

THE OUTCOME OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS FROM THE ANGLE OF KOSOVO AND THE WESTERN BALKANS ENLARGEMENT: A comprehensive report

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THE OUTCOME OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS FROM THE ANGLE OF KOSOVO AND THE WESTERN BALKANS ENLARGEMENT: A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT

Introduction

On the morning of 27 May 2019, a new EU parliamentary outline had been laid out, and new questions were raised by hopeful Western Balkans candidates as to how it could impact the enlargement process. Namely Kosovo, still a potential accession candidate wrangled in the EU-moderated dialogue for the normalization of relations with Serbia. For Kosovo, EU integration is as much a priority as a far-off reality, and the next cycle of the European Parliament and European Commission is important to both.

This report looks, in detail, at the outcome of the 23-26 May 2019 European elections with the European enlargement to the Western Balkans as key reference frame. What to expect for opening negotiations with official candidates, what to expect for the development of the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue? And what to expect from the new European Commission in the fall?

The real and long-term impact of the election results for the prospects of new enlargements and of Kosovo's European path will be explored. Each section of the report will take into consideration different angles of the European elections' role in shaping the development of Kosovo's EU perspective and the overall enlargement process. Firstly, the new design of the European plenary, one with no more majority but rather a plethora of significant yet opposing political families. Secondly, the clear national positions of key Member States towards the enlargement process and towards Kosovo's integration in particular. Thirdly, how both strategically inform what expect and what to recommend, moving forward with Kosovo's European integration process.

1. The end the centrist majority in the European Parliament

Never had a race to European Parliament (EP) elections caused so much of a national, regional or international raucous. Fears and calls for the inevitable crumble of the European Union ran amount yet in parallel to screams and pleas for the upholding of the very same European project. Since the last European elections in May 2014, Brexit became an agenda-topper, unconstitutional developments came to be a bigger threat in Hungary, Poland and Italy, and enlargement became an issue of mixed reactions. While there is certainly a lot to analyze during the 2014-2019 interval during which the last EP plenary and European Commission (EC) conducted their works, this report focuses on the aftermath of the 23-26 May 2019 European elections.

With a total percentage of 51% turnout among the European electorate, the turnout for these elections was the highest in 20 years, going up almost 10 percentage points since the last elections in 2014 (42,61%)¹. It proved to critics - those favorable and those opposing the European Union - that citizens take notice in being integrated in the European project and seek ways to ensure its sustainability by voicing their opinion on its internal bureaucratic workings. *Politico*, the renowned political journal whose coverage of the European elections was praised, said it best: "Since the outbreak of the debt crisis in 2009, observers of European affairs treated every crisis that the European Union has faced as an existential one and every moment as a critical juncture. Yet, for all its dysfunction, the EU is here to stay. Overall support for the

¹ European Parliament, "Turnout 2019 European Elections", available at: <https://election-results.eu/turnout/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

integration project is at historic highs, and the benefits of membership are obvious even to its populist critics”². The vital way forward now lies in reforms, which both nationalists and liberals are asking for, albeit with different intentions. Disintegration is no longer the watchword, but rather reforms - reforms of the Eurozone, of the common asylum policy, of Schengen’s free movement, of centrality, and of foreign policy tied to enlargement.

Distribution of the fragmented plenary seats

The most important takeaway is the bigger ideological discrepancy among the 751 plenary seats. The EP used to be at the helm of two majority centrist political blocs which form the Grand Coalition, the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). However, the elections’ results led to major losses by the centrist blocs, mainly in favor of three political families: the liberal-centrists & Macron’s Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the Greens’ European Free Alliance (EFA) and the Nationalists’ Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)³. The outcome is a more fragmented parliament where any renewed Grand Coalition requires more parties to reach the 376 seat majority threshold. A detailed outline of the seat distribution by the different European political blocs or families can be found below, in Figure 1.

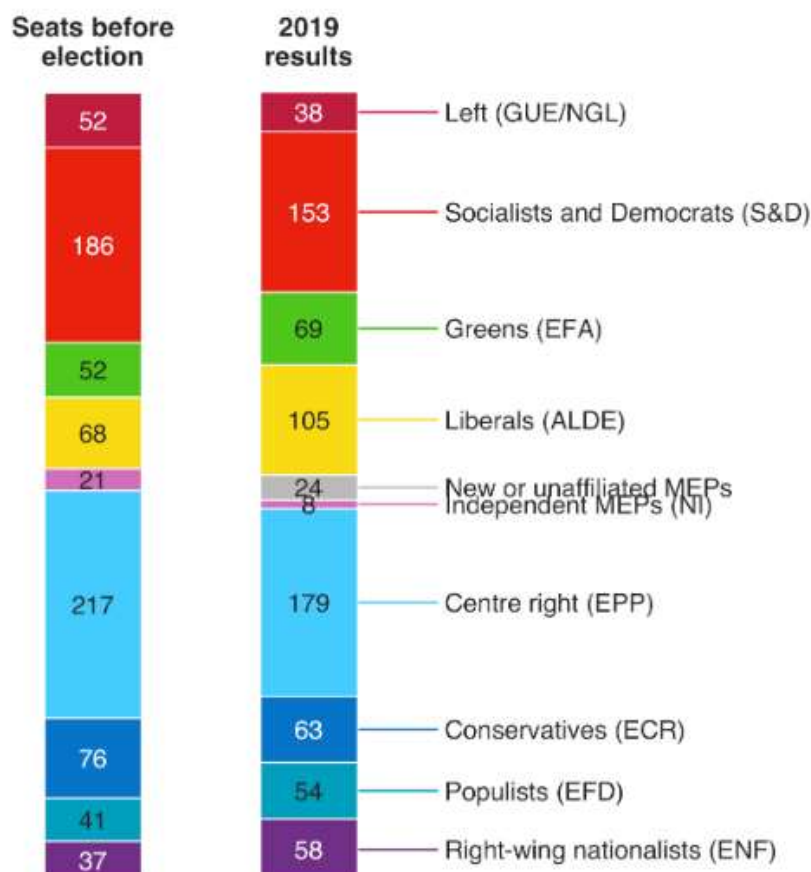


Figure 1: Comparison of European Parliament seats before and after the 2019 elections.

Source: BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48417191>.

N.b.: Combination of provisional, projected and final results.

² POLITICO, “European Elections - 5 lessons from the European Election”, 27 May 2019, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-lessons-from-the-european-parliament-election-2019/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

³ European Parliament, “Majority Calculator”, available at <https://election-results.eu/tools/majority-calculator/>. Accessed 28 July 2019.

For the sake of clarity, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) recently changed its European Parliament group name to *Renew Europe* on 12 June 2019 - "the new name was inspired by the slogan used throughout the European elections campaign by the seven lead candidates forming Team Europe"⁴ - and therefore this report will make note of both variations for readers' clarity.

