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# Global change starts at the doorstep: Why the Western Balkans matter for Ursula von der Leyen's geopolitical Commission

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# Introduction

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With big words appealing to European values, European unity and European solidarity, emphasizing that the European Union (EU) “can be the shapers of a better global order”<sup>1,2</sup>, Ursula von der Leyen (VdL) began her term as president of the European Commission (EC) ambitiously in 2019. Not less than the “geopolitical commission” is her declared goal. This core idea builds upon the legacy (at least in narrative) of her predecessor Jean-Claude Juncker who was committed to a “new start to Europe” with a “political Commission” in 2014 promising “to rebuild bridges in Europe after the crisis”<sup>3</sup>. This indicates, rightly, an EU-centred approach which was mildly balanced out by the strengthening of former High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini and her vision of a more powerful European Commission to guide a

united group of EU member states through challenging global dynamics, expressed in the 2016 Global Strategy.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the EU still lacks leverage and credibility in foreign affairs, a policy field still dominated by national interests. When it comes to reactions to international issues or global crises, unanimity among member states is difficult to reach. Whether it concerns global market collapse, the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Russia, a refugee emergency outside its borders or an international pandemic as most recently – the EU is considered a laggard in crisis response. This contributes to the EU’s general perception as a rather weak player in global affairs, especially without the backing of strong transatlantic relations. The one region where the EU could – and partly does already –

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<sup>1</sup> All of the following online references were accessed in June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula von der Leyen (November 2019): Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude Juncker (July 2014): A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker--political-guidelines.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> EEAS (June 2016): Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy. (European Union Global Strategy). [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)

exemplify its strength and autonomy is for the time being the Western Balkans, a region of strategic interest and importance to the EU for various reasons.

This paper explores VdL's ambitions for the EU as a global actor by focusing exclusively on the Western Balkan region, starting out with a comparison to the approach of the previous European Commission. It then moves on to look at challenges in the EC's pledge to become a geopolitical player, by looking at how relations between the EU and the WB could develop in the future. That is especially critical, considering that the region is regarded as a geopolitical chessboard when it comes to other external actors. This is why, as will be explored further down, the Western Balkans are not only an area for the EU to exercise the role as global player, but also a region crucial to the international recognition of the EU's integrity, strength and appetite for strategic autonomy.

# Caught in the midst of uncertainty? VdL's European Commission in the context of a reshuffling global order

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Against the backdrop of a more hostile global environment where strongmen abdicate the rules of traditional diplomacy, VdL proposes her ambition as an alternating model. Here, policies are drafted with social welfare and all people's interest in mind whereas multilateralism is regarded an asset, not a sign of weakness. When first presenting her political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen went to the heart of the – today – nebulous European values when demanding “an economy that works for people”, “protecting our European way of life” and a “push for European democracy”. The European

Green Deal and digitalisation were declared key priorities and, evidently, “a stronger Europe in the world” became the defining notion relevant for all portfolios. The new EC acts explicitly as an, ideally strong, actor within global dynamics, following an outward-looking approach. This approach has drawn lessons from strategic shortcomings of before and aims at understanding European integration more than before as key to changing the world order, the European way.

VdL's predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, had to guide the Union through the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis, respond to Brexit and was soon into his term challenged to navigate the migration crisis of 2015/2016, following a very inward-looking approach to crisis management response. Reacting to growing populism and anti-EU sentiments in the Union, Jean-Claude Juncker promised to “renew the EU on the basis of an Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change”<sup>6</sup>. This internally centred approach seemingly impeded

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- <sup>5</sup> Ursula von der Leyen (2019). A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe (Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2019-2024). [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/political-guidelines-next-commission\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Juncker (July 2014): A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker--political-guidelines.pdf>

Juncker to understand the crucial role of the Western Balkans within crisis response. The interconnectedness between the EU and the Western Balkans became dramatically obvious and clearly visible once the migration crisis unfolded along the Balkan route.

Even if his approach was focused primarily on EU integration from within by means of economic cohesion and a socio-economic agenda, Juncker's Commission was not blind to growing pressure from the immediate neighbourhood, primarily concerned with security threats arising from Russia as the Ukraine crisis had just erupted shortly before. Juncker politicized the position of the HR/VP and went into lengths to use the capacities of the Lisbon Treaty for security and defence structures. Looking at the tangible foreign policy output of his Commission the record is however poor. The former EC's single greatest foreign policy success – the Iran deal – is now shattered and reveals the vulnerability of the EU in its dependency on US support.

