

The EU's *raison d'état* in the Western Balkans: Can the new enlargement methodology help?

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Abstract: By employing the concept of *raison d'état*, the article questions the European Union's role in the so-called Western Balkan region. While the region continues to be covered by the EU's enlargement policy, we argue that the policy has been in paralysis. We explore whether the heightened geopolitical tensions in Europe have brought the EU to a turning point at which it would use its enlargement policy decisively to pursue its strategic interests in the region. We start with a theoretical discussion of *raison d'état* and its instrumentalization in the context of the European Union as a non-state actor. Then, we use the conceptual benchmarks of the *raison d'état* to analyze its empirical implementation through the EU's relations with Western Balkan countries. We explore the EU's available enlargement policy tools and the diverging positions within the EU towards enlargement. We pay special attention to the "New enlargement methodology" devised by the Commission in 2019. We argue that despite the Commission's efforts to promote the EU's common interest in the region framed in a geopolitical narrative, the diverging national interests still preclude the EU from aggregating its own and pursuing its *raison d'état* towards the region. The "new methodology" does nothing to overcome this situation. What is more, by insisting on a "stronger political steer" and by further facilitating the reversal of the accession process, the document pushes the Union further away from a common ground regarding the enlargement.

Keywords: *raison d'état*, Western Balkans, EU enlargement, geopolitics, European perspective, new enlargement methodology.

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Introduction

This paper examines the EU – Western Balkans relations through the prism of *raison d'état*. While being aware of the provocative nature of this approach, we do not tend to argue for the existence of EU *raison d'état*. Instead, we want to take advantage of the concept's explanatory potential to identify the place of the EU-Western Balkans relations in the EU's priority list and the EU's capacity to act according to these priorities.

Our research interest was sparked by our uncertainty about the role and place of enlargement policy in the hierarchy of EU priorities. On many occasions, the EU reiterated its commitment to the Western Balkans region's "European perspective." Still, at the same time, the enlargement process has been in an obvious impasse, with alternative proposals proliferating recently. Also, the (potential) enlargement to the Western Balkans would be (geo)political rather than economic, reflecting the EU's repeatedly stated interests in the region. Geopolitical reasoning behind the possible EU's decision to enlarge more promptly has become ever more present since the strategic competition between the EU and other global actors (i.e., Russia, China, or Turkey) intensified in the region. In that context, we raise the question of whether the enlargement would be a *raison d'état* of the European Union since it is often indicated as a principal reason for action in EU officials' statements.

We have created a two-tier methodological sequence. Firstly, based on deductive reasoning, we frame the explanatory potential of the concept of *raison d'état*. Secondly, based on an overview of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans and inductive critical analysis of the new EU methodology, we will be able to juxtapose the framed *raison d'état* benchmarks with our findings and thus assign the place of EU enlargement in the hierarchy of EU priorities. The paper is divided into two parts. The first one is devoted to the theoretical problem of *raison d'état* and its instrumentalization in the context of our research. The second part will analyze its empirical implementation through the EU's enlargement policy and its relations with the Balkan countries. The EU enlargement policy has long been considered one of its major foreign policy instruments, used for practicing its soft power with its nearest neighbors and for reshaping Europe's geopolitical scenery, spreading peace and security (Moravcsik 2010, 91, 92, 93). Once a successful instrument, the enlargement policy no longer fits the purpose, even though it would be expected to deliver a similar result in a contemporary era of heightened geopolitical tensions. We examine whether this new geopolitical reality that culminated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine would be a sufficient justification for a potential EU decision to fast-track the

Western Balkans to enlargement to safeguard its primary interests in the region – security and stability. In addition, we discuss whether the EU has the capacity to act in such a way, keeping in mind the available policy tools and diverging positions of the EU member states towards enlargement.

