RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND EUROPEAN ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations
Specialisation: Global Order in Historical Perspective
Supervisor: Dr Max Bader
5 July 2019
Word Count: 14,935
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**Introduction**

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was the climax of Russian efforts to destabilise a Ukraine that had turned suddenly towards the European Union. It also marked a dramatic change in the tone of EU-Russia relations, a change that has seen the return of rivalry and competition to Europe, particularly in areas where interests and influence overlap. One such area is the Western Balkans, a group of seven states surrounded by EU Members but also historically a site of Russian influence.\(^1\) This conflict has begun to have an undeniable impact on the EU enlargement process which began in 2003 with the Thessaloniki Summit. Since then Croatia has joined the Union but progress elsewhere has been slow. Montenegro and Serbia are not expected to become members until 2025 while North Macedonia and Albania hold candidate status but have no clear end date to negotiations. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still only potential candidates.

The literature on EU enlargement has already explored its effectiveness, whether it remains a popular policy among the Member States, and if Balkan political elites and their populations still prioritise EU membership. Insights have been offered into the current discord between, and conflicting interests of, the EU and its Member States, and whether the EU in its current state can offer the incentives necessary for Europeanisation to progress in a region with simmering nationalist and ethnic tensions. However, little effort has been expended on exploring whether and how EU policy towards the Western Balkans has been affected by increasingly assertive Russian foreign policy. To answer this, I will examine the accession process from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 until 2018, a year which saw two major European summits dedicated to the region. The exploration of whether Russia is considered a threat to the EU's ambitions in the region and how the EU has chosen to respond will result in a greater understanding of the Union's capacities and limits as an international actor.

As will be seen in the literature review academic opinion is largely uniform in its belief that the Western Balkans will eventually join the EU. With this end state in mind, earlier accounts frame enlargement as an internal EU matter and offer various critiques of the policy-making process. A more nuanced picture emerges from 2014 onwards. No doubt influenced by the crisis in Ukraine some scholars took more critical views of other international actors and how they interact with the Western Balkan states, or at least their elites. Henceforth, any exploration of EU enlargement into the Western Balkans must take the changing international environment into account.

\(^1\) I include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, (North) Macedonia, and Serbia.
**Cost-Benefit, Identity-Driven, and Critical Approaches**

As mentioned previously there is a broad consensus that the Western Balkans will eventually join the EU. However, previous writing on enlargement prior to 2014 can be sub-divided into three groups: cost-benefit rationalists, those who emphasise the relevance of identity, and critical approaches that dissect 'EU imperialism'. It is only after the Crimean crisis that academics representing a fourth group began to focus on the impact of external powers. The rationalists, by far the largest of any group, assert that the reward of full membership is so great that Western Balkan elites will follow a long-term cost-benefit analysis that will see them accept significant political and economic reform in the short and medium-term. Many rationalist accounts have adopted overtly deterministic positions which, as a result, grants the EU all the agency in proceedings as well as all the blame for enlargement’s protraction. For them, the delay is a matter of EU policy (the ineffectiveness of conditionality) or attitude (enlargement fatigue).

Florian Bieber is one of the earlier examples of this approach. He explains that the EU has two objectives in the region - state-building and Europeanisation - and that conditionality has proven ineffective in delivering either so far.\(^2\) This is due to the fact that whereas conditionality was able to build the institutions necessary for accession in Central and Eastern Europe, building entirely new states is simply beyond it. Moreover, the EU has been inconsistent in the application of conditionality, opting to establish 'minimal states' that avoid antagonising the region's various sub-state units. This desire to avoid tensions is counter-productive, however, as local elites tend to have their power base in these sub-state units and accommodating them makes elites less responsive to conditionality.\(^3\) Similarly, Gitta Glüpker shows that the domestic political cost of compliance to ruling parties is the most effective limit of conditionality.\(^4\) While this hints at the matters of national identity better explored by others, Glüpker uses this observation as part of a wider policy critique. Enlargement’s key weakness is the lack of coercive measures beyond the suspension of earlier agreed treaties, which combines with research that shows material incentives are only effective at the early stages of the accession process to undermine the entire logic of conditionality.\(^5\) It must not be forgotten, however, that most candidate countries are at the beginning of the accession process.

Jacques Rupnik shares concerns with Bieber in questioning the effectiveness of conditionality to integrate 'contested states'. His larger critique, however, lies with the EU's decision to operate separate accession processes for individual states, as opposed to the group enlargement of 2004. This approach means regional issues such as border controls and

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the expansion of the single market are harder to resolve.\textsuperscript{6} The idea is that individual accessions will be discreet enough for the Member States and their populations while still stimulating enough for Western Balkan leaders.\textsuperscript{7} Yet, this tactic risks breeding dissatisfaction among elites who might consider themselves snubbed in comparison to their Western and Eastern Balkan neighbours. Eviola Prifti is more optimistic in light of 2013 seeing Croatia’s accession and a significant step towards normalisation of Serbian-Kosovar relations. However, she recognises another balancing act that the EU has to contend with, that of keeping up enough pressure to maintain momentum behind negotiations without reducing the effectiveness of conditionality by pushing too hard and provoking Eurosceptic forces.\textsuperscript{8} Success requires the EU to lay out a reliable path to accession, yet several political parties in the Member States have been willing to whip up xenophobia at home for political gain.

This unease at both the public and political level toward further EU expansion has been categorised as 'enlargement fatigue', a development that emerged following the premature accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 and was embedded by events such as the Eurozone crisis. John O’Brennan in 2014 and Soeren Keil and Zeynep Arkan in 2017 have written comparable accounts of enlargement fatigue's impact on the effectiveness of conditionality.\textsuperscript{9} The former is more direct in attributing enlargement's current state to fatigue, a result of the nationalisation and politicisation of expansion via the European Council's increased role in an area typically managed by the technocratic and pro-enlargement European Commission. Conflicting interests and a lack of consistency has damaged the EU’s credibility, weakening conditionality which in turn sustains clientism and minimal statehood in the Western Balkans.\textsuperscript{10} The latter recognise the unhelpful influence of the Council but focus on the effect on the Balkan population; the authors believe inconsistent messaging will lead to confusion and political unrest.\textsuperscript{11} Importantly, enlargement fatigue is not felt uniformly across the union and James Ker-Lindsay and Natasha Wunsch represent the few who have explored reactions at a national level through the lens of conditionality, detailing how past expansions were perceived by the Member States who now lay extensive costs on new candidates.\textsuperscript{12}

It is the shared opinion of the above-mentioned authors that despite the failings of conditionality as a policy it only affects the rate at which enlargement will be achieved not its eventual success. This is because they see no alternative for the region, or as Julija Brsakoska

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid}, p.27.
\textsuperscript{8} Eviola Prifti. \textit{The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10}, Paris: ISS, 2013, p.22.
\textsuperscript{10} O’Brennan "The Slow Train" p.223, p.227-8, p.236.
Bazerkoska puts it the Balkan people and politicians are "ready to make significant compromises in order to attain what they believe to be the only option for a viable future". However, this is based on a perception of the Balkan people as little more than cost-benefit calculators and as targets of EU policy rather than actors in their own right. How national identity, a particularly fraught issue in the region, impacts the appetite for accession should not be overlooked.

Tina Freyburg and Solveig Richter applied a "logic of appropriateness" to how problems are perceived and suitable (re)actions determined. Governments will not consider actions that contradict national identity, regardless of the benefit, one example being Croatia and Serbia’s prevaricating over cooperating with the ICTY. The authors do accept that eventual compliance may occur following "profound national identity change" but that during this transition governments will adopt "an ambivalent and contradictory manner" that restricts compliance with conditionality. Marko Stojić has charted that very transformation within previously Eurosceptic nationalist parties (in Croatia and Serbia) and given that parties have an inflated presence in countries with weak civil society they serve as informative subjects for populations as a whole. He asserts that "most parties formed stances on the EU based on their attitudes towards national and identity issues" instead of their left-right economic posture. Regardless, in both countries important nationalist parties became Europhile, a result Stojić claims was due more to party strategy and relations with key voter groups than with EU incentives. While such transformations lie outside the scope of this thesis it is important to keep in mind that the ambitions and dissatisfactions of the Balkan people also affect the success of EU policy in the region and can offer rivals opportunities to frustrate the enlargement process.

