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Journal Article**Author(s):**

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Publication date:

2017

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000225309>

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Originally published in:

Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 17(4), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2017.1390831>

Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans

Accepted for publication in South East Europe and Black Sea Studies, vol. 27 no. 4 (2017)

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France's hesitant stance on EU enlargement towards the Balkans is illustrative of a broader ambivalence among both French elites and citizens towards the European project. Despite principled support for the Balkans' EU membership, achieving this step is no strategic priority for France. The official approach emphasizes strict conditionality and a rigorous monitoring of reform progress in aspirant countries. A hostile public opinion and superficial media coverage further strengthen the country's reluctance to admit new, possibly unprepared candidates into the Union. Analysing the historical evolution of the French position on EU enlargement as well as its current political, institutional and societal expressions, this article construes France's disinvestment from the Balkans' EU perspective as the result of failed expectations and a growing disillusionment with the EU's international role and its political future more broadly.

Keywords: Balkans, CFSP, EU enlargement, France, foreign policy

France's relationship with the European Union (EU), of which it is one of the founding members, is of a paradoxical nature (Rozenberg 2013). On the one hand, the country is a steadfast supporter of European integration as a means of strengthening the continent's international role and projecting its own power more forcefully at the global level. On the other, both French elites and citizens are generally reluctant to give up sovereignty by transferring competences to Brussels and have become increasingly wary of the economic liberalism that has come to characterize the European project. This ambivalence is reflected in the country's growing hesitation towards further EU enlargement, with the perceived risk of diluting the EU's achievements overshadowing the expected benefits of such a step.

This article analyses France's long-standing ambiguity towards the European project through the prism of the country's stance on EU enlargement towards the Balkans. Much has been written on the challenge that the relative unpreparedness of the Balkans candidates and their need for multi-fold transitions – political, economic, social, but also in terms of regional reconciliation and state-building – poses for the EU and its desire to exert 'transformative power' over accession hopefuls (Blockmans 2007; Elbasani 2013; Freyburg and Richter 2010). However, the academic literature lacks a thorough analysis of member states' attitudes towards this crucial foreign policy issue. The gradual (re)nationalisation of EU enlargement policy, which gives member states a greater weight in shaping the eventual outcome of candidates' membership bids, makes such an investigation all the more relevant (Hillion 2017 - [cross-reference](#)). Filling this gap for the French case, this article asks: Which position has France adopted towards the Balkans' EU accession, and which factors allow us to account for this position and its evolution over time?

The article draws on desk research and on 17 face-to-face interviews conducted with French officials, researchers, and journalists between June and September 2014 and in December 2016. It begins by placing France's attitude towards the Balkans' EU accession in the historical context of the EU's attempts to respond to Yugoslavia's violent break-up in the early 1990s. It traces France's involvement in the region through three stages: an early ambition to forge an independent European capacity for crisis management, followed by growing disillusionment before the EU's failure to resolve the Yugoslav conflicts without NATO intervention and eventually a downsizing of French ambitions in the Balkans region and a corresponding decrease in its engagement. The second section focuses on political attitudes towards EU enlargement. It discusses the reasons for France's early reluctance regarding CEE accession and how this attitude shaped its official policy of rigorous conditionality and merit-based progress towards EU membership of the Balkans. The following section tackles the institutional set-up of French policy on EU enlargement, emphasizing the prominence of executive-dominated, hierarchical policy-making and the managerial attitude that prevails on this dossier. Finally, the broader societal indifference and growing hostility towards EU enlargement is analysed, as expressed through public opinion on and media coverage of the region. The final discussion ties together the different strands of analysis and paints a picture of French disengagement from the Balkans as the combined result of political reluctance and public indifference towards EU membership of the region.

