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JUNCKER'S SILENCE ON ENLARGEMENT – DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

EUROPEAN ACCESSION WAS A DREAM COMES TRUE FOR MOST OF THE EX-COMMUNIST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES. SO FAR, BALKAN COUNTRIES ARE WISHING FOR THE SAME DREAM, BUT THE CURRENT CONTEXT IS NOT SO FAVOURABLE. TO PARTLY ADDRESS THIS SITUATION, THIS ARTICLE PRESENTS A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON JUNCKER'S DECLARATIONS ABOUT FUTURE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EU. THE EMPIRICAL DATA COME FROM STATE OF THE UNION SPEECHES, AND ALSO PUBLIC DECLARATIONS AND PRESS RELEASES. THE RESULTS INDICATE THAT JUNCKER'S SILENCE IS MOSTLY INFLUENCED BY EXTERNAL FACTORS SUCH AS THE GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT FROM THE LAST YEARS. FURTHERMORE, 2025 CAN BE AN INDICATION, NOT A PROMISE, AND ACTUAL EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS MORE PREOCCUPIED ABOUT INTERNAL STABILITY AND SECURITY THAN ENLARGEMENT.

KEY WORDS: ENLARGEMENT, BALKAN COUNTRIES, JUNCKER STATEMENTS, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important EU policies is the enlargement policy. This one applies to countries currently aspiring to join the EU and potential candidates. The role of the European Commission is to help those countries wishing to join the EU to meet the necessary criteria for membership, and supports them in implementing the related economic and democratic reforms². The enlargement process is important for UE's future and always has been a major concern for political decision makers. Due to the fact that European Commission is the major player in this process, is relevant to analyse the president's declarations in order to understand the enlargement status.

Any European country can join the European Union and can apply for membership if it respects the democratic values and meets the membership criteria. Current candidate countries are: Albania, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates.

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² European Commission, *Policy: EU enlargement*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/eu-enlargement_en#documents.

This article analyses the current EU enlargement policy by looking at perceptions prior to the moment of policy formulation. More specifically, it presents a discourse analysis on Juncker's declarations about future enlargement of the EU. This comes in the context of public statement published on European Commission website according to *There will be no new EU members in the period of the current Commission, as no partner will be fully ready by the end of 2019*³.

The aim of this paper is to understand why this silence on enlargement from the European Commission exists during the Jean Claude Juncker mandate. As a research question, I asked if this silence is specific for the European Commission in general or is something particular for this mandate. Consequently, if the answer is explaining this silence being specific, then is it or is not influenced by external events?

The study analyses Juncker's State of the Union speeches, and also public declarations and press releases. I consider these speeches being relevant because we are talking about official declarations, made each year in front of one of the most important European institutions.

Methodologically, this research is realized by using qualitative methods as document and speech analysis. In doing so, the study identifies and analyses the main ideas about Westerns Balkans and EU's enlargement. It is also important to identify the context because in this way we can reveal a justification for the specificity of Juncker's statements. All these are presented in the body of the article using qualitative insights.

The first section briefly presents the background of the accession criteria to the European Union. It also describes the Western Balkan countries context on the European integration path. The second section includes details about official documents elaborated by the European institutions regarding the enlargement policy in general and the Western Balkan accession in particular. The third section presents the perspectives of president Juncker towards the enlargement policy by analysing his declarations made through State of the Union Speeches. The conclusions summarize the main observations and discuss directions for further research.

THE ENLARGEMENT EUROPEAN UNION POLICY

The current enlargement agenda covers the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. Turkey has a different position in which regard the European integration, the country applies for associate membership of the European Economic Community since 1959. 2005 represents the year of stating the accession negotiations and since 2014 the EU-Turkey readmission agreement enters into force⁴.

³ European Commission, *Policy: EU enlargement...*

⁴ European Commission, *Key findings of the 2015 report on Turkey*, Press Release, 2015, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-6039_en.htm.

