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**Towards more cohesion
in EU enlargement policy –
tapping the potential
of the Weimar Triangle**

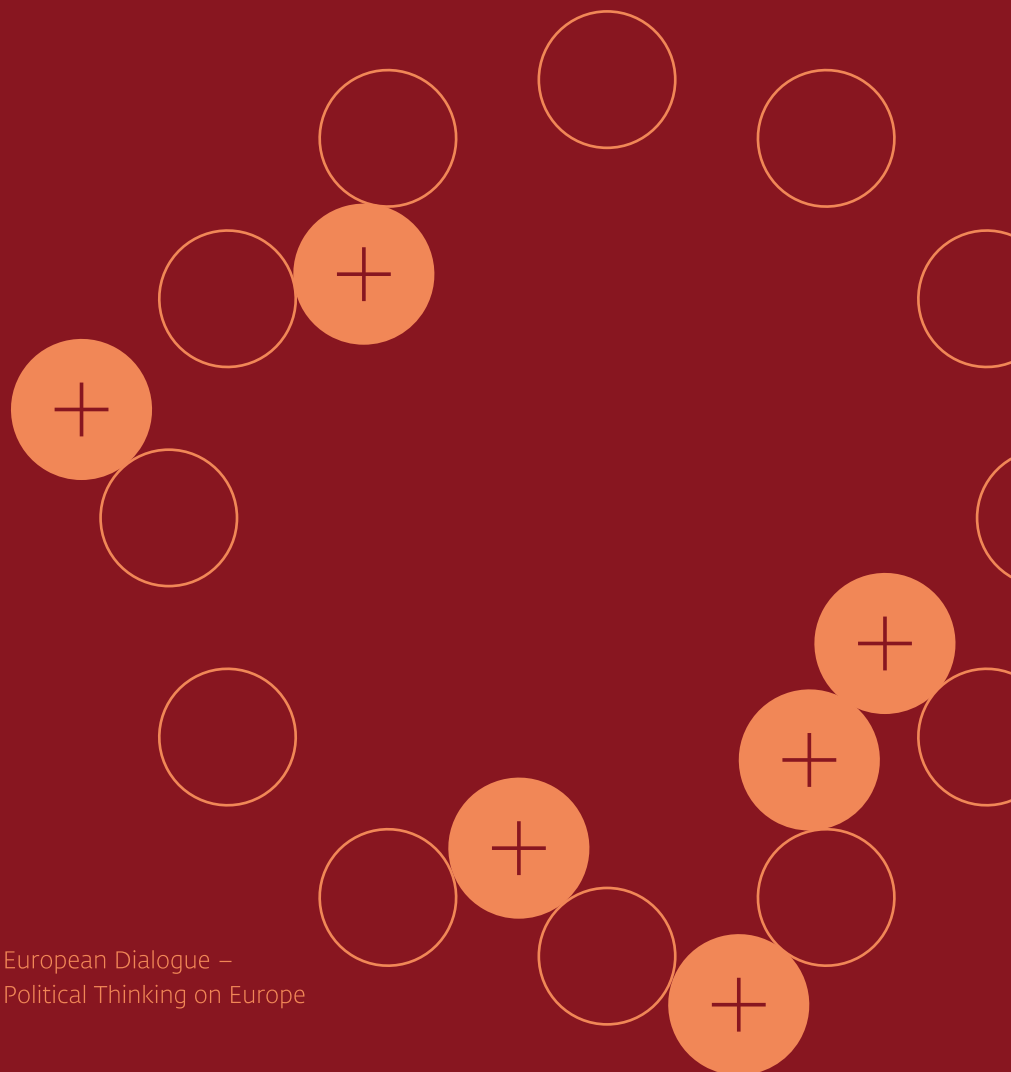


Table of contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	3
I. Motives for and attitudes towards enlargement	4
II. Reform of the accession process	8
III. Perspectives on conditionality and the rule of law	11
IV. Regional cooperation and bilateral disputes	13
V. A blueprint for the Weimar Triangle's enhanced engagement in the Western Balkans	16
The Genshagen Foundation	22
About the authors	24
Imprint	25

Executive summary

In the past couple of years, France, Germany and Poland have all played an active role in advancing and/or reshaping the EU's enlargement approach vis-à-vis the Western Balkans. At the same time, they have expressed interest in relaunching intergovernmental cooperation under the Weimar Triangle formula. While fraught with notable differences, their respective approaches to enlargement intersect with one another in key areas of EU-Western Balkans relations. The three countries do not support enlargement with the same energy and consider the reform of the accession process from various perspectives. Although they recognise the importance of conditionality, they draw different conclusions when it comes to promoting it. However, these dissimilarities do not preclude the pursuit of converging geopolitical, security-related and economic interests in the region as well as a shared endorsement of regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations.

Accordingly, this analysis argues that enlargement has the potential for becoming a new area of cooperation for the Weimar Triangle. Enhanced consultations in this format, building on shared strategic thinking and security motives, could help to consolidate the EU's approach to the Western Balkans. To that end, the Weimar Triangle could also build on existing bi- and trilateral initiatives pursued in the fields of reconciliation, regional cooperation and conflict resolution. By intensifying consultations in enlargement matters, France, Germany and Poland would not only further energise the Weimar Triangle, but would also make a meaningful contribution to strengthening EU cohesion vis-à-vis the Western Balkans.

Introduction

At the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in 2000, the Union pledged to support the countries of the region on their path towards EU membership. In 2003, at the Thessaloniki Summit, it reiterated its promise of the prospect of EU membership and formally included the Western Balkans in its EU enlargement policy. To date, however, the only country of the region that has acceded was Croatia, in 2013. The remaining six countries, often referred to as the Western Balkans Six or WB6, have not completed their journey and remain at different levels of integration with the Union. Montenegro and Serbia opened their accession negotiations in 2012 and 2014 respectively; Albania and North Macedonia await the Council's unanimous decision to start negotiations over their future accession. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo¹ have yet to be granted the official status of candidate countries.

Although the EU maintains its proclaimed commitment to enlargement, the process has, in practice, experienced a serious slowdown since the 2004/2007 enlargement round. The slow pace of reforms in the Western Balkans and the eroding credibility of the EU in the region, amplified by geopolitical competition, has prompted the EU to support complementary initiatives such as the Berlin Process, to adopt a new enlargement strategy in 2018 and, more recently, to revise its accession methodology. France, Germany and Poland have all been very proactive against this back-drop in advancing and/or reshaping the EU's approach. Germany, which initiated the Berlin Process in 2014, remains a firm supporter of the Western Balkans' EU integration and insists on the application of strict conditionality. France, although declaring its general support for the Western Balkans' prospect of EU

membership, has been reluctant – at best – to consent to any fresh progress in this area. Instead, it emphasises the need to reform the EU before it can expand, triggering a reform of the accession process itself in 2019 after opposing the opening of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Poland, by contrast, remains one of the most adamant advocates of EU enlargement.