From ambition to disappointment: EU foreign policy and the Balkans

The Balkans are often described as the birthplace of EU foreign policy. The signing of the Maastricht Treaty and with it the introduction of a separate second pillar dedicated to a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) took place against the backdrop of the gradual disintegration of Yugoslavia. It was the disorganised handling of Croatia's and Slovenia's independence, recognized as early as December 1991 by Germany without prior consultation with its European partners, that served as one of the triggers for the creation of the CFSP (Buchet de Neuilly 2005: 77). France in particular supported the establishment of an independent EU capacity to intervene in crisis situations outside the EU's territory, and the Balkans thus became a test case for the EU's resolve and ability to act autonomously and cohesively in external affairs.

The launch of the CFSP came with high-flying ambitions, as embodied in the infamous declaration by Jacques Poos, then Luxemburg Foreign Minister and head of the European Council, that 'the hour of Europe has dawned' (see Adebahr and Wunsch 2011). Yet, the EU eventually failed to bring a peaceful resolution to the Yugoslav secession wars single-handedly, demonstrating its 'collective powerlessness' (Rupnik 2014: 204). Following several unsuccessful attempts on the part of EU negotiators to broker a lasting ceasefire for Bosnia, it took the US-led intervention of NATO forces to end the fighting and prepare the ground for the Dayton accords. These accords brought relative political stability, if no functional institutional solution, to the Bosnian case. The need to rely upon US forces to put an end to the Yugoslav wars was perceived as a humiliation by France and is widely regarded as the EU failing its initial test in becoming a credible foreign policy actor. To this day, the continued expansion of NATO, including the addition of Croatia and Albania in 2009 and the imminent accession of Montenegro, highlight the enduring attractiveness of this transatlantic military alliance and have overshadowed efforts to forge an effective Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) with independent military capacities.

For France, creating an EU foreign policy is both a question of prestige and a means of expanding France's power on the international scene. A prominent French political scientist sums up the neo-Gaullist world vision as a desire that 'France should use the European megaphone to voice an autonomous and distinctive message to the world' (Rozenberg 2013: 59-60). In a similar vein, the CFSP has been described as an institutionalisation of French and German dominance over smaller states, which often simply tag onto the political agendas of the dominant member states (Charillon 2005: 70). Indeed, the CFSP framework was often sidelined during the Yugoslav wars by the contact group composed of the US, Russia, Germany, France and the UK (with Italy joining from 1996), much to the displeasure of medium-sized member state diplomacies such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Buchet de Neuilly 2005: 80-81). In spite of initial hopes that the successful resolution of Yugoslavia's disintegration would forge a European foreign policy capacity capable of acting autonomously from the United States, international intervention in the region instead relied heavily upon the transatlantic alliance. The EU's dependence on NATO in military matters once again became obvious in Kosovo in 1999, where the US-led KFOR operation put an end to Serbia's oppression of the Albanian population. The EU was left in charge of the aftermath in the form of economic and humanitarian support (Rupnik 2014: 204).

Despite the disappointing performance of the CFSP in the Balkans, France as an individual country was very present in the region throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. Given France's traditional pro-Serbian policy, the NATO regional command for Kosovo North was transferred to France in the assumption that French soldiers would be more readily accepted by the local Serbian population (Dérens 2010: 8). Moreover, it was French politician Bernard Kouchner, the country's future Foreign Minister under President Sarkozy, who acted as the UN Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) from 1999-2001. Following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, which, in a turn of policy, France strongly supported, the first head of the EU's rule of law mission EULEX became French General Yves de Kermabon. Nonetheless, French involvement has focused narrowly upon Kosovo and Serbia, with French Balkans expert Dérens qualifying France's diplomatic efforts in the broader region as 'very discreet and unimaginative' (Dérens 2010: 11). As of February 2014, France has fully withdrawn from KFOR (Le Parisien 2014), thereby terminating its military engagement in the Balkans region.

On balance, the EU's engagement in the Balkans has allowed for some progress towards developing into an effective international actor, setting precedents and allowing for a gradual strengthening of the Union's capacities. In 1998 for instance, the bloc for the first time adopted sanctions against a third country – Serbia – independently of prior measures taken by the United Nations (Buchet de Neuilly 2005: 81). Sanctions have since become an effective tool for EU foreign policy, most recently in the cases of Iran and Russia. Nonetheless, the heavy reliance upon NATO for the military dimension of crisis management in the Balkans underlined the EU's ongoing dependence upon the US. This tendency has since been confirmed in Afghanistan and Libya, disappointing French expectations of a progressive emancipation of EU foreign policy from the NATO framework.

