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Politicizing enlargement in times of uncertainty: 'the curious case' of blocking and un-blocking decisions on Albania and North Macedonia's EU path

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ABSTRACT

The main argument put forward in this article is that the overlapping crises that hit the EU over the past decade, culminating with the war in Ukraine, led to new forms of politicization of EU enlargement with ambivalent outcomes. At the theoretical level, the article sheds light on the shifting power relations and contestation within the specific context of EU enlargement policy. At the empirical level, the article focuses on the first mandate of Ursula von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission' (2019–2024), and it assesses the forms of politicization around the decision of blocking and un-blocking the start of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The article relies on selected secondary data, as well as on research interviews with officials from the two countries. The conclusions outline how the geopolitical context triggered by the war in Ukraine has both enabled and constrained EU integration in the specific case of the Western Balkans.

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Introduction

Wartime favours politicization. In the case of the already very politicized topics – such as EU enlargement – it leads to an intensification of politicization and a variation of its forms. Is this the case for the way in which the war in Ukraine that erupted in February 2022 impacted EU enlargement talks? Indeed, Russia's invasion in Ukraine in 2022 brought enlargement back to the top of the EU's agenda. Between June 2022 and December 2023, several crucial European Council decisions significantly changed the course of EU enlargement policy's 'business as usual.' First, four countries, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, were awarded candidate status, while one more (Kosovo[1]) applied for EU membership. Second, the 'long-dormant' accession processes of North Macedonia and Albania were reawakened as negotiations finally opened, and EU leaders promised the other two 'longtime candidates'- Serbia and Montenegro 'expedited membership' if they advance with EU conditionality compliance. And third – for the first time after Croatia's accession to the EU in

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2013, a timeframe for the end of the process was mentioned – and that was 2030 (by the President of the Council, Charles Michel) (Politico 2023). Scholars are still to determine whether these events had a positive or negative effect on current candidate countries and their ongoing EU integration path, but the topic remains under-researched. In this context, two crucial questions are worth discussing: What are the exact outcomes of the war in Ukraine on the EU integration process in the Western Balkans (WB hereafter)? Did this trend of intensified politicization of enlargement enable or constrain the EU integration process in the WB?

Each wave of EU enlargement had its own share of politicization, both in member states and in the candidate countries. Along the two decades after the launch of the Thessaloniki Agenda that opened EU membership perspective in 2003, the EU integration process in the WB has experienced various forms of politicization (Hillion 2010, 2015) and forms of resistance and opposition to the advancement of the enlargement talks either in the candidate countries themselves (Troncotă 2018; Elbasani and Šelo Šabić 2018) or in EU member states (Wunsch 2017). In this context, the article raises two relevant questions: did the war in Ukraine change the 'business as usual' attitude of the EU actors towards the candidates from the WB, or are there still signs of 'enlargement fatigue' and politicization as before the war broke? Is there evidence for a new form of politicization that marks enlargement debates in the WB driven specifically by the war in Ukraine?

To tackle these questions, the arguments of 'discursive postfunctionalism' (Wendler and Hurrelmann 2022) about the constraining impact of politicization on national governments' EU-related policymaking are useful, but the article seeks to specify them further by also examining the mediating factors of political contestation at the level of public opinion and as well as perceptions of national policymakers in the WB. From this theoretical point of view, of special interest is to explore the power relations and contestation between various supranational or intergovernmental forces involved in the politicization of EU enlargement policy and to check if and to what degree these have changed after February 2022. As such, for grasping a multi-dimensional view of I already defined as 'wartime enlargement politicization' (Troncotă 2024) the article proposes a more complex theoretical model that simultaneously builds on the analytical frameworks of Costa (2019), Ferrara and Kriesi (2021), and Wendler and Hurrelmann (2022).

The cases of Albania and North Macedonia are illustrative of the politicization of the enlargement policy by the Commission and the Council, each pulling in different directions. North Macedonia had a far longer history of being blocked by a member state with Greece. Athens blocked the EU integration path of Skopje from 2009 to 2014 when the Commission recommended opening accession negotiations in six consecutive annual progress reports. Greece's veto on the name dispute ended only in 2018 with the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which implied for the country to change its constitutional name. Albania also previously faced strong opposition from the Netherlands and France on matters of rule of law and domestic affairs already in 2014 when it was granted EU candidacy status. Member states' opposition to further enlargement resurfaced most visibly between 2019 and 2021 (before the war in Ukraine started) when first France (2019) and then Bulgaria (2020) vetoed opening negotiations with the two WB countries. By the end of 2022, the Bulgarian veto against North Macedonia was withdrawn, and

both countries already started their first Intergovernmental conferences. These specific case studies of fluctuating 'enlargement scepticism' deserve an in-depth analysis. Therefore, the article aims to analyse and categorize different forms of politicization of EU enlargement in the WB, within a comparative perspective on enlargement discourses and policy decisions before and after the war in Ukraine. The main added value of the article is that it differentiates between factors of politicization that have enabled and constrained the main decisions on EU integration of the designated countries (Albania and North Macedonia) but also adds nuances to these rigid categories.

The timeframe covered by the analysis is between 2019 and 2024. One reason for choosing it is that this coincides with (almost) the full mandate of the Von der Leyen Commission, a crucial 'policy entrepreneur' of EU enlargement, and second because the two countries of the case study – Albania and North Macedonia – experienced in this timeframe several significant changes in their EU integration process that were the outcome of deepening politicization. In this timeframe – the two countries moved from being subsequently vetoed by two different countries in the Council (France and Bulgaria) to starting negotiations and finalizing the screening process at a fast pace. These changes will be discussed as instances of politicization. The aim is to discuss not only the intensity of this phenomenon based on the types of actors involved in it but also its impact on the elite perceptions of EU integration.

The main argument put forward in this article is that the recent overlapping crises that hit the EU over the past decade, which culminated with the war in Ukraine, led to new forms of politicization of EU enlargement that require closer analysis. The article illustrates in the conclusion that the strategic decisions taken at a fast speed regarding the start of membership negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine, together with North Macedonia and Albania, led to more tensions rising between different policy actors in the EU, especially between the Commission and the Council – more visibly among some enlargement-sceptical member states such as France or Bulgaria. That is why a combination of qualitative data from different types of actors involved in the process is included in the empirical analysis: EU-level actors, the Commission and the Council (as reflected in public statements and decisions), national political actors (based on research interviews with diplomats from Albania and North Macedonia) and secondary quantitative data on citizens perceptions on EU from Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer. To substantiate the main argument, the article is structured as follows: the theoretical section scans the existing literature to derive the main arguments on the effects of politicization on the EU integration process, then the methodological section explains the main analytical model and the types of data collected, while the empirical section tests the hypothesis against the evidence and the final section draws the main conclusions, pointing towards the added value of the article.