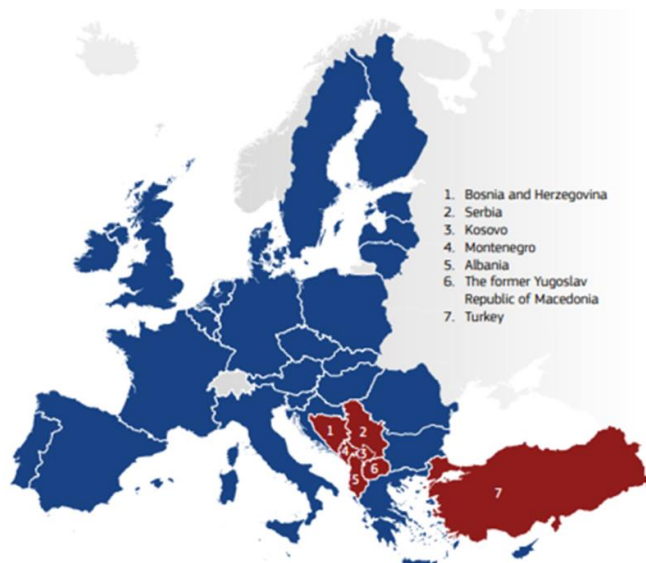


Figure 1. Western Balkan countries and Turkey
Credits: European Commission

The Western Balkans countries are geographically surrounded by EU Member States. Those countries have a common history and hope for the same future: European integration. From the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, the European Union has supported the future of the region as an integral part of the EU⁵ – visa liberation and foreign direct investment in the region being some of the most valuable actions between parts. The top-down institutional promotion of the rule of law employed by the European Union, empowered by the golden carrot of full membership, and has generated unique, broad-based and long-term support for reform and progress toward EU membership in the Western Balkans⁶.

In order to intensify his enlargement policy, the European Union has developed a strategy to support the gradual integration of the Western Balkan countries. This strategy started already to show his benefits, and in this regard, on 1 July 2013, Croatia became the first of the seven countries to join, and Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania are official candidates. More advanced steps were made by Montenegro and Serbia, those two countries have started accession negotiations and chapters have been opened. On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

As official candidate, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was granted EU candidate status in December 2005. One year later, Montenegro gained its independence and applied for EU membership in December 2008, accession negotiations being opened in 2012. Serbia submitted its application for EU membership in December 2009 and was granted

⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, Strasbourg, 2018, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

⁶ Jelena Dzankic, Soeren Keil, Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans. A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 87.

candidate status in March 2012 after Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on Kosovo's regional representation⁷. In the same year, 2009, Albania applied for EU membership and obtained the status of candidate for the EU membership in 2014. On the other side, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate country which submitted its membership application on February 2016. Kosovo is also a potential candidate country, one not recognised by all of the European states and whose future EU integration remains closely linked to the dialogue with Serbia.

The process of Balkan enlargement has started more than 15 years ago, their entry being determined by a long process that involves aligning their national laws with EU policy. It means that those countries have to demonstrate that they are aware and satisfy the accession criteria⁸:

- political criteria: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces;
- administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *acquis* and ability to take on the obligations of membership.

More than that, it also means that they have to demonstrate progress on resolving the domestic issues and ethnic tensions between them. Only the European Union has the right to decide when a candidate country has accomplished its duty and it is ready to become a member.

In the last two years, the European Union has opened up to the prospect of taking in new members from the Western Balkans. Proof of this fact is the *Strategy for the Western Balkans*, a document in which content Commission adopts a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans countries. As Juncker himself declared, this strategy means *a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*⁹, stating clearly that the EU door is open to further accessions when – and only when – the individual countries have met the criteria. Also, the Strategy sets out an Action Plan with six concrete flagship initiatives targeting specific areas of common interest: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations¹⁰.

In 2018, the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, took a tour in all six Balkan countries and has made it clear membership of the bloc is not a promise but a perspective. On this occasion, he pointed again that *we cannot add to the European Union countries that have not resolved territorial conflicts amongst themselves. Bilateral conflicts cannot be imported. We would like such problems to be resolved before the date of*

⁷ European Parliament, *Fact Sheets on the European Union. The Western Balkans*, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>.

⁸ European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations. Accession criteria*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.

⁹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, Strasbourg, 2018, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Strategy for the Western Balkans*, Strasbourg, Weekly Meeting, 6 February 2018, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en.

membership¹¹. It is still widely assumed that the post-communist Balkan states should only be allowed into the EU after they have sorted out their problems – not before¹².

