

TARTU UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Social Sciences

Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Eliis Irv

The stagnating enlargement processes of the EU: assessing the factor contributing to slowing down of the Western Balkans enlargement through the deepening and widening framework.

MA thesis

Supervisor: Eiki Berg, Ph.D

Second Supervisor: Filipa Figuera, Dr.

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## **Authorship Declaration**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper explores the processes of EU enlargement and the external and internal factors which have contributed to the EU expansion haltering. This analysis is informed by the deepening and widening approach to EU enlargement, as well as other integration theories. To evaluate enlargement influences, the current Western Balkan candidate countries progress will be assessed, to assess the EU conditionality appropriateness. The analysis will then discuss the internal causes of enlargement fatigue and absorption capacity to explore factors contributing to increasing enlargement resistance of the EU. This will also be linked to political and identity factors, which contribute to growing Euroscepticism and populism in Europe. This will provide an overview of factors which have impacted the potential for further EU deepening and widening processes.

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## Introduction

Since its composition as European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the now-EU has seen seven enlargement waves. The number of member states (MSs) has increased rapidly since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. The “Big Bang Enlargement” of 2004 saw the accession of 10 new member states: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia; followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013 (De Munter, 2021). These expansions were conducted following the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, which include political, economic and *acquis Communautaire* conditions. The incorporation of the post-communist block has not happened without challenges, however. New standards of accession have been established, both explicitly and implicitly. In 2006 the European Council created a ‘renewed consensus on enlargement’, which placed stricter conditions on accession criteria and on the EU’s capacity to integrate new members. (ibid.). This criterion was notably relevant to accession of Croatia. The Western Balkans (WB) integration into the EU is based on the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) programme, launched in 1999. Accession of Croatia reinvigorated interest in further integration of the region, while also forced reform to the process, with greater emphasis on the rule-of-law conditions, ie. chapters 23 and 24. The EU reaffirmed its position on the accession of WB states in 2020 with revised methodology articulated in ‘Enhancing the accession process — A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’, following the ‘Western Balkans Strategy’ published in 2018, which stated the earliest that Montenegro and Serbia could be joining the EU would be by 2025. However, recently observers have discussed a slowdown of enlargement processes, due to both enlargement fatigue and enlargement resistance. This has been attributed to internal fragmentation and fracturing of the EU, and the candidate countries (CCs) inability to meet membership demands (Economides, 2020 ; Mišćević and Mrak, 2017).

This thesis will seek to investigate the increased EU membership conditionality, and how it is applied to the context of WB candidate countries. EU integration is perceived as the ultimate strategy for achieving peace and prosperity in the WB region, with absorption into the political and economic union strived for by regional leaders to solve fragmentation, ethno-political conflict, and economic backwardness in the long term (Belloni, 2009). However, as a transitional region, a considered and specialised approach for building mutual trust, engaging populations beyond the political elites, defining multi-ethnic cohesive identities,

and securing post-war democracy is crucial in sustaining reform. It will assess whether the process of accession is primarily hindered by the candidate countries lack of progress in implementing the reforms required in EU negotiating chapters, EU's absorption capacity or a wider shift in political sentiments forming resistance towards further enlargement. It will focus on the EU member candidate states in the Western Balkans: Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, through analysing progress reviews of each candidate countries, discussing how each member state is progressing in meeting the EU membership conditions and the crucial objects they face. Barriers to further enlargement will be explored from both policies and progresses of EU enlargement, exploring the issues encountered in integration of post-communist states and how these experiences contribute to the reduced appetite for further expansion (ie. expansion fatigue and increased conditionality). Furthermore, both the conditions set out in *Chapters of the acquis*, and the increasingly important de-facto/common law conditions will be discussed to highlight how the barriers to entry have increased both implicitly and explicitly for candidate countries. The external integration capacity (the ability of the EU to prepare non-members for membership) and internal integration capacity (ability preserve its functioning and cohesion once they join) (Börzel, et.al., 2017) will be evaluated.

## 1. Theorising integration and enlargement

Europeanisation research stems from analysis contextualising and evaluating the domestic implementation of EU policy, based on the view that European integration will continue to be partial until European rules are implemented in their intended spirit (Exadaktylos, 2020). EU has for a long time defined its expansion in terms of grand normative values, such as ensuring peace in Europe, uniting the East and the West and transforming itself into a world power (Breuss, 2002). Classic European integration research emphasised the discourse between neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism schools of thought. First concerned with the "uploading" of domestic politics to EU level, and the second focused on state-role in European level decision making processes and institutions (Exadaktylos, et.al., 2020). As the European project has grown, however, the range of policy fields and analysis has also, including economic and social studies. New integration research incorporates increasingly multidisciplinary approaches, including "dialogue with political science, legal studies, cultural anthropology..." etc., whereas older research often ignored such fields (Klaus Patel,

2019). Furthermore, concept of European integration is increasingly becoming linked to broader processes of human rights, international organisation and civic engagement. Idea of Europeanization, where a “recipient state” comes to take on the norms, standards, and behaviours of EU, hence becoming more “European”, is in essence, a process (Börzel, 2002; Featherstone, 2003). The “transformative power” of the EU on candidate and perspective countries has been largely accepted, through both identity and soft-power factors, as well as technical processes that surround in integration, namely the *acquis communautaire* (Economides, 2015 ; Radaelli, 2003). Building on the experience of previous enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe, this analysis has expanded to include states with “European perspective” (Börzel, 2011; Börzel and Risse, 2011), arguing that Europeanization was the primary force for transforming the post-Cold War Europe (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005, 21-23). Within the WBs, the idea of encouraging Europeanization is already being applied at pre-accession stage, creating the notion of “Europeanization via enlargement” (Economides, 2015). This generates a deepened sense of regional integration as a consequence of enlargement policies, however such thinking risks conflating all modified behaviour with increased Europeanisation.

Deepening and widening of integration theory has increasingly shifted from neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism focus, to rationalism versus constructivism (Jachtenfuchs, 2002 ; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). Rationalism and constructivism are both “metatheories” meaning they are defined primarily by a set of assumptions, mostly ontological in nature, about the world, rather than specific applicable hypothesis (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, 508). Essentially, they constitute ways of perceiving the socio-political world and processes. Rationalist ontology focuses on individualism and materialism, based on an active logic of consequentiality. Constructivist ontology meanwhile focuses on sociality and ideas, with its logic of action emphasising appropriateness (ibid.,).

The framework of this thesis will reside in the EU integration and expansion theorizing, to explore the “relationships between widening, deepening and completing the European project” (Faber and Wessels, 2005, 3). Multi-disciplinary theoretical perspective on deepening integration and widening expansion tensions will inform the analysis of the WB candidate countries integration capacity, as well as EUs absorption capacity.



## 1.1 Rationalist approaches

Rationalist approaches to enlargement theorising are based on two aspects: the rational reasoning for MS enlargement policy preferences, and the collective decisions making on enlargement policy. Rationalist theory follows the rational choice model, assuming that states are rational actors, guided by individual cost-benefits analysis, and will base their preferences on which enlargement policy will maximise their net-benefits (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002), or more precisely, MS will support absorption of an external state, and an outsider state will seek to increase its integration with the organisation, if they assume they will receive more benefit from doing so than from an alternative. This cost-benefit analysis will also depend on which rationalist IR theory one subscribes to. Neo-liberal institutionalists view states as mostly concerned with individualist net-gains, primarily on net-welfare gains, with autonomy concerns being secondary. Meanwhile, realist institutionalists see state actors as primarily concerned with external influence and autonomy, and perceive international cooperation as a zero-sum game, as relative gains of other states will increase their international power (ibid.). Rationalist explanations also apply for cooperation preferences based on desire to counterbalance the superior power or threat of a third state. A third perspective emerges between these institutionalist approaches that is comparative to Liberal Intergovernmentalism school of thought but focused on applicant states. This view, laid out by Mattli (1999), incorporates the internal and external autonomy concerns, and supposes that leaders are only willing to accept autonomy costs in exchange for political power. Such rationalist analysis have also identified a number of factors for enlargement preferences (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002):

- General systemic conditions: this refers to global economic changes, technological changes, and the international security environment.
- Positional characteristics of states: referring to factors such as states' regional economic dependence or interdependence, and the impact regional organisation has on their interests.
- Subsystemic conditions and domestic structure: domestic political and economic structure factors, such as political structure or relative strength of economic sectors, for example a significant export sector would be likely to incentivise integration.
- Organisation-specific systemic conditions: this refers to implications from factors such as degree of organisational integration, for example deepening of economic integration, creating negative externalities for non-members, for example uneven

trade competition, which can incentivise non-members to seek membership. This would be a case of deepening generating widening pressures. The opposite is also possible, as high levels of integration will increase the cost-benefit barriers for states which attribute more value to autonomy, thereby deepening can serve to disincentivise widening.

These factors contribute to the “club-theory” perspective for evaluating the optimal organisational size, which supposes that enlargement will proceed while net-benefits exceed the net-cost of enlargement for both incumbent states and applicant states and will come to a stop once the equilibrium is reached where marginal costs are equal to marginal benefits (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). However, two additional factors which will influence this balance are comparative bargaining power relationships and the formal decision-making rules of the institution. First factor accounts for the uneven bargaining power between MSs, where enlargement might not be directly beneficial for all MSs, however states which might obtain losses can receive compensation from those benefiting from the enlargement. This also requires therefore that the concessions made by winners of the enlargement to the losers must not exceed the net-benefits to the winners, as this would not result in net-benefit and therefore disincentivise the enlargement. The reverse of this could be if states benefitting from enlargement possess a sufficient bargaining position where they can exert pressure on the losers of enlargement, who, if rational, will consent when the cost of potential pressure from the winners will exceed the losses from enlargement (ibid.,).

The European integration has very broadly been categorised into supranational, primarily neofunctionalist, versus intergovernmental schools of thought (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger, 2006). Both neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism view integration as a cooperative process between influential actors and governments and stem from prior functionalist thinking, which was the dominant European integration theory until 1950s. This theory, spearheaded by thinkers like Mitrany, saw the tensions between the practical and territorial scale of human concerns, and the limitation of sovereign political authority, as forcing jurisdictional change, and believed that benefits of supranationalism will prevail (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). While neofunctionalism emerged from this theory as response to EU integration acceleration in the 50s, intergovernmentalism appeared as a primary opposition theory in the 60s, as nation states reclaimed their position, and both schools of thought have experienced further internal diversification since (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger, 2006). Intergovernmentalism is the most relevant theory in accessing how the

state preferences of MSs express in constructing assessment criteria and negotiations, and how states maintain dominance over the process, for example in explaining how Greece has leveraged its veto power within EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia in bilateral disputes. Neofunctionalism, meanwhile, is more appropriate for accounting for other interest groups influence and cooperation with governmental actors, for example assessing the impact of civil society in candidate countries. More crucially, however, it illustrates the mechanisms for the supranational institutions themselves to reinforce their power by expanding spill-over competences.

### **1.1.1 Neofunctionalism and post-functionalism**

Neofunctionalism became the dominant theory of supranationalism, advocated by prominent scholars such as Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg, Joseph Nye and Philippe Schmitter (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger, 2006). It grew out of functionalism, as a response to the rapid European integration of 1950s-60s, and incorporated pluralist ideas into understanding functionalist benefits of supranationalism, developing the view that government could be disaggregated to component groups/actors (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). If these actors perceive their goals as better met at supranational or regional level, then they will pursue further integration. This process will then become self-enforcing, as deepened integration instils greater authority in supranational institutions and more transnational interests will be drawn to this level, the supranational actors themselves would be in a position to pursue further authority and expansion of competences, to better meet the goals of both the supranational actors and transnational interests. This would be further reinforced by regional mobilisation and policy spill-over (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). While neofunctionalism follows the functionalist belief that international cooperation emerges as response to economies of scale in fulfilling public concerns, they see potential for comprehensive regional governance beyond simply transferring some state functions to specialised supranational agencies (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). This relied on the assumption that EU would follow the logic of state building, with welfare concerns leading to centralisation, as elite interests shifting to supranational level will eventually lead to mass engagement (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Postfunctionalism, meanwhile, is informed by political psychology, rather than the rationalist-economic logic of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. These scholars

view economic interests as merely one possible driving factor, and possibly less important than identity, religion or ethnicity factors (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). This approach sees European integration through a conflictual lens, and sees the European project as attempting to incorporate incompatible belief systems, creating a cultural divide (ibid.). This more aligns with the constructivist approaches, as it centres identity and social factors, and can be applied to discussing phenomenon of growing Euroscepticism, populism and Brexit, for postfunctionalist research implies that more exclusive nation-group attachment is correlated with higher Euroscepticism and support for nationalist parties (Curley, 2009).

### **1.1.2 Intergovernmentalism and Liberal Intergovernmentalism**

After the mid-1960s, following the failures of further EU integration and opposition to supranationalism in instances such as the “empty chair crisis”, the intergovernmentalism school of thought gained traction (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Intergovernmentalism and LI stem from the realist traditions of rational choice and international political economy, perpetrated by theorists such as Keohane and Snidal (2001 ; 2002). Intergovernmentalism sees states as primary actors, in line with realist interpretation of international relations, and assumes they will act in rational self-interest. It sees any policy decision as a collaborative or competitive action of individual states, with potential for integration and expansion within Europe constrained by states’ self-interests and sovereignty concerns. This neo-realist view of inter-governmental organisation of EU will inform the discussion of various MSs influence over, and attitudes towards, further expansion.

This theory is further elaborated upon by Moravcsik’s (2020) Liberal Intergovernmentalism, which sees the process of EU integration driven primarily by economic interests and pursued through “national preference formation, intergovernmental bargaining and institutional choice” (Kleine and Pollack, 2018). LI adds a strategic element to this analysis, emphasising the benefits of cooperation to achieve a wider, more comprehensive range of policy objectives (Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2002). LI adds to the rational choice analysis of states’ behaviour by incorporating domestic policy agenda in formulating a national position, acknowledging the influence of societal sentiments, and competing domestic political groups, positioning state preference formation as an intersection between national and international strategic pressures (Moravcsik 1993). Equating states’ and individuals as rational actors, the rational choice analysis of states’ preferences towards further integration can be assessed in

terms similar to political and behavioural economics, methodologically weighing up costs and benefits which determine the actors preferences (Snidal, 2002 ; Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeir, 2005). Intergovernmentalism applies this approach in measuring which areas are beneficial for rationally self-interested states to cooperate in, viewing state actors as in control of the integration process, an attitude arguably evident in the functioning of EU governance (Bickerton, et.al., 2015).

This perspective sees the EU as fundamentally democratic and constitutionally based, both through institutional framework and by being subservient to sovereign national states (Moravcsik, et.al., 2009). Due to this dominance of states, the relative bargaining power of the states leads to what is known as “asymmetrical interdependence”, where possession of coercive power resources held by one side involved in an issue provides them with a favourable position over the opposing side (Keohane, 2001 ; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009 ; Moravcsik, 2009). The competitive and power-centred view of international relations is reminiscent of realist tradition, which views state’s possessing resources, or lack of need for resources, as relative strength; and lack of resources, or need for resources, as relative weakness. This applies to the EU integration and expansion processes, due to the candidate countries economic dependence on the EU, which it can leverage in negotiations to impose conditionality. This could be argued to undermine the democratic legitimacy of policy implementation in candidate countries, as the EU *acquis*, as well as other regulation contained in its various treaties, is imposed on countries externally.

However, as both intergovernmentalism and LI theory are primarily concerned with state actors, they do not provide adequate scope for exploring the EU supranational institutions’ role. Therefore, while it can provide insight for following analysis in regard to individual MSs and CCs, it is not sufficient for discussing the absorption capacity of the EU and processes of accession adequately. Furthermore, an assumption of rational actors that the theories rely on is deemed insufficient for accounting for the influence of values and sentiments that are crucial, particularly in political agenda setting (Fearon and Wendt, 2002 ; Kratochvil and Tulmets, 2010). While this theory has established itself securely alongside neofunctionalist and constructivist schools of thought, it remains highly debated (Kleine and Pollack, 2018). Recent crisis experienced by Europe, such as the Eurocrisis, the migrant crisis and Brexit, have highlighted the weaknesses in LI’s explanatory power, with its neo-liberal and economically preoccupied focus, it does not easily respond to phenomenon of rising

politicization in Europe, increasingly eurosceptic publics and politicians, and surgency of sovereignty concerns (Schimmelfennig, 2018).

Theoretical reasoning for attitudes towards enlargement can be grouped in two: Economic cost-benefits analysis, in line with rationalist considerations; and post-materialist identity-based factors, aligning with postfunctionalist and constructivist approaches (Timuş, 2006). National elites must consider three types of cost to weigh against the benefits of enlargement. First involves transactional costs, stemming from increased infrastructure and bureaucracy, which increases the friction in communication and centralised decision making as number of actors increases. Secondly, policy costs for MSs involve sharing collective goods of EU, such as economic benefits and budgetary provisions with new members, while the applicant states will have to bear the membership contribution and *acquis* implementation costs. Thirdly, there is a policy autonomy trade-off associated with uploading competencies to supranational institutions and the consequent power sharing with the other MSs (*ibid.*) Increasing European Parliament membership will reduce the vote-weight of the incumbent members, and within Council's qualified majority system, each individual states influence on policy reduces.

Rationalist approach will interpret the motives for enlargement and integration as self-interest of actors weighing the benefitting from economic and political integration and collective action against these costs. For incumbent states, the benefit may arise from increased external affairs control, potentially increasing regional stability. For applicant states, autonomy costs may be outweighed by ability to participate in organisational decision-making, or protection of state autonomy against other external states.

Meanwhile, constructivist interpretation argues that EU enlargement is value driven, and therefore the benefit which is weighed against these costs stems from norms being shared through enlargement. Prospect of EU membership served as important incentive for democratic reform in post-communist CEE, as well as EU's normative influence in Eastern neighbours such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as well as WB, and this democratic and stability pursuit is sufficient motivator in itself.

## **1.2 Constructivist approaches**

A constructivist analysis of enlargement centres social identities, values and norms, rather than material and distributional considerations of individual actors (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). Constructivist ideas of political, social and identity values are often

overlooked in intergovernmental analysis, with emphasis on economic and geopolitical interests. The functionalism and intergovernmentalism schools of thought have centred elites in European integration analysis, even after the initiation of European Parliament direct elections in 1979 (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). EU decision-making, as well as research on it, have tended to share a rationalist bias, with EU supposing to base its enlargement policy on objective and rational assessment criteria. Alternatively, enlargement policy is viewed through the self-interest rational choice lens, imagining states as prioritising cost-benefits analysis over “moral” or emotional motives (McMahon, 2017). Such researchers concluded that European integration was a low-salience issue for the electorate but a high-salience issue for business interests; public attitudes towards the EU are deemed to be superficial and hence do not produce electoral incentives for parties, and the integration policies function “*sui generis*”, separately from domestic political competition (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Meanwhile political science disciplines have sought to develop generalisable theories (McMahon, 2017).

However, since the eastern enlargements, subsequent research on public opinion has proven citizens’ attitudes towards the EU quite politically structured, influential in voting behaviour and crucial in contested politics (Exadaktylos, et.al., 2020). Constructivism relates to national and political identity creation, which will be relevant to analysing how political absorption capacity is determined by identity politics, which are informed by cultural and social self-, and in-group identity formation. However, with the rise of populism and ideological shifts in domestic politics, international cooperation is feeling the impact of the constructivist identity creation (Gjuzelov and Hadjievaska, 2020 ; Cocco, 2017). An example of this would be the UK’s “Brexit” and rising Euroscepticism across EU, which can be a contributing factor for the reduced expansion appetite, which rational choice cannot adequately account for. Exploring a constructivist perspective will widen the scope of analysis and will highlight the two-way influence of EU policy on domestic politics, and vice versa.

Unlike rationalist hypothesis, constructivist approaches typically start with the systemic level, rather than individual actors’ preferences, as they see actors’ preferences as contextually formed. For constructivists, enlargement policy is based on ideational and socio-cultural factors, primarily as relates to ideas of “community” and “culture”. Prospective and existing members “construct” ideas about each other, their mutual relations and the community image presented by an international organisation, and whether accession of any potential new member is seen as desirable depends on how similar/ fitting with the community they

perceive each other to be. Greater identification by the state with the international community or organisation will cause it to seek greater institutional ties with the organisation, and similarly more aligned with the values of norms of the community the state is perceived to be by member states, the more likely they are to pursue horizontal institutionalisation with the potential member state (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). In the case of the EU, this refers to ideas of being “European”, subscribing to liberal democratic principles, the integration project, and policy norms. The level of internal consensus on applicant’s identity and adherence will determine how controversial or accepted the enlargement will be (ibid.).