Overall, from the place of a European failure in the early 1990s, the Balkans have developed into a laboratory for European foreign and security policy (Rupnik 2014: 201). The mixed record of the EU's involvement in crisis management in the region is a source of frustration for those member states, such as France, that place a high priority on effective joint external actions. Disillusioned by the EU's performance in the region, France has chosen to radically

downsize its engagement in the Balkans and to focus its attention upon the EU's Mediterranean neighbours.

Following the shift from crisis management to support for political transformation and democratisation, the EU accession process has without a doubt become the main framework determining the progress and direction of reform in the Balkan countries. In this regard, France has opted to make cautious use of the tools at the EU's disposal. This reluctance is related less to the recent history of the Balkans specifically, and more to France's perception and expectations with regards to European integration in general. The French policy and attitude towards the Balkans' EU membership is therefore strongly informed by the debates on the EU's initial expansion towards Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in 2004.

For a 'controlled enlargement': from CEE to the Balkans

EU enlargement experienced a qualitative change in the wake of the 2004 accession of ten mostly Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Whereas previous enlargement rounds had concerned a small number of countries that were either already close to the standards of the remaining member states or benefited from extensive pre-accession support to ensure their preparedness, the 'return to Europe' of a large group of post-Communist countries represented a considerable challenge to the Union in both political and economic terms. As a traditional defender of the deepening of European cooperation, France showed strong apprehension that the addition of new member states would result in the dilution of the European project (Grunberg and Lequesne 2004: 60-61).

In the early 1990s, French President Mitterrand went as far as putting forward the idea of an alternative to full EU membership for the CEE region, proposing the creation of a Confederation as an intergovernmental forum for sectoral cooperation open to both East European candidate countries and the Soviet Union. The inaugural meeting of the Confederation proved a resounding failure, as the CEE aspirants refused any form of association below the status of full and equal member states. Despite a progressive opening towards CEE membership following the March 1993 legislative elections and the instauration of a co-habitation regime with Edouard Balladur as a Prime Minister, France has retained the image of an enlargement-sceptic, a reputation that lastingly hampered its ability to forge strong ties with the new CEE member countries (Grunberg 2004: 56).

Three key considerations drove France's eventual shift towards support for a 'rationalised enlargement' from the mid-1990s onwards. First, pressure by French businessmen to gain access to CEE markets emphasized the economic benefits of extending membership to the post-Communist region. Second, the creation of strict conditionality in the form of the Copenhagen criteria adopted at the European Council meeting in 1993 alleviated some of the fears regarding the admission of unprepared countries. Finally, the desire to prevent German political dominance in a region where Germany was perceived as enlargement-friendly led to a shift in France's official stance towards CEE accession (Lequesne 2008a: 54-56). Moreover, it was this latter argument that motivated French backing for the membership of Bulgaria and Romania, which followed in 2007, three years after the initial CEE accession round. Both countries are members of the Francophonie and were thus considered potential French allies in Europe's East (Grunberg 2004: 56-57).

Despite this gradual weakening of French resistance to CEE accession, the country's general attitude remains one of concern and hesitation regarding the effects of EU expansion (Grunberg

2004: 51-52). The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French voters back in 2005 was symptomatic of a creeping discomfort with an EU that seemed to become bigger than France could handle. The ensuing institutional crisis further heightened concerns about the possible trade-off between 'widening' and 'deepening' (Lequesne 2008b: 140), inaugurating a return by France to a very reluctant policy towards EU enlargement (Dérens 2010: 11). The debate at the time was dominated by concerns that the CEE accession would bring about industrial delocalisation and competition in the service sector because of cheap Eastern European labour, embodied by nervous reporting on the 'Polish plumber' that would come to take French jobs (Grossman and Woll 2011). Similar concerns have been voiced regarding the Balkans, if less vocally so due to the smaller size of the region.

