of European Parliament (MEPs) who will define the voting and political landscape of the EU for the next five years.

On the ground of this reality, there has been a clear priority shift in the EU - from asserting its influence in the world to ensuring its own survival and durability. Henrique Burnay, Senior Partner at *Eupportunity* argued that “The problem is that Europe is always in crisis and waiting for ‘the solution’. However, unlike countries, it does not run the risk of failing, but of disintegrating, of ending”¹. In fact, just when the EU was recovering from the recession and Eurozone crisis, the

¹ Henrique Burnay, “Europa: o pior está para vir?” [Europe: is the worst to come?], in *Observador*, 16 January 2019, <https://observador.pt/opiniao/europa-o-pior-esta-para-vir/>. Accessed 28 January 2019.

global refugee crisis led to unprecedented migratory flows and asylum requests across EU countries. Suddenly the Schengen Area's lack of border controls, a core EU policy, was identified by certain governments as a security flaw and handicap to state sovereignty. In parallel, the United Kingdom, a member country since 1973, voted and triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to leave the Union altogether. All these pressing transnational issues and EU common challenges cried the same in the form of far-right populist parties: an urge to halt, or even reverse, integration in lieu of glorifying the national identity.

Suddenly, raising talks of more integration and further enlargement was construed as a political risk. The populists reject the current integration status quo and the liberals seek to appease the masses by making sure the first concern of domestic governments and EU institutions are the citizens, not migrants, refugees or potential new Member States. The problem not necessarily being the new candidate countries, but rather more so the Member States themselves in more and more revealing the fragility of the Union as is now. Said also Burnay, "The discussion on Europe these days regards the very question of the viability of the European Union. The procedures against Poland and Hungary, but possibly also Romania, raise a fundamental problem: there are Member States which, should they have now been in the process of accession, would be refused. This may mean that membership was premature, or that the values we regard as fundamental are not rooted there, either definitively or transiently"². The EU's lack of a united stance and long-term vision surrendered to transnational challenges and forged a troublesome 2018, which now has made way for a further unsettling 2019. Even though EU enlargement continues to be included in official speeches, accession talks with Serbia and opening negotiations with Albania and Macedonia is expected, suddenly there is too much internal instability and this renders enlargement talks almost unavailing.

For instance, the first 2019 meeting of the EP's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), the one in charge of Kosovo's visa liberalization, handled mainly migration aspects, such as Integrated Border Management Fund.³ As things stand, the only EP topic related to Kosovo falls under the *Work in Progress* category and refers to the proposal on visa liberalization – 2016/0139(COD) *Third countries whose nationals are subject to or exempt from a visa requirement: Kosovo*⁴. Since the plenary backed the proposal to enter inter-institutional negotiations in September 2018, no progress has seemingly been made by the Council to conclude the legislative procedure.

Institutionally, it is clear that enlargement and external members' integration is far down the priority list for 2019 as the election year it is. During the last week of January 2019, the European Parliament agenda covered: Brexit talks and visa exemption for UK citizens, the situation in Venezuela, as well as rule of law issues and fundamental rights in Hungary⁵. In laying out the sociopolitical context behind agenda-setting, it is noted that domestic hurdles have gotten the best out of the EU's initial willingness to expand its borders toward the Western Balkans. The willingness is still there, yet buried by internal problems and populist rhetoric.

² Henrique Burnay, "Europa: o pior está para vir?" [Europe: is the worst to come?], 16 January 2019.

³European Parliament, "Draft Agenda Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Monday 7 January 2019", <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+COMPARL+LIBE-OJ-20190107-1+01+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>. Accessed 20 January 2019.

⁴European Parliament legislative Observatory, "Procedure File - 2016/0139(COD) Third countries whose nationals are subject to or exempt from a visa requirement: Kosovo", [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=&reference=2016/0139\(COD\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=&reference=2016/0139(COD)). Accessed 20 January 2019.

⁵European Parliament, "The Week Ahead 28 January – 03 February 2019 – Brussels plenary session", <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/2019-5>. Accessed 29 January 2019.