This, however, implies some criteria for determining who constitutes “Europeans” and what kind of norms or values this entails, as a justification for inclusion or exclusion of potential members (Sjursen, 2012). Ethical norms and values contribute to the characterisation of a community and the identity of its members and will depend on cultural and social context. Meanwhile, Moral norms or right are considered universal, unrelated to identities or community (ibid.). Defining the EU as a value-defined community would propose a entity based on traditions and histories of some shared European values, with a common identity as a basis for integration, not limited to tangible benefits pursuit, but cross-border solidarity. Meanwhile, if perceived as merely a problem-solving entity, for promotion of MS interests, one would consider EU’s competences primarily concerned with the free market, and integration as limited by state’s preferences for collective solutions. This would not amount to a substantial or “thick” collective identity (ibid.).

As sociological institution relies on an assumption of cultural and institutional effects on position formation, it would expect little variation in MS preferences towards enlargement (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002), however this does not appear to hold true for the EU. The deepening and widening debate is an example of the way tensions among community’s standards for enlargement policy can generate differing preferences. While organisational actors are likely to be strongly aligned with the organisational norms, example being the EU Commissions continuous support for further enlargement and integration, MSs’ governments are subject to potentially competing influences from both national and international levels, leading to varying preferences (ibid.). Furthermore, an actors position within the organisation can also impact their position, as those who hold influence will seek enlargement policy that either solidifies, or at least does not undermine their position, while MSs who have less supranational influence will seek to benefit their position and gain influence through enlargement. This can be seen both in Greece utilising enlargement veto



for bilateral negotiation leverage as well as Italy's support for enlargement for regional partners in pursuit of coalition building. Such consideration will be elaborative analysing MSs positions on enlargement as it relates to political absorption capacity.

Whereas rationalist perspective saw conflicting goals of states as leading to a process of bargaining, conflicting positions for constructivism will be met with process of arguing. When community norms or values application is contested, supernational norms conflict with national norms or MSs perceive the external state's meeting the norms or values of community differently, the states will engage in discourse of argumentation (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). However, discourses can modify or reconstruct identities and norms, redefine community boundaries and norms and consequently reassess the community and enlargement standards.

Higher level of community identification and perceived cultural match equates to quicker and more deep horizontal institutionalization, and enlargement is assumed to continue until the formal borders of the international organisation match the cultural-identity borders of the community (ibid.). EU has been highly selective and cautious in absorbing post-communist countries as members, so far admitting 11 out of 22 who have expressed desire to join. Some have noted a certain cultural feature, in the form of religion, in the current selection (McMahon, 2017). Traditions of Catholic and Protestant denominations of Christianity have been suggested to have been utilised to construct an image of kinship obligation for EU to allow accession of these countries. These kinds of cultural narratives have been assigned significant importance by constructivist scholars. Within EU integration and enlargement processes, two rival civilisational narratives have been constructed, of the "progressive West" and the "traditional Europe" (ibid.). Such civilisational logic has been credited with aiding the progress of the eastern enlargement, but also with being a critical barrier for Turkey's membership. Civilisational conservatives have utilised simplified narratives, such as Turkey's association with the historical Ottoman empire, to create distinct groupings, typically based on a single characteristic, reducing enlargement issues to binary European/non-European dynamic (ibid. ; Sjusren, 2012). As democratic transition is considered to be one of the fundamental goals of EU enlargement, if it is to remain committed to principles of universalism and liberal democracy then invoking ethno-nationalist cultural reasoning to stop enlargement would suppose to conflict with such self-identification (Sjusren, 2012). Further enlargement from the constructivist perspective will rely on defining the enlarged EU universalist principles with European particularities in a

way that can establish an idea of community through which to garner loyalty and solidarity for collective action (ibid.).

### **1.3 Deepening and widening perspective**

An extensive range of theorisation has been applied to explaining the various phenomena of EU expansion, in terms of integration and enlargement, some of which has been referred to above. While the utility of the theories discussed should not be understated, these approaches have tended to observe the deepening and widening dimensions of EU enlargement as separate processes (La Barbera, 2015). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier define enlargement “as a process of gradual and formal horizontal institutionalization” (2002, 501) where concepts of “horizontal” and “vertical” corresponds to “widening” and “deepening” respectively. Such horizontal expansion occurs when institutional norms spread beyond the range of incumbent actors, ie. EU member states, both through formal and informal (diffusion) means. Formal in this case referring to concrete acts, such as accession of new members and signing cooperation treaties, while informal or diffusion of influence would refer to influence of regionalism on aspiring members or other regional non-incorporated members, either through political influence and co-vergence or unilateral adaptation of institutional norms as a response to wider systemic challenges. If viewed as a gradual process, integration can be evaluated as both preceding and following accession or even as supplanting it. Formal integration can be pursued as a requirement of accession conditionality or due to embedment in association agreements (ibid.). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier point out that dominant regional integration theories, such as intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, focused heavily on the “deepening” processes like the creation of a monetary union or legal integration. Studying enlargement can tend to focus on case studies of enlargement rounds, overlooking the aspects of pre-accession processes and the impact this has on both the EU Member States and Candidate Countries (2002, 502). More ambitious scholarship within the neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism dichotomy aimed to develop more broad theories, neo-functionalism evaluating the economic, political and social actors’ impact on unification and societal modernization, and intergovernmentalism exploring state actors in intergovernmental competition within the international system (Jachtenfuchs, 2002). However, these perspectives have also been criticised for lacking competitive rigour or even overlapping (ibid.). With EU maturing, an elaborate multi-disciplinary approach on deepening and widening incorporating the meta-theories like Constructivism and the

traditional integration theories of functionalism and intergovernmentalism (Faber and Wessels, 2005) with more current theorising would provide the most effective scope for exploring the unique complexities of EU governance.

Some scholars will state that widening and deepening have existed supplementarily throughout the European process, as both a source of gridlock as range of state preferences expands, and a tool of state bargaining between MSs (Kelemen, et.al., (2014). Whether widening and deepening are complimentary or contradictory progresses depends on MS preferences and institutional decision making. Even if enlargement causes potential gridlock, this can serve as incentive for institutional reform and thereby facilitate deepening consequently. While if MS do not seek integration with new enlargement members, then widening can serve as block to deepening. Integration can also be sectoral, referring to new policy areas or sectors being uploaded to regulating at supranational level (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger, 2006). Through applying deepening and widening theory the evaluation of current candidate countries pre-accession processes and policies, as well as impacts on both the candidate countries and the EU, can be discussed (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002).

### 1.3.1 *Deepening or widening*

The concept of “Europe” has become increasingly defined through the EU, the regional states’ “Europeanness” being framed by their institutional relations with the EU and a countries “Europeanization” referring to its adaptation of EU norms (ibid.). The dominant theories such as intergovernmentalism, supranationalism and functionalism, meanwhile, have largely focused on the “deepening” aspects of integration, such as policy production and implementation, legal integration or the Economic and Monetary Union (ibid.). With the slowing of accession processes being observed since the “golden age” of enlargement during the Eastern-and and CEE enlargements between 2004-2007, interest in enlargement is likely to falter further.

Past enlargement rounds have created concerns about EU’s absorption capacity and continued institutional and policy making heterogeneity or efficiency. The deepening integration progresses have encountered multiple obstacles and stumbling points, including the failure to ratify the treaty of Lisbon in Ireland on the first try, to rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in both France and the Netherlands (La Barbera, 2015). As these happened during the biggest EU enlargement, this is likely to have contributed to the

concerns about the compatibilities of deepening and widening processes (Guerot, 2004), and potentially even the emergence of the concept of “enlargement fatigue” which has become adopted for referring to the EU’s unpreparedness for enlargement post-big bang enlargement. Much of this concern stems from the growing heterogeneity of the union, in terms of both constructivist cultural implications, as well as an expansion of the number of voices which will lead to a range of positions, views and interests to be satisfied being expanded. The growing range of preferences may conflict with incompetent members, particularly when new MSs have relatively different domestic and historical contexts, and this may hinder further expansion and efficiency of the Union. In this way, widening may halt integration progresses, if a plurality of preferences increases friction on EU institutional reforms or policy making, which can create an internal obstacle for further integration (ibid.), by making negotiations more difficult, reducing legislative output and the unions efficiency (Pollack, 2009). This view stems from collective action literature, noting that typically collective action becomes more strained, and output of public goods reduces as organisational scale increases, suggesting a fundamental trade-off between scale of the polity and the “parochial altruism” of the community, in which shared norms enable public goods to be provided (Kelemen, et.al., 2014). Thinkers subscribing to this view propose that EU expansion goals in both horizontal (widening) and vertical (deepening) directions are incompatible, and that benefits of integration, such as economies of scale and responsiveness to regional policy concerns, will come at a cost of increased heterogeneity of preferences (ibid.).

Beyond policy formation, growing membership may also present challenges to policy implementation (Nugent, 1992), particularly in the intended spirit (Exadaktylos, 2020), as interpretations of policy are also likely to vary. Expansion will also have a budgetary effect, as the difference between the biggest contributors and biggest receivers is likely to increase (Nugent, 1992), particularly with the accession of economically weaker states such as the WB CCs. Finally, enlargement has the tendency to involve the EU in politically delicate issues, such as accession of Cyprus with the Turkey conflict (ibid.). The current CCs also have ongoing conflicts that the EU has become mindful of, including the bilateral issues between North Macedonia with Greece and Bulgaria, and ongoing Serbia-Kosovo tensions. A crucial factor in the impact of widening on deepening within all these dimensions is the accession country’s relative political and economic position, as compared to existing MSs (Kelemen, et.al., 2014), as close alignment would mediate the policy heterogeneity concerns

of enlargement, therefore the most likely instance of widening hindering deepening would be the accession of a country with an anti-integration position.

### 1.3.2 *Deepening for widening*

An alternative position views deepening as a pre-requirement for widening. For this perspective, deepening and widening are not conflicting directions, but for effective and sustainable enlargement it is necessary to conduct the appropriate institutional, policy and processes reforms to ensure continued functioning of the enlarged union. This relates to the absorption capacity of the union, as it is necessary to conduct reform pre-emptively, to ensure capacity before enlargement can be undertaken (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002). EU integration is a gradual and episodic process, taking the form of numerous steps, acts and treaties over a prolonged period of time since the construction of the The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 (De Munter, 2021). Since then, the EU has grown from 6 to 27 (28 until 2020) MSs and is defined in 11 ratified treaties<sup>1</sup>:

1. Treaty of Paris, signed 1951 – Established the ECSC, created the European Parliamentary Assembly (expired in 2002).
2. Treaty of Rome (EEC), signed 1957 – Established the European Economic Community (EEC) and made European Parliamentary Assembly members directly elected.
3. Euratom Treaty, signed 1957 – Established the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC).
4. Merger Treaty, signed 1965 – Established the European Community, a Single Council and a Single Commission (expired after Treaty of Amsterdam).
5. Treaty of Luxembourg, signed 1970 – First Budgetary Treaty.
6. Second Budgetary Treaty / Treaty of Brussels, signed 1975 – strengthened Assembly's budgetary powers, established Court of Auditors.
7. Single European Act (SEA), signed 1986 – amendments to European Communities and European political cooperation. Renamed the Assembly to European Parliament, and increased EP's powers
8. Treaty on European Union (TEU) / Maastricht Treaty, signed 1992 – created the 3 pillars: European Community (EC), Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA). Increased the powers of EP.

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<sup>1</sup> (European Parliament, *Treaties and the European Parliament*)

9. Treaty of Amsterdam, signed 1997 – Amending the TEU, increasing the powers of the EP, simplified and broadened the codecision procedure of the EP and the Council.
10. Treaty of Nice, signed 2001 – amending the EU Treaty, reforming EU institutional structure to prepare for new enlargements, increasing EP powers and expanding Qualified Majority Voting in the Council.
11. Treaty of Lisbon, signed 2007 – codified the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, EP appoint President of the Commission based on European Council proposal, accounting for EP elections. Codecision become the “ordinary legislative procedure”.

Each of these treaties have served to reform the functioning and institutions of the EU, as well as its policy processes and power sharing politics, deepening the integration of the EU MSs. While the Treaty of Nice most explicitly notes its purpose as preparing for further enlargement, as it was produced in preparation of the eastern enlargements of 2004, every one of these treaties serves to meet the need of deepening and widening expansions. The Treaty of Nice may have been most acutely conscious of the enlargement strains on institutions, shown in reforming the institutional power balances, as well as moves such as expanding QMV, instead of unanimity, which serves to facilitate functioning of policy making processes and moving from status quo to deepening integration (Kelemen, et.al., 2014). However, by the nature of the process, deepening and widening are self-enforcing, as supernational integration of any policy area will have spill-over effects to related policy areas, which must now also be coordinated among the union partners (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Therefore, each subsequent treaty has had to expand competencies of the EU, to meet the needs of an increasingly integrated union. Furthermore, the institutions have been constantly reformed, to accommodate both their shifting roles and their growing size. The EP has gone from 142 in 1958 (when it was the European Assembly) to 785 in 2007, with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria (De Munter, 2021), to being limited at 751 in the Treaty of Lisbon. While the growing number of EP seats has been necessary to accommodate enlargement, it is also important to balance the need for MS representation against the practical functioning of the EP. An infinitely numerous EP would not be pragmatic, both due to the functioning of any debate within it, as well as due to the insignificant influence of the votes the MEPs would cast, which would severely discredit this institution.

The preference for such reform being enacted before enlargement rounds is largely practical in this sense, to ensure the functioning of the EU following the accession of new members. Furthermore, if reform is not enacted in time, it can potentially be more strenuous to make policy reform within an enlarged union if the policy processes are not adaptable for the increased membership, for the reasons discussed before. Beyond the practical considerations, however, is also a political factor. MSs can use their influence over enlargement processes to ensure favourable policy outcomes, for example vetoing a candidate until their preferences in relation to reform or policy issues are achieved. This could be due to two factors, one being that a MS believes the policy will encounter more resistance post-enlargement, either due to the potential member(s)' preferences being opposed to the policy or due to the concern for policy-process being hindered with increasing union scale (Steunenberg, 2001). Alternatively, the MS might not be concerned about resistance but rather indifference. The MS can leverage enlargement consent against other policy issues, thereby making deepening policy a prerequisite for widening, even when the two areas are not inherently connected.

### 1.3.3 *Deepening from widening*

The converse of the deepening as a requirement for widening is the perception of deepening and widening functioning as complementary and connected processes. Instead, this perspective views widening as facilitating, aiding and incentivising deepening. The trade-off which is typically supposed to exist between widening and deepening is questioned, relying on distinction of short-term and long-term effects. While in short term, widening can cause gridlock and friction, impeding deepening, as the organisation adjusts, same widening processes can also empower supranational actors and incentivise long-term reform, leading to deepening (Kelemen, et.al., 2014). In this capacity, widening and deepening have been the driving forces of EU processes, as enlargement has been a continuous and stated goal of the union, stated in the Treaty of Rome (European Union, *Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, Rome Treaty*). Yet there is little evidence that enlargements have contributed to the supposed trade-off integration capacity (Kelemen, et.al., 2014). The EU has successfully managed to absorb even the 2004 enlargement, and maintained its operation and economic functioning (Pollock, 2009). The widening processes have generally been considered a success in utilitarian terms, which speaks to the union's flexibility. The Council has met the challenges of enlargement with increased use of QMV, and the EP has conducted reform in terms of both the number of MEPs and also the recalculation of the distribution (proportional with the rule that no MS can have less than 6 and more than 96 seats (European

Parliament, *How many MEPs?*)), the Commission has arguably been the biggest beneficiary of enlargement-necessitated deepening. Enlargement has enhanced its centrality as the primary supranational institution, as the internal pressures generated have increasingly positioned it within a coordinator and brokerage role among MSs (Kelemen, et.al., 2014). This has been coupled with reforms in the Lisbon Treaty, as a response to friction fears, leading to appointment of Commissioners and subsequent legitimising of the institution, fostering further deepening capacity. Essentially, by generating initial gridlock, widening increases the influence of supranational, bureaucratic and judicial actors who can leverage this to pursue greater competencies and subsequent deepening (ibid.). And when legislative friction is created, these serve as incentives for further institutional reform.

However, a counterargument for this supposes that the apparent coordination of deepening and widening has been realised through increasing “differentiated integration” (Feldmann, 2012), referring to forming subgroups of MSs for cooperation on specific issues. Meanwhile, others have been even more pessimistic, predicting institutional problems and internal conflict following eastward enlargement, possibly even leading to undermining the whole European project (Taylor, 1996 as cited in Kelemen, et.al., 2014). The recent crisis faced by the EU, such as the economic crisis, migrant crisis and Brexit, although not directly linked to past-enlargements, have served to validate fears of EU disintegration. In this capacity, it can be discussed whether widening has indeed led to deepening obstacles, in the form of public opinion shifts, Euroscepticism and rising populism. Integration attitudes of populations are shown to be correlated to dimensions of European identification, as higher levels of European identity attachment tend to foster support for integration and EU cooperation, however enlargement attitudes tend to be more correspondent to distinction of in-group/out-group identity (La Barbera, 2015). Public opinion is crucial for EU deepening and widening processes, as MSs are responsive to domestic sentiments and because the EP is directly elected, and therefore representative of the MEPs populations, but also because many MSs require referenda to ratify enlargement or functional treaties. The failure of the Constitutional Treaty being a prime example of this. Therefore, if the widening processes contribute to undermining European collective identity, making the populations more resistant to deepening integration, this can limit the potential for reform. Furthermore, anti-integration sentiments can even lead to constricting horizontal institutionalisation, in the form of MS withdrawal from the EU, as done by the UK in 2020.



## 2. Methodology

This thesis will take the form of policy research, applying qualitative research methodology to conduct explanatory research by utilising secondary resources and data. Qualitative methodology will be more appropriate for exploring explanatory research dimensions, ie. answer “why” and “how” questions, aiming to provide more nuanced illumination of specific issues (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). Qualitative methodology refers to “word-based” methods, which is suitable for studying policy issues that are commonly contested (Yanow, 2006, 414), such as EU integration and expansion policies, as it allows for detail and context aware description of phenomena, aware of dynamic processes and patterns, as well as allowing for nuance based on conditions and shareholders specifics. Therefore, qualitative methodology can use realistically grounded theory to generate exploratory theory (ibid.). Due to this capacity, qualitative research has become vital for producing insights, explanations and theories of social behaviour, in conducting contextual, diagnostic, evaluative and strategic policy research (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). Qualitative methodology also has the postmodernist tendency of centralising constructivist approaches (Yanow, 2006, 420), making it more appropriate for analysing the political, social and identity driven factors of EU expansion attitudes. By adopting a less structured approach which the qualitative methodology allows for better than quantitative methods, it is better equipped to determine idiographic causation factors, which might be outside the intended consequences of policy being researched. For this thesis, an interpretive policy analysis approach will be adopted, rather than survey or cost-benefit analysis, as this allows for perception of policy as situation-specific and focuses on meaning and behaviours (ibid.).

This research will focus on analysis of policy, rather than analysis for policy, therefore it will follow the incremental model’s assumptions, which views policy as pluralistic and involving actors with conflicting objects, limited by imperfect knowledge and practical limitations. Due to this, rational model is unrealistic because of the nature of bargaining and compromise, which tends to result in only incremental policy changes, as and when policy application experience demands modification in subsequent cycles (Hayes, 2012). This is applicable for the enlargement policy analysis as it will allow for discussing of state bargaining, following intergovernmentalism, as well as the function of multiple interests in the form of public opinion and its impact on domestic politics which inform state positions. Mainstream approaches on policy research view states as self-interested as seeking to maximise their individual gains as interpreted by intergovernmentalism. This will be evident in analysing the

MSs individual approaches to enlargement, by highlighting the interests which they are pursuing through enlargement-policy positioning. However, knowledge-based and cognitive approaches will be crucial in evaluating the importance of normative and causal beliefs decision-makers hold, and how such beliefs shape preferences (Sutton, 1999). Furthermore, with the rise of global communications, the importance of non-state actors must be recognised, including how domestic opinion formation affects governments or oppositions' positions, particularly through the increasing "international-domestic nexus", referring to the importance of foreign policy in domestic politics (ibid.). This has led to an increasing understanding that policy issues are historically and culturally constructed, and policy processes are discourse determined (Browne, et.al., 2019). Therefore, accessing the enlargement policy adequately will involve exploring the impact of constructivist concepts of political and socio-cultural identity on MSs' positions on deepening and widening processes.

Both meso-scale and macro-scale concerns will be relevant for this policy research. The meso-scale analysis will focus on the policy processes and influence of the stakeholders, both the state and non-state actors, and how their preferences affect the enlargement policy outcome. This approach evolves from the game-theory formalism, focusing on interactive problem-solving and coordination of interdependent agents within institutional constraints and with imperfect information (Elsner, 2007). This approach is used to analyse the state's behaviour in striving for self-interest maximation, how policy is applied and how it is constructed, and how institutional structures and stakeholder's action has hindered enlargement processes.