Conceptualizing *raison d'état*

While discussing the various methodological approaches for our research, we decided to rest on the logic applied by Zygmunt Bauman (2007) in his inspiring “Consuming life”. Bauman relies on Max Weber’s models as “indispensable for any understanding, and indeed for the very awareness of the similarities and differences, connections and discontinuities that hide behind the confusing variety of experience (2007, 24). Weber’s ‘ideal types’, as Bauman puts it aptly, “(if properly constructed) are useful, and also indispensable, cognitive tools even if (or perhaps because) they deliberately throw light on certain aspects of described social reality while leaving in the shade some other aspects considered to be of lesser or only random relevance to the essential, necessary traits of a particular form of life. ‘Ideal types’ are not descriptions of reality: they are the tools used to analyze it. They are good for thinking; or, arguably though paradoxically, despite their abstract nature they make empirical social reality, as available to experience, describable (Bauman 2007, 27).”

While we have a far less ambitious goal than creating an ideal model of *raison d'état*, we want to follow this Weberian logic and frame *raison d'état* benchmarks against which we can compare the EU enlargement policy. As Koenig-Archibugi (2004, 149), we also acknowledge the *raison d'état* usefulness as an interpretative lens about European integration.

The raison d'état benchmarks

The term *raison d'état* is strongly associated with the power of the state. The modern term (Rzegocki 2021) evolved with the time from the classical association with the absolutist ruler, associated with N. Machiavelli, G. Botero, or C. Le Bret, to the acknowledgment of the contemporary pluralist form of state organization. Thus, it has become more complex and, in a sense, vague as it is no longer an emanation of a monarch’s will but a sublime expression of polity’s superior priorities. Not only do states and polities need to act according to democratic principles within their own communities, but they also need to consider the universally accepted

international norms of behavior in a contemporary globalized world when pursuing their national or community interests. As Burchill (2005, 28) argues, “they have obligations to humanity which override their national concerns”. Despite these modern-era limitations, states and polities still make efforts to arrange their foreign policy actions in autonomous way following their defined interests.

The comprehensive approach to the definition of *raison d'état*, taken by Joanna Sanecka-Tuczyńska (2015), aims at elucidating the specific features of the term from theoretical and methodological perspectives, provided us with a sufficiently rich toolbox from which we extract the needed *raison d'état* benchmarks.

Firstly, while it is a state-centric category, we recognize the specificity of the EU context. Whereas the EU is not a state, it aspires to be treated as such in rhetorical and political terms. Simultaneously, the European institutions already possess a decision-making autonomy, even if flawed. Whereas in the context of enlargement policy, the final decision rests with the member states, the European Commission has the capacity to produce political dynamics. Hence, leaving aside the endless debate about the nature of the EU, the application of the *raison d'état* can provide a constant cognitive perspective. Secondly, following Józef Kukułka's (2000, 222) argument, *raison d'état* includes the state's primary, superior, most important or universal interests. This statement remains at the center of our research, while this claim is also our research question. To explore whether the EU enlargement policy contains the features of *raison d'état* and for the sake of terminological clarity, we will treat the EU as a political system (Hix 1999) willing and capable of setting its own foreign policy priorities, defining its interests and taking decisions that affect both its own and other, third-party subjects.

Following Sanecka-Tuczyńska (2015), we rely on the ascertainments that: (1) *raison d'état* specifies the hierarchy of political objectives and means of achieving them, including those that cannot be negotiated with foreign entities. (2) It constitutes permanent and overriding interests and is implemented in an uncompromising way (2015, 52-54). Finally, (3) the presupposition that the term itself is associated with legal and moral relativism, namely, that in the name of *raison d'état*, it is admissible to violate laws and can serve as a moral justification (2015, 56).

EU enlargement as a raison d'état

The enlargement is an intrinsic part of European integration. The sole idea of European unification evolving throughout the centuries relies on its regional/continental inclusiveness. Even if often envisaged as a successful formula against external threats, it also contained hope for the peaceful settlement of

European disputes and tensions. Within the ideas on United Europe, meticulously collected by Kazimierz Łastawski (2011), of kings, scholars, intellectuals, revolutionaries, and politicians, two indispensable elements endure: the hope for a unified polity and a rally around shared rules.

Whereas these ideas differed profoundly in terms of geographical outreach, proposed structure, dominant powers, or reasons for unification, they all contained the spark of hope for a more predictable and peaceful future based on mutual recognition and shared interests. Within the essence of these assumptions, the ideas of European integration developed in the aftermath of World War II.