Overall, foreign policy was not Juncker's main concern – he rather relied on strong transatlantic bonds – and this is best reflected in his, early in his mandate, enlargement stop and call for more time to digest the addition of 13 member states." Relevant then, as it is now, one would have expected for consolidation to be well progressed and even achieved 16 years after the accession of Central and Eastern European "newcomers".

Thus, when taking office, VdL inherited a variety of unsolved crises and, on top, commences her mandate in times when the EU and the world is faced with a pandemic and resulting an economic and social crisis of magnitude not seen in recent history. Both, VdL and Juncker, represent the EU in times of international turmoil, only that the situation did not quite evolve towards a friendlier global context, but quite the opposite in the past five years. Faced with the crisis-torn reality of (European) policy making, VdL picked up on Juncker's vision of a more united Europe, led by a political



Commission, and steered in direction of a distinctively outward-looking perspective. She takes Juncker's promises further, slightly shifting – or rather, emphasizing – priorities. Overall though, the difference between both Commissions lies less in the 'what' and more in the 'how'. Comparing the opening statement of Juncker and VdL one might find distinctive differences, looking however at where Juncker left and where von der Leyen picks up, the new Commission takes forward what the old has begun, however with a distinctively different, more holistic and more interconnected approach which understands and acknowledges the EU as a crucial actor, in – but not limited to – the Western Balkans, within a changing and challenging global context.

The new Commission follows the prepared path in terms of security and defence policy and aims at strengthening the social Europe. At the same time, a novelty, climate change

becomes a key priority; an area in which VdL hopes for the EU Green Deal to champion the EU as global frontrunner and good example for others to follow. Global warming and climate change are a prime example why the EU's leverage and credibility in foreign affairs are crucial. The current EU emissions amount to only 10 per cent of the global percentage, hence a successful Green Deal depends on international cooperation under European lead.<sup>7</sup>

The change in the 'how-to' of VdL's Commission lies in the implicit importance of the foreign, the interconnected global dimension in all aspects. Just as the EU is understood as a part of a greater global system, VdL has called for a more interconnected, more clustered approach. A cooperative approach at eye-level between different EU institutions is part of this deepened cooperation. The EC's president is convinced that "if we are to go down the European path, we must first rediscover our unity. If we are united on the inside, nobody will divide us from the

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<sup>7</sup> Stefan Lehne (Forthcoming): "Geopolitics, the EU and the Western Balkans". A Foreword to the Western Balkan Think Tank Forum Skopje Follow-Up Analyses. Published by IDSCS.

outside”<sup>8</sup>, demanding efforts to cooperate and show solidarity. This approach is reflected in the symbolic distribution of Commission portfolios among different regions of Europe, actively tackling negative attributes (such as the appointment of an Italian for the portfolio of Economy) and the introduction of overarching portfolios which connect concrete policy areas with agendas on European values or norms. VdL presents herself as a true European at heart, a sentiment which she aims to embody in an EC which cares for its citizens and defines liberal standards in the world. In her vision, the Commission becomes an actor to ensure that the EU will rise as strong Western power, filling the gap from the global withdrawal of the US as mediating force.

## Friends with benefits: The importance of the Western Balkans for the Commission’s portfolio success

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The Commission’s new, more outbound-looking approach becomes most evident in the new and determinate approach to EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. This does not necessarily mean that the WB countries will enjoy the same attention given to Central and Eastern European Countries during the 5th wave of enlargement, or to Croatia for that matter. It simply means that VdL is aware of the importance of this policy for EU internal integration – for the sake of the EU’s own geostrategic and geopolitical interest. For her, external action is not limited to one or two portfolios, instead, the global dimension shall be implicit in all activities and portfolios, putting the global strength of the Union at top of the priorities.

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<sup>8</sup> Ursula von der Leyen (November 2019): Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original_en.pdf)

This strength can best be exercised in clear proximity to EU borders and therefore it should not come at much surprise that the VdL's Commission puts the completion of the unification of Europe and continental integrity high up on her agenda.<sup>9</sup> In her political guidelines she reaffirms "the European perspective of the Western Balkans and [sees] an important role in the continued reform process across the region" by mentioning that "we share the same continent, the same history, the same culture and the same challenges, and thus [w]e will build the same future together."