Macro-scale will refer to meta-policy approach, which is concerned with the structural and macro-level influences such as economic, political and social contexts (Hochberg and Poudineh, 2021). This approach is utilised to explore the impact of the economic crisis, the migrant crisis and shifting public opinion trends has impacted the construction and application of enlargement policy and politics.

The aim of this research is to evaluate the factors which have contributed to ceasing EU enlargement progresses to determine the central cause(s) which have caused the European project to stall. The explanations to this have ranged from the inability of CCs to meet the EU accession criteria, the fatigue of past enlargement rounds and scepticism for the ability of EU's institutions to preserve their functioning and cohesion in the face of further expansion, to reduced enlargement appetites of MSs as a consequence of EU's increasing internal

fragmentation (Börzel, et.al., 2017). To explore these potential causes, three hypotheses will be proposed, and subsequently evaluated:

*H1: Enlargement progress is delayed by the CCs inability to meet EU's accession criteria.*

*H2: Enlargement is delayed by objective and practical absorption capacity of EU institutions contributing to enlargement fatigue.*

*H3: Enlargement is halted by political considerations and growing enlargement resistance.*

These potential causes will be evaluated by applying a theoretical constructed policy research approach, with a cross sectional comparative analyses of the progress reviews of candidate countries, descriptive analysis of policies and progresses of EU enlargement, and weighing up and evaluating the barriers for further enlargement. Qualitative methods of data gathering will be conducted following thematic framework building approach, as this is less mechanical and less constricting, focused on themes rather than pre-determined coding, allowing for more reflexivity, recognising ambiguities and nuance (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002 ; Yanow, 2006). This will primarily include close reading of topic-relevant documents (Yanow, 2006, 406), including: the CCs progress reports, annually generated by the EU Commission; infographics and briefings produced by the EU Commission about enlargement processes; and the EU communications relating to accession criteria and strategies, contained in treaties, agreements, and announcements. Furthermore, an extensive range of academic and theoretical literature will be consulted to develop a deeper and more analytical understanding of the processes, practices, and politics of EU expansion progress. Such sources will be relied on for gouging the causes and challenges of the individual CCs accession progresses, as well as for any external or bilateral influences upon them. Furthermore, theoretically informed literature will also be referred to for establishing a basis for the concepts of absorption capacity and enlargement fatigue, which will subsequently be explored. These concepts will then be evaluated with reference to prior academic research, historically informed comparison of policy application, evaluating the potential institutional consequences and political feasibility based on probably acceptability of these for stakeholders. References to EU institutional structures, as well as public opinion statistics will serve to inform the primarily qualitative literary-based analysis.

This project will focus on the EU member candidate states in the Western Balkans: Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (European Commission, undated).

These present a unique case study for both deepening integration and widening enlargement, since they've received special attention from the SAP programme onwards. Furthermore, the WB region has exhibited significant range in progress of integration, from full membership accession of Croatia to potential candidacy status of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo (ibid.). The varying levels of progress made in these countries allows to apply these cases to evaluating the effects of EU integration policies, while their regional proximity allows to discuss the concept of EU frontiers in practical terms. Furthermore, the accession of Croatia in 2013 provides another point of comparison for evaluating the shift in policy and application between then and current accession prospects. This will enable analysing the evolution of enlargement policy in terms of both changing political contexts and the lessons learned from previous rounds. The aim of this critical policy analysis is to explore the functional, the intergovernmental and constructivist factors determining the policy process, preferences, and application of enlargement policy. Furthermore, the policy will be analysed through the lens of deepening and widening theory, discussing the relationship between (widening) enlargement policy and (deepening) integration policy, and the capacity to which these policy goals are complimentary, supplementary or contradictory.

The study will begin with a survey of the accession criteria which will note both the explicit conditions, and the increasingly important de-facto criteria of rule of law conditionality of EU membership (Kochenov, 2005) This will essentially highlight how the barriers to entry have increased both implicitly and explicitly for candidate countries.

Following that, a detailed discussion of current WB candidate countries will be undertaken. In this part, primary focus will be on individual countries' annual progress reports (European Commission, 2021), showing how each candidate country is progressing in meeting the EU membership conditions and where they are currently falling short. This will allow for comparing and contrasting of these states, individual barriers and conditions they are facing. By evaluating the candidate countries process, the analysis seeks to show which chapters are presenting challenges and how far each candidate country is presumably from membership accession.

The internal absorption capacity evaluation will begin with setting out context for EU expansion and integration, by looking at the process of EU expansion, particularly the 5th, 6th and 7th waves of enlargement. It will explore the issues encountered in integration of

post-communist states and how these have contributed to reduced appetite for further expansion, expansion fatigue and increased conditionality.

Following this, EU absorption capacity will be explored. As a supposedly “oft-forgotten” condition (İçener and Phinnemore, 2006), emphasised by the 2006 ‘renewed consensus on enlargement’, this paragraph seeks to evaluate the factors affecting EU’s effective preparedness to incorporate new members, provided they fulfil all other conditions. Both the external integration capacity (the ability of the EU to prepare non-members for membership) and internal integration capacity (ability preserve its functioning and cohesion once they join) are crucial for any prospects of further expansion (Börzel, et.al., 2017). The internal absorption capacity of the EU will be discussed in terms of institutional, economic, political and social and cultural absorption capacity. The institutional factors will concern the practical impact of enlargement on EU policy-making institutions: the European Parliament, the European Commission and The European Council. The economic and financial factors will look at the readiness of the EU to incorporate the WB CCs into the single market in terms of the economic disparity and the financial cost. The political capacity will explore the political cost of expansion for the MSs and their policy positions on enlargement. The cultural and social enlargement capacity will look at the formation of European identity and the sentiments towards expanding this identity to CCs. Discussion on European social identity will also involve exploring the concept of European frontiers in constructing a perception of defined community.

Based on these considerations, evaluation of whether the EU is experiencing enlargement fatigue in terms of practical or objective consideration, or politically motivated resistance to enlargement can be concluded. This links into the growing populist sentiment that has emerged in both the CCs and MSs to the detriment of enlargement and integration prospects.

### 3. External integration capacity (the ability of the EU to prepare non-members for membership)

#### 3.1 The *acquis Communautaire* of EU accession

The *acquis Communautaire*, also known as the EU *acquis*, refers to the cumulative body of all EU law and obligations, since 1958, including all treaties, legislation and international agreements and, the primary and secondary legislation and case law, which form the basis of

the EU's the legal order. This is the framework of legislation which all CCs must adopt and implement within the accession negotiations process, to prepare to take on the duties of membership and function within the EU supranational system. The Chapters of *acquis*, which form the negotiation chapters, are based on the *acquis Communautaire*.

### **3.1.1 Legal basis for enlargement: Treaties and Copenhagen criteria**

The Treaty on European Union, ie. The Maastricht Treaty, which entered into force in 1993, lays the foundation for 'a new stage in the process of creating an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe'. It sets out the 3 pillars the union is based upon: the European Communities, a common foreign and security policy, and cooperation between EU governments on justice and home affairs. It also establishes the economic and monetary union, single currency, concept of European citizenship as foundation of the EU's 4 freedoms (Treaty on European Union (TEU) / Maastricht Treaty, 1992). This was further ratified by the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997, and which came into force in 1999 (Treaty of Amsterdam Amending the Treaty on European Union, The Treaties Establishing the European Communities and Related Acts, 1997), Treaty of Nice signed in 2001 and came to force in 2003 (Treaty of Nice amending the Treaty on European Union, The Treaties Establishing the European Communities and Related Acts, 2001), and most recently the Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007 and in force since in 2009 (Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, 2007). These treaties constitute amendments to the current Treaty on European Union (TEU) and establish the legal basis for EU enlargement:

- Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establishes which states may apply.
- Article 2 of the TEU describes the EU's founding values.

Accession of new member states to the EU is governed by Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (Etherington and Wright, 2020). A state that desires to apply for membership of the EU needs to fulfil the following two conditions:

1. Be a European state.
2. Respect and commit to upholding the common values of the EU: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights including minority rights, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union).

The *Copenhagen Criteria*, as defined by the European Council in 1993, is considered the key criteria that a CC must meet before being considered suitable for membership.

1. The political criteria, referring to the stability of the CC's institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and protection of minorities.
2. The economic criteria, referring to the existence of a functioning market economy, and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU single market.
3. The administrative and institutional criteria, referring to the ability to take up the membership obligations, including adhering to the goals of the political, economic and monetary union, and the capacity to adopt and effectively implement the *acquis Communautaire*.

Furthermore, a consideration of the Union's "capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration" is also set up within this criterion. The EU maintains the authority to determine whether a CC has adequately met the Copenhagen Criteria, and whether the union is deemed ready to accept a new MS. (European Commission, 1993 ; European Commission, undated). This consideration forms the basis of the enlargement fatigue concept, codifying the idea of a potential trade-off between widening and deepening processes.

### **3.1.2 Steps to EU membership**

First step to becoming an EU MS is submitting a membership application to the Council. Any European state that meets the conditions for membership, ie. the Copenhagen Criteria, can supposedly apply, according to the TEU, provided it respects EU's values. It should be noted that historically the "European" distinction has been meaningfully applied, most notably in the unequivocal rejection of Morocco's membership application in 1987 (Rumelili, 2004).

The Council will then task the Commission with evaluating whether the country meets the Copenhagen Criteria. If the Commission determines it does, the Council must agree upon negotiating mandate. This does not always follow, however, as shown in the case of North Macedoni, which applied for membership in 2004, and who the Commission recommended for opening accession negotiations since 2009 yet was not granted candidate status until 2020 (North Macedonia Report, 3). This delay was primarily due to bilateral disputes with Greece,

showing the influence the MSs can exert over the process, diverting the supposedly objective process for political aims.

If an applicant is deemed as not yet fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria, it can be designated a “potential candidate”, and cooperate with the EU in implementing the required changes to potentially move to candidacy stage. Currently, two states hold this designation: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, *Joining the EU*).

The process of joining the EU consists of 3 main stages:

1. Candidature stage: When a country is ready it becomes a formal candidate for membership, but this does not imply that formal negotiations have begun.
2. Negotiation stage: The candidate country moves on to membership negotiations—a process that involves the adoption of established EU law, preparations to ensure capacity to effectively apply and enforce it and implementation of judicial, administrative, economic, and other reforms necessary to meet the conditions of accession criteria.
3. Joining Stage: When the negotiations and accompanying reforms have been completed satisfactorily, signified by closing of all negotiation chapters, the country will become an accession state.

During the pre-accession period an applicant country is expected to enact reforms to meet the satisfactory conditions of EU membership. The process involves compliance with the accession criteria, including adoption and implementation of the *acquis*. EU will also provide financially, administratively and technically support to candidates during this pre-accession period.

Negotiations for membership can only start after all EU MSs and the EU council have a unanimous decision on a framework for negotiations with the candidate country.

Intergovernmental conference is a series of meetings in which negotiations are carried out between ministers and ambassadors of the EU governments and the candidate country.

The conditions and date of accession, any transition periods required and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the EU is founded must be agreed in the form of an accession treaty.

This treaty is signed and ratified by all the MSs and the candidate country in accordance with their own constitutional rules, as well as approved by the European Parliament.



For the accession treaty to become binding it must:

- Win support of the EU Council, the Commission and the European Parliament
- is signed by the candidate country and representatives of all existing EU countries
- is ratified by the candidate country and every individual EU country, according to their constitutional rules (parliamentary vote, referendum, etc.).

The accession treaty contains all the terms and conditions of membership, any and all transitional arrangements and deadlines negotiated, and the financial agreements and safeguards agreed upon. Once the accession treaty is signed, the country moves from candidate to acceding country. This means it will become a full member state upon the date and conditions of the treaty being satisfied. Until this point, the acceding country will be able to enjoy the advantages of special status, including being able to comment on draft legislation and maintaining an “active observer status” within EU institutions, whereas it will be able to speak but not vote.

### **3.1.3 The *Chapters of Acquis***

Opening of negotiations is based on screening of the Chapters of Acquis. The screening process entails carrying out a detailed assessment of each chapter, in cooperation with the CC, to assess how prepared the CC is in each policy area, or the progress they are making. The findings are presented in a screening report. Based on this report, the Commission will recommend either opening negotiations on each chapter, or establishing opening benchmarks which would need to be met for opening a negotiation chapter (European Commission, *Steps towards joining* ; European Commission, *Accession criteria*,).

There are currently 35 official Chapters of Acquis which must be concluded before the candidate country can move past the negotiation stage. CCs must undertake reforms in corresponding areas of the acquis to meet EU’s administrative, institutional and legislative standards, and the meeting of chapters is monitored by the screening of acquis (European Commission, *Chapters of the acquis / negotiating chapters*).

Table 1 - Chapters of Acquis / Negotiation Chapters<sup>2</sup>

<b>Clusters</b>	<b>Chapters of Acquis</b>
<b>Fundamentals</b> (Opened first and closed last)	Chapter 5: Public procurement
	Chapter 18: Statistics
	*Chapter 23: Judiciary and fundamental rights
	*Chapter 24: Justice, freedom and security
	Chapter 32: Financial control
<b>Internal Market</b>	Chapter 1: Free movement of goods
	Chapter 2: Freedom of movement for workers
	Chapter 3: Right of establishment and freedom to provide services
	Chapter 4: Free movement of capital
	Chapter 6: Company law
	Chapter 7: Intellectual property law
	Chapter 8: Competition policy
	Chapter 9: Financial services
	Chapter 28: Consumer and health protection
<b>Competitiveness and inclusive growth</b>	Chapter 10: Information society and media
	Chapter 16: Taxation
	Chapter 17: Economic and monetary policy
	Chapter 19: Social policy and employment
	Chapter 20: Enterprise and industrial policy
	Chapter 25: Science and research
	Chapter 26: Education and culture
	Chapter 29: Customs union
<b>Resources, agriculture and cohesion</b>	Chapter 11: Agriculture and rural development
	Chapter 12: Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy

<sup>2</sup> (European Commission, *Chapters of the acquis / negotiating chapters* ; Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020)

	Chapter 13: Fisheries
	Chapter 22: Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments
	Chapter 33: Financial and budgetary provisions
<b>Green agenda and sustainable connectivity</b>	Chapter 14: Transport policy
	Chapter 15: Energy
	Chapter 21: Trans-European networks
	Chapter 27: Environment
<b>External relations</b>	Chapter 30: External relations
	Chapter 31: Foreign, security and defence policy
	Chapter 34 - Institutions
	Chapter 35 - Other issues

To close negotiations on a chapter, CC must meet any closing benchmarks set out in the common position adopted before opening negotiations. However, since 2011-2012 the Commission has proposed that the chapters pertaining to EU fundamentals, particularly chapters 23\* and 24\* will be opened early and be the last to be closed in the future, with interim benchmarks to be met (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020 ; European Commission, *Steps towards joining*). This highlights an increased emphasis on rule-of-law issues, as a priority for the EU, building on its experience with Croatia (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020)). The pace of negotiations at this stage will primarily depend on CC's progress in meeting benchmarks of the chapters, but each chapter will only be closed once every MS is satisfied, and the negotiation process is concluded once all chapters have been closed (European Commission, *Steps towards joining*).

### 3.1.4 Western Balkans Perspective

The western Balkan enlargement gained significant notice in 1999 with the launching of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and the Stability Pact initiatives, which established a framework for cooperation between EU and the WB region (De Munter, 2021) This takes the form of Stabilisation and Association agreements (SAAs), seeking to ensure political and economic cooperation, centered on shared democratic, human rights and rule of law principles. The Stabilisation and Association Council, which meets annually and

oversees implementation of SAAs, the Stabilisation and Association Committee and a Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) were established within this framework, to facilitate cooperation between WBs and EU (ibid.) In 2003 the European Council in Thessaloniki affirmed potential for candidacy to EU membership for all SAP countries, making this framework officially a part of EU enlargement policy (European Commission, *Stabilisation and Association Process*). In 2008, the Stability Pact was replaced by Regional Cooperation Council.

Since 2006, a “renewed consensus on EU enlargement” guides the enlargement policy, based on an EU commitment to ongoing accession negotiations, rigorous conditionality, transparency and communication ensuring sustained public support and maintaining the EU's capacity to integrate new members (European Council, 2022). The new enlargement strategy included an upgrading of the accession criteria to what is referred to as “Copenhagen Plus”, which contained an emphasis on security, requiring full cooperation with the ICTY and return of refugees (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). Croatia is the first country in the WB region to successfully gain EU membership in 2013 under this renewed consensus.

Part of EUs support for reforms in WB countries, in terms of economic and technical assistance, has been exercised within the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) since 2007 (European Commission, Overview - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance). The IPA budget has increased during each of its 3 periods, with EUR 11.5 billion allocated during 2007-2013, EUR 12.8 billion being allocated for the period 2014-2020 and EUR 14.162 billion being allocated for 2021-2027 period, with current receiving countries being Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey (ibid.). This was further supplemented in 2021 with the €30 billion Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans, seeking to “spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union” by mobilising up to EUR 9 billion for funding investment, which the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, promoted with appeals to integration and enlargement aspirations (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020). Rest of the EIP is comprised of potential for attracting investment, back by the Western Balkan Guarantee Facility, and EUR 3.3 billion in health and socio-economic support in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (European Council, 2021). The EIP coincided and complimented the

Commission’s communication on 5 February 2020, titled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’, which laid out a revised methodology for enlargement to the Western Balkans (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020).

### 3.2 Meeting EU *Chapters of the Acquis*

Under the revised enlargement methodology for the Western Balkans (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020), the EU has refocused its emphasis on the fundamentals cluster of the acquis, which also includes a strengthened focus on the economic criteria, functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform. Table 3 will provide an illustrative overview of the progress the 4 WB CCs have made in meeting the *Chapters of the Acquis*, followed by elaboration upon this for each CC, particularly in their progress on cluster 1 that EU has dedicated particular attention to. This will be supplemented by evaluating impacts of the main individual challenges or main factors for each CC’s accession progress. As Albania and North Macedonia only opened formal negotiations in 2020, neither CC has managed to officially open any negotiation chapters yet. Therefore, instead their level of preparedness on each negotiation chapter will be evaluated, as well as the progress made over the reporting period.

*Table 2 - CC’s Progress in Meeting the EU Chapters of the Acquis*

Clusters	Chapters of Acquis	Chapters Opened/ Closed		Level of preparedness (progress over reporting period)	
		Serbia	Montenegro	Albania	N.Macedonia
<b>1. Fundamentals (Opened first and closed last) - Economic criteria - Functioning of democratic institutions - Public administration reform</b>	Chapter 5: Public procurement	Opened: December 2016	Opened: December 2013	Moderate (good progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 18: Statistics	Opened: December 2018	Opened: December 2014	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (good progress)
	*Chapter 23: Judiciary and fundamental rights	Opened: July 2016	Opened: December 2013	Some/moderate (good progress)	Some/moderate (some progress)
	*Chapter 24: Justice, freedom and security	Opened: July 2016	Opened: December 2013	Some/moderate (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)

	Chapter 32: Financial control	Opened: December 2015	Opened: June 2014	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
<b>2. Internal Market</b>	Chapter 1: Free movement of goods		Opened: June 2017	Some/moderate (limited progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 2: Freedom of movement for workers		Opened: December 2017	Some (some progress)	Early stages (no progress)
	Chapter 3: Right of establishment and freedom to provide services		Opened: December 2017	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (no progress)
	Chapter 4: Free movement of capital	Opened: December 2019	Opened: June 2014	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 6: Company law	Opened: December 2017	Opened: December 2013	Moderate (some progress)	Good preparedness (some progress)
	Chapter 7: Intellectual property law	Opened: June 2017	Opened: March 2014	Some/ preparedness (limited progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 8: Competition policy		Opened: June 2020	Some/moderate (limited progress)	Moderate (no progress)
	Chapter 9: Financial services	Opened: June 2019	Opened: June 2015	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 28: Consumer and health protection		Opened: December 2014	Early stage (no progress)	Moderate (no progress)
<b>3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth</b>	Chapter 10: Information society and media		Opened: March 2014	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 16: Taxation		Opened: March 2015	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 17: Economic and monetary policy	Opened: December 2018	Opened: June 2018	Moderate (limited progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 19: Social policy and employment		Opened: December 2016	Some (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)

	Chapter 20: Enterprise and industrial policy	Opened: February 2017	Opened: December 2013	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 25: Science and research	Opened: December 2016 <b>Provisionally closed</b>	Opened: December 2012 <b>Provisionally closed</b>	Some (good progress)	Good (limited progress)
	Chapter 26: Education and culture	Opened: February 2017 <b>Provisionally closed</b>	Opened: April 2013 <b>Provisionally closed</b>	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 29: Customs union	Opened: June 2017	Opened: December 2014	Moderate (limited progress)	Good (good progress)
<b>5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion</b>	Chapter 11: Agriculture and rural development		Opened: December 2016	Some (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 12: Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy		Opened: June 2016	Some of (some progress)	Good (good progress)
	Chapter 13: Fisheries	Opened: June 2018	Opened: June 2016	Some (good progress)	Moderate (no progress)
	Chapter 22: Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments		Opened: June 2017	Moderate (limited progress)	Moderate (limited progress)
	Chapter 33: Financial and budgetary provisions	Opened: June 2018	Opened: December 2014	Some (good progress)	Early stage (limited progress)
	<b>4. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity</b>	Chapter 14: Transport policy		Opened: December 2015	Some (some progress)
Chapter 15: Energy			Opened: December 2015	Moderate (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
Chapter 21: Trans-European networks			Opened: June 2015	Some (some progress)	Good (limited progress)
Chapter 27: Environment			Opened: December 2018	Some (limited progress)	Some (limited progress)
<b>5. External relations</b>	Chapter 30: External relations	Opened: December 2017	Opened: March 2015	Good (good progress)	Moderate (some progress)

			<b>Provisionally closed</b>		
	Chapter 31: Foreign, security and defence policy		Opened: June 2014	Good (some progress)	Moderate (some progress)
	Chapter 34 - Institutions	Currently N/A			
	Chapter 35 - Other issues	<b>Normalisation with Kosovo</b> Opened: December 2015			

### 3.2.1 Serbia

Since 1999, the priority for Serbia has been to improve its regional status and image, presenting itself as an integrated and cooperative regional partner. European powers recognised the “Serbian question” was key for stabilisation of the Balkans region (Džankić, et.al., 2021). Serbia was granted candidate status in 2012 and opened accession negotiations in 2014. By 2021, 18 out of 35 negotiation chapters have been opened and 2 have been provisionally closed. However, the “Serbian question” seems to persist, predicated in the state-national nexus where the Serbian nation appears to still be struggling to incorporate its final state borders (ibid.). This is causing tensions with Serbia’s minorities, external diaspora, and its neighbours, particularly Republika Srpska and Kosovo, which subsequently creates friction for Serbia’s EU integration. EU Negotiating Network officially opening accession negotiations in 2014 included prioritising “visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo” (Council of the European Communities, 2014), and one of the first negotiation chapters opened in 2015 was chapter 35, dedicated to normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Since then, all chapters in the fundamentals cluster have been opened, under the revised enlargement methodology. The pace of further negotiations with Serbia under this framework is reliant on the rule of law reforms, as well as normalisation of relations with Kosovo (Serbia Report, 3).

