



## France, Kosovo and the Western Balkans in the making of a stronger Europe

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# France, Kosovo and the Western Balkans in the making of a stronger Europe

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# Executive Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a watershed moment in European history. It has affected all regions in Europe, including the Western Balkans, and of course Kosovo, and pointed to key vulnerabilities in the region and beyond undermining the European Union's geostrategic ambitions on the continent. This brief argues that in facing this challenge, France has a pivotal role to play. Its re-engagement in the region is a good start. But to project constructive leadership in EU affairs and contribute to the effective anchoring of the region into a sovereign Union, France will need to take further measures, and invest diplomatic capital where it is most needed. In Kosovo, concrete actions need to be taken to at last give substance to the EU's call for strategic autonomy and respond to Kosovo's actual transformation progress and European aspirations.

## Introduction

With its debates on European strategic autonomy, European sovereignty and Europe-Puissance sprouting in the capitals, the return of geopolitics on the European scene has paved the way for a reappraisal of Western Balkans' geostrategic position on the European map. For Kosovo, this reappraisal is long overdue. The country's EU accession perspectives remain at best distant, despite the EU's benevolent guidance; its disputes with Serbia remain unresolved, despite the EU's protracted facilitation; and its statehood does not even command consensus among the Member states for lack of unanimous recognition of its independence. What geostrategic goals can the EU strive for achieving as global actor, if its actions in its closest courtyard do not speak for themselves?

The question has become more pressing than ever in the past couple of months. With the Russian war in Ukraine, the EU now faces one of the most serious crises in its history. Its implications have already hit all regions in Europe, including of course the Western Balkans. They have exacerbated key vulnerabilities in the EU's humanitarian, security, energy and economic architecture, and put the Member States' unity to the test.

In the Western Balkans, this is a challenge that the EU cannot afford to underestimate. The ambition to re-engage, which France keeps signalling since the late 2010s, therefore comes opportunely -although caution is called for. To make a difference, France will need to overcome its traditional reluctance for enlargement, engage in favour of strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans, boost its leadership in the region and address some of the pressing issues, in particular those related to Kosovo.



FRENCH  
GEOSTRATEGIC  
AMBITIONS IN THE  
WESTERN BALKANS



# A limited appetite for enlargement in France...

The notorious reluctance of France to support further enlargement of the European Union (EU) has already spurred trenchant criticism. Rooted in an underlying nostalgia for „little Europe”<sup>1</sup>, this reluctance has thrived on fears that the accession of new Member states might eventually contribute to the „dilution of the European project”<sup>2</sup>; that widening the Union would come at the expense of the logic of deepening. Stalled reforms, flourishing state capture and unresolved ethno-nationalist strife in the Western Balkans certainly reinforced circumspect attitudes towards a region that remain little known in this other part of Europe. In the meantime, this reluctance of France has also gained ground as by-product of creeping nationalism, cultural sovereignism and anti-Europeanism. Only 39% of the French admit that they trust EU institutions<sup>3</sup>, i.e., less than in any other Member state but Greece. Similarly, this reluctance to support further enlargement builds on the belief that enlargement, coupled with economic liberalism, will accelerate production relocation or social demotion. The controversy over the Polish plumber, which broke out during the debates on the Constitutional Treaty in the mid-2000s, epitomises the populist appetite for enlargement debates.

For those reasons and some others, enlargement remains highly unpopular in France. Since the Summit of the Hague in 1969 at the very least<sup>4</sup>, political elites in Paris tend to share the (debatable) idea of a trade-off between the logics of widening and deepening<sup>5</sup>. In the past couple of years, they for instance argued that the Union should not overburden itself with enlargement, since it has „never been in so much danger”<sup>6</sup>. Emmanuel Macron also made it explicit in April 2018 in his speech before the European Parliament, when he declared that he „will only support an enlargement when there is first a deepening and a reform of our Europe”<sup>7</sup>. His caveat echoed the position of his predecessors. In 2000, Jacques Chirac was already warning the Bundestag that he would not support a „*fuite en avant*”<sup>8</sup> diluting the achievements of European integration<sup>9</sup>. Before him, François Mitterrand and Georges Pompidou all pre-conditioned the enlargement of the European Communities to its consolidation<sup>10</sup>.

Their wariness towards unbridled enlargement, at times instrumentalised for political purposes, tainted French public opinions with generally negative attitudes towards enlargement. All in all, 59% of the French oppose further enlargement, while the EU average is about 44%<sup>11</sup>. This opposition is particularly marked for Kosovo: 65% of the French consider any future accession of Kosovo as „bad or very bad”<sup>12</sup>. Only Turkey ranks below. The indication that the question is not considered important by most people in France<sup>13</sup> is a scant consolation: the countries of the region -and their population- have been in the antechamber of the EU for more than two decades. Yet, their accession is neither at hand, nor in sight.

1 Wunsch, N. 2017. Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 17. (4), pp.541 - 554

2 Bertoincini Y. and S. Andoura. 2013. „Europe” and its „enlargements”: enough... or do we want more? *Notre Europe Viewpoint*. 27 June 2013. Available at: <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/europe-and-its-enlargements-enough-or-do-we-want-more/>, retrieved on 28.3.2022.

3 European Commission. 2021. Standard Eurobarometer 94. Winter 2020-2021, Public opinion in the European Union. Available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=74731>

4 The Hague Summit built on Georges Pompidou's initiative for the EEC, summarised as „Completion, deepening, enlargement”. It aimed at putting an end to the political and institutional stalemate that had existed since 1967 when General de Gaulle had vetoed Great Britain's entry into the Common Market for the second time and relaunching European integration.

5 Schimmelfennig, F. and U. Sedelmeier. 2002. Theorizing EU enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research. *Journal of European Public Policy*. Vol. 9(4).