Theoretical framework – unpacking the conceptual map of EU politicization during recent crises

A useful definition of politicization is an 'increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU' (De Wilde 2011, 566). In other words, politicization occurs when the EU has to make an important decision, and there is a clash of opinions about

the main course of action. Moreover, politicization also includes a discussion about possible ways to make that decision, and most often, it implies contestation and competing positions. The 'politicization "at the top" is mostly visible in the increasingly contestational nature of interactions among EU actors' (Schmidt 2019, 1019). This implies that some actors involved in the EU's decision-making system, be it at the supranational or intergovernmental level or even at the level of public opinion – contest or block decisions based on their own political agendas. Another important feature of politicization is its high visibility and its power to engage as many actors as possible, including public opinion. Recent research on politicization discusses the concept based on scale, agency, framing, and effect on institutions, as well as the connection with the EU's successive crises – focusing not only on theoretical clarification but also on the empirical measurement of controversy *within* and *between* political arenas where it manifests (Mercenier et al. 2023).

Over the last decade, EU politicization has been recognized by scholars as a relevant sub-field within EU studies (Haapala and Oleart 2022; Mercenier et al. 2023). This flourishing literature showed that EU politicization occurs most often during EU crises, and various factors that favour politicization differed for each type of crisis. The 'polycrisis' certainly left traceable marks on intra-European unity (Zeitlin et al. 2019). In this context, the key question of the last decade's theoretical debates in this emerging field of study was: does politicization have an enabling or constraining effect on EU integration? The main theories of EU integration, such as Neofunctionalism, Intergovernmentalism, Postfunctionalism, and Federalism, offered competing explanations of how member states or other EU actors dealt with the EU crises in the post-2010 timeframe and how that impacted the consequences of politicization (De Wilde 2011; Statham and Trenz 2013; De Wilde et al. 2016; Grande and Hutter 2016; Kauppi et al. 2016; Zürn 2016; Börzel and Risse 2020; Zürn 2019; Jabko and Luhman 2019; Schmidt 2019; Voltolini et al. 2020). A key normative debate unfolded between two classical theories of EU integration – Neo-functionalism and Postfunctionalism – as opposing arguments were developed.

The 'optimist view' on politicization belonged to the Neofunctionalists, who perceived it as a desirable and logical by-product of the European integration process *per se*. Among others, Schmitter (1969) argued that the constant increase in supranational authority over larger policy areas would lead to more political actors becoming involved in EU affairs. In other words, more politicization means more actors dealing with EU matters, and this facilitates more EU integration. The consequence of this phenomenon was assessed as a clearly positive one: the more politicized the EU becomes, the more legitimate, open, inclusive, and democratic it becomes. Neofunctionalists also drew attention to the fact that politicization potentially led to significant EU reforms and constant adaptation to new political realities that would not have been possible otherwise. As suggested by Bressanelli et al., politicization worked mainly as 'an enabling mechanism for political and institutional actors to advance their substantive goals' (Bressanelli et al. 2020, 331), and deepening EU integration was among these goals.

The contrasting 'pessimist view' on politicization belongs to the Postfunctionalists, who view it as a threat to the present and future of EU integration or even a stimulus for 'EU disintegration.' They tend to see politicization as a major constraint to the functional problem-solving capacity of the EU as a whole. Their studies focused more on EU

contestation in the form of Euroscepticism that has visibly grown in recent decades. Along these lines, Hooghe and Marks (2009) showed that EU contestation shaped by what was called 'identity politics' ends up politicizing European integration and ultimately determined the EU to move from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' that blocks further integration. Postfunctionalist authors thus reflected on the negative implications the recent crises have had on the functioning of the EU political system, as well as the structure of domestic contestation and public opinion in member states. Hutter et al. (2016) argued with strong evidence that politicization of certain issues did not spill over to citizens but remained limited to political elites. From this public opinion point of view, scholars argued that the repercussions of the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis culminated in the Brexit referendum in June 2016, which triggered a new cleavage between elites and masses, catalysing the rise of 'identity politics' present even in the public communication of European executives (Rauh et al. 2020).

EU foreign policy at large, and enlargement policy in particular, are the types of policies that are more prone to politicization than others. Over the last few years, these policy areas have become as contentious as the accession to Schengen or the adoption of the Euro (Cercel 2023). One reason is that the intergovernmental element of EU decision-making over these policies is stronger. Taking into consideration the crucial role of the war in Ukraine in this analysis, this article also builds upon recent reflections on the consequences of the politicization of EU external relations (Barbé and Morillas 2019; Costa 2019) and in the context of increasing debates around EU's 'strategic autonomy' (Paşcu and Chiriac 2021). For these authors, a key element is to highlight the role of 'interfaces' for politicization: those institutional venues, political agents, and acts of discursive framing that either establish a linkage between or shield supranational decision-making from public controversy at the domestic level. Relevant was Wendler and Hurrelmann's contribution (2022), resulting in what they call 'discursive postfunctionalism,' arguing that it better specifies the triggers, transmission, and eventual effects of politicization. The proposed analytical framework here offers a more nuanced picture that goes beyond the aspects discussed by Neofunctionalists and Postfunctionalists, as it moves away from the simplistic dichotomy of politicization either enabling or constraining EU integration, but suggests that politicization varies in different degrees according to which object is politicized, at what political moment and in which arena(s). As such, this analytic framework will help us to examine the influence of the EU institutional context critically and to assess the impact of politicization on enlargement decisions in the case of the WB by looking closer to the specific cases of Albania and North Macedonia and their trajectories towards EU integration between 2019 and 2024. This highlights the different patterns of politicization between the two sides involved in the EU enlargement policy (both member states and candidate states).

Notes on methodology

In order to map the main features of politicization of the EU enlargement process in the WB between 2019 and 2024, the main analytic strategy relies on a constructivist methodology that includes close textual interpretation and hermeneutical discourse analysis of multiple qualitative data from primary and secondary sources consisting in 'enlargement discourses.' What is meant in this article by 'enlargement discourses' is the aggregate

patterns of the positions actors take, and the framing they use when discussing EU enlargement. These qualitative units of analysis are relevant for the study of different forms of politicization, especially during the chain reactions triggered by the war in Ukraine and a certain level of 'decoupling' between the EU technocratic institutions (the Commission) and the more politically oriented institutions (the Council) when they had to decide about the start of enlargement negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

The main assumption for this analysis is that major international crises, such as Russia's invasion in Ukraine, favour politicization of numerous topics because elites engage in wide public debates where they express their opinions and values in order to influence the general audience to legitimize certain decisions against others. For tracing the evolution of enlargement politicization before and after the war in Ukraine, this article used both primary and secondary data. Secondary literature served to grasp the evolutions of the EU accession process in the WB over the last years and, in particular, after the war in Ukraine. Primary data consisted of 6 qualitative semi-structured interviews that the author conducted with senior diplomats from the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Albania and North Macedonia in the spring and summer of 2023 in order to explore national elite perceptions on the researched topics. The names of the diplomats were anonymized, and generic labels were used in the analysis (from IN1 to IN6, in the order in which the interviews were taken; see Annex 1).