The critical approach to EU enlargement is best put forward by David Chandler’s work *Empire in Denial*. Enlargement in the Western Balkans necessitates state-building, which Chandler considers to be a highly invasive form of external control which has allowed Western states and international organisations to deny the responsibilities and accountability for the exercise of their power over smaller states. This is achieved through the dual strategies of depoliticising the process and country ownership (claiming the target state is enacting the vital reforms itself). The former represents state-building as a technical and bureaucratic

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17 Ibid, p.5.
18 Ibid, p.15. See also Mladen Mladenov and Bernhard Stahl. "Signalling Right and Turning Left: The Response to EU-Conditionality in Serbia", in Keil and Arkan (ed). The EU and Member State Building: European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans, Taylor and Francis, 2014, pp.122-139
development with little need for political debate as to its direction while the latter allows any failures to be blamed on the target state. For Chandler, the EU’s activity in the Western Balkans, but especially in Kosovo and Bosnia, exhibits this behaviour where the pretence is that EU administrators are merely facilitating the adoption of laws agreed on between two equal parties. In fact, the presence of external administrators and locally elected governments with shared authority is troubling for our understanding of sovereignty as belonging to distinct but legally equal states. The actual hierarchy is ever present given that state-building is fundamentally legitimised by the disparity between those who build and those who are being built, a disparity made clear in the EU’s political and economic domination over its Balkan neighbourhood.\(^{20}\) As a result, local elites become accountable to the EU and not their own populations, locked in by the Stabilisation and Association Process which allows the EU to suspend aid, programmes, and projects at its discretion.\(^{21}\) Hence, any compliance is forced not voluntary further reducing the popular legitimacy of enlargement. Chandler believes this then isolates the Balkan elite who, as a result, fake compliance, ultimately slowing the process of Europeanisation. However, he concluded that "despite growing disillusionment and alienation there is little in the way of political alternatives"\(^{22}\) indicating how his thesis is beginning to show its age.

Having recently gained more attention, the return of great power rivalry to the Western Balkans remains the most underexplored aspect of EU enlargement. Bojana Zorić (2017) and Galina Nelaeva and Andrey Semenov (2016) have written parallel accounts of Russia’s return to the region since 2014 and the decline in its relations with the West. They both zero in on Russia’s connections to Serbia, based on their Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage (similar connections are also found in Montenegro and the Republic Srpska) and Russia’s willingness to wield its UN veto to Serbia’s benefit. This twists Serbia in interesting directions, for example, it refused to impose sanctions on Russia in 2014 but justified it to the EU by saying such a move would hamper their economy and impede necessary reforms. While both articles see Russia’s motivations as purely strategic - it wants bargaining leverage against the EU elsewhere - Nelaeva and Semenov are particularly confident that Russia does not have the means to derail European integration.\(^{23}\)

The threat Russia poses has also been subject to extensive research by think tanks and policy analysts. For example, Mark Galeotti stresses Russia’s broad array of historical, cultural, economic, and political ties in the region, which are being harnessed into an increasingly systematic Balkan policy. Galeotti believes Russia’s main ambitions are to firmly establish itself as a regional actor and suspend the expansion of NATO. More importantly for this essay,\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Chandler. *Empire in Denial*, p.122.
he also believes the Kremlin wants to exploit rather than prevent the expansion of the EU by having the Union absorb further internal divisions.  

Francisco de Borja Lasheras similarly claims that "competition between great powers has returned to the region, and the EU ... has failed to respond," running the risk of Russia creating Trojan horse states through which to disturb the EU's stability and interests. This portrayal suggests that since 2014, rather than coalesce in the Europeanisation of the Balkans the Kremlin now aims for the Balkanisation of Europe. De Borja Lasheras also incorporates the importance of identity by highlighting how, as Russia stokes ethnic divisions, the EU's fear of a return to conflict has seen them accept the growing power of a few regional strongmen operating 'stabilocracies' - not too dissimilar to Bieber's minimal states. Although both writers stress the resurgence of Russia should not affect the eventual expansion of the EU it is time greater notice was taken of just how this growing presence in the region is impacting EU policy-making and the enlargement process.

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Research Design

This piece of research tracks the change in the EU and its Member States' rhetoric and policy toward enlargement in the Western Balkans, which functions as the dependent variable. In response, my independent variable is the growing presence of Russia in the region. I aim to prove that the EU has recognised the threat an increasingly assertive Russia poses to the success of enlargement and, furthermore, has responded to it by adapting their approach. However, accusations against a foreign power without clear evidence of intent are not typical of international relations, hence, they are often subtle or implicit. This does open the possibility of reading into sources only those messages that seem to support my thesis and discounting those that oppose it. One way, and the option I have chosen, to confidently decode such messages is to conduct critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the assumption that, as Arkan and Keil state, "the actorness of the EU ... is constructed through the discursive practices emanating from and surrounding the union"\(^{26}\). Thus, I will follow a qualitative methodology making heavy use of Senem Aydin-Düzgit's suggestions regarding EU foreign policy.\(^{27}\) Starting from her definition of CDA as "the retroduction of a discourse through the empirical analysis of its realisation in practices"\(^{28}\), Aydin-Düzgit emphasises its effectiveness in determining the tropes, substitutions and metaphors employed in the EU's varied discursive activities and the policies they inform. Among other things these techniques can be used to construct in and out groups, which I will argue is one example of a change in EU policy since 2014 in an effort to establish the Western Balkan states as already in Europe and Russia as far beyond it.

Discursive strategies target not only the candidate countries and Russia but also the Member States. This draws attention to the constrictions put on the EU by its members when negotiating its foreign policy and how it is able to go about resolving them. This will be necessary to keep in mind when assessing how the EU has adapted its enlargement policy. For Aydin-Düzgit enlargement policy specifically, "creates a paradox in the sense that it creates new borders at the EU's outer edges that are securitised through references to the smuggling of goods, trafficking of people, illegal immigration or terrorism"\(^{29}\). In other words, as the EU defines a secure Europe as necessarily including a transformed Western Balkans it justifies this by citing the risks the region currently exposes the Member States too. This interpretation suffers from viewing the EU and its members as one cohesive unit instead of - at least - two separate groups with distinct interests. Rather than paradoxical EU enlargement policy is conflictual with Brussels endeavouring to establish a European identity and continue expansion, and the Member States generally more concerned with the risk posed by the Western Balkans to themselves. This dynamic means that any analysis that only explores how


\(^{28}\) Ibid, p.355.

\(^{29}\) Ibid, p.363.
the EU and its central officials have reacted to Russian influence in the region would be lacking, some attention must also go to the Member States.

Hence the sources addressed are taken from both EU institutions and officials as well as their counterparts in the Member States and come in three broad categories: parliamentary debates, political speeches, and official declarations. The first is self-explanatory, relying on official transcripts of proceedings, I add to this the transcripts and published conclusions of parliamentary committees. These will allow me to show how policy is articulated by those in charge and negotiated by important parties. The second includes remarks and speeches made by key officials in the enlargement process as well as leaders and foreign ministers of Member States. They have the widest audience of the three, and so have the most potential for extracting evidence of shifting priorities and discursive strategies. The third will be official declarations, chiefly summit conclusions and publications, but also the policy and strategy reports that the EU issues regarding enlargement. Due to their high formal authority, need to reflect a consensus, and technocratic nature these sources tend not to emphasise controversial topics. Instead, their main use comes from being able to identify which rhetorical elements from debates and speeches directly filter into policy. It is also necessary to show how these sources then interact with the wider discourse to be found in academic papers and thinktank pieces.\textsuperscript{30}

To study the reaction of the EU and all its Member States to Russian influence throughout the entire region would be impractical and imprecise. For this reason, I have focused, where necessary, on the impact recent Russian assertiveness has had on the enlargement process in Montenegro and Serbia. Concerning which Member States to study alongside the EU I have chosen France and the United Kingdom. The decision to limit the discussion to the Serbian context is justified by its importance to the success of the enlargement project in the entire region and its deep historical and cultural ties with Russia. The inclusion of Montenegro allows for interesting comparisons to be made due to it sharing these ties and yet being more enthusiastic for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, most noticeably its membership of NATO since 2017. Meanwhile, my choice of the UK and France as representatives of the Member States is based on their similarly high level of importance to EU decision making, especially regarding foreign and security policy due to their status as military powers. Moreover, they represent different sides of the enlargement debate. The UK has traditionally been one of the staunchest supporters of EU expansion, while France has endeavoured to slow and control it.