2. Recent developments in Brussels: the Foreign Affairs Council and the Presidency

Besides the Parliament and the Commission, the third EU institution to look at is the Council of the EU. Operating on a rotating basis, the Presidency of the Council of the EU is held by Member States for a six-month period, with Romania currently holding the slot until July 1st 2019⁶ - this must also be considered when examining the likelihood of Kosovo's geostrategic interests being considered or supported by the EU. For instance, now a non-recognizer Member State is the one holding power, which hampers Kosovo's prospects of pushing statehood and/or visa exemption claims. On the other hand, during the Austrian presidency in 2018, visa liberalization for Kosovo was set as a main issue and heavy lobbying was undertaken during the presidency's months between high level Kosovar officials and their Austrian counterparts⁷. Indeed, the Romanian presidency, especially in the country being a more recent and Eastern Member State itself, has supported another wave of enlargement to the Western Balkans and preconditioned it in their priorities for the 6 months of Council Presidency. For instance, they have put clear support for opening accession talks with Albania and Macedonia during the Romanian EU presidency. It has however been noted that such a commitment and political investment has been challenging given other Member States' more hesitant positions and the EU's own fragility in the present days, two levels of analysis which this report examines. In fact, The Council of Foreign Ministers has already met once this year in Bucharest, an informal meeting of the Foreign Affairs ministers on 31 January and 1 February 2019⁸, a so-called Gymnich meeting organized by ministers to discuss their countries' positions without their assistants and in a more informal setting. Although only the agenda for the meeting was released and no briefing has been made public, it was previously announced by the Romanian Foreign minister Teodor Melescanu that the "Western Balkans will be on the agenda of the meeting of the EU Foreign ministers on 31 January in Bucharest"⁹. More specifically related to Kosovo, stated that both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo "are still at the initial phase. We will talk to them and see how we can support their efforts"¹⁰.

Besides that high level meeting, there is the scheduled Foreign Affairs Council of the EU on 18 February 2019¹¹, which provides a good tell-tale of the main discussion points among such EU circles. Neither Kosovo, Serbia or the Dialogue are part of the current affairs-agenda highlights, which instead are controlled by the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the situation in Ukraine, in Syria and in Venezuela, as well as the entry into force of the Prespa agreement allowing for the change of name of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹². Now that the other major neighborly Balkan dispute - the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece - has been resolved, the focus on Kosovo can very well increase or, potentially, the focus can also fade as other international issues arise and other previous disputes move forward and require added attention. Notable issues to that need to be urgently discussed in these fora the impasse on visa liberalization or accession were scarce.

⁶ Romania2019, "Priorities", <https://www.romania2019.eu/priorities/>. Accessed 30 January 2019.

⁷ Republic of Kosovo Ministry of European Integration, "Minister Hoxha meets Austrian Minister Blümel- seeking to conclude decision-making on visa liberalization during the Austrian presidency", 27 September 2018, <http://meiks.net/en/lajmet/minister-hoxha-meets-austrian-minister-blmel--seeking-to-conclude-decision-making-on-visa-liberalization-during-the-austrian-presidency>. Accessed 12 December 2018.

⁸ <https://www.romania2019.eu/event/informal-reunion-of-the-foreign-affairs-ministers-gymnich/>

⁹ Independent Balkan News Agency, "Romanian Foreign minister supports the opening of accession talks for Albania", 28 January 2019, <https://www.balkaneu.com/romanian-foreign-minister-supports-the-opening-of-accession-talks-for-albania/>. Accessed 15 February 2018.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2019/02/18/>

¹² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2019/02/18/>

This section sought to outlay where the Western Balkans enlargement and specifically Kosovo fit into the broader context of EP elections and Council presidency. Building on that, the following sections will take a closer look at the political landscape in several EU Member States and main global state actors in order to understand if a new radical right could impact the Republic of Kosovo's prospects and what the United Nations is standing for.

3. Radical political trends in the EU and global partners: what it means for Kosovo

The last time European elections took place was in 2014. The political landscape was very different, in that, for instance, no Member State was poised to leave and Euroscepticism had yet to be a mainstream concept. The mandate of the 751 MEPs elected ends now, in 2019, under a very different political climate. The importance of enlargement in the EU's foreign policy, however, remains intact.

Burnay, expert on European affairs, further put the elections into context by reminding that "There will be European elections in May 2019, but neither the problems nor the solutions for Europe will appear on that occasion. Election day for the European Parliament will serve to measure the pulse of Europeans - among other things, realize how many populists and radicals are elected - but the current list of concerns is much longer than what will be shown then"¹³. In fact, as some European countries, the Western Balkans, seek more integration, several other European countries, EU Member States, seek more separation as nationalism resurges among the political elite. British political commentator Andrew Neil reminded that the far-right "only has about 23 percent of the European Parliament at the moment. Almost everywhere I look they're going to get a lot more than that - they won't get a majority"¹⁴. He predicts they won't get a majority amidst the main EP political groups – the European People's Party group (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance for Socialists and Democrats (S&D) – but they will still have bigger influence and increase the seats of eurosceptical alliances.

