

# The EU Enlargement and Foreign Policy: Limits of Alignment in the Western Balkans

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## ABSTRACT

The article discusses whether, to what extent and in what way the Western Balkan countries have been fulfilling the part of the enlargement conditions (political) related to the foreign policy alignment with the foreign policy of the EU. Specifically, four membership candidates are targeted – Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. Both factors and actors that influence the alignment of each particular country are identified, thus indicating whether the declared foreign policy priorities, which include membership in the EU and alignment with its foreign policy, are genuinely Europeanized and domesticated. Additionally, the disciplined study of the alignment with the EU foreign policy variations takes into consideration the status each country has in relation to the EU and indicates the limits of the normative, transformative and structural power of the EU in this region.

**KEYWORDS:** EU foreign policy, alignment, enlargement, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

## POVZETEK

Članek obravnava, ali, v kolikšni meri in na kakšen način države Zahodnega Balkana izpolnjujejo del širitvenih pogojev (političnih), povezanih z usklajevanjem zunanje politike z zunanjo politiko EU. Natančneje, obravnavane so štiri kandidatke za članstvo – Črna gora, Srbija, Albanija in Severna Makedonija. Opredeljeni so dejavniki in akterji, ki vplivajo na usklajenost posamezne države, kar kaže na to, ali so deklarirane zunanjepolitične prednostne naloge, ki vključujejo članstvo v EU in usklajenost z njeno zunanjo politiko, resnično evropeizirane in ponotranjene. Poleg tega študija usklajenosti z zunanjepolitičnimi različicami EU upošteva status vsake države in njen odnos z EU in navaja meje normativne, preobrazbene in strukturne moči EU v tej regiji.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** zunanja politika EU, usklajenost, širitev, Albanija, Črna gora, Severna Makedonija, Srbija

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## INTRODUCTION

For Western Balkan countries (WB), the European Union (EU) is both an actor and a goal (Schimmelfenning, Sedelmeier, 2020; Tzifakis, 2007; Woodward, 2011). The EU, as an actor which got its second chance in the Western Balkans in late 90ies (Džananović, 2020, p.2) has been engaged in conflict resolution and state building (Keil, Arkan, 2015). The EU agenda has been implemented through both enlargement and foreign policy tools, as the two policies run in parallel and are mostly complementary. In the segment of enlargement, the EU chose to impose a model based on normative transformation and it's been somewhat effective in coping with the short-term challenges (Hasa, 2019, p.23).

Stabilization of the volatile region, being the long-lasting goal of the EU foreign policy in the region, is, ideally, complemented by the WB countries' integration through accepting full range of EU regulations and norms (Bjorkdahl et al., 2015; Noutcheva, 2009; Woelk, 2013). Initially, the twofold EU approach to the region was formalized through a policy and legal tool called the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), the name of which clearly refers to primary priority (stabilization) and ultimate goal (integration). The framework combines the Europeanization and conditionality already applied in the Central and Eastern Europe with the upgraded approach devised to address the specific needs of the Western Balkans.

The Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA), signed with each of the WB countries within this framework, regulated trade relations, but also identified common political and economic objectives. In Title II, Political Dialogue, approximation of policies with EU policies was established as a general goal, implying an obligation of approximation of the WB countries' foreign policies with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU. More recently, the high-level political dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkan countries is designed to enhance the regional stability and security, mainly through neutralizing all emerging crises and tensions, reconciling and resolving open issues regionally, as well as developing comprehensive and coordinated approaches towards addressing the potential security challenges (Hasić, Vit, 2020).

The EU membership criteria for the WB countries have remained the

same, founded on the so-called Copenhagen Criteria from 1993 that define the fulfilment of political, economic and legal conditions, an integral part of which is the adoption and implementation of the EU *acquis*. Gradual alignment of foreign policy of candidate countries with the EU foreign policy is not only a part of political criteria, but also one of the negotiation chapters and areas where progress is assessed annually by the European Commission in its Progress Reports.