How these two nations have responded to the increase of Russian influence in the Western Balkans will make up the third chapter. The first will proceed as follows, I establish that the EU, in the sense of its central officials, and then the Member States have eventually come to recognise that Russian influence in the region has increased and has developed the capacity to upset enlargement. In the following two chapters I then show how this has affected the rhetoric and policy concerning Europeanisation, first in regard to the EU then the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, p.363.
Member States. The last chapter will explain the limitations in the EU’s response as deriving from its limited room for manoeuvre as a supra-national organisation, constrained by both its unwillingness but also inherent inability to engage in traditional power politics as well as the differing priorities of reluctant Member States.
The Recognition of Growing Russian Influence

To prove that the European Union recognises growing Russian influence it is important to start with those indications that have emerged at its highest levels. The best example being the State of the Union speech Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, delivers each year in September. Speaking before the European Parliament in 2018 he declared:

"Europe can export stability, as we have done with the successive enlargements of our Union. ... But there is more to be done. We must find unity when it comes to the Western Balkans - once and for all. Should we not, our immediate neighbourhood will be shaped by others".31

Although the use of 'others' could be applied to Russia, China, or Turkey it is chiefly intended for Russia, an inference further supported by Juncker immediately going on to lament the humanitarian crisis in Idlib, Syria - at the time the target of a military offensive supported by the Russian government. The statement accepts that Moscow, among others, has developed the capacity to influence the Western Balkan region, in the EU's absence if not in direct competition with it. Of course, such certainty may be part of an attempt to rally members of the European Parliament (MEPs), particularly those sceptical of further enlargement, behind a renewed and coherent drive in the region. Offering them a black or white decision between Europe or those hostile to it controlling its neighbourhood. This should not detract, however, from the significant shift represented by the inclusion of external forces in the enlargement political calculation.

This is put into greater relief when compared with another of Juncker's speeches this time at a session of the European Parliament in 2014:

"In the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the EU ... However, the negotiations will be continued ... This tragic European region needs a European perspective. Otherwise, the old demons of the past will reawaken."32

Putting aside the fact that a pause in enlargement prospects marks the low priority of the region at the time, the difference of note is where the perceived threat of a failure to successfully transform the Western Balkans originates from. In 2014, even after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the threat remained internal, the old demons of ethnic tensions and the wars they inspired in the 1990s. Four years later this worry is no longer prioritised, instead, the main concern is the influence of foreign powers. It is worth further emphasising the change this reflects in deeply-embedded European thinking about the region. For example, the European Parliament debate on enlargement strategy in November 2009 is littered with references to the war-torn history of the region and its fragilities, both from officials chairing the debate and MEPs representing diverse ideological positions. Yet, nowhere is concern

expressed of the role non-European powers could play in shaping the Western Balkans' future.\textsuperscript{33}

There has been a discernible change in thinking. A change that has in many ways mirrored developments in the academic literature. As shown in the literature review, earlier assessments of enlargement disregard any viable alternatives to the EU for the Western Balkan states, which can also be understood as discounting any Russian presence in the region. This continues as late as 2016 with Bazerkoska declaring this presence to be negligible.\textsuperscript{34} However, her assessment that suffers from its comparison with the EU's post-Soviet neighbours, the difference, though relatively large, should not be used to diminish Russia's emerging role as a competitor to the EU in the Western Balkans. A more promising description is offered by Roberto Belloni who suggests that Russia has steadily developed its influence in the region, especially Serbia, as far back as 2008, leaving it poised to attract regional elites if enlargement prospects become anymore remote.\textsuperscript{35} A conclusion clearly shared by Juncker in his State of the Union speech in 2018.

This new appreciation of Russia's potential to upset EU ambitions is not isolated within the presidency of the Commission but shared by its leading figures. Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has been particularly sensitive to Russia's new assertiveness and its consequences. Speaking in Belgrade in early 2017 she warned:

"The impressive progress of Serbia, and of all the Western Balkans, is endangered by a growing sense of uncertainty in the world and in the region ... the global balance of power of shifting"\textsuperscript{36}

On the surface, her high profile visit to the National Assembly of Serbia can be seen as a reaction to the increasingly close relations of the Serbian and Russian political elites. Since 2008 there has been at least one official visit among the highest ranking officials a year, and in 2016 despite claims to neutrality the Serbian military conducted ten times as many exercises with Russian than Western forces.\textsuperscript{37} At a deeper level, however, the reference to the shifting balance of power and its impact on the stability of international politics ties into works that define Russia as an openly revisionist power.\textsuperscript{38} Activities such as annexing territory amount to a serious challenge to the norms that have defined international relations since at least the Second World War and are considered the foundation of the EU. This competition between actors representing different values is now a firm feature of EU discourse, one

\textsuperscript{34} Bazerkoska, "The European Union and (Frozen) Conflicts in its Neighbourhood", p.236.  
\textsuperscript{36} Federica Mogherini, Speech at the Parliament of Serbia, Belgrade, 3 March 2017.  
\textsuperscript{37} Emilio Cocco. "Where is the European Frontier? The Balkan Migration Crisis and its Impact on Relations Between the EU and the Western Balkans", \textit{European View}, 2017, p.298.  
\textsuperscript{38} David Clark and Andrew Foxhall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans - Cause for Concern?", \textit{The Henry Jackson Society}, 2014, p.3.}
example is offered by Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, who in mid-2018 concluded:

"it would be unwise and almost negligent to leave behind a vacuum that other international actors, whose values do not agree with ours, make use of".  

Here the representation of foreign actors, this time identified as being opposed to the EU's very values, ready to exploit the neglect, or even withdrawal, of the EU reoccurs. Hahn, like Juncker, still credits the EU as being the power with the most room to manoeuvre, but it was by then impossible to deny the growing awareness of competition. The EU could not have ignored reports such as that by the Belgrade based Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies which in 2016 documented over 100 organisations (including student groups, political parties and movements, and Russian-owned foundations or media outlets) in Serbia which push for closer ties to Moscow and aim to discredit enlargement.

Such reports emphasise that while competition in the region can be conceived as against actors like China, Turkey, or the Arab States it is the EU's relationship with Russia that has changed most dramatically and that has the biggest potential to upset enlargement. Hiski Haukkala and Sinikukka Saari assert that the period that followed Crimea marked the lowest ebb in EU-Russian relations since the collapse of the USSR, but even before the crisis both sides already considered the other a bad-faith actor. Within the EU appreciation that Russia was no longer a sincere partner seems to have come as a surprise in 2014, expressed by MEPs in debates on the situation in Ukraine and soon appearing in political declarations and speeches. While it took some time for these apprehensions to filter through into policy, by 2016 they had become a consistent feature best made clear in Mogherini’s foreword to the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) publication where she writes "we have learnt the lesson: my neighbour’s and my partner’s weaknesses are my own weaknesses". The experience in Ukraine at this point clearly began to be translated to the situation in the Western Balkans, again captured best by Mogherini’s statement before the Foreign Affairs Council a year later that "The Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played". By then, of course, this potential had already been expressed in academic

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42 Sandra Kalniete: "unfortunately, for years to come, Russia will not be a strategic partner for Europe but rather a strategic challenge", Situation in Ukraine and state of play of EU-Russia relations (debate), Strasbourg, 16 September 2014. Juncker. Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity, 9 September 2015.
44 Mogherini, Remarks Following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 6 March 2017.
literature since at least 2014 where the Western Balkans was described as, among other similar terms, a contested space.\(^{45}\) In addition, policy papers have detailed how Russia has played on unrealistic expectations of enlargement and exploited ethnic tensions to influence local elites, all the while using economic tools to acquire interests in strategic infrastructure and industries.\(^{46}\) It would be reasonable to assume that EU officials and policymakers, especially those concerned with foreign policy, would be well versed in such methods. Mogherini puts this beyond reasonable doubt when, in conclusions from the Foreign Affairs Council, she cites "disinformation, internal interference, hybrid threats, malicious cyber acts"\(^{47}\) as specifically Russian behaviour that now challenges the EU. This appreciation of new forms of Russian activity was explicitly tied to the enlargement process in the launch of a new policy for the region in February 2018 which, in outlining the projects to advance the process, explained that "particular attention will be paid to providing increased support to capacity-building in the area of cyber-security and the fight against cyber-crime"\(^{48}\).

