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LEAVING STABILOCRACY BEHIND

RETHINKING THE FRENCH APPROACH
TO THE WESTERN BALKANS



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The spring elections have resulted in regime continuity in both France and Serbia. President Macron has secured the second term with a [convincing victory](#) in the second round against the archrival Marine Le Pen. Simultaneously, President Vucic has stroke another [landslide victory](#) in the first round of the elections, with his Progressive Party holding on to power although losing absolute majority in the Parliament for the first time since 2014. However, the political landscape has changed radically since their previous victories five years ago. The war in Ukraine has shifted the focus of the European Union toward geopolitics, pushing the Western Balkans, seemingly forgotten, back on the European agenda. The threats of instability and the rising influence of third powers in the region have rung the alarm in the new global context, opening the floor for the discussion on how to revamp the European strategy which has been largely inadequate for the past decade.

In contrast to previous periods in which France had a more passive approach and appeared mostly indifferent to the developments in the Western Balkans, during the first term of Macron's presidency the official Paris has retaken a major role on the regional stage. As part of his ambition to become the political leader of Europe, Macron has launched several initiatives attempting to modify the European enlargement policy. Based on the consequences of these initiatives, we can conclude that the goal was to stop the enlargement process for a foreseeable future, substituting it with an economic and political presence that would ensure the stability of the region within the European sphere of influence. For this purpose, Macron was more than ready to collaborate with autocratic regimes such as the one in Serbia which he believed to be crucial for keeping the Western Balkans relatively stable. This strategy has contributed to the region steadily becoming both less secure and less democratic, eroding the once unquestionable European credibility and influence. The tectonic shifts we are witnessing on the European continent should be a wake-up call to critically evaluate and rethink the French policy in the Western Balkans, including a U-turn in the relationship with the current regime in Belgrade.

The French return to the Western Balkans?

The French approach to the Western Balkans during Macron's first Presidential term would be best described as mimicking proactiveness. Several seemingly bold initiatives were put in motion, but the end goal was to preserve the current state of affairs and delay any progress in the accession process of the countries in the region. The main political motive driving this policy is avoiding political turmoil at home since the French public is widely considered not to be in favor of new accessions. Since taking the office in 2017, Macron has repeatedly stated that there will be no new members before the Union undergoes a deep internal reform. His firm stance culminated in October 2019, when France, together with the Netherlands, blocked the opening formal accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, a decision which sent a huge wave of disappointment throughout the region.

Simultaneously, Macron saw his stronger involvement in the enlargement process as a perfect opportunity for building the image of the European leader in the field of foreign policy, starting with restructuring relations with the Union's immediate neighborhood. To demonstrate his dedication to regional development and prove that the European perspective is still alive for the Western Balkans after the French veto, in November 2019, Macron launched the idea of a [new methodology for accession](#). Based on this proposition, the new methodology has introduced the grouping of negotiating chapters into clusters, awards for champions of reforms, and penalties for those countries who stand still or fall behind, including the reversibility of the process. This change was promoted as breathing a new life into the exhausted enlargement process. In truth, the new methodology is nothing more than a new packaging for the same technocratic process which does not resolve the main weaknesses of the accession process, keeping the focus on the *tick the box* approach instead of insisting on tangible reforms - basically, the prolongation of the status quo.

At the Conference on the future of Europe on May 9th, Macron has launched another idea, proposing forming of the [European Political Community](#) which would tie non-EU partners, including the Western Balkan countries, in closer political and security collaboration with the EU. Macron insists that the European Political Community should not be seen as an alternative, but rather an initiative complementary to the EU accession process, claiming that this new political organization would help create "a new space of political cooperation, of security, of cooperation in terms of energy, of transport and to invest in infrastructure where people could circulate". In practice, this idea would further deepen the stalemate in the enlargement by providing an excuse for prolonging the process, while allowing easier access to funds for governments that would not be conditioned by necessary reforms, especially when it comes to the rule of law standards, in exchange for geopolitical alignment.

How Vucic became Macron's closest ally in the region

Here is where the closeness with the regime in Belgrade comes into the equation. Vucic is the perfect ally for Macron's strategy in the Western Balkans. The democratic backsliding that Serbia is going through over the last decade provides a perfect excuse for the lack of progress in the accession of the whole region, as it feeds the negative perception of the French public, and provides arguments within debates in Brussels for prolonging the process. Ironically, the further away Serbia is getting from reaching necessary European standards, the more ideal partner it is becoming for Paris.