The inception of the integration process with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community was grounded in the open-access model. At least in principle, every European state has the right to join. (Emmert and Petrović 2014, 1350) Ever since the ECSC, the following treaties expanding the European integration process reconfirmed and encouraged the process of enlargement. As art. 49 of the Treaty on the European Union states, “Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union (TEU 2016, Article 49).”

Within the last seventy years, the enlargement has become an indispensable part of the integration with a solid experience. The need to draw clear lines of who and when can become a member appeared already in the early 1960s in the relations with the south European authoritarian regimes. De Gaulle’s obstruction of the UK membership framed the habit of reconciliation of national and integration priorities in the relations with third countries. The membership of Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the 1980s underlined the unanticipated democratizing role of the accession process. The end of the Cold War and the Central and Eastern European countries’ (CEECs) quest for membership provided a unique opportunity to unify the whole continent around a shared vision. At the same time, the enlargement faced the unprecedented challenge of simultaneous political, economic and social democratization and adjustment to EU’s *acquis*, as well as Europeanization of norms, habits, and social organization. This task went way beyond the enlargement’s preliminary role. This expanding nature of the EU enlargement went beyond the narrow process of accession to a complex process of interaction with external players and with internal implications, for the integration process itself has become the *raison d’être* of the EU (CJEU Opinion 2/13, para. 173). Even if we accept that the EU is not a state and still resembles Jaques Delors’s “unidentified political object” (CVCE n.d.) or, as Simon Hix (1999) sees it, a stateless political system, the enlargement constitutes the *raison d’état* of the EU.

EU enlargement policy and geopolitical rivalry

As Barbara Lippert (2021) argues, the EU “is predisposed to enlargement by its treaties (Art. 49 TEU), history (seven enlargement rounds) and political ambition (Global Strategy)”. Since the end of the Cold War, the EU enlargement policy turned into a goal and a major foreign policy tool that the EU has been using to exert influence in its nearest vicinity (Moravcsik 2010; Sedelmeier 2015, 411). By mixing conditionality and financial and technical assistance, the EU sought to transform the former eastern bloc countries (some of which had just gained their independence from the Soviet Union) into democracies and market economies. This transformation was regarded as a precondition to peace and security in Europe (European Council 2003). Thus, enlargement has had the objective of reshaping political order in Europe (Sjursen and Smith 2004, 126-127). Judging by the fact that twelve countries became EU members in 2004 and 2007, it could be assumed that the EU’s endeavor was relatively successful. The enlargement served the economic and geopolitical interests of both the “old” and “new” member states as it expanded the internal market and increased security and stability in Europe (Vachudova 2014, 122; 2019, 65). After accession, these countries were considered out of Russia’s zone of influence.

However, the 2004 and 2007 enlargements left the EU’s and Russia’s new common neighborhood in limbo and thus a playing field for both sides interests’ competition. Consequently, the EU framed its “renewed consensus on enlargement” of 2006. It rested on four Cs principles. The first would be consolidation, meaning avoiding new political commitments to European non-candidate countries, mainly aiming at the countries later embraced by the Eastern Partnership. The second principle was conditionality, which elevated the Copenhagen criteria to a quasi-constitutional principle. The third one, communication, to shore up public support (Lippert 2021) and the fourth one – the capacity of the EU to enlarge (Council 2007). Within the European Neighborhood Policy, the EU started promoting its European Partnership approach in 2008. Russia, on the other hand, sought to widen its Eurasian Union to the region once covered by Soviet influence (DeBardeleben 2013).

Similar geopolitical tensions started to unfold in the Balkans, where the EU initiated its Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) in 1999 with the view to influence the economic, political, and institutional processes in the region and eventually integrate these countries. At the same time, Russia pursued its own economic and political interests – in some of the region’s countries more successfully than in others. For some time, the two global actors tolerated each other’s presence. However, the geopolitical and geo-economic competition has

become less friendly after the financial crisis hit the EU in 2008. This one and the crises that followed (e.g., Ukraine in 2014, refugee crisis in 2015, Brexit) pushed the EU to deal more with its own domestic problems and neglect the Balkan enlargement countries (Panagiotou 2020), leaving the empty space to be filled with the influence of other global actors, such as China and Russia.