6 Macron. E. 4.3.2019. For European Renewal.

7 B92. 17 April 2018. French president: EU must first reform, Balkans can wait.

Available at: [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=04&dd=17&nav\\_id=103956](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=04&dd=17&nav_id=103956)

8 Speech delivered by Mr. Jacques Chirac before the German Bundestag, 17 June 2000.

Available at: <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/chirac/chirac2-244736>

9 L'Obs, 17 June 2000, „EU: Chirac asks the question of the future of the Enlargement”.

Available at: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20050616.OBS0261/ue-chirac-pose-la-question-de-l-elargissement-futur.html>

10 Deloche F. 1998. La France et l'élargissement à l'Est de l'Union européenne.

Available at: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/sites/sciencespo.fr.cei/files/etude46.pdf>

11 European Commission. 2021. Standard Eurobarometer 94. Winter 2020/2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39Wq9gL>

12 Hubner C. et al. 2021. It's the EU, not the Western Balkan Enlargement...French Public Opinion on EU Membership of the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://osf.to/3yKsbeb>

13 *Ibid.*

But French reluctance to give in does not alone explain the erosion of Western Balkans' accession perspectives. The blocking by France and a couple of other Member states of the opening of North Macedonia and Albania's accession negotiations in the late 2010s shed harsh light on the systemic malfunctioning of the EU's proverbial „most effective foreign policy tool". And it hastened its demise, albeit very unfairly so. A lengthy accession process, only supposedly based on merit, coupled with an unpredictable enlargement procedure, readily hijacked by Member states, are (at best) poor reflections of the Union's ambitions -for the region and for the EU itself. How can the EU strive for credibility as global actor, if its most-praised crown policy is not able to shape its closest neighbourhood in any meaningful manner?

The acknowledgment of this weakness, to which Berlin, Paris and other capitals tried to respond through the launch of the Berlin Process in 2014, unveiled an even more serious flaw. The EU's indecisiveness (in both senses of the term) -as actor, role-model and agent of economic, social, legal and political transformation-, in the Western Balkans, opened shared vulnerabilities<sup>14</sup>, readily exploited by external actors (Russia, China and others) and local potentates.

## And yet, an ambition to re-engage

The return of geopolitics on the European scene, with its debates on European strategic autonomy, European sovereignty and Europe-Puissance sprouting in the capitals, consequently paved the way for a reappraisal of Western Balkans' geostrategic position on the European map. For Kosovo, this reappraisal is long overdue. The country's EU accession perspectives remain at best distant, despite the EU's benevolent guidance; its disputes with Serbia remain unresolved, despite the EU's protracted facilitation; and its statehood does not even command consensus among the Member states for lack of unanimous recognition of its independence. What geostrategic goals can the EU strive for achieving as global actor, if its actions in its own courtyard do not speak out for themselves?

The ambition of France to re-engage, or „geographically reinvest in the Western Balkans"<sup>15</sup> therefore came as a welcome development -although caution is called for. In substance, it suggests a growing awareness in France that the making of a stronger Europe will require a more strategic engagement of the EU and its Member states in the Western Balkans. After years of lower interest, France has accordingly signalled its willingness to regain a foothold in the region<sup>16</sup>. In 2016, it hosted the Berlin Process summit and played an important role in establishing the Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO). In 2017, it launched with Germany an initiative to coordinate the drive against firearms trafficking in the Western Balkans. In 2018, it expanded the intervention mandate of the French Development Agency (AFD) to all Western Balkan countries. In 2019, it initiated, again with Germany, an intergovernmental dialogue on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and adopted a national Strategy for the Western Balkans<sup>17</sup>. In 2020, it withdrew its reservations against opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, while drawing the contours of the revised accession policy. In 2021, it announced that its Presidency of the Council would sponsor the organisation of a 2022 Conference on the Western Balkans.

This ambition to re-engagement is promising -provided France walks the talk, and it comes at the right moment. The Covid pandemic and Russian invasion of Ukraine have brought the EU's „age of innocence" to an end<sup>18</sup>. In this new geopolitical age, France is well positioned to provide the political leadership needed to advance the European project, in its core but also at its margins.

14 Marciacq F. 2021. Neither Accession, Nor Resilience ? The European Union in the Western Balkans against the backdrop of geopolitical rivalry. *Journal for Intelligence, Propaganda and Security Studies* vol. 15 (1)

15 Élysée (August 27, 2019), Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3wl9f4d> [accessed November 1, 2021]

16 Marciacq F., Le Quiniou R., (eds.) French Engagement in the Western Balkans: Boosting Strategic, Political, Economic and Societal Cooperation Etudes de l'Ifri, February 2022

17 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. France. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3FU3Nbl>

18 Lehne S. Carnegie Europe. February 2020. How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age. Available at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-24\\_Lehne-EU\\_Geopolitics.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-24_Lehne-EU_Geopolitics.pdf)

# A French interpretation of European strategic autonomy

The notion of European strategic autonomy, which has gained ground on the European scene, has been actively promoted by France in the past couple of years. This emphasis put by France on strengthening the Union has been key to pushing forwards important reforms in the EU's security and defence policy, in monetary and economic policy, in technology and industrial policy, etc... The Conference on the future of Europe and Strategic Compass are just the most recent examples of those initiatives spearheaded by France and aiming at reinforcing the EU's strategic thinking. But those efforts should not be interpreted as support for sheer depoliticised supranationalism.

In the French imaginary, the notion of European strategic autonomy echoes Charles De Gaulle's „dreams of a powerful, united Europe, that could exist between the Soviet threat and American power”<sup>19</sup>. For the father of French foreign policy, it was a matter of strategic balance, which could only be achieved through the Member states, and ideally, under the *primus inter pares* leadership of France. De Gaulle's vision for Europe was in many respects closer to the stillborn Plan Fouchet, enshrining intergovernmentalism, than to the Plan Pleven, envisioning the creation of a „stateless European army”<sup>20</sup>.