Hence by 2016 it is surfacing and by 2018 it is obvious that the EU recognises the potential Russia has to challenge their ambitions in the Western Balkans. Indeed, the EU is also aware of the tools and methods favoured by Russia alongside its willingness to use them. What remains to be explored is how the EU understands the consequences of this change, in other words, what they consider the exact threat posed to Europe by an increasing Russian presence to actually be. It is best summarised as the undermining of Europe's stability and prosperity, but also the values on which the European project is based - in brief, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Both aspects have been articulated in the European Parliament while discussing enlargement. Hahn has highlighted the latter in portraying enlargement as "a geostrategic investment in a strong, united Europe, based on common values"\(^{49}\). One can then invert his argument and suppose efforts to impede enlargement will weaken Europe and its core values, be that by enflaming cross border tensions within the Western Balkans or proving that the population of the region care little for the freedoms and values embodied in the EU. In the same debate, MEP Tunne Kelam put emphasis on the former, saying: "The Western Balkans is not a neutral ground. Fake alternatives are promised by Russia, China, Turkey ... The only chance for permanent stability and economic reforms ... is European integration"\(^{50}\). Kelam is referring to the stability and economic transformation of the Western Balkans, instability in the region is understood to threaten that of Europe, while the economic reforms are intended to provide the opportunity for more trade with the region and so restricting reforms limits the EU's economic prosperity.

\(^{46}\) Galeotti. "Russian Storm?"; de Borja Lasheras. Return to Instability, p.4
\(^{47}\) Mogherini. Remarks at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, Luxembourg, 16 April 2018.
\(^{48}\) European Commission. A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans, 2018, p.11.
\(^{49}\) Johannes Hahn. Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans (debate), Strasbourg, 6 February 2018.
\(^{50}\) Tunne Kelam. Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy, 6 February 2018.
The slightly different interpretations of the threat of Russia influence is to be expected from someone who represents the Union itself and another who represents a specific member state. I will explore how these appreciations differ shortly but first, it is necessary to establish that the Member States, specifically the governments of the United Kingdom and then France, have also come to acknowledge the growing influence of Russia in the Western Balkans. Like the EU, by 2018 the UK government was well aware of the increasing Russian presence. The report by the Foreign Affairs Committee *Global Britain and the Western Balkans* published in July 2018 contains plenty of evidence to prove this. It begins, "Russia is capable of exploiting the region's problems and undermining its progress toward peace, prosperity and, ultimately, EU and NATO membership" and later underlines the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 as "evidence of Russia's risk-appetite and willingness to attempt disruption". Such a reaction is not surprising considering that the UK self-identifies as a leading power in resisting Russian aggression and so it would be expected that the government is more sensitive to any interference. This is proven as early as April 2014 when the then Foreign Secretary William Hague stated in an interview with the *Financial Times*:

"Russia's behaviour has laid bare the danger of the creation of economic, political and media power that subverts democratic institutions, particularly in South-East Europe. We will increase our focus on supporting those institutions in European countries vulnerable to the pressure of creeping oligarchisation"  

That this took place only a month after the annexation of the Crimea and was in a daily newspaper attests to the depth of anti-Russian feeling and sensitivity in the UK at both a political and popular level.

Regarding France, there was little active interest in the region at all let alone Russia’s growing influence in it prior to 2017 and the election of Emmanuel Macron. Since then, however, the French government has shown increasing concern about Russian interference in the Western Balkans, but always in connection with, and subservient to, its main goal of stimulating reform of the EU itself. This was made clear in Macron’s Initiative for Europe Speech in late 2017:

"When they fully respect the acquis and democratic requirements, this EU will have to open itself up to the Balkan countries ... securing them to a European Union reinvented in this way is a precondition for their not turning their backs on Europe and moving towards either Russia or Turkey, or towards authoritarian powers that don’t currently uphold our values."

The insistence of a full transformation prior to membership reflects France’s long-held enlargement scepticism, but what is important to note here is, even in a member that has been at worst hostile and at best indifferent to the enlargement process, the introduction of rival powers into the calculation around enlargement is now undeniable.

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Having established that both the EU and its Member States recognise the growing influence of Russia in the Western Balkans it remains necessary to compare their differing appreciations of the nature of the risks and threats posed. As made clear in the French position most members want to avoid hastily including any of the Balkan states. Especially after the experience of Romania and Bulgaria’s accession in 2007, many members believe that problems like corruption and organised crime present a larger potential risk to them and the EU’s stability if enlargement were to be accelerated than maintaining the course and allowing Russian influence to grow in the region. Even a more pro-enlargement and instinctively anti-Russian member like the UK has come to interpret the growing presence as a security risk instead of in terms of defending values. Compare, for example, Hague’s statement in 2014 with Prime Minister Theresa May’s report before Parliament in 2017 where the deteriorating conditions in the region are no longer those to do with creeping oligarchisation subverting democracy but vulnerabilities that can be exploited by terrorists and criminals.54

Admittedly, for the EU security concerns are also important, as explained above the EU is aware that the failure of enlargement risks the Union’s stability and prosperity, yet it is worth considering the more existential threat posed by Western Balkan states prioritising links with Russia. According to Dimitar Bechev, "the Union conceives its foreign policy as one based on the promotion and dissemination of values rather than simply the defence of interests"55. As a result, if the Balkan states reject these values in favour of closer ties to Russia this undermines EU’s legitimacy as an actor in international politics and allows Moscow to portray itself as a rival pole to the EU, regardless of the objective gulf in resources and capacities. This issue is further compounded by enlargement being considered one of the EU’s most successful policies and evidence of its positive role in international politics. Mogherini has said in relation to enlargement policy that the EU has "the confidence that derives from the fact that there is no other power in the world that has so much impact for good on the Western Balkans"56. But this only emphasises the impact that failure to transform the Western Balkans would have on the EU’s status. Arguably it has already begun to as although the majority of academics and analysts still believe accession is inevitable this belief is no longer universal.57 Others go on to specify that it is Russia who is the main challenge to enlargement’s success and has most to gain from its failure.58

58 de Borja Lasheras. Return to Instability, p.4; Marta Szpala. "A New Opening in Relations Between the EU and the Western Balkans", Centre for Eastern Studies, 2018, p.4; Bechev. The Periphery of the Periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro Crisis, ECFR, August 2012, p.7.
The EU Response – Rhetoric and Policy

Having proved that the EU appreciates the growing presence of Russia in the Western Balkans, its potential to upset enlargement, and the likely fallout of such a result it should be expected that the EU has made efforts to oppose this development. Brussels has undoubtedly become more active in the region, especially since 2016 with the EUGS outlining a refocus on the EU’s eastern and southern peripheries, what Spyros Economides refers to as prioritising the politics of proximity over global ambitions. Even within the reduced scope of Europe’s neighbourhood the Western Balkans has experienced a relative increase in attention and diplomatic activity. Highlights include the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in 2018, Juncker’s 2017 and 2018 State of the Union speeches making special mention of enlargement, and the new enlargement strategy launched in 2018. The Berlin Process, a multilateral process led by select Member States, is also part of this package but will be discussed later. To track how a change in rhetoric has informed a policy shift it is appropriate to start once more with the State of the Union speeches, in 2017 Juncker declared:

"it is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission ... no candidate is ready. But thereafter the EU will be greater than 27 in number."

This may not seem at first like a ringing endorsement of the accession prospects of the candidate states but taken in comparison to 2014’s statement that negotiations would merely be continued there is more of a sense of a concrete timeframe being offered. Alternatively, to prove the renewed interest of the EU in the region 2017’s speech could be compared to the two previous years where enlargement was not even mentioned and the region as a whole was only included in relation to the refugee crisis. Better yet one could compare the interest in the region to the State of the Union addresses by José Manuel Barroso, Juncker’s predecessor, which saw the entire Western Balkans mentioned only once in four years.

An even clearer commitment to the region was set down in writing by February 2018’s new enlargement strategy, which spelt out that Montenegro and Serbia now had the potential to become full members by 2025. This was the first time a definite date has been offered to these candidates and was clearly intended to offset both popular and elite frustration with the pace of enlargement. Although the extent to which Montenegrin policymakers, who consider their country the clear frontrunner, enjoyed being pegged to Serbia’s progress is highly doubtful. Nevertheless, EU officials trumpeted the policy, with Hahn claiming that it successfully put the recent flurry of activity into "concrete terms".