The most visible sign of French wariness towards further enlargements has been the introduction of a referendum requirement for all accessions following the EU entry of Croatia in 2013. Initially, President Jacques Chirac had inserted this 'referendum bolt' into a constitutional revision in March 2005 in the hope of preventing the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, which was threatened *inter alia* by a highly emotional debate on Turkey's membership bid (Lequesne 2008b: 134). Despite plans originally foreseeing an abolishment of the referendum provision, the requirement was maintained in a mid-2008 constitutional revision. In contrast to the original provision, the new formulation adds the possibility of circumventing a referendum in cases where both chambers of the Parliament authorise the ratification of an accession treaty by a three-fifths majority. This adds an important competence to the traditionally weak National, since it pulls the trigger for the referendum. In practice, however, it is unlikely the required threshold to circumvent a public vote would be reached even for the Balkan countries, granting the French electorate a *de facto* ability to block any future accessions even once all membership conditions have been met.

A key concern in France's positioning towards further EU enlargement is the desire to preserve the Union's achievements and to maintain European integration as a political project. Support among political parties for further enlargement has consequently been declining: not only the far-right *Front National* (FN) has called for an end to enlargement, but the centre-right party *Les Républicains* equally opposes future accessions. A formal declaration by *Les Républicains* following the Brexit referendum claimed that 'the enlargement process needs to be stopped until the re-foundation of Europe has been completed' (Les Républicains 2016). Depending on the outcome of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in Spring 2017, scepticism towards enlargement may become significantly more prevalent among the country's leaders than it is already today.

There is an underlying nostalgia for a 'little Europe' (Lequesne 2008a: 74) as France senses a threat of losing control over decision-making in Brussels. This preoccupation with protecting the status quo has translated into an emphasis on 'controlled enlargement' that stresses the full preparedness of new member states and thus ensures the ongoing functioning of the EU's institutions. It implies a rigorous evaluation of aspirants' preparedness for membership, a stance that has been further hardened by the widespread perception that the accession of Bulgaria and Romania was precipitated (author interviews with French Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, July 2014).

In spite of mounting political hostility, French official support for the accession of the Balkan countries can be qualified as firm, if largely passive. Following France's significant involvement during the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it was French President Jacques Chirac who called for an EU-Balkans summit in May 2000 in order to

develop 'a more determined strategy' towards the region (Fitchett 2000). The result was the Zagreb Summit in December of the same year that offered a membership perspective to all Balkan countries for the first time. In light of this accession promise, French support for the Balkans enlargement is one of principle, namely that subsequent administrations need to live up to the political commitments made by their predecessors. The official insistence upon the geopolitical inevitability of Balkans accession (author interviews with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, July 2014) supplants any deeper commitment to bringing the region closer to this goal.

In practice, France has embraced a policy of 'controlled enlargement' (author interview with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Balkans unit, July 2014) that consists in a strong backing of the European Commission's 'new approach' to negotiations. By 'frontloading' the negotiations process, this new approach sees the more demanding negotiation chapters 23 and 24 dealing with judiciary, fundamental rights, justice, freedom and security opened first and closed last, with progress in these chapters conditioning the overall pace of negotiations. French officials emphasise the need for aspiring member states to develop a solid track record of results in all three pillars of reform singled out in the revised enlargement strategy, namely democracy, economic governance, and public administration (author interview with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU unit, July 2014). The need for candidate countries to fully comply with this reinforced conditionality is widely viewed by official interlocutors as a crucial measure to preserve the credibility of the enlargement process and prevent a further rise of Europhobia among the population, which may turn not only against enlargement but against the EU itself. The hesitant support for further enlargement is complemented by a policy of small steps and a case-by-case assessment, known as 'regatta principle,' rather than the desire for a further grouped enlargement as it occurred for the CEE candidate countries in 2004.