The need to compromise brought France closer to Germany. Both countries signed the Treaty of Elysée in 1963 and Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl were key in establishing the CFSP and CSDP. But this cooperation did not extinguish aspirations that France should play a pivotal role in European affairs if it wants to „sustain its rank” on the global stage<sup>21</sup>. Jacques Chirac's calls for establishing a „Europe-Puissance”<sup>22</sup> or Emmanuel Macron's call on making a „puissance d'équilibre”<sup>23</sup> in Europe and in the world, all resonate with this idea, once formulated by De Gaulle, that „Europe is Archimedes' Lever for France”. In French imaginaries, European strategic autonomy and French leadership in EU affairs are the two sides of the same coin.

French pretensions to boosting European strategic autonomy should not invalidate the concept altogether, even though it rightfully raises questions and a certain weariness in other capitals. France, after all, does not impose its conception against sceptical Member states, but rather responds to a need that has grown in the Union over the past couple of years. The impetus given back to intergovernmentalism by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the UK vote to exit the EU in 2016 and the erosion of Germany's leadership, after the Greek economic and the refugee crises throughout the 2010s, did open new opportunities for France to re-engage along those lines and reclaim leadership in EU affairs. The European speeches of Emmanuel Macron at La Sorbonne, Athens, Strasbourg, Aix-la-Chapelle, etc..., thematised the consolidation of (quite interchangeably) European sovereignty, European strategic autonomy or Europe-Puissance, as much as they signalled French readiness to assume leadership in EU affairs.

This linking of French *volonté de puissance* with European sovereignty is reflected in public opinions. Most of the French associate the notion of sovereignty with „power” (50%) rather than nationalism or freedom, and see no contradiction in boosting it on both European and national levels (66% of the French are in favour of reinforcing European sovereignty; 70% in favour of reinforcing French sovereignty)<sup>24</sup>. The French predilection for deepening the EU, in that sense, contrasts with conceptions

19 Robert Schuman Foundation.2021. Europe as a power, European sovereignty, strategic autonomy: a debate that is moving towards an assertive Europe. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Nlk0Jt>

20 The New York Times.1951. De Gaulle Opposes a 'Stateless Army'; He and Other Party Leaders Make Pronouncements on Eve of Move for June Elections Defense Bungled, Aide Says. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/05/07/archives/de-gaulle-opposes-a-stateless-army-he-and-other-party-leaders-make.html>

21 Bertrand Badie, «La France, une puissance contrariée», L'État du monde 2022. Éditions La Découverte.

22 Élysée (4 May 2000). Statement by President Jacques Chirac on the next French Presidency of the EU. Available at : <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-9489-fr.pdf>

23 Élysée (27 August 2019). Speech by President Macron at the Conference of Ambassadors. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3wE63Ql>

24 Jean Jaurès Fondation. 01 March 2021. Le Rapport Des Français a la Souveraineté Européenne. Available at :<https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/le-rapport-des-francais-a-la-souverainete-europeenne/>

in other Member states rather suggesting a consolidation of supranational rule-based governance. In France, the deepening of the EU is conceived as a means of strengthening both European power and French leadership. This essential connection explains why the French look at the 2004 enlargement wave rather critically -it shifted the gravity center of the EU towards the East, away from Paris, empowered an already economically successful Germany, and therefore side-lined France in Europe.

In the new geopolitical context, the need for strategic autonomy is a godsend for France to re-engage in European affairs -all over Europe- and to at last bridge its deepening vs. widening dilemma. While the conceptual contours of the notion of European sovereignty or strategic autonomy remain blurry and hinge on national contexts, they denote in their core an ability to mitigate vulnerabilities resulting from dependencies. Peripheries, both internal and external, (or „peripherality“ for that matter) are extremely important, as their neglect nourishes a number of „pathologies of the margin“, readily exploited by third actors<sup>25</sup>. No wonder that France, ahead of its Presidency of the Council, identified in December 2021 „the third thrust of this sovereign Europe (as) the stability and prosperity of our neighbourhood“<sup>26</sup>. The broadening of European vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans and exploitation by China, Russia and other rival powers made it clear that there can be „no sovereign Europe if we do not decide in Europe to have our own strategy, our own agenda when it comes to our neighbourhood [and the Western Balkans specifically]“<sup>27</sup>.

## Is France building up EU leadership in the Western Balkans?

Traditionally more focused on North Africa, France has increasingly come to look at the Western Balkans through the prism of geopolitics. But unlike others, it tended, so far, to decouple the geopolitical reasoning from the EU's enlargement grammar. For Emmanuel Macron, for instance, there is a geostrategic imperative in „anchoring the region“ in Europe, but this anchoring shall build on „infrastructures, education, languages and culture“ and much less so on the opening of negotiating chapters<sup>28</sup>. The French argument is that discussions about enlargement should always be linked to broader strategic reflections; that they should be part of a „bigger picture“. This re-appraisal echoes French efforts in the past few years at re-asserting the leadership of Paris on European questions, claiming that the overall priority for the EU today is to boost European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, while making sure that enlargement will make the Union stronger and not weaker.

How, against this background, to assess French efforts at re-engaging in the Western Balkans in general and Kosovo in particular, where the need for strategic action, on the side of the EU and its Member states, is amongst the highest? What is their potential? Are they paving the way to the consolidation of the EU's role in the region as a stronger, more strategic actor, guided by a political leadership boosted by French re-engagement? Or will French re-engagement remain marginal to meaningfully contribute to strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy?