As the chart in Figure 1 shows, the EPP lost 38 seats and the S&D lost 33 seats, as did the Conservatives lose 13 seats. In contrast, ALDE/Renew Europe won 37 new seats, and the EFA made historical gains by upping their plenary presence from 52 to 69 seats (33% win). The right-wing nationalists (ENF) also made gains, increasing their presence from 37 to 58 seats (56,7%). Also linked to that Eurosceptic bloc is that of the Populists (EFD), consisting mainly of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party which the results boosted. On that note, it is important to note that this report will not consider the nationalist bloc in unison with the populist bloc, considering that the interests and motivation behind each one's Euroscepticism is different. Most important of all, EFD's ultimate link to British MEPs and Brexit renders its presence in the European Parliament not only temporary, but also irrelevant to the Western Balkans. Fragmented as is between left and right, the European Parliament plenary is a real microcosms of the major European political divides. *Open Democracy*, a political online hub, dubbed this result a "wake-up call to traditional parties"⁵.

Indeed, the centrist blocs were overshadowed and will now have to strategically engage with other blocs in order have majority. For this reason, ALDE/Renew Europe might come off as the most powerful surge, given that the centrist parties are more prone to enter into a coalition with the Liberal bloc in order to meet the majority threshold given that the latter is pro-EU by nature and mission. Ultimately, the Conservatives will have to work more with the Centrists and Liberals in order to ensure their voice is impactful. Furthermore, the Greens and the Nationalists are now better able to garner support for policy proposals they may put forth, be it related to environmentalism or Euroscepticism. Wrote *Al Jazeera* in their post-elections assessment that "Mainstream parties have faced a drubbing at the hands of far-right populists and a rising Green tide"⁶. The former officially became the main opposition force and the latter yet another important force to consider in European policy-making. The democratic exercise held all over the EU in the end of May had European citizens voicing their opinions, concerns and appreciations in a more diverse way this time around, with seemingly peripheral forces growing into powerful blocs.

After breaking down the plenary distribution, the next chapter delves into what each rising bloc brings to the Enlargement table and what their new surge could mean for Kosovo's future in the EU.

2. What each of the three growing forces means for the Western Balkans

a) The Liberal Democrats/ALDE/Renew Europe

⁴ ALDE/Renew Europe Party, "ALDE Group becomes Renew Europe", 18 June 2019, available at <https://www.aldeparty.eu/news/alde-group-becomes-renew-europe>. Accessed 28 July 2019.

⁵ Open Democracy, "Euro-election results 2019: a wake-up call to traditional parties", 3 June 2019, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/euro-election-results-2019-wake-call-traditional-parties/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

⁶ Al Jazeera, "Europe's leading parties lick wounds after bruising election", 27 May 2019, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/europe-leading-parties-lick-wounds-bruising-election-190527093017373.html>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

Long an important presence in the European Parliament, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (previously ALDE and renamed Renew Europe in June 2019) enjoyed a very good outcome following the recent elections. The biggest gains made by a single political bloc was by ALDE/Renew Europe, which garnered a total of 105 seats by winning more 67 seats than before. It shows Europeans' heightened interest in defending pro-European parties and leadership. Indeed their campaign slogan was "I Am European" and their official website praises the EU by recognizing that "In 60 years of European integration, the European Union has served us well in achieving peace, stability and prosperity"⁷. The Liberals are led by renowned pro-European MEP Guy Verhofstadt and also encompass French President Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche/Renaissance* political force. ALDE/Renew Europe advocates for the EU as a unique project of incomparable privileges and for a renewed awakening of the feeling of being European among all citizens of the EU28.

As the map in Figure 2 shows, the Liberals garnered significant support all over the EU. Countries such as France, Finland, Denmark, Romania, Slovenia and Czechia Worth noting is that not all member states with 0% of votes necessarily rejected the Liberal party – for instance Portugal has no national equivalent to ALDE/Renew Europe and, therefore, no vote cast could even count toward that party's final tally. Instead, their domestic parties mostly align with the EPP, the S&D, the GUE/NGL and the Greens/EFA.

⁷ ALDE/Renew Europe Party, "Alliance of Liberals & Democrats for Europe Party", available at <https://www.aldeparty.eu/about/the-alde-party>. Accessed 13 June 2019.



Source: BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48417191>.
N.b.: Combination of provisional, projected and final results.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pg.2

important step in the countries' development and fulfillment of accession criteria. Moreover and perhaps most importantly of all, the same Resolution advised against President Juncker's 2015 statement that no new countries would join the EU in the next 5 years, for they believe that such an "enlargement stalemate has a negative psychological effect on those countries applying for membership and questions the present results, threatening and weakening motivation, and could jeopardize further EU integration efforts"¹². ALDE/Renew Europe therefore has always sought to alert the centrist Grand Coalition in power until now that the Western Balkans enlargement is a sensitive and time-sensitive topic which requires engagement from Brussels, as well as locally from the countries' civil societies themselves.

On the topic of ALDE/Renew Europe's relationship with the Republic of Kosovo, one of the party's key figures is Cecilia Malmström, the Swedish politician and member of the European Commission who led the first efforts towards visa liberalization in the newborn country. Currently serving as EU Commissioner of Trade, back in January 2012 Malmström held bilateral meetings with Kosovar authorities in Prishtina – namely with, at the time, Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Hajredin Kuçi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Local Government Administration Slobodan Petrović, Minister of Interior Bajram Rexhepi and Minister of European Integration, Vlora Çitaku¹³ - in order to launch the opening of visa liberalization talks. Consequently, the EU roadmap for visa exemption was handed by MEP and ALDE/Renew Europe member Malmström to Kosovar leaders in June 2012¹⁴. It was also Malmström who, at the time serving as Commissioner for Home Affairs, handled the assessment and progress reports of Kosovo related to the visa dialogue and roadmap¹⁵.

Another important EU political figure encompassed by the ALDE/Renew Europe party is Mark Rutte, Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Rutte holds a good bilateral relationship with Kosovo, namely having received President Thaci in the Netherlands at the end of 2018 and asserting the Dutch support for Kosovo's European future¹⁶. In contrast, ALDE/Renew Europe's movement for the European elections allied itself with President Emmanuel Macron's *Renaissance/En Marche* political force in the run for the European elections, the leader of which has been openly opposed to enlarging the EU at this time. Amid a politically divided France facing many domestic hurdles, as showcased in the strong *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement and in view of his proposals for deepened Eurozone integration, Macron has long showed caution with regards to enlargement. During the Sofia Summit in May 2018, the French President stated that "I am in favor of anchoring the Balkans in Europe and moving toward Europe. But I think we need to look at any new enlargement with a lot of prudence and rigor"¹⁷. His priority is to strengthen the EU28, soon-to-be EU27, and the tied-in Eurozone, with the Western Balkan candidate countries lagging behind in the agenda.