The trend peaked after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The geopolitical tensions in the Balkans gained more dramatic tones with the reemerging concerns about destabilization in the region, pushing the EU to double its forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR 2022). For the Balkan countries, “doing business” simultaneously with the EU and Russia became nearly impossible. The pressure has been felt particularly in Serbia due to the country’s close ties with Russia. The EU started insisting more strongly on aligning the country’s foreign policy with the EU’s position towards Russia and its several packages of sanctions (European Council 2022). Immediately after the war started, Ukraine and two other countries, Georgia and Moldova, filed their official EU membership applications, forcing the EU and its member states to take positions on further enlargements.

Thus, the EU enlargement policy was brought to a turning point. The expectations have risen that the EU should take decisive steps. From this point further, two broad options could be imagined. The EU could continue indefinitely keeping the Balkan countries in the enlargement process by endlessly reiterating their “European perspective,” or it could once again use its enlargement policy decisively as a tool for reshaping the continent’s geopolitical landscape. To answer this dilemma, we look more deeply into the approach and the instruments that the EU has been developing in its relations with the Balkan countries, and we critically analyze the suitability of the latest changes made to its enlargement methodology.

EU enlargement policy governance

Before we start our analysis of the EU’s policy tools in its relations with the Western Balkans, it is important to emphasize the evolving and complex nature of the enlargement policy since we consider it to be determining the Union’s capacity to engage decisively in the region. The EU enlargement policy has always been intergovernmental despite the formal roles envisaged for the supranational institutions, the Commission and later the European Parliament. Over time, as a consequence of its heightened intricacy combined with the so called “enlargement fatigue”, the enlargement policy in practice came to represent a case of an “intensive intergovernmentalism” (Wallace and Reh 2015, 109-111). Although the (supranational) Commission closely monitors the process, recommends measures,

or gives opinions on the candidates' progress, and it influenced largely the contents of enlargement conditionality, the (intergovernmental) Council takes decisions unanimously on each, even the minor step of the process. It decides whether to grant a country a candidate status, start and end accession negotiations, adopt negotiating frameworks, open negotiating clusters (earlier chapters) with or without setting the opening (sometimes even interim) and closing benchmarks, etc. There are many steps upon which all the EU member states need to agree; in other words, many veto points are on the way toward EU accession. Needless to say, with 27 member states (28 before Brexit), decision-making has become increasingly difficult, and finding common ground on further enlargements has become close to impossible. Thus, contrary to Wallace and Reh's findings that "intensive intergovernmentalism" has been a "vehicle towards more extensive cooperation" (2015, 110) in some policy areas, the enlargement policy so far produced mixed outcomes.

Over time, the enlargement policy has become increasingly complex, developing from a policy with almost no rules and conditions back in the 1960s to one with a highly complicated procedure and a huge set of very detailed criteria to be met by aspiring candidates. New conditions and procedures have been added during the rich experience of several enlargement waves. Still, the most visible changes have happened during the so-called "big bang" enlargement process between the early 1990s and 2004. Due to considerable differences between the "old" and "new" Europe, the EU had to engage in a huge transformational endeavor using the enlargement perspective as its main tool (Commission 1992: 9-10, 18-20). Thus, in order to reshape the central and eastern parts of the continent, the EU had to build up its own instruments simultaneously, so the EU formulated the enlargement criteria for the first time. The so-called Copenhagen criteria were set to achieve in the candidate countries the "...stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy ... the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union" as well as the "ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union" (European Council 1993).

With the enlargement agenda spreading to the countries of former Yugoslavia, the policy has become even more complex. The enlargement strategy and procedure have changed on several occasions, each time becoming harder to comprehend. The conditions for enlargement piled over time, becoming ever more detailed and technical, not contributing to the speedy progress of the (potential) candidates. The Commission had a prominent role in these

modifications, playing its part in shifting the accent from the goal of membership to the process as such (Anastasakis 2008). Some observers noted the “link between the declining enthusiasm for enlargement and the growing entrepreneurship of the Commission” (Gateva 2015,157).