Ever since the Western Balkan 6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) have made the EU membership one of their major foreign policy priorities, the alignment with the foreign policy positions of the EU became a clear indicator of their willingness and dedication to the process. While, apparently, alignment of foreign policy of the EU does not seem too demanding or incompatible with national interests in any of the WB countries, the extent of the alignment varies and even continually decreases in some. Foreign policy is not just an area where countries demonstrate their abilities to assume membership obligations, but one of the specifically delicate areas where countries show their genuine affiliations. Being one of the symbols of national policy and identity, foreign policy alignment or misalignment of a particular country reveals positions, power relations and order of foreign policy priorities.

The specific goal of this article is threefold: to analyse whether, to what extent, and in what way have the Western Balkan countries fulfilled this piece of the political criteria, to identify the factors and actors that contribute to or prevent the full alignment and, thus, to indicate the limits of the normative, transformative and structural power of the EU in this region.

The comparative review of the status of alignment of the four out of six WB countries that follows will be based on the primary sources that illustrate the developments - the data provided by the EU itself through the reports made by the European Commission on the progress achieved by particular countries since 2014. The four countries are Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In order to facilitate the research aims, the review takes into consideration the fact that the four countries are in different stages of integration and displays their cases accordingly in two clusters - Montenegro and Serbia as the leaders in the process, as they are both negotiating candidates; Albania and North Macedonia as candidate countries that have not yet

started negotiations. Two remaining countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, are still in their pre-negotiation state as potential membership candidates and will not be considered in this study. The analysis of each country follows the methodology of the chapter on foreign policy, security and defence – the foreign policy goals and their compliance with the global Strategy of the EU, the level of alignment with the Council decisions and declarations of the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, the level of diplomatic and administrative preparedness and examples of misalignment and overall performance in international arena and regional engagement.

## **NEGOTIATING MEMBERSHIP CANDIDATES**

Montenegro and Serbia are considered the leaders of the integration process in the region as they are both in advanced phases of membership of negotiations with the EU on different chapters. Also, their respective paths towards the EU started few years later than the others in the region, after the fall of former Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević in 2000 and his later transfer to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the peaceful dissolution of their former union called the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006. Similarities, however, end with that.

### ***MONTENEGRO***

Montenegro identified EU and NATO orientation as its priority very clearly (Skupština Crne Gore, 2013) and its full commitment to these goals resulted very quickly in first important successes in the integration processes – the SAA was signed in 2010, positive *avis* from the European Commission obtained later same year and membership negotiations opened in 2012. Montenegro became the first country from the Western Balkan 6 to start the membership negotiations with the EU and has taken over the lead in the process. Currently, after 8 years of negotiation, all the 33 screened chapters have been opened, with 3 provisionally closed (European Commission Staff, 2020b, p.3).

In terms of negotiations on particular chapters, foreign policy, security and defence has been a success for Montenegro as it early achieved and maintained a good level of preparedness (European Commission Staff, 2015d, 2016b, 2018b, 2019b, 2020b). Also, Montenegro has

proven to have diplomatic and administrative structures in the field of foreign policy and defence sufficient to support the obligations stemming from the member status. Since 2014, when chapter 31 was opened (Foreign policy, Security and Defence), Montenegro has achieved an impressive record of 100% alignment with the decisions of the Council of the EU and High Representative declarations and joined all restrictive measures imposed by the EU (European Commission Staff, 2015d, p.73, 2016b, p.80, 2018b, p.85, 2019b, p.92, 2020b, p. 117). In particular, Montenegro joined the sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea, and remained on the same the course in the UN General Assembly (European Commission Staff, 2015d, p.73). The Montenegro 2020 Report stresses the amending decision of the Montenegrin government from March 2020 concerning the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine which contains a consolidated list of persons and entities against which restrictive measures have been imposed (European Commission Staff, 2020b, p.117).

Montenegro, however, failed to comply with the EU in a single case that concerns the country's relationship with another strategic partner – the United States of America (USA). In 2007, Montenegro signed a bilateral agreement with the USA, which guarantees the exemption of US citizens from the International Criminal Court (ICC) – the so-called Article 98 Agreement. The provisions of this bilateral agreement, according to the European Commission, are contrary to the common EU positions on the integrity of the Rome Statute and completely disregard the EU's guiding principles for bilateral immunity agreements (European Commission Staff, 2015d, 2020b).