ALDE/Renew Europe's main message involves reforming the EU in order to bring it closer to the needs and demands of the present time and age. Not because it is broken or useless, but

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ European Commission, "Commission launches dialogue with Kosovo on visa free travel", 19 January 2012, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-12-32_en.htm. Accessed 12 June 2019.

¹⁴ European Commission, "Commission delivers visa roadmap to Kosovo government", 14 June 2012, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-12-605_en.htm. Accessed 12 June 2019.

¹⁵ European Commission, "Commission assesses progress by Kosovo in visa dialogue", 24 July 2014, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-871_en.htm. Accessed 12 June 2019.

¹⁶ Republic of Kosovo Office of the Prime Minister, "Prime Minister Haradinaj: The Netherlands, Kosovo's supporter in the Euro-Integration and Euro-Atlantic path", 27 September 2018, available at <http://kryeministri-ks.net/en/prime-minister-haradinaj-the-netherlands-kosovos-supporter-in-the-euro-integration-and-euro-atlantic-path/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

¹⁷ POLITICO, "Macron pours cold water on Balkan membership hopes", 17 May 2019, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

precisely because it is necessary and vital to a prosperous European future – “The reality is if the EU didn't exist, we would have to create it. Because no single country can respond to climate change, international terrorism and ensure that globalization delivers for everyone”¹⁸. For this reason, their mission is in line with enlargement ambitions and their increased presence in the European Parliament has the potential to be very positive for the Western Balkans. For Kosovo in particular, the fact that several leading figures within the party have strong bilateral ties with the country bodes well for Kosovo’s standing in the priority list of the party and serving MEPs.

b) The Greens/EFA

Arguably the most important outcome of the EU elections is the historical surge for the Greens/European Free Alliance group. The European group focused on climate, human rights and social issues won its highest representation in parliament, now with 74 elected seats¹⁹. Together with the EPP, the S&D and the ALDE/Renew Europe party, the Greens/EFA make up the four leading political forces in the European Parliament.

The surge revealed environmentalism as well as a democratic, transparent and fair EU to be decisive priorities for a large chunk of European voters. As visible in Figure 3, the Greens made gains in many key EU countries. Most significantly, for the first time in history they were the most voted party in Germany, notably an EU founding member state and leading voice in EU affairs. In Germany, the final count won them 21 seats and topped all other parties, including Angela Merkel’s CDU party²⁰. Also in France the number of seats rose, doubling from 6 to 12 elected MEPs. All across the Western and Northern countries increases were verifiable with important added seat allocations in Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland, almost all of which doubled their number of seats (from 1 to 2). Ireland and Portugal elected their first Green MEPs, two and one respectively.



Figure 3: Gains and Losses of the Greens/EFA in the 2019 European Parliament elections, by relevant EU Member State.

Source: CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/27/europe/european-elections-takeaways-intl/index.html>.

¹⁸ ALDE/Renew Europe Party, “About Us”, available at <https://alde.eu/en/about-us/>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

¹⁹ European Parliament, “European Parliament: 2019-2024”, available at <https://www.election-results.eu/european-results/2019-2024/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

²⁰ Telegraph, “Germany’s Greens oust Merkel’s Christian Democrats as most popular party”, 9 June 2019, available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/09/germanys-greens-oust-merkels-christian-democrats-popular-party/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

It is still to be fully determined how many seats the Green bloc will end up encompassing for, as of mid-June, talks are still underway to define the final plenary allocations of all parties, movements, blocs and non-aligned MEPs. An example to consider is the newfound pan-European party, Volt. Founded in 2017 under a clear citizen-drive, pro-European agenda – *“We won’t let far-right party voices drown out those that have brought our continent peace and prosperity”*²¹ – the Party made waves in the recent European elections by garnering over 400,000 total votes in eight member countries. It elected one MEP in Germany who, after collaboration talks and an internal decision by the Volt party, will sit with the Green bloc in the Parliament.

With regards to the Western Balkans and Kosovo in particular, even though the Greens/EFA do not have a substantiated document on EU enlargement, their pro-enlargement stance is visible in their day-to-day-workings or official statements. Following the Prespa Agreement reached between Greece and North Macedonia, Philippe Lamberts, President of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament stated that “The rest of the Western Balkans should take note of the work of the Greek and North Macedonian governments as a model for cooperation in the region. The Republic of North Macedonia’s European aspirations must be given the support and political backing they deserve from the European Union as well a credible roadmap to EU membership”²². He concluded by reminding that “The Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament will always support efforts to bring the Western Balkan countries to their rightful place at the heart of the European Union”. Most recently, in April 2019, the group organized a conference specifically targeting the question of “How can the EU regain relevance in the Western Balkans?”²³. The topic came at a time when the current European Commission, which precluded no new member states would accede to the EU during its term, is coming to an end and the new Commission had yet to be announced. In avidly promoting a sustainable future, both for our planet and for the EU, the Greens uphold a positive rhetoric for enlarging European borders towards those countries which fulfill accession requirements and are eager to join the European project.

The Kosovo issue has also been taken up by the Green MEPs. In fact, the recent European rapporteurs for Kosovo have belonged to the EFA political group: Igor Soltes currently serves as the EP rapporteur on Kosovo and, formerly, Ulrike Lunacek, was the EP foreign affairs spokesperson and draftsperson on Kosovo. Lunacek was notably in favor of resolving the demarcation issue between Kosovo and Montenegro to speed up the visa exemption process and was also very active during the negotiations and ratification of Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Kosovo²⁴. On the stalled visa liberalization process for citizens of the country, Soltes warned that “it is important for the EU to acknowledge that Kosovo has fulfilled all required criteria for visa liberalization and the EU should respect that fully”²⁵. The statement came as a result of the EP adopting two resolutions assessing the latest efforts by Serbia and Kosovo to move along the EU integration path. The two resolutions alerted that Serbia

²¹ Volt Europa, “European voters elected Damian Boeselager into the European Parliament!”, available at <https://www.volteuropa.org/european-voters-elected-damian-boeselager-into-the-european-parliament>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

²² The Greens/EFA, “Historic name deal between Greece and North Macedonia a victory for peace”, 25 January 2019, available at <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/historic-name-deal-between-greece-and-north-macedonia-a-victory-for-peace/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

²³ The Greens/EFA, “Back to the Future? How the EU can regain relevance in the Western Balkans”, 10 April 2019, available at <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/event/back-to-the-future/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

²⁴ European Western Balkans, “The supporters, the critics and the shockers – 10 MEPs who made the Western Balkans more European”, 23 April 2019, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/04/23/supporters-critics-shockers-10-meps-made-western-balkans-european/7/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

²⁵ European Parliament, “European Parliament marks EU accession prospects for Serbia and Kosovo”, 29 November 2018, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181120IPR19548/european-parliament-marks-eu-accession-prospects-for-serbia-and-kosovo>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

should better align with European values and foreign policy and that visa liberalization for Kosovo “is vital without undue delay”²⁶.