VdL sends an important and long-awaited signal, picking up the sheds her predecessor left her. Out of the 2018 credible enlargement strategy's six flagship initiatives none has shown proper progress, the Kosovo-Serbia relationship are in a deadlock and so seems the visa liberalisation process with Kosovo, progress with Bosnia and Herzegovina moves slowly, democratic backsliding has become evident in Montenegro and

Serbia and finally, Albania and North Macedonia were – at the moment of inauguration – still kept waiting, because the Council could not unite on a positive stance to open accession negotiations. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Despite these daunting premises, the VdL Commission has recognized the strategic interest of the thorough integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, founding their decisive pro-enlargement stance on the notion of EU transformative power and European values, but equally on shared destiny and shared challenges. VdL's political priorities would be hard to tackle coherently without the Western Balkans on board, which had brought her to acknowledge this co-dependency.

A flagship initiative, the EU Green Deal, will lack clout and effectiveness if the Western Balkans remain a polluted island among greened up states. Already today, the energy sectors of EU member states and the Western Balkans are increasingly interconnected within the institutional

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<sup>9</sup> Srdjan Cvijic, Iskra Kirova, Marie Jelenka Kirchner and Zoran Nechev (2019): From enlargement to the unification of Europe: why the European Union needs a Directorate General Europe for future members and association countries. Published by Open Society Foundations. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/42290bc0-c7f1-43cc-9932-c1bd6901a136/from-enlargement-to-the-unification-of-europe-20190628.pdf>

framework of the Energy Community.<sup>10</sup> Exclusion of the Western Balkans from ambitious restructuring plans would be foolish, not least because the region offers great capacities for renewable energies which could serve not only the respective countries.<sup>11</sup>

To make Europe fit for the digital age will demand joint effort among all European states. Already today, the markets of the EU and the WB are tightly connected. To remain mutual beneficiaries the level of digitalisation of the economy must be harmonized. Digitalization entails a set of unpredictable challenges for economies, security and social welfare. To respond adequately, the EU will need to incorporate as many actors as possible in joint action, beginning with its closest partners. In the interest of the Digital Single Market the new Commission will be likely to follow up on the path laid out with the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans in 2018<sup>12</sup>.

Ursula von der Leyen also wants to give a new push for European democracy, proposing a “Conference on the Future of Europe” organised by the Vice-president for Democracy and Demography, the Croatian Dubravka Šuica. For the time being, the only discussions on enlargement are planned to be held in the existing setting, hence without the participation of primarily-concerned actors (the countries of the Western Balkans). Such an event without the participation of future member states would be half-baked and would undermine the message of inclusion.

Equally, her determination to nurture and strengthen not only the EU democratic system and to protect it from “those who wish to divide and destabilise” depends on a “European Democracy Action Plan” (as worked out by Commission and Parliament)<sup>13</sup> not limited to current EU member states, but also including those joining in the near future.

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<sup>10</sup> Energy Community (Webpage): initiatives & Infrastructure: Western Balkan 6 Initiative. <https://energy-community.org/regionalinitiatives/WB6.html>

<sup>11</sup> Balkan Green Foundation (2016): Western Balkans Sustainable Policies towards EU Integration. A snapshot of the energy developments in the Western Balkans. [https://balkangreenfoundation.org/file/repository/Western\\_Balkans\\_Sustainable\\_Policies\\_towards\\_EU\\_Integration.pdf](https://balkangreenfoundation.org/file/repository/Western_Balkans_Sustainable_Policies_towards_EU_Integration.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> European Commission (June 2018). European Commission launches Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans. Press Release. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/european-commission-launches-digital-agenda-western-balkans>

<sup>13</sup> European Parliament (May 2020): Legislative Train Schedule. A new Push for European Democracy. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-new-push-for-european-democracy/file-european-democracy-action-plan>

Picking up where Juncker left, Ursula von der Leyen remains dedicated to creating an economy that works for people. To create a “Europe of equality” entails solutions to the massive brain drain the Western Balkans are experiencing and of which EU member states often benefit. Already today, economic inequalities between regions of Europe are dynamite for debates. A system of real equality – including strong support structures early on into the accession process – is needed for mutual benefit and sustainable economic prosperity of the EU as a whole.