Furthermore, Belgrade is widely seen as the biggest potential stability-breaker in the region. Serbia has a major impact on destabilizing issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. Also, the influence of third countries, especially China, has been rapidly rising in recent years. Therefore, a widespread belief among European stakeholders is that the EU needs to keep Serbia within its sphere of influence even if it means turning a blind eye to the illiberal turn in the country. Macron can therefore easily claim that by keeping close relations with Vucic he is securing regional stability. Also, the transactional nature of bilateral relations between the two regimes opens up the possibility of negotiating lucrative deals for French companies with the government in Belgrade directly, some of which raise environmental concerns.

For the current regime in Serbia, Macron is perceived as a worthy heir to Angela Merkel's role as the external protector of stabilocracy. Much like Merkel, Macron has repeatedly praised the pace and ambition of reforms in Serbia during his meetings with President Vucic, stating that Serbia will be the [next country to join the European Union](#). This type of public endorsement is crucial for Vucic to maintain a smokescreen of the European support for the domestic public. On his behalf, Vucic is more than happy to support the illusion of progress on the EU path that Paris is trying to impose, as well as to publicly admire Macron, adding more weight to him in the EU diplomatic circles. In return, he expects the French government to be a sort of protector in the EU Serbia needs to mitigate any potential harsh critique or pressure from the EU institutions or other members on the state of democracy or the rule of law in the country. After the political change in Berlin last year, it seems that France has assumed the German position as the key ally of the Serbian regime in the West.

An important piece of the puzzle when it comes to the amicable bilateral relations between the incumbent regimes in France and Serbia are large-scale business ventures arranged during the last years. The French companies Alstom and Egis Rail will be partnering with the Chinese company Power China to [construct the Belgrade metro](#), a very lucrative project of strategic importance for the Serbian capital. French companies should deliver trains and electromechanical subsystems, while the Chinese company will perform construction works. In addition, according to the Serbian Minister of

Finance Sinisa Mali, an agreement was signed with the French government on providing financing of 454 million euros for the part that will be done by French companies.

Another big French investment in Serbia was [the 25-year concession agreement for Belgrade Airport](#) signed with the French company Vinci in December 2018. This deal has raised a lot of controversies as the Serbian government was accused of having decided to take over the management of the second-biggest airport in Nis because of the secret clause in the agreement with the French company to [limit the development of other airports in the country](#) so that they would not be able to compete with the Belgrade Airport in the market. Serbia has also been turning to France for armament. In 2019, Serbia purchased French [Mistral short-range homing air defense missiles](#). In addition, President Vucic announced in April that [Serbia is planning to purchase 12 new Dassault Rafale jets](#) early next year.

The consequences of supporting stabilocracy

In the recent years, it has become obvious that the EU policy of supporting stabilocracy has failed in the Western Balkans. The accession process has been in a stalemate for years, the regional security environment is deteriorating, and no major progress has been achieved in the rule of law reforms. Although most of the blame surely lies with the local political establishment, the European approach has provided perfect conditions for such developments. All of this has resulted in a serious crisis of credibility and deteriorating European influence in the region.

For the past few years, the security situation in the Western Balkans has been at its lowest point since the late 1990s. The ever-deepening institutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina has led to a situation in which those openly fearing new conflicts are increasingly heard, both in the country and the international community. The negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina have come to a complete standstill, while occasional incidents between Kosovo special police forces and the Serbian population in northern Kosovo have brought the situation on the ground to the brink of conflict. By emphasizing the idea of the creation of a Serbian World, the regime in Belgrade has significantly radicalized its rhetoric and awakened the specters of the recent past across the region. The political situation in Montenegro has been unstable ever since the long-awaited regime change in 2020, often spilling over to interethnic tensions. The war in Ukraine has further deepened the tensions in the region, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where additional EUFOR troops were deployed in the first days of Russia's aggression.

Most countries of the region have made little to no progress when it comes to crucially important issues such as the rule of law, fight against organized crime and solidifying democratic institutions. Reforms are often cosmetic, designed merely to tick the boxes in the technocratic accession process. For many years, the EU has been the main catalyst and a strong external driver of these reforms. However, with the accession prospects progressively declining, there are no real incentives for regimes to pursue necessary reforms, and the pressure from citizens on their governments is fading. As Vesela Tscherneva, Deputy Director of ECFR aptly puts it, "the European Union's current enlargement policy is defective and is largely based on the mutual exchange of hypocrisy - the bloc pretends to enlarge and Western Balkans countries pretend to reform." Nowhere is this more true than in Serbia, where the scope of democratic backsliding has reached the level of a [captured state](#).