In terms of security and defence, the path to realization of NATO membership that was successfully finalized in 2017, largely facilitated the successful alignment of this segment with the EU as well. The country is part of the EU Hybrid Risk Survey, the aim of which is to identify weaknesses and build resilience to hybrid attacks (European Commission Staff, 2019b, p. 92). Montenegro took part in civilian and military missions under the auspices of the EU Common Defence and Security Policy (CDSPP) and UN-ATALANTA in Somalia, ISAF in Afghanistan, UN-MIL in Liberia, INIFICYP in Cyprus, EUTM in Mali, EUFORCAR in the Central African Republic and MINURSO in Western Sahara (European Commission Staff, 2015d, 2016b, 2018b, 2019b, 2020b). Montenegro's participation in the KFOR mission in Kosovo since 2018, however, has

created tensions with neighbouring Serbia and among a part of population in the country itself (European Commission Staff, 2019b, p.92).

The country has taken an active role in numerous regional organizations and initiatives (Regional Cooperation Council, Central European Initiative, Central European Free Trade Area, South East European Cooperation Process, Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, US-Adriatic Charter, Berlin Process, Brdo-Brijuni, and Western Balkan 6) and is commended as an example of positively transformed relations with its neighbours (Džananović, 2020, p.8).

The public political commitment to the EU accession is mostly successfully translated into political decisions and actions, and as Montenegro continues to align fully with the EU CFSP, others issues and chapters draw much more attention and dictate the overall pace of the negotiations – the issue of rule of law and chapters 23 and 24<sup>2</sup> primarily. There is an intensive academic debate about the nature of the Montenegrin success, precisely because of the dramatic difference between the evident success in some filed and failure in others, but also about the uneven and often faulty approach of the EU towards Montenegro (Keil, 2013, p. 350; Keil, Arkan, 2015, p.83; Vučković, 2019, p.142). It is argued that the Montenegrin success does not seem to depend on the domestic actors, but is an EU driven project as EU acts like a major agent of changes. Vučković specifically argues that the case of Montenegro demonstrates how mutually beneficial interaction of both local and EU actors remained superficial, and did not touch upon crucial domestic reforms (Vučković, 2019, p.141). With the new government in place in Montenegro<sup>3</sup> since December 2020, the domestication of the Euro-Atlantic orientation in foreign policy will be tested.

## **SERBIA**

Even though it is also a negotiating candidate country, Serbia has a very different path and record in this chapter from Montenegro. Curiously, Serbia gained membership candidate status in 2012, before the SAA with the EU entered into force in 2013. As of October 2020, more than half chapters have been opened (18 out of 35), with two provisionally closed (European Commission Staff, 2020e, p.3).

2 Chapter 23 is Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Chapter 24 is Justice, Freedom and Security.

3 A new conservative pro-Serb government which took office on December 4, 2020, is a coalition founded around the main goal of unseating the decades-ruling DPS party of Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović. They have been campaigning against pro-Western Đukanović by accusing him of corruption and close ties with organized crime.

In terms of diplomatic and bureaucratic apparatus, Serbia is considered to be moderately prepared (European Commission Staff, 2020c, p. 114). Formally, relations with the EU and EU membership are high among the foreign policy and security policy priorities of Serbia (National Assembly of Serbia, 2019, p.1) and it has supported the EU Global Strategy (European Commission Staff, 2018c). However, it is particularly indicative that Serbia has a mostly downward trend in alignment with CFSP, the highest being in 2013 – 89%, the lowest in 2018 – merely 52% (European Commission Staff, 2015b, p.70, 2016c, p.80, 2018c, p.84). Despite the fact that the alignment increased in 2020 to 60% (European Commission Staff, 2020e, p.114), Serbia still has the lowest alignment percentage in the region and the list of dubious moves is quite extensive and concerns Russia, China, and since July 2021, the US as well.