VdL stirred criticism when announcing the “Protection of our European Way of life”, a portfolio under which rule of law questions would fall just as “a fresh start for migration” and finally changed it into “Promoting our European Way of life”. The essence remains the same: “There can be no compromise when it comes to defending our core values. Threats to the rule of law challenge the legal, political and economic basis of how our Union works.” It is self-evident that these principles apply to candidates just as they should apply to EU member states, an assumption which

was challenged by the nomination of a Hungarian Commissioner – representing a country which has cleared away from European democratic and liberal ideas in recent years – for the portfolio of neighbourhood and enlargement.

Through enlargement to the Western Balkans, hence by unifying Europe and by establishing continental integrity, the EU could express their transformative power, geopolitical vision and strategic autonomy outlook offering integration in exchange for democratic transformation. When envisioning a stronger Europe in the world, VdL draws upon the – today almost romantic – notion of the EU as normative global actor, basing their action on common values. Fact is that the new Commission will be faced with the same (institutional) challenge as her predecessor – harmony among all national representatives in the intergovernmental bodies of the EU will be difficult to reach. Ambitious efforts and grand speech at side of the Commission are noble, but nonetheless dependent on the good will of member states. It is especially in this institutional

setting that close ties with the Western Balkans, a credible enlargement strategy and tangible actions are crucial for the credibility of the EU as global player. If the EU cannot even convince the countries just on the other side their own borders of the benefit of EU integration, how will they ever step up the global game? Ursula von der Leyen's priorities and approach give reason to believe that the Commission has understood this dependence on the Western Balkans for the international recognition of their geopolitical strength. It is now needed that the ambitious (new) narrative would be underpinned by tangible action, including legislative changes. The introduction of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in some segments of the accession process in this regard would be a genuine move.

## The Balkan Chessboard, the European Commission and Geopolitics

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In 2017, the former HR/VP Federica Mogherini made the vigilant observation that "the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played"<sup>14</sup>. Because the success of the new Commission's ambition in these specific areas of foreign policy and their level of cooperation with the Western Balkans are inextricably connected, the EU must get into a good position vis-à-vis competing external actors and subsequently coordinate, or take the lead, in providing solutions for problematic governance issues and facilitating the resolution of disputes. In this, the VdL Commission will be faced with a two-tier challenge.

On the one hand, the EU must significantly lower the malign influences from other

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<sup>14</sup> Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev and Florian Trauner (eds.) (August 2017). Resilience in the Western Balkans. Reports. ISSUE Report No. 36. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report\\_36\\_Resilience%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_36_Resilience%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans_0.pdf)

external actors such as Russia or China by increasing its own political and economic presence. On the other hand, the EU must, on a partnership basis, coordinate their work with the divergent US approach in the region, concerning especially the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the way forward for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With different intent, and with changing intensity, leaders in the Western Balkans have engaged with, courted or praised different external actors all of whom have their own approach to and interest in the region. Since a few years, China is increasingly investing in critical infrastructure all over the world, including the Western Balkans; whereas in number of cases it is establishing a relationship built on a one-sided debt trap. Recently, Chinese investment (managed through loans) has expanded the portfolio to

include also manufacturing sectors, with Serbia being the biggest beneficiary<sup>15</sup>. While the Chinese strategy is clearly defined by providing loans in key sectors and critical infrastructure projects, the Russian strategy is more ambiguous. In the competition with Europe, Russia takes on the role of a spoiler, awakening anti-EU sentiments among governments or politically meaningful fringe groups<sup>16</sup>. Where Russia invests, their money flows into strategic sectors such as energy, heavy industry, mining and banking<sup>17</sup>. Looking at newer players, the Gulf states – Saudi Arabia ahead – have quite recently discovered the Western Balkans, starting out their engagement through cultural or ideological channels in predominantly Muslim-populated regions of the Western Balkans, however, the Arab investment in tourism, construction and other areas and significant development aid keeps growing<sup>18</sup>. Turkey, on the other hand,

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<sup>15</sup> Ardian Hackaj (February 2019). The Pragmatic Engagement of China in the Western Balkans. <http://cdinstitute.eu/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pragmatic-Engagement-of-China-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Dimitar Bechev (September 2018). Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategic-Analysis-2018-9-Beshev-.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Stanislav Secieru (July 2019). Russia in the Western Balkans. Tactical wins, strategic setbacks. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Konrad Adenauer Foundation (2018). The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans A map of geopolitical players. [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038)

builds their relation to the region upon old historical ties, but recently their strategy remains blurred by constant redefinition<sup>19</sup>.