This positioning of the official establishment is mirrored by independent voices from the policy research community. In the wake of Croatia's EU accession, two researchers from one of the leading French think tanks dedicated to European affairs, *Notre Europe*, called for a strategic adjustment of EU enlargement policy which should be accompanied by an 'extremely strict control of the respects for membership conditions both during membership negotiations and after their conclusion.' Acknowledging that this sets the bar higher than it was for CEE candidates, the authors pursue that this would be 'the price to pay to guarantee cohesion and solidarity within the 'clubs' [EU, Eurozone, or Schengen] they are seeking to join' (Andoura and Bertoncini 2013: 2). Moreover, the paper calls for the introduction of compensatory measures for those countries losing out from enlargement through rising unemployment and social costs. It insists upon the need for enlargement policy to clarify the borders of Europe and the status of each of the EU's neighbouring countries, including in the East, 'in order to avoid the impression of a flight forwards with no limits' (*ibid.*). This opinion piece thus illustrates well the French fear of continued enlargement diluting the European project and putting under pressure 'old' member states' social systems.

France's position corresponds in this regard to the German stance. Both countries share an enlargement-sceptic elite and populations that view the entry of new member states as a threat to the welfare state (Lequesne 2008b: 133). As a result, both Paris and Berlin have accentuated their emphasis on conditionality and the rigorous evaluation of the aspiring countries' full compliance with membership requirements. The two countries however differ in their degree of engagement on enlargement questions. Germany is becoming increasingly vocal on enlargement and is one of the key players when it comes to shaping the EU's policy towards the Balkans (see [Töglhofer 2017](#) – cross-reference). In contrast, France tends to adopt a more

passive stance, generally aligning itself with German positions and defending these with somewhat less vehemence (Töglhofer and Wunsch 2015). This divergence can be explained by the low political and economic relevance of the Balkans for France. Whereas the Yugoslav diaspora numbers 1.4 million in Germany (Federal Office for Statistics 2013), only around 100.000 persons are of Yugoslav descent in France (INSEE 2011). There is a similar discrepancy regarding the economic importance of the Balkans for Berlin and Paris, with Germany among the most important trading partners and foreign investors in the Balkans. France, in contrast, is represented through several large businesses, but in terms of the overall trading volume comes only tenth with regards to Serbia, its largest trading partner in the region (France Diplomatie 2014).

In an apparent renewed engagement in the Balkans, in July 2016 Paris hosted the third meeting of the Berlin Process, following initial summits held in Berlin in 2014 and Vienna in 2015. This process aims to provide a parallel and complementary framework to the EU enlargement process. It seeks to facilitate the resolution of some of the core obstacles to further progress in the Balkans, such as bilateral disputes, and to put on track sectoral projects of great visibility to underline the ongoing commitment of key EU member states to the region. In the case of the Paris Summit, the highlight was the launch of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), modelled on the French-German Youth Office, which aims to bring together young people from across the Western Balkans to promote a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation. However, despite this visible result, RYCO had been largely prepared outside of the Paris Summit framework. French officials were frequently not even aware that the Berlin Process meeting would be held in their capital at all, and international participants complained about the lack of involvement of the French side in the preparations and strategic debates on the purpose and future of the Berlin process (author attendance of preparatory meeting for Paris summit, May 2016).

In sum, the conjunction of a general reluctance towards EU enlargement and the low political and economic significance of the Balkans for France explain why the region's EU accession is not a policy goal that the French diplomacy actively pursues. Given the limited objective impact that the Balkans' EU membership would have on France, the dossier remains comparatively marginal to the country's overall engagement at the European level. This is also reflected in the institutional set-up for the handling of enlargement questions, which is both executive-driven and managerial, rather than strategic, in nature.