The main reason for the misalignment is the disagreement with the EU regarding the restrictive measures against Russia, despite the fact that Serbia enacted the Law on Restrictive Measures and the Implementation of International Sanctions back in 2016 (European Commission Staff, 2016c, 2018c). Even though Serbia declaratively supports Ukraine in principle of territorial integrity, it has never joined any sanctions against Russia regarding the Crimea. In addition, Serbian authorities are reluctant to oppose Russian positions on a broader international level, even outside of the European context, so over the course of years they refused to follow the Council decisions regarding Venezuela, China, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Zimbabwe (European Commission Staff, 2015b, 2016c, 2018c). In 2019 and 2020 in particular, Serbia did not align with decisions concerning Myanmar and Iran, and ignored latest declarations on Hong Kong and Russia (European Commission Staff, 2019d, 2020e). In case of Belarus, Serbia did not join the restrictive measures introduced by the EU, but supported the High Representative's declaration on presidential elections in Belarus and condemned the escalation of violence and intimidation of the Co-ordination Council (European Commission Staff, 2020e).

Relations with Russia have been additionally strengthened which is particularly reflected in the frequent exchange of top-level visits and continued and intensified technical and defence cooperation. Serbian president visits Russia annually, while Russian Prime minister Dimitri Medvedev visited Belgrade in 2019 and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov paid a visit on the eve of the June elections in 2020. Serbia earlier estab-

lished and continued cooperation with the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while holding joint military drills with Russia and Belarus in 2015 (European Commission Staff, 2016c). Moreover, the cooperation with the CSTO was included in the country's new security and defence strategies (European Commission Staff, 2020e). As a part of overall cooperation in defence and security with Russia that includes joint drills, procurement of substantial video-surveillance equipment and arms and security systems purchase, a battery of Pantsir-S1 air defence missile system was handed over to Serbia in March 2020. In September 2020, Serbia introduced a six-months moratorium on all international military cooperation, including joint exercises (European Commission Staff, 2020e).

The EU voiced its concern over the Cooperation and Joint Action Agreement signed between the Ministry of Interior of Serbia and the Russian Federal Security Service as it is believed to pose a risk to the implementation of the Agreement on Security Procedures in Exchanging Classified Information previously signed with the EU. Serbia also defied EU regarding a Free Trade Agreement with Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in October 2019 (European Commission Staff, 2020e). While the EU expected Serbia to align itself with the EU policy, Serbia insisted it was in no way contrary to its EU ambitions, as the agreement will cease to be valid when Serbia joins the EU (Beta, Večernje novosti, 2019).

The existing level of cooperation with China has already caused warnings from the EU side regarding the respect of EU standards in relation to state aid, public procurement, railroad safety and interoperability (European Commission Staff, 2016c, 2018c, 2019d). Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić extended his gratitude and admiration for the Chinese leadership when China delivered medical aid to Serbia, while holding his tongue regarding the EU relief efforts. The EU also noted his silence on the support expressed for Chinese actions in Xinjiang by a high profile government official (European Commission Staff, 2020e)<sup>4</sup>.

As Serbia appears to believe that its military neutrality is but should not be an obstacle to its cooperation with NATO, 20 joint military drills took place and a Logistic Support Cooperation Agreement with

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<sup>4</sup> The European Parliament adopted a resolution in December 2020 condemning China over allegations of forced labour and over the situation of Uighurs, calling on the EU to impose sanctions.



NATO was enacted. Also, a second Individual Partnership Action Plan (2019-2021) was adopted (European Commission Staff, 2020e).

When it comes to relations with the US, Serbia is the only country in the region that did not sign an Agreement on the immunity of US citizens from the ICC. Moreover, Serbia agrees with the EU and follows its position regarding the integrity of the Rome Statute and the EU guiding principles on immunity agreements (European Commission Staff, 2015b). Despite a major disagreement with the US over Kosovo, the relations with the US are quite stable. During the July 2021 visit to Washington DC, Serbian president signed a peculiar unilateral memo regarding the normalization of economic relations with Kosovo, and thus committed to move Serbian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem<sup>5</sup>. The EU expressed its “serious concern and regret” over this plan, as its implementation would make Serbia and Kosovo first nations in Europe to relocate the embassies (Euractiv, 2020). As the former US President Donald Trump was not re-elected in November 2020, it is unclear whether the administration of the new president will insist on the fulfilment of this intention.