Moreover, this article included different arenas of politicization in the analytical framework, each with its own dynamic, specific actors, and practices. This allows me to look at various interactions between the top 'political entrepreneurs' in the EU on the topic of advancing EU integration in the WB (the Commission and the Council – with a focus on two countries that have openly blocked enlargement in recent years – France and Bulgaria (see Figure 1). For EU representatives the author looked at the main public positions of the Commission (either through the voice of its main representative – Ursula von

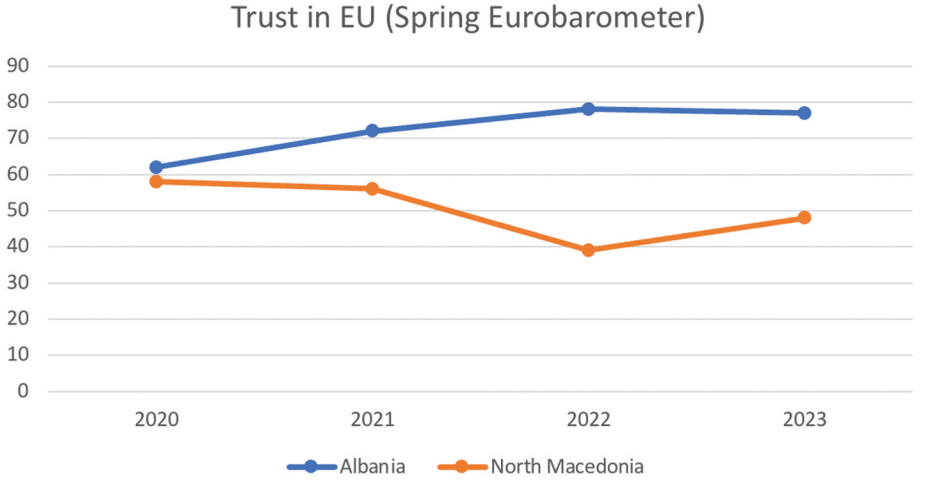


Figure 1. Trust in the EU in Albania and North Macedonia between 2020 and 2023 from Spring Eurobarometer, edited by the author.

der Leyen, President of the Commission during its SOTEU speeches, during EU-Western Balkans Summits), as well as in the Annual progress Reports, the relevant Council conclusions, together with speeches of Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy). For the citizens' overview, public polls from Albania and North Macedonia regarding the perception of the EU integration process (from Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer) were examined.

The power struggles between the Commission and the Council

The Enlargement dossier is, according to Mayrgündter (2015), one of the most intriguing processes of EU policy formation and integration, as it offers the possibility to analyse the caveats of 'intergovernmental supranationalization' that the author will further argue plays an important role in the specific forms of 'enlargement politicization.' According to Article 49 (TEU), the Commission and the Council share responsibilities over different stages of the EU's enlargement, with the Council being in 'the driving seat.' At the technical level, the supranational actors represented by the Enlargement Commissioner and the Directorate General (DG)NEAR are involved in setting benchmarks, assisting, monitoring, and reporting to the Council and Parliament the transposition of the EU legislation by the acceding countries. In terms of public communication, the President of the Commission is the voice of the EU's supranational competence.

Out of all the actors involved in enlargement decisions, the Council is the most exposed to open politicization because this is the main forum where member states may assert their national interests. The most political gesture of politicization in the Council is the use of the veto by a member state to block a candidate country from moving forward with the accession process. The Commission's own politicization opportunities arise when it publishes the annual progress reports and when it recommends to the members of the Council the next steps to be taken, such as granting candidate status or opening (or not) accession negotiations. In fact, on this matter, 'the Commission became a mediator between and counsellor and adviser of member states and accession countries' (Mayrgündter 2015, 15), and this is usually visible in the media attention given each year to the progress reports. This does not stop the Commission from developing its own agenda and getting involved in certain occasions, such as the Future of Europe debates, into a form of 'supranational politicization' (Butnaru-Troncotă and Ioniță 2022). Additionally, new politicization opportunities depend on how much the President and the Enlargement Commissioner engage in public debates on the topic. As this article will illustrate further, the usual 'collaborative decision-making mode' prone to reach consensus in the Council committees (Mayrgündter 2015, 14) showed its limits as soon as sensitive bilateral foreign policy issues were at stake. In this sense, the experience of the Council vetoes against Albania and North Macedonia between 2019 and 2021 is illustrative.

Right before the Juncker's Commission's end of its mandate, despite the Commission's recommendation issued during the presentation of its 2019 Progress Reports (European Commission 2019), France vetoed opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in the Council. This gesture was very much criticized, as it came only one year after the Prespa Agreement was signed, implying a long-awaited

unblock of the process as Greece's persisting veto against North Macedonia was lifted. Taking many by surprise, France's decision was widely criticized by EU representatives and by other member states. As such, in the same month with the French veto – November 2019 - the newly formed Von der Leyen Commission announced in the European Parliament Plenary, on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme, that it will adopt 'a more geopolitical approach' in general. She underlined her intention 'to reaffirm the European perspective of the Western Balkans,' given that 'We share the same continent, the same history, the same culture, and the same challenges. We will build the same future together' (European Commission 2019).

These two moments that mark the beginning of the Von der Leyen Commission represent instances of politicization around the topic of enlargement and the EU's foreign policy at large. Responsible for them is both an important member state (France this time) and the supranational institution that publicly assumed a supportive position (in contrast to member states' position) towards the WB (the Commission). In parallel, during his hearing in front of the European Parliament, the future High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission of the EU – Joseph Borrell, mentioned that Europe 'must learn quickly to speak the language of power' (Politico 2019b), that he also reiterated with other public occasions (Weiler 2020). This strengthened Von der Leyen's position towards a more 'geopolitical Commission' that by the end of their mandate would already become a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. This new 'geopolitical push' of the Von der Leyen Commission was also reflected in the Strategic Agenda agreed by EU leaders in June 2019 for the 2019–2024 period, which highlights the fact that 'the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future' (European Council 2019).

It is also important to mention that soon after its veto, France published a so-called 'non-paper' titled 'Reforming the European Union accession process' (Politico 2019a) launched very close to the moment the new Commission officially started its mandate – in November 2019. This document played an important role in the first phase of increasing politicization because it led to a fundamental re-shuffle of EU's enlargement policy that was confirmed with the launch of the New Enlargement Methodology in February 2020 to be applied primarily to Albania and North Macedonia but also on the other countries (Serbia and Montenegro) if they choose so (European Commission 2020). This gesture showed that the Commission took on board member states' proposals, so this is a clear illustration of the EC's 'intergovernmental supranationalization' that has strengthened its role as a politicizing actor in the reform of the enlargement policy. An important aspect of the Commission's 2020 revised approach on enlargement, custom-made for the Balkans, regards the role of EU member states in the process of accession negotiations, the so-called 'stronger political steering.' This new dimension seeks to ensure a stronger role and engagement of member states, reflects the demands, and addresses the concerns raised by France on the effectiveness of the existing format of the enlargement process. This implies that the member states have the opportunity to monitor the progress of the negotiating countries and affect the pace of negotiations. France influenced the introduction of the new EU enlargement methodology publicly

presented by the Commission in February 2020, involving heads of state and government to a greater degree and making the process easier to stop or reverse if conditions are not met (Elbasani and Butnaru-Troncota 2021). This constituted a relevant event that displayed elements of politicization where both the intergovernmental and supranational actors in the enlargement arena met. Scholars have critically examined this issue by placing it in the context of the so-called 'geopolitical turn of the EU's institutional thinking on enlargement in the WB' (Petrovic and Tzifakis 2021; Panagiotou 2021; Bélanger and Schimmelfennig 2021).

