30 YEARS OF THE EU'S PEACE, STATE AND DEMOCRACY BUILDING EFFORTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A FRAGILE PEACE, INCOMPLETE STATE BUILDING, SOME DEMOCRACY… AND NO EU ACCESSION

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Abstract: Ever since it failed to prevent the breakout of the post-Yugoslav wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H) in the early 1990s, the EU has been extensively engaged in peace, state and security building and democratisation in the Western Balkans. However, the outcomes of this 30-year engagement are a mixed bag. Focussing on securing regional peace and stability through insisting on compliance with the SAP conditions and its own incentives for building state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and putting the democratisation and compliance with the original Copenhagen accession conditions in the second tier, the EU has not secured lasting political stability in the region nor brought the Western Balkan states close to EU membership.

Keywords: EU, Western Balkans, peace and state building, regional stability, EU accession

Introduction

        The former Yugoslavia as well as the post-communist states in East Central Europe (ECE), the Baltics and its Balkan neighbours Bulgaria and Romania all were offered the same opportunity by the EU to link transition reforms to the process of EU association (and later accession)as early as 1990/1991 (Lavigne, 1999). After the peoples of former Yugoslavia, divided by their ethno-national local communist leaderships, did not take this opportunity, and after all their post-Yugoslav states (bar Slovenia and partially North Macedonia) sunk into post-Yugoslav wars, the EU, together with its leading member states, was heavily involved in attempts to assist the peaceful (re)solution of these wars and post-war democracy and state building in the region. (Cohen, 1995; Woodward, 1995). However, this EU engagement has provided mixed results.

        While there has been no large-scale violent conflict since the end of the NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro in 1999 and the uprising of the Albanian ethnic minority in (now) North Macedonia in 2001, there are not many signs of a successful state building process in the region. The relatively large presence of the international (particularly EU) factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the nearly three decades since its civil war ended and in Kosovo since 1999 has not resulted in transforming these two constitutional territorial units of the former Yugoslav federation into anything which could be defined as a viable

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state, and it looks like their semi-protectorate status will continue indefinitely. Although it is not so intensively exposed to EU monitoring and control as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, North Macedonia is another former Yugoslav republic whose statehood status is contested by internal and external factors. It continues to be hampered by the demands of its Albanian ethnic minority (making up one quarter of the country's total population) for further territorial (and ethnic) decentralisation and possible federalisation of governmental power as well as the objections of neighbours to its constitutional name and national identity and language. After the Greek veto was finally removed with the Prespa agreement on the name 'North Macedonia' in 2018, another neighbour, Bulgaria, started to veto the country's progress in the EU accession process by questioning the *authenticity* of its national identity and language.

Looking at the adopted legislature and the practical engagement of EU institutions and officials in trying to build the viable and legitimate state institutions in the above mentioned countries, this paper argues that the main reason for the failure of the EU's state-building engagement in the Western Balkans lies in the inadequately defined objectives and content of this engagement. The latter is closely related to the EU's approach to further democratisation and development of functioning market economies in the region. Although these should have been at the core of the accession negotiation process with EU membership candidates (as defined by the official EU accession conditions adopted at the Copenhagen 1993 European council meeting (European Council, 1993)) progress in democratisation and market reforms has always been overshadowed by the EU's prioritisation of security/stability goals in the Western Balkans, which have not resulted either in lasting political stability or the successful democratisation of the region (Bieber, 2020; Smith et al. 2021). Like most other EU and member-state foreign policy actions, the EU's peace and state-building incentives in and towards the Western Balkan states have primarily derived from the perceptions and/or particular interests of the most influential EU member states rather than from a careful assessment of the internal and external conditions which the Western Balkan states have had to navigate. The EU's attempts and engagement to first, bring peace, then to build the failed or 'impossible states' (Bieber, 2011) in the region have overshadowed (and largely undermined) its efforts in developing democracy and (to a slightly less extent) a functioning market economy in the Western Balkans.