On the political level, first, it might be useful to remember that France was the first Member state to recognise Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. France has since then been a key partner of Kosovo on the international scene and a strong supporter of its independence. In security matters, more than 50.000 French soldiers and three French Generals served in Kosovo under the banner of KFOR since 1999<sup>29</sup>. But the French withdrawal from KFOR in 2014, which epitomized French shifting security priorities at that time, certainly weakened Paris' foothold in the region. How to explain the absence of French soldiers in Kosovo today, when other contributors to KFOR include non-EU countries like

<sup>25</sup> See the special issue by Sandra Fernandes & Andrey Makarychev. 2019. Rethinking periphery in Europe: redistributing the cards. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Volume 27, Issue 4 (2019).

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/12/09/presentation-de-la-presidence-francaise-du-conseil-de-lunion-europeenne>  
<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices 2019, 27 August 2019. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3a8S9xX> , retrieved on 5 January 2021.

<sup>29</sup> NATO. 08 February 2014. France Salutes Kosovo.

Available at : <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/media-center/archive/news/2014/france-salutes-kosovo>



Armenia, Moldova, Canada or Turkey?

Another limitation similarly hanging heavy on French ambitions in the region is the notorious reluctance of French authorities to grant visa liberalisation to Kosovo on the pretext that Pristina fails to meet requirements in the fields of the rule of law and fight against organised crime and criminal activities. While indeed much progress remain to be done in those areas, it might be useful to consider the political signal that this reluctance sends. Countries with no clear EU accession perspectives, like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, have been granted visa liberalisation in 2014/2017 for geostrategic reasons, regardless of fundamental conditions (such as sovereign control over territory). Moreover, French opposition to grant visa liberalisation to Kosovo runs against the recommendation of the European Commission and despite repeated calls of the European Parliament and other Member states. Politically, it thus remains a hindrance to French efforts at rallying support for renewed leadership on strategic issues.

On the economic level, French engagement in Kosovo never took off. Trade relations remain marginal (less than €15 million in 2020), even though they have been markedly progressing since 2018<sup>30</sup>. French companies operating in Kosovo include the Aéroport de Lyon, which together with the Turkish company Limak, manage and operate the Pristina airport; Mazars, Egis Route, Interex (a subsidiary of Intermarché), and BNP Paribas, present through its Turkish subsidiary TEB. In the past years, new French investment projects have nonetheless been promoted. For instance, the development of a 90MW wind farm by Akuo Energy, and the construction of the Pristina wastewater treatment plant, to be financed by a concessionary loan from DG Trésor<sup>31</sup>. In the field of cultural diplomacy, cooperation has been similarly strengthened in the past couple of years with Kosovo's associated membership in the international organisation of the Francophonie in 2018<sup>32</sup> and a new agreement signed in 2021<sup>33</sup>. But here again, much remains to be done and limited resources does not make it easy.

France has also sought to re-engage on the sensitive issue between Belgrade and Pristina. As discussions envisioning an exchange of territory stirred tensions in the EU and the Western Balkans, France, together with Germany, took the initiative of launching supplementary channels of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, which now run next to / in support of the EU-facilitated dialogue<sup>34</sup>. A first intergovernmental meeting took place in that framework in Berlin in April 2019 and was, according to Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, „not about accession negotiations”<sup>35</sup> but „about a policy of stability that we want for the region”<sup>36</sup>. Due to the limited progress achieved on that occasion and given the points of contention that grew on the EU's accession policy agenda ahead of the Council's meeting, the second gathering initially planned for June 2019 eventually took place in July 2020, under the auspices of the French president. Ahead of this event, which similarly bore little fruits, the foreign ministers of France and Germany jointly co-authored an article published in Serbia and Kosovo, calling on the leaders of the two countries to stop any political manoeuvring and getting serious about solving the dispute<sup>37</sup>. Further meetings took place at the margins of recent summits (namely in Brdo in 2021), but they registered no remarkable progress. While the initiative does indicate a renewed interest of the Emmanuel Macron himself for thorny issues in the region, it falls short, to this day, of taking a strategic turn. It remains exclusively centred on dialogue at the highest level and barely involves the French diplomatic apparatus; and more importantly, it does not engage with the five Member states that have not recognised Kosovo and therefore fails to bolster convergence where it is most needed.

30 Ministry of Economy and Finance. France. 2020. Bilateral Trade between France and Kosovo in 2020.

<https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/XK/les-relations-bilaterales-france-kosovo>

31 Ardian Hackaj. 2022. Boosting Economic Cooperation, in Florent Marciacq, Romain le Quiniou, (eds.) French Engagement in the Western Balkans: Boosting Strategic, Political, Economic and Societal Cooperation Etudes de l'Ifri, February 2022

32 Kelmendi T, Morina E. ECFR. 24 February 2021. How Macron can strengthen the EU in the Western Balkans.

Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-macron-can-strengthen-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/>

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, Kosovo. 16 November 2021. Kosovo and France deepen cultural cooperation, support agreement is signed between the ministries. Available at: [https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/single\\_lajmi/4533](https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/single_lajmi/4533)

34 Marciacq F., Zornaczuk T. March 2021. Stiftung Genshagen. Towards more cohesion in EU enlargement policy – tapping the potential of the Weimar Triangle. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3FYWjHn>

35 Press statements by Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron on the Western Balkans meeting, Berlin, 29 April 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3PkUfuG>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

36 Kosovo and Serbia agree to resume talks after Macron, Merkel push, Euractiv, 30 April 2019.

Available at: <https://bit.ly/3t5FGSr>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

37 Jean-Yves Le Drian/Heiko Maas, Germany and France: „Restart the dialogue now!”, Koha Ditore/Kossev/Blic, 23 May 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-le-drian/2343952>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