EU enlargement policy and the Western Balkans

Since 1999, the EU enlargement policy encompassed the region that became known as the Western Balkans. The name has been used to denote countries emerging from former Yugoslavia (Socialist Federal Republic – SFRY), adding Albania but skipping Slovenia since the country was already considered for membership with the CEECs. A unique approach to the region was developed – the Stabilization and Association Process – to account for the specificities of the post-conflict region and its weak states. This new approach that the Commission proposed in its 1999 Communication was supposed to replace the so-called Regional approach and contribute to the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe (Commission 1999). Claiming that the EU was facing “geopolitical challenges requiring the development of new policies, and instruments, towards a group of countries,” the document emphasized both the EU’s responsibility and interest in the region’s immediate stabilization and integration in the longer term (*ibid.*).

Thus, in the Commission’s view, what the EU had to do to serve its interests was to adopt the SAP that opened the way for the region’s EU-assisted incremental transformation and integration. The Commission’s initiative arrived in the immediate Yugoslav post-conflict period, while the Kosovo conflict was still fresh in the EU leaders’ minds, providing for the right geopolitical moment and enabling the EU member states to agree to tie the region closer to the EU. This had to be done even though no less than 13 countries were already queuing for EU membership at that time, and the EU still had to finish its internal reforms to accommodate enlargement started in 1997/1999 with the Treaty of Amsterdam.

At its meeting at Santa Maria de Feira in 2000 (under the agenda heading “External Relations,” not “Enlargement”), the European Council endorsed the SAP, declared that all the Western Balkan countries are considered potential candidates for EU membership, and proposed holding of a joint EU-WB summit (European Council 2000). At the EU-WBs summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, in an atmosphere of optimism created after the signing of accession treaties with ten candidates at the time (eight CEECs and Malta and Cyprus), the EU leaders expressed their

“unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries” (Council EU 2003).

However, the European perspective for the WBs was not that bright. On the road towards EU membership stood not only numerous EU conditions they had to fulfill but many domestic and regional issues these countries had to face (weak economies still in transition, state-building, identity and territorial issues, high levels of corruption and organized crime, to name only a few). In addition, the EU, on its side, had to deal with its own absorption capacity, which became “an important consideration in the general interest of ... the Union” emphasized at the Copenhagen summit ten years earlier (European Council 1993). By the time of Bulgarian and Romanian accession in 2007, the “enlargement fatigue” spread, and concerns about the EU’s capacity to integrate new members started to grow (Börzel, Dimitrova and Schimmelfennig 2017, 157-158). In addition to the slow “digestion” of the previous “big bang” enlargement, the enlargement fatigue has been additionally enhanced by the subsequent crises that have been hitting the EU since 2008 bringing the process to a “political paralysis” (Ferreiro-Turrion 2015, 24) or even apt for a ‘life support’ (O’Brennan 2014, 223).

Despite the apparent enlargement paralysis, the EU’s and many member states’ positions officially and declaratively remained pro-enlargement. On so many occasions, officials of both the EU institutions and the member states reiterated their support for the “European perspective” for the Western Balkans, although nobody dared to promise the exact entry dates. In other words, among the EU member states, there has been no consensus on officially dropping the enlargement agenda for the Western Balkans, but neither on speeding up the process that obviously got into some sort of a crisis. The fatigue created the environment in which individual member states have been silently allowed to block the enlargement process upon bilateral issues with specific candidate countries pursuing their own national interests under the umbrella of conditionality policy, which has been observed in the academic literature as “nationalisation” of the enlargement policy (Hillion 2015, 24). The Greek-North Macedonia name issue was just one case in point. Other member states, like France, blocked the enlargement process based on the general concerns about the Union’s internal coherence and unity and offered ideas for reforming the enlargement agenda. Recently, Bulgaria saw the prospective beginning of the negotiation process as a chance to exert pressure in order to resolve bilateral historical and identity issues. So far, the Council of the EU has managed to reach a consensus only on the Commission’s proposal to (vaguely) modify the accession negotiations methodology but not to change the existing logic of enlargement strategy substantially, even though this might have been the original idea of France

who initiated the change in 2019 after president Macron blocked North Macedonia's and Albania's start of accession negotiations.