Overall, it is relevant to observe how the most 'geopolitical Commission' of the EU, led by Ursula Von der Leyen, had put a special emphasis on the WB not only in her inaugural speech from 2019 but also in all her 4 State of the Union (SOTEU) speeches (from 2020 to 2023) where the region is mentioned each time. Moreover, von Der Leyen participated in three official visits in both Albania and North Macedonia during her mandate (2021, 2022, and 2023) – a relevant political gesture in comparison to the much less active Juncker Commission on this topic (Troncotă 2014). If we put these visits together with the 4 EU-Western Balkans Summits organized during her mandate (2020–2023) – one of them organized in Tirana (2022) – this shows a clear strategy of 'supranational politicization' on behalf of the Commission.

'Pre-war politicization' - two different forms of 'enlargement scepticism' (2019–2021)

As already highlighted, the intergovernmental element is the leading one in the enlargement policy. Even though deeply marked by 'enlargement fatigue' after Croatia's accession in 2013, since 2019, deep divisions among the EU Member States (MS) on the enlargement agenda have become more visible in the public arena. Attitudes of EU member states vary greatly when it comes to enlargement, ranging from full support, support in name only, indifference as a result of being preoccupied with other issues, to scepticism. Opposing enlargement has been evidently a strategy instrumentalized by some MS for varying domestic political gains for decades, and this is not a new phenomenon. Between 2019 and 2021, there were two EU member states that acted as obvious 'brakemen' in the accession process, and they deserve more careful consideration to better understand their different ways of politicizing enlargement. France and Bulgaria disclosed forms of 'enlargement scepticism' that contributed to a clear politicization of enlargement that manifested not only through their successive vetoes against opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia but also in other forms.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Commission has issued 3 Progress Reports in which it recommended the Council to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia; each time, the Council decided differently. As already mentioned, the first stage of politicization started in November 2019, when President Macron of France blocked for the first time the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. This added more pressure to the already existing 'enlargement fatigue' and previous resistance to negotiations with new candidates by certain MS (at the political level in the Netherlands, Denmark, and up until 2018 in Greece).

Traditionally, France has opposed EU enlargement several times before 2019. From this perspective, the French veto was far more predictable than the Bulgarian one. This

trend has been constant, from President de Gaulle's veto of British membership in 1963 up to, most recently, President Macron's veto of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019. However, analysts showed that successive French leaders after de Gaulle have pragmatically gone along tacitly with enlargement (Lequesne and Rozenberg 2023). Moreover, it is well known that the Balkans have not been an area of privileged relations in French foreign policy. The region is not seen as a zone of influence, and France has historically prioritized relations with Russia (Lequesne and Rozenberg 2023, 43). France's stance over EU enlargement was relatively known as problematic, particularly after the debates surrounding the period post-'Big bang enlargement' from 2004, France's vivid opposition to Turkey's EU membership bid, and after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French voters back in 2005. These episodes were proof of a French 'creeping discomfort with the EU' and a political vision in which the future of the Union implies 'a trade-off between widening and deepening' (Wunsch 2017, 544). The country pleaded in recent years for more rigorous compliance of aspiring countries with EU conditionality, becoming a promoter of 'a more controlled enlargement based on the full preparedness of the countries,' which was motivated by domestic concerns, respectively a public opinion that is increasingly hostile to further accession (Wunsch 2017, 44). In other words, France's 'enlargement skepticism' is rooted both in its vision of the EU and its EU scepticism, as well as in its internal politics. Tregoures (2019) also adds that France has always been reluctant about enlargement because it weakens Paris' influence and dilutes the political project of the EU. Moreover, it was also shown that the reflex that the French have for enlargement is the reflex they have for the EU and the Balkans are only 'a scapegoat' and this form of 'instrumentalising "enlargement"' for domestic purposes was a strategic mistake (Pollet 2021). Additionally, other important aspects are the so-called 'national constitutional requirements,' that were included in Article 49 (2) TEU, bringing tighter parliamentary control in France, implying that future accession should be ratified by referendum or, in the case of Germany Bundestag's opinion is required before opening accession (Hillion 2015, 27).

In the 'Non-Paper' mentioned before, France justified its veto while proposing also certain solutions for the enlargement impasse (Politico 2019a). The first argument of the French government justifying its veto for EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania was the necessity to reform accession procedures before any new countries could join. The second argument was that EU should concentrate first and foremost on its own reforms before further enlargement. Cvijić (2021) explained that France's opposition to opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 stemmed from the fear of some officials that supporting enlargement would hurt their chances in the European elections, which suggested that the question of WB enlargement had become more politicized. Macron's solution to these problems was that the EU's accession process would have to be redesigned, which indeed happened a few months later. Beyond the need for institutional redesign, for Macron, this was an opportunity to drive forward his own agenda in the EU (De Weck 2023). As already mentioned, France is one of the member states with the highest rates of popular disapproval of WB countries joining the EU: 'The French position of putting the brakes on enlargement has less to do with the Western Balkans itself than with President Emmanuel Macron's desire to prioritize the quality of integration' (Tcherneva 2019). In other words, France was an example of an actor that did not politicize enlargement by simply blocking the

progress but by proposing a change in the rules of the game during the game (strengthening conditionality and bringing more political steering in following the progress of the process by member states).

Next, in November 2020, exactly one year after the French *No*, Bulgaria vetoed the start of EU membership talks for North Macedonia. The decision sparked frustration from EU officials and diplomats because Bulgaria broke 'an unwritten rule' of the Council – it used bilateral issues to hold EU accession decisions 'hostage' to its own claims. Particularly, Bulgaria tried to legitimize the veto by explaining that it expects North Macedonia to acknowledge that the language spoken by the Slav Macedonian majority in North Macedonia is not 'Macedonian' but Bulgarian – or a dialect thereof (Jakimovska 2020). With this veto, identity politics went back to enlargement debates, as Sofia required Skopje to recognize the Bulgarian origins of the Macedonian nation. The Bulgarian demands for Skopje were to acknowledge the Bulgarian roots of the Macedonian language, to declare that the use of the term 'North Macedonia' refers to the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, to give up any claims on the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria; and to end its anti-Bulgarian rhetoric (Jakimovska 2020). These demands were seen by experts as 'an unpleasant surprise both because they broke the taboo on involving historical disputes in enlargement negotiations and because they came after a two-year Bulgarian campaign to speed up the EU integration process in the Western Balkans' (Buldioski and Tcherneva 2020). Moreover, according to a stricter legal interpretation, the linguistic and historical claims made by Bulgaria were considered illegitimate under international law because they constitute an interference in North Macedonia's internal affairs and call into question its right to 'self-determination' (Buldioski and Tcherneva 2020).