At the end of that day, the sustainable development of the EU which the Greens/EFA advocate for involves not only biodiversity, clean transports and human rights, but also an involvement of all European countries within the budding European project of peace and togetherness.

c) Nationalists/ENF

The Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) political group gives a voice to the far-right movement in Europe. After years of rising momentum among the European political scene on national levels, the European elections for the 2019-2024 parliament took place in May of the present year.

As visible in the map present in Figure 4, the far-right made gains in several EU countries. Meaningfully, Italy and France, followed by Austria and Hungary. Italy’s Matteo Salvini led the far-right movement’s campaign for European votes and parliamentary seats, having even been addressed by *Al Jazeera* as “flagbearer of the nationalist and far-right forces in Europe”²⁷. As Italy’s socioeconomic stability continues to be tarnished by financial troubles and asylum arrivals *en masse*, the *Lega Nord* party kept up the momentum created after winning the national elections last year. Italy was the only country with far-right gains above 30%, amounting 34% of the votes from the Italian electorate²⁸. The map also reveals France’s strong far-right results, led by Marine Le Pen’s National Rally party with its anti-migration and anti-EU agenda. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Órban has long been a European nemesis, with his Fidesz party having even been suspended from the European People’s Party in 2018 in light of its nationalist, xenophobic and openly anti-EU stances. His victory was expected, as were the ones in Austria and in Belgium, yet whose results ended up being lesser than the initial projections led on. In parallel, also the Populist with a similarly Eurosceptic agenda made significant gains. However, since the Populists’ wins were most noteworthy in Italy (where the aforementioned far-right ended up winning) and in the United Kingdom (where the internal Brexit issue rules), such win virtually holds no influence for the Western Balkans and is probable to be drowned amid the ENF’s bigger voice.



²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Al Jazeera, “Europe’s leading parties lick wounds after bruising election”, 27 May 2019, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/europe-leading-parties-lick-wounds-bruising-election-190527093017373.html>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

²⁸ The Guardian, “Salvini’s far-right party tops Italy’s EU election polls”, 27 May 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/27/matteo-salvini-far-right-league-party-tops-italy-eu-election-polls>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

Source: BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48417191>.

Notwithstanding the numerical gains, the truth is that the nationalist hype did not live up to expectation. The fear spread far and wide did not translate in the elections' outcome: the far-right upped their plenary seats to 73 MEPs, almost double as before yet the significant increase fell short of the estimated triumphs and parliamentary influence they were expected to win. When it comes to sensationalist parties such as the far-right, especially those helmed by leading figures like Le Pen or Salvini, it is important to put the figures into context when interpreting results. For instance, in France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally won the most votes with 23,31% of votes in the EU founding country²⁹. However, President Macron's pro-EU agenda as present in his *Renaissance/En Marche* party was an extremely close second, with 22,41% of the votes³⁰. Moreover, in actuality Le Pen's party fared worse in this election than in the previous European Parliament election in 2014 in which she gathered 24,86% of the total votes³¹.

This is very telling, especially in a country as politically divided as France, and one whose domestic politics have been riled up by European issues such as migration, asylum and xenophobic rhetoric. It reveals that the surge in support for the far-right parties – feared by some and preached by others – did not materialize in the elections' outcome.

Looking further into the far-right's results in the European elections, another crucial matter to consider is their alignment or willingness to enter into coalitions in the EP. As things stand, the far-right could end up with a larger voice in the plenary and a larger scope of influence in European parliamentary affairs should more far-right parties join the ENF group and ultimately be united in one single bloc³². For instance, Hungary's *Fidesz* party used to belong to the EPP bloc until it was suspended last year over human rights and democracy concerns. However, recent reports have already given word that Salvini and Le Pen's alliance failed to attract other parties into their coalition, therefore rendering their group as the fifth biggest EP bloc. Stated Doru Frantescu that "It's not enough to be powerful in one country if one wants to be influential in EU politics. One has to build a sustainable pan-European political network"³³. Thus, Le Pen and Salvini's national wins did not translate into major EP wins, and the bloc is not expected to have enough power to block legislation.

The Nationalist bloc's openly Eurosceptic stance necessarily informs their take on enlargement. Salvini, Le Pen, Orbán and similar-minded leaders of xenophobic, nationalist far-right parties oppose further integration of the European project, be it in matters of migration,

²⁹ European Parliament, "European Elections results - by country - France 2019-2024", 3 July 2019, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/elections-press-kit/0/european-elections-results>. Accessed 20 July 2019.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ European Parliament, "Results of the 2014 European elections - France", available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-fr-2014.html>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

³² Euronews, "Large power block in waiting but can the far-right unite?", 28 May 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/05/27/can-the-far-right-unite>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

³³ The Wall Street Journal, "Nationalists Fail to Join Forces in European Parliament", 13 June 2019, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/nationalists-fail-to-join-forces-in-european-parliament-11560427001?fbclid=IwAR3gy8t4cMwDLCdNf7eyZi8Vzpl3_gXKTwOLA14bpV3uS2CenmiVPAuuX18. Accessed 14 June 2019.

asylum, economy or enlargement. France's National Rally has released several statements criticizing the EU's insistence on admitting countries with lesser socioeconomic standing, following the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements and in view of the desire to have the six Western Balkan accede, in time. Said Dominique Bilde, French MEP within the National Rally: in line with the free movement of people in the EU, "the enlargement of Europe to the East has prompted a huge number of Posted Workers Directive to come to France. The enlargement encompasses very different economies, social standards much lighter than ours, wages much lower than ours and much more lenient taxation. We cannot create a whole, of any kind, economic, political or military, with such disparities. (...) It would seem logical that the technocrats of the European Union simply abandon projects aimed at making the Balkan states of the member states of the Union"³⁴. Bilde further addressed Kosovo as "a bankrupt micro-state surviving on international aid"³⁵. The document concluded argued against enlargement "because history does not pull in the same direction and many people in the Balkans, especially in Serbia, do not want to join this sick man that is now the EU"³⁶. The document encapsulates the far-right's opposition to the EU and its plans for more integration or enlargement. The same hostile sentiment is visible in Italy's Lega Nord. In an online publication in the party's official website, Lega Nord's MEP Mario Borghezio is quoted back in 2015 as opposing the visa exemption systems for the Western Balkans³⁷. He argued that several Member States (Austria, France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) were showing alarming rates of asylum seekers reaching their country from the Western Balkans, namely many applicants who prove to not be eligible for refugee status. For this reason, the Italian MEP argued that the free movement regime for the citizens of Balkan countries should be suspended.