The Serbian government continues to declare EU integration and correspondent reform a priority, focusing on rule of law agenda (ibid., 11). In 2021, it delivered on number of benchmarks under clusters 3 and 4, leading to the EU Commission recommending opening negotiations in these areas. However, while the accession timetable remains uncertain, the pre-enlargement momentum for generating reform appears sluggish, making the relationship



between Belgrade and Brussels slow and non-linear, at time seemingly lacking progress all together (Fagan and Wunsch, 2019).

Serbia has improved alignment with the EU *acquis* in many areas, particularly taxation and energy, improving the perceived ability to assume obligations of EU membership (Serbia Report, 6). Economic criteria of cluster 1 has seen some progress, as the Commission evaluated Serbia as being at moderate/good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy in line with EU criteria (*ibid.*, 55-57) and is moderately prepared to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU (*ibid.*, 64). Some progress has been made in tax administrative reforms (*ibid.*, 13) and privatisation of the financial sector (*ibid.*, 62), however the state maintains a stronghold in economy and the private sector remains underdeveloped, prolonging inefficiencies in the finance sector (*ibid.*, 60-61). Progress is lacking in fiscal regulation and rule of law (*ibid.*, 60), fostering continued corruption and judicial inefficiency (*ibid.*, 24-25). Judicial and public administration reform remains limited. EU has called for ensuring merit-based recruitment, strengthening quality control capacity of the Public Policy Secretariat and mechanisms for prioritising investments equitably (*ibid.*, 13-17). For judiciary, a revised system for appointments and evaluations of judges and prosecutors is required following constitutional amendments, to ensure merit-based recruitment and guarantees against political influences (*ibid.*, 17-20). These reforms would aid in addressing corruption and organised crime, as both areas are still struggling to meet EU standards (*ibid.*, 26-31, 42-46).

Political polarisation in Serbia poses a concern for creating a broad consensus on EU-related reform. Furthermore, there remains scope for improvement in cooperation between the government and civil society, as well as fostering a supportive environment for developing and financing civil society organisations (*ibid.*, 12). EU has placed considerable emphasis on creating a viable civil society space, as a means of driving domestic policy and more participatory governance (Fagan and Wunsch, 2019 ; Alviz and Irv, 2021). However, there is scepticism towards whether EU assistance and the accession criteria generate viable improvement of state–CSO relations (Fagan and Wunsch, 2019). While Serbia is often considered a “frontrunner” for WB enlargement, due to its administrative capacities (Vachudova 2014), empirical evidence suggests an incomplete, or mostly façade implementation of participatory policy-making mechanisms, incentivised by external pressure but with little evidence of institutionalisation. (Fagan and Wunsch, 2019). Sceptics question whether EU or other external assistance can have a meaningful impact on state

officials and CSOs relations, and whether surface-level improvements are likely to endure once integration goals are realised (Warleigh 2001; O'Brennan 2013). While Serbia has a broadly established institutional and legislative framework for upholding fundamental rights, consistent implementation needs to be ensured (Serbia Report, 31-33). Human rights institutions need to be strengthened, alongside an environment for exercising freedom of expression (ibid., 33-35). The limited progress made recently coincides with concerns of apparent deterioration of the political climate in Serbia, with democratic backsliding, which includes growing hostility towards CSOs and retreat in past progress (Fagan and Wunsch, 2019).

Much of the friction between EU and Serbia has stemmed from deep differences which emerged in the aftermath of Kosovo's declaration of independence, in February 2008. In 2011 however, process of dialogue was started between Serbia and Kosovo, facilitated by the EU's External Action Service, which eventually led to agreements on the exchange of cadastral records, the mutual recognition of diplomas and a mechanism for integrated border/boundary management (IBM) and the participation of Kosovo at meetings of regional organizations, and the establishment of 'First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations' in April 2013 (Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015). This agreement effectively signals an end of Serbia's aspiration towards a partition of Kosovo, and acceptance that Kosovo would pursue EU accession independently. This agreement also enabled Serbia to officially begin accession negotiations with EU. Normalisation of relations with Kosovo remains a priority concern for EU-integration, included in chapter 35, opened in 2015. However, the change in Serbia's position towards Kosovo is likely more a pragmatism and rational pursuit of EU integration and consequent Europeanization as a policy, rather than meaningful change in normative values and European identification (Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015). EU-facilitated dialogue continued in 2021, after a stalemate following Kosovo's governmental collapse in 2020 (Serbia Report, 76). While both parties are largely complying under their respective obligations, the 2013 'First agreement of principles governing the normalisation of relations' provisions were not respected by Kosovo on one occasion, and the technical dialogue agreements of 2011-2012 are not, or only partially implemented. No further progress was made on reaching a binding and comprehensive legal normalisation agreement, which would enable both countries to continue with further EU-integration (ibid., 78-79).

Serbia's implementation of EU acquis and approach to regional relations is primarily pragmatic, rather than stemming from normative and value sentiments towards "Europeanisation" (Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015). This is shown in their external cluster reform implementation and in foreign policy. Recently Serbian officials have approached deepening regional relations with a post-Yugoslav perspective of constructing a "Serbian World", examples of which include reducing barriers to Serbian citizenship for ethnic Serbs and focusing on greater interdependence with Serb-populated regions such as Republika Srpska, which has also greatly influenced Serbian defence and security policy (Džankić, et.al., 2021).

This has seen Serbia increasingly turning towards China and Russia, in part due to rising identity and memory focus that has emerged, pushing Serbia further from the EU partners (Patalakh, 2018). With the increasing ethnic tensions, particularly sensitive issues for Serbia are NATO, due to its intervention in 1999; and Kosovo, with resistance to further relationship building (Džankić, et.al., 2021). Russia is a classic influence in the region, particularly in its bilateral ties with Serbia. The relationship between Russia and Serbia impacts the Europeanization process, as the EU-WB-Russia triangle complicates alignment with chapter 31 of the acquis (Zorić, 2017). However, a notable development in Serbia's bilateral relations is China. China has been a consistent supporter of Serbia on the Kosovo policy, and in return, Serbia has lent its support China's one-state position and turned a blind eye to China's human rights violations (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021). However, the relationship has become closer recently, particularly the extent of civil-military cooperation, exemplified by millions of euros worth of military, technology and security support provided by China, which has garnered EU criticism, as well as growing economic ties through Chinese direct investment in Serbia, and increase in tourism to the country (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021). The deepening of bilateral relations with China and Russia has hindered alignment with EU foreign policy, and slowed Serbia's membership progression, yet the Serbian leadership still states EU accession to be their primary foreign policy objective. However, due to Serbia's conflicting goals, its participation in foreign policy cooperation is predominantly pragmatic, including in areas of EU and NATO defence and security and migration policy during the 2015-2016 crisis (Džankić, et.al., 2021). This translates to low alignment rate with the EU, rising marginally from 56% to 61% in 2021 (Serbia Report, 122-126), delaying opening negotiations on chapter 31. In comparison North Macedonia, which is the second lowest of the 4 WB candidate countries has 96% alignment on common foreign, security and defence policy, and both Montenegro and Albania had full alignment in 2021.

### 3.2.2 Montenegro

Montenegro became a candidate country in 2010 opened accession negotiations in 2012 (Džankić, et.al., 2021). Since then, Montenegro has opened all negotiation chapters, and provisionally closed 3. Currently, Montenegro is the most likely candidate to meet the 2025 aspirational accession date, as suggested by the European Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy (Lilyanova, 2018). Under the revised enlargement methodology, continued progress will depend on Montenegro meeting interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24, as currently no further chapters will be provisionally closed until these are achieved (Montenegro Report, 2).

The political elites in the country have been relatively successful in overcoming internal divisions for applying integration reform, constructing a positive and aspirational image of the EU as a partner and therefore enjoyed higher levels of popular support for EU integration (Džankić, et.al., 2021).

Montenegrin authorities have consistently stated European integration to be a key priority, however tensions and polarisation between the new ruling majority and the opposition in Montenegro have intensified since the 2020 election period. The policy and governance reform are slowed by executive and legislative friction, as well as periodic boycotts (Montenegro Report, 3, 10-11). The slowdown of integration could be attributable in some extent to both enlargement and accession fatigue caused by the convoluted process, as well as a new government unprepared for comprehensive reform to state structures (Džankić, et.al., 2021). Creating cross-party consensus and strengthening stakeholder participation is crucial for making progress on EU-related reforms (Montenegro Report, 8-9). In terms of public administration reform, Montenegro remains moderately prepared and has made limited progress in the reporting period (ibid., 14-15), with the incoming government lowering requirements for “competence, independence and merit-based recruitment of civil servants”, which among other concerns may affect Montenegro's ability to retain experienced staff in EU-accession related matters (ibid., 4). This does not align with proposed strategic endeavours addressing size of the administrative apparatus and pursuing meritocracy (Corpădean, 2018). Therefore, need to strengthen administrative capacity and re-construct a negotiation structure poses an urgent priority for further EU-integration.

The fight against corruption and organised crime, respect for rule of law and liberty appear currently be the most significant concerns for Montenegro to address (Lilyanova, 2018). Judicial reform looks to be stagnating (Montenegro Report, 17-18), and corruption remains a prevalent issue (ibid., 4). Strong political will is needed to ensure the effectiveness and independence of both the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Agency, as well as a robust criminal justice response (ibid., 24). While making progress, some deficiencies in Montenegro's criminal justice system still need to be addressed (ibid., 4-5, 20-22). On fundamental rights, implementation of existing legislative and institutional frameworks on human rights has scope for progress (ibid., 28). Efficiency of investigation and enforcement through legal processes needs to improve. Vulnerable groups, minorities and women continue to experience discrimination, while gender-based violence and violence against children remains a concern (ibid., 34-37). Hate crimes/speech and ethnically and/or religiously motivated attacks are rising, while access to justice requires improvement (ibid., 5).

Economically, EU Commission evaluates Montenegro as moderately prepared for developing a functioning market economy and to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU (ibid., 52-53, 58), but lack of diversification poses a risk by being highly vulnerability to shocks (ibid., 6, 53). Weaknesses in supply-side development, namely human capital, and infrastructure (ibid., 59), hinders market integration. A significant action of economic integration by Montenegro was unilaterally adopting the Euro in 2002, as de facto currency, alongside Kosovo (Corpădean, 2018 ; European Central Bank, 2020). As this was a unilateral decision by Montenegro, the Euro is not legal tender, however it is used as official currency by the state and population (Fabris, 2015). This effectively forced further economic integration between the EU and Montenegro.

A clear and consolidated sense of statehood, enabling democratisation, is a key prerequisite for EU accession and effective integration, as internal contestation hinders consensus on necessary reform, nation building and Europeanisation (Džankić and Keil, 2019). A fluctuating sense of national identity has been a concern for Montenegro, particularly how its self-identity relates to Serbia, however, external influences on Montenegro have been more moderate by comparison. This has allowed it to effectively articulate and materialize its EU aspirations and prioritise EU in foreign policy, in full alignment on foreign, security and defence policy and managed to provisionally close negotiations on chapter 30 on external relations (Džankić, et.al., 2021) ; Montenegro Report, 111-114).

Montenegro was able to achieve NATO membership in 2017, despite considerable political turmoil and international pressure, particularly from the Kremlin (Corpădean, 2018 ; Corpădean, 2018). Montenegro has sharp social divisions between the Montenegrin majority and the large Serbian minority, remaining from the separation of the two countries in 2006 (Gardasevic, 2018). Many of the ethnic Serbians support stronger ties with Russia, oppose NATO membership or even support annexation of Montenegro to Serbia (ibid.). Russia has a long history of special interest in the Balkan region, and after independence of 2006 Russia sought influence by establishing economic and political ties, as well as through the Serbian Orthodox Church, which it could utilise to influence the ethnic-Serbian population (Gardasevic, 2018, 66-67). Russia and Russian-aligned interests employed aggressive and hostile rhetoric towards Montenegro's EU and NATO aspirations, seeking political interference by forging ties with opposition and by spreading anti-government propaganda and seeking to block Montenegrin integration with Europe. These interference attempts escalated in 2016, when a group of Russian, Serbian and Montenegrin citizens, seeking to stop Montenegro joining NATO, attempted to assassinate the Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic (ibid., 71). Despite this, Montenegro achieved NATO membership in 2017.

### 3.2.3 Albania and North Macedonia

Albania's post-communist legacy is distinctly felt in countries transformation progresses, particularly in terms economic and socio-political development. It was ruled since 1944 by Enver Hoxha, noted for a particular rigid application of the Stalinist model, based on national self-reliance and isolationism, breaking off economic ties, even with socialist regimes of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and China, and refusing all foreign aid and investment (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021). The regime also enforced complete subjugation of human and political rights, restricting all freedom of expression, religion, organisation movement or information, forbidding any political or civic action, democratic institutions or international organisations. Through this, the leadership created one of the most oppressive dictatorships of the communist bloc, based on an atmosphere of xenophobia and paranoia towards the outside world (Panagiotou, 2011). In 1991 Albania held its first multiparty election, after over 45 years of communist regime (Fischer, 2019). After the communist system collapsed, Albania was the poorest country in Europe. It positioned its foreign policy priority towards EU accession in 2003, after the Thessaloniki summit, where the EU Council affirmed the prospect of WB future in the EU (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021).

Accession negotiations with Albania were opened in March 2020 and in October the Commission assessed that all conditions for the first Inter-Governmental Conference on accession negotiations were met, with exception for the conditions related to functioning of the Constitutional Court, which were close to being met (Albania Report, 3). Main obstacles to Albania's membership progression in the past have predicated on broad political problems, government transparency and slow institutional reform (Panagiotou, 2011). Political criteria have found favourable improvements, with wide-ranging electoral reform facilitating generally well organised elections, but concerns remain related to misuse of public resources and sensitive data handling (Albania Report, 9-10). Albania's administrative and oversight structures have allowed for ongoing problems with clientelism, corruption and bribery (Panagiotou, 2011). In 2021, the Commission found Albania moderately prepared in area of public administration reform (Albania Report, 14) and judicial system reform (ibid., 18) and making progress. Efficiency of the judiciary has been strengthened and vetting of judges and prosecutors continues to deliver results (ibid., 19-22). Progress is being made in fighting corruption and organised crime, however, political will is necessary to ensure a structures and consistency to tackle the prevailing concern of corruption and a culture of impunity in both public and private sectors (ibid., 5, 22-24). Counter-terrorism strategy has made good progress, but more emphasis is required in addressing cybercrime, human trafficking, and money laundering (ibid., 5, 36, 40-44). Albania complies with international human rights instruments and has sought to meet its obligations (ibid., 26-27), however progress on freedom of expression has stagnated (ibid., 29), as tensions between officials and journalists have increased and an atmosphere of attacks and intimidation against media remains (ibid., 6).

Albania managed to achieve 100% alignment with the EU in relation to the external relations cluster, exhibiting good level of preparedness (ibid., 124-128). Albania's legal framework on migration mostly aligns with the EU (ibid., 44), but needs updating, and influx of irregular migrants, entering primarily from Greece on the way to other EU countries, continues to grow (ibid., 45). Issues of unfounded asylum applications being made to the EU from Albanian nationals still needs substantial attention to address (ibid., 6-7, 46).

Outside of the EU, Albania maintains a strategic relationship with China, mostly on economic grounds. In 2009, Albania and China signed a number of investment agreements, including the construction of the Bushat Hydropower plant in northern Albania. Many of these projects risk contradicting Albania's accession priorities, for example by involving the

influx of Chinese labourers into Albania (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021), as migration frameworks are a crucial strategic interest between EU and Albania. China maintains an interest in bilateral relations with WB states as a gateway to EU, but Albania is not its closest political ally in the region anymore. Albania has committed mostly to the European stances on international affairs and completely opposes China's position on Kosovo. Albania has made support for Kosovo's recognition one of its foreign policy priorities, while China, alongside Russia, have sided with Serbia (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021).

North Macedonia's process of nation building and democratization has met multiple challenges, following its newly found independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, set out in the context of contested national identity, opposed by neighbours Greece and Bulgaria, as well as the multi-ethnic composition of the country with a large ethnic-Albanian minority. Furthermore, these challenges were exacerbated by low economic development caused by the disintegration of the Yugoslav market, regional conflicts, and an embargo imposed by Greece in the first half of 1990s (Tziampiris, 2012). The newly independent government, led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) (Bieber and Ristić 2012, 381) exercised a strict state control over the media and conducted privatisation policy which benefited party sponsors, allowing the governing elites to maximise institutional and discursive capture. This allowed public attention to be directed away from corruption and officials abuse of state resources, instead controlled media focused on smear campaign against critics and construction of an ethno-nationalist framing of Macedonian identity (Tziampiris, 2012).

The Commission has continuously recommended opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia since 2009, while the European Council finally endorsed opening accession negotiations in March 2020. The delay in opening official negotiations threatens undermining EU expansion credibility (North Macedonia Report, 3). Combination of internal and external factors has contributed to North Macedonia's accession process effectively screeching to a halt, since becoming a CC in 2005, at the time seemingly a frontrunner in the WB (Rajchinovska Pandeva, 2021). However, slow-down of the process due to bilateral disputes has led to Macedonia becoming more isolated and nationalist, going from being a regional leader in EU integration to essentially marginalised in the process (Đukanović, 2019). The primary obstacle for North Macedonia's accession has been Greece, who has levered its veto power as a MS of the EU in pursuing bilateral objectives. Majority of the progress made by



North Macedonia has been during periods of good bilateral relations with its neighbour, 1995–2004, 2004–2006. Meanwhile periods of strained diplomatic relations with Greece, in 1991–1994 and 2006–2011, have had negative impact on integration (Tziampiris, 2012).

This harkens back to 1991, when the Assembly of the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia declared independence. The Greek government responded by declaring 3 conditions for the Skopje Republic<sup>3</sup>:

1. [it must] change the name ‘Macedonia’ which has a geographic but not an ethnic basis
2. [it must] acknowledge that it has no territorial claims against our country, and,
3. [it must] acknowledge that no ‘Macedonian Minority’ exists in Greece.

