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For a Geopolitical Instead of Technocratic Approach to the EU Enlargement Process: Addressing the Aftermath of the Lifted Bulgarian Veto

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Abstract: The paper argues that the European Commission and the Union itself ought to adopt a more hands-on political rather than technocratic approach to the issue of EU enlargement. In a context when Europe redefines geopolitics, including technology, science, education as well as combating climate change and digitalisation in its geopolitical self-repositioning, the issue of enlargement should be treated as an internal geopolitical concern of the European Union itself and not just as the concern of the applicant countries.

Keywords: European enlargement, digital geopolitics, political vs technocratic EU commission

The aftermath of the lifting of the Bulgarian veto to North Macedonia’s negotiations that took place in the summer of 2022,¹ under the French Presidency of the European Union, has caused a rather unexpected change of heart in the public. Ever since, the habitual pro-EU majority among the local expert public and journalists alike, has been opposing the EU’s Common Position on Opening Negotiations, including the accompanying negotiating framework – calling upon the Prime Minister to refuse it,² followed by

¹ Spanning from June, when the EU’s Common Position and Negotiating Framework leaked into the Macedonian public to July 16th, when the Government accepted the so-called “French Proposal,” and in its immediate aftermath.

² Malinka Ristevska Jordanova: It should Not Remain No, *Sloboden Pecat* (June 2022), available at <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/malinka-ristevska-jordanova-ne-treba-da-ostane-ne/>, accessed on 13 May 2023, (Dr. Malinka Ristevska Jordanova has been engaged in the EU integration process since the end of the nineties, holding high positions as part of the public administration in the Macedonian parliament and government. As a State Counselor at the Secretariat for European Affairs, she chaired the MK-EU SAA Subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs from 2002-2008 and the SAA Committee from 2008-2010 and was the coordinator of the national program for the adoption of EU law. She made a special contribution to her country’s candidacy for joining the EU, the fulfillment of the recommendations for the beginning of the accession negotiations and the realization of the benchmarks established in the roadmap

appeals to pause the negotiations which, by this Spring of 2023, have not ceased. The main reason for this is the perception that the document itself, i.e., the EU's Common Position including the Framework, and the negotiating process itself are premised on historical revisionism that will erase the Macedonian national identity. "No" to a Europe like this," "No' to an undemocratic Europe" have been slogans to be heard, perhaps too often by the center-left leaning mainstream, of the civil society³ and academia as well as by the nationalist parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica.⁴ The civil society mainstream specialized in EU integration such as the European Policy Center (EPI) and Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis- Skopje (IDSCS), and according to IDSCS Director Marko Trosanovski:

for the liberalization of the visa regime. Dr. Ristevska – Jordanova is the founder and former director (February 2011 – February 2017) of the Macedonian think-tank Institute for European Policy – Skopje, where she is now a non-executive member of the board. In her research, Dr. Jordanova focuses on the application of EU conditionality policy in the region of Southeast Europe, as well as on the transposition of EU law.); Ida Mantou, Improve the Proposal to Save Europe from Itself [Подобре го договорот за да ја спасите Европа од самата себе] Youth Educational Forum/Radio MOF (July, 2023), available at <https://www.radiomof.mk/stav-podobrete-go-dogovorot-za-da-ja-spasite-evropa-od-samata-sebe/>, accessed on 13 May 2023.

³ The French Proposal: Who is for, Against and Something in Between [Француски предлог: Кој сè е за, против или нешто помеѓу], Civil Media (Skopje: 22 June, 2022), available at <https://civilmedia.mk/trenchevska-zaedno-so-megunarodnite-partneri-i-graganskite-organizatsii-gradime-ednakvo-opshtestvo-za-site/>, accessed on 13 May 2023.

