

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

France is one of the European countries with the highest rates of popular disapproval of countries in the Western Balkans joining the European Union. What is this disapproval based on, and how important is the issue of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans for people in France? Using a combination of 2020 survey data representative of the adult French population and in-depth focus groups with French voters, this report offers a comprehensive insight into the views of the French on whether or not the countries of the Western Balkans should join the EU. The results are important for political decision makers and civil society actors. Our most important conclusions are:

1. A majority of people in France are opposed to the Western Balkan countries joining the EU, but for most this issue is not a salient one and attitudes are not firmly held.

With close to 60 percent disapproval, the majority of respondents said that it would be rather or very bad if Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia joined the EU. However, less than a third said that the addition of the Western Balkan countries to the EU would affect their lives a lot or at least somewhat, and almost half changed their views on the issue, depending on whether they were asked about the region in general or specific countries. This shows that for most people in France EU enlargement in the Western Balkans does not have great salience and that views on the topic are not firmly held.

2. Attitudes to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans reflect general views of the EU more than stereotypes or concerns specific to the countries in the Western Balkans.

Among the survey respondents, those who disapproved of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU tended to have a much more negative view of the Union than those who approved of EU enlargement in the region. One in two 'disapprovers' held a fairly or very negative image of the EU. In contrast, close to two thirds of 'approvers' said they held a very or fairly positive image of the EU. This suggests that for many people in France, opinions about whether the Western Balkans should join the EU reflect views of the EU in general.

3. 'Approvers' and 'disapprovers' share concerns regarding EU enlargement in the Western Balkans but come to different conclusions about the EU's ability to deal with these issues.

Fundamentally, those in favour of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU believed the EU can cope with challenges brought about by EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, particularly economic challenges, while those against were less optimistic. The findings further support the conclusion that views on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans are reflective of the views people have about the EU, its capacity to integrate new member states, and the consequences of that for France.

4. The French government should be aware that, for most citizens, the EU's enlargement in the Western Balkans is not a salient issue.

Given the low salience of the issue among French voters, it is unlikely that a continuation of the Western Balkan enlargement process would have a significant impact on French internal politics in general, and the electoral process in particular. Fears that the French government might be penalised by the electorate for moving forward with enlargement do not find a basis in this research. This is not to say that policy makers should not be careful of disenfranchisement over the issue. For many people in France, EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is associated with concerns over European cohesion, feelings of distrust in the EU and lack of control.

5. Communication on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans needs to reassure those with latent concerns and address French voters' general EU concerns.

Without addressing the wider concerns people have with regard to European cohesion and the future of the EU, further EU enlargement might add another layer of dissatisfaction to EU attitudes in France. In the long run, the best way forward is thus to build a wider trust in the EU, its institutions, and its rules and procedures, and ensure that communication on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans does not encourage negative views of European cohesion amongst French voters. When thinking about the Western Balkans, abstract arguments are unlikely to affect people's views, while enhancing personal experiences (such as opportunities for tourism) has some positive potential.