The intensification of the war in Ukraine since 2022 has deepened the West-Russian divisions, bringing to the geopolitical necessity of mitigating the Russian power and influence in the WBs. The new geopolitical situation increased the need to tie the region closer to the EU immediately, but there has been no clear idea on how to do it. While some observers argue for either preserving the current mode or speeding the EU enlargement to the region as a whole (European Movement Serbia 2022), others propose the means different than the (failed) enlargement policy. French proposal of a "European political community" (Council 2022a) and the similar Charles Michel's offer of a "European geopolitical community" presented in May 2022 (European Western Balkans 2022) represent the initiatives that should run in parallel if not as an alternative to the enlargement process. President Macron argued for the abandonment of enlargement as a Union's geopolitical tool because it is contrary to preserving the EU's internal unity. In his words, "We have ... the historic duty, not to do what we have always done and say the only solution is accession ... but rather to open up a historic reflection commensurate with the events we are experiencing, on the organization of our continent" (Council 2022a). When it comes to enlargement, both Macron and Michel advocate for a reformed enlargement approach that does not entail granting full membership rights to the current candidates. France has been openly pursuing counter-accession program visible in many official statements and documents. Most notably, the position is present in Emmanuel Macron's idea of a "staged accession" (Politico 2019) instead of full membership, which would not interfere with his "sovereignty agenda" for the EU (Council 2022b). The proposal for a "renewed approach to the accession process" through a "staged accession" was circulated in a non-paper (Politico 2019) and the Commission was tasked with developing a detailed plan.

"New enlargement methodology"
– what was feasible but not what had to be done

In February 2020, the Commission presented its proposal "Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans," claiming it to be a blueprint for a more dynamic, predictable, credible process with a stronger political steer (European Commission 2020). Coming after President Macron blocked further accession process in 2019 and subsequently proposed a change of the enlargement approach, the Commission's proposal was supposed to work as a damage control tool and get the enlargement process back on track.

The “new enlargement methodology”, as it quickly came to be known, was the Commission’s attempt to reconcile the diverging member states’ national interests with the EU’s indisputable general interest in stabilizing the region, preserving the EU’s soft power, and saving the enlargement policy from disgrace. However, the result is insufficient and at risk of underperforming since the Commission did not do what had to be done (i.e., substantially change the approach towards WBs), but did what it considered possible at the moment and acceptable to many.

At the very beginning of the document, by putting the EU’s strategic interest in the region to the fore, the Commission tries to set the common ground and remind the member states of the reasons for engaging with the Western Balkans:

“This firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union’s very own political, security and economic interest. In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, it remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity.”... “Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU’s credibility, for the EU’ success and for the EU’s influence in the region and beyond – especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition.” (European Commission 2020; emphasis in the original)

Continuing with its “strategic” discourse, the Commission (2020) points out the importance of tackling a “malign third country influence” in the region, thus emphasizing one of the EU’s biggest common concerns.

In the remaining part of this six-pager, the Commission sets the main aims of the “new methodology” and some general ideas on how to reach them. Most of these ideas are not really new (Kovačević 2020) nor precisely developed, and the existing association/accession framework has already allowed for most of the proposed solutions to be practiced. For example, to return the credibility to the process, the Commission restates the obvious – the necessity for the candidates to fulfill obligations and the need for the EU and the member states to move forward with the accession process after the candidates meet the objective criteria. Another emphasis on the so-called negotiating fundamentals (the rule of law, democratic institutions, regional cooperation...) is made, and the dependency of closure of any of the negotiating chapters upon the progress in these areas repeated, which has been the rule applicable for several years already. The Commission calls for stronger political steering of the process and argues for the necessity of more frequent high-level meetings. However, the Commission did not propose any new venues for dialogue but called for the more frequent use of

the existing fora, such as the EU-Western Balkans summits or the Stabilization and Association Councils provided for in the Stabilization and Association Agreements with the WB countries.

According to the Commission's proposal, the enlargement policy remains in a unanimous voting regime as a general rule. Nevertheless, whereas the progress of a country in the accession process continues to be endorsed unanimously, the possible reversal of the process (principle of reversibility) would be decided through a simplified procedure, namely the reverse qualified majority vote (European Commission 2020). In this way, the Commission makes it easier to block the process of enlargement than to push it forward, thus pleasing the enlargement-skeptic member states.

The most visible, although not substantial change, was grouping the 35 negotiating chapters into six "thematic clusters" aiming at an arguably more dynamic process providing for opening a whole cluster instead of individual chapters. However, the new solution offers no guarantee that the process will be speeded-up since the number of opening benchmarks to be fulfilled by a country can still remain the same despite organizing them in clusters. This is precisely the case with the Serbian and Montenegrin accession process, as the EU negotiating framework with these countries was kept unchanged despite the new methodology.