Obviously, it would be short-sighted to lump all six countries from the region together as one homogenous mass, equally receptive to the external (malign) influence listed above. Serbia, for example, keeps, most obviously, flirting with Russia and China, stirring uproar among Europeanists and scholars in early March 2020 when top officials, including President Aleksandar Vucic, praised Chinese support during the Covid-19 crisis as opposed to the lack of solidarity shown by the EU. Propagandesque press conferences and posters in best Chinese fashion erected in Belgrade underlined the strong anti-European message.

Unlike the actors listed above, the US remains a valuable partner to the EU; this partnership comes with its own challenges though visible in the diverging approaches to Kosovo or Bosnia & Herzegovina. To

give an example, reactions to recent developments, entangled in the messy government crisis alongside the Covid-19 crisis in Kosovo, have yet reinforced the ambiguous, blurred US strategy, "out of sync" with EU efforts.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the new style of politics coming from the White House does not quite serve as the democratic blueprint the EU would like to see developed in the country.<sup>21</sup> For the Western Balkan countries to develop towards the direction envisioned by the EU, the VdL Commission and EU MS must take on a leading role and not step aside as supporting actor or, worse, become a pawn in the hands of powerful players. A clear, forward-looking strategy is key to success, reflected in courageous investment in economy, political systems and citizens. The Western Balkans must be regarded strategic partners beyond the mere accession process. Obviously though, a credible and feasible enlargement strategy plays a big part for mutual commitment.

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<sup>19</sup> Asli Aydintasbas (March 2019). From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans. [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from\\_myth\\_to\\_reality\\_how\\_to\\_understand\\_turkeys\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans)

<sup>20</sup> Florian Bieber (August 2019). Leadership Adrift: American Policy in the Western Balkans. Policy Brief. [https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Leadership-Adrift\\_fin-2.pdf](https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Leadership-Adrift_fin-2.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Kurt Bassuener & Bodo Weber (April 2020). US burns Credibility in Grenell Quest for Foreign Policy Win, as Kosovo Government Falls. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/69489/us-burns-credibility-in-grenell-quest-for-foreign-policy-win-as-kosovo-government-falls/>



# New beginnings, same old challenges and a revived drive for enlargement?

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Ursula von der Leyen has realized that European integration depends on an interconnected approach to policy making. Unfortunately, for EC presidents, the institutional reality of the EU does not exactly play in the favour of a strong and independent European Commission as driving factors of EU reform.

Proposing a more political process of enlargement by means of a new methodology for accession negotiations, and underpinning this with the fulfilment of long-standing promises, certainly gives credibility to the Commission, if backed by the EU MS. On the other hand, certain choices (especially concerning Commission staff) have received criticism and raised concern. Many questioned whether a Hungarian

Commissioner for Enlargement would best represent the expected terms of conditionality from candidate countries and potential candidate countries coming from a country heavily criticised within the EU for deteriorating its own state of democracy. Orbán's first proposal, his former minister of justice Laszlo Trocsanyi, was received with outrage in EU and some Western Balkan circles and consequently rejected by the European Parliament on the basis of conflict of interest. Instead, Oliver Várhelyi, a former ambassador to the EU, has filled the position of Commissioner for the neighbourhood and enlargement, promising to be loyal to the EU and not the Hungarian state interest. One way or the other, the choice of personnel remains tinged with the shale taste of double standards.

Speaking about the representation of EU foreign policy interests abroad, the HR/VP is the key figure, a role intertwined and often doubled with the responsibilities of the Commissioner for

the neighbourhood and EU enlargement when it comes to the Western Balkans. If differently to Várhelyi, the nomination of former Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell as High Representative sparked criticism mostly in Kosovo. Spain is among the five EU member states who do not recognize Kosovo's independence and as Foreign Minister Borrell had directly represented the tough Spanish stance abroad. Critics of Borrell fear that his appointment could eventually influence EU's stance towards Kosovo, a country far behind in the EU accession process. Borrell however, by taking his first official trip as HR/VP to Pristina, emphasized his commitment to the European perspective of the entire region of which a comprehensive agreement

between Serbia and Kosovo would be a crucial aspect.<sup>22</sup> While the appointment of an EU Special Representative for the BG-PR dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues underlines EC's commitment to increase its presence and influence, the choice of Miroslav Lajčák, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Slovakia, is seen as controversial from some national actors in Kosovo. Slovakia, as Spain, belongs to the group of EU MS not recognising Kosovo. However, on purpose, or by accident, the approach of involving high level officials from these countries could easily turn into a good strategy for softening and eventually changing the course of these two, and for that matter also other non-recognisers, countries.