The following sections of this paper will show how the EU has diverged from its original Copenhagen accession conditionsin pursuingthe process of Western Balkan states' accession, particularly after 2006 in trying to secure regional piece and successful state building. While the post-communist states of ECE (including Bulgaria and Romania) and the Baltics had to comply 'only' with the Copenhagen 1993 accession conditions to secure regional peace and achieve both their successful post-communist democratisation/marketization and EU membership, the candidates and potential candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans have had to comply with the additional set of (often unrealistically defined) accession conditions specifically related to regional political stability and state building from the very beginning of their EU accession bid. Moreover, the number and the difficulty of compliance with these (and also the 1993 Copenhagen conditions) for this group of states have been continuously (and seem indefinitely) increasing.

1. The Western Balkans' 'EU future'[2]

Following the end of the post-Yugoslav wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU designed the so-called 'coherent strategy' of 'conditionality' and '[a] gradual approach' in offering EU cooperation and assistance for "peace and stability, economic renewal, democracy … and [mutual] cooperation" to post-Yugoslav states (excluding Slovenia) and Albania (later labelled the 'Western Balkans'). It seemed that this group of states was on the verge of joining their European post-communist counterparts which by then already were on the path to successful post-communist transition and EU membership (EU General Affairs Council, 1997; Pippan, 2004).

The positive impact of this new EU strategy, which after the Kosovo conflict and the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 was turned into the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkan states, rapidly became obvious. Not only did the two largest countries in the region, Serbia (then with Montenegro) and Croatia, almost simultaneously replace their post-communist authoritarian regimes with strongly pro-reformist and pro-EU governments during a 10-month period in 1999/2000,[3] but all the countries in the region (with the sole exception of North Macedonia) succeeded in significantly accelerating their post-communist political and economic transformation in the first half of the 2000s.

Table 1. Indicators of post-communist democratisation and marketization

	Democracy score*					Economic Transition**		
	1999	2006	2012	2014	2017	1999	2006	2014×
EU-8 (2004)	*2.12*	*2.03*	*2.25*	*2.32*	*2.48*	*3.4*	*3.7*	*3.9*
Hungary	*1.88*	*2.14*	*2.89*	*3.18*	*3.71*	*3.7*	*3.9*	*3.9*
Poland	*1.58*	*2.36*	*2.18*	*2.21*	*2.89*	*3.5*	*3.7*	*4.0*
Slovakia	*2.71*	*2.14*	*2.57*	*2.64*	*2.61*	*3.3*	*3.7*	*3.9*
Romania	*3.54*	*3.29*	*3.50*	*3.46*	*3.46*	*2.8*	*3.3*	*3.7*
Bulgaria	*3.58*	*2.89*	*3.18*	*3.29*	*3.39*	*2.8*	*3.5*	*3.7*
Croatia	*4.46*	*3.75*	*3.61*	*3.68*	*3.75*	*3.0*	*3.5*	*3.8*
North Macedonia	3.83	3.82	3.93	4.07	4.36	2.7	3.1	3.6
Albania	4.75	3.82	4.25	4.14	4.11	2.6	2.9	3.5
Bosnia-Herzegovina	5.42	4.04	4.39	4.46	4.64	2.0	2.6	3.1
Montenegro	5.50	3.93	3.82	3.89	3.93	1.6	2.5	3.3
Serbia	5.50	3.68	3.64	3.68	3.96	1.4	2.7	3.2
Kosovo	N/A	N/A	5.25	5.14	4.93	N/A	N/A	2.9
Ex-USSR 7	4.92	5.46	5.62	5.64	5.69	2.3	2.6	2.9

EU-8 (2004): Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
Ex-USSR 7: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine

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[2] This and the following two sections draw on the author's article "EU enlargement into the Western Balkans: a gloomy prospects gets gloomier" published as *Discussion Paper No. 271* in March 2022 by the Centre for European Integration Studies, University of Boon. However, here the presented text includes some revisions, necessary updates and additional comments.

[3] After the death of Croatia's authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of Serbia's post-communist dictator Milosevic in October the following year.

× The EBRD significantly changed its methodology for calculating indicators of economic transition after 2014 so that the data for more recent years are incomparable to those of previous years and cannot be included in the table.

* Freedom House NIT "democracy score" (1 being the highest: full democracy; 7 being the lowest: complete dictatorship) are published annually in June and show the state of play in the respective countries during the previous year. The scores given in the above table for particular years (e.g. 2014) are actually published in the NIT publication for the following year (2015 in this case).