During the Western Balkan Tirana Summit of May 2019, Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic expressed his exasperation with the stalled and non-consequential enlargements process and dialogue with Kosovo. Most importantly, perhaps, is his meeting with the ENF's own Matteo Salvini in the sidelines of the same event, disclosing a closer alliance to the far-right force of European rather than the liberal one. According to Euractiv³⁸, the Serbian President said acknowledged Salvini's running plan of creating a network of allies in Central Europe and added that Serbia should similarly seek the formation of a group allies to support its European path. Inasmuch, the biggest proximity the Western Balkans have had to the far-right's agenda is Salvini's bilateral meeting with Vucic.

The turnout of the European-wide electorate better informs the final results and distribution of plenary seats, both among the 28 Member States as well as among the different European political families. In turn, this opportunely informs the impact for the Republic of Kosovo and the Western Balkans enlargement process. Each of the three rising European blocs.

3. The upcoming definition of the new European Commission

³⁴ Rassemblement National, "Élargissement aux Balkans : quand Bruxelles persiste dans l'erreur" [Enlargement to the Balkans : when Brussels persists in error], 9 February 2019, available at <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/elargissement-aux-balkans-quand-bruxelles-persiste-dans-l-erreur/>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Lega Nord, "Borghezio: troppe false richieste di asilo dai Balcani" [Borghezio: too many false requests for asylum from the Balkans], 18 October 2018, available at <https://www.leganord.org/index.php/notizie2/9550-borghezio-troppe-false-richieste-di-asilo-dai-balcani>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

³⁸ Euractiv, "Dialogue on Kosovo dominates Western Balkan summit in Tirana", 10 May 2019, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/dialogue-on-kosovo-dominates-western-balkan-summit-in-tirana/>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

As was analyzed in the previous chapters, the loss of the centrist majority in the European Parliament means that, now, the plenary is much more politically fragmented. It is more diverse in its left-to-right seating, with a bigger number of influential blocs needing to cooperate in order to pass legislation. The first European Parliament plenary session of the 2019-2024 mandate took place on July 2nd and the 751 MEPs nominated their picks for the top four EU jobs: President of European Commission, President of the European Council, President of the European Central Bank and the High Representative for Foreign Policy. Respectively, Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel, Christine Lagarde and Josep Borell Fontelles. The nominations pinpoint real gender equality and for the first time see two women leading the European Commission and the European Central Bank. For enlargement matters and the future of Kosovo, the first and last positions are the ones to keep an eye out, and the ones this chapter will examine.

The political fight for majority and influence in a fragmented EP had never been more poignant as in the current buildup for the new European Commission. Unlike in the previous EP mandate, a new candidate for the EC presidency was proposed after the election and outside the Spitzenkandidaten process. The Spitzenkandidaten process determined that all political parties put forth one candidate for EC President and, after the results are in, leaders decide based on the outcome of the voting preferences³⁹. On the original political battle for the EC presidency, the EU Observer's stated that "European People's Party lead candidate Manfred Weber called for an EPP, Socialists, liberal and green alliance underlining 'stability', while S&D lead candidate and Dutch EU commissioner Frans Timmermans called for a 'progressive alliance' with liberals, the greens and the far-left, without the EPP"⁴⁰. However, all was thrown out the window with von der Leyen's unexpected nomination and eventual win. Heavily backed by France's Emmanuel Macron, the nomination of former German Defense Minister and member of the EPP party Ursula von der Leyen by EU leaders came from an aim to appease as many MEPs in order to get the needed majority in parliament without surrendering to the far-right's newfound bigger plenary presence. Von der Leyen's political guidelines, as laid out in her speech to the plenary, prioritized climate change and a new Green Deal for a carbon-free Europe by 2050, an EU-wide rule of law monitoring mechanism, a renewed asylum policy, a humane way to do business, as well as a push for active democratic role of citizens⁴¹. The EPP candidate, with her party's support, campaigned for a fair, innovative and ecological Union at the helm a true pro-European leader. The first woman EC President was elected with 383, just over the 374 needed for her nomination to be confirmed. Her narrow victory was well below Juncker's 422 votes. Von der Leyen's work on uniting a fragmented Europe and improving its core policies starts now - "The trust you placed in me is confidence you placed in Europe. Your confidence in a united and a strong Europe from east to west, from south to north"⁴², said the upcoming EC President in her acceptance speech. With regards to Kosovar interests, GLPS' researchers assess this nomination as a positive development for the newborn country - "her appointment is expected to increase the role of Germany and France in general, which will be reflected in a stronger leadership in issues such as

³⁹ European Parliament, "European elections 2019: what's next (infographic)", 30 April 2019, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20190417ST041782/european->. Accessed 12 June 2019.

⁴⁰ EU Observer, "Key takeaways from the European elections", 27 May 2019, available at <https://euobserver.com/eu-election/145011>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

⁴¹ Ursula von der Leyen, "A Union that striver for more - My agenda for Europe", available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20190716RES57231/20190716RES57231.pdf>. Accessed 30 July 2019.

⁴² POLITICO, "Ursula von der Leyen elected European Commission president", 16 July 2019, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-elected-european-commission-president/>. Accessed 30 July 2019.

enlargement, but also the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue”. In light of the way the nomination was put forth and how the Dialogue is running (or rather not running), the role of the High Representative could potentially lose influence on this matter and instead a rise in member states’ direct management be seen. Therefore the government of Kosovo should be on the lookout for stronger ties with Germany and France⁴³.

Regarding the High Representative for Foreign Policy, the nominee pick raised some flags in Prishtina. Josep Borrell Fontelles acts as Foreign Minister in Spain, arguably the most antagonizing EU Member State toward Kosovo’s statehood and sovereignty. Although Borrell’s nomination came in July and his post has yet to be confirmed by the EP plenary, speculations on how it could affect the Republic of Kosovo were quick. Not looking to make rash conclusions, this report emphasizes that EU diplomats must act in accordance with EU’s foreign policy and forego their own national interests. Most importantly, having a Spaniard facilitate the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue could very well bring a light to the dark tunnel that is Spain-Kosovo bilateral relations currently. Should Borrell be elected, he will have the important job of following through on the EP’s new strategic agenda which prioritizes a “more assertive and effective” European voice in the world stage⁴⁴. Borrell is known in diplomatic circles for his undiplomatic language, which has sparked a couple of international spats with Russia and indigenous groups in the USA for example, and furthermore differs from Mogherini in, at the time of nomination, being much older and experienced⁴⁵. Jury’s still out on what his mandate could bring to the EU and mean for the Western Balkans and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in particular.