An executive-dominated process: 'managing' EU enlargement

The French policy-making process is generally dominated by the executive. There is a strong interconnectedness between administrative and political elites, with the majority of high-ranking politicians and civil servants having been trained at the same elite institutions before taking their positions and thus sharing patterns of socialisation (see Morisse-Schilbach 2002: 111). This makes for a close-knit community and a largely shared vision when it comes to national sovereignty and the commitment to European integration as a peace project and a counterweight to the transatlantic relationship. The European Union is a clear foreign policy priority for France, with a focus, however, on the internal dimension of European integration rather than on the EU's external activities. There is a strong desire to preserve the core of European integration – first and foremost the Eurozone and the Schengen area – and an understanding that the future of the Union implies a trade-off between widening and deepening.

Mirroring the general set-up of French policy-making, the formulation of the country's stance on EU enlargement is a largely executive-driven process. Whereas the President retains the prerogative over major policy priorities, the day-to-day management of Community affairs lies with the Prime Minister. The formal procedure of policy formulation for issues related to European affairs foresees a prominent role for the *Secrétariat général des affaires européennes* (SGAE), a government agency directly attached to the Prime Minister's office that is in charge of facilitating the exchange of views between different Ministries and arbitrating the official position adopted by the French administration (Rozenberg 2013: 68). The SGAE works closely with France's Permanent Representation in Brussels, which defends the country's positions from technical working groups through the COREPER right up to intergovernmental conferences.

The SGAE serves the purpose of inter-ministerial concertation and tends to focus on 'coordination over negotiation' (Morisse-Schilbach 2005: 115). The concertation process consists of physical meetings or digital exchanges between representatives of different Ministries that precede every enlargement-related reunion in Brussels, from working group consultations on specific technical issues to intergovernmental conferences that decide on major steps in the accession process. These meetings are relatively informal and function on the 'principle of silence,' whereby a call for input is distributed widely among Ministries and other executive bodies. Those desiring to contribute to the issue in question can react, while the approval of the bodies remaining silent is taken for granted (author interview with SGAE, September 2014).

Rather than a place for fundamental debate, the SGAE meetings are an opportunity for different Ministries to feed information into the decision-making process on the dossier. The Foreign Ministry, thanks to its privileged access to information through its network of diplomatic representations on the ground, is generally the main shaper of the deliberations, whereas the Ministries of Economics, Interior and Justice contribute important sectoral views on enlargement questions. The Ministry of Interior is generally more reserved on the issue, insisting on the sustainability of reforms and focusing on areas that serve as anchors for further change, such as training, human resources, and the fight against corruption (interview with Ministry of Interior, July 2014). As a rule, the occasional differences of views expressed during the SGAE meetings tend to concern the weighting of issues rather than any substantial divergences over the basic position to be adopted. Where major discord does persist, an interministerial meeting can be called by the Prime Minister, who has the final call on issues of disagreement. With debates around enlargement typically very consensual, no such direct involvement of the Prime Minister has taken place so far in this field.

On the whole, the SGAE allows for an efficient coordination of the French executive position and ensures that this position is defended consistently across Ministries and levels of government. At the same time, the process is conducted very much on a day-to-day basis, with little ambition to develop a strategic vision for the integration of the Balkans region. Moreover, there is little space for input from legislative or third-sector actors, with the Parliament relegated to a secondary role and broader societal actors marginalised in the debates.

The ratification of the Amsterdam Treaty resulted in an expansion of parliamentary prerogatives concerning EU affairs. Following a constitutional change, both the National Assembly and the Senate can now adopt EU resolutions on any Community draft legislation or other documents issued by an EU institution (Rozenberg 2013: 69). Still, the level of parliamentary Europeanisation remains low in both comparative and concrete terms, with an

annual average of eleven EU-related resolutions for the National Assembly and nine for the Senate (*ibid.*). French Members of Parliament (MPs) display low levels of involvement in EU-related matters, with few floor debates and few examples of parliamentary influence on European affairs. The central role of the President and his lack of parliamentary accountability make it difficult to control the orientation of European policies and offer low personal incentives for MPs to become involved (*ibid.*: 70).