⁴ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Opposition to 'French Proposal' Mounts in North Macedonia, *Balkan Insight* (Skopje: BIRN, July 4, 2022), accessed on 12 May 2023; Protests in front of the Government Building Against the French Proposal [trans. of the original title in Macedonia], Kanal 5 (2 July, 2022) available at <https://kanal5.com.mk/protest-pred-vladata-protiv-francuskiot-predlog/a536946>, accessed on 13 May 2023; Call from EPI and IDSC: Parliament to convene today for a session on the "French proposal," the Government must not remain, *Sloboden Pecat* (June, 2022), available at <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/povik-od-epi-i-idsc-sobranieto-ushte-deneska-da-svika-sednica-za-francuskiot-predlog-vladata-ne-smee-da-ostane-nema/>, accessed on 13 May 2023; Top Tema with Marko Trosanovski, Aleksandar Krzalovski and Emil Kirijaz [„Топ тема“ со Марко Трошановски, Александар Кржаловски и Емил Кирјаз] *Telma TV* (Skopje, January 2023), available at <https://tinyurl.com/5fupdxnn>, accessed on 10 May 2023,

If we accept, i.e. by silence, we approve of the introduction of bilateral issues and bulgarianization of the process itself, I do not believe that many member states or at all whether any will oppose this, as was previously the case with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, especially in the context of the urgency of the momentum and crisis in Ukraine, with the EU needing immediate success in the Western Balkans and its perspective from the perspective of European enlargement. In the part of the proposal itself, much of it is realistically harmful.”⁵

Based on the desk-analysis (the list of analyzed sources is at the end of the document) conducted for the purposes of this study, we can infer the following premises of the discussion to follow:

- The EU is seen as “undemocratic” due to its catering to the Bulgarian nationalist bullying of North Macedonia (all of the arguments raised in favor of the thesis of EU’s democratic deficiency are related to this issue purely, and sometimes also to the agreement with Greece)⁶
- Even the NGO’s and scholars specialized in EU integration deny, to this day, that the negotiations

⁵ The French Proposal: Who is for, Against and Something in Between [Француски предлог: Кој сè е за, против или нешто помеѓу], Civil Media (Skopje: 22 June, 2022), available at <https://civilmedia.mk/trenchevska-zaedno-so-megunarodnite-partneri-i-graganskite-organizatsii-gradime-ednakvo-opshtestvo-za-site/>, accessed on 13 May 2023.

⁶ “Restoring EU’s Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia” [Analysis of Survey and Focus Group Results], Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities (Skopje, February 2023), available at <https://www.isshs.edu.mk/restoring-eus-credibility-and-the-european-consensus-in-the-civil-society-in-n-macedonia-preliminary-research-report/>, accessed on 13 May 2023.

have truly started due to the conditionality that might lead to their halt – the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia.

- The elite civil society in question, the big, visible and rich, declaredly center-left and moderately center-right leaning CSOs – including the academia and the media – are against the recognition of the Bulgarian minority.⁷ Let us note the fact that the same part of the society that insists on the national, ethno-linguistic distinctness between the Macedonian and the Bulgarian states and nations, as well as their separate cultural-historical backgrounds, rejects the recognition of a separate, minority group called Bulgarian. It is an odd choice considering such a recognition would vouch for the distinctness of the Macedonian majority.

Certainly, no social group is monolithic, no part of the spectrum of political debate is univocal, and we do not wish to erase the nuances among the different actors and voices. However, the situation in the country is deeply polarized across a number of political-social arrays, and, in this context, the question of EU enlargement holds the dominant status. Both the left and the right of the public debate seem to be united regarding the question of enlargements, or the reservations toward it more specifically, and in their opposition to the recognition of the Bulgarian minority. Upon the latter, the continuation of the freezing of the EU accession relies. Thus, even that question falls under the category of (opposition to) the continuation of the EU enlargement.

⁷ Katerina Kolozova, "North Macedonia's EU path is under threat from an unlikely actor", Al Jazeera English (18 September 2022), accessed on 1 May 2023.