Ultimately, be it at the level of the EP parties or the EC presidency, the enlargement process to the Western Balkans is a hot topic of contention European officials. Pro-European forces are most prone to support opening accession talks and advocate integration of potential candidates such as Kosovo given their mission statements of believing and promoting the European peace project that is the EU. Just the same, Eurosceptic forces are most prone to isolationist foreign policy and opposing enlargement, given cries of East-West inequalities which fuel mass migration flows and employment hurdles in the Schengen Zone of free movement. However, these associations are not always clear-cut. An example is French President Emmanuel Macron, someone championing the European project and deeper Eurozone integration who also asks for caution and disputes enlarging the Union before it is running unhinged at 28. The issue of the European future of Kosovo is different but divisive all the same. The potential candidate country is still struggling with the pending visa liberalization and the non-recognition from five EU member states. Additionally, the dialogue with Serbia is not only stalled but failing, which does not grant momentum to the already-hampered issue. In view of all of this, the particularity of the Kosovo issue is left out of European parties’ mission statements or campaigns, rather only mentioned in the context of the Western Balkans enlargement.

At the end of the day, two analyses can be relayed: Firstly, we must examine national politics first before jumping to the EU level of foreign policy and decision-making in order to best assess the prospects for the Western Balkans enlargement. Secondly, candidate countries are encouraged and expected to undergo reforms, improvements and real progress (i.e. rule of law,

⁴³ KOHA, “GLPS-ja e shih pozitive për Kosovën zgjedhjen e Van Der Leyenit në krye të PE-së” [GLPS sees Kosovo’s election of von der Leyen as EP leader positive for Kosovo], 3 August 2019, available at <https://www.koha.net/arberi/177294/glps-ja-e-shih-pozitive-per-kosoven-zgjedhjen-e-van-der-leyenit-ne-krye-te-pe-se/>. Accessed 30 July 2019.

⁴⁴ European Commission, A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>. Accessed 30 July 2019.

⁴⁵ POLITICO, “Josep Borrell: Europe’s undiplomatic envoy”, 30 July 2019, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/josep-borrell-europe-undiplomatic-envoy/>. Accessed 30 July 2019.

corruption, organized crime, democracy, transparency) to prove they are equipped for accession and will be constructive new members of the EU. At the moment, a wave of protests and important changes seem to be taking over the Western Balkan countries. In Serbia, since December mass protests have been organized against the government's authoritarian tendencies, demanding change in leadership and a renewed democratic rule⁴⁶. In Albania, mass protests have also been organized asking for Prime Minister Edi Rama's dismissal amid accusation of fraud and corruption⁴⁷, a similar movement to the anti-government protests organized in Montenegro earlier this year.

At a time when the EU's next chapter is being decided with parliamentary seats and presidency bids, it is up to the Western Balkan countries to make use of the renewed momentum for change in the EU's in a constructive way, one that shows an unwavering and irrefutable bid to join the new future of the European project. For Kosovo the situation is more complex, as it is more dependent on cooperation with Serbia and not only on the EU's readiness to push forth its integration path.

The European Commission's annual reports for the Western Balkans

On May 29th 2019, the European Commission issued their assessments and recommendations for candidate and potential candidate countries, all six Western Balkans and Turkey. Turkey was sidelined as a suspended accession candidate in light of the authoritarian tendencies of Erdogan's government. In contrast, the Commission recommended the Council open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, with Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn stating that *"Albania and North Macedonia have embraced the opportunity of the reinvigorated enlargement agenda, and delivered on reforms. North Macedonia not only continued its ambitious reform agenda, but also reached a historic agreement with Greece, resolving a 27-year old name dispute, an example for the entire region and beyond"*⁴⁸. On Kosovo and its immediate neighbors, the EC stated therein that *"a firm and credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans remains essential to drive transformation, foster reconciliation, export stability to the region and promote EU values, norms and standards"*⁴⁹.

Focusing now on the Republic of Kosovo and its European future, the 2019 Report on Kosovo has, arguably, three main points to consider with regards to the country's future in the EU. Firstly, the visa liberalization process is pinpointed *"as a matter of urgency"*⁵⁰ to be resolved given that the country has already fulfilled all extraordinary requirements. Secondly, the 100% tariff imposition on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is criticized as not being in the spirit of good neighborly relations or conducive to a final agreement with Serbia, and is asked to be revoked. Thirdly, progress and successful reforms are noted in varied sectors, yet further efforts are needed fight corruption and organized crime and to align the Kosovo with European standards for economy, human rights and public administration, for example. A more detailed

⁴⁶ Euronews, "Anti-government protests in Serbia enter third month", 24 March 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/24/anti-government-protests-in-serbia-enter-third-month>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

⁴⁷ BBC News, "Albania president cancels local elections amid protests", 9 June 2019, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48571159>. Accessed 14 June 2019.

⁴⁸ European Commission, "Reforms in the Western Balkans and Turkey: annual assessments and recommendations", 29 May 2019, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-2752_en.htm. Accessed 14 June 2019.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ European Commission, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT - Kosovo 2019 Report, 29 May 2019, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-kosovo-report.pdf>, pg.3.

examination and informed reaction to the Report findings was provided by the *Group for Legal and Political Studies* immediately after the Report's release, and it calls for Kosovo leaders to stand by its citizens and keep the European agenda alive by means of a more transparent and correct handling of daily policy work⁵¹.

Pertaining more directly to the future of Kosovo in the EU in the aftermath of the European Parliament elections, the onus lies both at the EU level – to deliver the deserved visa exemption process to Kosovar citizens standing along in the region as living with the burden of Schengen visa restrictions – and at the Kosovar national level – to deliver the needed reforms and institutional changes to garner credibility and effectiveness as a potential candidate for accession. Putting it plainly, not much has changed since the last annual report. This is both owed to the EU's decision on visa liberalization and lack of clarity with its membership prospects, but also to Kosovo's own domestic situation. Only minor reforms took place on matter of the judiciary or public administration, and the Dialogue reached new lows after Serbia intercepted Kosovo's Interpol bid and the latter reacted with the imposition of import taxes on Serbian products.

The European elections, in consummation, did not shed a lot of light on what to expect from Brussels or Strasbourg regarding another enlargement wave, let alone regarding Kosovo's future. Since the EU itself is currently not prioritizing enlargement in their agenda, it is therefore up to national governments in the EU and to the national governments in the candidate countries to push the issue forward, highlight its benefits and engage with pro-enlargement MEPs to streamline the process – the next chapter looks into some national politics amid a fragmented European Parliament.

4. Is Enlargement moving forward or backwards?

The European elections decided what the EU, institutionally-wise, will look like in the forthcoming five years. Now the elected European officials need to decide what the EU, external borders and enlargement-wise, will look like in the same time period. Will new countries already find themselves with full-fledged membership rights and duties? Will accession timelines be pushed back indefinitely? Adding to that, will Brexit have already happened and will Scotland's individual bid for British independence and EU membership be underway? The next five years will be decisive for the shaping of the European future.