** EBRD economic transition indicators (4.33 = standards of advanced industrial [market] economies; 1 = standards of a centrally planned economy) are published annually in October in the *Transition Report* and refer to the state of play in the previous 12 months.

Sources: Freedom House Nations in Transit, various years; EBRD Transition Report, various years

All the Western Balkan states (excluding Kosovo) during the first half of the 2000s clearly overpassed seven European post - Soviet states regarding democracy and marketization levels, although the latter were significantly ahead in both aspects of post-communist transition in the late 1990s (see Table 1). However, they did not establish close ties with the EU, let alone received a promise on 'EU future' as did their post-communist counterparts from the Western Balkans.

The positive trends from the late 1999s in the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans were further boosted by the conclusions of several EU Council and European Council meetings in the early 2000s on the bright prospects of all the Western Balkan states for an 'EU future' (Pippan, 2004; Petrovic, 2013). These culminated in the adoption of the *Thessaloniki Agenda* in 2003[4], but nevertheless the progress of these countries in developing contractual relations with the EU was comparativelymuch slower than those achieved by the accession aspirants during the 2004/07 enlargement round. This development became particularly slow after completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round and the emergence of the global financial crisis and the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis a few years later, when the EU decided to tightened accession requirements for the Western Balkan states. Moreover, the incorporation of new security-stability goals in these requirements, particularly those related to building national state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (which were often too ambitiously or simply inadequately formulated regarding the potential of the targeted countries to comply with them - see e.g. Domm, 2007; Schimmelfenig, 2008) along with the Council's inability to overcome Greek and Bulgaria's veto over (North) Macedonia's accession have virtually blocked any progress in the accessionof these states since the late 2000s.

2. Prioritisation of the EU's security-stability goals in the region

The official EU rationale behind the introduction of all its additional accession conditions for the Western Balkan since 2006 has been to better prepare them for the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* and (incorporate) core EU values and norms on democracy, good governance and the rule of law. As stated in the European Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy, '[c]ore issues such as the rule of law, fundamental rights, strengthening democratic institutions public administration reform, as well as economic

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[4] Which declared that all the Western Balkan states "will [ultimately] be an integral part of united Europe" (EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003).

development and competitiveness remain key priorities in the enlargement process' (European Commission 2018, p. 6). However, despite these declarative commitments, the building of democratic institutions and a market economy has never been (and especially has not been after 2006 when the EU changed its approach to new enlargements and tightened the original Copenhagen conditions for the Western Balkan states) (Petrovic, 2013; Phinnemore 2006), the most important accession requirements for the Western Balkan states. Compliances with the SAP conditions on post war reconciliation, return of refugees and particularly, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and other requirements raised from EU strategic visions on the stability and security in the region (primarily defined by the EU's stances on and (non) incentives for the resolution of the 'hot political issues' in the region noted in the previous section) has always been at the core of the EU's accession conditions for the Western Balkans aspirants for membership. Both the opening of Croatia's accession negotiations in October 2005 and the signing of Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008 were postponed (and Serbia's SAA also frozen immediately after it was signed in April 2008) due to these two countries' lack of cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague in delivering their citizens accused of war crimes to the Court. Similarly, the Council postponed its response to the Commission's recommendation to grant official candidate status to Serbia from December 2011 to March 2012 due to Serbia's unsatisfactory progress 'in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue' on issues arising from its refusal to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 (European Council, 2011, point 13). However, the cases of North Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina are even more telling.

Although the Commission had recommended to the Council to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia already in 2009 (European Commission, 2009) the Council has continued to block the opening of accession negotiations with this country until the present day.[5] The main reason for this initially was the Greek veto over North Macedonia's former constitutional name 'the Republic of Macedonia.'[6] However, after it officially changed its name in 2019, Bulgaria's veto over North Macedonia's national/ethnic identity and language became the primary obstacle to opening accession negotiations (see the next section). On the other hand, the EU itself (represented by both the Commission and the Council) had largely contributed that Bosnia-Herzegovina was unable for years to meet the basic (pre) conditions for getting the status of a candidate country. In order to 'overcome 'a complex institutional architecture that remains inefficient and which is subject to different interpretations' (European Commission 2015, p. 7).The EU imposed a (pre) condition on B-H in the form of a demand for the country's constitutional change towards greater centralisation and strengthening the role of federal institutions. Despite

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[5] At the time of writing, after the North Macedonian Parliament agreed to change the country's constitution in order to please some of Bulgaria's requests for removing its veto, the EU finally formally opened accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania on 19 July 2022 (Gijs 2022). However, from the formal opening of the accession negotiations to their closure and EU membership, the Western Balkan states have an extraordinary long and uncertain way to go. The below discussed experiences of the two current regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia – clearly confirm this.