The discourse is in fact ambiguous: no one dares, in particular those funded by the Euro-Atlantic sources, to say explicitly that they oppose the EU integration, whereas a worrying majority of them are in favor of a) pausing the negotiations, b) looking for alternatives to the EU,⁸ and against a) the implementation of the Bulgarian-Macedonian treaty as part of the negotiating process, b) constitutional recognition of a Bulgarian minority. While admitting the growing euro-skepticism in the country due to the fact that N. Macedonia has been a candidate (non-negotiating) country for nearly two decades, we must admit that the breaking point that marks a dramatic drop in the nation's support of EU accession is directly linked to the Bulgarian-Macedonian (un)neighborly relations.

If we proceed with the discussion on the fate of the country's further EU accession in purely technical terms, we might say that there is no veto impending – at least in the foreseeable future – from North Macedonia's neighbors. There is, however, the possibility of a paradoxical act of what one might call "self-vetoing": if the National Assembly of North Macedonia fails to vote in the Bulgarian minority in the country's Constitution by November 2023, the negotiations will be frozen, the accession process, once again, put back in a state of an indefinite halt.

Thus, one more time, we are up against the stubbornly re-emerging wall of competing national romanticisms in the Balkans in the way of the process of EU enlargement. In this policy essay, we are looking at the matter from the

⁸ Katerina Kolozova and Tihomir Topuzovski, "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia" (Skopje: Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2023), 23.

two perspectives: not only that of accession, and thus, the Western Balkan and Macedonian viewpoint and interests, but also from the perspective of EU enlargement, which, I argue here, is becoming increasingly geopolitical instead of technocratic. The latter is a point which I would like to defend by invoking the following arguments in its favor: France's center-aligned policy discourse, in particular the expert part of the public, promulgating values and goals encapsulated in slogans such as "Pour une Europe géopolitique," but also pushing for ideas such as the European political community. The latter may be considered by some as a second tier version of the Union that actually resists further enlargement until the full membership of all EU candidates. However, I would argue the opposition – the Union gains political, and even geopolitical, groundedness by adding a political union around it, or underpinning it, or complementing it. The idea is neither fully fleshed out, nor do we know whether it will become a reality – so, it will be treated here as a marker, a symptomatic shift in European mainstream discourse on the more generic question of "Europe as some form of - even if only loose – unity."

2. Geo/Political Europe, and its Enlargement?

2.1. The thesis just presented, namely that the EU has been developing a geopolitical vision of its future, is one that needs to be corroborated and disambiguated from the argument that it is France under Macron's leadership which propagates it. In other words, we have to examine the hypothesis if the other "big players" in Europe assume a similar logic and adopt a more geopolitical and globally competitive reasoning that relies on the continent's cohe-

siveness. As a simple overview (see below) of the European Commission's strategic documents and investment long-term plans (including the grant-schemes) would show, the EU seems to be seeing Europe (not the EU exclusively) as a single global player that seeks to improve its competitiveness in innovation-based economy. For example, the New European Research Area (New ERA) 2030 Strategy underscores the inextricability between innovation, economic growth and global geopolitical relevance: chapter 5 of the New Era Communication released 30 September 2020 is titled "The Geopolitical Dimension of ERA."⁹

The V4 countries also seem to be supporting the idea of an enlarged, cohesive Europe, and their arguments seem to be phrased in geopolitical terms primarily.¹⁰ Consider the following statement by Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen about the mission of the new Directorate General International Partnerships ('DG INTPA'):

The journey of the new 'Geopolitical Commission' started in December 2019. We want Europe to be stronger in the world. President von der Leyen entrusted me with the role of Commissioner for International Partnerships in my mission letter, and asked me to ensure that the European model of development evolves in line with new global realities [...] This means working hand in hand with partners, setting agendas, taking initiatives and ensur-

⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a New Era for Research and Innovation (Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM (2020), 628.