Notwithstanding these nuances and differences among their approaches, France, Germany and Poland adopted a joint statement at the beginning of 2020 under the Weimar Triangle format, in which they »reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement of the EU«². The meeting of these countries' foreign ministers on 15 October 2020 – the first in the Weimar formula in four years – and the announcement of enhanced cooperation within the Weimar Triangle signals a rising level of interest in exploring spaces for common actions in enlargement matters.

This paper sheds light on the respective approaches of France, Germany and Poland in enlargement policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans. It explores the three countries' attitudes and motives underpinning their engagement in the region and identifies the role they have played in shaping the accession process in the past few years. It scrutinises their respective views on key areas and mechanisms in the accession process – conditionality, the rule of law, regional cooperation and conflict resolution – identifying both a series of common ground and conflicting points. Based on these findings, this paper formulates a series of recommendations seeking to enhance cooperation among the countries of the Weimar Triangle in enlargement matters.

¹ Kosovo has not yet been recognised by five EU member states or by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, among others. Based on a 2012 agreement, Kosovo has since been represented in regional forums as Kosovo*, with the annotation that »This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence«.

² Joint statement of the Ministers for European Affairs of the Weimar Triangle, Lens, 21 January 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/the-weimar-triangle/article/joint-statement-of-the-ministers-for-european-affairs-of-the-weimar-triangle>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

I.

Motives for and attitudes towards enlargement

Geopolitical and strategic motives: France, Germany and Poland's respective approaches to enlargement are underpinned by a variety of motives. A first set, shared by the three countries, is constituted by the understanding that the EU's policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans should be informed by strategic and geopolitical reasoning. The primary advocate of pushing for enlargement for strategic reasons is Poland. «Always a firm supporter of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans»³, in the words of then Minister of Foreign Affairs Jacek Czaputowicz, Warsaw has increasingly come to perceive the process as strategic and in the interests of Europe, the Balkans and Poland itself. The Polish government has repeatedly cautioned that the region is an arena for strategic rivalry and that Russia and China would benefit from the EU's weakness in the Western Balkans. Previous cabinets have also pointed to this risk⁴.

This geopolitical reasoning has gained traction in Germany, too. As argued by German Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth, «any political vacuum that we Europeans allow to emerge [in the region] will inevitably be filled by others»⁵. However, for Germany, this geopolitical reasoning comes with reservations: only enlargement to «safe, stable and democratic countries» can serve a geostrategic purpose⁶. Traditionally more

focused on North Africa, France too, under the leadership of President Emmanuel Macron, has increasingly come to look at the Western Balkans through the prism of geopolitics. Unlike others, however, it tends to decouple geopolitical reasoning from the EU's enlargement rationale. For Macron, there is a geostrategic imperative in «anchoring the region» in Europe, but this anchoring should build on «infrastructures, education, languages and culture» and much less so on the opening of negotiating chapters⁷. The French argument is that discussions about enlargement should always be linked to broader strategic reflections, that they should be part of a «bigger picture». This re-appraisal echoes French efforts in the past few years to reassert the leadership of Paris on European questions, claiming that the overall priority for the EU today is to boost European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, while ensuring that enlargement will make the Union stronger and not weaker.

This concern is particularly relevant given the influence geopolitical actors have already gained in the region over the past few years⁸. Russia's disruptive diplomacy and disinformation campaigns have been successful in propagating narratives discrediting the EU, further undermining Serbia's convergence with the EU in foreign policy matters and exacerbating neighbourly tensions. Likewise, China's economic diplomacy has enabled Beijing to gain a foothold in the EU's «soft underbelly», disregarding principles of good governance promoted by the Union, and has allowed authoritarian regimes to thrive. For better or for worse, the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans has therefore become a matter of geopolitics.

³ Marcelli Sommer, Czaputowicz: Polska od zawsze za rozszerzeniem UE o Bałkany Zachodnie, Polska Agencja Prasowa, 12 March 2018, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1325139%2CCzaputowicz-polska-od-zawsze-za-rozszerzeniem-ue-o-balkany-zachodnie.html>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

⁴ Laure Mandeville, Beata Szydło: Non à une Europe à plusieurs vitesses qui creuse les divisions, Le Figaro (Online), 28 September 2017, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/09/28/01003-20170928ARTFIG00321-beata-szydlo-non-a-une-europe-a-plusieurs-vitesses-qui-creuse-les-divisions.php>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

⁵ Michael Roth, Der Westbalkan ist Europas Innenhof, FAZ, 2 June 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/roth-frankfurter-allgemeine/2102814>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

⁶ Benjamin Pargan, German Minister Roth: 'EU expansion is also in our interest', Deutsche Welle, 8 April 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-minister-roth-eu-expansion-is-also-in-our-interest/a-18369610>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

⁷ Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices 2019, Paris, 27 August 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

⁸ See for instance: Florian Bieber/Nikolaos Tzifakis N. (eds.), *The Western Balkans in the World – Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

Security-related motives: A second set of motives is constituted by Germany, France and Poland's acknowledgement that security in the Western Balkans is important for European security as a whole. Then Prime Minister Beata Szydło argued that Poland, because of its own past, appreciates the candidate countries' aspirations for the security guarantees provided by EU accession⁹. Today, security continues to be a central argument for enlargement in Poland, and the government regularly links the Western Balkans' accession directly to Poland's safety, also emphasising that this region is key to security in Europe¹⁰. In Warsaw's view, instability in the Balkans makes it necessary for the EU and the countries of the region to work together to address such challenges as illegal migration, organised crime, hybrid threats and interference by external actors. Poland also maintains its hard-security related presence on the ground. It continues to make military contributions to the EU's Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) where it contributes 230 troops – the sixth-biggest contingent among 27 – compared with 70 from Germany and none from France. Poland also participates in the EU's rule of law mission to Kosovo EULEX with currently the only international police officers on the ground.

More actively engaged in soft security areas, Germany nonetheless remains a keen supporter of NATO enlargement towards the Western Balkans and likewise contributes to KFOR, for example. It also stresses, politically, that peace and security in Europe depend on the Western Balkans and views enlargement as a way to consolidate both. As for France, after years of

intensive engagement on the ground in the 2000s (e.g. heading UNMIK, EULEX and KFOR) and withdrawal in the 2010s, it now appears to be gradually »re-investing« in the area. One of the most notable developments in this regard was the launch, together with Germany, of an OSCE initiative on the Fight against Firearms Trafficking in the Western Balkans in late 2017, which also received the support of Warsaw.

Economic motives: A third set of motives informing Germany's and to a much lesser extent the approach to enlargement taken by France and Poland is of economic nature. Unlike France and a fortiori Poland, Germany has a large diaspora of migrant workers – popularly known as »Gastarbeiter« – from the Western Balkans (see Table 1). Their access to the labour market has made a remarkable contribution to the German economy¹¹. German companies have likewise greatly benefited from the gradual integration of the Western Balkans into the German and Central European supply chain and from the availability of skilled and cheap labour in the region¹². Germany has, accordingly, been Serbia's main economic partner for years, with over 400 companies funded by German capital employing more than 60,000 people¹³. Support for infrastructure investments as a cornerstone of the Berlin Process should also be seen in the light of German economic interests.