Serbia has been participating actively in crisis management missions and operations under the CSDP - The EU Training mission in Mali, NAVFOR ATALANTA, and contributed to missions in Somalia and Central Africa. As it intends to contribute to the civilian aspects of the CSDP missions, the EU finds that it should finalize the legal and administrative framework that would enable the participation of civilian staff. Serbia is in the roster for EU Battle Groups and is also present in UN peacekeeping missions (European Commission Staff, 2016c, 2018c, 2019d, 2020e).

Brussels has apparently accepted the Progressivists, led by President Aleksandar Vučić and deliberately turned a blind eye in front of their detrimental behaviour and practices, opting for stability over democracy (Radeljić, 2019, p.122). For many years the European Commission has been aware of the Serbian compliance issues, as the reports show, but the priority in the overall integration progress was given to other topics and chapters such as the rule of law and normalization of relations with Kosovo. That left the space open for Serbia to

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5 The Washington Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo on economic normalization was brokered by president Trump and hailed as a “major breakthrough”. Presidents of Serbia and Kosovo each signed separate documents with similar commitments. In addition to that, Kosovo and Israel agreed to establish diplomatic relations, and both Serbia and Kosovo promised to move their embassies to Jerusalem.

lead the politics of opportunities, developing its relations with both East and West, rather than the politics of alternatives, thus securing significant international attention and competition, while developing internally and ever increasing authoritarian approach (Radeljić, 2019, p.120). The 2020 Progress Report, however, is more resolute than ever in its appeals to Serbia to demonstrate a clear commitment to EU as its main political and economic partner, restrain the Eurosceptic rhetoric of the high governmental officials and step up its efforts towards a full alignment with the EU CFSP. While maintaining a very diplomatic tone, EU has expressed its expectation for Serbia to adjust the political course so it clearly and undoubtedly reflects its EU ambition (European Commission Staff, 2020e).

The two cases of negotiating candidates clearly show that the EU evaluates and assigns political priorities in the accession process differently, depending on the country itself and its specific context. Despite the downward trend of the alignment in case of Serbia and an extensive list of positions, decisions and activities that defy the position of the EU and cause concerns over its priorities, the EU has not recognized them as crucial for the pace of accession and Serbia remains one of the leaders in the process, a step behind Montenegro, the regional champion in the region.

### **NON-NEGOTIATING MEMBERSHIP CANDIDATES**

Albania and North Macedonia are both non-negotiating candidate countries. Despite the positive recommendations by the European Commission, and the decision from March 2020 of the EU 27 to launch the membership negotiations with the EU, the process has not yet started. The infamous French “non” in October 2019<sup>6</sup>, was followed by a Bulgarian “framework position”<sup>7</sup> in November 2020 aimed at North Macedonia. The Bulgarian position effectively blocked the start of the negotiations for both countries, as German presidency and some other

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6 French president Emmanuel Macron blocked the EU decision to start the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania at the European Council meeting in October 2019 and justified it by the need to review the enlargement process in general. Also, the Netherlands and Denmark had reservations in giving approval to open negotiations with Albania.

7 The Bulgarian government officially announced that it does not approve of the EU negotiation framework for North Macedonia in November 2020. It has sent a memorandum to the other 26 member-states insisting that the EU documents and the “framework for negotiations” should reflect Bulgarian stance. Bulgaria insists North Macedonia should formally recognize that its language is a dialect of Bulgarian, eliminate its anti-Bulgarian rhetoric, reinterpret its history in accordance with Bulgarian historic narrative and give up claims about a separate Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The demands are entirely related to the issues of identity, language and history and clearly reflect a nationalist position of the current government for domestic political reasons.

EU countries decided that these two countries should continue the accession process together, as a package. Albania has been a membership candidate for just over six years, while North Macedonia gained the status already in 2005 and has been waiting since for the opening of the negotiations. As was the case with Montenegro and Serbia, while formally in the same status, the two countries have a different foreign policy record regarding the CFSP alignment.