Greece adopted a maximalist official stance that the term “Macedonia” may not be included in any capacity in the new republics name. This conflict stood at an impasse for 3 rounds of attempted arbitration by Portuguese, British and UN negotiators (Tziampiris, 2012). This caused the new republic to be blocked from NATO membership and prospect for EU accession. The two-decade long conflict highlights the issues of EU intergovernmental nature, allowing Greece to singlehandedly leverage the whole of European Union community’s membership against North Macedonia, to achieve bilateral political aims. The Council became the essential blockage to reaching compromise that would have allowed North Macedonia to proceed with membership accession. The Commission proved secondary, as shown by the consistent rejection of its recommendation for opening negotiations.

In 2017, North Macedonia produced a new coalition government, who drastically changed course, and achieved a compromise with Greece on a name: “Republic of North Macedonia”, opening the door for EU integration. However, public opinion data, as well as a non-binding referendum held on the agreement in 2018, shows that the Prespa Agreement was not supported by the citizens of North Macedonia (Đukanović, 2019). The decision not to open negotiations in 2019 due to obstruction by a few MSs, namely France, provoked anti-EU sentiments in Macedonia based on resentment for accession being withheld, despite compromise being reached on name dispute with Greece. The intense backlash triggered early elections and perceptions of EU having disregarded its promises of enlargement

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<sup>3</sup> (Papakonstantinou 1994 as cited in Tziampiris, 2012).

prospects to WBs, despite North Macedonia having “sacrificed” a name. (Rajchinovska Pandeva, 2021).

North Macedonia has also made progress in improving bilateral relations with Bulgaria, and soothing tensions between North Macedonians and Albanians, improving the broader political context of the country (Rajchinovska Pandeva, 2021). Pending bilateral conflict with Bulgaria remains a concern for North Macedonia’s accession (North Macedonia Report, 3). Territorial disputes, as well as conflicts stemming from shared history, language and ethnic diasporas within each other’s territories have caused further friction for North Macedonia’s accession process. Crucial landmark in this relationship with Bulgaria was achieved in 2017, with the signing of the Treaty on friendship, neighbourliness, and cooperation with Bulgaria, where the former committed to supporting North Macedonia’s further integration into the EU and NATO (Đukanović, 2019). Regional cooperation remains crucial for North Macedonia accession progress. It maintains good relations with the other CCs and engagement in regional initiatives. Crucially, existing bilateral agreements, notably the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Bulgaria, must continue to be adhered to (North Macedonia Report, 65-66). The improved regional relations have been further accompanied by some institutional improvements, such as not (yet) employing state instruments for unfair political advantage and relaxing pressure on the media (Rajchinovska Pandeva, 2021).

North Macedonia continues to exhibit commitment to strengthening democracy and rule of law through activating checks and balances and outreach on key policy issues (North Macedonia Report, 3; p8). Opposition remains engaged in governance, although polarisation can impede parliamentary work (ibid., 9-10). Civil society remains active and involved in policy process (ibid., 11-12). In public administration reform, North Macedonia is moderately prepared and making progress in horizontal functional review processes (ibid., 13).

The judicial system has seen reform through further implementation from the Venice Commission, and continues following the new standards in appointment, promotion, discipline, and dismissal processes (ibid., 5, 17-19). Progress is also being made in addressing corruption, maintaining a track record on investigation and prosecution, including high level cases (ibid., 20-23). Fighting organised crime and terrorism is generally aligned with EU standards bilateral agreements (ibid., 36-40). Legal and institutional framework on fundamental rights in North Macedonia is mostly in line with EU standards (ibid., 24-25),

including protections against discrimination (ibid., 32). Additionally, further efforts are needed to address issues of law enforcement accountability, treatment of detained and convicted persons, and legislation on hate speech (ibid., 26-27).

Economically, North Macedonia is at good level of preparedness for developing a functioning market economy (ibid., 46-47). While it was severely hit by the pandemic, gradual recovery began in 2021, and the financial sector remained strong while the business environment continues to be impeded by the large informal economy (ibid., 47-51). North Macedonia is moderately prepared to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU, and integration with EU in terms of trade and investment remain steady (ibid., 53).

North Macedonia has increased its alignment with the EU on common foreign and security policy to 96% (ibid., 102). Other regional power, Russia, has primarily established its presence in terms of ethnoreligious sentiments, building ties with pro-Russian political actors (Nechev and Nikolovski, 2021). Beyond hampering WB integration into the EU and NATO, Russia is more focused on Serbian and Montenegrin strategy. China, however, maintains a strategic interest in North Macedonia. The relationship with Beijing was briefly paused in 1999, when Skopje recognised Taiwan's independence, however the relationship was resumed in 2001. North Macedonia's strategic importance stems from its geographic location, crucial for China's Land-Sea Express Route, from Greece to Budapest, passing through Skopje and Belgrade, the process for which was initiated at the 2014 Belgrade summit (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021). In 2020, China further surpassed Russia in presence in the region, through the use of "mask diplomacy" as a response to the pandemic (Nechev and Nikolovski, 2021).

### **3.3 Western Balkans' candidate countries preparedness for EU membership**

Regarding H1, it would indeed appear that the current CCs have not managed to meet the accession requirements, with each one at a different point in the negotiation stage.

The frontrunner in the accession process currently seems to be Montenegro, which has opened all negotiation chapters and provisionally closed 3 as of 2022, but its further progress is challenged by domestic political frictions which impede policy processes, including making further substantial progress in meeting the fundamental rule of law conditions. The

EU's revised emphasis on these factors means that the commission has halted closing any more negotiation chapters until the interim benchmarks for these chapters are met, which has the potential to significantly slow Montenegro's accession process. Therefore, it is currently unclear what a realistic timeframe for Montenegro to join would be. It should be noted, however, that once negotiations are closed, the accession date will still need to be determined by ratification of each MS, a process which took the most recent joining country, Croatia, nearly two years (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). Therefore, while Montenegro is probably the most likely candidate for completing negotiations next, its accession in the near future is by no means guaranteed and depends on both the EU Commissions judging the criteria met, including Copenhagen conditions of EU integration capacity, as well as all current MS governments will to ratify Montenegro's accession.

The second most progress has been made by Serbia, which was determined with Montenegro as possessing the potential to achieve accession by 2025. It has opened 18/35 chapters, and closed 2, however it has not made any further progress in negotiation chapters since 2018. The primary reason for its halting accession progress remains the issue of formally recognising Kosovo, which is presenting an impasse. While recognition cannot be a formal demand by the EU (instead framing chapter 35 in terms of "normalisation of relations"), as five current EU members do not officially recognise Kosovo either, individual MSs are likely to demand the recognition before ratification of Serbia's accession (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). Serbian domestic political sentiments have consequently been shifting, with rise of ethno-nationalism and closer cooperation with Russia and China, it would appear that Serbians' appetite for further EU integration is waning.

While North Macedonia was the first among the current WB CCs to gain candidacy in 2005, its progress has primarily been dictated by bilateral concerns, most notably its prolonged name dispute with Greece. While progress has finally been made in the relations with Greece and Bulgaria, which is supposed to facilitate the country to finally make progress on accession, the crisis of confidence in the credibility of the EU accession prospects has damaged North Macedonia's institutions and the trust between the negotiation sides. Albania, meanwhile, has made accelerated progress in catching up on instituting and implementing reform in recent years, however its legacy of oppressive communist regime which left the country impoverished and lacking effective institutions, has made the reform progress difficult. Its main concerns are corruption and rule of law issues; however, progress indications have signalled improvement (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). As both countries opened

formal negotiations on accession in 2020, they have not managed to formally open any negotiation chapters as of May 2022, positioning their progress well behind Serbia and Montenegro currently. However, North Macedonia in particular is expected to make quick progress in negotiations, as it has been preparing for membership the longest out of any CC, provided it does not encounter further bilateral opposition.

However, the current shortcoming of CCs is largely due to the significantly increased conditionality being applied under the EU's renewed consensus from 2006 and the "credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans". The accession criteria have not just increased in terms of the number of negotiation chapters, but also in strict application. The enhanced accession criteria and rule of law conditionality which EU has placed its emphasis on is likely to pose the highest obstacle for the WB CCs ability to meet accession criteria, which if not overcome will limit the external integration capacity. Democratic and rule of law backsliding across the region in the last decade highlights how surface-level reform is undermined by weak implementation by elites who are disincentivised towards norm adaption and absence of internal push for change (Kmezić, 2019). The goal European integration adopted by former Communist states in the region is increasingly undermined by resurging Euroscepticism and deterioration of relations between WB countries and EU institutions and dominant MSs, particularly Germany, since the 2008 crisis (Cocco, 2017). Therefore, there is less domestic political will for EU related reform implementation, making SAP less successful than equivalent processes in CEE and Baltics before the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. The state-building in WBs has at time conflicted with EU accession agenda within the context of prolonged socio-economic regression which has generated resistance to such policy reform (Bonomi, 2020). While EU conditionality leveraging has in the past been effective in generating governance reform, with weakened credibility of accession prospects and diminishing appetite for membership, such conditionality is losing effectiveness (Richter and Wunsch (2020). Current political environment in WB favours strong-men governments, engaging in state-capture, corruption and anti-western rhetoric, particularly evident in Serbia (Bonomi, 2020). Meanwhile, Montenegro, along with North Macedonia and Albania, continue declaring commitment to EU perspective, and comply with EU foreign policy, as well as with membership requirements to various levels. However, without effective incentives through credible membership prospect and EU's continued commitment to the region, profound reform is likely to delay, lowering the likelihood of any of the WB CCs achieving accession soon (Richter and Wunsch (2020).Furthermore, conditionality

effectiveness also appears to waver when an accession date is established, as shown in the case of Croatia, as the incentive to reform is dropped, therefore an effective gradual accession criteria is required, which includes checks at every stage (Steunenberg and Dimitrova, 2007).

Therefore, the external capacity relies on effective conditionality. This means conditionality that is not impractically stringent and therefore disincentivising alignment; while also effective in ensuring satisfactory reform adoption as well as implementation, to ensure norm adoption prior to accession completion, when the effectiveness of conditionality falls. The potential for establishing such criteria, however, is dependent on the EUs, which ability to enact effective policy is dependent on the will of the MSs. As the Council maintains dominance over the accession process, the individual MSs political preferences are crucial for setting the enlargement policy. Furthermore, as enlargement requires unanimity consent, the success of the process depends on satisfying every MS, generating pressure toward tightening conditionality. Finally, there is a concern over the democratic nature of the accession criteria enforcement process, as CCs are subject to legislation, they have not had democratic control over (Raik, 2004).

Therefore, while it is fair to say the CCs have not currently fulfilled the accession criteria, as assessed by the EU commission, it is also insufficient to explain the stagnation without noting that the increased conditionality is imposed by the EU, therefore requiring analysis of the contributing factors. Imposing higher barriers to entry inherently slows down enlargement processes, and if the criteria imposed is so high as to effectively halt the process, the internal factors for enlargement resistance and demanding such conditionality, are the crucial factor for enlargement stagnation. Accession criteria is essentially determined by MSs preferences, and political will for pursuing EU enlargement. The heightened criteria could be due to deepening and widening concerns, whether perceiving states that are too deviant from the EU as a risk for widening or seeing widening as incompatible with deepening processes in essence. Alternatively, this could also be due to individualist MS interests, whether determined by domestic or foreign policy concerns. To evaluate this, EU internal enlargement factors will now be explored.

#### 4. EU Internal integration capacity (Absorption Capacity)

The phrase “absorption capacity” has been embraced in official usage and academic discourse without a precise definition, but an insinuation that it represents objective reality. It is often used in combination with “enlargement fatigue” and “final frontiers” discussions, all three being widely used yet contested terms, regularly used to justify, or supplement, political sentiments hostile to further expansion (Emerson, et.al., 2006, 11), particularly referring to growing pains from the big bang enlargement of 2004 (Miščević and Mrak, 2017). These ambiguous sentiments are frequently seen in responding to potential Turkey or WB integration, revealing cultural, social and identity dynamics to absorption capacity discussions, particularly within anxieties towards globalism and an imperialist image of the EU (Emerson, et.al., 2006, 11). Causes for deceleration of EU expansion processes can be further consolidated by more recent events, such as the pecuniary cynicism following the euro and the twin crisis, and the disintegration fears succeeding the 2015 migrant crisis and Brexit in 2016, which can all be supposed as contributory to diminished desire within EU MSs for WB enlargement, echoed in the EU’s restructured enlargement strategy (Miščević and Mrak, 2017).

#### **4.1 Past Enlargements**

The increased accession conditionality discussed above became a theme in relation to the EU enlargement to the post-soviet states. The 1970-1980s Mediterranean enlargement negotiations, with Greece, Spain and Portugal, were not structured around strict criteria or prolonged economic and democratic progress evaluations. By comparison, the post-communist countries were subject to an extensive process, as EU formulated the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993 to structure accession standards around general democratic and economic liberalisation (Fossati, 2008). However, in 1997 Slovakia failed to meet the political conditionality, Latvia and Lithuania did not meet the economic criteria and Romania and Bulgaria did not meet either (ibid.). Yet the 10 countries managed to achieve EU accession in 2004, including Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. Furthermore, Romania and Bulgaria followed suit in 2007, when they reached accord with the economic conditionality. This contrasts drastically with the accession processes the WB aspiring EU members have been subject to. This highlights that the conditionality imposition is determined by the political and structural goals of the enlargement, as the desire to increase its size and dominance has reduced with each subsequent enlargement, while internal heterogeneity has increased.

Table 3 - Past Enlargements<sup>4</sup>

Year	1958	1973	1981	1986	1995	2004	2007	2013	2020
<b>MSs</b>	BE FR DE IT LU NL	+DK +IE +UK	+EL	+PT +ES	+AT +FI +SE	+CY +CZ +EE +HU +LV +LT +MT +PL +SK +SI	+BG +RO	+HR	- UK
<b>Number of MSs</b>	6	9	10	12	15	25	27	28	27
<b>MEPs</b>	142	198	434	518	626	732	785	766	705

#### 4.1.1 Eastern enlargement of EU

Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, EU undertook rapid expansion eastward, with the “big-bang” enlargement of 10 new MSs in 2004, followed shortly by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 (table 3). The big-bang enlargement was significant in several ways. First, the negotiations were undertaken with all the countries simultaneously. Secondly the negotiations were based on explicit Copenhagen criteria, organised into 31 chapters, to be implemented prior to accession (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). The WB, in contrast, all negotiate separately with individual progress monitoring (Šabić, 2019). Since the eastern enlargement was a political and geo-strategic goal, to promote political stability and strengthen EU internationally, the Copenhagen criteria was applied quite benevolently in both political, economic and *acquis* terms (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). This loose application of conditionality stemmed from concerns that EU accession delay might cause democratic backsliding and conflicts in these newly independent states (Fossati, 2008). In institutional terms, the 2004 and 2007 enlargement involved significant recalibration of EU institutions, with an increase from 15 to 25 and then 27 MSs, changing the balance of powers and processes in all key policymaking institutions. Furthermore, the expansion to ~100 million

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<sup>4</sup>(De Munter, 2021)



new EU citizens, providing under 5% of EU GDP, with almost all CEE countries in deficit vis-à-vis the established EU, meant that prior to accession, direct investment from the EU to CEE was corresponding to ~20bn euros a year, bulk going to Visegrad countries (Landaburu, 2007: 13). If evaluated through security and economic terms, the enlargement has been generally assessed as successful, as enlargement has substantially increased EU's global influence, significantly within the WTO, however the consensus on continual institutional and political operational standard is less confident (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017).

For negotiations with WB states, first of which to accomplish accession being Croatia in 2013, the EU had learned lessons from the previous two enlargements, namely that leverage on CCs is mostly effective before accession, whereas the enthusiasm for further improvement and implementation may stall once accession is ensured (Šabić, 2019). Furthermore, implementation of the *acquis* criteria may often lack behind legal harmonisation. Due to these concerns, EU learned that a more rigorous and broad application of the Copenhagen criteria must be realized, part of which included introduction of checkpoints in negotiation chapters (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). The Commission recognized areas of particular concern for the WB CCs to be rule of law, justice, and fundamental rights, and updated its *acquis* according. Furthermore, the EC created a new chapter of *acquis* for dealing with war crimes of former Yugoslavia and minority rights (Šabić, 2019). This action is reflective of the chapter 35 for Serbia which relates to normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

While the WB countries negotiated individually with EU, this was balanced with EU insistence on high levels of regional cooperation, due to the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia (*ibid.*). Dealing with the past and transitional justice implementation has been crucial for EU-WB integration since the adaptation of the "Regional Approach" in 1996, which is seen as a foundational step to democratic transition. This is contrasted to the 2004-2007 enlargements as these MS independence processes were not defined by military conflict among the new MSs. Closest comparison can be drawn to the cases of Estonia and Latvia, where democratic state building processes did not extend to protection of right for the ethnic-Russian minorities in these states, particularly in terms of recognising public use of Russian language even when EU had already initiated negotiations with these countries (Schimmelfennig, 2008). The experience of Croatian accession issues has had the impact of EU insisting on a renewed process for WB accession processes, including the rule of law chapters of the *acquis* now being opened first and closed last to ensure sufficient time for normative implementation of reforms (Šabić, 2019). Furthermore, EU has become notably

more attentive to unresolved border and bilateral disputes (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017), which could be seen most crucially in the experiences of Serbia-Kosovo and North Macedonia – Greece/Bulgaria. All these lessons have contributed to increased accession conditionality, with now 35 Chapters of the Acquis, stricter application of the Copenhagen criteria with interim benchmarks and a renewed awareness of the importance of ensuring meeting of acquis sufficiently pre-accession, as EU holds most leverage at this state.

#### **4.1.2 Enlargement Fatigue**

The dominant narrative of EU enlargement revolves around the idea that European publics, domestic governments, and EU supranational institutions were not prepared to absorb further enlargement without distressing its institutions or damaging the EU's economic prosperity (Economides, 2020). This sentiment has overlapped the notion that EU's capacity has been exhausted by previous enlargements in terms of institutional structures, which must be reformed before any further expansion is viable (Szolucha, 2010). However, such reform hinges on appetites for pursuing enlargement policy, the absence of which relates to the “enlargement fatigue” mindset observed to be a prevalent tone in several MSs and Brussels, along with much of EU population.

Due to this, EU has appeared “reluctant to extend a membership perspective to further countries” (Schimmelfennig, 2008), being wary about initiating any new commitments and pursuing existing commitments cautiously.

This diminished enthusiasm is indicated in how EU has restructured enlargement strategy, the “Copenhagen Plus” conditionality, with a “fundamentals first” approach to rule of law, bilateral conflict resolution and economic governance related acquis criteria (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). It should be noted that these areas emphasise the lessons learned from past enlargement issues, particularly from the experience of backsliding and weak implementation in Croatia, and the experience of economic crisis following the expansion to the CEE.

Croatia's low performance and occasional willingness to leverage its membership against other candidate countries in the region serves to discourage further WB enlargement, as well as undermine trust and regional cohesion, which EU has placed prior emphasis on (Šabić, 2019).

The reasons for this slackening of enlargement urgency are twofold:

1. EU has become increasingly captivated by internal and international issues, economic crisis, Brexit, Russia-Ukraine conflicts, geopolitical and security concerns, 2015 refugee crisis and subsequent rise of populism to name a few (Šabić, 2019). This has caused the enlargement policy to diminish in importance within the EU's political agenda.
2. The response to these crisis, particularly economic and refugee crisis, has been far more intergovernmental than supranational. As a response to the euro crisis, creditor MSs imposed harsh austerity measures and cut the credit for deficit countries, most notably Greece, to protect their own economies, which undermined EU's monetary union's cohesion. Furthermore, the refugee crisis in 2015 saw MSs such as Hungary defy the EU and its fundamental principles entirely, weakening its reputation and normative power, as well as leading to dissolution fears, particularly following the resurgence of populist-nationalism and Brexit. This weakened the relative position of the European Commission, EU's predominantly supranational institution, and strengthened the power of European Council in policy setting.

As a result, enlargement policy is increasingly being determined by the European Council, which functions on intergovernmentalism rationality in setting benchmarks and negotiation tempo. Due to this, while previous enlargements followed a predominantly rationalist and normative reasoning, the WB enlargement has been progressively more politicised, including being subject to increasingly more bilateral provisions (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017).

The effect of this has been to stall further widening of EU through expansion for the sake of concerns about the depth of EU integration. The shift towards intergovernmentalism in EU policy making has weakened its supranational cohesiveness, as bilateral and individual state interest dominate the agenda. Appeals for institutional and constitutional reform as a prerequisite for expansion profess to call for further deepening to enable widening, however, such reform is not evident in the periphery of EU's immediate agenda. Instead, EU has been forced to create membership alternatives, such as the Eastern Partnership and The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (Szolucha, 2010). This institutional capacity concern, in combination with EU's crisis of confidence and legitimacy, have then caused MS to push for exceedingly tight conditionality to accession criteria, to mediate both the EU's absorption capacity fears and worries about the illiberal tendencies and rule of law weaknesses which have beleaguered previous enlargements (ibid. ; Šabić, 2019).