In 2019, in July, in Poznań was organized the thematic summit *Strengthening links within the region and with the EU*. At this meeting, the European Union confirmed its commitment to strengthen cooperation with the region with a set of concrete measures focusing on five key areas: transport and energy, digital, economy, security and good neighbourly relations¹³. The European officials pointed the importance of improving connectivity between EU and Western Balkans, as well as within Western Balkans as a vector for bringing multiple benefits to the region and to the EU's economies and citizens. In this context, the Balkan candidates arguably face much stronger political scepticism towards further enlargement, with the overall climate often described as enlargement fatigue¹⁴.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper seeks to explain the current silent on enlargement of the European Union, by conducting an analysis based on two main components: a descriptive and an explanatory one. The research focuses on Juncker's State of the Union speeches, adding information from public declarations and press releases. The selection of the case was based on the fact that since 2007, only one new state joined the European Union in 2013, Croatia, one of the Western Balkans countries. Moreover, the European political decision-makers continue to mention in their statements that this is not the time for enlargement. To explain this situation I used document analysis, analysis of official declarations and direct process observation, relying on the structure of the speeches.

Thus, I selected the last four *State of the Union speeches* because the paper goal was to analyse Juncker's reactions and he addressed only these ones since he is the president of the European Commission. Those speeches are¹⁵:

- State of the Union Address, 9 September 2015;
- State of the Union Address, 14 September 2016;
- State of the Union Address, 13 September 2017;
- State of the Union Address, 12 September 2018.

So, for each speech, after reading and analyzing the entire document, I selected the relevant ideas about Westerns Balkans and EU's enlargement.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

For the first selected speech, the one of 2015, in the context of refugees' crises, Juncker talked about criteria for EU membership that should also apply to potential candidate countries on the Western Balkans, in view of their progress made towards candidate status. This is the only remark made during this speech, and there is no specification about enlargement.

¹¹ euronews.com, *EU enlargement on agenda as Juncker tours Balkans*, 2018, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2018/02/27/eu-enlargement-on-agenda-as-juncker-tours-balkans>.

¹² Robert Bideleux, Ian Jeffries, *The Balkans: A Post-Communist History*, Routledge, 2007, p. 590.

¹³ European Commission, *Western Balkans Summit in Poznań: strengthening links within the region and with the EU*, Press Release, Brussels, 5 July 2019, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-3669_en.htm.

¹⁴ Natasha Wunsch, *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans: From Mobilisation to Empowerment*, (Zurich:Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 6.

¹⁵ European Commission, *State of the Union speeches by President Jean-Claude Juncker*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches_en.

In 2016, the references to Westerns Balkans continue to be made in the context of refugees' crises, and it is also brought back into discussion the territorial dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. More than that, it is mentioned that new steps were made by Montenegro and Serbia by opening new chapters in their accession negotiations. Again, there is no use of the word enlargement.

Next year, in 2017, the discourse is related to stability. But, the situation about enlargement is clearer. It is precise told that no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament will be made. No candidate is ready. Despite this, Juncker admits that EU will be greater with more members, but only if they will respect the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights. Also, there is a small remark regarding Turkey, which has been taking giant strides away from the European Union for some time.

In 2018, the discourse about Western Balkans was more specific about the steps made by each country, admitting also that there is more to be done. In this regard, it is mentioned that the progress has started by reaching a historic agreement on the name issue between Skopje and Athens, by ratifying the border demarcation agreement between Kosovo and Montenegro, Commission proposed to the Council the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Bosnia and Herzegovina made small but important steps in the right direction, by answering the questionnaire on its membership bid, which allows the Commission to take the work forward. And the recommendation to lift short-term visa requirements for Kosovo was reconfirmed by the Commission in 2018. The EU also continued to work with Turkey: while in the current circumstances no progress on the accession track is possible, the channels of communication remain open and cooperation continues in areas of strategic importance including energy, migration and security policy.

However, European Commission proposed an ambitious Western Balkans strategy and EU Leaders then held the first summit with their counterparts from the region in 15 years, in Sofia in May 2018.

In order to realize a vocabulary analysis, I pointed that Juncker is using an optimistic tone and he is hopeful about the future of these countries: *2025 is an indication, not a promise, we have to help them*¹⁶. He also underlines the mutual responsibility that the parties (the European Union and the candidates) have in the progress of the integration bids: *And I was trying to make the governments and others of this region understand that all the conditions and criteria for the accession have to be fulfilled, they are not, and so it takes time*¹⁷. However, he also reminds the fact that candidates themselves have to solve their own problems: *Accession candidates must give the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights utmost priority in the negotiations*¹⁸; *No candidate is ready*¹⁹.

President Juncker used frequently in his speeches phrases with the same meaning like: *we are discussing the process ~ 2025 is an indication not a promise; they are not ~ no candidate is ready; all the conditions and criteria for the accession have to be fulfilled ~ accession candidates must give the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights utmost priority in the negotiations.*

¹⁶ euronews.com, Jean-Claude Juncker and EU 'enlargement fatigue', 2018, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2018/03/02/jean-claude-juncker-and-eu-enlargement-fatigue>.