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60 Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017.

Admittedly, the extent to which the policy’s flagship initiatives\textsuperscript{62} will actually further the process of accession has been called into doubt by some analysts. Marta Szpala, for example, believes that the preference for sectoral integration over real economic and democratic reform will only benefit entrenched elites and that the new policy does little but maintain momentum in accession talks.\textsuperscript{63}

Regardless, that the EU cares about the momentum of negotiations remains undeniable and is an indication that their previously dormant or passive approach to enlargement policy has changed and taken on more importance in EU decision making. This is further illustrated by the Sofia Summit in May 2018 which was the first summit of this scale since Thessaloniki in 2003 and used as an opportunity for the entire EU to again reaffirm its unequivocal support for the Western Balkans’ European perspective. A couple of caveats must be acknowledged regarding the summit, the first is that member state support was not ubiquitous with the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy snubbing the event due to Kosovo’s inclusion. This was despite the Western Balkan attendees being referred to as 'partners' instead of states and the fact that accession itself was not actually up for discussion. Regarding the latter point, the lack of explicit reference to accession should not detract from the focus on connectivity between the EU and the Western Balkans which included diversifying energy sources and routes, aligning foreign policy positions and fighting disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats. All have been previously acknowledged as areas of Russian influence and activity and function as a reminder of the EU’s motivations and ambitions in these talks.

That this increase in activity was influenced by the EU’s recognition of growing Russian influence should be stressed once more. It is no coincidence that 2016, a year that featured a Russian backed coup attempt in Montenegro but also allegations that Russia was using disinformation campaigns to meddle in France and the USA’s presidential elections, seems to have been the tipping point in the EU’s enhanced approach to the Western Balkans. The role of external powers has even been publicly acknowledged by Aivo Orav, the EU’s ambassador to Montenegro, who conceded that although "the influence of third parties does not bring anybody into the EU. At the same time, due to this influence, I believe that the EU has become so active in the area."\textsuperscript{64} What is clear is that although Russian influence has not led to the EU lowering its conditions on political and economic transformation in an effort to accelerate accession, the EU has now accepted they need to prove that they are truly engaged with the region in order to further encourage its political elites down that path.

\textsuperscript{62} Those six initiatives are to: Strengthen the Rule of Law, Reinforce Engagement on Security and Migration, Enhance Support for Socio-Economic Development, Increase Connectivity, Establish a Digital Agenda, Support Reconciliation and Good Neighbourly Relations
\textsuperscript{64} Sarantis Michalopoulos, "Balkans should build on momentum, focus on reforms — EU ambassador", EURACTIV, 3 July 2018, https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/balkans-should-build-on-momentum-focus-on-reforms-eu-ambassador.
At this point a look at how the EU has been putting increased pressure on Serbia in particular, especially regarding the alignment of its foreign policy positions, is also illustrative of the EU’s response to growing Russian influence. The origin of this conflict lies in the sanctions imposed by the EU and its Member States on Russia following the annexation of the Crimea. These sanctions were also imposed by the Western Balkans states bar Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Conspicuously, Serbia’s refusal came only months after their accession negotiations began and has plagued them ever since. The EU’s rhetoric on the matter has slowly intensified over time, note Tusk’s earlier conclusions to the European Council in 2015 that he had "expressed the EU’s expectation that Serbia progressively aligns with the EU’s positions in the process up to accession"\(^{65}\). This sentiment of *progressive* alignment was reiterated in further council conclusions and in progress reports in both 2015 and 2016 and while it betrays a discomfort with Belgrade refusing to oppose Moscow there is also no attempt to employ leverage to change their policy, also betraying a belief (or perhaps hope) that alignment will come about almost automatically. By mid-2018, however, the EU position’s witnessed a small but significant shift with the Council of the EU calling:

> "on Serbia to progressively align with the EU common foreign and security policy, *in line with the Negotiating Framework, and to reverse the current declining trend as a matter of priority* [my emphasis]\(^{66}\).

Here the same language of progressive alignment is accompanied with an underlined sense of urgency, an explicit statement that Serbia’s current stance is regarded negatively by the EU, and an assessment that they are currently violating the agreed terms of accession negotiations. With that final point in particular able to be interpreted as establishing a justification for suspending future enlargement talks if need be. Furthermore, by 2018 the desire to enhance dialogues relating to alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy (as well as its common security and defence policy) had made their way into practice with the new enlargement policy singling out increased "participation in actions related to hybrid threats, intelligence, space issues and defence and security sector reform"\(^{67}\). This shows renewed efforts by the EU to engage with Western Balkan states, and even if they cannot get Serbia to introduce sanctions on Russia it is at least able to work with it to combat other areas of challenging Russian activity in the region.

The new policy is also a reminder that the EU has begun to not only rely on rhetorical pressure. One alternative has been the persistent use of the ‘regatta principle’ - each country progresses toward accession individually based on its own merit – to stress the distinctions between a certain candidate and the frontrunner, in this case Montenegro. For example, after his meeting with Prime Minister of Montenegro Duško Marković in January 2017 Tusk

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\(^{65}\) Donald Tusk. Remarks after his meeting with Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, Brussels, 21 April 2015.

\(^{66}\) Council of the EU. Conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process, 18 June 2018.

declared that "in foreign policy, Montenegro is already a de-facto EU member. You are steadfast in protecting our values and interests ... and you apply our sanctions against Russia". This would have sent a signal to Serbia of what is expected of them to become accepted as EU members. Such remarks are backed up by the Council signing off on Montenegro’s progress in talks having opened 32 out of 33 negotiation chapters (to Serbia’s 16) and closed three of them, most importantly chapter 30 on external relations. The other alternative strategy to rhetorical pressure on Serbia has been rhetorical pandering. Accepting the competitive advantage and legitimacy Russia has in relation to issues of identity due to its shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage and denial of Kosovo’s independence, the EU has appealed to these concerns directly in recent years. The most noticeable instance was a speech Tusk delivered in Belgrade (in Serbian) that referred to national heroes like Nikola Tesla and Novak Djoković and concluded that “Together we can win almost everything ... above all mutual respect and preserving national identity". It will be some time before the effectiveness of these different strategies become apparent but what cannot be ignored are the new methods the EU has employed to try and persuade Serbia into weakening its reliance on Russia.

In fact, while these efforts to exert pressure on Balkan leaders may seem unimpressive they mark a significant break from the past. The EU has faced consistent criticism in the literature and debate on enlargement for prioritising security in the region – and so its own stability – over genuine democratic transformation. This has led it to support Bieber’s ‘minimal states’ whose institutions are so weak they do not infringe on sub-state units, and so avoid provoking conflict, but because of this are not anywhere near strong enough to hold up the *acquis communautaire* (the body of laws all EU Member States have to enforce). This has prevented the genuine democratic and economic reforms necessary for accession to the Union and has meant that local elites, such as Vučić in Serbia and Milo Đukanović in Montenegro, are able to shore up their own political and economic power bases and move toward becoming illiberal strongmen. This stagnation speaks to the EU’s predisposition for the status quo over radical change, previously seen in their opposition in 2006 to Montenegro’s referendum on independence and peaceful separation from Serbia. The slowing down of enlargement then creates this odd situation where every party’s proposed aim of full Europeanisation as soon as possible has been frustrated yet all groups benefit from it. The elites in Candidate States gain by having their regimes entrenched, the EU by not seeing the boat rocked too much, and the Member States who are in no rush to see the Union expand.

We are beginning to see a transformation in regard to the EU’s attitude, however, with attempts to redefine the enlargement debate and the discourse that surrounds it. The main

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69 Tusk. Remarks after his meeting with President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia, Belgrade, 25 April 2018.
manifestation of this approach has been efforts to create new in and out groups to motivate both the Member States and candidates to develop a new appreciation of the process. It amounts to portraying the Western Balkans as already being in/within Europe, included in a discursive representation of Europe which makes enlargement simply a detail that will confirm the already existing reality of the region as a part of the European community. Mogherini has led the way by projecting this representation in Brussels, tackling negative and exclusionary tropes, "Some say [the Western Balkans] is the backyard. It is not the backyard: it is Europe"\textsuperscript{73}, as well as offering positive statements: "the Western Balkans are within the Member States of the EU. We share a cultural heritage, we share the same interests at present .. and we will share a common future inside our EU"\textsuperscript{74}. She has also furthered this idea in the region itself claiming: "our Union will not be complete as long as Serbia, and all the Western Balkans, will not join our family"\textsuperscript{75}. The region has been seen as the last piece of the EU puzzle ever since the 2007 expansion physically enclosed it,\textsuperscript{76} but the use of the metaphor of the single family or community work to give a technical process more of a sense of obligation for all parties involved.