With regard to the EU's accession process, finally, France has insisted in the past couple of years that its re-engagement shall not give the EU free rein to further enlarge. This insistence has been incorporated into the EU's 2018 enlargement strategy, which provides that „the Union must be stronger and more solid, before it can be bigger”<sup>38</sup>. It was presented as argument to justify Emmanuel Macron's opposition to Albania and North Macedonia's opening of accession negotiations, despite the recommendation of the Commission. This opposition, which, quite unfairly so, had nothing to do with the two countries incriminated, has left a mark on the reputation of France as „enlargement-sceptic-in-chief”<sup>39</sup>. But it should not be objectivised as principled rejection. With this antagonising behaviour, France signalled its ambition to broaden (albeit in at first non-constructive ways) the scope of its engagement, which it hitherto decoupled from EU accession matters<sup>40</sup>. Its approach shifted accordingly from passive follower of Germany's lead in the region to self-proclaimed reformer of the EU's accession policy. The new accession methodology, unanimously endorsed in March 2020 by the Member states<sup>41</sup>, mirrors in that sense the most important elements brought to the forefront by Paris. It introduces a „differentiated, reversible and clearer” process<sup>42</sup> and underlines the need to take a more political look at what is at stake in the EU's relations with the countries of the region. This involvement of France in revising the accession methodology and Emmanuel Macron's recent calls on „clarifying the European perspectives”<sup>43</sup> of the countries of the region open avenues for France to further boost its strategic engagement in EU accession matters and show leadership in the implementation of the parts of the revised accession methodology that are applicable to the Member states. This need for leadership is particularly high in those issue-areas, where the „Member states and institutions [fail to] speak with one voice in the region”<sup>44</sup> – these will find in the region a „true agenda for Europe's sovereignty”<sup>45</sup>. French leadership could finally be important to make it clear (perhaps in contrast to other Member states) that geopolitics should not trump the vision underpinning European integration, or that accession cannot be sheerly conceived of as a bulwark against Russian or Chinese interferences in the region, but also and perhaps above all, as „positive accession, through adherence to our project, in a reasonable period”<sup>46</sup>.

38 European Commission. 6 February 2018. A credible perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. COM(2018) 65 final.

39 Delevic M., Prelec T. BiEPAG. 17 January 2020. Flatter, faster, fairer – How to revive the political will necessary to make enlargement a success for the WB and the EU. Available at: <https://biepag.eu/article/flatter-faster-fairer-how-to-revive-the-political-will-necessary-to-make-enlargement-a-success-for-the-wb-and-the-eu/>

40 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. France, Summit between the EU and Western Balkans, 14 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/europe/western-balkans-62918/>

41 European Commission, Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 5 February 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z0YXrZ>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

42 Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence de Munich sur la la sécurité 2020, Munich, 15 February 2020. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3sl0UW7>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

43 Elysée (09 December 2021). Présentation de la Présidence française du Conseil de l'Union européenne. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3FYPSkw>

44 European Commission. Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 2020. Available at : [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf)

45 Elysée (09 December 2021). Présentation de la Présidence française du Conseil de l'Union européenne. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3FYPSkw>

46 French Presidency of the Council of EU. French President Emmanuel Macron's Speech at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 19 January 2022. Available at : <https://bit.ly/3NIMtyN>



# KOSOVO IN THE MAKING OF EUROPE-POWER



# Strategic pitfalls in the EU's approach to enlargement

In his first speech as re-elected Prime Minister, Vetevendosje's Albin Kurti highlighted that „our orientations for integration into NATO and the European Union are clear“<sup>47</sup>. On Enlargement perspectives, Serbia and Montenegro are already negotiating accession, Albania and North Macedonia eagerly wait for their accession frameworks be adopted, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo remain as potential candidates, in a no-man's land of vague accession commitment. Given such a delayed enlargement wave, the EU saw the need to revise the process and make it more „credible“<sup>48</sup>: the methodology used to measure progress by candidates is merit-based, and „on the EU side, we need to deliver on our commitments. The EU is not complete without the Western Balkans. It's time we come together and unite in building a stronger Europe“<sup>49</sup>. Nonetheless, once Albania and North Macedonia fulfilled their scorecard, the EU did not deliver on their commitment. The same for Kosovo with regards to the visa-free regime given that, once the benchmarks were completed, no follow-up was given to grant Kosovars freedom of movement to Schengen.

Similarly, as the EU itself notes in the Enlargement package published on October 2021, „Albania and North Macedonia continue to fulfil the conditions to open accession negotiations and both countries advanced steadily on the EU reform path. The delays in the official launch of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia are having a negative impact on the credibility of the EU“<sup>50</sup>. As well-documented by the media at the time, France's blocking of the accession of Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019 was dubbed a „historic error“ by EU officials<sup>51</sup>. President Macron has since stepped up and been vocal about the need for the EU to send positive signals to the Western Balkans in order to prevent a feeling of desertion. When announcing the programme for the 2022 French EU Presidency he conceded that „Today we have a special responsibility towards the Western Balkans“<sup>52</sup>.

All six Western Balkan countries benefit from instruments for accession, be it the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA), of which with Kosovo it entered into force in 2016, and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which grants financial and technical assistance to strengthen beneficiaries' capacities<sup>53</sup>. Evidently, the European Commission's commitment to the Western Balkans has predominantly translated into heavy investments in favor of standardization. As a matter of example, the Kosovar Prime Minister met the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, in February, and the bulk of the discussions concerned financing energy and infrastructure projects<sup>54</sup>. Later in March, an EU Commission delegation met with senior Kosovar officials to discuss local implementation of IPA III funds<sup>55</sup>. Therein lies the problem – a holistic commitment and investment in the Western Balkans must necessarily entail accession steps too. To the trained skeptical eye, it could even be seen as if the EU is keeping candidate and potential candidate countries busy with blinding investments and shiny summits to distract from the harsh reality: commitment is in paper and not in practice. Looking particularly at Kosovo, the country is not even part of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism<sup>56</sup>, the mechanism to improve disaster preparedness and response, despite a recent October 2021 agreement to enhance cooperation between the EU and

47 Prime Minister Office, „Prime Minister Kurti presented to the Assembly the Government Program for 2021-2025“, 17 May 2021.