Bulgaria's veto was indeed surprising for all actors, be it the Commission, other member states, and North Macedonia itself, because it represented a U-turn from the country's decades-long position of a strong supporter of the WB EU integration. This gesture largely discredited the country's previous efforts to serve as a mediator between the region and the EU, as well as its professed support for the EU integration of the WB. The declared commitment of Bulgaria to have a role as a regional supporter of the WB has 'shifted into its purely national interest against the good neighbourly relations and EU values and principles' (Jakimovska 2020). Apparently similar to the case of France's politicization of enlargement, as it focused mostly on its domestic agenda, Bulgaria's veto also reflects the asymmetry of power between EU member states and candidate countries, an aspect that is crucial for the politicization of enlargement. The drivers to block the opening of accession talks are also part of a rather 'domestic politicization' model, as experts observed that 'the Bulgarian government may want to engage in symbolic politics as a cover for its missteps in handling an accelerating coronavirus crisis' (Jakimovska 2020).

The political context in Bulgaria at the moment of the veto is also very relevant. In 2021, Bulgaria entered an unprecedented series of snap parliamentary elections: after the regular elections early in 2021, which failed to produce a regular government, two snap elections followed in 2021, and then another in 2022 after the fall of Kiril Petkov's government, which stayed in power for only six months. Seen from this perspective, the veto was targeting not mainly North Macedonia but also was used as a desperate and

rather populist attempt by the ruling centre-right GERB party to deflect attention away from the anti-corruption protests that took place in Bulgaria at the time since July 2020 (Nikolova 2020). For most of 2021/2022, Bulgaria had caretaker governments appointed by President Rumen Radev. Political parties represented in the Bulgarian Parliament were not able to form a government without making coalitions with political opponents, which is unacceptable to a large majority of their voters. Problems with the rule of law, corruption, and institutional integrity were at the root of popular street protests that propelled several newly established political parties with significant electoral support into successive parliaments (Bertelesman Transformation Index BTI 2024). Bulgaria actively continued to maintain its veto throughout 2021 and early 2022.

Still, there are stark differences in the reasons why France and Bulgaria contributed in this period to the politicization of enlargement. Even though there is a plurality of factors that shaped individual member states' negative attitudes towards enlargement, in the case of France there were concerns over immigration (a topic of great interest for French citizens) as well as the article already showed the French 'tradition' of foreign policy approach towards the future shape and orientation of the EU for the years to come. For Bulgaria, the reasons are more connected to a nationalist populist agenda, then to general foreign policy priorities, and on an ideological approach to national and cultural aspects.

Governments, in general, try to have continuity and consistency in their foreign policy, especially on crucial topics such as enlargement, but there are exceptions. During its 2018 EU Presidency Bulgaria put enlargement as one of its main priorities. Bulgaria's use of veto against North Macedonia just 2 years after that proves that the politicization of enlargement is not necessarily framed by Eurosceptic and anti-enlargement forces/member states, but it can come from countries that were strong supporters of the WB and enlargement.

In conclusion, between 2019 and 2021, France and Bulgaria acted as 'brakemen' of EU integration (member states openly sceptical of enlargement), and they contributed to enlargement politicization in different ways. They were able to block progress on EU accession technicalities and construct 'geopolitical' excuses for their caution. If, in the case of France, the country moved from indifference to opposition with regard to enlargement, in the case of Bulgaria, the shift was shocking – from strong support to opposition.

The 'wartime geopolitical enlargement' model (2022–2024)

After the beginning of the war in Ukraine, in just four months the EU enlargement policy was marked by unprecedented political decisions. Only four days after the start of Russia's invasion, on 28 February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership. At that time, the country was included in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as an associated country without a membership perspective. Shortly after this symbolic gesture, Georgia and Moldova, the other two associated countries in the EaP followed by applying for membership. After only a few months that were marked by a devastating refugee crisis of Ukrainian citizens fleeing to EU countries and huge destruction and killings in Ukraine's major cities in June 2022, the EU not only offered the former so-called Association Trio an explicit membership perspective, but it took a historic decision to grant Moldova and Ukraine official candidate

status. These decisions were not limited to these Eastern European countries because, in July 2022, the EU opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which were previously vetoed. Finally, in December 2022, the European Council granted BiH the status of an official candidate, and Kosovo (which remained the only potential candidate from the WB) filed an application for membership. Going even further, in November 2023, the Council decided to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and also granted Georgia candidate status, while in March 2024, the Commission recommended the Council to open negotiations with one of the last remaining candidates from the WB – BiH (Jones 2024). This is the last stage of enlargement politicization analysed here, which consists mainly of the unprecedented speed of the usual EU decision-making processes but also of a critical shift of the enlargement sceptic countries.

The June 2022 European Council conclusions referred explicitly to the WB stating that 'Building on the revised methodology, the European Council invites the Commission, the High Representative, and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner' (European Council 2022). This change was visible also in Von der Leyen's SOTEU speech from September 2022 when she included Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia together with the Balkans: 'I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!' (European Commission 2022).

The politicization of EU enlargement, manifested through a 'geopolitical acceleration' of the process involving bypassing formal steps established by the EU, is not at all a new phenomenon. As Džankić et al. (2023) argued, it was actually part of the very drivers of previous enlargement waves, that also witnessed numerous 'geopolitical' momentums. Scholars discussed how the Ukraine war marked the emergence of the Commission as a geopolitical actor (Håkansson 2024). It is indeed not the war in Ukraine that made enlargement a very politicized subject. But at the same time, it was evident that the EU enlargement policy could not stay untouched by the context of the new fragmented geopolitical reality after the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The war brought the end of enlargement 'as we know it' and the beginning of a new model – called either 'wartime geopolitical enlargement' (Anghel and Džankić 2023) or 'EU Accession through war' (Petrov 2023), 'geopolitical enlargement' (Schimmelfennig 2023) or 'enlargement as a geopolitical necessity' (Dyonisiou 2023), 'enlargement under geopolitical and security emergency' (Džankić et al. 2023), 'EU's geopolitical momentum' (Beshku 2023) or 'the redefinition of geopolitical Europe' (Laidi 2023).

One of the most visible effects of the war in Ukraine on enlargement was influencing the reluctant member states to tone down their positions and agree to advance the negotiations. For the case of France, Lequesne and Rozenberg (2023, 43) argue that in the summer of 2022, 46% of French citizens polled expressed opposition to enlargement, while 40% were in favour. This was notably below the EU average of 57%. Still, it marked a 12% increase over six months earlier, an effect of the Ukraine war (Lequesne and Rozenberg 2023, 43). This, in fact, confirms the results of a similar Report on French public opinion conducted before the war in Ukraine, which showed that 'although opposition to further EU enlargement is widespread among the French public, much

of this enlargement fatigue is the result of wider concerns regarding European cohesion, evaluations of previous rounds of enlargement, the future of the EU, and, to some extent, France's role in it' (Hübner et al. 2021, 1). But what was evident was that the war determined a significant political shift in the French official position. In just one year, Macron accepted the membership applications of Ukraine and Moldova; he endorsed a European perspective for Georgia and also initiated the European Political Community in May 2022, stressing this was not an alternative to enlargement. Nevertheless, he remained somehow ambivalent towards the Balkans, being unwilling to bring in new members who failed to respect the Copenhagen criteria (Lequesne and Rozenberg 2023, 45).