⁹ Laure Mandeville, Beata Szydło: Non à une Europe à plusieurs vitesses qui creuse les divisions (see footnote 4).

¹⁰ Sejm, Response to interpellation no. 33689 on cooperation with new NATO Member States and support for the process of further enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance by Maciej Lang, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 October 2019, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=BGMHT8>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

¹¹ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel nach dem Europäischen Rat am 18. Oktober 2019 in Brüssel, Brussels, 18 October 2019, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-nach-dem-europaeischen-rat-am-18-oktober-2019-in-bruessel-1683376>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

¹² OECD, Global South East Europe: Unleashing the Transformation Potential for Growth in the Western Balkans (Global Relations Policy Insights), 2019, http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Unleashing_the_Transformation_potential_for_Growth_in_WB.pdf, retrieved on 4 January 2021.

¹³ Federal Foreign Office, Germany and Serbia: bilateral relations, 29 October 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/serbia/228080>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

Table 1: Citizens from the Western Balkans Six residing in France and Germany¹⁴

France	68,900 (2012)	96,900 (2017)
Germany	363,564 (2012)	675,212 (2019)

With no such systemic ties in the Balkans, France is nonetheless present in the region economically. Its operators remain scarce: the region's trade with France is dwarfed by Germany's by a factor of eight. To revitalise its position, France adopted a Western Balkans Strategy in May 2019 aiming, in particular, at »enhancing bilateral cooperation« in economic matters. An important tool in this strategy is the intervention of the French Development Agency (AFD), now mandated to support »ecological and energy transition as well as territorial transition, fields in which the AFD can use French experience and expertise«¹⁵. As for Poland, its trade with the Western Balkans has doubled over the last decade¹⁶, with a sharp increase in the past few years, and surpasses French trade with the region (see Table 2). These economic questions do not play an important role in shaping Polish motives for enlargement, however.

¹⁴ Unlike those for France, the numbers for Germany exclude people with a »migration background« (i.e. who received German citizenship), de facto indicating an even bigger difference between the two countries. The number of citizens from the Western Balkans Six in Poland is incomparably lower than in France and Germany. Sources: INSEE, Étrangers – Immigrés: pays de naissance et nationalités détaillés, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4510522?sommaire=4510556>, retrieved on 5 January 2021; Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_POP1CTZ__custom_415726/default/table?lang=en, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

¹⁵ France Diplomacy, France's strategy for the Western Balkans, May 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/europe/western-balkans-62918/>, retrieved on 4 January 2021.

¹⁶ Ministry of Development, Syntetyczna informacja o eksporcie i imporcie Polski, styczeń–grudzień 2019 rok w mln euro, August 2020 (and earlier synthesis), <https://www.gov.pl/web/rozwoj-praca-technologie/analizy-z-obszaru-handlu-zagranicznego>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

Table 2: Trade in goods of Germany, Poland and France with the Western Balkans (WB6)¹⁷

	Exports to WB6 2019 (in million euro)	Imports from WB6 2019 (in million euro)
Germany	5686	5764
Poland	1378	543
France	892	594

Political attitudes and public opinion: The countries of the Weimar Triangle all remain committed to EU enlargement. However, it has become highly unpopular among French and German citizens. In 2018, the two countries were the third least favourable to its pursuit, just after Austria and Finland: 61% and 63% of the French and Germans respectively were against further enlargement. Although Turkey's prospect of accession certainly exacerbates this opposition, enlargement in general remains a politically sensitive topic, especially in France. Poland, on the other hand, is on the opposite end of the spectrum, with support for enlargement only being stronger in two member states (Spain and Lithuania). In 2018, 65% of Poles were in favour of further enlargement (see Table 3).

¹⁷ Eurostat, Western Balkans-EU – international trade in goods, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Western_Balkans-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=479958#The_Western_Balkans_trade_with_the_EU_and_other_main_partners, data retrieved on 15 December 2020. According to the Polish national data, imports from the WB6 to Poland in 2019 amounted to 879 million euro (over half bigger than quoted by Eurostat), whereas exports amounted to 1372 million euro (slightly smaller compared to Eurostat). See footnote 16 for the source.

Table 3: Public support for enlargement in France, Germany and Poland¹⁸

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
France	39%	31%	31%	26%	25%	23%	23%	31%
Germany	36%	28%	33%	21%	20%	21%	28%	31%
Poland	78%	72%	74%	69%	62%	55%	53%	65%
EU average	53%	45%	47%	40%	36%	37%	37%	44%

The circumspection found in France vis-à-vis enlargement is fuelled by the suspicion that further widening might lead to the »dilution of the European project«¹⁹, and also by the persistence of a certain nostalgia for »little Europe«. Other factors in this regard include the belief that the EU's unbridled expansion should come to an end, as well as diffuse fears that enlargement, coupled with economic liberalism, accelerates production relocation and downward social mobility. Enlargement, for these reasons and others such as islamophobia, remains highly unpopular in France – be it among the wider public or French political elites. Germany, by contrast, displays a high degree of continuity over time in its support for enlargement towards the Western Balkans, even though this support is not reflected in opinion polls. This continuity, however, is not set in stone: the entry into the German Bundestag of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in 2017, which calls for a referendum on any further enlargement to be held, is indicative of an inflection in Germany's

dispositions in this area. To counter the widespread belief that previous enlargements were too hasty and secure tacit consent from citizens, German governing parties insist on tough conditionality, while recalling that »there will only be a truly united Europe with the states of the Western Balkans«²⁰. In Poland, there is a broad consensus among the political elite and the citizens that »Europe cannot be perceived as fully united without the Western Balkans«²¹. Poland, for that matter, is a member of the Friends of Enlargement informal group, consisting of 14 member states and also known as the Tallinn Group.

¹⁸ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 62, 65, 69, 73, 77, 81, 85, 89 (»Are you for further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years?«).

¹⁹ Yves Bertoncini/Sami Andoura, »Europe« and its »enlargements: enough... or do we want more? (Notre Europe Viewpoint), 27 June 2013, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/europe-and-its-enlargements-enough-or-do-we-want-more/>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²⁰ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Ministerpräsidenten der Republik Ungarn, Viktor Orbán, Sopron, 19 August 2019, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-der-republik-ungarn-viktor-orb%C3%A1n-1661858>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²¹ Polska Agencja Prasowa, Czaputowicz: Europa nie może być postrzegana jako w pełni zjednoczona bez Bałkanów Zachodnich, 4 July 2019, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C478675%2CCzaputowicz-europa-nie-moze-byc-postrzegana-jako-w-pelni-zjednoczona-bez-europa-nie-moze-byc-postrzegana-jako-w-pelni-zjednoczona-bez>, retrieved on 21 January 2021.