### **ALBANIA**

Albania had a particularly low starting point in the integration process as one of the poorest and most isolated countries in Europe. While other countries of the Western Balkans share common legacy of Former Socialist Yugoslavia and its brutal disintegration, Albania has had a much different political path. Still, its democratic transition has not been easy as it has never experienced any form of local democratic government (Koyama, 2009, p.5).

Its primary foreign policy priorities are related to the EU and NATO membership that was achieved in 2009. In the interpretation of the Albanian authorities the two priorities are both compatible and intertwined. The Albania was granted potential candidate status for EU membership at the 2003 Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans Summit. The SAA entered into force in 2009 and the formal application for membership was submitted later in the year. The EU awarded the candidate status in 2014, but despite the repeated recommendations by the EC, the EU member-states have not yet set the date for the Albania and North Macedonia package.

In terms of the alignment with the EU and the ability to assume the rights and obligations as an EU member country, Albania has made a significant progress and continues to enhance its abilities, especially in Chapter 31. Justice sector, fighting corruption and organized crime, as well as reforms in intelligence and civil service appeared to be the most demanding, while foreign policy, security and defence alignment reached a fascinating degree of 100%. In its annual reports the European Commission has established very early and noted continuously Albania's diplomatic and bureaucratic preparedness in Chapter 31 (Council of the EU, 2020; European Commission Staff, 2015a, p.71, 2016a, p.10, 2018a, p.92, 2020c, p.112). There have been no particular problems or obstacles for Albania to follow common positions taken

by the EU. It has always joined and applied all the restrictive measures adopted by the European Council, and supported the Council's decisions and declarations made by the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy.

Following its own foreign policy priorities – the memberships in NATO<sup>8</sup> and EU, Albania exported its surplus weapons to the Kurdish forces fighting ISIL and took part in the ALTHEA, EU military mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a training mission in Mali (EUTM). The country also expressed readiness and interest to take part in the EU battle groups in 2024. As a part of the Hybrid Risk Survey, Albania provided the answers to the survey (European Commission Staff, 2020c).

In the wider context of foreign relations, the Albanian participation in a number of international and regional organizations and the stable improvement of good neighbourly relations has been appreciated by the EU. The country is particularly praised for its engagement in Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and the fight against terrorism and radicalism through Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative (European Commission Staff, 2016a, 2018a, 2019a, 2020c).

Albanian strategic commitment to Euro-Atlanticism, just like in the case of Montenegro, led to a single serious disagreement with the EU and failure to comply. Albania signed a bilateral immunity agreement with the USA in 2003, which guarantees the exemption of US citizens from the ICC. This issue is likely to remain, given the special nature of its relations with the US and the determination to maintain it outside, or even against the EU context.

The 2020 Report praises the level of preparation for the assumption of obligations under this Chapter and alignment with CFSP, as well as wider multilateral engagement such as the Chairmanship-in-Office within OSCE (European Commission Staff, 2020c).

Without denying similarities to other ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe as well as to former Yugoslav republics in the Western Balkans, Albania has been one of the most unique cases in Eastern Europe, primarily for its communist legacy in economic and political development, as well as regarding many other peculiarities (Toqja, 2014, p. 83).

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8 The accession of Albania to NATO took place in 2009.

Over the past 20 years, numerous statistics, public opinions and many other facts point to a strong desire for European integration among citizens and political parties (Cipuri, Kocibelli, 2010; Preshkopia, 2020; Tojja, 2014). The external promise of EU integration is perceived as a remedy for internal concerns, and, in particular, democratic deficiencies, but just like in the case of Montenegro, the question remains whether there is a strong domestic impetus for improvements or is just about ticking the boxes on the conditions and compliance requirements (Cipuri, Kocibelli, 2010, p.50; Hoxhaj, 2020).