With the accession turning into a seemingly never-ending process, the impaired credibility has led to the EU's influence over the region being increasingly challenged. Nothing rings hollow more than the unfulfilled promise that hard concessions eventually pay off. The decision not to grant the pledged candidate status to North Macedonia, despite very difficult decisions that were made to solve bilateral issues with Greece and

Bulgaria, including the change of the country's name, has generated major disappointment and resentment in the whole region. The support for stabilocrats is depleting the support for the EU in the most pro-European parts of societies. Many of those citizens feel disillusioned with the idea of the EU as a value-driven actor and believe that they are left to the mercy of autocratic regimes for higher interests. Moreover, the frequent changes in the methodology have greatly damaged the integrity and accountability of the process, relativizing once firm conditionality as negotiable.

This approach has been rewarding the least reformist regimes, such as the one in Serbia, and punishing those who are ready to make the boldest steps in the process. The strategy of bargaining over standards that the government in Belgrade has conducted over the last decade might seem increasingly viable in the eyes of the neighbors. The result is a fading trust in the EU among the citizens throughout the region. [A recent poll](#) has shown the support for the accession process in Serbia falling below the 50% margin for the first time. A historically low trust in the EU has been recorded in North Macedonia too, with the number of Macedonians who believe the EU is the country's biggest ally plummeting to [a third of the previous number](#) over the last two years alone. Consequently, the lack of vision for the European future has led to the rise of the influence of third powers in the region, such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries.

Remodeling the French approach in the Western Balkans

To reverse these negative trends, it is necessary to agree on a new approach that would be in complete contrast with the current reinforcement of stabilocracy. This new European policy in the Western Balkans can only be achieved if pursued in coordination with member states. Therefore, the crucial paradigm shift must happen at the national level of those countries that are the main protagonists of the current approach, which includes France. Three main principles should serve as guidelines for the new French commitment to the region.

Firstly, **the perspective of full EU membership must be real and credible**. This topic has largely been avoided in the French political arena over the last years because of the widespread belief that the French public is strongly opposing any new enlargements of the Union. The fear of domestic backlash which could be used by right-wing politicians has been the major, albeit implicit excuse for disrupting the accession process, including the blocking North Macedonia and Albania in 2019. However, in [a report](#) published by dIpart and OSEPI, comprehensive public opinion polls show that the French people have rather indifferent attitudes towards the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans, with three in four people believing that it would not affect their lives much or at all if the countries of the region would joined the EU.

A telling finding is that their attitudes to the EU enlargement reflect their general views and fears about the developments within the EU itself more than about any country in the Western Balkans. As the report finds, “although opposition to further EU enlargement is widespread among the French public, much of this enlargement fatigue is the result of wider concerns regarding the European cohesion, evaluations of previous rounds of enlargement, the future of the EU, and, to some extent, France’s role in it.” In essence, both the French public and, consequently, French politicians, just could not be bothered with the Western Balkans. The current geopolitical threat might provide good arguments for these attitudes to change, both in political circles and among the citizens.

Secondly, **instead of hiding behind the unfruitful technocratic process, we need a strong political commitment to the enlargement**. The focus of the process must move away from the technocratic *tick the box* approach that is often very removed from the reality on the ground and incomprehensible to citizens. Instead of reconceptualizing the accession process ever and again, much more attention needs to be paid to political signals and messages that are reaching citizens in the region. They must regain the trust that the accession process leads to nothing less than the full EU membership with all of its benefits. In that regard, further delays in the process mitigated with new initiatives such as the European Political Community would only result in the formalization of stabilocracy and damage the credibility of the Union even further. The bottom-line argument here is that nobody wants to be a second-tier citizen, not even in the EU.

Finally, **stabilocracy and geopolitics must not overshadow the rule of law reforms on the European agenda**. As stated, the concept of providing regional stability by turning a blind eye to democratic backsliding is crumbling before our eyes. Moreover, the position of Serbia concerning the war in Ukraine has shown that the stabilocracy regimes are not reliable partners on foreign policy issues either. Reliable support for the joint European foreign policy can only come from truly democratic countries. Bargaining with autocrats might bring short-term benefits, but it leaves devastating long-term consequences both for the citizens and for the credibility of the Union. This is yet another argument why it is crucial to uncompromisingly insist on the so-called fundamentals in the accession process.

The goal should not be merely keeping the concept of enlargement alive. The real ambition should be to make the accession process effective, one that would generate changes tangible for the citizens, and create functional democratic states in the region. That is why the EU should be bold in the Western Balkans, and France should be among the countries leading the way. The European stakeholders must offer evidence to future members that the door to full accession is genuinely open, but only if democratic values are truly embedded in their DNA and Copenhagen criteria are fully respected in all its nuances. Stability and geopolitical alignment will follow naturally.



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