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DECODING ENLARGEMENT POLICY REFORM ON THE ROAD TO THE ZAGREB SUMMIT AND BEYOND

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Reform of the enlargement methodology has become a defining topic in the enlargement debate following the impasse over opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania at the European Council meeting of 17-18 October 2019. Despite the European Commission's favourable recommendation and increased pressure from other EU capitals, arguing that the enlargement methodology was in need of a drastic overhaul, France refused to give a green light to Skopje and Tirana. Paris was backed by Amsterdam and Copenhagen which had increasing reservations about Tirana's track record in fighting corruption and organised crime. EU term president Finland's proposal for decoupling the two Western Balkan countries and allowing North Macedonia to proceed on its path towards the EU was rejected by France.¹ French President Emmanuel Macron based his opposition to launching accession talks with Skopje and Tirana on two arguments: initially on the completion of EU's institutional reform process as a general precondition for further enlargement (deepening before widening) and later on the necessity to reform the existing procedures for accession.²

French President Emmanuel Macron's refusal in October 2019 to give a green light for launching accession negotiations with the two EU-hopefuls has sent shockwaves across the EU. The move which was described as 'a grave historic mistake' by the outgoing President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker³, has dealt a huge blow to the EU's credibility in the region, and risked playing into the hands of anti-EU forces and outside actors vying for increased influence in the region.

Enlargement Reform à la Macron: The French Non-Paper

A few weeks after its refusal to greenlight opening accession negotiations with Skopje and Tirana sent shockwaves across the EU, Paris outlined its vision for a revised

¹ Alexandra Brzozowski and Georgi Gotev, "All Eyes on France after Inconclusive Enlargement Summit Debate", *Euractiv*, 18 October 2019. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/all-eyes-on-france-after-inconclusive-enlargement-summit-debate/>

² Andreas Eisl, "France's Questionable Arguments against EU Enlargement", Blog Post, Institute Delors, 12 December 2019, Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BP_ElargissementMacedoine_Eisl-EN.pdf

³ Andrew Gray, "Juncker: EU's North Macedonia, Albania Rebuff is 'Historic Mistake'", *Politico*, 18 October 2019. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-claude-juncker-eu-north-macedonia-albania-rebuff-historic-mistake/>



enlargement methodology in a 5-page-long non-paper⁴ circulated to other EU capitals. Guided by the principles of ‘gradual association, stringent conditions, tangible benefits and reversibility’, Paris called proposed the reorganisation of the 35 *acquis* chapters around seven thematic policy blocks (*see Table-1*).

In a major departure from the current methodology, France called for stage-by-stage negotiations on the seven policy blocks. In practice, this would imply that negotiations would proceed in a sequential manner disallowing the simultaneous opening of chapters in different policy blocks. Successful completion of negotiations on one policy block would lead to the opening of negotiations on the next one.

In line with the new approach prioritising the rule of law in the negotiations since 2011, ‘rule of law, fundamental rights, justice and security’ were to be addressed at the very first stage of the negotiations. Education, research and space, youth, culture, sport, environment, transport would be dealt with at the second stage of the process while employment, social policy, health and consumer protection and competitiveness would be tackled at the third stage. This would be followed by negotiations on economic and financial affairs at stage four; internal market, agriculture and fisheries at stage five; and foreign affairs at stage six. And finally, the seventh stage would deal with other matters and its completion would lead to formal accession.

While targeted financing, increasing investment opportunities and participation in relevant EU policies and programmes were stated among the incentives to reward candidate countries with exceptional reform performance, a key element of the French proposal was the increasing emphasis on the ‘reversibility’ of the process. The reversibility component aimed at ensuring that candidate states maintain their reform performance and continue to adhere to norms and values fundamental to the EU throughout the process. Depending on the extent to which the candidate country failed to fulfil its reform commitments or ceased to meet EU accession criteria, withholding of the associated rewards, moving a step backwards in the process and suspension of the negotiations as a whole in cases where EU’s fundamental values were seriously challenged were outlined as the options that the EU could resort to.