[6] Thus it was admitted to the UN and called in the EU documents and documents of other international organisations by its provisional name 'the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' until the two parties finally reached the deal on the name 'North Macedonia' by the Prespa agreement of June 2018.

very strong opposition by leaders (and wider public) of two (of three) constitutive B-H national/ethnic groups (Bieber, 2011; Domm, 2007; Noutcheva, 2009; Keil & Kudlenko, 2015), the EU continuously demanded this constitutional change as a sine qua non for any significant progress in the accession process from the second half of the 2000s until the middle 2010s (European Commission, Annual Progress Reports on Bosnia-Herzegovina 2007-2015; Noutcheva, 2012; Petrovic, 2017). Not only did this accession requirement have zero chance of being unanimously adopted (which is the constitutional requirement) and as such it blocked any progress in B-H's EU accession, but it became an additional source of ethnic animosity and an obstacle to consolidation of democracy in this country (Domm, 2007; Petrovic, 2017; Reuters 2014). Similarly negative were the effects of the EU's de facto accession demands on North Macedonia to solve its 'naming problem' with Greece, more or less by themselves (which they were unable to do for almost three decades).[7] In the absence of any progress in EU accession (which has always been unanimously supported by all political groups and parties in the country), ethnic mistrust between the large Albanian minority (around a quarter of the total population) and the Macedonian majority, coupled with deep animosity between the increasingly authoritarian national-populist government of Prime Minister Gruevski and the largest opposition party had by then completely paralysed political life in the country in the course of 2014 and early 2015 (Bechev, 2015; Petrovic, 2017). The situation was normalised only after negotiations led by EU Commissioner Hahn brokered an agreement between the four major Macedonian parties on a 'tender truce' and early elections in April 2016 (Marusic, 2015).[8]

That the EU has largely prioritised regional and national political stability (as understood and defined in the respective EU policy incentives and proposals) rather than democracy standards and progress with necessary socio-economic reforms in its approach towards Western Balkan accession can also be seen from the accession pathways of the two regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia. While Serbia's progress was primarily determined by its cooperation with the ICTY in the second half of the 2000s and then by progress in the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue throughout the 2010s until the present day, Montenegro has largely been spared additional EU requirements related to the SAP and/or regional political stability. As a result, it is ahead of Serbia and any other Western Balkan states in the accession process although its progress in post-communist democratisation can hardly be assessed to be better. As measured by the internationally respected indicators (shown in Table 1) Montenegro has reached about the similar level of post-communist democratisation and economic marketization as Serbia and North Macedonia.[9] Regardless,

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[7] The two countries had agreed already in 1995, when they formalized bilateral relations to negotiate this problem under the auspices of the United Nations; however, these negotiations have been very occasional and informal and (until very recently) without any resolute political incentive which could have moved them forward.

[8] After the elections were eventually held in November 2016 and several months of negotiations afterwards, Gruevski was finally removed from power by the coalition government led by Prime Minister Zaev, the leader of the Social Democratic Union of *Macedonia* (SDSM).

[9] This, at least in terms of the country's democratisation, seems to be even exaggerated, as the presented indicators obviously ignore the fact that Montenegro is the only post-communist state in Europe which until the last parliamentary elections in August 2020 had never experienced an electoral change of ruling party or leader (even 'last European dictatorship' Belarus changed its political

it opened its accession negotiations with the EU much earlier than its neighbours and by the end of 2020 opened all 33 negotiation chapters *(acquis communautaire)* with the EU (though it has only been able to close three of them so far). On the other hand, Serbia started its accession negotiations three years later than Montenegro (Table 2) and has opened only 18 of 34 chapters[10] closing only two to date. North Macedonia, as noted above, was waiting almost 17 years (after it became the official candidate in 2005) to formally open its accession negotiations with the EU in July 2022 and has not yet opened any negotiation chapters.