Concomitantly, in the case of Bulgaria, after continuous pressure from the Commission and the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union (almost ironically, taking into consideration that France itself was the country that also opposed the same decision in 2019), the veto was finally lifted in June 2022 by a decision of the Bulgarian Parliament (Marusic 2022). The lifting of the veto was accompanied by a public statement that contributed to deepening the politicization of the issue, as it confirmed that Bulgaria does not recognize the Macedonian language and insisted that the presence of Bulgarians must be noted in the North Macedonian constitution which in fact meant that it only partially changed its position on the matter (ibidem). This compromise gesture was most evidently influenced by the context of the war in Ukraine and the new dynamics brought by the candidacy status offered to Ukraine and Moldova. The agreement requires North Macedonia to initiate constitutional changes on minority protection while leaving the status of the Macedonian language open to interpretation by both sides (Nikolova 2020). As a reaction, the North Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski, after initially calling the deal 'unacceptable,' reversed course, accepting it as 'a solid basis for building a serious, responsible and ambitious position' (Heil 2022). This effectively meant the immediate start of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

It is also important to reflect on two other important instances of politicization triggered by the war in Ukraine – the launching of the European Political Community (EPC) in May 2022 and the Franco-German Report on the reform of the EU to be prepared for enlargement in September 2023 – both involving France. From 1 January to 30 June 2022, France held the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Russia initiated its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see more on the context in Rusu 2022) just two months into the French Presidency. In this role, France contributed to another project that indirectly politicized enlargement through the launch of the EPC. This was publicly presented by the French President on 9 May 2022, at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE). The EPC is an intergovernmental platform aimed at strengthening cohesion, cooperation, and dialogue between all countries on the European continent. The EPC was thought of as a cooperation platform, functioning based on Heads of State Summits organized twice a year in different states, that brings together different categories of countries outside of the 27 member states, based on their relation to the EU: the newest candidates such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the oldest candidates from the WB 6, also Turkey, but also former member United Kingdom and an associated country Switzerland. This new Community met for the first time in Prague on 6 October 2022 under the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, at an

inaugural Summit of 44 European Heads of State and Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs France 2022). The launching of the EPC sparked intense criticism in the WB, particularly in the context of the December 2022 Council's decision that granted Moldova and Ukraine candidate status. According to the criteria established in the current theoretical model, the EPC is an intergovernmental initiative launched by an enlargement reluctant member state – France – that contributed to the politicization of EU enlargement by sparking distrust and contestation among candidate countries that perceived it as an 'alternative to enlargement' (Lonardo 2023).

In the second part of 2022, Albania and North Macedonia continued with a significant step – the organization of their first Intergovernmental conference, followed by the beginning of the screening process that was already completed by December 2023 (see Figure 6). In the absence of significant momentum in Bulgarian-Macedonian political relations, both sides are waiting for the April 2024 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia. But even after these elections, the prospects for constitutional changes in North Macedonia remained unclear, which opened new avenues for increasing politicization of the EU enlargement.

Outside the impact of the war, another factor that contributed to politicization is public opinion in member states (Orenstein 2023; Karjalainen 2023; Kaeding et al. 2024). Public scepticism for enlargement varies considerably across EU countries, but overall, ECFR data shows that it rose over the last decade. According to Eurobarometer data, Austria and France remain the only two countries where public perception of enlargement has long been consistently negative (Kaeding et al. 2024, 2). This is an effect of domestic politicization in those countries where public support for enlargement is very low. A comparative look at ECFR opinion polls from 2019 to 2023 about EU citizens in certain selected countries about EU enlargement shows us a visible negative trend of persisting 'enlargement-reluctance'. According to the 2023 ECFR survey (that included only six EU countries), there is no clear majority support for any of the current candidate countries joining the bloc soon, despite respondents being open-minded to the accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Montenegro. Most recent ECFR data (2023) showed that the negative trends in public support for enlargement persisted after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The dataset suggests there is a clear divide in how citizens view the subject of enlargement – with those in 'older' EU member states, including Austria, France, Denmark, and Germany, more likely to object to a widening of membership, while those in 'newer' member states, including Poland and Romania see expansion in a more favourable light. Unfortunately, in this survey, there is no data for Bulgaria.

War-related shifts in public opinion and in perceptions of candidate countries' elites

In the research interviews the author organized in the summer of 2023 with representatives of Albania and North Macedonia (see Annex 2) the author focused primarily on their insights on how the war in Ukraine changed the dynamics of the EU accession process for their specific countries. Most of them agreed with the fact that the decision of the European Council in June 2022 to grant candidate status and then in October 2023 to already open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova was, for some of the diplomats, proof that enlargement could be easily unblocked if there is enough 'political will' among

the member states. All participants in the interviews confirmed that they shared great fears of a possible growing EU enlargement scepticism in member states, particularly during European elections in 2024. They believe that now any decision on their countries' advance in the process can be held 'hostage' to various domestic electoral agendas, and that means not just one but 'an increased possibility of more vetoes' (IN3). A great impact on the process was brought by the New Methodology from 2020, and some considered that this policy change had a stronger impact on their countries' integration process than the war in Ukraine (IN2, IN4, IN5). Overall, they perceived enlargement as a lengthy, technical, complex and particularly unpredictable process (compared to the other previous accession negotiations rounds), but after the war in Ukraine broke, they also perceived it as 'somehow unfair' (IN3). For some of them 'the heightened technicality of the procedure is counterbalanced by very ambiguous political bargains that are solely in the control of the member states' (IN5). Member states' using their own foreign policy agendas to block opening accession was perceived as 'unfairness' and this might have a damaging effect over the next phases of EU enlargement process in Albania and North Macedonia. One diplomat identified as an important source of EU ambiguity that negatively impacted accession negotiations the fact 'the Council speaks the 'language of power,' while the Commission speaks the language of strict conditionality and benchmarks. What our countries experienced over the last decade was a demonstration of how domestic electoral political concerns or geopolitical calculations override readiness and compliance with EU conditionality. This makes EU conditionality less relevant as 'a guiding principle compared to fluctuating geopolitical aims' and this was considered as very dangerous (IN4).

Particularly for the diplomats directly involved in the screening processes for Albania and North Macedonia, 'the accession has become a moving target' (IN1) and it 'felt very frustrating to keep up with all the demands' (IN3). They all agreed that France's opposition in November 2019 to the opening of accession talks was met with a wave of fury and feeling of unfairness, especially by the elites in North Macedonia (IN4, IN5). Moreover, they believe that Bulgaria's position was too radical (IN6) and that there is 'a real danger that debates about the EU enlargement process to fuel anti-EU stances' in their societies (IN3, IN6). Moreover, it was mentioned several times by the Albanian informants that the Bulgarian veto, even though it targeted North Macedonia directly, also effectively delayed Albania's accession negotiations, creating supplementary frustration and dissension among the two countries (IN 2, IN3). Several diplomats also drew attention to the fact that they feel that they are only 'half way responsible for the process' (IN2, IN4) because 'the EU's internal political battles between the "enlargement-friendly" and "enlargement-weary member states" have a stronger influence over the process outcomes' (IN5). Some of them felt that the Commission is 'less responsible for the process' (IN2), and they find this troubling in the long term.