48 EU DG NEAR, „2021 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses and sets out reform priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey“, 19 October 2021. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_5275](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5275)

49 *Ibid.*

50 EU DG NEAR, „2021 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses and sets out reform priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey“, 19 October 2021.

51 Reuters, „France under fire for 'historic error' of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls“, 18 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans-idUSKBN1WX1CT>

52 European Western Balkans, „Macron urges for „clarifying“ EU perspective of the WB, announces conference in June“, 10 December 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3My8F9a>

53 EU DG NEAR, „Enlargement region: European Commission welcomes final adoption of EU's new €14 billion pre-accession assistance budget for 2021-2027“, 15 September 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Ptt1SQ>

54 Prime Minister Office, „Prime Minister Kurti meets with Commissioner Várhelyi“, 28 March 2022.

Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/prime-minister-kurti-meets-with-commissioner-varhelyi/>

55 Prime Minister Office, „European Commission delegation and government officials discuss implementation of IPA in Kosovo“, 24 March 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Lra9R8>

56 EU DG ECHO, „EU Civil Protection Mechanism“, accessed 16 April 2022.

## Strategic pitfalls in the EU's approach to Kosovo

Kosovo's lack of real leverage is noticeable and damages the country's position at the negotiating table. Most prominent is the fact that the Republic of Kosovo is the only remaining country in the region with visa restrictions for the Schengen Area. The liberalization process has been stuck at the Council level since the Commission (and before that the Parliament's) positive decision in July 2018, after the country fulfilled all benchmarks.

The lack of EU reaction after Kosovar domestic efforts has been disappointing – Kosovars continue to face isolation in the region and in the world, which essentially growth and progress. This attitude does not match EU values on openness – as President Macron stated in a recent speech, “at the core of the European project, that is, Europeans' ability to be open with each other, stay true to their values, stay open to the rest of the world, and never give in to the easy option and naivety. This is the very foundation of our democratic, humanist and progressive identity”<sup>58</sup>.

Kosovo as the underdog in geopolitics has been noticeable in the EU's track record of exerting pressure on Kosovo rather than on Serbia. In the end, Kosovo being the one most aligned to EU values means pressure may be best exerted on it since it may actually listen to the EU, whereas Serbia is now too far down the Russian rabbit hole to comply easily. A recent example was when HRVP Borrell reprimanded Kosovo “which is showing that it is not willing to sit at the table”<sup>59</sup> for Dialogue discussions, despite Kosovo being the most committed to advancing the Dialogue given that its international recognition and EU integration path are at stake; whereas Serbia is already an internationally-recognized state and has open accession negotiations with the EU. In contrast, Kosovar President Vjosa Osmani highlighted in March „The only thing that can have a negative impact in our dialogue with Serbia is the fact that Serbia has been using obstruction through participation as a method. So they do sit down at the table but they obstruct everything”<sup>60</sup>.

This should not and cannot be the way the EU wishes to conduct its foreign policy, let alone in its immediate vicinity. There is a clear need to place Kosovo on an equal footing with Serbia at the negotiating table. After all, the EU has as much to gain, as to lose, should the Dialogue succeed or fail. Kosovar citizens and authorities are left with more questions than answers given such a disjointed EU foreign policy – will the Russian invasion of Ukraine shift any of the above accession instruments or hesitancy? Will the war shake up the enlargement fatigue EU Member States, and France in particular, is experiencing, in recognizing that stability in its neighborhood is now more important than ever to meet EU interests?

## Game-changing implications of the Russian war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of the sovereign democratic state of Ukraine brought new political risks which threaten the entire existence of traditionally-Western alliances, such as the EU and NATO. It also highlighted an even more pronounced divide between Europe and the European Union: when Ukraine was invaded and a war started in Europe, it was Ukraine, a non-EU European country, who has been fighting to defend European values against authoritarian forces. The point is that embracing Europe

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Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en)

57 EU DG NEAR, “EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brdo reaffirms European perspective and strategic engagement in the region”, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3yGVNZZ>

58 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, “Speech by President Emmanuel Macron to the Ministers for Home Affairs”, 4 February 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LjBpks>

59 Euractiv, “Borrell pressures Kosovo ahead of EU-led Serbia dialogue”, 28 January 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3FWPTpk>

60 Anadolu Agency, “Kosovo says it joins EU, US sanctions against Russia as 1st country from region”, 16 March 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lkmxP>

as Europe implies embracing the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries. Yet the Western Balkans remain in limbo – they have committed to sociopolitical ties with the EU but, in parallel, Russia and China's influence and investment keep growing in the region. There is a non-aligned power vacuum in the Western Balkans which antagonists to liberal democratic values may seize. With an eye on Ukraine, one can argue that NATO's hesitance to fully integrate the partner country into the Alliance gave way for Putin to usurp that margin and invade the country with no concern for the military Alliance's Article 5 of collective security. Similarly, the lack of integration of the Western Balkans in the EU arguably allows for a small margin for antagonists to usurp. This so-called limbo was made more pressing after Russia's attacks on Ukraine. In fact, EU HRVP Borrell stated „We are afraid that Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine, and the Russian influence can start working in the neighboring countries“<sup>61</sup>. Common reactions to assert EU influence on the region was to organize high-level visits by the HRVP<sup>62</sup>, and by the German Foreign Minister, who signaled that „Germany promotes political stability and economic prosperity in the Western Balkans, and the German Government views the region's prospects for joining the European Union as a priority“<sup>63</sup>.