The problems the EU has been facing have made for a very different political race and reigning parties in key members. I will look into some particular Member States below, at a time when countries are still lining up their national lists and candidates for the May election. Once elected, MEPs can align with others who share a similar political orientation to form groups (or alliances) within Parliament. Each group must have at least 25 MEPs originated from at least 25% of Member States – there are currently eight political groups or alliances in the EP, but this number can change depending on the 2019 results and coalitions. While there is no clear-cut and outspoken position about Kosovo from each political party, they in hindsight offer clear positions on the enlargement and the expansion of EU borders – this provides direction as to how the ongoing political trends of the main right and left parties are likely to change the rules of the game, the EP plenary game, and potentially hamper Kosovo's path in the EU.

France: the battle between nationalists and globalists

France is one of the most important countries to look at when analyzing how likely the European elections and new Commission are to impact Kosovo's interests. France has since 2017 been under the rule of Emmanuel Macron, a centrist and liberal president with a clear and vocal pro-

¹³ Henrique Burnay, "Europa: o pior está para vir?" [Europe: is the worst to come?], 16 January 2019.

¹⁴ Euronews, "Is the centre-left dead? David Miliband with Andrew Neil", 25 January 2019, https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/24/are-we-witnessing-the-death-of-the-centre-left-in-today-s-europe-andrew-neil-asks-david-mi?fbclid=IwAR1FUuJa_G2tXFiBWBz4-VQElSKV0026PhB5GZlH5G6lggnINTqGCdQY-M. Accessed 28 January 2019.

European agenda. His *En Marche* movement heavily bet on a reenergizing France's role in the EU and reforming the EU itself as a means to counter the rising nationalist rhetoric of the opposing far-right party, The National Rally, formerly the National Front. In line with this, he called for a structured EU centralization on fields such as the environment, defense and the Eurozone in order to rehabilitate the Union in a sustainable way. For this reason, he has been hesitant toward further enlargement of EU borders, stating: "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"¹⁵. Macron believes another enlargement does not meet the strategic interests or cohesion efforts of France or the EU. This is harmful for Kosovo's European prospects, in having a key EU state actor discourage attention be given to external candidate or potential countries. This belief amplified as the sociopolitical situation in France worsens: mass protests (Yellow Vests - *Gilets Jaunes*) against Macron's policies and generalized economic frustration have been taking place in all major French cities since November 2018. It is the biggest challenge Macron's presidency has faced and has already raised some flags regarding France's voting in the upcoming EU elections. The Yellow Vests movement has not only fueled social divisions and inequalities but also officially announced their interest in contesting Macron's movement in the upcoming European elections¹⁶. Their desire to become a more organized political force is still primitive but, nonetheless, both Macron and EU opponents Marine Le Pen, far-right, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, far-left, have expressed their support. Le Pen asserted that, in the European election, "the battle is now between nationalists and globalists"¹⁷. Should the far-right garner more votes in this election - as recent polls giving Macron's party 23,5% and Le Pen's 20,5% showcase¹⁸ - France's refusal on enlargement will be even more severe.

Germany: strengthening the EU27 as priority

Germany has long been a top supporter and defender of Kosovo's strategic interest in the region and in the EU. Chancellor Angela Merkel, from the German conservative party CDU, has led the country with a decisive pro-European agenda. The current coalition in Germany is made up of conservative parties CDU and CSU as well as the social-democrat SPD. The coalition managed to beat out of power the rising populist group AfD, instead implementing a very pro-European agenda with an outlook of building a united, strong and reformed EU. For this reason, Merkel and France's Macron have reached informal agreements to collaborate on reforms that combat nationalist sentiment and distrust - on 19 June a joint declaration on EU reform and budget convergence was released, entitled 'Renewing Europe's promises of security and prosperity'. On the other side of the spectrum, much like the Yellow Vests movement in France is seeking to form a party to enter the European election, also the AfD movement is looking to complete a party list to run for the

¹⁵ Politico, "Spain, France upset Brussels' Balkan plans", 16 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-mariano-rajoy-emmanuel-macron-balkan-enlargement-spain-france-upset-brussels-balkan-plans/> . Accessed 20 January 2019.

¹⁶ Reuters, "Splits among French 'yellow vests' deepen as some eye EU elections", 25 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-election-yellowvests/splits-among-french-yellow-vests-deepen-as-some-eye-eu-elections-idUSKCN1PJ1PZ> . Accessed 29 January 2019.

¹⁷ Euronews, "France's Le Pen appeals to 'yellow vest' protesters for Europe election", 13 January 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/13/france-s-le-pen-appeals-to-yellow-vest-protesters-for-europe-election> . Accessed 29 January 2019.