II. Reform of the accession process

The differences in the attitudes of Germany, France and Poland towards enlargement, as articulated by specific stakeholders, have shaped distinct preferences over the reform of the accession process. In France, the traditional domination of the Elysée over the enlargement question, given its strategic character, has been reinforced under Macron's leadership. Little scope in the formation of enlargement-related positions is now left to ministries, the Parliament or societal actors, although a constitutional requirement for referendum gives citizens the ultimate say in all future cases of accession²². In Germany, by contrast, preferences are moulded and mediated by a variety of actors and institutions – from the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Chancellery to the Bundestag, which has a decisive say throughout the accession process (via the 2009 Federal Act on Cooperation). It is also closely followed by political parties, which have stepped up their monitoring of the accession process, and other societal actors²³. In Poland, decisions on enlargement had been traditionally taken within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs²⁴. The enlargement portfolio remained there and the position is approved by the Minister for European Affairs, who, however, has been part of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister as of 2020. The Parliament, in turn, adopts the accession treaty by simple majority, which is subsequently ratified by the President of the Republic.

Until recently, Germany's leadership in reforming the accession process was barely contested. Previous

reforms and numerous initiatives vouch for Germany's critical role as a policy-shaper in the region. Its mark can be found in the EU's »renewed consensus« (2006) and »new approach« (2011) toughening conditionality. Other examples here include the launch (and aim) of the Belgrade-Pristina negotiations that have been ongoing since 2011, the launch of the Berlin Process and the German-UK initiative on Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014 and the initiation of the Priebe Report in 2015, delivering recommendations on systemic rule of law issues in Macedonia. In most instances, Germany received the support of France, who accepted the pre-eminence of its neighbour across the Rhine. Enlargement reforms were also endorsed by Poland before and after the new impetus injected into its foreign policy towards the region in the mid-2010s²⁵, strengthened from 2018 by the participation of Warsaw in the Berlin Process.

Germany's leadership in EU enlargement was challenged in 2018 when France opposed the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (in the latter case together with Denmark and the Netherlands). After the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which put an end to the 25-year-long name dispute between Athens and Skopje, and extensive reforms in Albania, the EU considered moving ahead with the two countries. Germany and Poland, like most EU member states, along with the European Commission and the European Parliament, supported the opening of accession negotiations. However, the Council was blocked by the position taken by France. Paris's move was at first justified by a series of tactical

²² Natasha Wunsch, *Between Indifference and Hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans*, *South East European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 27 (2017), no. 4, pp. 541-554.

²³ Theresia Töglhofer/Cornelius Adebahr, *Firm Supporter and Severe Critic – Germany's two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans*, *South East European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 27 (2017), no. 4, pp. 523-539.

²⁴ Tomasz Żornaczuk, Poland, in: Rosa Balfour/Corina Stratulat (eds.), *EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans* (EPC Issue Paper 79), July 2015, pp. 63-72, https://wms.flexious.be/editor/plugins/imagemanager/content/2140/PDF/2015/Issue_Paper_79_-_EU_member_states_and_enlargement_towards_the_Balkans.pdf, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²⁵ For example, in 2010 Poland launched an annual Skopje Conference – a bilateral instrument for passing pre-accession experience to Macedonia. Based on this, it established the Belgrade Conference in 2017 and the Tirana Conference in 2018, in addition to an annual Enlargement Academy for civil servants from the Western Balkans, launched in 2015, among other initiatives. For details, see: Tomasz Żornaczuk, *Poland's Policy towards the Western Balkans*, in: *Yearbook of Poland's Foreign Policy 2011-2015*, Warsaw: PISM, 2020, pp. 291-307; Tomasz Żornaczuk, *Polityka Polski wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich*, in: *Rocznik Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2017*, Warsaw: PISM, 2020, pp. 195-210.

considerations, including the threat that the far-right constituted ahead of the European elections of May 2019, the number of Albanian asylum-seekers in France rendering enlargement decisions too unpopular and the overriding priority that Brexit negotiations needed to be accorded at that time. What appeared to be temporary opposition on the part of France took a more strategic turn in the course of 2019, when President Macron started to condition the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania to a reform of the accession process, which he deemed »unsuitable«, »too bureaucratic« and »cut off from people«²⁶. This insistence of Paris to first reform, and only then open negotiations, caused tensions.

In the months that followed, Poland, Germany and other member states supportive of enlargement mobilised considerable diplomatic efforts to overcome the blockade of the accession process. Roughly a month before the Poznań Summit of the Berlin Process, Poland issued a joint statement together with its partners of the Visegrád Group (V4) expressing »the belief that the reform of the Union and the transformation and integration processes of the candidates and potential candidates could and should be carried out in parallel«²⁷. Moreover, together with Slovenia and Italy, Poland initiated a joint statement supporting the opening of accession negotiations²⁸ that was finally endorsed by 11 member states and published shortly before the June 2019 Council meeting. In anticipation of what Poland, Germany and others considered to be a

French blockade, the V4 convened an additional meeting with the political leaders from the Western Balkans, the first ever at prime ministerial level, in September 2019. On that occasion, they not only called on »all EU stakeholders« to open the talks, but also argued that »a credible enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in the security, stability and prosperity of the EU as well«²⁹. Immediately prior to the October Council, the V4 foreign ministers published a joint article in *Politico* arguing in favour of starting the talks³⁰.

Germany, whose parliament in the meantime overwhelmingly backed opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, sought a diplomatic solution that would at least allow the latter to move forwards. It considered the proposal made by Greece and others to decouple the decision on opening accession negotiations, focusing on North Macedonia, but France – and above all Italy – did not accept this idea. In the end, despite the pressure exerted by Berlin, Warsaw and other capitals, France refrained from agreeing on opening accession negotiations at the Council's meeting of October 2019. German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, bluntly criticised President Macron's »biggest mistake«³¹ in the Union's recent history. Poland's Foreign Minister Czaputowicz similarly described the non-decision in the Council as »a mistake that has already caused negative consequences in the Western Balkans«³².