⁴ The French Government, “Non-Paper - Reforming the European Union Accession Process”, November 2019. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>



Table 1- Reorganisation of the Acquis as proposed by the French Non-Paper

Proposed new stages	Corresponding chapters
Stage 1 (cross-cutting): Rule of law, fundamental rights, justice and security	23 - Judiciary and fundamental rights 24 - Justice, freedom and security
Stage 2: Education, research and space, youth, culture, sports, environment, transport, telecommunications and energy	14 - Transport policy 15 - Energy 21 - Trans-European networks 22 - Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments 26 - Education and culture 25 - Science and research 27- Environment
Stage 3: Employment, social policy, health and consumer protection, competitiveness	19- Social policy and employment 28 - Consumer and health protection 5 - Public procurement 7 - Intellectual property law 8 - Competition policy 20 - Enterprise and industrial policy
Stage 4: Economic and financial affairs	4 - Free movement of capital 9 - Financial services 16 - Taxation 17 - Economic and monetary policy 18 - Statistics 32 - Financial control
Stage 5: Internal Market, agriculture and fisheries	29 - Customs union 1 - Free movement of goods 2 - Freedom of movement for workers 3 - Freedom of establishment and freedom to provide services 6 - Company law 10- Information society and media 11 - Agriculture and rural development 12 - Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy 13 – Fisheries
Stage 6: Foreign affairs	30 - External relations 31 - Foreign, security and defence policy
Stage 7: Other Matters	33 - Financial and budgetary provisions 34 - Institutions 35 - Other issues

Source: Non-Paper, Reforming the European Union accession process, November 2019



The proposal also suggested that the Council, which represents the Member States, should assume a stronger role in assessing the reform performance of the candidate countries – confirming an increasing trend that has already been evident for some time most recently by the successive vetoes by France, Denmark and the Netherlands. While the reform performance of the candidate countries would continue to be monitored and assessed through the annual country reports presented by the Commission, they would be subject to increasing scrutiny by the Member States. Last but not least, an annual summit, which would bring together EU leaders and the top leadership of candidate countries to discuss issues of common interest, was proposed as an attempt to send a strong signal to the publics of the candidate countries that they were part of the EU family photo. And finally, the proposal tasked the Commission with formulating a renewed methodology to be presented to the Council by January 2020.

Enlargement Reform Gains Pace: Counter-Proposal by Nine Countries

The debate concerning the reform of the enlargement process reached new heights as the Foreign Ministers of Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Slovenia came up with a counter-proposal to the French non-paper.⁵ While acknowledging the need to reform the existing enlargement procedures, the nine foreign ministers struck a more balanced and conciliatory tone. They called for the decision for launching accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania to be made by March 2020 regardless of enlargement reform being a precondition. In departure from the French proposal, the nine foreign ministers argued that countries covered by the EU's current enlargement agenda should be included in the Conference on the Future of Europe planned for 2020-2022.⁶

Commission's Contribution to the Enlargement Reform Debate

Against this background, on 5 February 2020, the European Commission presented its input to the debate on EU enlargement reform in a document entitled 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans'. As made obvious by its title, the Commission's reform proposals focus on the EU's engagement with the six Western Balkan countries, more specifically with North Macedonia and Albania. The fact that the document does not include a single reference to Turkey's EU

⁵ Jacopo Barigazzi, "9 EU Countries Push back on French Enlargement Revamp", *Politico*, 13 December 2019. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-enlargement-reform-pushback/>

⁶ "Nine EU Members Release a New Proposal for the Reform of Enlargement Process", *European Western Balkans*, 11 November 2019. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>



membership process is unfortunate. Despite the fact that Turkey's accession talks have ground to a halt mainly due to political blockages, Turkey is a candidate country with which EU accession talks have been underway since 2005 and therefore naturally deserves a place in the EU's future plans concerning the reform of the enlargement process.