France, as current President of Council of the EU, hurried to organize an EU- Western Balkans summit for June 2022. France, as current chair of the rotating EU Presidency and a founding, key Member State of the EU, should advocate for a clearer EU future for Kosovo and for the Western Balkans as a group. The EU needs to choose if they will go down the path of more integration among the 27 Member States, slowly but surely closing off the membership club more and more; or if it will focus on expanding borders, indeed encompassing geographic Europe into the EU, and realizing their repeated statements to the Western Balkans. We argue such enlargement and expansion would be in favor of the EU27, not simply as a move against Russia or China, but in favor of the EU's standing as credible geostrategic actor.

In EU foreign policy, a repeated mistake has been done of pushing away the Western Balkan concern, almost in a procrastinating nature, in hoping that things will fix themselves. This renders Kosovo, and its large young population, with the reigning sentiment of disappointment given years of visa rejections, stalled Dialogue, remote accession and empty EU promises. One can argue that indulging Serbia's clear-cut stance of going into the Dialogue noting they will never recognize Kosovo's independence is ultimately indulging similar expansionist aims and disregard to territorial integrity as Russia did with Ukraine. While there are, naturally, differences between the two scenarios, the big picture remains: the regional powers do not wish to see a territory which used to belong under its jurisdiction be independent. In addition, noting how dire the situation is for Kosovo, we see that Ukraine has received no EU accession commitment, besides the essential for shelter, refuge, aid, and arms. A similar reality can be noted for Kosovo, in that besides the tangible help by means of public investment, no real commitment has been done to Kosovo as a state since the visa liberalization process remains blocked. Kosovo is particularly vulnerable.

Prime Minister Albin Kurti's statement following the Russian invasion of Ukraine echoed this sentiment, in highlighting that “Today, Ukraine is not only defending the sovereignty and the right for self-determination of a free and independent state, but rather is defending universal values of peace, democracy and nation's right for self-determination. None better than the people of Kosovo recognize the value of freedom, human dignity and right for self-determination”<sup>64</sup>. The Kosovar Prime Minister reminded that Kosovo is unfortunately well-placed as a target for Russian imperialistic aims, for „The Republic of Kosovo has consistently faced with Russian Federation's efforts to undermine its sovereignty and progress, either by blocking Kosovo's membership in international organizations, arming Serbia, building camouflaged military bases in Serbia, near the border with Kosovo, or through the orchestration of special and hybrid warfare such as propaganda and other forms that Moscow has

61 Reuters, “EU's Borrell: ‘We fear Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine’”, 27 February 2022.

Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-eu-region-idINS8N2SV0BJ>

62 EEAS, “HR/VP Visit to the Western Balkans, 14-16 March 2022 | Wrap-up”, 22 March 2022.

Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-visit-western-balkans-14-16-march-2022-wrap\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-visit-western-balkans-14-16-march-2022-wrap_en)

63 Federal Foreign Office, “Trip to the countries of the Western Balkans and to the Republic of Moldova”, 10 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/baerbock-web/2516406>

64 Prime Minister Office, “Joint Statement of the Head of Institutions of the Republic of Kosovo following Russian Federation's military aggression and invasion of Ukraine”, 24 February 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3NqYrr7>



consistently employed against the Republic of Kosovo<sup>65</sup>. Indeed, Russia's foreign policy strategy in the Western Balkans has been to destabilize and keep old wounds open.

The EU must recognize Kosovo's commitment to the EU is an asset to the Union, especially amid the challenges it faces to the East. Kosovo's reaction to the Russian invasion was quick and pronounced: the Parliament voted to take in 5000 refugees (note-worthy given the country's population of not even 2 million)<sup>66</sup>, and established a so-called Security Fund to „contribute to state security“, to provide more money for the Kosovo Security Force. The country was united in „showing solidarity with Ukraine because we see ourselves in their struggle for freedom“<sup>67</sup>. The reactions from Kosovo and from Serbia have been world apart: Serbia condemned the attack yet remains the only country in Europe, besides Belarus led by authoritarian leader Lukashenko, that did not join in on sanctions against Russia<sup>68</sup>. Commenting the war in Ukraine, Kosovar President Vjosa Osmani pressed that spillovers effects in the Western Balkans should be contemplated given that Russia is „using Serbia as its proxy in the region for quite some time“<sup>69</sup>. So how to justify not only Serbia's accession negotiations being more advanced, but even visa-free regime having been granted to Serbian citizens and not to Kosovars - what signal does that send? Certainly not the right one.

Euro-Atlantic integration and membership of the Western Balkans would significantly stabilize tensions. Yet, despite being aware of the risks, the EU is not moving beyond its comfort zone. In order to achieve security and defense autonomy, more concrete EU engagement towards the Western Balkans is needed. The EU Member States already acknowledge this, hence the opening of negotiations with two of the six countries, and another two openings looming hopefully later this year. Moreover, three of the six countries already enjoy full-fledged membership to the NATO military alliance. Amidst the recent war outbreak, the EU formally adopted the Strategic Compass for European defense and security by 2030, the white paper endorsed by the European Council presided by France, in March 2022. Among the actionable proposals to improve the EU's ability to act decisively in crises and to defend its security and its citizens is to „develop tailored partnerships in the Western Balkans (...) including through enhancing dialogue and cooperation, promoting participation in CSDP missions and operations and supporting capacity- building“<sup>70</sup>. Raising French commitment to the Western Balkans, and Kosovo in particular, is indispensable to assert France's leadership on European Strategic Autonomy. While an enlargement fatigue very much marked President Macron's first mandate, a focus on ensuring peace and stability in Europe by means of integrating the Western Balkans should mark his second mandate.