Although the aim was to work out a plan based on Macron's non-paper (Politico 2019), the Commission's proposal differs on a couple of important points. In contrast to Macron's approach, the Commission's proposal remains within the confines of the current enlargement strategy in two important respects. First, the Commission aims to preserve the "Enlargement perspective" not only by keeping up with the full membership as an endpoint but also by insisting on keeping the accession negotiations with the countries that already started these (i.e., Montenegro and Serbia) within the existing negotiating frameworks. This is understandable because new negotiating frameworks would have to be adopted by the Council unanimously and might be another opportunity for dissent among the EU member states. Second, by "clustering" the negotiations process, the Commission's proposal dilutes Macron's idea of a "staged accession" that envisages an exact sequence of accession steps and participation of a candidate country in certain EU programs and policies before full accession. The Commission (2020) also mentions the opportunity of "'phasing-in' to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes" for countries achieving the agreed priorities. But participation would be a reward on their otherwise unchanged EU integration path and not a part of their membership in a defined accession stage that could lock the country in-between the associated and full membership status indefinitely.

Conclusions

Our research confirms the dominant enlargement rhetoric of the European Commission, which has been actively promoting the EU's common interest in the Balkans. This interest has been framed in strategic, geopolitical terms emphasizing the Union's security and stabilizing concerns and the need for political dominance competition in the region with other global actors. Highlighting the EU's geopolitical interests has become more prominent as the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans has come to a stall. The Commission has used it to mobilize the EU member states' interest in further enlargement. In a new geopolitical context, we explored whether the EU was able to act following its primary interests, in other words, to pursue further enlargement that would be justified by its interest in an overall stabilization of the region. Our conclusion is obviously negative. However, our research provides a much more variegated picture of the EU approach toward the region. While some of the findings seem obvious, others require a second thought.

Following our benchmarks, *raison d'état* includes primary, superior, most important, or universal interests of the state. In the case of the EU, it would mean a primary interest of the political system (*raison du regime politique*), transcending all other, first of all, national interests. Until recently, the EU enlargement was treated as a policy with no alternative and as a cure to all political, security, or economic problems. After its experience-based modifications, it has become a piece of institutionalized machinery grounded in a shared consensus by all stakeholders, countries, and EU institutions alike. Whereas disruptions are possible regarding the member states' veto power, the policy principles, logic, and application were not questioned. Even more, as the example of the "New Methodology" revealed, changes focus on nuances in its application rather than profoundly challenge the logic of enlargement. In this sense, the policy remains officially high in the hierarchy of political objectives of the EU.

The second part of our first benchmark is more questionable since the question of non-negotiability in the EU context is more complex. On the one hand, the enlargement policy's content, logic, and structure are not negotiable with foreign entities. The EU does not make concessions in its foreign policy but draws rather clear lines of its application horizon through the existence of different approaches, e.g., the European Neighborhood Policy. This division was clear until February 24, 2022, when the next phase of the Russian aggression in Ukraine pushed Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to submit official applications for membership, thus blurring the line between neighborhood and enlargement policies.

Simultaneously, negotiations are an indispensable feature of the enlargement policy both with candidate countries and within the decision-making process in the EU. However, these technical dimensions of policy making do not question the enlargement process's strategic importance and logic. Still, we cannot ignore the practical implications of the member states' vetoes, which impact the reliance and effectiveness of the enlargement policy and the EU itself. To be able to aggregate and pursue its primary interest, a political community should be able to speak with one voice (Burchill 2005, 13). Hence, we identify a structural problem within the enlargement policy stemming from the "constitutional" specificity of the European Union that undermines its *raison d'état*.

This conclusion has an impact on our second benchmark related to the implementation in an uncompromised way. Indeed, the process is applied in an uncompromised way towards the candidate countries to the extent that there is a dominant argument about the piling of requirements for every next candidate. However, this external determination is not supported by internal consistency. The internal disagreements and veto determine the pace and nature of the "enlargement fatigue" used as an excuse for the EU's inconsistent approach.