¹⁸ Elabe, "Européennes : LREM/MoDem à 23,5% (+4 depuis novembre), devant le RN (20,5%)" [Europeans: LREM / MoDem at 23.5% (+4 since November), ahead of the RN (20.5%)], 23 January 2019, <https://elabe.fr/elections-europeennes-janvier2019/> . Accessed 29 January 2019.

German seats in the EP – difference is here the party is already a part of national politics, holding opposition seats in all regional assemblies and the federal Bundestag¹⁹.

It is from Germany where the nominee of the European People's Party, Manfred Weber, originates from. He is likely to become the next European Commission president should the EPP remain the main European party - it currently holds 218 seats and it expected to win 183 seats (out of 705 seats) in this election²⁰. The other main political liberal groups of the Commission (S&D and ALDE) are also expected to garner the most votes overall, nevertheless still losing seats in the plenary. On the other hand, the opposition parties Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) and new parties (mainly populist) are expected to make large gains, respectively winning 58 seats and 45 seats.

The Netherlands: a bet on EU reform and renewed trust in existing borders

Germany's neighbor, The Netherlands, has also laid up a very telling strategy ahead of the election in May. The small country, and founding Member State, has announced its plan to assert itself as a more serious discussion partner along with France and Germany, looking to fill in the void left by the UK's impending exit. Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok officially set five policy topics he wants the EU to prioritize in the new EP and EC mandates: "Migration, security, a strong and sustainable economy that offers protection, climate change, and the promotion of values and interests abroad"²¹. Once more, the strategic focus proposed by this government sidelines external candidate countries in favor of reestablishing trust in the internal order. Much to appease growing security worries amid the migration crisis and nationalist sentiments of rejection of the communal project, Blok added that "The Dutch interest in Europe and the positive choice in favor of the EU are by no means equal to borderless integration. (...) It is important that citizens have a grip on the future. European cooperation must, first and foremost, be based on the interests of European citizens and be able to count on their support"²². In the Netherlands, the voting turnout is expected to result in similar percentages for Prime Minister Rutte's VVD party (16%) and the far-right's PVV party (12%)²³. In practice among the 29 seats the country occupies in the EP, the MEPs are expected to be quite divided among the different alliances (ALDE, Greens and euroskeptics). At the end of the day, the rise of far-right parties nationally does not always influence the position a country takes within the EP plenary for MEPs may be quite distributed among the eight political groups or alliances.

Austria: the pro-EU populist government

An interesting Member State's domestic politics to look at is Austria. Its current Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, is a conservative who encapsulates far-right anti-immigration sentiments but is an avid promoter of the EU. In fact his government coalition collaborates with the far-right and his conservative agenda, namely in their priority to secure and protect Europe's external borders²⁴.

¹⁹ Deutsche Welle, "Protests as far-right AfD wrangles over Europe candidates", 12 January 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/protests-as-far-right-afd-wrangles-over-europe-candidates/a-47060823> . Accessed 30 January 2019.

²⁰ Politico, "European Elections", <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/> , accessed 30 January 2019.

²¹ Politico, "European Elections - Dutch set out EU goals for 2019", 25 January 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-set-out-eu-goals-for-2019-stef-blok-european-parliament-elections-mark-rutte/?fbclid=IwAR2oKz0GFwMifhOgFvyPIS0q3vLBGkB7lmeduJhiz63tfvdYGVrXd8q7s> . Accessed 30 January 2019.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Politico, "European Elections - Netherlands", <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/netherlands/> , accessed 30 January 2019.

²⁴ Franz Stefan-Gady, "The Future of Europe for better or worse is Sebastian Kurz", in *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/09/the-future-of-europe-for-better-or-worse-is-sebastian-kurz/> . Accessed 29 January 2019.

Austria is interesting in boasting a regional sentiment: it lauds the EU but is more hesitant towards migration flows and expanding borders.

Hungary and Italy: the possibility of a Eurosceptic front

Italy is one of the Member States expected to show the biggest change in voting. Whereas in 2014 the Democratic Party garnered 40% of the votes, in 2019 Italian citizens are expected to grant 32% (27 seats) to The League, the far-right and eurosceptic current ruling party, and 26% (22 seats) to the 5Star Movement, another populist and eurosceptic party. A founding country of the EU, Italy is sending a clear message of distrust in the EU and its durability in the world order.