In the aftermath of the elections in May, *Open Democracy* published a piece titled "The era of "which Europe do we want?"⁵². It is not enough for pro-European internationalists to be advocating the European project and the benefits of integration and to be criticizing the far-right's lack of vision or empathy, the piece argues. The future lies in the power of positive and pro-active parties with concrete ideas on how to keep the EU relevant, improving and advantageous to its 508 million inhabitants. The Greens' progressive strategy to focus on constructively tackling a collective problem is the best example of this. Regardless of which Europe is to come, the EU is foreseen to stand, unlike many predictions worldwide which, for years now, had carved its

⁵¹ KOHA, "GSJP: Raporti i Progresit konfirmon se Kosova e ka humbur betejën për ta mbajtur gjallë agjendën evropiane", 29 May 2019, available at <https://www.koha.net/arberi/165713/gsjp-raporti-i-progresit-konfirmon-se-kosova-e-ka-humbur-betejen-per-ta-mbajtur-gjalle-agienden-evropiane/?fbclid=IwAR3UssUbmPF39wQtPn2xcuhDfQj6STuUhTu5D0yAroPAPAgNZ8hbkrRSSA8>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁵² Open Democracy, "The era of 'which Europe do we want?'", 3 June 2019, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/the-era-of-which-europe-do-we-want/?fbclid=IwAR0ZV9tjWacV5Xfh-mEW1XC0OzYJAdVMq3ZxOTgs1CVLYSTS5KMN81WpDKU>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

preemptive obituary. Even far-right parties are not pushing for a 'Frexit' or 'Italexit', "they are not trying to dissolve the EU (which is highly unpopular), but to transform it into a racist "Europe of fatherlands" based on the supremacy of white, Christian, straight, male Europeans"⁵³. Regardless, the ideas of which Europe will be built are splintered. So are the stances on enlargement.

The centrist parties (EPP, S&D) are no longer the ones to look at for answers, but rather the new influential blocs (Liberals, Greens, Nationalists). In fact, the expectations are so mixed that online media platforms have been releasing opposing interpretations of the European elections results in relation to the Western Balkans. One piece from Balkan Insight's *Reporting Democracy* segment argues that "With the far right making further clear advances in the weekend's European elections, the EU's big players will likely become even more cautious about enlarging the club to include the Western Balkans"⁵⁴. Another piece from the same segment argues the opposite, that "the strong Green showing in European Parliamentary elections offers an opportunity for the EU to change course with regards the Western Balkans"⁵⁵. Objectively, both interpretations are plausible to be argued and correct. The EU finds itself politically divided on internal and external matters, enlargement included. For this reason and based on the at-odds plenary distribution

When it comes to the European elections, the main concern is not necessarily that nationalist forces won seats, but that their ideas have now mobilized enough people that liberal parties have to be more cautious in what legislation they push or globalist ideas they put forth. Enlargement may very well fall within this category. Indeed, big challenge during the EP mandate which is now starting will be for the Centrists and Liberals to not appease the far-right in their search for approved legislation or proposals. The Enlargement topic is unpopular at a time when discussions are more divisive than cooperative and solid ground is attempted to be reached on other issues, often more urgent and with an internal nature (i.e. Órban's anti-democratic rule in Hungary, Poland's unconstitutional Supreme Court changes, and the never-ending Brexit headache). Amidst all the aforementioned hot topics, the Western Balkans come along on a colder note.

The results did not offer a fantasized green light to Western Balkan populations. Nevertheless, when all's said and done, no matter how pro-enlargement the elections outcome had been the truth of the matter is that all six countries in the Western Balkan region must undergo socioeconomic reforms and developments before becoming incontestable candidates for EU membership. Already with seven enlargement waves under its belt, the EU is now more cautious when extending its borders and welcoming new countries into the integration project. This is especially true since Romania and Bulgaria of the 2007 enlargement and Hungary and Poland of the 2004 enlargement have raised serious credibility questions. However, indulging such East-West divides is also part of the problem. While it is true that several ugly ducklings take shelter in Eastern EU capitals, it is also true that countries from more recent enlargement waves are prominent success stories. An example is Estonia, currently a leading digital powerhouse⁵⁶, or

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Balkan Insight, "EU election results only worsen Western Balkans' bleak prospects", 28 May 2019, available at https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/28/eu-election-results-only-worsen-balkans-bleak-perspectives/?fbclid=IwAR3XwOGZEV2Y4vHzsc0f6Kuh4hJEeBEPg_XHsPaDNcsbmw7Ti-y40kzYzVs. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁵⁵ Balkan Insight, "EU elections results offer opportunity for Western Balkans", 29 May 2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/29/eu-election-results-offer-opportunity-for-western-balkans/?fbclid=IwAR1LgWUjbyVWFHqLxsx3zfMDf8vkoxOKn2Z2zvTETDnEuiYecBLd2L1prSM>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁵⁶ E-Estonia's official website: <https://e-estonia.com/>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

Croatia, the most recent member (2013) and also a former Yugoslav nation⁵⁷. Politico reminded that “it is increasingly the ongoing political ferment in some countries in Eastern Europe that carries in it the promise of revitalizing the European project. Slovakia, for example, is leading the way, with a new moderate, pro-EU coalition of the center right and center left (Progressive Slovakia-SPOLU) that ended up winning the election by sizeable margin”⁵⁸. One finds what they are looking for, after all. In this case, anti-migration parties look for trouble and pro-enlargement parties look for opportunities.

Potential ways to surpass the EU's impasse with regards to enlargement

Precisely in light of the abovementioned mindset and the fact that the EP is now politically divided, this report argues that the way to constructively and proactively move forward is to put the onus on the national governments of candidate and potential candidate countries. Each candidate country must expose the real opportunity the county presents, the readiness of their domestic institutions to join the European economic, political and social union, and the country's true belonging to the collective project of peace and togetherness.

A case in point is North Macedonia, who this year surpassed a major international obstacle personified by the name dispute with Greece and, from there on, already signed their NATO accession protocol and is now in line for opening EU negotiation talks. Albania, in contrast, has had a more difficult time in getting support from several EU countries, most recently from the Netherlands over cries of corruption and money laundering⁵⁹. Pertaining Kosovo, the international community and the Kosovar citizens in particular are eagerly, and patiently, waiting for the visa liberalization to be duly concluded. At the close of 2019, this would be Prishtina's safest bet in terms of the country's European integration path.