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<sup>22</sup> Alexandar Brezar (October 2019). New EU Foreign Policy Chief Pencils in Kosovo Visit. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/07/new-eu-foreign-policy-chief-pencils-in-kosovo-visit/>

# Gearing up? The effects of von der Leyen's new approach on the EU and enlargement

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From the beginning, von der Leyen took pride in presenting a comprehensive approach to EU policy, defining strong partnerships and, as a result, a strong global position of the EU as a top priority. A few months after inauguration, the Commission took this approach to heart when it presented the new enlargement methodology for accession negotiations<sup>23</sup> in February 2020 which should take effect for next enlargement rounds, starting with North Macedonia and Albania. For a Commission for whom enlargement is defined as top priority<sup>24</sup>, the new methodology is intended to enhance the accession

process among others by making the process more credible, more political, and more dynamic. The most notable change compared to the previous methodology is, in line with the new Commission's general approach to EU policy making, a more interconnected, more comprehensive and overall clustered process based on a strong commitment to liberal values, rule of law and democracy ("fundamentals")<sup>25</sup>. The new methodology has been well-received, for it promises a way out from the unfortunate status quo in EU enlargement policy by holding all actors involved more accountable among others with a reversibility clause to sanction un-cooperative or backsliding governments in the Western Balkans. It will be applied to all countries beginning accession negotiations in the future, however "can be accommodated within existing negotiating frameworks, ensuring a level playing field in the

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<sup>23</sup> European Commission (February 2020). Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans. Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Ursula von der Leyen (November 2019): Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original_en.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (February 2020). Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans. Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf)

region"<sup>26</sup> which concerns the cases of Montenegro and Serbia. Since it is more complex and more demanding, equal rules for all negotiating candidates are a crucial precondition for credibility. Its complexity is best illustrated along the new "cluster-structure". Negotiations remain structured along the 33 *acquis* communautaire chapters, these are however not anymore individually opened. Instead, thematically connected chapters are clustered in six groups and can be opened simultaneously (however, still closed individually), allowing for a more dynamic, more interconnected and, on the long run, also more cohesive process. In addition to a more comprehensive approach to *acquis* conditionality, the new methodology strongly emphasizes the element of political conditionality, hence the expected alignment to democratic principles and structures of which the EU does not offer an institutional blueprint or European-wide

standard. Especially for the side of the candidate state, the entire process will be politicized, meaning that a formerly primarily administrative and technical process will demand more political consciousness, sensitivity and will from political actors. In practice this asks for more interconnected work between state institutions, more participatory structures (thus strengthening civil society in respective countries) and more candidate ownership in the process through enhanced structures of cooperation with EU bodies. On the other hand, political conditionality becomes an unavoidable factor for candidates, because the first cluster "fundamentals" – remaining subject to work from the very beginning through the end – tackles economic and democratic criteria, including Public Administration Reform (subject to very political assessment) and as such is the most crucial, yet most challenging cluster.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> In a commentary for IDSCS, Dragan Tilev (March 2020) presents advantages and challenges of the new methodology in greater detail: The New EU Enlargement Methodology. Enhancing the Accession Process. <https://idscs.org.mk/en/portfolio/the-new-eu-enlargement-methodology-enhancing-the-accession-process/>

The new methodology shows political commitment at side of the European Commission which was, after a lot of to and fro, reinforced with the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020. Even if this political success was side-lined by constantly flashing news updates on the Covid-19, the new methodology and the commitment expressed by the Commission have the potential to fill the gap in credibility which has in past years decreased the leverage of EU-conditioned reform in candidate states enormously. If the proposed path is confidently treated, “the new Methodology has the potential to bring back the process to its fundamentals of an “accession driven” process that should not just enlarge the European Union, but should assist in its political unification and territorial consolidation with the Western Balkans as part of it”<sup>28</sup>.