²⁶ Les principales déclarations de Macron à l'issue du Conseil européen, *Le Figaro*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/brexit-macron-souhaite-que-la-date-du-31-octobre-soit-respectee-20191018>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²⁷ V4 Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement on the Western Balkans, Bratislava, 28 May 2019, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²⁸ Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers on the EU commitment to the Western Balkans' European integration, 11 June 2019, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/joint-statement-of-the-foreign-ministers-on-the-eu-commitment-to-the-western-balkans-european-integration>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

²⁹ V4 Statement on the Western Balkans, Prague, 12 September 2019, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-statement-on-the-190912>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

³⁰ Tomáš Petříček/Péter Szijjártó/Jacek Czaputowicz/Miroslav Lajčák, Let's move forward in the Western Balkans, *Politico*, 14 October 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-western-balkans-north-macedonia-albania-accession-talks-eu/>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

³¹ Ansgar Graw, Maas will den »größten Fehler« der EU abfedern, *Die Welt*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article203483756/Nordmazedonien-Maas-will-den-groessten-Fehler-der-EU-abfedern.html>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

³² Jacek Czaputowicz: Polska wspiera Bałkany Zachodnie, *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 December 2019, <https://www.rp.pl/Publicystyka/312189902-Jacek-Czaputowicz-Polska-wspiera-Balkany-Zachodnie.html>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

France's role thus shifted from being a passive follower of Germany's lead in the region to a policy-shaper on its own terms. In a «non-paper» on reforming the accession process, written shortly after the Council meeting of October 2019, France specified its expectations and urged the Commission to issue a proposal to this end³³. Both the stalemate caused by France in the Council and the French non-paper were widely criticised in Poland by the government and experts. An alternative non-paper was issued by nine countries, including Poland, in December 2019. It contained a few converging points with the French proposals for improving the process, but more fundamentally stated that «internal EU reform cannot be a precondition for enlargement»³⁴.

Poland continued its pro-enlargement efforts in multiple regional initiatives after the termination of its presidency of the Berlin Process. In February 2020, the V4 foreign ministers met with their counterparts from the Western Balkans, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia and with the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. They backed the Commission's «intention to make the accession process more effective and credible by allowing the Western Balkans to move forward based on real progress in fundamental reforms» and stated «a positive decision of the Council in March is the only just way forward»³⁵. A call for the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania was also jointly reiterated by the foreign ministers of the V4 and Germany³⁶. Meanwhile,

Czaputowicz flew to Skopje and to Tirana – together with the foreign ministers of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – to express commitment to the aspirations of both capitals.

The new accession methodology proposed by the European Commission³⁷ was unanimously endorsed by the member states in March 2020. This was crucial because it allowed the Council to move forwards (at least temporarily and on that issue), but does not mean that France, Germany and Poland have come to understand enlargement in univocal ways. Differences in their approaches remain. The new methodology can rather be considered as a consensus reached under time pressure, which mirrors the most important elements brought to the fore by Paris, i.e. a more «differentiated, reversible and clearer» approach to enlargement³⁸. However, being clear about enlargement, for France, implies communicating that the EU membership prospect of the Western Balkans will not be fulfilled anytime soon³⁹, while Germany and Poland prefer to underscore the EU's commitment to making the accession process more effective and credible. Eventually, reaching consensus on the accession methodology did not mean starting membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as the latter was blocked by Bulgaria due to bilateral historical and identity issues at the December 2020 Council meeting.

³³ Tallinn Group, Non-Paper: Reforming the European Union accession process, November 2019.

³⁴ Nine EU Members release a new proposal for the reform of enlargement process, European Western Balkans, 11 December 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

³⁵ Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries on the Western Balkans, 27 February 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-of-the-200323>, retrieved on 21 January 2021.

³⁶ Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrád Group and Germany, Prague, 13 March 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-of-the-200323-1>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

³⁷ European Commission, Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 5 February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

³⁸ Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence de Munich sur la sécurité 2020, Munich, 15 February 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/15/conference-sur-la-securite-de-munich-faire-revivre-leurope-comme-une-puissance-politique-strategique>, retrieved on 5 January 2021.

³⁹ Ibid.

III.

Perspectives on conditionality and the rule of law

While agreeing on their importance, Germany, France and Poland hold slightly different views on conditionality and the rule of law as part of their respective approaches towards the Western Balkans. Germany, to start with, is often seen as a critical supporter of enlargement policy. Its constant insistence on »strict and fair conditions« being imposed on would-be member states is rooted in the belief that conditionality is key to the EU's transformative power, that effective transformation is necessary to avoid any potential disruptions to the EU's rules-based order, and that tougher accession criteria will eventually make enlargement more palatable to European (and German) citizens. This insistence goes hand in hand with Germany's support for the Regatta Principle, an approach that contrasts with the en bloc expansion of the EU in 2004 and is shared by all member states today. It contends that »progress of each country towards the EU will depend on its own merits«⁴⁰ or, put differently, that the countries of the region »should have the opportunity to join the European Union if [and only if] they fulfil the accession requirements«⁴¹.

Germany has thus adopted a critical stance towards domestic developments in the Western Balkans in numerous cases. For instance, it was among a handful of Western countries that resisted the international financial institutions' granting of loans to Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's regime in the 2010s. Against the backdrop of major democratic backsliding, Germany's ruling party, the Christian Democratic Union, similarly cooled its relations with its conservative sister party

VMRO-DPMNE⁴². Germany similarly spared no efforts to convince Gruevski and his allies to accept the change of government after snap elections in December 2016⁴³. Germany's critical stance is conveyed all across the region through different channels – at the intergovernmental level, as well as via parliamentarians and political foundations.

France, in principle, shares Germany's insistence on conditionality and the rule of law. It similarly views compliance as indispensable in order to preserve the credibility of the process and prevent a further rise of euroscepticism. However, France's leverage and channels of communication are less diverse, given the concentration of the authority held by the President in enlargement matters. France is therefore less directly engaged in Western Balkans' domestic politics than Germany, and less eager to enter the frontline on violations of the rule of law. Its insistence on conditionality is rather projected onto the EU's accession policy, as recently exemplified by the emphasis on reversibility enshrined in the new methodology. On the ground, France sometimes lacks consistency in addressing the issue of state capture in the Western Balkans and criticising those who are responsible for democratic backsliding, for instance when Emmanuel Macron praised Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić for doing »a fantastic job« and having »a lot of leadership in his country«⁴⁴.

Notwithstanding their principled support for the Commission's work, France and Germany both rely on their own assessment when it comes to deciding if conditions have been fulfilled. This quasi-parallel

⁴⁰ Presidency Conclusion of the European Council, Santa Maria da Feira, 19–20 June 2000, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/feii_en.htm, retrieved on 4 February 2021.

⁴¹ Merkel seeks to strengthen EU ties to Western Balkans, Euractiv, 29 August 2014, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/merkel-seeks-to-strengthen-eu-ties-to-western-balkans/>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

⁴² VMRO-DPMNE stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

⁴³ Ioannis Armakolas/Igor Bandovic/Dimitar Bechev/Bodo Weber, North Macedonia: What's Next, Brussels: Open Society European Policy Institute, 2019, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/north-macedonia-what-s-next>, retrieved on 4 January 2021.

⁴⁴ Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence de Munich sur la sécurité 2020 (see footnote 38).

monitoring is key to broadening the interface in enlargement matters between the countries of the Western Balkans and the member states. However, it can also be a source of inconsistency when assessments diverge or political considerations prevail. This is, for instance, the case with regard to visa liberalisation for Kosovo, which France, together with some other member states, has resolutely opposed in recent years. France has justified its opposition with the justification that »some recent progress has been made, but not enough to stop the corruption«⁴⁵ – an assessment that is not shared by the European Commission, which confirmed the fulfilment of all criteria in 2018, the European Parliament, which voted for opening negotiations, and by neither Germany nor Poland for that matter.