As a rule, French executive actors see little need to involve legislative players into their decision-making process. Despite representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly appearing before the National Assembly's EU Committee, these occasions are perceived by both sides more as a one-sided provision of information rather than a *lieu* for equal-level exchange (author interview with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 2014, and National Assembly, July 2014). Nonetheless, the EU Committee follows closely the developments in the region and seeks to feed its largely favourable assessments into the process of policy formulation. The EU Committee convenes whenever a Balkan country is set to complete a further step in the accession process and distributes its resolutely positive positions widely among both national and EU institutions. Furthermore, despite its limited influence on positions adopted by the Executive, the EU Affairs Committee sees a role for itself in practicing 'parliamentary diplomacy' and thereby influencing the situation directly in the region.¹

Apart from its EU Committee, the National Assembly has friendship groups for each Balkan country, whereas the Senate has a regional France-Western Balkans friendship group. These groups serve as the basis for inter-parliamentary cooperation and regularly deliberate current events in the region. Nonetheless, they have a weak policy role, contributing at best to the respective chamber's EU Committee, and thus serving more as a forum of exchange for interested MPs whose main substantial work takes place in the sectoral committees.

When it comes to third sector involvement, there are few associations or groups involved in Balkans issues. Beyond public conferences held on the occasion of formal visits by Balkan policymakers, the level of attention given to the region is limited, be it in academic or policy circles. Balkan specialists in the policy research community typically cover a broader region, such as Eastern Europe or the EU's neighbourhood, or act as Balkans experts for several organisations at the same time (author interviews with Notre Europe, July 2014 and Robert Schuman Institute, December 2016). This low level of involvement is indicative of the broader public indifference towards the Balkans that prevails in French society and explains the low levels of the country's engagement in this region.

Between indifference and hostility: the Balkans as a 'non-issue'

The Balkans are largely a non-issue in France, with little strategic effort invested in pursuing a coherent policy towards the region. Media coverage is low and public opinion disinterested at best, when it is not openly hostile. The scarce attention France grants to the region is explained by the limited objective importance of the Balkans for France. The aim of stabilising the region, initially one of the key justifications for the Balkans' EU integration is largely viewed as a mission accomplished, leaving one of the few French experts in the area commenting that 'in reality, the Balkan states have largely disappeared from France's political agenda' (Dérens 2010: 11).

¹ One example of this was the Committee's engagement in favour of opening accession negotiations with Serbia against German hesitation in June 2013 (author interview with National Assembly, July 2014).

Inside the institutions, it is not unusual to hear that the region has ‘no strategic role’ and is of ‘no vital interest’ to France (author interviews with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2014 and December 2016). Whereas the country has diplomatic representations in each of Balkan states, diplomatic postings to the region are not held in high regard. Moreover, France has reduced its cultural presence as its interest in the region dwindles. In 2013, then French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, in a letter to President François Hollande, justified the decision to close all three French cultural centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the need to give up ‘diplomatic antennas in countries where our interests are non-existent’ (Toè 2013).

The lack of salience of the enlargement dossier is also reflected in the allocation of human resources. In the wake of the economic crisis, several Ministries cut down on the number of contractual staff, leaving less people in charge of broader areas. The Balkans is one of the regions particularly concerned by these measures, with the Ministry of Defence, for instance, passing from three full-time analysts in charge of the Balkans a decade ago, to just a single person on a part-time contract today (author interview with Ministry of Defence, July 2014). More anecdotally, as of February 2017, the website of the French Permanent Representation lists Croatia as a member-to-be in its section on EU enlargement (French Permanent Representation s.d.).

Media coverage of the Balkans in France is sparse and typically focused on the negative dimensions of enlargement. Triggers of media attention are mostly official visits of French Ministers to the region or visits of Balkan leaders to France, with the tone remaining factual and the discussion superficial. The entry of Croatia yielded a number of informative articles presenting the country to the French audience (Le Monde 2013; Le Figaro 2013), but attention quickly subsided. None of the French media has permanent correspondents in the Balkan region, and the only serious source of information for French-speaking readers is the *Courrier des Balkans*, a specialised online outlet that offers translations of articles from Balkan media alongside its own contributions, and regularly runs into funding difficulties.