As seen from the above cases of North Macedonia, B-H and Montenegro (which has partially been followed by Serbia in recent years), the EU's prioritisation of its stability-security goals in the region over the consolidation of democratic institutions has not accelerated the EU accession of these states, but has weakened their democracies and caused some of their earlier achieved reforms to backslide. Some authors argue that the EU has, through its insistence on stability/security goals, supported (instead of further democratisation) the establishment of semi-authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans (most notably in Montenegro, in North Macedonia during Gruevski's rule and in Serbia under President Vucić in recent years) which they labelled 'stabilitocracies'.[11] In ethnically heterogeneous and politically unstable states of B-H and North Macedonia the EU's demands for solving political-stability issues (as defined by the EU, i.e. its leading member states) in these countries before they can make any progress in accession, have not only damaged the achieved level of democratisation but contributed to further political destabilisation.

Becoming aware of the negative effects of its 'stability over democracy' approach towards Western Balkan accession (Bieber, Smith at. al) the EU launched the so-called 'Berlin Process' in 2014, aiming to deliver more practical policies that could speed up the accession of these states. Regular high-level meetings between the heads of six Western Balkan states and their counterparts from several EU Member States involved were the cornerstone of the process. The process also included Civil Society, Business and Youth forums in which representatives from all of these states would discuss the project and initiatives that could advance 'regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and… [Their] integration…into the European Union' (Berlin Process Information and Resource Centre at https://berlinprocess.info/about/). Following this initiative the European Commission

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leadership in the early post-communist years). The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (DPMS - formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its leader, Milo Djukanović were in power throughout the whole period of the first 29 years of post-communist (and even the last few years of communist) history of the country. While the DPMS lost its parliamentary majority (by only one seat) in the August 2020 elections, Djukanovic, however remained the country's President with significant control over the army, police and foreign policy. Since 1990 he has served six terms as prime minister and two as president of the country (for more details see e.g. Džankić & Keil 2017 and Vachudova, 2014).

[10] Differently than Montenegro, it has an additional chapter to negotiate, specifically focussed on its relationship with Kosovo, i.e. progress in the Pristina –Belgrade Dialogue.

[11] The term tries to explain that these regimes, differently than 'standard' semi-authoritarian or 'hybrid regimes' which are positioned between consolidated democracy and full dictatorship, enjoy external legitimacy and support from advanced democracies (foremost from the EU and its member states) due to their '(false) promise of [securing] stability'. See e.g. Bieber, 2018 and 2020.

and the Council also tried to be more pragmatic. As above stated, in North Macedonia via Commissioner Hahn they directly contributed to the resolution of the 2015 political crisis and the consequent replacement of the national-populist Gruevski government with the more moderate Zaev government which was able to finally solve the 'naming issue' with Greece in early June 2018. In addressing developments in B-H, the EU council initiated a change of approach in December 2014 to focus on solving the'outstanding socio-economic challenges [B-H] faces' rather than changing its constitutional order (EU Foreign Affairs Council 2014). This resulted in the quick adoption of the so-called 'Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015 – 2018' by all three levels of the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 2015 which initiated common reform actions and some legislative changes which were supported by the leaderships of all three major ethnic groups (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015). After the EU decided to reward the country for these positive steps by allowing it, after so many years spent in limbo, to finally submit its application for membership in February 2016 (Table 2) it seemed that Western Balkan accession may not be such a distant prospect.

3. Some positive signals in 2018, but no real change since...

Accession hopes among Western Balkan political elites increased after European Commission President Junker indicated that the EU might expect to enlarge its membership by 2025 in his 2017 State of the Union speech (European Commission 2017), and particularly after this was included in the Commission's 'new' Enlargement strategy of February 2018 as a 'best case scenario' for the frontrunners (European Commission. 2018). However, although designed to give new credibility and revitalise the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans and encourage the current candidates and potential candidates for membership to continue with reforms, the 2018 Enlargement strategy also included a new and fairly challenging accession condition.