Among these personal views of the national elites expressed in the interviews, the study has identified a new category of politicization directly connected to the war in Ukraine. In the discussions, several advanced the argument that after the war in Ukraine, they would share a feeling of 'unfair competition' among the current candidate countries that did not exist before Ukraine and Moldova joined the club (IN4; IN5). The accelerated pace of favourable decisions taken by the same Council that blocked Albania and North Macedonia for years and were able in just one year to open negotiations with

Ukraine and Moldova sparked what they called 'new types of fears' and determined certain demotivating attitudes most visible in their countries (IN3; IN4; IN6). This perceived 'unfair competition' suggests that Moldova and Ukraine were somehow favoured because of the geopolitical dangers associated clearly with the war in Ukraine and that now they are all 'in the same boat even though they did not start from an equal footing' (IN4). This refers to the fact this 'new model of geopolitical enlargement' inaugurated by the EU after 2022 offered the possibility to the countries that did not have a membership perspective before 2022 (like Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) to advance more rapidly on the EU accession path than the countries that have been 'stuck' in EU negotiations or in candidate status for more than a decade (like Serbia, Montenegro, Albania or North Macedonia) (IN1; IN2; IN6). Diplomats see this factor as a partially demotivating factor for their countries to keep pace and advance in the process, especially when they have elections, such as in the case of North Macedonia in 2024. Regarding the European Political Community, almost all the diplomats the author talked to confirmed their fears for a possible 'two-tier' version of the enlargement process that would combine one-tier rising 'enlargement scepticism' for the WB and the second tier more visible 'enlargement-friendly' attitude for Moldova and Ukraine. The author identified this as a new category that the author would call 'ambivalent politicization'. According to the analytical model applied in the analysis, this form of politicization deeply connected to the specific and exceptional context of the war in Ukraine included both factors: on one hand it enabled integration (France and Bulgaria became milder in their reluctance towards enlargement) on the other hand it constrained further integration (by demotivating candidate countries from the WB as they feel they are not treated fairly in comparison with the accelerated model of enlargement offered to Ukraine and Moldova).

This observation was also supported by data on public opinion in the two candidate countries, where there are alternatively other forms of politicization of enlargement seen in a comparative manner before and after 2022 from Balkan Barometer (2023) (see Figure 2). Across the whole WB region, support for the EU enlargement process still remains relatively high among citizens, but recent challenges have also empowered Eurosceptic voices. Despite various forms of public contestation on the EU in Albania and North Macedonia over the last two years, levels of trust in the EU have considerably risen in most candidate countries since winter 2022–2023. The highest levels of trust are observed in Albania (77%, +6) (out of all countries in the WB), but in North Macedonia, there is a serious decline compared to the period before the war (48%, +1 in 2023). According to the Eurobarometer data (see figures 3 and 4), in 2020, citizens in North Macedonia and Albania had similar levels of trust in the EU (between 55% and 60%), with a slightly higher level in Albania. But over the next years, the two started to differentiate from each other, with trust rising at the level of Albanian citizens and decreasing for the citizens in North Macedonia. Therefore, one can interpret this by pointing towards the fact that EU politicization and the Bulgarian veto had different impacts on the citizen-level perceptions in the two countries that are 'coupled together' in the EU accession process. Politicization is behind this new cleavage between elites and masses that Rauh et al. (2020) talked about, which is considered responsible for catalysing the rise of 'identity politics' even in foreign policy positions. On the same note, Börzel and Risse argued that 'the

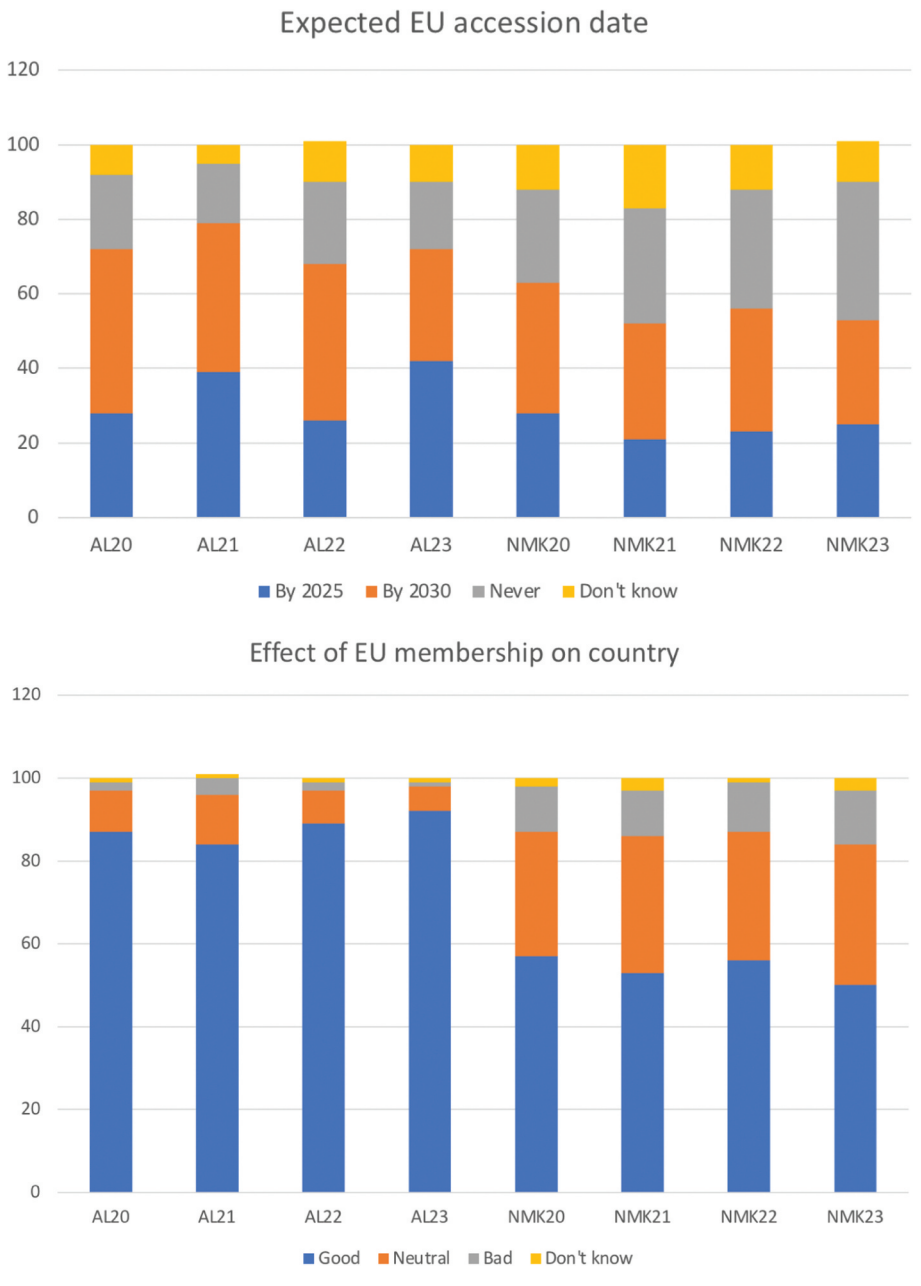


Figure 2. Expected EU accession date in Albania and North Macedonia between 2020 and 2023 from Balkan Barometer, edited by the author.

influence of identity politics on integration is particularly powerful when it relates to the constitutive dimension of the in-group/out-group distinction' (2020, 342). The author identified this aspect in Bulgaria's veto against North Macedonia when aspects such as national identity politics became a major reason for justifying the veto and deepening the politicization of enlargement.