Examining Kosovo in particular, much like the Baltic countries view the EU and particularly NATO as a security guarantor, also Kosovo relates to such survival instincts in wanting to be further integrated into the Euro-Atlantic system. When the dire need hits, will it be too late? At this point, years into the SAA and 2 months into a newfound war in Europe, more is needed to signal that the EU is ready to protect the Western Balkans as fellow democratic European states. In the very least, a positive signal should be to grant visa liberation for Kosovo, a privilege already granted to other Western Balkans, besides other partner countries such as Georgia and Moldova, or pressing the five non-recognizers for recognition. This would drive bilateral relations beyond the current stalemate, and instill a breath of – constructive – fresh air into EU-Western Balkans relations towards integration. After all, to cite the EU Strategic Compass approved in a time of war, the EU believes „the strength of our Union lies in unity, solidarity and determination“<sup>71</sup>.

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65 *Ibid.*

66 Euractiv, "Kosovo parliament passes resolution on Ukraine, will accept 5000 refugees", 4 March 2022.  
Available at: <https://bit.ly/38z2ym4>

67 *Ibid.*

68 Balkan Insight, "Serbia Resists EU Pressure to Impose Sanctions on Russia", 16 March 2022.  
Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/16/serbia-resists-eu-pressure-to-impose-sanctions-on-russia/>

69 Anadolu Agency, "Kosovo says it joins EU, US sanctions against Russia as 1st country from region", 16 March 2022.  
Available at: <https://bit.ly/3NnCRDE>

70 European External Actions Service - EEAS, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence", no date, accessed 24 April 2022.  
Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en)

71 *Ibid.*



# CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



The European Union and France have recognised the strategic importance of the Western Balkans in the making of a stronger Europe. Without clear accession perspectives, the power vacuum left by the EU in the region is unlikely to shrink. Geopolitical rivals have already stepped up their level of engagement at the expense of the EU, and they will continue sow the seeds of instability, corruption, illiberalism, nationalism and anti-western resentment. The convergence of Chinese and Russian aspirations for the emergence of a new world order, signaled in their joint declaration of 4th February 2022<sup>72</sup>, is a bad omen for a region already exposed to malign influence. The Russian war in Ukraine accentuates the risks and vulnerabilities, and its disruptive implications in the region will not be countered without an even clearer engagement of the EU, especially in support of those countries most devoted to European integration. Kosovo is one of them.

Thus, the position of individual Member states blocking its path towards EU integration (be it on visa liberalisation or international recognition) does not only undermine the country's prospects as member of the European family; it also further undermines the EU's international credibility in times when it is most needed. If the Member states are not capable of presenting a united front on such modest issues as visa liberalisation or Kosovo's international recognition, what kind of geopolitical challenge can the EU strive for addressing? What strategic autonomy can it demonstrate? What leadership can it project? In order to strengthen its international position, both in the region and against the backdrop of mounting geopolitical challenges, the following recommendations can be formulated:

First, the Member states should start building a common understanding of European strategic autonomy. The Strategic Compass is a first step towards learning the same language of power, but the review of vulnerabilities should not limit itself to identifying external challenges, which need to be addressed. Some of the EU's approaches, like the enlargement policy itself, can be a source of vulnerability, when it is pursued without common understanding of their strategic value. Launching a track-2 initiative bringing together a wide spectrum of perspectives from the Member states could help bringing convergence in that area, developing a common understanding of the notion of strategic autonomy, and exploring more systematically its necessary implications for, or translation into the EU's approach towards the countries of the region.

An important step forwards, which the EU needs to do for the sake of building up its strategic autonomy, is to relinquish unanimity in foreign policy and enlargement matters. Unanimity is a strong vector of coherence, but it is also a hindrance in power politics. The return of geopolitics on the world scene and the Western Balkans is a decisive development, which should lead the EU to revise its Treaties in that sense. The overall costs of maintaining the unanimity principle are already outweighing its benefits for the Member states.

France has a role to play in this regard and it should accordingly continue to step up its engagement in the region and with Kosovo. Boosting French leadership in strategic matters and reinforcing European strategic autonomy are two mutually supportive processes, from which the Western Balkans and Kosovo would benefit. With regard to Kosovo, France should be ready to re-deploy soldiers in support of the KFOR and engage visibly in the ground. It should correct the anomaly of blocking Kosovo's visa liberalisation; and it should boost economic and cultural cooperation in the region to reinforce its presence.

France also has a role to play vis-à-vis the other Member states, in all those issue-areas, where these and EU institutions fail to speak with one voice. More track-1 and track-2 engagement and more diplomatic leadership could help increasing EU convergence on Kosovo's international recognition issue; on North Macedonia's stalled integration; on Bosnia-Herzegovina's unstable trajectory, etc... In the case of Kosovo, it is important to build political pressure in light of art. 1 of the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on self-determination, and the International Court of Justice's 2010/25 Advisory Opinion which provides that "that the declaration of independence of Kosovo adopted on 17 February 2008 did not violate international law"<sup>73</sup>.

72 China Aerospace Studies Institute. Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. 04 February 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39upT8A>

73 International Court of Justice, "Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo – Advisory Opinion", 22 July 2010. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/141/16012.pdf>



France should follow up on its promise to clarify the Western Balkans' EU accession perspectives, and invest more massively in public diplomacy. It is important, in this respect to communicate how to square the circle of widening vs. deepening and explain, both the in the Western Balkans and in France, how the enlargement policy shall contribute to the consolidation of the EU's strategic autonomy.

France should finally clarify its position on the values guiding the EU's approach to the region -whether precedence is given to security and geopolitical calculations or to democracy, as the two cannot always be pursued at the same time. No complaisance should be allowed for EU Member states violating democratic standards, as it projects the image of an EU following double-standards -closing a blind eye on peer Member states' faults, while withholding actual support for countries that actually progress towards better and more democratic governance.





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