Poland, for its part, also remains a strong supporter of the conditionality principle. However, unlike France or Germany, which equate conditionality with tougher conditions, Poland stands for refraining from raising the accession bar or deviating from existing conditions. Regardless of the composition of its government, it is keen to view the accession process as primarily technical in nature and therefore sees no need to burden it with additional political elements that might delay the Western Balkans' EU rapprochement⁴⁶. For Warsaw, it is important that the prospective member states »receive a tangible perspective of the next step on the path of integration once they implement the required reforms«⁴⁷. Accession, in that

sense, should not be a moving target, or else it runs the risk of being perceived as biased. Warsaw considers existing criteria as set and (unlike France to some extent) does not question the European Commission's control over benchmarks, including on the rule of law. It has traditionally refrained from expressing critical concerns over the failure of Western Balkans' leaders to implement reforms. In the past, Poland has often backed an even softer approach than the one pursued by the Commission⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Réponse du Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères à la question écrite n° 10179, Journal officiel de la République française, Sénat: débats parlementaires, 16 May 2019, http://www.senat.fr/questions/jopdf/2019/2019-05-16_seq_20190020_0001_p000.pdf, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁴⁶ Tomasz Żornaczuk, Polityka Polski wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich (see footnote 25).

⁴⁷ Sejm, Response to interpellation no. 30610 on the slowdown [of the activities] of the Polish government regarding the enlargement of the European Union and NATO by Konrad Szymański, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 April 2019, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=BBCHMF>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁴⁸ Tomasz Żornaczuk, Poland (see footnote 24).

IV. Regional cooperation and bilateral disputes

Germany, France and Poland have all intensified their support for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in recent years, in particular within the framework of the Berlin Process. The initiative, launched outside the realm of the enlargement policy by Angela Merkel in 2014, gathers a small group of member states and the United Kingdom, working together with the countries of the Western Balkans to keep enlargement on the EU's agenda. The group endeavoured »to make *additional real* progress in the reform process« by focusing on resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, achieving reconciliation and enhancing regional economic cooperation⁴⁹. To achieve that end, the Berlin Process was initially established for a period of five years, as a flexible, mini-lateral platform with no institutional setup, no budget and no built-in steering or monitoring mechanism⁵⁰. While the involvement of France as host of the yearly Summit in 2016 – following Austria and preceding Italy – raised no eyebrows (given Paris' relationship with Berlin), the co-optation of the UK and Poland as hosts of the Berlin Process Summit in 2018 and 2019 respectively came in some circles more as a surprise: the former was caught up in Brexit while the latter was historically more interested in the East and was locked in a dispute with the European Commission over the rule of law⁵¹.

The flexible structure of the Berlin Process also granted the successive hosts of the yearly summit a degree of freedom in setting the agenda, pushing for certain priorities and (refraining from) following up on some issues. Germany, for instance, started by prioritising connectivity, or, in Chancellor Merkel's words, »doing everything for the growth of the region«⁵². France focused more on »soft« reconciliation and worked with Germany to prepare the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). The organisation was modelled on the Franco-German Youth Office and has been promoted by a series of Franco-German joint visits to the region at the ministerial and ambassadorial level. France, at that time, did not follow up on the new focus set by Austria the year before – settling bilateral disputes. For Poland, the priorities were the economy, connectivity, civil society and – inherited from the UK – security issues. Despite the London Summit's failure to launch RECOM⁵³, Poland followed upon reconciliation as it had some experience in cooperating with the Balkans in this regard from the Reconciliation and Memory initiative (later renamed Remembrance, Understanding, Future), which aimed to pass the Polish-German experience to young people from the Western Balkans. A novelty brought to the Berlin Process by Poland was the Think Tank Forum. Moreover, Poland financially supported both RYCO and the action plan on small arms and light weapons (SALW), a Franco-German initiative seeking to tackle firearms trafficking within the framework of the OSCE.

⁴⁹ Emphasis added. Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, 28 August 2014, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634#>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁵⁰ Florent Marciacq, The European Union and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process: Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty, FES: Sarajevo, 2017, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁵¹ Florian Bieber, It is time to ditch the Berlin Process, European Western Balkans, 10 July 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/10/time-ditch-berlin-process/>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁵² Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel, Ministerpräsident Rama und EU-Kommissionspräsident Barroso, Berlin, 28 August 2014, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-ministerpraesident-rama-und-eu-kommissionspraesident-barroso-am-28-august-2014-846734>, retrieved on 16 December 2020.

⁵³ RECOM is the Regional Commission for establishing facts about war crimes and other serious violations of human rights committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

All in all, the emphasis placed by the Berlin Process on regional cooperation has been largely beneficial⁵⁴. It accompanied key efforts at resolving outstanding bilateral disputes in the region, for instance on the Macedonian name issue (in the course of which negotiations with Greece were conducted under the auspices of the United Nations). Angela Merkel visited Skopje ahead of the renaming referendum of September 2018, Emmanuel Macron published a video message expressing his support for the renaming agreement, and Jacek Czaputowicz backed the dialogue with Greece during a visit to Skopje prior to the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement.

The resolution of the name dispute gave rise to expectations that the stalled Belgrade-Pristina dialogue could also gain new momentum, finally leading to a comprehensive, legally binding agreement on the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo required prior to accession. Instead, the idea of an exchange of territory as a solution to the Serbia-Kosovo dispute resurfaced. Supported with different motives and levels of intensity by the United States, the EU's High Representative and the Presidents of Serbia and Kosovo (among others), the »land swap solution« did not trigger much opposition in France at first. This changed when Chancellor Merkel, anticipating the potential implications of the deal for regional stability (and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular), voiced her firm and resolute rejection, arguing that »the territorial integrity of the states of the Western Balkans has been established and is inviolable«⁵⁵. Poland, although not outspoken on this question, likewise opposed any border changes.

⁵⁴ Florent Marciacq, *Reviving Solidarity: A New Regional Approach to Integrating the Western Balkans into a Stronger European Union*. Sarajevo: FES, 2019, <http://oefz.at/2019/05/28/florent-marciacq-2019-reviving-solidarity-a-new-regional-approach-to-integrating-the-western-balkans-into-a-stronger-european-union/?lang=de>, retrieved on 16 December 2020.