Of course, these ideas do not permeate throughout the entire EU discourse on the Western Balkans. Hahn, even while promoting the new enlargement strategy, declared "we must not leave a vacuum on our doorstep [my emphasis]"\textsuperscript{77} and in the same parliamentary debate Andor Delian MEP, although pro-enlargement, contributed that "in 2014 ... it seemed enlargement fatigue was irreversible. However, the migrant crisis and the security challenges pointed up the fact that Europe needs the Western Balkans [my emphasis]". Both comments position the region discursively as outside of Europe. With an MEP that represents the people of a specific state this portrayal might be more expected, but it is concerning in Hahn's case given his role in the Commission. However, Mogherini has been supported in her efforts by other high ranking officials such as Tusk who, at the Sophia Summit, spoke of there being "no other alternative, there is no plan B. The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe and they belong to our community"\textsuperscript{78}. In talking about belonging Tusk also gets to the exclusionary effect of creating in groups, the formation of out groups. It should not be forgotten that the EU’s re-engagement with the Western Balkans has been triggered by Russia’s growing influence so efforts to redefine who belongs within the European family also work to establish others as definitively outside of it, thus making Russia seem an inappropriate or even unnatural ally for Candidate States.

\textsuperscript{73} Mogherini. Speech at the opening session of the 2017 EU ambassadors Conference Brussels, Brussels, 28 August 2017.
\textsuperscript{74} Mogherini. Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy, 6 February 2018.
\textsuperscript{75} Mogherini. Speech at the Parliament of Serbia, Belgrade, 3 March 2017.
\textsuperscript{76} Keil and Arkan. "The limits of normative power?", in Keil and Arkan. The EU and Member State Building p.18.
\textsuperscript{77} Hahn. Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy, 6 February 2018.
\textsuperscript{78} Tusk. Remarks after EU-Western Balkans Summit, Sofia, 17 May 2018.
The Member State Response

While the Member States may not yet be embracing their Balkan neighbours to the extent the European Commission would like this does not mean that they have not also felt a need to change their policy toward the region in light of the growing influence of other powers. This is best seen in the multilateral effort, known as the Berlin Process, to re-engage with the Western Balkan states, but first, the actions of individual members are also worth considering. In the case of the UK, one might expect it to have led the way given its history of support for enlargement and antagonism toward Russia. But while these characteristics saw the UK be more sensitive to increasing Russian assertiveness, throughout the 2010s government support for enlargement steadily became a victim to an increasingly toxic domestic debate on migration and growing popular euro-scepticism that restricted the political incentives for a renewed engagement with the region. This was compounded by the fact that beyond the intervention over Kosovo the British public feels little connection to the region and so lacks any sense of obligation to the enlargement process. This deep-seated public disinterest has long been reflected by their elected representatives, for example, in 2011 the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee had the opportunity to interview Baroness Ashton, then the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, regarding enlargement policy. The Western Balkans was practically ignored, however, with MPs deeming Turkey’s torturous accession process as much more important.

The end result is that while the UK has remained committed to EU enlargement and resisting Russian activism in a general sense, a particular disinterest in the Balkan region and a domestic atmosphere opposed to increased EU expansion have come to prevent successive governments from making re-engagement with the region a foreign policy priority. This is despite that they have come to recognise that the two commitments now have considerable overlaps. The most significant attempt to resist growing Russian influence bilaterally came in the form of the Good Governance Fund announced in March 2015 and which is set to run until 2021. It supports progress in Serbia, Bosnia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in areas such as anti-corruption; improving the business environment; judicial reform; strengthening the rule of law; supporting independent media. Or, as then Prime Minister David Cameron explicitly put it, "the reforms needed to build lasting stability in the region, especially in the face of Russian intimidation." Thus, it is obvious that the programme was a shift in policy to contest Russian influence in the Western Balkans while supporting those changes in Serbia and Bosnia that directly influence the pace of enlargement. Furthermore, that Serbia and Bosnia were included alongside post-Soviet states that contain Russian satellite states reflects the seriousness with which the British government has assessed the level of Russian involvement there. Of course, the level at which the UK can sustain its support for EU enlargement when it is itself working to leave the Union has been called into question since

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80 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. EU Enlargement and Foreign Policy: Oral and Written Evidence, 21 November 2011.
the Brexit referendum in 2016. Ker-Lindsay believes "the decision to leave the EU has now rendered the UK wholly irrelevant in the enlargement debate", an opinion shared by others.82 Yet, while this might be what the EU would prefer, for the British continued involvement in the Western Balkans offers the opportunity to prove they are still involved in the European continent if not Union.

Whereas the UK’s pro-enlargement position has continued steadily hardening since - although not because of - the annexation of Crimea, France’s long-held scepticism of the process has slightly softened. Significantly, resistance to previous enlargements was only overcome by the Member States being granted new controls over the process,83 yet by 2018 even France has been convinced the risk of the Western Balkans falling under external influence justified a reappraisal of enlargement policy, admittedly within limits. One reason for this could be the extensive benchmarks already applied to candidates in the region, but an appreciation of the changing balance of power in the region is better detected in President Macron’s speech before the European Parliament in April 2018:

"Le risque géopolitique qui est le nôtre, c'est de voir les Balkans Occidentaux dériver ou vers la Turquie ou vers la Russie ... mais, pour ma part, je ne défendrai un élargissement que quand il y aura d'abord un approfondissement et une réforme de notre Europe"84.

Reflecting the executive driven nature of French foreign policy Macron highlighted both the importance of the Western Balkan states remaining close to Europe but also ensured this does not supersede his main foreign policy ambition of a comprehensive reform of the EU first. It is worth keeping in mind that this is not a particularly controversial or obstructionist position to take up and, if anything, mirrors the new enlargement policy’s conviction that "our Union must be stronger and more solid, before it can be bigger"85. In this sense, it is possible to see in France that those states opposed to further rapid enlargements are coming to share the European Commission’s appreciation of the need to keep the Western Balkan region on side, even in the face of other pressing priorities. Wunsch quite rightly considers that France’s approach to enlargement has been and continues to be firm but passive allowing others to take the lead, yet she is wrong to say support does not significantly go beyond rhetoric, this ignores France’s involvement in the Berlin Process.86

This multilateral process began in 2014, instigated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and involving all six Western Balkan ‘partners’ alongside a growing list of Member States.87 The first summit was framed as commemorating the beginning of the First World War – which itself has obvious connotations regarding the persistent place the Balkans holds in the European imagination. However, the process has always functioned as an attempt to

82 Ker-Lindsay. “The UK and EU Enlargement”, p.556. See also Szpala. “A New Opening in Relations”, p.3.
84 Macron. Debate with the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, on the Future of Europe, Strasbourg, 17 April 2018.
87 Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Slovenia are the only EU members that have attended every summit. France, Italy and the UK have each hosted one.
maintain momentum behind enlargement negotiations, particularly after Juncker’s speech to the European Parliament in 2014 made further accession seem distant. Like the new EU enlargement policy it in part inspired, this momentum has been sought through a focus on increasing connectivity both between Member and Candidate States and within the latter. Admittedly, it is another question altogether to prove that the process is a reaction against growing Russian influence over the region, but the signs are there. Implicitly, the first conference took place in August only months after the annexation of the Crimea so it is not too bold to suggest that Russian aggression would have been in the minds of the organisers and participants. Moreover, this particular motivation behind enhancing interaction with Balkan political elites has always been appreciated in the policy debate that surrounds each summit. On a similar timeframe to reactions we have seen within EU institutions the most explicit reference to the role of the Berlin Process in opposing Russia’s developing role in the region came in 2017 where the concluding declaration by the Italian hosts established that the

"participants agreed on the need to renew the political engagement to make sure that each of the Western Balkans partners makes irreversible steps forward in the European path and that democracy, stability and association efforts are not put on hold due to internal divisions or to external influences. [my emphasis]"