Similarly, Hungary under Prime Minister Orbán has long offered a strong anti-EU speech. In fact, in his first public speech in 2019, Orbán sought to further distance himself from communal values but toward a nationalist agenda in saying that "There will be two civilizations in the EU. One mixed Muslim-Christian in the West, and one traditional European-Christian in Central Europe. The most important political issue for us is the EP election. 52% of Hungarians think the biggest challenge in the EU is immigration. Only we can decide with whom we want to live in the future"²⁵. In line with this, Orbán joined Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and Polish xx in initiating talks to form an eurosceptic alliance to contest the EPP's dominance in the EP. Nationalists from these countries are preparing to assert their nationalist agenda by means of an allied front against what they call the liberal elite of the EU and the ruling EP²⁶. This is certainly bad news for any hopeful candidate looking to have their accession prospects protected, let alone join a credible or united EU.

Linking elected MEPs' political affiliation to Kosovo

There are 705 seats up for grabs in the European Parliament plenary. Each country's domestic politics and party listings will be instrumental for the final layout, but not decisive. Depending on the political groups or alliances formed, therein lies the majority and the biggest influencing powers in the EP. This is where the impact on Kosovo's geostrategic interests will be felt the most.

For instance, back in September 2018 the European Parliament backed with 420 votes in favor, 186 against and 22 abstentions LIBE's decision to lift visa restriction for Kosovar citizens. Breaking down the votes by political party or alliance, it is noticeable that it is a highly contested topic: while the far-right parties almost exclusively voted against it and the Green politics parties almost exclusively for it, the main central-liberal coalitions rendered a mixed vote. The EPP voted 108 for and 67 against with 4 abstentions, and the S&D voted 146 for and 15 against with 2 abstentions²⁷. This being said, should the right and far-right parties win more EP seats in May, this can be expected to have an impact on other potential plenary decisions to arise related to Kosovo.

Even at the current initial stage, when national parties are still forming EP campaign strategies to make sure their leaders take the much-coveted plenary seats available for each Member State, the absence of enlargement to the Western Balkans as a priority or strategic issue is already noticeable. Amid the political landscape of rising populist and centrists looking to

²⁵ Euronews, "Orban warns immigration will divide EU ahead of parliamentary elections" 10 January 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/10/hungarian-pm-orban-there-will-be-two-eu-civilisations> . Accessed 29 January 2019.

²⁶ Ian Wishart, "How Brexit Could Spill Over Into EU Elections", in *Bloomberg*, 23 January 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-23/still-here-how-brexit-delay-might-worsen-eu-s-election-headache> . Accessed 30 January 2019.

²⁷ VoteWatchEurope, "Listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement (Kosovo) - vote details", 13 September 2018, <https://www.votewatch.eu/en/term8-listing-the-third-countries-whose-nationals-must-be-in-possession-of-visas-when-crossing-the-externa.html#/>. Accessed 20 January 2019.

appease right-wing sentiments, Ana Maria Luca of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network argues that “the failure of the traditional centrist parties to even mention future enlargement in the campaign for the European elections is only creating space for populists to make capital from this thorny issue”²⁸. Raising the topic of the enlargement of EU borders, when it is precisely borders and migration which have fueled nationalist sentiments and key EU leaders are calling for internal reforms, is a sure way to dissuade voters. Party leaders therefore do not venture into speeches or agendas on how enlargement can indeed be a positive thing for the EU, at the risk of scaring off important votes - “There are many advantages to enlargement, but there has been a lack of courage from EU leaders to emphasize those benefits”²⁹, said Erwan Fouere of the Centre for European Policy Studies. In point of fact, the issue of enlargement to the Western Balkans has surrendered to a narrative that paints the region as volatile and with far-reaching rule of law issues – both by the part of Brussels and the national Balkan governments themselves which have yet to fully implement needed reforms or meet accession criteria on, for instance, democracy and human rights. Naturally, building off this accepted take on enlargement, praising an expansion of EU borders and increase of Member States is seen as a political risk in an already-risky time of elections and EU volatility itself. This being said, the burden-narrative must be changed and the attractiveness of the region must be highlighted: the Western Balkans are an opportunity for the EU to expand its influence over the continent, increase prosperity and opportunities for far-reaching European businesses and citizens, as well as stand against opposing Eastern forces. Otherwise the prospects of peace and stability in the region just on the other side of EU external orders will dim, as populations can be expected to turn inward and incite inter-ethnic tensions among the isolated region. Moreover, the reforms key EU leaders want to accomplish in the EU can very much so run in parallel to accession talks and enlargement plans *en cours*, therein boosting government to better implement reforms and eventually reach the merit-based threshold for membership.