¹⁷ euronews.com, Jean-Claude Juncker and EU 'enlargement fatigue'...

¹⁸ European Commission, *Reforms in the Western Balkans and Turkey: annual assessments and recommendations*, Press Release, Brussels, 29 May 2019, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-2752_en.htm.

¹⁹ European Commission, *PRESIDENT JEAN-CLAUDE JUNCKER'S State of the Union Address 2017*, Brussels, 13 September 2017, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm.

As regards a grammar analysis, numerous verbs can be observed in the structure of the speeches: *we are not discussing dates, we are not discussing the end of the story, we are discussing the process*. There are also used a lots of first person pronouns - *we are not discussing; I was trying, we are indicating, we want more stability, we must maintain a credible enlargement*, but can easily be remarked the lack of adjectives - *credible enlargement* – one of the few examples.

Even if the message if not so encouraging for the audience, Juncker is using a lot of positive terminology – *stability, to help, to try, they are doing well, will be greater*. Also the use of the modal will reflects the importance given to the future – it is combined with the personal pronoun we. However, they cannot be neglected the neutral formulas – *it takes time, 2025 is an indication*, and even if the negative phrases - *no candidate is ready, they are not*.

In order to understand why this silence and why now, I considered relevant an inquiry on the previous mandate, the one of Jose Manuel Barroso. During his period, president Barroso declared the following: *The political importance of EU enlargement must not be underestimated; Member States are in favor of further enlargement of the European Union in future years*. – 2007²⁰, *An enlarged and united Europe is also a source of power and influence for all its Member States*. – 2008²¹, *I especially welcome the decision to set a date for the start of negotiations with Serbia*. – 2013²².

First of all, the main difference is that Barroso faced two waves of enlargement: 2007 Romania and Bulgaria and 2013 with Croatia. He was more positive about enlargement, and I presented above only a few examples about his declarations on enlargement.

As a difference, Juncker is considered to be silent because he is using phrases as *Negotiations will continue. But they are doing well and we have to help them. It takes time. No further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready*.

Juncker clarified in his declarations that 2025 is an *indicative date*, meant to encourage and drive Balkan partners to reform. The countries need especially to clarify their specific problem, and Serbia's longstanding dispute with Kosovo seems to be one of the biggest obstacles (Belgrade does not recognise Kosovo's independence, unilaterally declared in 2008). As Juncker said, *if this dispute between Serbia and Kosovo is not resolved there will be no chance or whatsoever for Serbia and Kosovo to become members of the EU. We do not want to import instability in the Union, we want to export stability*²³.

As a future perspective, EU opens door to the Balkans with the 2025 target for membership. In this context, Serbia and Montenegro have already opened accession talks, on two chapters by each one.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The European Union needs to be prepared to welcome new members, including from an institutional and financial perspective, once they have met the admission

²⁰ European Commission, *Press conference*, Strasbourg, 23 October 2007, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-07-650_en.htm?locale=en.

²¹ European Commission, *EPC Annual Conference*, Brussels, 26 May 2008, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-08-272_en.htm.

²² European Commission, *State of the Union address 2013*, Strasbourg, 11 September 2013, available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-684_en.htm.

²³ European Western Balkans Website, *Juncker: No chance for membership of Serbia and Kosovo without solving the dispute*, June, 2019, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/06/12/juncker-no-chance-for-membership-of-serbia-and-kosovo-without-solving-the-dispute/>.

criteria. So, the Western Balkans need to solve their own disputes before to accomplish the accession criteria. In this context, 2025 is an indication, not a promise and Juncker's Commission is more preoccupied about internal stability and security than enlargement.

Secondly, Juncker's silence is also influenced by external factors such as the geopolitical and geostrategic context from the last years. Only to remind some events, we can mention about Ukraine crises, Russian influence, Erdogan's policy, refugees crises. But more than that, we are talking about Brexit context; it is more difficult to talk about enlargement when you are facing the first try to leaving of one member.

After analyzing the texts, we admit that Juncker has created subtle connections between the message he wants to transmit and a very conciliatory atmosphere. Another element is the use of informal language and simple structures, which creates a colloquial environment, where the first person pronoun in the plural is chiefly noticeable. Also, Juncker focuses his speeches more on the future than on the past and shows determination to collaborate and work for the desired outcome – the Balkans' integration.

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