## **4.2 Absorption capacity**

The concept of “absorption capacity” has proven contested in definition since 1993, within the Copenhagen summit conclusion (Emerson, et.al., 2006), where the EU leaders for the first time set out an internal condition for any further accession to the EU, the capacity to absorb new members “while maintaining the momentum of European integration” (İçener and Phinnemore, 2006, 37). The term has gained popular usage since resurfacing in 2005 and became a significant controversy of the 2006 European Council summit (Emerson, et.al., 2006, 11). There exists a tendency to perceive failure of ratifying constitutional reform as lack of capacity for further enlargement in institutional terms, while alternative interpretation would emphasise the mismanagement of systemic changes and constitutional amending by political leaders as a gridlock in wider scheme of EU politics applied to enlargement and integration in general (ibid.,).

In 2006, French president Jacques Chirac defined EU absorption capacity in terms of institutional, financial and political capacity (Emerson, et.al., 2006, 21). In this case the political refers to the sentiments of the populations of existing MSs. Analysis of absorption capacity along these factors would further be supplemented by also including a “cultural and social” aspect, exploring the identity discourses which have often surrounded expansion discussion, particularly highlighted in reference to prospect of Turkey’s accession. Therefore, a survey of these 4 factors, so far as they relate to the concept of EU absorption capacity, will now be undertaken.

### **4.2.1 Institutional**

The crucial institutional concern for the EU internal absorption capacity is the continued functionality and adaptability of EU governing institutions to incorporation of new members. This most notably applies to the Commission and European Parliament. Discourse around the institutional impact of enlargement since 2004 has focused on both the increased number and diversity of member states, meaning the range of voices to be satisfied for successful policy making increases (Nugent, 2016). Furthermore, failure of the institutions to meet these needs would pose concerns about the efficiency, legitimacy and accountability of the EU institutions (Best, et.al., 2010). However, much of the concern about the continued functioning of the EU did not seem to initially materialise, and the institutions have been

credited with being remarkably adaptable to previous enlargements (ibid. ; Pollack, 2009). In terms of administrative and policy making efficiency, EU has proved effective in conducting some of the necessary institutional and decision-making reforms, both formal and informal, to alleviate policy process gridlock (Nugent, 2016).

One example of this is increasing use of Qualified Majority Voting, making it harder for any state to unanimously barricade policy making. Treaty reform progresses of 1986 Single European Act (SEA), the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, the 2001 Nice Treaty, and the 2007 Lisbon Treaty all have Expanded the use of QMV to encompass policy sectors previously left for unanimity, meaning it can now be implemented for vast majority of legislation. Growing membership has been an important incentive to this, particularly since the Mediterranean enlargement, as MSs recognised importance of facilitating continued legislative capacity as well as coalition building (Nugent,2016). Unanimity is now only required for high profile decisions. This is important as enlargement rounds have shown that increased plurality does not make forming majorities easier, as ranges of political views and national interests have expanded (Best, et.al., 2010), causing decision making to increasingly rely on informal and bilateral terms, undermining public scrutiny and accountability. Therefore, maintaining administrative capacity of the EU institutions and policy processes may have come at a price of making the policy processes more fragile. Overall, the changes made by the EU in adapting the decision-making arrangements have seemingly aided in avoiding decision-making paralysis concerns of past expansions. With both deepening integration in terms of policy areas and widening expansion to new members, flexibility is crucial for EU institutions to maintain functionality and efficiency (Nugent, 2016).

However, institutional absorption capacity for future enlargements will once again require reformative change, as pointed out by EU Parliament since 2006, claiming that the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 reached the limits of the Treaty of Nice, and the EU's future functioning predicated on institutional reform (European Parliament, 2006). This proposes a distinct deepening to enable widening perspective on the future of the process. Yet since this, Croatia achieved membership and was incorporated successfully in 2013.

While the Council appears to have successfully incorporated new members of past expansions, although potentially becoming somewhat more "bureaucratised" (Bes and Settembri, 2008), it is primarily the European Commission and the European Parliament

whose structure must be reviewed in the context of the potential Western Balkans expansion (Raunio and Wiberg, 1998).

#### 4.1.1.1 *European Parliament*

The European Parliament is the legislative body of the EU, directly elected by the voters in every EU MS for 5-year terms. The Parliament is made up of 705 Members of European Parliament (MEPs), distributed roughly proportionately to each MS populations, with rule that no country can have fewer than 6, or more than 96 MEPs. The Lisbon Treaty caps the maximum number of MEPs at 751. Since the withdrawal of UK from the EU, only 705 seats have currently been allocated, with the EU stating that the remaining 46 will be held vacant for potential future expansions (European Parliament, *How many MEPs?*).

*Table 4 - MSs European Parliament seats<sup>5</sup>*

Member State	Population (million)	% of EU population	Parliamentary seats (% of EP seats <sup>6</sup> )	% of EP seats - projected <sup>7</sup>
<b>1. Germany</b>	83.2	18.6	96 (13.6%)	12.9
<b>2. France</b>	67.1	15	79 (11.2%)	10.6
<b>3. Italy</b>	60.2	13.5	76 (10.8%)	10.2
<b>4. Spain</b>	47.3	10.6	59 (8.4%)	8
<b>5. Poland</b>	38	8.5	52 (7.4%)	7
<b>6. Romania</b>	19.4	4.3	33 (4.7%)	4.4
<b>7. The Netherlands</b>	17.3	3.9	29 (4.1%)	3.9
<b>8. Belgium</b>	11.5	2.6	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>9. Greece</b>	10.7	2.4	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>10. Czech Republic</b>	10.6	2.4	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>11. Portugal</b>	10.3	2.3	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>12. Sweden</b>	10.2	2.3	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>13. Austria</b>	9.9	2.2	21 (3%)	2.8
<b>14. Hungary</b>	9.8	2.1	19 (2.7%)	2.5
<b>15. Bulgaria</b>	7	1.6	17 (2.4%)	2.3
<b>16. Denmark</b>	5.8	1.3	14 (2%)	1.9
<b>17. Finland</b>	5.5	1.2	14 (2%)	1.9

<sup>5</sup> (Eurostat, 2020 ; European Union, *EU INSTITUTION: European Parliament ;*)

<sup>6</sup>  $X = \text{Nr of EP seats} \div 705 \times 100$

<sup>7</sup>  $X = \text{Nr of EP seats} \div 746 \times 100$

<b>18. Slovakia</b>	5.5	1.2	14 (2%)	1.9
<b>19. Ireland</b>	4.9	1.1	13 (1.8%)	1.7
<b>20. Croatia</b>	4.1	0.9	12 (1.7%)	1.6
<b>21. Lithuania</b>	2.8	0.6	11 (1.6%)	1.5
<b>22. Slovenia</b>	2.1	0.5	8 (1.1%)	1.1
<b>23. Latvia</b>	1.9	0.4	8 (1.1%)	1.1
<b>24. Estonia</b>	1.3	0.3	7 (1%)	0.9
<b>25. Cyprus</b>	0.8	0.2	6 (0.9%)	0.8
<b>26. Luxembourg</b>	0.6	0.1	6 (0.9%)	0.8
<b>27. Malta</b>	0.5	0.1	6 (0.9%)	0.8

*Table 5 - Candidate Countries' projected European Parliament seats<sup>8</sup>*

<b>WB Candidate Country</b>	<b>Population (million)</b>	<b>% of EU population</b>	<b>Estimated nr of MEPs</b>	<b>% of EP seats - projected</b>
<b>Serbia</b>	6.9	1.5	16	2.1
<b>Albania</b>	2.8	0.6	11	1.5
<b>North Macedonia</b>	2.1	0.5	8	1.1
<b>Montenegro</b>	0.6	0.13	6	0.8
<b>Total</b>	12.4	2.73	746 (5 empty)	

The EU's decision to hold back a number of seats would seem to signal the preparedness to accommodate new members to the European Parliament, ensuring there is capacity for absorption. If any of the WB countries who currently hold candidate status did indeed succeed in accession, then there would be sufficient number of empty seats currently available. Table 5 shows the estimated number of seats each country would be entitled to if they did succeed in gaining membership. As can be seen, when compared to current MSs with similar populations, Serbia would be entitled to 16 MEPs, Albania to 11, North Macedonia to 8 and Montenegro to 6 MEPs. This is the most likely scenario in case one or a few of the current WB CCs becomes accedes. However, if all 4 become MSs, this would leave 5 empty seats available for future enlargements. This would not be pragmatic, as the 5 seats would not be sufficient even to meet the minimum requirement of 6 per MS. Furthermore, these seats are highly unlikely to be held for further enlargement as the only other official CC currently is Turkey, which has a huge population at 85.4 million (World

<sup>8</sup> (Eurostat, 2021a)

Population Review, 2022), so even if it was to succeed in accession, it would be entitled to 96 seats (EP max), therefore the seats would still need to be either redistributed or the EP be reformed. Furthermore, both of the potential candidate countries, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have populations bigger than bottom 4 current MSs, as well as Montenegro, which would also entitle them to more than the minimum 6 MEPs, therefore necessitating a redistribution. The redistribution of seats would entail current MSs losing seats, and thereby influence, in the EP, making it a controversial approach. But the alternative, to increase the number of MEPs, is also unfavourable as the effective functioning of the EP requires the number to be limited at a point that is both operational and representative, which was one of the aims of the Lisbon Treaty capping the number of MEPs.

However, the accession of any of these 3 countries is currently rather far-fetched, therefore making it even less reasonable to hold empty seats for expansions beyond the 4 WB CCs. Therefore, the likely result of all 4 joining would be a redistribution of the EP. Such act would include many current members losing seats, as well as a great deal of political bargaining, therefore requiring a notable political momentum.

#### 4.1.1.2 *European Commission*

The European Commission is made up of 27 Commissioners, one appointed by each MS, called “the college”, and led by a President (Directorate-General for Communication, *About the European Commission*). The Commission is divided up into Directorates-Generals (DGs) responsible for different policy areas. DGs develop, implement, and manage EU policy, law, and funding programmes.

With deeper integration of an increased number of members, greater complexity and reduced transparency, legitimacy and accountability concerns heighten (Lippert, 2006). Greater delegation of tasks to the supranational scope of the Commission becomes necessary for managing interdependence, however this creates bureaucratic friction. Enlargement affects Commission size, composition and working practices. The 2004 big bang enlargement necessitated the one national per MS standard, due to the desire to maintain a small and efficient Commission. The issue of defining meaningful portfolios for each commissioner was already faced then (Lippert, 2006, 110). The efficiency of a small Commission, supranational in nature, was opposed by smaller MSs who advocated for enhanced legitimacy by having equal representation from all MSs in the Commission. However, this poses a challenge to the functioning of the Commission. The core portfolio areas of the commission include: budget, single market, trade, competition, external affairs, economic and monetary



policy, CAP and regional policy (ibid., p111). The distribution of portfolios to commissioners is both a functional, as well as a political consideration, requiring the alignment of nominees' skills, MSs interests and Commissions practical functional needs. Due to this, the framework of the Commission is adapted by the President when composing a college and allocating portfolios. To meet all these needs, as well as the various demands of the MSs, the Commission Presidents have approached organising their colleges creatively. This has entailed both renaming the roles and re-allocating duties. Table 6 compares the last 3 Commission colleges, highlighting the roles that translate across relatively uniformly at the top and the ones that significantly differ below. The 2019-2024 Commission in particular created new portfolios such as “An Economy that Works for People (EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT)” and “Promoting our European Way of Life (VICE-PRESIDENT)”, which do not immediately correspond in their title to any of the core competencies. Furthermore, it is noted that both “Economy” portfolio exists alongside “An Economy that Works for People”. This does not only apply to the latest Commission either, for example the Barroso Commission has separate “Environment” and “Climate Action” portfolios. What can also be observed in the table is that portfolios are often combined or broken up. Some of the examples being the Juncker’s “Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality” portfolio being broken up to separate “Justice” and “Equality” portfolios in the Von der Leyen Commission. Alternatively, the Juncker Commission combined “Internal Market and Services (VICE-PRESIDENT)” and the “Industry and Entrepreneurship” portfolios of the 2010-2014 college into a “Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs” portfolio. These types of reorganisations are necessary when there is more Commissioners, ie. more MSs, than meaningful competences in the Commission.

Failure to ensure meaningful and adequately equal portfolios to each commissioner can risk undermining the MS, and therefore the credibility and legitimacy of the Commission. Meanwhile, excessive focus on developing and allocating portfolios makes the Commission less efficient, if holding titles becomes primary to conducting meaningful policy production and implementation. With further MS accession, this problem can be further magnified, as the current standards would mean incorporation of one more Commissioner per each new MS. Reform of the institution would require either broadening the scope of responsibilities which could then be allocated to Commissioners, or reducing the number of Commissioners, either by establishing a rotational seats system or portfolio sharing. This is unlikely to be supported, however, particularly by smaller MSs, for fear of losing representation and influence in the Commissions work.

Table 6 - Commissions 2010-2024

<sup>9</sup> Commission 2010-2014	Commission 2014-2019	Commission 2019-2024
<b>PRESIDENT: José Manuel Barroso</b>	<b>PRESIDENT: Jean-Claude Juncker</b>	<b>PRESIDENT: Ursula von der Leyen</b>
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VICE-PRESIDENT)	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission	A Stronger Europe in the World (HIGH REPRESENTATIVE/VICE-PRESIDENT)
Transport (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Transport	Transport
Health	Health & Food Safety	Health and Food Safety
Digital Agenda (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Digital Economy and Society	A Europe Fit for the Digital Age (EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT)
Energy (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Energy Union (temporarily in charge of the Digital Single Market) (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Energy
Maritime Affairs and Fisheries	Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries	Environment, Oceans and Fisheries
Environment		
Climate Action	Climate Action & Energy	European Green Deal (EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT)
Agriculture and Rural Development	Agriculture & Rural Development	Agriculture
Internal Market and Services (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs	Internal Market
Industry and Entrepreneurship		
Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy	European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations (temporarily in charge of Regional Policy)	Neighbourhood and Enlargement
International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response	International Cooperation & Development	International Partnerships
	Humanitarian Aid & Crisis Management	Crisis Management
Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth	Education, Culture, Youth and Sport	Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

<sup>9</sup> (European Commission, 2014 ; European Commission, 2019 ; European Commission, 2020)

Research, Innovation and Science	Research, Science and Innovation	
Inter-Institutional Relations and Administration (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Better Regulation, Interinstitutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT)	Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight (VICE-PRESIDENT)
Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship	Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality	Justice
Consumer policy		Equality
Home Affairs	Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship	Home Affairs
Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion	Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility	Jobs and Social Rights
	Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness (VICE-PRESIDENT)	
Financial Programming and Budget	Budget & Human Resources	Budget and Administration
Economic and Monetary Affairs and the Euro (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Euro and Social Dialogue, also in charge of Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Financial services, financial stability and Capital Markets Union
Taxation, Customs, Statistics, Audit and Anti-Fraud	Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxation and Customs	Economy
Competition (VICE-PRESIDENT)	Competition	Cohesion and Reforms
Trade	Trade	An Economy that Works for People (EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT)
Regional Policy	Security Union	Promoting our European Way of Life (VICE-PRESIDENT)
Development		Democracy and Demography (VICE-PRESIDENT)
		Values and Transparency (VICE-PRESIDENT)

Commission has also gone through less formal evolutions as result of EU expansions. The role of the Commission has both expanded with deepening and widening of the Union, as well as changing in character from primarily market regulation to involvement in foreign affairs, justice, immigration and international issues (Harlow 2002: 63 in Wille, 2010). The

enhanced political role of the Commission demands greater accountability to underpin its legitimacy in policy formation. And as the power of the European Parliament has grown, MEPs and political actors have sought to increase their influence over the Commission president and Commission composition. Although the Commission is supposed to be a bureaucratic rather than political, and supranational rather than national interest led, it does need Parliamentary backing, as it votes to approve both the president and their collage of Commissioners. This has allowed parliament to levy political expectations on the Commission seeking parliamentary confirmation (Wille, 2010). Another problem faced in structuring the Commission is “hierarchisation” of Commissioners, who are meant to be equal (Lippert, 2006, p110-111). The political position and organisational power invested in the President is entrenched in their role of setting the agenda, designing, and distributing portfolios and designing the Commission organisation (Directorate-General for Communication, *How the Commission is organised*). The increased size of the Commission has arguably necessitated the hierarchical structure of the college, while widening and deepening integration has meant the scope of its policy areas, as well as diversity in national interests, has exponentially expanded. The Commission is potentially currently best suited of the EU institutions to represent the union as a whole, and therefore as the EUs supranational status has become more established, the increased political and external role of the Commission is unavoidable. However, fulfilling this role is hindered by inefficiencies which arise from the challenge the current system of formulating the college of Commissioners and distributing portfolios poses. The political considerations of Commissioner nomination, approval and job allocation can affect the quality of recruitment, and shortage of meaningful portfolio areas for the number of Commissioners can risk creating empty title positions or excessive bureaucratic grit. Another potential response to this problem could be generating portfolio working groups, rather than allocating a single Commissioner per portfolio field. However, this would pragmatically likely further the hierarchisation of the Commission, particularly if foremen roles are generated within portfolio groups. While this may be an efficiency and administrative advantage, it does undermine the equality of the Commissioners, and therefore is likely to receive opposition if proposed.

#### 4.1.1.3 Qualified Majority Voting

The adaptation of the European Council in composition quite straight forward. The Council is attended by the relevant ministerial level representatives of each MS. This means an enlarged

Council would merely include an additional representative from a new MS. However, when it comes to casting votes in the Council, it may prove more complex. The Council uses 3 voting system options, and therefore, depending on the issue, might require varying level of consensus:

- Simple majority (50%+1 MSs, currently 14)
- Qualified majority (55% of MSs, representing at least 65% of the EU population)
- Unanimous vote (all in favour)

The Qualified majority vote (QMV), also known as “double majority”, is the most regularly used method of voting in the Council, accounting for about 80% of all the legislation adopted (European Council, *Voting System: Qualified majority*). In practice, this currently requires 15/27 MSs, provided they collectively account for 65% of the EU population. This essentially produces a compromise between the proportional representation (such as the Parliament), which benefits more populous MSs, and equal representation for each MS, ensuring a majority coalition of small states cannot overrule the will of the majority of EU, as the “blocking minority” required is 35%.

The Council may also use **reinforced qualified majority**:

- at least 72% of Council members vote in favour (currently 20 MSs)
- they represent at least 65% of the EU population

To assess the impact of the potential new MSs, 3 factors must be considered in analysing voting power in any forum: the distribution of votes, the decision rules used, and the possibilities of forming coalitions (Raunio and Wiberg, 1998). The distribution of votes would remain 1 vote per MS, but the number of votes needed to pass would change. If any one of the CCs joins, 55% would effectively be 16. If all 4 WB CCs joined, the vote needed would become 18/31.

The population distribution impact would vary, depending on the accession country. While increasing the number of MSs will require increased coalitions to be built to achieve either of the majority goals, this is more crucial with more populous CCs. As a new EU MS, Serbia would become the 16<sup>th</sup> largest by population, giving it more influence towards the population percentage requirement. Albania would have equal influence with Lithuania, currently in 21<sup>st</sup> place by population, and North Macedonia will be just behind it, equating to the population of Slovenia. Meanwhile, Montenegro would be similar to the second smallest, Luxemburg.

Therefore, Montenegro's impact would be arguably the smallest if incorporated. However, none of the WB CCs are populous enough to cause a particularly significant shift in the current Council dynamics single-handedly.

Coalition building would probably be the most impactful way the new MSs could direct decision making. Most coalition building is based on factors of ideology, policy interests and intergovernmental power balances. Policy issues which are significant at domestic political level tend to generate cross-national partisan coalitions, based on ideology. On issues at socioeconomic and structural level, cross-national coalitions emerge around socioeconomic convergence on policy standards. And at the supranational level, intergovernmental power balances affect the preferences of each MS, building coalitions to maximise their relative bargaining power (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos, 2011). Therefore, coalitions are likely to emerge in terms of:

- Financially primarily contributing states versus the primarily dependent states, forming policy preferences based on similar socioeconomic concerns
- Pro-integration versus Eurosceptic MSs, forming opposing preferences on ideological basis. This, however, might not be directly equivalent to the pro-enlargement and anti-enlargement coalitions, due to differing perspectives MS actors have on the interaction between deepening and widening.
- Big versus small MS, as an attempt by smaller MSs to counterbalance the greater influence of the larger MSs. This is particularly significant as the qualified majority voting means large-population states will lack the state numbers, while the smaller MSs will lack the population percentage. Therefore, such coalition building is likely to be counteractive to policy processes.
- Old and new MSs. This is likely to be determined by socioeconomic differences between the MSs, as the new states are typically less economically prosperous than old EU states.