Furthermore, the following summit in London added a security element by introducing a roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in the Western Balkans by 2024. Considering that arming nationalist militias has been recognised as a key source of Russian influence in Serbia and the Republika Srpska, it was also undeniably an attempt by the Member States to counter such actions. This roadmap could also be criticised as the Member States co-opting the Berlin Process to focus on issues pertaining to their interests in stability over the reforms necessary for enlargement and feeds into a policy debate that has surrounded the Berlin Process since its inception. Szpala makes a variation of this argument in referring to the centrality of connectivity and economic reforms to the process. In her opinion, this decision, motivated by the belief that "the bad economic situation is the main cause of the Balkan democracies’ weakness", has and will face resistance by attacking local elites’ economic power base without making any effort to sure up rule of law. Similarly, Donika Emini considers that the Berlin process, by introducing new projects such as the Balkan Transport Community, risks crowding out the essential work of democratic reforms. Thus, the Member States are pulled between wanting to maintain momentum in enlargement negotiations as a way to prevent Western Balkan elites turning toward Russia, or increasing their commitment to reforms that

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89 Declaration by the Italian Chair, Trieste Summit, 12 July 2017.
will lead to the necessary political changes at the cost of alienating that same elite. A challenge also faced by the EU as it increases its attention on the Western Balkans.
Explaining the Limitations of Policy Change

So far it is clear not only that the EU and its Member States have recognized the growing presence of Russia in the Western Balkans but that they have taken steps toward either obstructing that presence or ensuring they have a more active presence themselves. The question remains, however, of why they have not done more to significantly change how enlargement is negotiated or to increase its pace. Much of the limitations lay with the EU instead of the Member States. This is to be expected given both the EU’s central role in overseeing enlargement and its size and complex bureaucratic nature. It takes time for the necessity of a policy change to be negotiated, agreed to and executed. However, this has been further complicated by the pro-enlargement European Commission’s steady loss of control over the process to the more sceptical Member States.

In what has been called the nationalisation or politicisation of enlargement members have introduced several ways to slow and control the process, a key development being the introduction of mandatory milestones within negotiating chapters that candidates have to reach. These are then signed off (or not) by the European Council and allow the members to act as gatekeepers to accession. This is because while the Member States are nervous about Russia’s expanding influence and see enlargement as a security strategy to control the risk of ethnic conflict, they continue to be more concerned with the threat to the stability of the EU once candidates are in it than with the threat to European security while they are outside it. This then has an irresistible impact on the makeup of pro-enlargement EU institutions such as the collapsing in 2014 of the previously separate Commissioner for Enlargement into the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. The diverging interests between the EU and its members concerning enlargement, despite shared discomfort over Russian presence in the Western Balkans, results ultimately in a loss of credibility for the EU as it currently operates and perceives itself. In other words, The EU and its officials (self)identify it as a liberal power based on its commitments to democratic governance, human rights and free market economics. These norms are considered universal.

These are of course factors worth keeping in mind, but a more interesting dynamic to consider is what a shift in enlargement policy from one that assumes the EU’s values have transformative power to one that more enthusiastically engages in the defence of its interests would mean for the EU as it currently operates and perceives itself. In other words, The EU and its officials (self)identify it as a liberal power based on its commitments to democratic governance, human rights and free market economics. These norms are considered universal.

93 O’Brennan "The Slow Train.", pp.221-41.
94 Christophe Hillion. "Masters or Servants? Member States in the EU Enlargement Process", in Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat. EU Member States and Enlargement Towards the Balkans, European Policy Centre, 2015, p.25.
and acceptance of them forms the basis of accession for enlargement candidates, as a result, shifting away from them or reducing their importance would require the EU to drastically rethink its own foundations and its role in world politics. There is little evidence of such a leap seeming necessary to EU officials, even appreciating Russia’s growing presence they believe they remain in an overwhelmingly dominant position in the Western Balkans. This is an idea that is, as shown in the literature review, supported by most of the academic and policy literature on enlargement.

Tusk has been particularly keen to express that the EU outperforms all rivals in the Western Balkans when it comes to economic power, saying before the European Parliament in April 2018:

"the EU is and will continue to be the most reliable partner for the entire region. As the biggest investor, the biggest donor, the biggest trading market and the best promise for a better future for citizens."  

Less than 10 days later he spoke along similar lines in front of Balkan leaders at a regional summit:

"[the EU] remain[s] steadfast in our offer of a European perspective to the region ... And these are not empty words ... Just an example: if we look at the Western Balkan countries' total trade, 73% is with the EU. Twelve times bigger than China. Fifteen times more than Russia."

Here we see a confidence in Western Balkan policy as it currently functions, the areas where the EU far outpaces all its rivals - not just Russia - such as trade, investment and the attraction of a high standard of living are considered the most important aspects of its relations with the region. There is an expectation that Western Balkan elites and populations will give these factors the same weight the EU does, that what they think defines a reliable partner equates entirely to what makes a reliable trade partner. There has been remarkable continuity on this front, for example, on his first trip to Serbia in 2014 Hahn claimed:

"already today two-thirds of the foreign investments are coming from countries of the EU, two-thirds of import-export ... is going to and coming from the EU, so the EU is by far the most important economic and trade partner in Serbia."

This continuity helps emphasise that the recognition of Russian influence did little to upset the view that the EU’s economic and commercial strength and resources can offset any regional rivalry. Hence, even when the new enlargement policy was launched in 2018, itself an acceptance that something had to change, the debate in parliament saw repeated and heavy use of the trope of Europe’s magnetic force and ability to wield it as a transformative

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power. A case in point is Hahn’s statement that the EU "must use our 'soft power' of attraction, this magnetic force of the EU, more efficiently and smartly"\textsuperscript{101}

The use of the metaphor of magnetic force has been criticised in the past and although Hahn admits it has not been as effective as it could be, to Aydin-Düzgit he still uses a trope that lacks self-reflexivity, in which the EU is represented as so superior to the target that its attraction must be self-evident.\textsuperscript{102} Of course, a prosperous lifestyle for citizens and the investment and aid that make it possible are a very important part of the accession calculation for Balkan policymakers, but it has been suggested that financial incentives have their largest impact when a country is at the beginning of the process and both Montenegro and Serbia have seen considerable progress already.\textsuperscript{103} Moreover while it has been shown that young Serbians recognise that the EU offers a better standard of living to aspire to,\textsuperscript{104} that does not necessarily mean they favour its political systems and social standards, besides, due to the positive image of Russia in the country it is common for Serbians to believe that Russia is actually the country’s largest source of aid.\textsuperscript{105} Regardless, the belief in this power of attraction means the European Commission remains confident in the EU’s ability to change such opinions, as Mogherini told a meeting of EU foreign ministers in 2017:

"I am not worried about the influence or presence of any of the other partners that countries in the region can have ... when the EU is there - and it is there with all its power, with all its presence coherently - there is no other partner that has a stronger influence."\textsuperscript{106}

Like with Hahn, for Mogherini what matters is having this power targeted in the right way and with consistency. The idea that local political and social sensitivities that come from national identities can also impact decision making in the Western Balkans does not register too strongly. This is all the more worrying given it is exactly these dynamics in Slavic and Orthodox states that Moscow can draw similarities with and disparage Brussels as distant, foreign and technocratic.\textsuperscript{107}

This gets to a similar but distinct point to make regarding the EU’s self-identity as a liberal power. Even if the EU were not confident in the strength of its position in the Western Balkans that does not change the fact it is both reluctant and poorly equipped to respond to Russian actions that seek to expand its influence at the EU’s expense. Mogherini gave an indication of this stance at the Bled Strategic Forum in 2017:

"On one hand, there is a confrontational approach to the issues of our times. A mind-set based on transactions, on zero-sum games ... On the other, the hard work that’s leads to win-win solutions, compromises and multi-lateral approaches ... We know that cooperative solutions are more solid and more resilient in times of crisis."\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{101} Hahn Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy, 6 February 2018.
\textsuperscript{102} Aydin-Düzgit. "Critical Discourse Analysis in Analysing European Union Foreign Policy", p.362.
\textsuperscript{103} Glüpker. "Effectiveness of EU Conditionality in the Western Balkans", p.225.
\textsuperscript{104} CEAS. Eyes Wide Shut, p.11.
\textsuperscript{105} Galeotti. “Russian Storm?”.
\textsuperscript{106} Mogherini. Remarks following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 13 November 2017.
\textsuperscript{107} Belloni, 'The EU Blowback?', p.539.
\textsuperscript{108} Mogherini. Speech at the 2017 Bled Strategic Forum.
Present in this excerpt is an awareness of a general clash in value systems in world politics which can be easily translated to the developing rivalry in the Western Balkans, as can the EU’s unwillingness to change its approach. Russia is able to play a weak hand well in the Western Balkans by not abiding by such rigid limitations, it can manipulate existing tensions by supporting coup attempts or arming nationalist groups in order to further its aims or just obstruct those of the EU. The EU simply cannot and so does not operate in a similar style. Even when it has conceded that there should be acceptable cases of hard power use, as it did with the EUGS paper in 2016 such shifts have come with heavy caveats. Economides’ assessment of the EUGS claimed that "a revisionist challenge is accelerating the need for and process by which the EU develops its strategic agenda", in other words, that the attraction of conducting international relations through more actively guarding its own interests is becoming harder and harder to resist. Looking at the EUGS itself the impetus for Economides’ claim is quite clear:

"The EU has always prided itself on its soft power... because we are the best in this field. However, the idea that Europe is an exclusively "civilian power" does not do justice to an evolving reality".109

A more careful reading of the paper, however, shows a conservative evolution in policy and a reluctance to move beyond the idea that the EU’s "enduring power of attraction can spur transformation".111 This slow change can be in part explained by the fact that the EU lacks the intelligence gathering or military capabilities necessary to project hard power and that if it were to attain these one day it would be the result of a long slow process to gain the unanimous support of its Member States. In the meantime, any attempts to use hard power must rely on the resources of those same states and doing so would discredit the EU’s status as an autonomous actor in its own right and as a model for a different way of conducting international relations.

The case of Serbia’s increasingly close relationship to Russia serves to illustrate the limitations facing the EU in its effort to protect the enlargement process from growing Russian influence. As shown in a previous chapter the EU has reacted to this relationship by attempting to exert rhetorical pressure on Serbia to change its foreign policy. This does not mean calls to do more have not taken place within the EU, key voices such as David McAlister, the Special Rapporteur to the European Parliament on Serbia, expressed in 2016 that a stricter signal must be sent "to Serbia that continuing a dual approach to Russia could not be tolerated over the long term because Russia’s aggressiveness cannot be tolerated".112 However, the fact that this signal has not also involved actual attempts to exert leverage on Serbia, by either withholding funding or suspending negotiations, shows the EU is unable to force policy change. Such attempts at coercion would undermine the invitational and consensual conception of enlargement which is premised on being a peaceful and democratic process.

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This has led the EU to continue relying on its powers of attraction and hope that as the enlargement process plays out Serbia will align itself with the EU, a position evidenced by the decision to open chapter 30 negotiations in December 2017 despite there being no indication that Serbia was going to introduce sanctions on Russia. This lack of progress runs against the thesis laid out in Chandler’s *Empire in Denial* that during accession talks local policy is decided in Brussels then implemented by elected officials under the guidance of EU administrators.\(^\text{113}\) This view, which was predicated on there being no “political alternatives”\(^\text{114}\) to the EU, has been weakened by the fact that although Russia may not be an economic alternative it presents itself as a political one, exacerbating the EU’s own limitations in the Western Balkans.

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\(^{113}\) Chandler, David. *Empire in Denial*.  
\(^{114}\) *Ibid*, p.122.
Conclusion

Russia's efforts to extend its influence internationally since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 forced a general rethink of Brussels' relationship with Moscow. In the case of the enlargement process, I have detailed how the EU and its Member States have not only come to recognise Russia's growing influence in the Western Balkans and the exact threat it poses but have begun to respond to it. Moreover, while this initial response may seem light I have also explored the significance of the accompanying changes in rhetoric and policy as well as offered explanations of their continuing limitations.

While it took until 2016 for the EU to begin articulating that a more assertive Russia could upset their ambitions in the Western Balkans, it is now more than clear that they appreciate the developing rivalry in the region. This development can be traced in the rhetoric of its highest officials. Take Juncker's most recent State of the Union speech in September 2018, direct references to Russia's impact on the Western Balkans were scarce but the admission that the EU was no longer the only power that can shape the region can be tied into a broader discussion of the activity of revisionist powers in recent world politics. As regards enlargement policy, and especially its success in states with significant Orthodox populations, there can be no doubt Russia is the revisionist power that most concerns EU decision makers. Concerns about hybrid threats and cyber-crimes, but also the exploitation of energy dominance have been specifically referred to as areas of Russian foreign policy that test the existing order in Europe and alongside acts such as annexation amount to a challenge to the rules and values that inform the legitimacy of the EU's foreign policy - on which it depends for the success of enlargement. Although increasing Russian influence in the Western Balkans thus amounts to an existential threat to the EU but not its Member States this does not mean the latter group is less sensitive to Russian activities in the region. There is however a spectrum broadly determined by a state's historical animosity to Russia and its leaders' interest in the Western Balkans. The UK and France feature on opposite ends of this spectrum, and as a result, the UK even pre-empted the EU's own concerns about Russia, yet by 2017 both nations factored the presence of Russia into their changing position on enlargement. This shows that the threat Russia poses to enlargement's eventual success has been recognised alike by the EU and its constituent states.

Both groups' response to this has been a re-engagement with Western Balkan states to show that they remain serious about enlargement. For members this energy has been mostly channelled through the Berlin Process, a series of annual summits since 2014 that aimed to increase the physical, economic and social connections of the region both within itself as well as with the rest of Europe. This connectivity agenda has been criticised for shying away from the serious reforms that even frontrunners like Montenegro and Serbia still need to undertake to really progress toward EU membership, and so become firmly entrenched into European structures. While valid, this obscures how the agenda is also opposed to the expansion of Russian influence by working to build resilience against its key sources, such as cyber activity and disinformation campaigns. The EU's own new enlargement policy published in 2018 borrows heavily from the Berlin Process' ambitions and motivations and the EU has similarly pursued summit diplomacy, most notably with the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in 2018, the first of its kind in 15 years. The EU supersedes its members, however, in
how it has made the region a foreign policy priority since 2016. This is evidenced in enlargement featuring prominently in the two most recent State of the Union speeches and the sheer frequency in which Mogherini and Hahn have visited the Western Balkans' various capitals and conferences. This has been accompanied with an intensification of rhetoric on enlargement intended to both reach out to Candidate States and rally Member States to the cause of enlargement. This has involved attempting to redefine just what Europe is - a single community brought together by shared values and that will share a common union. Such representations attempt to both impress upon the Member States a sense of obligation toward their neighbours and to act as a reminder of the precise boundaries of Europe - authoritarian Russia is by definition excluded. This makes Serbia's - and until recently Montenegro's - close relationship with Russia an interesting case. Despite a hardening of rhetoric due to Serbia's refusal to introduce sanctions over the Ukraine crisis and alignment of foreign policy being essential to accession, the EU has not attempted to force Belgrade's hand.

This is essentially because the EU does not have the hard power ability to coerce the Western Balkan states into Europeanisation and even if it did, to do so would irreversibly undermine the invitational and consensual basis of enlargement. For this reason, the legitimacy of the enlargement process would not survive being used to forcefully secure the Western Balkan states to the EU. Regardless, there is little appetite in the EU for such a change in the approach to enlargement. The expansion of the EU is generally considered one of its most successful policies and a source of great confidence in the strength of the EU and its liberal values. Excessive changes to the principles of enlargement would be an implicit admission that the EU has lost some of its magnetic attraction and that the economic power which underpins such a belief is becoming less effective in a changing international environment. In this sense, the process needs to be better targeted rather than substantially altered. Evidence of this can be seen in efforts to improve the momentum of the enlargement process without changing its methods, such as, introducing the connectivity agenda but not loosening the benchmarks each individual candidate must reach prior to accession. The continuing apprehension felt by the Member States of rapid expansion of the Union is another reason for the persistence of rigid benchmarks and the regatta principle. Although they are aware of the risks of growing Russian influence in their neighbourhood this has not overcome fears of the stability of the EU and the security risks posed by the Candidate States themselves. These factors have combined to see enlargement policy and rhetoric significantly tweaked but not radically changed. Yet, given the lumbering nature of the EU, the changes seen even from 2016-2018 of how Russian influence in the Western Balkans has been identified and responded to emphasises the concern it attracts within the EU over the future success of European enlargement.
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