Driven by the motivation to make the enlargement process 'more credible, predictable, dynamic and subject to stronger political steering'⁷, the European Commission introduced a number of novelties to the enlargement methodology. It is important to note that the Commission's proposal on enlargement reform contains important parallels with the French non-paper. Similar to the seven policy blocks suggested by France, the Commission calls for regrouping the 35 *acquis* chapters under six thematic policy clusters namely; 'Fundamentals'; 'Internal Market'; 'Competitiveness and inclusive growth'; 'Green agenda and sustainable connectivity'; 'Resources, agriculture and cohesion', and 'External relations'. The Commission proposal however departs from the French proposal by making simultaneous negotiations on different policy clusters possible (*see Table-2*).

Building on the 'new approach' prioritising the rule of law in the accession process and the increased emphasis on 'fundamentals first' introduced in 2013, the European Commission aims to further strengthen its focus on reforms in core areas such as the rule of law, democracy, economic governance and public administration reform. Hence, the Fundamentals policy cluster is set to be addressed first in the negotiations with developments falling in its scope being closely monitored throughout the accession process.

Each cluster is set to be opened for negotiations based on the fulfilment of the opening benchmarks laid out for all the chapters covered by that cluster. Arguing that the time span between the opening and closing of policy clusters should not be indefinite, the Commission suggests a maximum time frame of one year between opening and closing negotiations on a thematic cluster.

⁷ European Commission, "Enhancing the Accession Process – A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans", 5 February 2020. Retrieved on 14 May 2020, from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf



Table 2- Reorganisation of chapters under the Commission's proposal

Proposed clusters	Corresponding chapters
1. Fundamentals	23 - Judiciary and fundamental rights 24 - Justice, freedom and security Economic criteria Functioning of democratic institutions Public administration reform 5 - Public procurement 18 - Statistics 32 - Financial control
2. Internal Market	1 - Free movement of goods 2 - Freedom of movement for workers 3 - Right of establishment and freedom to provide services 4 - Free movement of capital 6 - Company law 7 - Intellectual property law 8 - Competition policy 9 - Financial services 28 - Consumer and health protection
3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth	10 - Information society and media 16 - Taxation 17 - Economic and monetary policy 19 - Social policy and employment 20 - Enterprise and industrial policy 25 - Science and research 26 - Education and culture 29 - Customs union
4. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	14 - Transport policy 15 - Energy 21 - Trans-European networks 27 - Environment and climate change
5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion	11 - Agriculture and rural development 12 - Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy 13 - Fisheries 22 - Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments 33 - Financial and budgetary provisions
6. External relations	30 - External relations 31 - Foreign, security and defence policy

** Chapters 34 - Institutions and 35 - Other issues will be dealt with separately.*

Source: European Commission, "Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans", 5 February 2020



Under the revised methodology, in an attempt to make the enlargement process more predictable, the Commission aims to convey its expectations from candidate countries more clearly. To this end, the document defines the incentives the Commission would use to reward top reform performance along with ‘sticks’ to be used for sanctioning stagnation and backsliding in reforms. Closer integration with the EU including phasing in to individual EU policies, access to the EU market and programmes, along with increased financial assistance and investment opportunities are the main instruments in the Commission’s toolbox to reward outstanding reform performance by candidate countries. Freezing or suspending negotiations, re-opening previously closed chapters, cutting pre-accession funding or withholding participation in EU programmes are outlined as options the Commission would be ready to consider in case of a slowdown in the reform momentum or serious backsliding in fundamental EU values. It is important to note that regarding the negative conditionality to be applied in case of poor reform performance, the Commission places great emphasis on the reversibility of the process – an element repeatedly stressed by Paris. In this regard, the Commission’s proposal which is largely modelled after the French non-paper aims to overcome the reservations voiced by France and make a compromise on launching EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Tirana possible.

Just like the French non-paper, the Commission’s proposal foresees a stronger role for the Member States in the enlargement process. In a bid to give the enlargement process ‘a stronger political steer’, the Commission suggests enhancing political dialogue with the Western Balkan countries at the highest level, and more regular high-level meetings to be held between candidate countries and the EU, including Intergovernmental Conferences which would be convened following the Commission’s adoption of its annual enlargement package. The willingness for more frequent dialogue on issues of common interest is a welcome development. Moreover, photo opportunities with EU’s top leadership could also prove instrumental in sending a more symbolic message to the peoples of the Western Balkans along the lines that they have a place inside the EU family and inspire a sense of ownership for the required reforms.