The newcomers could also seek to build regional interest coalitions with incumbent neighbourhood MSs. Regional relations would need to improve potentially for this to be a sustainable alliance however, particularly for Serbia with Croatia and North Macedonia with Greece and Bulgaria. Alternatively, they can pursue interest-based cooperation, such as on migration, particularly for Albania.

#### 4.2.2 Financial/economic

The Great Recession and the twin Eurozone crisis have made EU states increasingly wary of macroeconomic imbalances and persistent current account deficits within their currency union, and hence more focused on external competitiveness, particularly including in enlargement considerations (Orszaghova, et.al., 2012)

Concern over financial and economic effects of enlargement have become particularly pronounced since the south- and eastwards expansions and the economic crisis of 2008, as well as the eurozone crisis. In 2007, before the economic crisis, 32% reported distrust of the EU. By 2011, this figure was 47%. Similarly, the share of those who view their nation's membership in the EU is a good thing went from 58% in 2007 to 47% in 2011 (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014).

The weak economic situation of the WB countries is a concern for their further EU integration, for both sides. Admittance of these countries, before their economies are ready to compete in the EU market, would mean accepting new MSs dependent on permanent alimony or long-term investment and aid (Schrader and Laaser, 2019). The WB countries have struggled with slow and unstable growth post-crisis, lacking effective restructuring of the real economy and rising debt levels (Bonomi, 2020). The per capita income of WB countries is around 30-50% of the EU average, which would place them at the bottom of the EU wealth hierarchy (Schrader and Laaser, 2019).

*Table 7 - CCs GDPs<sup>10</sup>*

<b>2019 data</b>	<b>Serbia</b>	<b>Montenegro</b>	<b>Albania</b>	<b>North Macedonia (2008*)</b>	<b>EU Average</b>
<b>GDP (€)</b>	45 970 million	4951 million	13 753 million	10 744 million	
<b>GDP per Capita (€)</b>	6620	7960	4820	5170	66 800
<b>GDP per capita % of EU average</b>	40.7	50.2	30.8	37.5	

The income cap between the EU and the WBs has increased since the crisis (Bonomi, 2020), and if the CCs cannot realistically catch up, this can have detrimental impact on their ability to survive in the common market, potentially making them victims of brain-drain and further destabilizing. However, current enlargement aspirations focus on political and regional

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<sup>10</sup> (Eurostat, 2021b)

stabilisation, prioritising rule of law and democracy conditions, and pursuing functioning market economy is more a vehicle for achieving stabilisation, as well as curbing the influx of migration from the region (Schrader and Laaser, 2019). Furthermore, trade integration may help to mitigate economic instability and reduce shock asymmetry through risk sharing. The interdependence of the region and sectors of the Eurozone can provide insurance against adverse shock and economic constriction, aligning with new trade theory and Frankel-Rose hypothesis (Peritz, et.al., 2022).

However, while an integrated Eurozone may be more resilient to shocks, without sufficient preparation the CCs will struggle under the market pressures of direct investment flows and job market asymmetries. These risks exacerbating the “trade off” between the deepening and widening of EU, as further economic or financial integration with an increasing number of MSs, who have vastly varied economic conditions, would require risk sharing burden being taken on by economically more advanced MSs. To manage this risk, EU could establish additional accession criteria, such as setting a minimum per capita income target for membership conditionality. EU has previously distinguished a 75% threshold for marking a “transition” region. Such a target for example could be more achievable for WB CCs, making it a more effective incentive target as well. Montenegro would reach this threshold in 2040, Serbia in 2043, Albania in 2045 and Northern Macedonia in 2064 (Schrader and Laaser, 2019).

Meanwhile, the big bang enlargement of 2004 welcomed 10 CEE and Balkan states with an average national GDP of around 4.8% of to a population comprising about 19.5% of EU population, equating to a GDP per capita of about averaging 24.7% of EU’s average (Kvist, 2004). This is far below even Albania today. The emphasis on projections of convergence predicted that high dependency on the EU international financial flows would impact convergence of the 2004 expansion countries within themselves and with the previous EU MSs, therefore facilitating economic catch-up of these states (Matkowski and Próchniak, 2004). However, for the WB the economic criteria of the Copenhagen criteria has been implemented with far more rigour, which could be due to increasingly cautious attitudes as a result of the financial crisis. Alternatively increased accession criteria might serve to soothe enlargement fatigue concerns for both governing elites and populations, by exhibiting increased conditionality.



### 4.2.3 Political

Political factors contributing to absorption capacity relate primarily to the level of integration and expansion appetites of EU states and populations. Political stances of MSs towards further expansion and integration are determined by the interdependent factors of elites' interests and public opinion. Political messaging is crucial for forming public opinion, while elites monitor electorate sentiments closely to form political stances towards enlargement, making the two interactional (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017). Due to this, enlargement politics vary across MSs. Support or opposition for enlargement may be due to wider policy goals, such as growing the states influence in both EU level and foreign policy, such as France or Greece, or signalling about EU-directed sentiments could serve the national interest of leaders, such as in cases of Hungary and Italy (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). Furthermore, states such as Hungary adopted the widening versus deepening mentality, seeing support for further enlargement as an antidote for integration (ibid.). Public opinion has become an increasingly important factor in determining EU integration capacity, and can generally be categorised into three stances:

1. pro-enlargement
2. anti-enlargement
3. enlargement under strict conditionality

EU has seen increasingly anti-enlargement public sentiments emerging, guided by populist, emotional and belief led cognitive reasoning, which has heightened polarisation and generated a “period of “constraining dissensus” towards the European project“(Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017). The interaction between various competing political reasons and goals has made the issue of enlargement more political in some MSs, including due to increased use of referenda, which risks challenging government's decisions, undermining the credibility of EU's integration capacity (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017 ; Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017).

#### 4.1.3.1 MS interests and effect on enlargement

Traditional analysis of the motives for EU enlargement have focused on the promotion of political, geographic, and economic integration that would strive to incorporate all countries of Europe eventually. This is set out from the beginning in the Treaty of Rome, stating a desire for “ever greater union” (European Union, *Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, Rome Treaty*). These aspirations are structured based on EU's perceived

normative and transformational power, as well as ability to radically improve the economic, political and social conditions of both its MSs and aspirational MSs, particularly in reference to the (widely considered) success of the Europeanisation of the CEE countries in previous enlargements (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). EU is also regarded as a historically significant conflict-management apparatus, stemming from its post-WW2 original ideal of uniting of, and fostering peace in, the war-torn region. It was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. This has given EU great normative power in advocating for a sense of European solidarity based on moral-equivalency sentiments, but what this general sense of solidarity means in action is disputed at EU level, driven mostly by interest-based politics (Grimmel, 2021). Theorising on enlargement motives for the unified and supernational entity of EU is insufficient for full consideration of factors determining enlargement-policy (particularly with the increasingly intergovernmental nature of the EU as discussed above), as enlargement agenda is composed from an aggregation of “a myriad of national policy agendas” (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017), and increasingly renationalised (Wunsch, 2017).

The classic rationalist logic of integration is built on the notion that purpose-rational *homines oeconomici* will seek EU integration to maximise pursuit of interest. The various actor’s economic and/or political interests will therefore drive integration processes (Grimmel, 2021). For many states, enlargement and/or integration constitute a national policy objective, which could be rooted in a multitude of aims; enhancing or preventing integration, economic development, promoting reform, managing conflict, as well as bilateral interests can all inform state’s enlargement policies (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). The idea of such interest driven integrational reasoning follows the functionalist and neofunctionalism schools of thought, where both state actors, and those interstate/intrastate actors whose objectives are more optimally met through supernationalism will seek to further the implementation of the EU project. However, this perspective fails to adequately account for the spectrum of approaches from varying domestic political dynamics of many MSs, whose specific national concerns can vary greatly, as well as change over time, which will have a diverse impact on the politics of EU enlargement (Grimmel, 2021). This is highlighted in the range of approaches various MSs have towards the WB enlargement (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017):

- *Germany* maintains a resolute but critical stance towards enlargement. Domestic politics and enlargement are deeply related in Germany, as parliament maintains extensive control over the procedure and constitutional changes must be ratified by referenda, making the issue fiercely political. Germany has close relations with the WB region, as around

1.5million people in Germany originate from the WBs, and Germany is a notable presence in the region through aid and political role. But at the same time, Germany has enforced strict accession criteria, to support reform and bilateral conflict resolution in the area, as well as accounting for scepticism and indifference to enlargement among German electorate and political elites. The numerous crisis of the EU have diverted resources and interest away from WB enlargement, however Berlin continues to emphasise integration in Europe and the EU perspective in its foreign policy (Töglhofer and Adebahr, 2017).

- *France* primarily views the widening and deepening of the EU as an expansion of its own power and prestige on the international level. While French generally supportive of enlargement in rhetoric, it is anxious about relinquishing sovereignty to Brussels and disinclined to tolerate its diminishing relative magnitude as number of MS increases, and stresses rigorous conditionality to safeguard capacity and coherence. Public and media sentiments in relation to enlargement fluctuate from indifference to hostility, and provided that such policy would entail ratification through referenda, populist viewpoints may seek to yield the lack of enthusiasm towards enlargement to direct towards EU integration in general. Economic and migration impact from WB accession are limited for France, lowering the interest in the region. Trade and business groups primarily focus on Turkey in terms of competitiveness, and WB are not considered a threat, therefore triggering less emotional reactions. Despite signalled support, France has less influence and consequently tends to align itself to Germany's position (Wunsch, 2017).
- *Italy* has traditionally supported WB accession for both positive effect on the region's stability and socio-economic development, as well as consequent benefits for neighbouring Italy and restructuring of Europe's geopolitical balance between south and north MSs. For Italy, EU enlargement to WBs would serve trade and economic goals, governance, justice, and rule of law solidification, advancing security and fighting corruption and organised crime. Achieving such security and economic benefits in bilateral terms would be worth the potential budgetary expense for Italy, making it a strong supporter of enlargement. However, poor knowledge and low interest among elites, and growing Euroscepticism of the public, exacerbated by coordination challenges of national dialogue, have contributed to a democratic deficit concern in pursuing enlargement objectives in Italy, particularly in times of imposed fiscal austerity (Frontini and Denti, 2017).

- *Hungary's* seemingly contradictory position of supporting enlargement but opposing further EU integration highlights how countries, acting by the rationale of intergovernmentalism, can separate the deepening from the widening. Hungary has supported WB membership aspirations, to pursue its own strategic goals:
  1. Improving bilateral relations and neighbourly relations, especially to benefit Hungarian minorities living in this region and the strong economic ties between Hungary and WBs
  2. Gaining EU MS partners who share its ideology of illiberal populism underpinned by nationalism
  3. Since the migrant crisis in 2015, enlargement seen as a method for pushing EUs periphery further and influencing WB countries migration and border policy.

Issue of migration has dominated Hungarian political discourse, the government has waged an extreme anti-immigration campaign, connecting migrants to terrorism, crime and gender issues. These sentiments have also spread to the broader Visegrad group (Bonansinga 2020). Hungarian government has positioned itself as in opposition to EU's "bureaucrats" seeking to infringe Hungary's national sovereignty. The strategic support for enlargement as an antithesis to further centralisation of the EU reflects the UK's "Europhobia" in 1990s (Schimmelfennig 2001, 53). The emerging Euroscepticism in Hungary, however, has not deterred the country from benefiting from EU's common policies such as structural funds. Therefore, Hungary's attitude largely reflects liberal intergovernmentalism ideas of preference formation (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009; Huszka, 2017).

- *Greece* declares strong support for enlargement to WBs due to its level of regional interdependence, particularly with Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia, in terms of bilateral trade, investment and ethno-cultural ties. At the same time, it becomes an obstruction for the process whenever its bilateral interests produce conflict. Therefore, it maintains a delicate balance between placing strategic conditionality to produce favourable bilateral negotiations while not endangering the enlargement course entirely. Greece's approach to foreign policy has is distinct for lack of "institutionalisation" and centralisation of elites and personalities, which can lead to short-sighted and impulsive decision making. Public opinion role is unusually crucial in Greek foreign policy, and the economic crisis have fostered polarised, volatile political attitudes that have decreased the

likelihood of compromise building. With Greece's international prestige falling since the Eurozone crisis, it is likely to increase reliance on accession leverage in bilateral disputes, particularly on domestically political costly issues (Armakolas and Triantafyllou, 2017).

- *Cyprus* is an example of a MS whose foreign policy is based predominantly on principles. Its experience of more than 40 years of Turkish occupation of Cyprus territory, as well as the “transformative power” of the EU has led to the centralisation of international law and human rights in its foreign policy position and has fended off the “enlargement fatigue” outlooks in Cyprus. However, its preoccupation with the ongoing dispute with Turkey and relatively small influence within the EU arena has limited its ability to advocate for WB enlargement (Ioannides, 2017).

Viewed through the lens of a multitude of domestic/foreign policy perspectives within EU MSs, solidarity as an “essentially contested concept” (Grimmel, 2021), interpreted by actors through their own lenses and applied for their aims becomes apparent. Visegrad group's redefined “flexible” solidarity can be seen as a response to the refugee crisis (ibid.), which lends itself to promoting widening solidarity, yet opposing deepening solidarity. Meanwhile for France and Germany the European project is paramount, and therefore they will make sure to guarantee the integrity of EU integration before expanding through enlargement, concern which has potentially been heightened by the accessions of Romania and Bulgaria which have been perceived as premature and politically led (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017).

However, aggregating domestic political discourse into national positions on enlargement conflates the interlinked interests of elites and attitudes of the publics in MSs. The self-interests of elites might lead to rationalist-functionalist perception and favour greater enlargement, but the public opinion trends appear to be increasingly opposing this. Croatia's accession process highlights the disparity that emerges when elite-driven accession policy is implemented without public engagement or sufficient transparency (Šabić, 2019). When public opinion opposes government policy direction through referenda, or in popular vote, it undermines EU expansion policy as well as domestic government legitimacy (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial for representative governments to both be steered by public opinion, but also employ effective communicative discourse to inform and persuade publics. The justification for enlargement at EU level has included both utility-based (political and economic benefits of EU enlargement) and normative reasoning (appealing to fostering regional peace and democracy); however domestic communicative discourse has

increasingly emphasised utilitarian justifications, primarily for defined in-group community, or underscoring the cost of non-enlargement, through potential negative externalities from democratic and economic backsliding in CCs (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012). Furthermore, mode of persuasion has also been described as increasingly manipulative, through securitising language, appealing to, and exaggerating public anxieties and polarising the discourse (ibid.). This is particularly evident in rising concerns about migration and EU's freedom of movement in states such as Hungary and previously UK (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017). The discursive caps between EU level co-coordinative discourse and domestic communicative discourse could partly be due to elite's anticipation of public opinion, and efforts to tailor their messaging accordingly (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012).

#### 4.1.3.2 Public opinion and politization

Intergovernmentalism approaches of focusing exclusively on state actors have traditionally overlooked the importance of public opinion on EU policy making. While early neofunctionalist scholars deemed politicisation significant, intergovernmentalism and LI have regularly ignored the influence of societal actors, media and national parties (De Wilde, et.al., 2016). Postfunctionalist argue that falling public support, in combination with greater politization, will hinder the EU states' ability to reach compromises and this will halt EU expansion (Baute, et.al., 2019).

Public support for expansion has fallen across enlargement rounds, with majority positive perception towards the southern enlargement, a stable but negative leaning perception towards the eastern enlargement and a predominantly negative perception towards further potential enlargement (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012). Meanwhile, there is a market difference across the MSs for support for enlargement in principle but opposition to certain accession candidates, particularly Turkey (Dixon and Fullerton, 2014). This is somewhat expected, as the stratification of EU populations is multifaceted across country-level economic, political, and cultural indicators. Socio-economic indicators have a significant impact on support for EU integration and enlargement (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017). Education level and EU-specific knowledge are positively correlated to general enlargement and potential member's entry (Baute, et.al., 2019). Ideological positioning also appears to have an effect with those leaning towards the right being more likely to oppose enlargement. However, economic insecurity seems to have the most significant impact. At macro level, GINI index is strongly

connected to the level of support for enlargement, suggesting that differing attitudes in MSs could be impacted by relative economic situation (Dixon and Fullerton, 2014).

This follows the observation that trust in EU has been severely affected by economic hardship consequent austerity measures imposed on MSs. In 2007, 32% of Europeans said they did not trust the EU, by 2011 47% stated the same. This drop was seen most clearly in Greece, where distrust of the EU went from 37% in 2005 to 67% in 2011. Meanwhile, support for EU membership on average fell from 58% in 2007 to 47% in 2011, and in Greece support for EU membership fell from 62% to 38% (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014). This shows a market difference in European populations attitudes corresponding to the 2008 financial crisis. Furthermore, by 2014, 48% of Europeans opposed enlargement, however CEE countries such as Poland and Bulgaria maintained majority population support (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017).

This drop in institutional trust is significant as disapproval of EU's institutions and own countries membership is linked to lower levels of support for integration and expansion of EU, as well as less support for regional solidarity (Dixon and Fullerton, 2014; Baute, et.al., 2019). Institutional trust also relates to the perception of various MSs. A positive cognitive image of a MS generates trust, and as integration is largely elite led process, trust in MS's elites provides a shorthand for formatting integration support. Trust in larger and more economically powerful states has a significant impact on integration sentiments due to the asymmetrical power levels within EU decision making, where population size translates into voting power, while economic wealth can serve to provide bargaining leverage and create perceptions of competency (Genna, 2009). Part of this could be due to having a lack of knowledge about non-member countries, making independent opinion formation difficult, and leading un-informed publics to rely on a combination of limited knowledge, association bias, past experiences and cultural anxieties (De Wilde, et.al., 2016).

Most significant determinant for level of population support for the EU, however, is trust in national government. Support or criticism of the EU is often based on valuations of domestic politics and policy, and lack of political trust in domestic governments can extend to disapproval towards the EU (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014). Therefore, levels of EU support can be a function interplay between supranational and national policy performance.

Admittedly, it is more realistic for any judgments about the EU politic and institutions to be filtered through a national contextual lens, however this risks national contextual and cultural

biases creating asymmetrical understanding and misunderstanding between EU populations, and subjective fears about identity and EU budget contributions create enlargement resistance (De Wilde, et.al., 2016).

Several scholars have observed that European integration has become increasingly politicised. Although the definition and form of this concept is contested, it is viewed as a discursive phenomenon, emphasising an expansion of actors and interests, with increased polarisation on issues that garner salience (Hurrelmann, et.al., 2015 ; De Wilde, et.al., 2016). For issue to be politicised, by this metric, it must be perceived by participants as relevant to, or salient in, political messaging shaping, or reacting to, collective decision making (Hurrelmann, et.al., 2015). While issues on EU institutionalisation, decision-making processes and legitimacy have all proved increasingly politicised, issues around membership generate more politicization than treaty reform or enlargement (De Wilde, et.al., 2016). This would indicate that the primary saliency of the issue is not determined by widening or deepening dimensions, but rather Euroscepticism in general. A particularly salient issue appears to be immigration. The growing Euroscepticism appears linked to perceived high levels of migration from the big bang expansion, as well as refugees arriving through the WB (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). However, while immigration concerns are prevalent in Eurosceptic sentiments, these concerns are often presented in domestic, rather than regional terms, illustrating the national perspectives' predominance in citizens focus identification (Hurrelmann, et.al., 2015). What this could be symptomatic of is the concept of "uninformed politicization", where general population's lack of knowledge about European politics and functioning. This relates to the relatively narrow and vague terms utilised in much of the regular citizen discourse, particularly among the pro-EU opinions (ibid.).

Crucially, attitudes towards national politics seems to largely determine citizens support for EU, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, which produced a "sudden frustration of expectation" and led to a decrease in affective support for the EU (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014 ). However, supranational policy is rarely the pertinent issue for most people engaging with politics, and only most fundamental aspects of EU integration, membership of one owns country, further enlargement and democratic legitimacy have received popular saliency (Hurrelmann, et.al., 2015). As the EU lacks affective support that is based in cultural attachment and loyalty, it lacks the same "political capital" enjoyed by national governments as a shield from policy fallout, instead it relies on utilitarian support which is fundamentally unstable and reduces its support to the whims of changing public opinion (Armingeon and



Ceka, 2014). Due to this, EU's preoccupation with economic policy has become scrutinised, supposing that an increased engagement with social policy would be required for sustaining popular support for the European project (Baute, et.al., 2019). Without improving EU's popular perception and public sentiments towards expansion, EU's commitment to further accession will likely prove exceedingly challenging (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012). To increase the absorption capacity of the EU in political terms, it is crucial that enlargement policy is made objectively, to counter the MSpolitical instrumentalism of the process, as well as with the engagement of EU publics (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017). The likelihood of generating political will and support for expansion will rely on effective criteria implementation, to ensure the preparedness of CCs to a level satisfactory to the publics, but simultaneously not insufficiently strict or dominated by special interests of MSs.