The case of America as main global ally

In parallel to the European Union and its many internal political variations, the United States is the other main Western partner to Kosovo in terms of funds, resources and initiatives. The American government has been vocal concerning its position on the recent significant development related to Kosovo, namely the 100% tariffs imposed on Serbian products in November 2018 and the vote to form a national army in December 2018. On the former, the US heavily cautioned against the retaining “actions that run counter to our strategic interests without facing consequences to our bilateral relationship”³⁰. On the latter, the US encouraged the military build-up despite condemnments by the EU, deeming it a fair sovereign decision and offering their support “to promote its professional development and organizational evolution”³¹. In fact, the United States and the European Union are very much at odds when it comes to the developments related to Kosovo and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, perhaps due to the current American presidency’s more defiant stance against the EU or perhaps due to the aforementioned decisions being quite controversial in themselves.

²⁸ Balkan Insight, “EU Election Campaign Pushes Balkan Enlargement Aside”, 22 January 2019, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eu-election-campaign-pushes-balkan-enlargement-aside-01-17-2019?fbclid=IwAR23HkXIwkdgtY98Cw0ejKQdrjI4VBCHQirodz1zFQiHSvOFEHoEOaTple4>. Accessed 30 January 2019.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Reuters, “U.S. urges Kosovo to lift trade tariffs against Serbia, Bosnia”, 25 January 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-kosovo-usa/us-urges-kosovo-to-lift-trade-tariffs-against-serbia-bosnia-idUKKCN1PJ1XR>. Accessed 4 February 2019.

³¹ European Western Balkans, “NATO, USA reactions to the adoption of the laws concerning Kosovo Armed Forces”, 14 December 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/12/14/nato-usa-reactions-adoption-laws-concerning-kosovo-armed-forces/>. Accessed 5 February 2019.

President Trump and his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, have shown support of a locally driven deal to conclude the longstanding Dialogue of back-and-forths between EU demands clashing with neighborly tensions. Pompeo “encouraged Kosovo to seize this unique window of opportunity to reach a historic comprehensive normalization deal with Serbia”³², especially at a time when tensions are escalating and the current EU mandate is still unequivocally committed to moderating the Dialogue.

While America’s focus is solely on the Dialogue, Kosovar nationals certainly similarly have NATO and EU membership as a long-term priority, of which the Dialogue is often considered as a means toward. In seeing that the Dialogue has reached an impasse which is troublesome to overcome in the Western, EU-censored limelight, experts believe parallel negotiations on divisive proposals, such as a territorial exchange, are continuing. “Some say there is no realistic alternative, when the only safe option to stabilize and reconnect the region, via EU enlargement, seems unavailable. This is why different sources say secret negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina are continuing”³³, reads Balkan Insight in late January 2019. In line with this, many experts have suggested that secret talks are actually continuing between the Kosovar and Serbian Heads of State, notwithstanding the formal Dialogue facilitated by the EU being stalled amid the tariffs row. In order to fast-track the much-anticipated EU and NATO membership, it is discussed whether bypassing the Dialogue, one of more formalistic control by Western powers tight demands of rule of law and human rights, is perhaps the best way forward from the current lose-lose situation. This such a supposition that Thaci and Vucic have sought to surreptitiously negotiate normalized relations is only speculative. Yet it potentially adds value in light of the EU’s more troubling political period of parliamentary and commissioner changes which have inevitably renegated enlargement or other external concerns.

The United Nations Security Council’s critical attitude

Finally, the last section builds on the analysis on European politics and American approach by looking into the United Nations all those countries participate in. While the political landscape in the EU may be up for a change this year in terms of MEPs’ plenary seating and new Commissioners’ priorities, the political landscape in the United Nations remains as troublesome as ever. Among the five permanent (P5) veto-holding powers of the United Nations Security Council (UNSG) are two firm non-recognizers of the Republic of Kosovo’s independence, Russia and China. The UNSG has, since the Kosovo war in 1999, been detrimental to fostering peace and stability in the Balkan region - a prime example is its Resolution 1244, which deployed the international peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), with an open-ended mandate.

Most recently, in early February 2019, the UNSG held a briefing on the situation in Kosovo, based on the new quarterly report by the Secretary General - “During the reporting period, tensions between Belgrade and Pristina continued to rise, negatively affecting the prospects for a productive dialogue”³⁴, the report reads. It led to interesting discussions on how the Council should proceed with the Kosovo issue in light of recent domestic developments. The last report from the Secretary General, dated 1 February 2019, condemned the deterioration in relations between Kosovo and Serbia, alluding to the 100% tariffs imposed by Kosovo on Serbian products, in relations to Serbian

³² Balkan Insight, “‘Dayton 2’ Debate, Serbia-Kosovo Talks Reflect Balkans Spiralling Out of Control”, 12 February 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/12/dayton-2-debate-serbia-kosovo-talks-reflect-balkans-spiralling-out-of-control/>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ United Nations Security Council, United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo Report of the Secretary-General, 1 February 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/102>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

malpractice in the former's bid for Interpol membership, and also the Assembly of Kosovo's decision to form a full-fledged national army. Both events proved more damaging than conducive to the lasting peace aimed by UNMIK and the UNSG's mandate for peace and security in the world.