This was a requirement that the Western Balkan candidate states have to find 'definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours' (p. 3) and solve them 'as a matter of urgency' (p. 8) as the EU 'will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail' (p.3). While the insistence on re-establishing good neighbourly relations has been at the core of the SAP process since its very beginning, such a firm request for the resolution of disputes between the candidate countries and their neighbours as the de-facto accession pre-condition had never been imposed on any candidate country in any of the previous enlargement rounds. When Cyprus was admitted into the EU in 2004 it was not asked to solve its (still) unresolved dispute with Turkey over its partition on the northern (Turkish) and southern (Greek) part, nor was Croatia asked to resolve its (also still ongoing) dispute with Slovenia over their maritime border before it joined the EU in 2013. Although obviously 'inspired' by the necessity for a resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute over the latter's statehood, the EU's request for 'definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours' included in the 2018 strategy document clearly refers to all possible existing disputes between a candidate country and its neighbours:'[all] countries must unequivocally commit... to...solve [their] open issues well before their accession to the EU, in particular border disputes' (p.18). As Petrovic and Wilson argue, this accession pre-condition has 'in contrast to all other Copenhagen and post-Copenhagen accession conditions broadened

the scope of its fulfilment beyond the capacity and competency of the [candidate] country governments' (Petrovic and Wilson 2021, p. 2021) In fact, it allows an EU member state that has a bilateral dispute with an EU candidate, to hold up the latter's accession process until their dispute is resolved to the former's satisfaction. North Macedonia's above mentioned experience with its disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, and Serbia's more recent experience regarding several border and other disputes it has with Croatia (which has already tried on several occasions to block Serbia's accession negotiations) clearly confirm the real risk of this outcome.[12]

In addition to the inclusion of these new accession requirements in the 2018 Strategy itself, another cold shower on the Western Balkan hopes for a more speedy accession raised by Junker's announcement and the optimistic tune of the Commission's Enlargement strategy of February 2018, came only a few months after the strategy was launched. First, with the highly discouraging outcomes of the Western Balkan-EU summit held in Sofia in May 2018 (Petrovic, Tzifakis 2021), and then by the European Council's decision in the following month to reject the Commission's recommendation to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The latter was particularly disappointing, as North Macedonia had by then solved its name dispute with Greece.

The mix of positive-negative signals regarding Western Balkan accession continued in the second half of 2018 when it seemed that the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue might still produce the final resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and remove this serious obstacle to both countries' paths towards EU membership. Strongly encouraged by High Commissioner Mogherini (who facilitated the Dialogue), Commissioner for Enlargement Hahn, and the Austrian government (which presided over the EU Council at the time and organised a meeting in Vienna in late August between Serbia's and Kosovo's presidents Vučić and Thaçi), the two parties seemed to have come very close to a mutually acceptable compromise. The most important point of the deal included an exchange of territories or border correction as compensation for Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence (Gray and Heth, 2018). While such a deal was optimistically supported by Mogherini, Hahn, Austria, some other EU member states and the USA, it was strongly opposed by a group of member states led by Germany and the UK who claimed that any deal between the two parties that includes border corrections or territorial swaps would set a precedent that may further destabilise the region (Emmot 2018) As a result, Mogherini's hope that the Vienna talks between the two presidents would lead to the finalisation of the deal 'in the coming months, before the end of the mandate of this commission...' (Rettman 2018) was never realised. The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue has completely stalled since then and Kosovo and Serbia seem further from resolving their dispute now than they did when they started the Dialogue in 2013 (Petrovic & Wilson, 2021).

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[12] In addition to several ongoing disputes with Serbia (from bitter clashes over differing interpretations of the events that led to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the outbreakof the Croatian 1992-1995 war, to the border delimitation on the Danube river) Croatia has ongoing border disputes with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina and has already tried to resolve them in its favour using its EU membership as leverage (see Petrovic and Wilson, 2021).