¹⁰ Olaf Scholz: "Wir brauchen eine geopolitische, erweiterte, reformierte und zukunfts-offene EU," Aktuelles Europäisches Parlament, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4yzvehxz>, accessed on 11 May 2023.

ing effective implementation of our actions for the ultimate benefit of people across the world. It also means promoting and protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law – the very foundations of our international cooperation.¹¹

The very dubbing of the Commission as “the Geopolitical Commission” shows a commitment to a new vision of the foundations and not only goals of the Union, its immediate neighborhood and thus affects the candidates, also called “accession countries.” This self-definition is so surprising to the “EU specialists,” so accustomed to the post-political vision of globalization, that the idea is met with skepticism and patronizing assumption that the “Commission” is unable – or should not venture – into restituting itself as either political or geopolitical.¹²

We can take the turn of 2020 as the point of the EU redefining not only the vision of the Union itself, but that of the future of the continent and its role in the global political arena, in terms of geopolitics, or often times, put simply, in terms of politics rather than technocracy. Enlargement is seen increasingly in primarily geopolitical and political terms, mobilizing digitalization and green agenda transformation processes as the background against which Western Balkans ought to reconceive its approach to the accession process. This view is reflected in the EU’s Strategic Investment Plan for the Western Balkans released in October 2020.¹³

¹¹ “Geopolitical Commission builds on International Partnerships,” available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/geopolitical-commission-builds-international-partnerships_en, accessed on 11 May 2023

¹² Nicole Koenig, “The ‘Geopolitical’ European Commission and its Pitfalls”, IWM - Vienna Blog, available at <https://www.iwm.at/blog/the-geopolitical-european-commission-and-its-pitfalls>, accessed on 11 MAY 2023

¹³ “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council,

However, if we want to be technical and mark the key dates and documents, it is safer to state that since 2019, the European Union has been redefining itself as a geopolitical Union, and that would not be an overstatement – the documents, press releases and statements are explicit. The European Commission’s President, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that Europe needs to become more assertive and take a more active role on the world stage. In her political guidelines for her Commission, she outlined the need for a “geopolitical Commission.”¹⁴ As part of this redefinition, the EU has produced a number of key strategic documents. These include the following (a summary overview):

1. The Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024: This document outlines the EU’s main priorities for the next five years. It includes a strong focus on geopolitical issues, such as foreign policy, defense, and trade.
2. The European Green Deal: This is the EU’s plan to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. It is a major part of the EU’s geopolitical agenda, as it aims to position Europe as a global leader in the fight against climate change.
3. The EU’s Trade Policy Review: This document, published in 2020, sets out the EU’s trade policy strategy for the coming years. It includes a focus on strengthening the

the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans” Brussels, 6 October 2020)

¹⁴ Beatriz Rios, “Ursula von der Leyen vows a green, digital, geopolitical EU in Davos,” *Euroactiv* (22 Jan. 2020), available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/von-der-leyen-vows-a-green-digital-geopolitical-eu-in-davos/>, accessed on 10 May 2023.

EU's strategic autonomy, enhancing its competitiveness, and promoting a free and fair global trading system.

4. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a New Era for Research and Innovation (Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM(2020), 628.

5. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Whittle, M., Rampton, J. (2020). Towards a 2030 vision on the future of universities in Europe – Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/510530>

6. European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, The EU in 2022 – General report on the activities of the European Union, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/0687>.

7. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (Brussels, 6 October 2020).

8. A Strengthened Enlargement Policy is the EU's Strongest Geopolitical Tool. European Parliament (Press Releases. Plenary Session) 23 November 2022.

9. European Council: Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022, available at <https://www>.

[consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/)

10. European Council: Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (18 May 2022), available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/18/discours-du-president-charles-michel-lors-de-la-session-pleniere-du-comite-economique-et-social-europeen/>

11. European Council/Council of the European Union: Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>, accessed on 14 May 2023.

It is evident from the sources cited, documents list presented, and positions of the EU and the EC discussed, it would be reductionist to see the “sudden” (as some have called it) geopolitical focus on the enlargement of the EU as an issue directly linked, if not immediately caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Certainly, the invasion has accelerated the enlargement process and deepened the geopolitical argument in favor of Europe's consolidation as territory, market, and a civilizational framework, pushing for closing the gaps on its map (not only geographically but also as a sphere of interest). The documents and policy transformation processes discussed above, demonstrate that the idea of “geopolitical Europe” as well as “geopolitical Commission” predates even the Pandemic of 2020, and thus, the war in Ukraine as well.