⁵⁵ Andrew Gray, *Angela Merkel: No Balkan border changes*, Politico, 13 August 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

To diffuse tensions and – tentatively – put an end to any discussion implying an exchange of territory, France and Germany took the lead in organising an intergovernmental dialogue on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. A first intergovernmental meeting within this framework held in Berlin in April 2019 was, according to Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, »not about accession negotiations«⁵⁶ but »about a policy of stability that we want for the region«⁵⁷. Due to the limited progress achieved on that occasion and given the points of contention on the EU's accession policy agenda ahead of the Council's meeting, the second meeting initially planned for June 2019 eventually took place in July 2020, under the auspices of the French President. Ahead of this event, which likewise yielded scant results, the foreign ministers of France and Germany jointly co-authored an article published in Serbia and Kosovo, calling on the leaders of the two countries to stop any political manoeuvring and get serious about solving the dispute⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem französischen Präsidenten Macron zum Westbalkantreffen, Berlin, 29 April 2019, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-franzoesischen-praesidenten-macron-zum-westbalkantreffen-1604114>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

⁵⁷ Kosovo and Serbia agree to resume talks after Macron, Merkel push, Euractiv, 30 April 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbia-and-kosovo-agree-to-resume-talks-after-macron-merkel-push/>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

⁵⁸ Jean-Yves Le Drian/Heiko Maas, Germany and France: »Restart the dialogue now!«, Koha Ditore/Kossev/Blic, 23 May 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-le-drian/2343952>, retrieved on 15 December 2020.

While many issues remain unresolved, the engagement of France, Germany and Poland in this highly political field remains promising. Mini-lateral formats of interaction, like the Berlin Process, have helped to more closely enmesh the Western Balkans with the EU's political order and thus constitute an important complement to EU-driven accession approaches. For one, with its emphasis on regional cooperation, the Berlin Process has been an invitation to consider the Western Balkans from a holistic perspective, as more than the sum of the six countries that make up the region. This consideration is anything but innocuous, considering the enmities inherited from the past, deep-rooted regional interdependences, and the persistence of bilateral disputes across the region and beyond. The limited impact of the Berlin Process on the EU's reformed approach to accession in this important area may come as a disappointment. The new methodology barely refers to regional cooperation and rather calls for intra-regional (country-specific) differentiation. However, this shortcoming in the EU's approach renders the role of key member states such as France, Germany and Poland even more critical.

V. A blueprint for the Weimar Triangle's enhanced engagement in the Western Balkans

With its three major member states, the Weimar Triangle is an influential grouping in the EU, but, interestingly, enlargement has never occupied an important part of this trilateral format's cooperation agenda. Since the three countries have been particularly active in the past few years in advancing and/or reshaping the EU's approach in enlargement matters, it appears that this lacuna in the Weimar Triangle's agenda is not rooted in France, Germany or Poland's lack of interest in these questions. Differences on the surface among the approaches of the three countries to EU enlargement in the Balkans may explain their reluctance to explore untapped potential for cooperation.

Enhanced consultations in this format, building on shared strategic thinking and security motives, would not only further energise the Weimar Triangle by adding a new field in which France, Germany and Poland can join forces. It would also help to consolidate the EU's approach to the Western Balkans and increase EU cohesion. To that end, the Weimar Triangle should build on existing bi- and trilateral initiatives pursued in the fields of reconciliation, regional cooperation and conflict resolution. By intensifying consultations in enlargement matters, France, Germany and Poland would then take one further step towards demonstrating that this formula of cooperation «can play an important role to promote a strong, sovereign, democratic and fair Europe»⁵⁹.

The following blueprint offers a series of recommendations for the countries of the Weimar Triangle that takes into account the national sensitivities and perspectives of France, Germany and Poland. It identifies potential areas of cooperation, which could be tapped for the benefit of the Weimar Triangle, the EU and the Western Balkans.

⁵⁹ Joint statement by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Weimar Triangle, 15 October 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/weimar-triangle/2405716>, retrieved on 16 December 2020.

1.
Send a joint political message underlining the Weimar Triangle's unwavering commitment to the unification of Europe – with the countries of the Western Balkans as future member states

The EU's commitment to enlargement was repeatedly shattered in recent decades when individual member states used their veto right to block enlargement policy for undeserving reasons. Joint initiatives undertaken by Germany, Poland and France could help to reaffirm that the EU's commitment to a fair and merits-based accession process is not just hot air and that member states should refrain from unilaterally blocking the Western Balkans' rapprochement towards the EU when this undermines the EU's credibility. The experience of the three countries in reuniting the continent proved that they have the moral standing to do so: any blockade of the EU accession prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans is an obstacle to the unification of a »strong, sovereign, democratic and fair Europe«. In this sense, a political declaration on a strong commitment to the seriousness of EU enlargement policy based on existing conditionality would be of paramount importance, also given Bulgaria's blockade of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia as of late 2020. The German Presidency of the Council took a very clear position on Bulgaria's unilateral actions, but a strong voice from a leading coalition such as the Weimar Triangle would be beneficial. This could be supported by a number of other member states.

2.
Discuss contentious points within the Weimar Triangle

The potential for intergovernmental cooperation among the countries of the Weimar Triangle is not limited to declaratory support. It goes beyond the surface of converging interests and could be used by France, Germany and Poland to strengthen affinities, foster mutual understanding and, consequently, strengthen the Weimar Triangle as a constructive discussion format within the EU. However, this implies that the exchange of ideas between the three countries does not shun those issues on which France, Germany and Poland hold distinctive views. Perceptions on the importance of conditionality, on the EU's credibility and the role of the rule of law in the accession process, but also on Kosovo's visa liberalisation and economic cooperation, should not be omitted. Some of them directly reflect, or are rooted in, the countries' respective positions regarding ongoing EU debates, e.g. on the prerogatives of the EU as a political order. However, while building common views among the member states on the future of the Union remains a challenge for the years (or indeed decades) to come, exchanging views on the same issues within a circumscribed framework committing future (rather than actual) member states would offer opportunities to approach these contentious points with greater distance and possibly pave the way for future convergence.

3. **Work on concerted communications on hybrid threats from Russia**

Common ground for the Weimar Triangle in enlargement matters is the countries' strategic interest in anchoring the region in the EU's political and legal order, with an emphasis placed on further democratisation. The pursuit of this strategic interest is hampered by Russia's disruptive diplomacy. France's advocacy for a reset in EU-Russia relations in 2019 – which has yielded few results and caused disappointment in Paris – is unlikely to remain on the table. Meanwhile, in Germany, Alexei Navalny's attempted poisoning triggered an internal debate over Nord Stream 2. The consequence of this is growing convergence among the countries of the Weimar Triangle in acknowledging the disruptive role of the Kremlin in Europe. The Weimar Triangle should thus explore concerted actions, including in the field of public diplomacy, to support the EU's communication instruments in countering more effectively Russian hybrid threats in the Western Balkans. Concerted communications on the part of the Weimar Triangle regarding external (cyber) risks emanating from Russia could enhance the EU's credibility and support the European anchoring of the countries of the region.