The most recent Eurobarometer results show a strong public scepticism towards further EU enlargement in France, which is among the most sceptical countries alongside Austria, Finland, and Germany. As of December 2015, a mere 26 percent of French respondents declared themselves in favour of admitting new members, with 67 percent explicitly against such a step (European Commission 2016: 101). This is a marked decrease in comparison to the results of the survey conducted just after the entry of the ten new countries in May 2004, when already only a minority of 39 percent of French respondents supported further enlargement (European Commission 2005: 153).

While explicit rejection of Balkans EU membership is not prominent in France, there is a general understanding that their accession would not bring many tangible benefits either. Where enlargement has triggered emotional reactions in the past, namely in terms of its economic impact, the accession of the Balkans would affect France only marginally. Still, EU expansion to the East is often equated with growing domestic unemployment and the delocalisation of French firms to more competitive regions (Grunberg 2004: 58-59). This perception has been called into question by a study conducted for the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) showing that only 4.2 percent of French firms moved abroad any kind of activity in the period between 2009 and 2011. Whereas the majority (55 percent) of these delocalisations did concern a transfer within the European Union, only 22 percent of firms chose to relocate in one of the ten new member states, with 38 percent

preferring a country belonging to the EU-15 (Fontagné and d'Isanto 2013). More than informed by facts, French enlargement scepticism is thus based on diffuse fears of suffering economic disadvantages from admitting less developed countries into the EU.

Given the small size of the Balkan economies, it can be assumed that the extent of delocalisations following their EU accession would be very limited. The same holds for the more immediate economic effects of the Balkans accession. The region's role for the internal market is already extremely constrained, and France's bilateral economic relations with the Balkans are weak in comparison to the involvement of other EU member states. Fear of work migration, which was very acute in the case of the CEE accession, is not an issue in discussions about the Balkans, be it within the institutions or the wider public. Trade unions and business associations instead focus on Turkey when they worry about their competitiveness, while the Balkans are not considered a threat.

On the whole, the attitude of French citizens and media towards EU enlargement oscillates between indifference and open hostility. The level of factual information and institutional expertise on the issue is low, resulting in an absence of public debate and a rather vague apprehension of the political effects and the economic consequences of further enlargement. In a climate of general resignation with regards to politics in general, this diffuse fear however may quickly be mobilised into more direct opposition to the EU accession of a Balkan country. Given the likelihood of such a step requiring ratification by referendum, there is a risk of populist forces in the country capitalising upon the general lack of enthusiasm regarding the admission of new member states to send a broader signal against the pursuit of European integration.

Conclusion

As one of the founding member states, France remains attached to the view of 'Europe' as a community of values and a vehicle to strengthening France's voice on the international scene. It is reluctant to accept its declining relative importance as the number of member states grows, and sees an emphasis on conditionality as a means to ensure coherence within the Union and to avoid 'overstretching.' While the country's principled stance on the accession of the Balkans is positive, its support is perfunctory and does not go significantly beyond the rhetorical level. Economic and immigration implications for France of an eventual Balkans accession are limited, explaining the reduced interest in the region.

Despite its principled support for EU membership of the Balkans, France is no major player in the EU when it comes to defining the Union's long-term approach towards the region. Instead, the country tends to align itself with Germany's positions on the dossier, stepping forward only in rare cases of divergences, such as on the question of opening accession talks with Serbia. Expertise and human resources dealing with the Balkans are limited both within and outside the French institutions, reflecting a lack of national strategic interest in the region. The awareness that no enlargement will take place in the coming years confirms France in its perception that there is no need for increasing its levels of investment, be it material or in terms of human resources, in the Balkans. Over the next years, France is therefore likely to keep its spot on the back bench, neither supporting enlargement too vocally nor actively hindering the progress of the Balkan countries towards eventual membership.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for helpful comments received by Rosa Balfour, Corina Stratulat and an anonymous reviewer on previous versions of this article.

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