More strikingly, the Commission advocates a greater say for Member State capitals in assessing the progress candidate countries make on the path to the EU. The Council, acting on behalf of the Member States, has the ultimate say when it comes to opening and closing negotiations whereby it has to decide by unanimity. Over the years, the Council has strengthened its grip over the enlargement process at the expense of the Commission’s traditional role as the driving force behind enlargement. This in turn gave rise to what Christophe Hillion famously described as ‘the creeping nationalisation of enlargement policy’.⁸ This tendency has reached unprecedented dimensions with

⁸ Christopher Hillion, “The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy”, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, November 2010, SIEPS 2010:6. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from



Member States instrumentalizing the enlargement policy to serve their domestic agendas. In this context, a greater role for the Member States risks making the process more vulnerable to political feuds. Given the increasing wariness among the EU public over future enlargement with support for enlargement standing at 46 percent and over half of the population opposing enlargement with the Netherlands, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria being the most notable examples according to a recent Eurobarometer survey⁹, it is not difficult to predict that this move could render progress on the EU path increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

The Commission's enlargement reform proposal, which is largely modelled after the French non-paper, will first be used for accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The ongoing negotiations with Turkey, Montenegro and Serbia are set to continue according to the current enlargement methodology. By proposing a revised methodology based on an increased emphasis on reversibility, a stronger political role by the Member States and the reorganisation of *acquis* chapters along related policy lines which had been originally proposed by France, the Commission aimed to unlock North Macedonia and Albania's EU path by addressing the fundamental concerns put forward by France.

The Long-Overdue Green Light for Skopje and Tirana

The Commission's proposal succeeded in convincing Paris to lift its veto at the Council. The General Affairs Council finally put its seal of approval on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania on 25 March 2020. A day later the decision was endorsed by EU leaders. The fact that the EU has decided on opening accession talks with Skopje and Tirana amid the coronavirus outbreak, entailed a strong symbolic message indicating that even in times of unprecedented crises EU's unequivocal commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans remained intact. By greenlighting accession talks with Skopje and Tirana, EU aimed to restore its credibility in the Western Balkans.

Although long-overdue, the decision was of historic importance especially for Skopje which under the landmark Prespa Agreement concluded with Athens in June 2018 resolved the 27-year dispute over the name 'Macedonia' removing the main stumbling block on its path to EU and NATO. Claiming that that the country's use of its constitutional name implied territorial claims on its northern region of the same name,

http://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2010/the-creeping-nationalisation-of-the-eu-enlargement-policy-20106/Sieps_2010_6.pdf

⁹ European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 91 Spring 2019 Report - Europeans' Views on the Priorities of the European Union", June 2019, p.28-29. Retrieved on 17 May 2020, from <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/88102>



Athens had previously blocked the country from starting accession negotiations with the EU and joining NATO. Although Athens had lifted its veto in the Council of Ministers as foreseen by the Prespa Agreement, the launch of accession talks was delayed this time due to Macron's veto. Ultimately, after spending 15 years in the EU's waiting room and getting 10 favourable recommendations by the European Commission, North Macedonia finally got a green light to start EU accession talks.

A candidate country since June 2014, in order to qualify for launching accession talks Albania had to make progress on the five key priorities determined by the European Commission namely; public administration reform, reform of the judiciary, fight against corruption and organised crime, and protection of human rights.¹⁰

Along with France, the Netherlands and Denmark had opposed launching accession talks with Tirana citing concerns over the country's track record in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Therefore, additional conditions have been introduced for Albania to be fulfilled prior to the first Intergovernmental Conference. In this context, Albania is expected to make additional progress in the areas of electoral reform, reform of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, protection of minorities and to amend its media law.¹¹