### ***NORTH MACEDONIA***

North Macedonia, known as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) until February 2019, was the first country in the Western Balkans that was awarded the membership candidate status. Despite the fact that it was granted the candidate status in 2005, the membership negotiations have not been opened yet. It has been a part of the SAP since 1999 and signed the SAA in 2001 during the domestic armed conflict. The signing of the SAA was not postponed, as the EU wanted to offer it as an incentive to local politicians and encourage them to turn back to political negotiations (Bjorkdahl, 2005, p.257). Taking into consideration the fact that North Macedonia has achieved a substantial progress in the overall alignment with the EU standards, despite its internal fragility and issues with neighbours, the European Commission recommended the opening of the negotiations consecutively in 2009, 2015, 2016 and 2019 (European Commission Staff, 2015c, 2016d, 2019c). In the update of the report in March 2020, the Commission re-validated the recommendation (European Commission Staff, 2020a), but its EU member-state neighbour Bulgaria decided later in the year to block the opening of the negotiations as explained earlier.

The significant achievements of the overall accession process have been followed up to a certain level in the fields of foreign policy, security and defence. The diplomatic and bureaucratic apparatus is considered to be moderately prepared, while the degree of the foreign policy alignment with the EU varies. Still, the compliance is high and ranges between 73% and 92% in 2019 (European Commission Staff, 2016d, p.71, 2018d, p.84, 2019c, p.94, 2020d, p.98). North Macedonia has accepted the EU Global Strategy and its goals, so it sides with the EU accordingly – supporting the decisions of the Council and declarations of the High Representative (European Commission Staff, 2018d).

The major obstacle to the full alignment is the decision on the restrictive measures against Russia regarding Ukraine that North Macedonia did not subscribe to. It maintained some level of diplomatic balance, though, by supporting the United Nations General Assembly's resolution in favour of the territorial integrity of Ukraine in 2014 (European Commission Staff, 2015). A very important indication of North Macedonia's strategic commitment to the EU was given in December 2019 when it aligned with the EU regarding the Turkish unauthorized drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (European Commission Staff, 2020d). The compliance with the EU occurred despite the decade long trend of intensification of close political and economic ties with Turkey.

Another divergence point with the EU is related to the United States and the bilateral agreement regarding the immunity of American citizens from the ICC. Like all other countries in region, except Serbia, North Macedonia signed the agreement which EU considers to be contrary to its positions on the integrity of the Rome Statute and EU guiding principles on bilateral immunity agreements. This remains a continuing objection (European Commission Staff, 2015c, 2019c).

The resolution of the name dispute between the FYROM and Greece has already been dubbed a historic success and in addition to the elimination of a long-standing bilateral issue, it also enabled the country's NATO membership<sup>9</sup> and further steps in the accession to the EU. Also, it is important to note that the EU itself gained an important influence in the overall process (Mavromatidis, 2010).

The European Commission finds that the country has proven to be a constructive partner in regional and international cooperation. Under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, North Macedonia participates in the ALTHEA Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the NATO's "Resolute Support" mission in Afghanistan. It's been contributing to the EU Battle Group 2014-2020 and the KFOR mission in Kosovo through the Host Nation Coordination Center. It plans to upgrade its involvement as operational partner and deploy staff officers. Also, in 2020 it started contributing to the military training mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA). The cooperation with the European Defence Agency (EDA) continues, and answers to the survey

<sup>9</sup> Following the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement, Greece lifted its veto on North Macedonia's NATO membership. North Macedonia became newest member of the Alliance in March 2020.

were provided as part of a Hybrid Risk Survey that aims to identify vulnerabilities of the participating countries to hybrid threats (European Commission Staff, 2020d).

While waiting for the start of the negotiations with North Macedonia, the EU insists on further tangible steps in key areas - judiciary, fight against corruption and organized crime and reforms in intelligence and public service (European Commission Staff, 2020a, 2020d). At the same time, the latest report extends a mild encouragement to the country to continue to improve the degree of its alignment with the EU's CFSP.

The overall EU integration success of North Macedonia has not been even, and Chapter 31 is no exception. The EU conditionality has not been an entirely effective mechanism for convincing domestic transformations, and in case of conflicting views, North Macedonia did not have a clear trajectory, but had to re-evaluate the incentives and gains (Koneska, 2019, p.119). Same goes for the field of foreign policy - the EU positions were often contested, under the influence of both Russia and US.

The repeated postponements of the opening of the membership negotiations betray the logic of the conditionality and diminish the country's genuine interest in reforms and compliance with the EU (Basheska, Kochenov, 2015; Koneska, 2014).