The Special Representative and head of UNMIK, Zahir Tanin, was critical of the decisions Kosovo has taken in retaliation to Serbia's own unfortunate defying attitude of the dialogue, as well as concerned over the ignored backtrack calls from the EU or NATO. It especially encouraged the Dialogue as the imperative way forward. However, the root of the concern seems to lie not in Kosovo's domestic interests but rather in that of lasting peace between the two volatile neighbors. In other words, Kosovo's geostrategic interests are considered by the Council members only as part of the bilateral talks and not as some stand-alone priorities to respect. In this way, the call for normalization talks to be resumed did not censure Serbia's lobbying foul-play or give fair consideration to Kosovo's demands that recognition be on the negotiating table before resuming the Dialogue.

As with the case of the EU's growing impatience, also the UNSG strategic review of UNMIK's open-ended mandate, already carrying 20 years of existence, which could possibly be better tailored by means of downgrading of forces. The US openly supported a downsize and eventual withdrawal, citing the level of stability in Kosovo. The American delegation believes "the mission is overstaffed and over-resourced for its limited responsibilities, and that these resources could be put to better use in more pressing situations on the Council's agenda"³⁵. The official meeting briefing reported that representatives from Germany, Belgium and Poland also supported the proposal to downgrade UNMIK's ground presence, a stance similarly supported by the Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo to the United States present at the meeting, Vlora Çitaku³⁶.

In line with the above, the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations defended two main points in her address: that the UNMIK mandate be reviewed to better tailor to the ground reality, and that the EU-facilitated Dialogue on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia be dutifully taken advantage of by the two state actors. She reiterated that "Kosovo is not an acute crisis situation of the sort that the Council sadly all too often has to deal with. Rather it and Serbia are fortunate in that the European Union has offered a dialogue within which they can normalize their relations and they can make progress towards integration into the European Union as equals and sovereign and respecting each other"³⁷. As a result of this stance, shared by other delegations, it was agreed by Council members that the UNSG to reduce the number of meetings to discuss the Kosovo issue to three this year and two in 2020, "avoiding what would likely have been a contentious procedural vote"³⁸.

The political design of the UNSG has, regrettably, made for inevitable and impossible-to-overcome impasse votes among the P5 countries. This is important for it confirms that the soft power leverage and political will to help normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia and allow for Kosovo's integration into the international and European communities, lies in the EU-facilitated Dialogue. In keeping with the Council's discussions and the political upheaval currently grasping EU member states, the Dialogue was flagged as a fortunate opportunity the EU sustains efforts in

³⁵ Security Council Report, "Europe – Kosovo", 31 January 2019, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2019-02/kosovo-2.php>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

³⁶ United Nations, "Meetings Coverage – SC/136693 844559th meeting", 7 February 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13693.doc.htm>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

³⁷ Government of the United Kingdom, "Reaching a proportionate way forward on UN Security Council action on Kosovo", 8 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/reaching-a-proportionate-way-forward-on-un-security-council-action-on-kosovo>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

³⁸ Washington Post, "UN reduces meetings on Kosovo under US, Europe pressure", 7 February 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/un-reduces-meetings-on-kosovo-under-us-europe-pressure/2019/02/07/788376c2-2b3c-11e9-906e-9d55b6451eb4_story.html?utm_term=.41fe0103be1f. Accessed 12 February 2019.

and should therefore be fruitfully seized by the hopeful candidates involved. "I encourage the leaders on both sides to transform an adversarial dynamic into one of problem-solving. In doing so, it is important to move away from entrenched positions and demonstrate commitment to reaching a comprehensive agreement, working towards removing obstacles and creating conditions conducive to the resumption of the dialogue"³⁹– reports the United Nations Secretary General. The EU dialogue is signaled in the international stage as the go-to arena for a constructive and mutually-beneficial way forward – the only thing, and a quite big thing at that to contemplate when idealizing normalization talks, is how the new Parliament or Commission design might impact the EU's role, inclination or diligence when it comes to moderating talks between Kosovo and Serbia.