Zagreb EU-Western Balkans 'Virtual' Summit

Another key date for the European perspective of the Western Balkans was the Zagreb Summit which took place on 6 May 2020. The summit, which was initially planned as the main highlight of Croatia's first-ever EU Presidency, had to be convened via videoconference due to the coronavirus pandemic. Defining bringing the Western Balkans back on the EU's agenda as a priority for its first-ever EU term presidency, EU's youngest Member State had invested enormous diplomatic and political capital in getting a green light for the launch of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania prior to the Zagreb Summit. Although Zagreb had to refocus its EU Presidency priorities on dealing with the coronavirus crisis, according to Croatian officials, the opening of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania along with the Zagreb Western Balkans Summit would be remembered as its legacy at the EU's helm.¹²

¹⁰ Council of the EU, "Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – Council Conclusions", 26 June 2018. Retrieved on 17 May 2020, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

¹¹ Council of the EU, "Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process - The Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania Council Conclusions" 25 March 2020. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

¹² Remarks by Gordan Grlić Radman Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia at the Online Event on "Balkans in a New Era – An Overview of the Croatian Presidency" Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 7 May 2020.



Moreover, hosting the EU-Western Balkans Summit -albeit virtually - entailed a lot of symbolism for Croatia, as the very first EU-Western Balkans Summit bringing together the leaders of the then EU15 and their counterparts from the Western Balkans had convened 20 years ago in Zagreb.

The Zagreb Summit of 24 November 2000 established a clear link between the Western Balkan countries' progress towards democracy, rule of law, regional cooperation and reconciliation and their EU accession prospects.¹³ This was followed on 19-20 June 2003 by the historic Thessaloniki Summit which constituted a turning point confirming the European perspective of the Western Balkans, and in the words of Chris Patten, the Commissioner for External Action at the time, 'sent two important messages to the Western Balkans: The prospect of the EU is real, and we [EU] will not regard the map of the Union as complete until you [Western Balkans] have joined us.'¹⁴ It took the EU leaders 15 years to re-convene with their counterparts from the Western Balkans. The Sofia Summit of 17 May 2018, hosted by the Bulgarian EU Presidency which had promised to conduct 'a Balkan Presidency', fell short of expectations mainly for its failure to touch upon issues such as 'enlargement' and 'accession'. Against this background, the Zagreb Summit convening on 6 May 2020 was the fourth gathering between the EU and the Western Balkans in two decades.

Amid the unprecedented pressure and challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the very fact that the Zagreb Summit took place was hailed as a success.¹⁵ EU's continued support and solidarity in helping the Western Balkans tackle the coronavirus crisis was a key theme at the summit. Prior to the summit, the Commission announced that 3.3 billion euros would be mobilised to help Western Balkan countries deal with the effects of the coronavirus crisis.¹⁶ More support is to come as the Commission is currently working on an Economic and Investment Plan to assist the region on the road to its recovery from the long-term effects of the coronavirus crisis.

The Zagreb Summit was also important for bringing together Spain and Kosovo around the same table for the very first time – albeit in virtual terms. Spain, being among the

¹³ Boris Grigić, "Croatia's Point of View on the European Perspectives of the Balkans", 8 November 2006. Retrieved on 18 May 2020 from

<http://www.cepor.hr/projekti/Croatia%27s%20point%20of%20view%20-%20final.pdf>

¹⁴ European Commission, "The Thessaloniki Summit: A Milestone in the European Union's Relations with the Western Balkans", 18 June 2003. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_03_860

¹⁵ Florian Eder and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Croatian PM on EU-Balkans Summit: The Meeting is the Message", Politico, 5 May 2020. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/croatian-prime-minister-andrej-plenovic-on-eu-western-balkans-summit-the-meeting-is-the-message-enlargement-coronavirus/>

¹⁶ European Commission, "Western Balkans' Leaders Meeting: EU Reinforces Support to Address COVID-19 Crisis and Outlines Proposal for Post-Pandemic Recovery", 29 April 2020. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777



five EU Member States which do not recognize Kosovo's independence, had boycotted the previous EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Sofia in 2018. This time, Madrid agreed to participate in the virtual summit provided that there was no mention of EU membership in the official declaration to be adopted at the summit, the countries would be referred to as 'EU's Balkan partners', no flags would be displayed and no official titles would be used in the summit.¹⁷