Table 2. Progress in EU Accession

Country	SA/Europe Agreement		Application for EU Membership	Official Candidate Status	Accession Negotiations	
	Signed	Entered into force			opened	closed
Albania	2/06/2006	1/04/2009	28/04/2009	27/06/2014	19/07/2022	NO
Bosnia-Herzeg.	16/06/2008	1/06/2015	15/02/2016	NO	NO	NO
North Macedonia	9/04/2001	1/04/2004	22/03/ 2004	16/12/2005	19/07/2022	NO
Montenegro	15/10/2007	1/05/2010	15/12/2008	17/12/2010	16/06/2012	NO
Serbia	9/04/2008*	1/09/2013	22/12/2009	1/03/2012	14/01/2014**	NO
Kosovo	27/10/2015	1/04/2016	NO	NO	NO	NO
Croatia	*9/04/2001*	*1/02/ 2005*	*20/02/2003*	*8/06/2004*	*5/10/2005*	*30/06/2012*
Bulgaria	*9/ 03/1993*	*1/02/1995*	*14/12/1995*	*12/12/1997*	*15/2/2000*	*16/12/2004*
Romania	*1/02/1993*	*1/02/1995*	*22/06/1995*	*12/12/1997*	*15/2/2000*	*16/12/2004*
2004 EU-5	*btw. 1991-96*	*btw. 1994-99*	*btw. 1994-96*	*btw. 1994-96*	*31/3/1998*	*12/12/2002*
2004 EU-3	*btw. 1993-95*	*btw. 1995-98*	*1995*	*1995*	*15/2/2000*	*12/12/2002*

2004 EU-5: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia
2004 EU-3: Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia
* Frozen pending further Serbian cooperation with the ICTY from 29/04/2008 to 7/12/2009
** Provisionally/officially opened; the first chapters (35 and 32) were opened only on 14 December 2015
Source: European Commission, various documents.

If the enlargement optimism awoken by the 2018 strategy document started eroding in the following months of 2018, it almost completely evaporated in the course of the following two years. The regional frontrunners – Montenegro and Serbia - continued their accession negotiations at an extremely slow pace, being able to open only a few new negotiation chapters. Serbia has not been able to open any new chapters since opening just two in 2019. Montenegro was pleased to open its last chapter in June 2020 but, like Serbia, it has not been able to close any new chapters since the adoption of the 2018 Strategy. The countries have, as earlier stated, closed only three (Montenegro) and two (Serbia) accession negotiation chapters by the time of writing (July 2022).[13] The two other official membership candidates: Albania and North Macedonia, and two potential candidates: B-H and Kosovo, felt even more abandoned by the EU as virtually nothing substantially changed regarding their

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[13] In comparison, the ECE and Baltic states which joined the EU in 2004 (Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia were just slightly slower) opened and closed all the 31 chapters which they negotiated in 3.5 -4.5 years (Table 2).

accession bids until the above mentioned very recent opening of the accession negotiations with the first two (Table 2).

Albania and particularly North Macedonia suffered the greatest disappointments as the Council, 'high jacked' by France's veto (supported by one or two other EU members)[14] continued to reject the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with these two countries for two additional years. After the Commission, relying on a French proposal/non paper, adopted a new methodology for accession negotiations in February 2020 (which in fact makes the negotiations more demanding and tougher for the candidate states - Petrovic & Wilson, 2021; Vankovska, 2020) and the Council finally gave the 'green light' to the opening of accession negotiations with these two countries, came new hurdles. While the Council proceeded with its decision to open accession negotiations with Albania, conditional on further progress in the fields of electoral reform, justice reform and the fight against organized crime and corruption (EU General Affairs Council. 2020) the formal start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia was this time blocked by Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria's objections regarding the existence of a unique Macedonian nation and language have a long history dating to the early post-World War II years, they were formally raised to the level of objection to any further progress in North Macedonia's accession negotiations after the Council's March decision, and have not been removed since (Petrovic & Wilson, 2021) After the Greek veto over the naming issue blocked this country's accession process for over a decade, its other Balkan neighbour has now 'assumed the mantle'. While this is not so surprising considering the history of relations between the two countries, it is surprising (or maybe not so, considering what was discussed on the previous pages) that the most influential EU member states for two years were unable to 'do anything' about it (as they did not for so many years about the Greek veto) beyond expressing regret and 'condolences' over another postponement of North Macedonia's EU aspirations (Rettman 2020).