## Many challenges (and opportunities) ahead

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There are numerous challenges to VdL’s ambitions to become reality. The current Covid-19 crisis is a case in point. While nobody could have foreseen this crisis and its unprecedented implications for individuals, societies and economies, the EC could have learnt from crisis patterns of before. Truth is that global crises – whether is economic crises, fiscal crises, migration crises and now a health crisis – keep happening at greater speed and with shorter or no breaks between them. If the EU fails to develop long-term strategies it will not be able to prevent the trend of sliding from one crisis into the next, overwhelmed and written off already each time again. As one crisis among many, the Covid-19 crisis does again illustrate the (perceived) weakness of the EU, just as it also shows that political will and interest can be moderated towards

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

tangible support structures after a while. At the same time, the history of the EU shows that transformation and reform has always been born out of crisis. In 2020, the (initial) trend of nationalisation when Corona first reached Europe as well as the obvious dependency of EU MS and the EU as a whole on other global players (namely China) show the weight which pressures the Commission's ambition to become geopolitically relevant. However, as cautious optimists have dared to hope, this crisis could have the potential for the EU to weight in on the need for sustainable crisis response and burden-sharing mechanisms which could give the EU the advantage to plan ahead as opposed to stumbling behind. Ambitious fiscal recovery packages for EU member states and future members alike are one important step to show how the EU can use existing tools towards its strategic goal of economic – and global – strength. To bolster the EU beyond Corona crisis relief, the EU must promote new, bold strategies – based on a candid set of European values and principles

– in order to assist Europeanization in all member's interests.

Theoretically, the ingredients for global EU power based on an alternative, cooperative approach opposing the nationalist *realpolitik* practices by a growing number of world leaders have been long in the cooking. EU member state leaders connected through a strong bond with the EC should now seize the opportunity to serve the meal, starting right at their doorstep where global change is best initiated.

If the EU manages to commit to a convincing different model, it will make a 'great return' to the Western Balkans. From February 2020, the European Commission is equipped to take bold steps forward and to practically determine, courageously carving in stone, the European path of its future member states. The new approach to enlargement as presented and promoted by the European Commission, including the new methodology for enhanced accession negotiations complemented with the

opening of accession renegotiations with North Macedonia and Albania sent strong signals to both future and existing member states; and even more so since it is strongly politically supported by the Franco-German motor. Steering the Balkan countries towards accession is a necessity if the EU wholeheartedly wishes to increasingly practice strategic autonomy. In doing so, the European Commission should ambition itself beyond the existing EU enlargement institutional architecture, thus inviting the European Council to broaden the scope of qualified majority voting (QMV) as for other matters for EU foreign policy decision-making. This will make the accession process more credible and ambitious, and finally resilient to single member states efforts to block Western Balkan advancement due to bilateral issues.

Ursula von der Leyen has unambiguously presented that the European Commission wishes to be the engine pushing the EU towards becoming a global trendsetter, a

moral compass of the world and strong geopolitical player. If the EU, however, wishes to go beyond visionary self-declaration and be in fact perceived as such global power by outsiders (and insiders for that matter), the geostrategic goal of European unification and continental integrity is an undeniable prerequisite. Ursula von der Leyen's Commission has understood the importance of EU Foreign Policy. Only if their political priorities are equally vigorously applied to both EU member states and Western Balkan future members, the Commission can prove that the EU can truly be the shaper of a better global order.





# Information about KAS

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Freedom, justice, and solidarity are the basic principles underlying the work of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS). The KAS is a political foundation, closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany. We conduct education programs for the society and cooperate with governmental institutions, political parties, civil society organizations and handpicked elites, building strong partnerships along the way. Together with our partners, we make a contribution to the creation of an international order that enables every country to develop in freedom and under its own responsibility.

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# Information about IDSCS

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IDSCS is a think-tank organisation researching the development of good governance, rule of law and North Macedonia's European integration. IDSCS has the mission to support citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and strengthen the participatory political culture. By strengthening liberal values, IDSCS contributes towards coexistence of diversities.

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## Link

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**This report is available electronically on:**

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**Global change starts at the doorstep:  
Why the Western Balkans matter for  
Ursula von der Leyen's geopolitical  
Commission**

Authors: Marie Jelenka Kirchner and Zoran Nechev

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