The main message the EU leaders conveyed to the Western Balkan countries was a reaffirmation of 'the EU's unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans'.¹⁸ Along the lines of the declaration adopted in the Sofia Summit of 2018, the Zagreb Declaration made no reference to 'enlargement', 'EU membership' and 'accession'. Given the increasing sensitivity among Member State capitals over the issue of enlargement, indicating support for the European perspective of the region was the only compromise formula EU leaders could come up with. Given the political realities aggravated by the coronavirus crisis, that is the level of commitment the Western Balkan countries could hope for at the moment.

Enlargement Reform That Wasn't: The Case of Turkey

A candidate country since 1999, Turkey has started EU accession talks simultaneously with Croatia on 3 October 2005. While Croatia has joined the EU's ranks as a full member in July 2013, Turkey's EU accession process has been complicated by a myriad of political blockages. The accession negotiations which should in essence constitute the backbone of the Turkey-EU relationship have been rendered ineffective due to the vetoes in the Council. The talks have stalled with nearly half of the chapters (14 out of 35 to be precise) being suspended due to the Cyprus question. Effectively, the resolution of the Cyprus question has become an opening benchmark for 14 chapters (8 of which have been blocked by the Council and 6 of which have been unilaterally suspended by the Greek Cypriot side) and a closing benchmark for all chapters. The weakening of the EU anchor and controversial statements by key EU leaders have translated into a weaker reform momentum on part of Turkey. This in turn has been met with criticism on part of EU on the grounds that Turkey was moving away from EU standards.

While the refugee crisis of 2015 has presented an opportunity for the revitalisation of Turkey-EU relations, with the Turkey-EU Statement of 18 March 2016 promising the opening of new chapters, realisation of visa liberalisation by June 2016 and launching the modernisation of the Customs Union along with financial support for the refugees,

¹⁷ David M. Herszenhorn, Jacopo Barigazzi and Andrew Gray "4 Takeaways from the EU's Virtual Balkan Summit", *Politico*, 7 May 2020. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/4-takeaways-from-eus-virtual-balkan-summit/>

¹⁸ European Council, "Zagreb Declaration", 6 May 2020. Retrieved on 16 May 2020, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>



this optimism was short-lived as relations hit an historic low point following the heinous coup attempt in July 2016. The aftermath of the coup attempt was epitomised by the EU becoming increasingly critical of Turkey over the state of emergency measures and its failure to comprehend the gravity of the situation and with Turkey criticising the EU over the lack of solidarity it has shown in the face of this threat.

Although the relations entered a period of normalisation with the lifting of the state of emergency measures, they were recently strained over hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Siding with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration under the pretext of “Union solidarity”, the EU has imposed a series of sanctions on Turkey over its hydrocarbon drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean since July 2019.

Due to the political blockages, Turkey’s EU accession talks have been virtually frozen with the last chapter being opened to negotiations in June 2016. Since June 2018, this situation has been reflected in successive Council Conclusions with the assessment that “no chapters could be considered for opening or closing”.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Customs Union modernisation and visa liberalisation which have the potential to relieve the tension and inject new impetus to the relations in the short-term are yet to be realised.

As the EU is working on ways to recalibrate the enlargement policy, Turkey stood out as the only enlargement country that received no mention in the initiatives aimed at enlargement reform. While it is clear that Turkey presents a different case from the Western Balkan countries with the size of its population, the scale of its economy and its global standing, it is still covered by the EU’s enlargement agenda. Given the massive mutual interests between Turkey and the EU and common challenges requiring Turkey’s and EU’s attention, the need to put the accession process back on track is urgent. While reiterating the European perspective of the Western Balkans, the EU should also work for reaffirming the European perspective of Turkey and work on creative steps to revitalise the accession process and restore mutual trust in the relations.

¹⁹ Council of the EU, “Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process- Council Conclusions”, 26 June 2018. Retrieved on 8 June 2020, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