Our third benchmark, legal and moral relativism, reveals a deep misfit with the EU enlargement policy. The evolution of the EU enlargement requirements and the mastering of its institutional supervisory mechanisms lead to a situation contrary to the enlargement *per se*. The conditional nature of the enlargement and the cumulated experience followed by increased requirements were aptly identified by Othon Anastasakis (2008, 365) as shifting the accent from the goal to the road. In the EU context, the multifaceted reasons for this shift (enlargement fatigue, internal crises, candidate states' reluctance to conduct necessary reforms, or internal political matters) and their tangible impact on the enlargement policy strip the latter of its *raison d'état* position.

In the case of our research, if we accept that the EU's primary interest is to preserve security and stability in the WBs (its courtyard), making a decision to fast-track the enlargement to the whole region would be an action justified on the basis of the currently unstable geopolitical situation. That would go against the rules and procedures of the enlargement policy since it would mean accepting countries that do not fulfill all of the criteria, but it could be justified on the basis of an urgent geopolitical situation. At the same time, despite the EU's official enlargement agenda towards the WBs set more than two decades ago and almost an emergency geopolitical situation created with the war in Ukraine, the EU enlargement policy remains in paralysis while alternative offers (e.g., European (geo)political community) appear. Also, the new methodology does nothing to overcome this situation. What is more, by insisting on a "stronger political steer" in the document

and by making it easier to reverse the process than to push it forward, the Commission drives the Union further away from a common ground regarding the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans. Even if the task of the Commission was to provide for something new, invigorating, and unifying at a moment when many member states were not willing to move away from the status quo, and some were even arguing for alternatives to full accession, the outcome was a clear expression of the widespread enlargement fatigue rather than an instrument for overcoming it. Since we see not only stable but even further elevation of the accession criteria, it is obvious that the policy is exposed to a complex set of interactions way beyond the primary geopolitical or geostrategic goals.

The *raison d'état* test tells us that despite the EU rhetoric, the enlargement is not a primary interest of the EU. The reasons for that are manifold, but most important being the diverging national and institutional interests combined with the EU's complex decision-making process and the dominant role of political criteria, which served not only as a tool for rapprochement with the candidate states but also as a mechanism to keep them at a distance.

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**RAISON D'ÉTAT EVROPSKE UNIJE NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU:
DA LI JE NOVA METODOLOGIJA PROŠIRENJA OD POMOĆI?**

Apstrakt: Koristeći se konceptom *raison d'état*, u članku se preispituje uloga Evropske unije u regionu poznatom kao Zapadni Balkan. Iako se još uvek primenjuje na ovaj region, politika proširenja je u stanju paralize. U članku se ispituje da li su uvećane geopolitičke tenzije u Evropi dovele EU do prekretnice na kojoj će svoju politiku proširenja iskoristiti za odlučno ostvarivanje svojih interesa u ovom regionu. Članak počinje teorijskom analizom koncepta *raison d'état* i njegove upotrebe u istraživanju delovanja Evropske unije kao nedržavnog aktera. Zatim, koristimo se konceptualnim merilima pojma *raison d'état* kako bismo analizirali njegovu empirijsku primenu u odnosima EU sa zemljama Zapadnog Balkana, posmatrajući instrumente politike proširenja dostupne Uniji i divergentne pozicije unutar EU prema pitanju proširenja. Posebna pažnja posvećena je "novoj metodologiji proširenja" koju je razvila Komisija 2019. godine. U članku se tvrdi da uprkos naporima Komisije da, koristeći se geopolitičkim narativom, promovise zajednički interes EU u regionu, divergentni nacionalni interesi i dalje onemogućavaju EU u agregaciji sopstvenog interesa i sprovođenju svog *raison d'état* u ovom regionu. "Nova metodologija" ne donosi ništa čime bi se prevazišla ova situacija. Štaviše, insistiranjem na "snažnijem političkom vođenju" i daljem proceduralnom olakšavanju kočenja procesa pristupanja, dokument udaljava Uniju od mogućeg zajedničkog stava u vezi sa proširenjem.

Ključne reči: *raison d'état*, Zapadni Balkan, proširenje EU, geopolitika, Evropska perspektiva, nova metodologija proširenja.