4. **Coordinate communications on systemic threats posed by China**

The geopolitical interest in boosting the EU's strategic autonomy by – among other things – limiting the reinforcement of China's positions in the Western Balkans is shared by the countries of the Weimar Triangle. Poland's modest benefits – at best – from cooperation with China within the framework of the 17+1 initiative, France's insistence on China being a technological rival and Germany's gradual understanding that China's influence in Europe needs to be taken seriously suggest that convergence among the countries of the Weimar Triangle on this issue is rising. While the Economic and Investment Plan adopted by the EU in October 2020 might help re-position EU funding opportunities vis-à-vis Chinese loans, the countries of the Weimar Triangle would gain in coordinating communications in that field. It would be important, in particular, to underline the downsides, risks and vulnerabilities of Chinese economic diplomacy. These countries could similarly be more vocal in calling on the countries of the Western Balkans to align their views with the EU's, i.e. recognising China as »a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance«⁶⁰ and countering China's public diplomacy. Since the Economic and Investment Plan is unlikely to meet the massive needs of the region, the countries of the Weimar Triangle could, furthermore, seek to increase the capacities of their respective development agencies to boost bilateral investments in the Western Balkans. In response to China's soft power diplomacy (especially in the educational sector), they should finally step up the promotion of European culture and languages.

⁶⁰ European Commission, EU-China – A strategic outlook, 12 March 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>, retrieved on 14 December 2020.

5. Engage together in security-related initiatives

The countries of the Weimar Triangle all view security in the Western Balkans as an important priority for the EU and as part of the accession process. This common ground could serve to explore joint actions in this area, notwithstanding the different levels of engagement among Weimar Triangle countries. Arguably, the Weimar Triangle could be used as a platform to reflect on the EU's mediation efforts in the Western Balkans. Chancellor Merkel and President Macron already set a precedent with the intergovernmental dialogue on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. Its lack of results should not discourage the Weimar Triangle from establishing channels of security-related dialogue with the countries of the region. The intergovernmental nature of the Weimar Triangle could help to create an atmosphere beneficial to political discussions on bilateral disputes in a way that complements the more technical negotiations mediated by the EU. On a different note, Poland could be associated more closely to the Franco-German initiative aiming at controlling small arms and light weapons (SALW). The countries of the Weimar Triangle could consider carrying out a joint evaluation of the results of this initiative and advance it further together should the prospects be promising.

6. Put reconciliation higher on the agenda and advocate jointly

The process of reconciliation has long been an important element in Franco-German and Polish-German relations. The three countries have, accordingly, developed a vast legacy of achievements at the political and societal level, which they could share in more concerted ways. In the Western Balkans, the need for making progress on reconciliation is cardinal, although the approach to reconciliation cannot be imposed from the outside. Lending support to regional reconciliation initiatives would send a strong signal with respect to the most fundamental drivers of European integration. France, Germany and Poland could thus step up their joint support for RYCO and jointly advocate the establishment of RECOM. The Weimar Triangle should finally express its firm commitment to depoliticising European historiographies. The recent decision by Bulgaria to oppose the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia shows that reconciliation issues go beyond the western part of the Balkans and also affect the member states. The political use of historical and linguistic issues to block the EU accession of neighbours undermines enlargement policy and runs counter to the spirit of reconciliation on the European continent.

7. Think together about the future of the Berlin Process

The Berlin Process, which aims to inject fresh momentum into regional cooperation, covers a wide range of issues and flagship initiatives. While bringing benefits to the region, their implementation remains difficult and sometimes lacks consistency. In order to improve its effectiveness, the Weimar Triangle countries could consider taking the lead in advancing a strategic reflection on the future of the Berlin Process. This could be achieved by convening an expert group to work on looking back at what has been achieved and what the prospects should be, including with regard to post-pandemic recovery assistance. The fact that the 2021 Summit will be hosted by Germany, that France will take over the Presidency of the Council in 2022 and that the Weimar Triangle is about to celebrate its 30th anniversary would offer an opportunity to look forward and launch such strategic reflections.

8. Support inter-parliamentary cooperation

Inter-parliamentary cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans and EU member states is important in terms of advancing European integration beyond government officials. In 2020, France planned an inter-parliamentary conference within the framework of the Berlin Process, which had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Germany and Poland could further intensify their association with this project, having both already entered into parliamentary cooperative arrangements with partners from the region, by supporting the initiative and perhaps hosting its future meetings.

9. Step up track-II and track-III diplomacy

Experts and civil society organisations play an important role in paving the way for greater convergence of views on enlargement matters. France, Germany and Poland are no exception. These countries could use the Weimar Triangle framework to intensify track-II and track-III dialogue with and among experts and civil society representatives, as part of an exclusive formula (limited to the three countries) or with an inclusive one (i.e. open to representatives from the Western Balkans). The aim of such a dialogue would be to promote mutual understanding and identify potential areas of cooperation. It would also allow the countries of the Weimar Triangle to step up their communication with broader audiences.

10. Ensure that the Western Balkans can actively participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe

In recent years, the EU, together with the Western Balkans, has faced a long list of serious challenges, from the global economic and financial crisis in the late 2000s to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the early part of last year. These challenges have put the EU to the test and a Conference on the Future of Europe has been launched with the aim of overhauling the general functioning of the Union. The Western Balkans should participate in, and contribute to, this reflection on the future of Europe as its participation is crucial to strengthening a community of purpose connecting the region with the EU. The countries of the Weimar Triangle should push for the meaningful inclusion of the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe. In so doing, they would signal their commitment in enlargement matters and enhance the credibility of the EU's strategic vision.

The Genshagen Foundation

Germany, France and Poland for Europe

The Foundation

The Genshagen Foundation evolved from the Berlin-Brandenburg Institute for Franco-German Collaboration in Europe, which was founded in 1993 by historian Rudolf von Thadden and Brigitte Sauzay, who later became an advisor to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Since 2005, the Foundation has been run as a non-profit foundation under German civil law. Its founders and main sponsors are the German Government, represented by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, and Land Brandenburg. The most important third-party donor is the Federal Foreign Office.

European Dialogue – Political Thinking on Europe

Convinced that European integration must be preserved and deepened in order to secure peace, freedom, solidarity and prosperity in Europe in a sustainable manner, the Genshagen Foundation is committed to the political dimension of Europe's future in the working section European Dialogue – Political Thinking on Europe. Its projects promote reflections on the internal cohesion of the European Union, its political capacity to act and its role in the world. A solution-based exchange takes place between experts and decision-makers from politics, diplomacy, business and society in public and closed formats. Furthermore, the Foundation is focused on civil society in order to give young people in particular an understanding of Europe and to offer them a platform where they can articulate their own ideas.

Profile

The Genshagen Foundation aims to strengthen Europe's cultural diversity, political capacity to act, social coherence and economic dynamism. At the interface between civil society, the state and the business world, the foundation operates in two working sections: Art and Cultural Mediation in Europe and European Dialogue – Political Thinking on Europe. We focus on promoting and intensifying Franco-German and German-Polish relations, as well as facilitating the dialogue within the Weimar Triangle, which was founded in 1991 by the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France and Poland. As a forum for consultation and conversation, we seek to foster dialogue between the three countries as well as promote European integration as a whole. The location of the Foundation, Genshagen Castle, offers a space for encounters and exchanges between actors from the worlds of art, culture, politics, business, science and the media. Through its varied events and publications, the Foundation helps to identify new approaches and solutions to current and future challenges in society and politics – always within the context of Europe.

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