Despite the considerable efforts made to adapt their states to EU standards and improve the abilities to assume the EU membership rights and obligations in future, including the foreign policy realignments, the outlook for the two countries does not seem promising as the EU failed to provide the consensus on the opening of the negotiations. Both countries have made difficult, unpopular and costly decisions to meet the conditions, and this failed promise may have a range of negative impacts - on the domestic level, but also in further relations with the EU, especially when it comes to political alignments with the supposed structural partner that lacks credibility.

## CONCLUSION

Foreign policy, security and defence are commonly considered as prerogatives of nation states and symbols of national policy, and areas in which countries have to demonstrate their independence, sovereignty and true allegiance. Accordingly, the candidates for EU membership in the context of Chapter 31 need to demonstrate the ability to take up membership obligations and willingness and determination to follow the foreign policy of the EU. The alignment of the candidate countries' foreign policies with the EU's CFSP is thus a clear indicator of their genuine political orientations and readiness for the EU membership. The misalignments reveal the actual positions, power relations, the order of priorities and true allegiance. The misalignments and disagreements of the member states constitute a significant part of the policy and decision-making within the CFSP framework. The nature of the accession process and the obvious imbalance in relations with membership candidates is manifested in such a manner that countries in accession process are held up to higher demands and standards than some of the member states. The harder the compliance task, the more convincing is the case for the accession of the country.

The cases elaborated in this article concern four Western Balkan countries that have membership candidate status, albeit in different stages – Montenegro and Serbia are negotiating candidates, while Albania and North Macedonia still wait for the opening of the negotiations. One of the most important findings of this comparative review is that the state of their achievements in Chapter 31 differs significantly and that their degree of alignment and preparedness in this field is not related to the degree of accession to EU membership. The full compliance and well preparedness of the diplomatic and bureaucratic apparatus is achieved by Montenegro and Albania, the latter still in the status of a non-negotiating candidate. Serbia, on the other hand, as a negotiating candidate, struggles with compliance and achieves only some level of preparedness. The discrepancy further points that the EU evaluates and identifies political priorities in the accession process differently, depending on the country and its overall political context. Despite the specific significance that foreign policy has as a symbol of overall national policy and orientation, the EU monitors foreign policy alignment and takes note of the trends, but does not treat it as a priority policy field.



All four states claim the EU accession to be a strategic priority and accept the EU Global Strategy and its goals, but the percentage of compliance with the Council decisions and declarations by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy varies and depends on the issue. The Western Balkan four have other separate domains and relationships of special national interests. Failures to comply (Serbia and North Macedonia) are in most cases related to Russia, sometimes even extended to its wider international interests. Despite the fact that this study did not include specifically the relations with NATO, it implies that the Euro-Atlantic commitment is an important factor in the disagreements with the EU and tensions in relations with the EU. Montenegro and Albania, the two champions in the matters of Chapter 31, are both NATO members. North Macedonia has also improved its compliance percentage since NATO membership in 2020.

The misalignments also occur in relations concerning actors such as China and the United States.

In the end, it is quite clear that despite the fact that EU membership remains a top foreign policy priority for all the countries in the region, the alignment of the WB region with its CFSP is indeed a very complex and demanding undertaking, in which the EU has achieved only *some* level of success. As relations between the EU, US, Russia and China become more aggravated on the international scene, the EU membership candidates will face ever more difficulties in achieving full compliance with the EU positions. The reach of EU influence on this region is significant and structural, but also clearly limited by the influence displayed by some other actors, US and Russia primarily.

As for the EU itself, the achievement of the region's full compliance in the domain of foreign policy, security and defence ought to become one of top priorities, given their symbolic weight but also their substance. Time and credibility also matter. If the full membership remains a too distant goal for the candidates, the EU will become proportionately less relevant for both domestic and international trends in the region. Same goes for the credibility, if the EU does not stick to its promises and provide the consensus among the member states on the enlargement, thus saving the candidate states from its internal disagreements, it will not only harm the region, instead of transforming it, but also diminish its own position and influence. If the EU's positions do not matter for its own membership candidates, for where else can they possibly matter?

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