With a fragmented Union and divided Parliament, the EU seems to sustain its interest in enlarging its borders while at the same time expecting positive developments in the candidates themselves to lead the way. The internal situation in the EU is so shaky that positive signs towards integration and eventual membership are expected to come from the candidates. For this reason, North Macedonia is widely praised and now a problem lies in most European countries wanting to open negotiations with North Macedonia as a sign of good faith, but not with Albania even though the two were initially paired up in the process. Reads the *Financial Times* that “Skopje faces a further complication because of debate within the EU over whether to keep North Macedonia and Albania coupled on the same membership track. Tirana is widely seen by diplomats as less ready for accession talks because of concerns over the rule of law, corruption and organized crime”⁶⁰. However, it is up now to the EU to live up to their promise or face serious discredit, even negatively impacting the Balkan region for it would be “discouraging also for those who attempt to resolve other important bilateral disputes”⁶¹, argued Macedonian diplomat Nikola Dimintrov. The dilemma in many EU capitals now lies in whether un-coupling the two and

⁵⁷ Government of the Republic of Croatia, “First five years of Croatia's EU membership is a success story - conference”, 27 June 2019, available at <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/first-five-years-of-croatia-s-eu-membership-is-a-success-story-conference/24068>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁵⁸ POLITICO, “European Elections - 5 lessons from the European Election”, 27 May 2019, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-lessons-from-the-european-parliament-election-2019/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

⁵⁹ Euronews, “Macedonia on track for EU accession talks but not Albania -diplomats”, 14 June 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/14/macedonia-on-track-for-eu-accession-talks-but-not-albania-diplomats>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁶⁰ Financial Times, “North Macedonia pushes compelling case for EU accession talks”, 26 May 2019, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/842f96b8-7c90-11e9-81d2-f785092ab560>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

moving forward with North Macedonia will be as disruptive and moving forward with both even though Albania has scarce support at the moment.

When at an impasse and faced with lacking, often adverse, momentum, the way forward is by exploring new openings. This report argues the way forward lies not in Brussels' divided front anymore, but in the capitals of candidate countries and in a new wave of support other allies can bring to the enlargement to the Western Balkans or the Kosovo-Serbia table.

In sum, considering the European Parliament's newfound design, the heated nature of domestic politics in member states and the unpopularity of another enlargement to an already-frail Union, arguably the most proactive way forward is through national improvements in the Western Balkan candidate countries themselves. Should the candidate countries undergo the necessary reforms to meet the Copenhagen accession criteria in matters of rule of law, judiciary, corruption, organized crime and migration, then many concerns nationalist parties voice and use against pro-enlargement proposals could potentially be squandered. Given than the political reality in Brussels and the EP in particular is so mixed, the best bet of candidate countries right now would be not to look to the MEPs for relief, but rather to prioritize tending for their domestic issues. One-sidedly but efficiently, albeit indirectly, it would have the potential to speed along the accession process and meeting benchmarks.

Applying this to Kosovo, the most complex case in the region given the limited recognition and the dependency on Serbia to reach a final agreement, the most constructive way forward would be to recover the Dialogue on the normalization with Serbia. Only this way could Kosovo's European integration path be recovered and un-stalled. Bearing in mind that the EU's institutional design is more fragmented than ever and its role as facilitator has been poor at times, a way forward to consider could be having the United States, one of Kosovo's main allies, get more involved in the process. At a time when prominent American leaders such as former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pay symbolic visits to the country to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the end of the Kosovo war⁶², pulling on the United States' support to surpass current obstacles in the Dialogue with Serbia and, in general, in Kosovo's integration prospects to regional and international fora, could be valuable. With EU facing massive internal hurdles and not stepping up enough in their facilitator role in the Dialogue, exploring a renewed level of support from the United States towards Kosovo's future is a way forward to consider.

5. Concluding remarks

This report sought to give an all-encompassing analysis of the 2019 European Parliament elections vis-à-vis the Western Balkans enlargement and the future of Kosovo. Albeit linked, the enlargement process offers a different narrative than the one on Kosovo's integration path toward the European Union. The latter, unfortunately, continuing to an elusive topic in European fora – not only because five member states do not recognize the 'newborn' country, but also because its Dialogue counterpart Serbia is not cooperating in their compromise to reach a mutually-beneficial final agreement on the normalization of relations.

The present report started by breaking down the turnout and general outcome of the 23-26 May elections which defined the 2019-2024 European institutional period. From there it took aim at the plenary seats' distribution among the centrist, liberal, nationalist and green blocs in order to interpret what the new parliamentary design means in practice when the time comes for

⁶² Balkan Insight, "Kosovo celebrates 20th anniversary of wars' end", 12 June 2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/12/kosovo-celebrates-20th-anniversary-of-wars-end/>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

coalitions, approving legislation and moulding the future of Europe. Each bloc has a renewed influence in the EU and each bloc has a particular stance towards another enlargement wave to the East and towards Kosovo's integration struggles. While the Greens/EFA are focused on building a more environment-friendly, inclusive and democratic EU and the Liberals/ALDE/Renew Europe's pro-European movement will carry positive influence for Kosovo and its neighbors, the Nationalists/ENF repudiate opening borders to the East instead choosing to promulgate a xenophobic bubble of white Western catholic nations. For their part, the Centrists parties (EPP, S&D) will now be more prone to cooperating with either the left or the right in order to pass legislation, virtually emptying the European center and having it tilt to one ideological side or the other. It is this multi-party reality in the European Parliament which determines the new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen and, with it, the new Foreign Affairs High Representative, Josep Borrell Fontelles 2019 should the EP plenary confirm his nomination, who will continue facilitating the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue after Federica Mogherini's term ends in November.

All in all, the report lays bare a troubled reality in the heart of the EU: no matter how little the wins of the far-right or the Liberals the truth would remain that the Union is facing serious internal problems. Brexit on one end, Hungary on the other and numerous issues in between. No matter the election outcome the fragmented reality would remain and, in that, the unpopular nature of the enlargement to the Western Balkans. It is up to national governments to change this and to make their case in Brussels. And it is up to Brussels to deliver on expected promises, ranging from the urgent visa liberalization for Kosovo to the opening of negotiations with new candidate countries.

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POLICY REPORTS

Policy Reports are lengthy papers which provide a tool/forum for the thorough and systematic analysis of important policy issues, designed to offer well informed scientific and policy-based solutions for significant public policy problems. In general, Policy Reports aim to present value-oriented arguments, propose specific solutions in public policy – whereby influencing the policy debate on a particular issue – through the use of evidence as a means to push forward the comprehensive and consistent arguments of our organization. In particular, they identify key policy issues through reliable methodology which helps explore the implications on the design/structure of a policy. Policy Reports are very analytical in nature; hence, they not only offer facts or provide a description of events but also evaluate policies to develop questions for analysis, to provide arguments in response to certain policy implications and to offer policy choices/solutions in a more comprehensive perspective. Policy Reports serve as a tool for influencing decision-making and calling to action the concerned groups/stakeholders.