4. Looking forward: ongoing trends in the European Parliament and the European Commission

May 2019 will be the 9th parliamentary election since the first direct elections of the European Parliament (EP) in 1979. The MEPs are currently distributed among eight different political groups: European People's Party, S&D, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL), Group of Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), besides those MEPs who don't belong to any political group. Furthermore, the current European Parliament for the first time encompasses two stable far-right groups in its formation which reject European centralization and promote nationalist values: the EFDD party and the ENF party, formed respectively in 2014 and 2015. As laid out in the section above by delving into the internal politics of several EU state actors, European party lists and coalitions are expected to lean more to the right in this election.

Looking at the European Commission (EC), Jean-Claude Juncker's current mandate will come to an end in October 2019. Among the changes, the one which will arguably impact Kosovo the most is the end of Federica Mogherini's term as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. "We have a lot to do this year. First of all to preserve what we have achieved so far, that has been a lot but fragile"⁴⁰, The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is certainly one of the abovementioned fragile achievements, an agreement and bilateral dialogue which has generated mixed results, mass protests and

It is the EP political groups which designate the candidates for EC presidency - Juncker was the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat* (top candidate) and now only in May will it be known which European party or majority will propose their candidate as head of the Commission. The current EC mandate has long designated enlargement policy as a trusted policy to not only fortify the security and stability of Europe, but also offer a future of connectivity and increased opportunities to the Western Balkans. It is a forward-looking strategic priority which revolves around deepening regional cooperation and developing good neighborly relations. However, despite such a formalized ambition, the integration impasse the region has feels is overpowering. Kosovo is, as of yet, a potential candidate as lined up in the most recent EC's EU Enlargement Policy, in February 2018.

5. Concluding remarks

³⁹ United Nations Security Council, United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo Report of the Secretary-General, 1 February 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/102>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

⁴⁰ France24, "EU's Mogherini prepares for successor next year", 3 September 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180903-eus-mogherini-prepares-successor-next-year>. Accessed 30 January 2019.

The present year will be critical for the European Union as a unique project of regional integration. The political climate as is precludes a change in the design of the European Parliament after the upcoming election in May, as well as different priority list for the new European Commission mandate starting in the fall. The European election is expected to give more seats to populist MEPs, signaling a change to the rules of the political game and to foreign policies, namely enlargement. On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States is solely pushing for a constructive recommence and speedy conclusion of the Dialogue on normalization of relations to assure regional stability and the United Nations Security Council meetings have denounced the retaliatory path Kosovo has recently taken for the Dialogue and urged a review of UNMIK's mandate or even potential role in supporting the facilitation of the Dialogue.

This report broke down the recent developments in the EU political landscape by Member State, party politics and institutions in order to better appraise what this means for Kosovo and where the country can expect to stand after May. It also looked at global actors' take and positive or negative encouragement on the enduring issue. 2019 has shaped up to be a hot-blooded year for Europeans, both EU citizens and hopeful-EU citizens: internal issues dividing the EU are putting its durability into question as patience wears thin in candidate or potential candidate countries hoping to be prioritized. Kosovo is the direst case among the six Western Balkans countries, given that the country's visa liberalization file at negotiations standstill and its accession prospects are faltering along with the ever-enduring dialogue with Serbia.

Enlargement is, outspokenly, a crucial topic in EU foreign policy. The interest to accept new Members on a merit-based system cannot be denied. The problem lies in the timing to promote and push for such a politically-heated endeavor, especially when the candidate countries still have a long way to go until they meet the Copenhagen accession criteria and, therefore, seem unappealing to the less educated eye. *Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, stated that "My principle for expansion is exporting stability rather than importing instability"*⁴¹ – this arguably falls in line with why most EU leaders aren't keen on prioritizing enlargement: because the EU itself is going through a severely unstable phase.

Ultimately, the EU's overarching position on Kosovo and the Western Balkans in general has not changed - it has been sidelined. I believe this can be construed as a positive development: while the EU focuses on its reforms and handles its serious internal divisions, the Republic of Kosovo can continue to, in parallel, implement reforms and focus on building up a credible state actor and partner. This way, when the elections have passed, the Brexit dust has settled, and hopefully the migration hot topic has been managed, the attractiveness of Kosovo will have exponentially increased.

Kosovo should not wait for the EU to take harder notice of a potential candidates or to wait for the right timing – it should itself gets its hands dirty to improve its prospects and its image in the EU. Kosovo should itself sideline the EU internal developments by prioritizing the impartiality of the judiciary, the upstanding of the rule of law, the respect of fundamental human rights and the solidification of its parliamentary democracy. This way it uses the 'lack-of-EU' timing in its advantage to jump out.

⁴¹ Euractiv, "Hahn on Western Balkans: Exporting stability instead of importing instability", 30 July 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/interview/hahn-on-western-balkans-exporting-stability-instead-of-importing-instability/>. Accessed 30 January 2019.

Policy Analysis

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