Particularly in the case of North Macedonia, a major factor in the visible decrease of trust is represented more by the Bulgarian veto, which had a strong impact on public opinion (from 2020 to 2022). After the war in Ukraine broke, one could observe a slight increase in trust (+1%), so we could conclude that the war had no direct impact on public opinion in North Macedonia. The same trend is also present in Balkan Barometer data (gathered by the Regional Cooperation Council on an annual basis). They measure different items on the Eurobarometer, but it is still relevant to the discussion on politicization reflected in public opinion trends. When asked to choose between different scenarios regarding their country's EU accession date (2025, 2030, never, or don't know), the biggest percentage of citizens that have a negative view (never) is in North Macedonia, and it has increased in 2022 and 2023. The trend is different in the case of Albania, where most citizens see their EU accession by 2025, confirming their more EU-enthusiastic attitudes. Overall, public opinion data in Albania and North Macedonia covering the last 4 years included in the study confirm the perceptions and concerns voiced by the political elites in the two countries that the war in Ukraine did not bring a boost to the enlargement process, but rather contradictory signals that were filtered in each country by the local political agendas.

Conclusions

Crises are, by definition, highly politicized events, stirring polarization, contestation, and insecurity. From this perspective, war is probably the most politicized event of all. Since 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought a tangible political shift to most reluctant member states towards EU enlargement, and this was followed by (re)opening the previously blocked accession negotiations with the countries in the WB. In just two years, decisions on EU enlargement achieved results they did not reach in ten years. Certain divisions among member states about how EU enlargement should further proceed were solved, and the negotiations continued, but did the politicization of enlargement fundamentally change after 2022?

The article tried to contribute to current scholarly debates about the politicization of EU enlargement by mapping its various consequences at the EU level (supranational and intergovernmental) and at the candidate countries level (political elites and citizens alike). The analytical model proposed chose a specific 'object of politicization' (EU enlargement policy towards the WB), at a specific moment in time (during an exceptional global crisis such as the war in Ukraine, but covering the entire mandate of the Von der Leyen Commission 2019–2024 that allowed a comparison), and in specific areas of politicization with specific dynamics (that include EU actors, national elites and public opinion on EU integration from two case studies – Albania and North Macedonia).

The analysis showed in detail how between 2019 and 2024, the EU enlargement in the WB has been challenged across four axes where politicization took place: in policy ideas (illustrated with examples of the highly complicated politicization of EU enlargement policy by the main political entrepreneurs – the Commission for the supranantional level, France and Bulgaria for the inter-governmental level) and in policy practices, by elites and

by publics alike (reviewing the ambivalent perceptions of the so-called 'wartime geopolitical model of enlargement' among political elites in North Macedonia and Albania).

The empirical analysis found that politicization took different forms in the context of EU Enlargement policy during the Von der Leyen's Commission mandate and it confirmed that indeed the war in Ukraine played a crucial role. Moreover, the case study also showed the differences between the impact of politicization of enlargement of public opinion in Albania (which remained with high levels of trust in the EU) while in North Macedonia, EU enthusiasm fell dramatically. The case study analysis also reflected on the determination of member states such as France and Bulgaria to block the enlargement process with Albania and North Macedonia, often driven by internal considerations and unrelated to the real progress or shortcomings of the countries concerned, raised numerous criticisms inside EU and in the WB.

In the specific cases of Albania and North Macedonia, the article identified a model of so-called 'ambivalent politicization,' which is defined by elements that both enable and constrain the process at the same time. As discussed in the research interviews with local diplomats, one of the main constraining effects of enlargement politicization was demonstrated that the major weakness of having increased member states' control on enlargement decisions is that a complex technical process of normative transfer (of the *acquis*) can be surpassed by certain bilateral issues between member states and candidate countries – or unrelated issue of domestic politics in member states.

Overall, the lack of consensus between EU-MS on opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania remains an illustration of the deepening politicization of the EU enlargement policy that existed before the war in Ukraine and changed after the war in Ukraine started. Both France and Bulgaria continued to manifest milder signs of scepticism after 2022 but did not take the form of a veto in the Council. Despite advancing on the EU path and starting and closing their screening process, elites in Albania and North Macedonia pointed towards the risk of rising 'enlargement scepticism' (more in North Macedonia than in Albania) at both elite and public levels. By empirically examining these scope conditions that occurred between 2019 and 2024 in the specific cases of Albania and North Macedonia, an important contribution to the literature is that politicization had both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on the advancement of the EU's enlargement policy in the WB. In other words, it combined elements that enabled EU integration by un-blocking previous vetoes with elements that continued to constrain it by maintaining a certain level of divisions among member states that remained visible in France's intergovernmental initiatives such as the launch of the European Political Community and the Franco-German report for reforming EU. In the future, more in-depth research is needed in other countries in the region and focusing on investigating other forms of enlargement politicization.

Note

1. This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's Declaration of Independence.

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Annex 1. Analytical Model of Enlargement Politicisation

Main issues to be analysed		Data
What is politicised?	EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans (case study focus on candidate countries Albania and North Macedonia)	The main policy debates around opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia
When it is politicised?	2019–2024	Before and after the war in Ukraine (February 2022) – comparative perspective
How is it politicised?	Through the constraining or enabling impact of politicization on national governments' EU-related policy making + the mediating factors between political contestation and decisions of national policy makers and public opinion polls about EU integration in candidate countries	Categorisation between 'Drivers' and 'Brakemen' of Albania and North Macedonia's EU accession
Where and by whom it is politicised? Arenas, actors, practices of politicization	– at the intersection of various actors' institutional interactions in the Enlargement policy:	

(*Continued*)

Main issues to be analysed		Data
	EU institutions: a.The Commission	- New Methodology 2020; Annual progress Reports; The 4 SOTEU Von der Leyen speeches (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023); The statements made in the 4 EU-Western Balkans Summits (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)
	b. The Council	Public statements to justify veto by French and Bulgarian political leaders and experts; contexts of each veto.
	c. Candidate countries: Political elites	Primary data collected by the author in summer 2023 from 6 in-depth research interviews with diplomats from Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Albania and North Macedonia (see Annex 2)
	d. Citizens	Quantitative data showing the evolution of public opinion polls in Albania and North Macedonia between 2020–2023 from Balkan Barometer and Eurobarometer

Annex 2. Research interviews conducted by the author

Denomination used in the text	Country and position	Date of the interview and location
IN1	Albania, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	19.08.2023, Tirana (Albania)
IN2	Albania, Office of the Prime Minister	22.08.2023, Tirana (Albania)
IN3	Albania, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	22.08.2023, Tirana (Albania)
IN4	North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2.09.2023, Online via Zoom
IN5	North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	3.09.2023, Online via Zoom
IN6	North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	14.10.2023, Online via Zoom