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# Germany's Policy Regarding Western Balkans' EU Accession

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*President Emmanuel Macron's opposition to the start of accession talks between the EU and Albania and Northern Macedonia may lead Germany to revise its current policy towards the Western Balkans. Germany will try to influence France's position but, at the same time, it may decide to develop bilateral relations with the countries of the region and existing forms of cooperation in which Poland may be a partner.*

**The Balkan Challenge.** From the German point of view, the admission of the Western Balkan countries to the EU is crucial to stabilising the situation in the region. The prospect of EU membership is expected to resolve local disputes, especially to normalise relations between Serbia and Kosovo. This would eliminate the risk of an armed conflict in the Balkans that could destabilise the immediate neighbourhood of the EU.

For Germany, cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans is also important because of the elimination of the terrorist threat in Europe. After the conflicts of the 1990s, Islamist movements such as Al-Qaida and ISIS became active in the region. Their presence in this part of the continent facilitates organisational and financial support for their cells operating in the EU. The region is also a place of recruitment for foreign fighters. According to data from 2017 collected by the Soufan Center, about 900 residents of the Western Balkans, mainly Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, went Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS. Out of this group, 250 people returned to their countries of origin.

German support for enlargement to the Western Balkan countries is also perceived as a way to limit the influence of non-EU countries pursuing policies contrary to Union interests. Investments and offers of economic assistance from China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf states, as opposed to EU financial support, are not subject to, for example, compliance with specific environmental standards or the rule of law. This may prompt them to choose a non-EU offer and that would threaten to increase the region's financial dependence on the Union's global competitors. An additional element is Russia's use of local antagonisms to escalate regional disputes, which is conducive to destabilising the situation in the EU neighbourhood.

Germany also wants to develop economic cooperation with the region and is one of the leading trading partners for the countries of the Western Balkans. In 2018, its trade with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, and Serbia amounted to €11.3 billion. The region is important for covering the deficit on the German labour market. Research from the Federal Statistical Office shows that in the last year, 24.4% of non-EU employees comes from the Western Balkans.

From the German perspective, the problem for the policy of enlargement to the Western Balkan states remains little support for these plans among their own citizens. The 2019 ECFR survey shows that 46% of German respondents are against the accession of any of the Western Balkan countries to the EU (26% agree to some of them, and 9% to all). With the exception of Alternative for Germany (AfD), German political groups formally support the need to extend the EU to the Balkans, but at lower party levels, the idea is increasingly viewed with scepticism. Sorting out climate policy and Brexit are perceived among the

Member States as priority issues for maintaining the functioning of the EU, and this is also delaying the admission of new members.

**The Importance of the Berlin Process.** As a result, Germany faces the challenge of how to maintain a membership perspective for the Western Balkans and reduce resistance to enlargement among its own citizens and other EU members. Until now, the answer to this dilemma was the Berlin Process, a German initiative launched in 2014. Although it does not replace the accession process, it is a valuable instrument of cooperation with the Western Balkan countries, covering the most important elements of German policy towards the region.

First, the initiative, which includes 10 Member States (including Poland, France, Italy and the UK), has allowed Germany to create a party supporting the idea of enlargement. In addition, the involvement in it of a group of large EU countries and the organisation of annual conferences are further signals to the Balkan states that they can count on allies in the EU that support their accession ambitions.

Second, two principles determining Germany's policy towards enlargement are visible in the Berlin Process. Conditionality is one of them. The German federal government has made maintaining a membership perspective for the Western Balkans conditional on progress in three areas: developing regional cooperation, reforming state institutions and legal systems, and carrying out economic reforms and infrastructure development. Another rule is "political frontloading", which is based on eliminating the most important problems at the earliest possible stage of the accession process. With the change of name to the Republic of North Macedonia in a deal with Greece, which had been blocking the country's negotiations, the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo remains an unresolved issue. Following these two principles, Germany wants to ensure that aspiring countries meet all the requirements for EU membership and allows it to maintain control over the enlargement process.

**Stalemate in Balkans Policy.** The main problem in maintaining the current approach—the continuation of enlargement depending on fulfilling specific expectations—is France's opposition to enlargement. Until now, its government has accepted both the current process and Germany's role as its leader. Macron's block on this is a departure from this position and thus weakens Germany's current policy towards the Western Balkans. This is particularly visible in the need for a Bundestag agreement to indicate the date of opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The additional conditioning of this designation on further rule-of-law reforms is a response to the French reservations. The situation is also complicated by the French proposed reform of the accession process as it would extend the process. Convincing France to give up this element will not be easy and could require accepting some of Macron's proposals for the future of the EU, such as consent to complete reforms in the eurozone.

Taking action to change the French government's position may also be difficult because of the internal situation in Germany. Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to resign as the CDU chair and next parliamentary elections calls into question further support for the initiatives she promotes, ambiguously evaluated among the Christian Democrats, including the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans. In addition, the situation is not improved by the risk SPD leaving the coalition. This would mean that the Christian Democrats would need to focus on building a new government or preparing for early elections, thus weakening Germany's role in EU matters.

**Conclusions.** Faced with France's block on enlargement, the likelihood of Germany modifying its actions towards the Western Balkans is increasing. On the one hand, it may decide to expand the Berlin Process and, on the other, to strengthen bilateral contacts with the countries of the EU's southwestern neighbourhood. Chancellor Merkel probably also will continue to try to find a compromise with President Macron, for example, as part of the "Conference on the Future of Europe" planned by both countries.

The French action is another point of contention within the Weimar Triangle and hinders that grouping's activity. It is also a renewed signal that President Macron, taking advantage of the weakening position of Chancellor Merkel, will try to increasingly influence EU external policy. Therefore, the increasing disparities in Franco-German relations may encourage Germany to seek support more often from the other EU Member States in the disputes with France.

Although inhibiting the accession process of the Western Balkans is not good news for Poland, it may create new opportunities. Given Polish activity towards EU enlargement, it is possible that Germany will strengthen cooperation with Poland, which would allow the introduction of new initiatives in the Berlin Process.