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## **The French perspective on EU enlargement and vision towards the Western Balkans**

**Nebojsa Vukadinovic**

The Thessaloniki summit in 2003 strongly affirmed that the Western Balkans would join the European Union. Twenty years later, an impression of an endless and culminating membership process has emerged. However, many efforts have been made by the European Union through aid instruments and the establishment of IPA pre-accession funds since 2007. Currently, these funds, with multi-year budgets, are in their third IPA III phase for the period 2021-2027. Efforts have also been made to strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine has also contributed to raising the question of the timetable and the exact date of the accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union. Given this context, several points are worth raising. First, France and the EU member states participate financially in the IPA pre-accession funds. These funds support institutions in the Western Balkan countries for the implementation of reforms in relation to EU accession. They also contribute to strengthening civil society. However, the amounts allocated are low in comparison with the needs and strategic orientations of the countries concerned. The amounts are also small if compared to the amounts that had been disbursed by Germany for the integration of East Germany. Finally, the amounts are particularly low in comparison with the structural funds from which the member states of the European Union can benefit. On several occasions, the proposal to increase the pre-accession funds<sup>1</sup> was presented in conferences, as was the possibility for the Western Balkan States to access structural funds during the accession process. However, this possibility comes up against the system of multi-annual programming of European funds, which suggests that a possibility of increasing European funds for the Western Balkans could not take place before 2028, after the period of allocation of IPA III (2021- 2027) within the framework of the IPA IV funds, if they will be called like that or other instruments that could be set up again for a multi-annual period. The announcement of an economic and investment plan of 9 billion euros<sup>2</sup> for the period 2021-2027 was well received, but the needs are much greater, particularly in the field of infrastructure. In this context, we recommend the organization of debates on EU pre-accession funds, their amounts, their impacts, and their modalities in the processes of their programming and implementation in Western Balkans countries. Secondly, the question of the enlargement framework deserves to be asked. Indeed, a new methodology has already been put in place. The new methodology for EU accession, supported by France, was another occasion to show the strategic interest in the EU integration of the Western Balkans. The new methodology was adopted by the Council in its conclusions of 25 March 2020. This methodology is based on four principles: credibility, predictability, dynamism, and greater political governance. It proposes "grouping the negotiation chapters into six thematic groups" or "clusters", which amounts to classifying the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* in six categories for more readability: rule of law; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources; agriculture and cohesion; and

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Pierre Mirel, *Union européenne-Balkans occidentaux : les illusions perdues ?* Politique étrangère 2022/4, p. 11-25.

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1811](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811)

external relations<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the idea of a stronger commitment by France in the Balkans and of a strengthening of the process of accession to the European Union was the subject of several meetings during the French presidency of the European Union in 2022<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, in France, the idea of a gradual accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union was exposed during the years 2022 and 2023 in several policy papers<sup>5</sup>. The effect of the new methodology should be evaluated. Third, the question of the accession timetable is very important. On this subject, at the beginning of the 2000s, the year 2014 seemed to be a possible horizon, but the more the years passed, this horizon moved away. On February 6, 2018, the European Union (EU) launched a strategy entitled “A credible prospect of enlargement and a strengthening of European engagement with the Western Balkans” which is part of the “Roadmap for a more united, stronger, and more democratic Europe” presented on 13 September 2017. The strategy announced the year 2025 as an indication of the prospect of a possible enlargement. However, a real timetable is not yet on the agenda<sup>6</sup>. The war in Ukraine has changed the situation, and the question of the duration of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union was raised, in particular among the states of the region, mainly after the announcements of applications<sup>7</sup> from new countries that fell under the neighbourhood policy of the European Union. The engagement of several French think-tanks focusing on the Western Balkans since 2019 has highlighted the question of the future of this region. At the state level, France hosted the Berlin Process Conference in 2016. In 2020, France also lifted its reservations about the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The European Union should not give an accession date that cannot be kept in order to avoid an increase in Euroscepticism<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, a realistic period for the accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union should be debated. For each country, it is important to consider a realistic timetable while at the same time knowing if there will be group memberships or not. In addition to these points and recommendations, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans should be fostered through an increase in amounts for IPA Cross-Border Cooperation projects, regional projects in the field of environment, regional education projects, regional projects dedicated to a common understanding of history, and regional projects in higher education and research.

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, *Union européenne: pourquoi la question de l’élargissement aux Balkans est importante*, JDD, 2022. <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/union-europeenne-pourquoi-la-question-de-lelargissement-aux-balkans-est-importante-4103127>

<sup>4</sup> Florent Marciacq, Romain Le Quiniou, (dir.). *L’engagement de la France dans les Balkans occidentaux. Pour un renforcement de la coopération stratégique, politique, économique et sociétale*, Études de l’Ifri, 2022. <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/lengagement-de-france-balkans-occidentaux-un-renforcement-de>

<sup>5</sup> Lukas Macek, *Pour une adhésion graduelle à l’Union européenne*, Policy Paper, Institut Delors, 2023. See: <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/pour-une-adhesion-graduelle-a-lunion-europeenne/>

<sup>6</sup> Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, *Union européenne: pourquoi la question de l’élargissement aux Balkans est importante*, JDD, 2022. <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/union-europeenne-pourquoi-la-question-de-lelargissement-aux-balkans-est-importante-4103127>

<sup>7</sup> Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have submitted their applications for EU membership beginning 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Riviere, Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, Guillaume Kloss, Isabelle Negrier, *How to fight against Euroscepticism among young people*, EuropaNova – Report of the meeting held on Tuesday 27 June 2023.

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