2.2. In a plenary held in November 2023, the European Parliament adopted a Recommendation, by 502 votes in favor, 75 against and 61 abstentions, to the European Union which can be summarized in the following steps, or more specific recommendations, and I quote:

- No alternatives should replace enlargement
- Reform the decision-making process on accession and advance with accession negotiations by qualified majority instead of unanimity
- Accession negotiations should be concluded by 2030.¹⁵

The essence of the conclusions that shape the Recommendation comes down to prioritizing “the importance for the EU of prioritising the alignment of accession countries with the EU’s common foreign and security policy.” This is truly a geopolitical reasoning, grounded in a sense of territory, security, against the background of the planetary competition for relevance. Europe, evidently, seeks to position itself as a global player in and of itself instead of as a mere appendage to the USA and/or other forces deemed to be suited to align with, considering the Euro-Atlantic definition of the EU. The fact that the main global competition revolves around technological innovation, and thus what was once called “industrial” power that is now primarily intellectual, does not exclude or heed the of prospects of war and thus the need for physical circumscription of the continent, “defining one’s borders” as Emanuel Macron would put it. Quite to the contrary, both the seemingly

“ethereal” battle of ideas (innovation) and the processes of digitalization are also defined as geopolitical factors, if not key geopolitical processes. The definition in case is evolving, deepening, and solidifying itself as a process in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The battle for technological planetary domination (seemingly) paradoxically coincides with the supposed threat of a nuclear war and the dangers of deepening the climate crisis. And it is undergirded by aspirations to counter said threats. Yet, political rhetoric, policy and politics are far from being the same thing. That is why we have put forward a few recommendations hoping to contribute to transforming words into action.

In conclusion, European geopolitics is a notion that expands beyond the conventional use of the term, beyond international relations and security policy. The “competitive planetary edge” obviously concerns technological advancement, yet the latter is presumed to be a category of geopolitical nature. If the scale is planetary, it puts forward the importance of territorial consolidation and control. Thus, the continent must become compact, not only at the borders but from within. Western Balkans is at the heart of EU, surrounded by EU states, outside the technocratic, yet inside the physical borders of the EU.

- We recommend that a more political European Commission assumes a more hands-on approach and carries out a systematic review of how its funds are being spent, esp. through IPA III, when it comes to the strengthening of the civil society in North Macedonia, Serbia and Western Balkans more generally speaking.

¹⁵ European Parliament: “A strengthened enlargement policy is the EU’s strongest geopolitical tool,” a Press Release (23 November 2022), available at <https://tinyurl.com/4egeb9sn>, accessed on 19 June 2023.

- The rift of the CSOs in North Macedonia and the EU has been growing throughout the second half of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, yielding a CS that favors Open Balkans and other alternatives to the EU accession, not shying away from calling the EU undemocratic (even fascist) and “something we may need to look for an alternative of”;¹⁶ the EU, and in particular DG NEAR, must carry out thorough examination as to whether its funds are helping build a society that shares the same values.
- A more hands on political approach must be undertaken, by supporting parts of the CSOs that share the EU values, to encourage the country to recognize the Bulgarian, Jewish, Croat and Montenegrin minorities in North Macedonia, which is the condition for further pursuing the accession process. If this issue remains unaddressed the entire enlargement process will be negatively affected.
- The Commission must work on deepening the sectoral integration approach in order to achieve a fully integrated continent in terms of standards, policies, economic and scientific production and complete freedom of movement, in short, an effective full integration, even if some of the nation states may not have the status of full member states (This is not a model to substitute the accession process but rather to accelerate and complement it).

¹⁶ Kolozova and Topuzovski, “Restoring EU’s Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia.”