Even more worrying for the EU accession bids of the Western Balkan states is the fact that the EU, after adopting the Commission's 2018 Enlargement strategy, has 'forgotten' to issue a more specific timetable about the accession of individual Western Balkan states.[15] Moreover, it started to avoid using the words 'enlargement', 'accession', and 'membership' in related documents. This already began with the adoption of the declaration from the disappointing Sofia summit in May 2018 and continued at the virtual EU-Western Balkan summit in May 2020 where these terms were replaced with 'European perspective'. The Commission's latest paper on enlargement in October 2020 (European Commission 2020) uses the above terms but not much in the sense of highlighting the ultimate goals of the EU's engagement with the Western Balkan states. The document primarily relies on these terms

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[14] This was imposed by President Macron's firm and frequently repeated stance that the EU cannot further enlarge before having made a 'real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union' (Gray, 2018).

[15] When e.g. at its Copenhagen meeting in December 2002 the European Council made a decision on the accession of eight ECE and Baltic States (+ Cyprus and Malta) on 1 May 2004 it also expressed the expectation that Bulgaria and Romania would be able to follow by 2007. This appeared to be a political decision and commitment as Bulgaria and Romania indeed joined the EU on 1 January 2007 although many thought that it was premature and the European Commission was asked to develop a number of safeguard measures and the so-called '*Co-operation and Verification Mechanism*' for these two countries (EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2007).

when referring to the obligations which the 'enlargement countries' have to meet during the 'accession/enlargement' process if they wish to be able to one day 'meet the requirements' or 'assume the obligations of membership' (ibid). After highlighting the importance of the new accession methodology adopted in February 2020 (which should 'enhance the accession process'), and the EUR 3.3 billion Covid assistance granted to the Western Balkan states at the May EU-Western Balkan summit (that was rather symbolic in comparison to the amounts given to EU member states for the same purpose),[16] the rest of the document mainly lists problems the Western Balkan aspirants for EU membership needed to solve. These were more or less copied from the Commission's previous reports without any specifics on what the Commission (or the EU in general) plans to do in assisting (apart from advising) the Western Balkan states to overcome these problems. Neither were targeted dates given for the resolution of these problems nor expected dates for opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia or closing negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia. The expectation that any significant acceleration of the accession process of any of the Western Balkan stateswill occur in the next year or two is very low, despite the recent formal opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The expectation that any of the current candidates and potential candidates for EU membership will join the EU in the foreseeable future hardly exists.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, and more recently of war in Ukraine, have further increased the EU's continuous preoccupation with internal issues[17] but its lack of genuine interestin effectively assisting the Western Balkan states to overcome their internal problems and accede to the EU was very strong much before the emergence of COVID-19. The EU's prioritisation of its political stability/security interests in the region has neither improved the general political stability in the region nor contributed to successful completion of state-building projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Moreover, such an approach has negatively affected the democratisation processes in most Western Balkan states and has contributed to the reverse trends in functioning of solidly developed democratic institutions in these states throughout the 2000s. Unlike the ECE, Baltic and Balkan states of Bulgaria and Romania whose post-communist peaceful development, democratisation and economic marketization the EU primarily supported and secured through the enlargement process and accession negotiations, the EU has tried to politically stabilise the Western Balkans without paying much attention to their internal democratisation and even less so to providing their peoples and states with a real and realistic pathway to EU membership. No wonder that it has failed to either politically stabilise the region or considerably support its democratic consolidation and advance towards EU membership.

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[16] In fact, half of this 3.3 billion was assistance in 'preferential loans' from the EBRD and the other half of real aid was four times less than Croatia alone was granted from the EU's (immediate relief) Covid package of EUR 750 billion adopted in July 2020 (see European Commission.2020b).

[17] After Brexit, these were primarily related to the question of the future and modes of its internal cohesiveness and the distribution of Covid assistance, and nowadays they are focussed on imposing and coordinating sanctions against Russia and managing their negative effects on the member states' economies.

The recently granted EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and the final opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia send encouraging signals, but they must not be perceived with much optimism. It is very hard to believe that these developments will give any strong impetus to the EU's eastern enlargement and to the Western Balkans' 'EU future' in particular. North Macedonia's 17-year long period of waiting to open accession negotiations, Montenegro's and Serbia's extraordinarily long accession negotiations (so far 10 and 8 years respectively) and, above all, the EU's respectively 30 and 14 years long history of unsuccessfully trying to build functioning B-H and Kosovo states and politically stabilise the region do not give good grounds for optimism.

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