#### 4.2.4 Cultural and social

Social cohesion within a heterogenous multi-nationalist community such as the EU relies on a concept of trans-national trust. Social trust is central to social capital, cooperation and production of collective goods and action, while in an environment of distrust, people may worry that others will take advantage of their commitment. Therefore, trust in the other will ease solving collective problems, and fosters solidarity, collective identity, and willingness to accept strangers, countering inter-group conflict and xenophobia (Delhey, 2007). Expansion debate has centred rationalist versus constructivist distinction, with emphasising either economic-rational considerations or ideas of "European" identity, as crucial determinants for which states are preferred candidates for membership (Curley, 2009). Attachment to an European identity and anxieties about loss of cultural identity are crucial predictors for enlargement opposition (Taydas and Kentmen-Cin, 2017). Enlargement involves a trade-off between dual goals of incorporating additional heterogeneous states while also building to a closer "union of peoples" (Delhey, 2007). The negative cohesion impact of enlargement depends on differences or similarities of acceding nations to existing MSs in three dimensions: level of modernization, cultural similarity and international power position (ibid.). While cultural identity of EU MSs is ingrained in terms of language, substance of education, administrative practices and societal habits, however slow change is happening in with exclusive national loyalties diminishing as multiple identities are emerging across EUs diaspora (Anderson and Bigo, 2002). However, recent enlargement rounds, as well as the potential future enlargements, have stirred anxieties about undermining cohesion and shared values, and sense of community among EU publics. This is due to a tension between the

formal and informal processes of community building, as formally EU citizens are entitled to certain universal rights, while for the levels of trust and readiness to accept others varies according to nationality (Delhey, 2007). EU citizens appear to maintain different criteria for different countries for judging their suitability for membership. These subjective considerations, particularly identity related, more strongly influence the public sentiments towards enlargement than subjective considerations (Taydas and Kentmen-Cin, 2017), which could explain the differences between support for enlargement in general to the support for accession of specific candidates, which can vary notably, for example with Turkey and Albania generating the most objections among EU publics, highlighting the socio-cultural political bias in enlargement attitudes (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017).

Social identities shape individuals' self-image and group-image, which can affect enlargement attitudes. Social psychology has supposed a Social Identity Theory which recognises how cognition of in-group and out-group affects the group members' perceptions of the other and generate in-group biases. Strong group identity correlates to opposition towards applicants to the group, due to desire for elevating status of their in-group and to protect the group identity (Curley, 2009). Furthermore, those who strongly identify with in-group exhibit greater biases and hostilities towards out-groups and therefore are less likely to accept sharing political and economic benefits with those "others" of whom they have an unfavourable view (Taydas and Kentmen-Cin, 2017). For these members, rationalist benefits of EU enlargement are not sufficient, as they also require the membership candidates to exhibit a "likeness" to the perceived group identity. Meanwhile, those with weak in-group identification are likely to be more utilitarian and more willing to include outsiders, therefore emphasising meeting the membership criteria above protecting group identity (Curley, 2009). This has been exhibited most clearly in the case of Turkey's membership candidacy, where its accession progress has seen France and Germany, the MSs typically associated with the highest level of EU identifying, exhibit increasingly protective stances towards group identity (ibid.). Due to this, one could argue that the goal of achieving ever larger Europe would actually be served by weakening the idea of "European".

The issue of such in-group mentality is also significant within the issue of immigration, which, as discussed, has grown increasingly salient. As high levels of in-group identification are correlated to lower tolerance towards the "others", these members are also more likely to believe that immigrants threaten their in-group identity, culture, or economic security. As enlargement extends the EU's freedom of movement area, these hostilities towards

immigrants are likely to extend to wider EU perceptions (Taydas and Kentmen-Cin, 2017). However, it is also important to note that empirical data shows that anti-immigration do not have the same impact on enlargement in all MSs, such cultural anxieties and hostilities appear to rise as national percentage of immigrants increases (ibid.). The anti-immigrant sentiments and perceived threat to cultural and national identity has become a crucial factor for anti-enlargement sentiments since the freedom of movement restrictions for CEE MS citizens expired after the 2004 enlargement, coinciding with significant impact on support for EU-related referenda in France and Netherlands (Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017).

#### 4.2.4.2 *The 'final frontiers' proposition*

The idea of national identity is intrinsically linked to a perception of a frontier as a frame or border of this group identity. The classical approach of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century equated the state border with exclusive nationalisms, interstate conflict and security and sovereignty, introducing debates that are relevant to this day. The appeal to homogenised national space, territory and citizen population is at the heart of international relations, competition, and state affairs (Anderson and Bigo, 2002). A realist view sees states as ultimate sovereign actors, driven by national interests in an anarchic system. EU supranationalism does not fit this traditional view. However, while the sovereign state competences have become intertwined with EU institutions, frontiers remain symbolic, socially shaped concepts which transcend their functional and physical features such as gates or checkpoints, they create instruments of power and group-identity formation among MSs (Cocco, 2017). European external frontier, as a boundary of European identity, has been criticised for being insufficiently clear or exclusive for creating a distinct image of group entity for EU citizens in same vain that old nation state frontiers have. A distinct inside-outside barrier of a national border is inconceivable within the institutional and transnational framework that EU has committed itself to (Anderson and Bigo, 2002). For centuries, the WB region has served as frontier of migration, transit and geopolitical relations between Europe, Asia and Africa, and since the 1990s has been integral to a shifting EU boundary (Cocco, 2017). EU's relationship with its neighbourhood in the past 15 years could be described in terms of a stability-democracy dilemma. EU's campaign of democratic reform promotion in the region has been informed by belief that securing its periphery is best achieved by building a boundary of like-minded democracies around itself as a buffer and for neighbourhood relations (Smith, et.al., 2021). However, democratisation process is typically associated with instability, at least in short

term, presenting a contradiction for EU goals. Therefore, EU's neighbourhood policy has over time shifted from promoting democratisation to preferring stability, particularly in volatile and proximity regions (ibid.). However, due to this, the push for preparing the region for accession has also haltered.

Establishing final frontiers for the EU presents a dilemma, in positioning its normative position as an international community committed to liberal democracy and regional stability, against increasingly enlargement-resistant publics and elites. Due to its supposed founding values, set out in Treaty of Rome, of pursuing integration of the whole region (Emerson, et.al., 2006), refusing membership to neighbours who have adopted its *acquis* criteria would undermine its moral-normative position. However, the ideas of enlargement fatigue and cohesion capacity which have been questioned since 2004 enlargements increasingly posit that the process of enlargement should be conducted within some predefined and limited regional space (Casier, 2008). Yet it is not clear where these final frontiers would lie, as the views on this vary across EU populations, and depend on the in-group identities of those involved. What is considered "real Europe" and "other" varies, but some of the most common designated out-group countries have traditionally been Turkey and Ukraine (Emerson, et.al., 2006). General view has been that in the minds of EU citizens, Europe's borders do not reach Ankara (Taydas and Kentmen-Cin, 2017); sentiment which has been attributed mostly to social identity and cultural factors, namely the religious differences and politics of memory of the Ottoman Islamic-Christian conflict, as well as migration concerns due to its large population (ibid.). Without establishing some sense of common community within the current and incoming MSs, enlarging the union risks perceptions of social cohesion within the EU further, and can position further widening against potential for deepening (Delhey, 2007).

### **4.3 Enlargement Fatigue or Enlargement resistance**

The previous narrative of "enlargement fatigue", that the EU or MSs were unready or unable to welcome new states without crushing its institutions and procedures, or damaging their economic prosperity, has converted to more to one of "enlargement resistance" (Economides, 2020). The concept of "absorption capacity" can be more accurately discussed in relation to a wide range of concerns such as impact on internal and labour markets, eurozone, institutional capacity to absorb new members, as well as society's capacity to absorb immigrants (Emerson, 2006).

Absorption capacity is less determined by the functional notions of institutions requiring reform, which would involve further deepening of integration, and rather the interaction between EU's internal fragmentation and fears of disintegration, and the CCs inability to meet the subsequently heightened accession criteria (ibid. ; O'Brennan, 2014). Consequently, accession processes have been detained by mutual distrust and "frozen negotiation chapters" (O'Brennan, 2014).

The Commission, which has customarily been a proponent of enlargement, has weakened its push in relinquishing power to the Council. Mr. Juncker began his mandate in 2014 with statement that there shall be no accessions during his term, which, while affirming the granted, inherently signalled political choice (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017). This predetermined mindset does not facilitate the necessary supernational reform, which would need to be led by the Commission at EU level, determined (and deterred) by political will. Lack of political will to implement necessary political and economic policy for accession will stall the enlargement progress even in those WB CCs closest to meeting accession criteria (Economides, 2020). And conversely, lack of realistic accession prospects undermines external capacity, as uncertainty about the conjoined eventual destination reduces the appetite for pursuing accession (O'Brennan, 2014). As a result, the appeal of EU membership has reduced for the WB states, and many of them are increasingly looking to other influential partners, like Russia, with whom they have crucial economic and cultural ties and are thus becoming more receptive Russia's anti-western and ethno-nationalist persuasion (Cocco, 2017). This risks reviving the regional conflicts, as EU's normative influence wanes (ibid.,). When CCs are motivated by accession enthusiasm, EU conditionality can effectively be leveraged. However, as mutual distrust and rising nationalist/populist attitudes cultivate animosity between the CCs and EU MSs, membership expectations are insufficient for incentivising reform, weakening policy implementation, and slowing expansion (O'Brennan, 2014). These sceptical attitudes, along with rising ethno-nationalisms, cultivates an environment where enlargement is effectively ceased, populism is expanding and autocratic regimes are legitimising in MSs such as Hungary (Cocco, 2017).

It is unreasonable to call the current state of enlargement "fatigue", which implies an involuntary state. This halt in pursuing enlargement is primarily determined by political will, which has waned in the WB accession pursuit or in commencing related reform (Bonomi, 2020). Absorption capacity rhetoric was discussed already before Romanian, Bulgarian and Croatian accessions, therefore it is hardly a rigid barrier. Furthermore, if institutions'

framework was the primary obstacle which required constitutional amending, such acts are at the mercy of EU MSs, and any functional obstacle to constitutional reform is political (unless they really can't find any pens). As shown above, public opinion is largely determined by cultural and identity sentiments, and public opinion is crucial for national politicians and elites who seek to maintain their positions. Therefore, political sentiments will determine individual MS's attitude towards enlargement policy. Furthermore, with right conditions of political will the accession process can be enhanced, such as during the enlargement of 2004. The CEE states did not come close to meeting the criteria being implemented on following accessions, signalling either lessons learned or changing sentiments. However, the big bang enlargement is typically heralded a success in both institutional, foreign policy and economic terms. Therefore, rather than a utilitarian or objective concern, it is the shift in public sentiment that is likely to have had the biggest impact on increased hesitancy. Therefore, it is not the lack of practical capacity of institutions and economic union to facilitate new members that is slowing enlargement, but it is the political and cultural absorption that is lacking capacity due to the temperament of much of the EU public, which has become enlargement resistant. Instead, European continent is witnessing an advent of populism, nationalism and contention about the identity of Europe, all of which decrease potential for enlargement (Economides, 2020).

#### **4.3.2 Populist turn in Europe and democratic concerns of bilateral negotiations**

Across Europe, nationalist populist tendencies have taken hold, as publics are exhibiting dissatisfactions with domestic and EU politics, leaders and institutions. The disconnect between the system and citizens creates distrust and fuels political extremism (Marin, 2019 ; Algan, et.al., 2017). This decline in institutional trust is critical in explaining the rise of Euroscepticism and electoral support of radical-left and far-right parties (Algan, et.al., 2017). Since 2017, EU countries have experienced a decrease in vote shares of moderate parties, and a growth of both polarised extremes (Noury and Roland, 2020). In post-communist Europe, what is considered mainstream discourse and politics is regularly even more radicalised than in western Europe (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017), which has led to the intermingling of these political spheres since the CEE and eastern enlargements. History of the EU is one of unprecedented supranational unification, managing to incorporate the former "periphery" of Southern- and Eastern Europe into the European democratic model (Algan, et.al., 2017). However, it is now experiencing a cultural retaliation against its progressive liberal like

cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (ibid.,). The essence of the populist movement is desire to be recognised, represented and the loyalty to one's religious, ethnic and cultural group. Populist movements utilise language that is emotive and simplistic, designed to manipulate and elicit an emotional reaction, persuading the disgruntled populations to desert traditional institutions to support them instead (Marin, 2019). This creates a sense of having their grievances listened to, allowing citizens to become passionately, more than rationally, politically involved and active (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). However, when lacking institutional and party system structure, these movements can foster environments of aggression and violence (ibid.).

Two explanatory events that have linked to this growing populism sentiment have been the economic crisis of 2008 and the 2015 migration crisis. The relationship between the rise in vote share of populist parties and the Great Recession was modest and varied between MSs (Noury and Roland, 2020). Economic insecurity, due to sudden increase in unemployment and more gradual anxieties around globalisation introducing low-wage competition, and technological processes increasing automation, have been suggested as explanations for drop in trust, and increase in extremism and populism which has led to termination in cultural integration in Europe (Algan, et.al., 2017). Meanwhile, the backlash to the influx of refugees and non-EU migrants during the 2015 crisis fuelled a surge in the far right (Noury and Roland, 2020), providing a salient issue for engaging in identity led discourse. The (perceived) ethnic and religious differences between the incoming migrants and the constructed European identities provoked highly emotionally charged exchanges (ibid. ; Algan, et.al., 2017).

Populist leaders, meanwhile, elicit these reactions for political utility, exploiting anxieties to serve their agenda (Marin, 2019), in both CCs and MSs, which affects EU's expansion prospects. The emergence of "hybrid-regimes" and "authoritarian tendencies" in post-communist states, which is characterised by governing elites monopolising power beyond their constitutional legitimacy, has garnered increased attention in accessing the democratic processes and standards in EU and its periphery (Gjuzelov and Hadjievaska, 2020). The WBs countries have experienced state capture by rent-seeking elites appealing to ethno-nationalist language (Vachudova, 2019). This hinders economic, media freedom and rule of law reform, and consequently their prospect of meeting EU's accession criteria, reducing external integration capacity. Meanwhile, within the EU, MSs which were previously recognised for progress in post-communist reform have experiences democratic backsliding since 2010.

Leaders in both Hungary and Poland have utilised ethno-nationalist politics to facilitate concentration of power and weakening liberal democracy (ibid.,). Such deterioration on previously successful MS from the previously optimistically regarded CEE enlargements could be perceived as discouraging expediting further absorption of WB which are grappling with their own democratic processes. For populist leaderships, ethno-nationalist resentment stoking is a political strategy. However, in the CCs the elites will balance these sentiments simultaneously with seeking the geopolitical and economic benefits of EU membership (Vachudova, 2019). However, for states which have already gained membership, there exist far less leverage to temper the populist feelings.

## Conclusion

*H1* appears to be partly true, as it would indeed be seen that the current CCs have not managed to meet the accession requirements for membership. However, this is due to significantly increased conditionality being applied by the EU to the WB CCs. This increased conditionality therefore has caused the external accession capacity to reduce as a response to the EU internal factors.

*H2* supposed that the slow-down of enlargement is due to practical absorption capacity and enlargement fatigue from past enlargements. The notion of enlargement fatigue is certainly central to discussions of further enlargement. However, the objective measures of absorption capacity in terms of institutional and economic capacity of the EU to absorb new members is inconclusive. While further enlargement would be facilitated by reform of the institutions, particularly the EU Commission, to ensure continues efficiency, it is also possible that the institutions could prove to continue to be flexible to enlargement if the need for being so prevailed. The Council has adopted increasing use of the QMV, and EP has reserved MEP seats for allocation to further enlargement, therefore implying some capacity reserve. And past experience of enlargement could be viewed as encouraging as to the impact of widening for the increasing position of the Commission, as the required deepening of further supernationalism tends to benefit the Commission. If further reform is required, however, to ensure deepening before potential widening, this is within the MSs competencies, as they hold the power to make Treaty reform. If political will was present, as in the case of the 2004



enlargement and the prevailing Treaty of Nice, then adequate reform to incorporate the WB could be undertaken.

Therefore, *H3* should be considered. It seems that further Enlargement is halted by political considerations and growing enlargement resistance, which inhibit the necessary reform to ensure functional capacity, and reduce the political and social capacity to incorporate new states due to MS individual preferences and their responsiveness to public opinion. The political and social factors, which contribute to enlargement resistance, are the crucial factors to enlargement fatigue and absorption capacity concerns, which have contributed to establishing more extensive accession conditionality, hindering the CCs ability to meet accession criteria and gain membership.

EU's prospect of enlargement in the Western Balkans is currently rather unlikely. While in practical terms both the external and internal capacities for integration present obstacles to overcome, the primary factor for the success of such processes is due to political will. External integration capacity, referring to ability of EU to prepare non-members for accession and of candidate countries to meet accession criteria by implementing the EU acquis, depends on the interdependent factors of EU's commitment and assistance towards the process of enlargement, as well as candidates' commitment to fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. However, lack of meaningful membership prospects reduces enthusiasm for further alignment with the EU and threaten reform in candidate countries. Furthermore, if the alignment lacks normative adoption, the implementation can be undermined, making the process fragile and jeopardising its sustainability. The observed anti-enlargement shift in the EU leaders' mindset has halted this progress and contributed to regional anti-democratic trends and state-capture. This is likely to limit the candidates' ability to pursue further integration, particularly in meeting the EUs updated fundamentals-first strategy emphasising rule of law and democratic liberalism.

The apparent dwindling of enlargement pursuits within the EU has been attributed to shifting sentiments following the last 3 rounds of enlargement, particularly the 2004 big bang enlargement which absorbed 10 post-communist south- and eastern European countries. The prevailing narrative since then has referred to a conventionalisation of concepts such as "enlargement fatigue" and "absorption capacity" to structuralise the opposition to further enlargements. Absorption capacity has been implied to refer to the many institutional and

structural facets of the EU, which the various discourses have sought to evaluate in their preparedness to incorporate new members. The institutional capacity referring to decision making organs is primarily determined by EU treaties, and the which the functioning of these organs has seen shifts such as increasing reliance on qualified majority voting in the Council and increase of members in both Parliament and Commission, the institutions have largely managed to absorb the enlargements. The most urgent body in need of reform is arguably the Commission, as its functioning has become far more political than before. However, many of these concerns existed prior to the last two enlargement round, signalling that when there is political the institutions will adapt. Similar observation could be made for the application of economic criteria, as the standards for market functioning and economic productivity have been raised for the WB accession, well above the standards set for the eastern and southern enlargements. This would imply that the EU has become generally more hesitant towards enlargement. The sticking point to constitutional reform is the opposition to deepening integration within some member states, which constitutional processes would entail. Others view deepening integration as anthesis to widening expansion and will prefer one over the other. France and Germany are among those who are supposedly supportive of enlargement but with the application of extensive conditionality. Meanwhile Hungary for example will advocate widening to dissuade further integration. Yet others will support enlargement to empower themselves politically within the EU, either through aspiring to form alliances such as Italy or to gain leverage in bilateral disputes, such as the case of Greece.

Therefore, political factors are primary determinants of Member states positions on enlargement. The international politics are also informed by domestic policies for member states, which will use EU expansion positioning to appeal to their population sentiments. EU publics have become increasingly enlargement resistant and Eurosceptic. These attitudes have been related to both the economic insecurity and national/cultural identity issues, as a response to the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 migration crisis. This has led to greater concern for concepts of European and national identities, anti-immigration sentiments and rise of ethno-nationalist and populist politics. However, absorption capacity discussions, as they relate to 'final frontiers' proposition, run the risk of implicitly creating an imagined boundary to the concept of Europe which limits further widening (Emerson, et.al., 2006). The influence of existing member states, as well as institutional and economic readiness of the EU will be detrimental in its continued absorption capacity. As a deeply asymmetric process, the accession negotiations allow EU to exert notable influence over candidate countries

politically (Hughes, et.al., 2004). But the influence of EU and its ability to elicit meaningful reform is deeply dependent on the state's commitment to joining, as meaningful and enforced reforms, particularly on Rule of Law conditions, is subject to political will and corruption challenges (Elbasani and Šabić, 2018). The process is increasingly bilateral (Uilenreef, 2010), so another factor which could be haltering deepening of integration could be domestic and national politics of both the existing EU members (Ker-Lindsay, et.al., 2017) and the candidate countries (Tucker, et.al., 2002). The increasing populist turn in Europe is a concern for furthering deepening and widening, as national elite interests and illiberalism can threaten rule of law, progressive reform, and the process of integration (Vachudova, 2019). Within the current regional political climate, further integration is likely to stall for the foreseeable future.

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