

# IT'S THE EU, NOT WESTERN BALKAN ENLARGEMENT...

## FRENCH PUBLIC OPINION ON EU MEMBERSHIP OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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# 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.

# INTRODUCTION

October 2019 was set to be the next step for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Albania and North Macedonia had hoped to advance to the next level in the accession process with the European Union after the summit held on 17 October. However, France and the Netherlands vetoed the next phase of negotiations with Albania, and France also vetoed North Macedonia's progression.<sup>1</sup> The fallout has been significant, with discussions not only addressing the future of these two countries, but the future of EU enlargement in general.<sup>2</sup> After the European Commission proposed changes to the rules guiding the process<sup>3</sup>, in March 2020, the two member states eventually changed their position<sup>4</sup>. Yet, their initial

and fervent opposition left a lasting mark on the debate about EU enlargement.

The French government played a particularly important role in this fallout. Even though French president Emmanuel Macron had long been an advocate for greater European integration, he has repeatedly voiced concerns about further enlargement.<sup>5</sup> He will stand for re-election in 2022, and his supporters argued that Macron's perspective reflected the views of large parts of the French population. In polls, a clear majority of the adult population in France said they were opposed to bringing further countries into the European

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1 Nielsen, N. (2019). 'EU fails to deliver on Albania and North Macedonia.' *EU Observer*, 18 October 2019. Available at <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/146329>.

2 Cvijic, S. & Cerimagic, A. (2020). 'Rebuilding our House of Cards: With More Glue'. Institute for Democracy: Societas Civilis Policy Paper No. 52. Skopje: Institute for Democracy: Societas Civilis. Available at [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/9\\_A5\\_REBUILDING-OUR-HOUSE-OF-CARDS\\_WITH-MORE-GLUEENG.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/9_A5_REBUILDING-OUR-HOUSE-OF-CARDS_WITH-MORE-GLUEENG.pdf).

European Stability Initiative (2020). 'Hamster in the Wheel Credibility and EU Balkan policy'. ESI Report, 15 January 2020. Available at <https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/ESI%20-%20Hamster%20in%20the%20Wheel%20-%2015%20January%202020.pdf>.

Delevic, M. & Prelec, T. (2019). 'Flatter and faster: New Western Balkans pathways to the EU.' *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 October 2019. Available at [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_flatter\\_and\\_faster\\_new\\_western\\_balkans\\_pathways\\_to\\_the\\_eu](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_flatter_and_faster_new_western_balkans_pathways_to_the_eu).

Cvijic, S., Kirova, I., Kirchner, M.J., & Nechev, Z. (2019). 'From Enlargement to the Unification of Europe: Why the European Union needs a directorate general Europe for future members and association countries', Brussels: Open Society European Policy Institute. Available at [https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/from-enlargement-to-the-unification-of-europe#publications\\_download](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/from-enlargement-to-the-unification-of-europe#publications_download).

3 Maksimov, V. (2020). 'Commission tries to breathe new life into EU enlargement.' *EURACTIV*, 5 February 2020. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/news/commission-tries-to-breathe-new-life-into-eu-enlargement/>.

4 Maksimov, V. (2020). 'EU moves to start membership talks with North Macedonia, Albania.' *EURACTIV*, 23 March 2020. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-moves-to-start-membership-talks-with-north-macedonia-albania/>.

5 Tcherneva, V. & Varma, T. (2019). 'After the French veto: The new scramble for the Western Balkans.' *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 October 2019. Available at [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_after\\_the\\_french\\_veto\\_the\\_new\\_scramble\\_for\\_the\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_after_the_french_veto_the_new_scramble_for_the_western_balkans).

Union. In the 2019 Eurobarometer, for example, only a third of French respondents (32 percent) approved of enlargement in principle, while 58 percent said they were against it.<sup>6</sup> What is more, the French public also seemed to be opposed to EU enlargement specifically in the Western Balkans. A poll conducted in December 2018 revealed significant opposition to Albania and Kosovo joining the EU (with 56 percent opposed), with other Western Balkan countries garnering just marginally lower disapproval (52 percent opposed to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina joining, and 44 and 43 percent respectively opposed to North Macedonia and Montenegro joining).<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to EU enlargement, France is not the only country with a sceptical public, but it is one of the countries with the highest rates of popular disapproval. Only in the Netherlands are more people opposed to further EU enlargement (60 percent), while disapproval is also high in Germany (57 percent), Austria (57 percent) and Belgium (56 percent). However, compared to these countries, the French opposition to countries in the Western Balkans joining the EU is significantly more pronounced.<sup>8</sup>

So did the French government's opposition to the addition of new member states from the Western Balkans reflect the views of the majority of the French population? In other words, was it electorally prudent?

While top-level polling may appear to support this view, drawing a firm conclusion is more difficult. When people answer a question in any survey, their responses need to be understood as them sharing

## So did the French government's opposition to the addition of new member states from the Western Balkans reflect the views of the majority of the French population? In other words, was it electorally prudent?

their view on the issue when being asked about it. However, this is not the same as evaluating how much an issue matters to people and, in particular, how much it impacts their voting decisions. This means that the existing polling data is not able to address the important question of how salient the issue of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is for the French public, and how far views on the issue relate to policy choices.

At least three questions about French attitudes to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans remain unanswered.

1. First, even though in polls a majority of the French public express opposition to countries in the Western Balkans joining the EU, we do not know how important the issue really is. Polls rarely assess whether EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is a topic that people think about often and whether or not they consider it to be something that could significantly affect their lives. Without knowing how salient the issue is, however, we cannot judge to what extent attitudes to it actually influence voting behaviour.

6 European Commission. (2019) 'Standard Eurobarometer 91. Europeans' views on the priorities of the European Union. *Directorate-General for Communication*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2253>.

7 YouGov (2018). 'YouGov/Eurotrack Survey Results'. *YouGov*. Available at [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/ofavfkfy8j/YouGov%20Eurotrack%20EU%20membership%202.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/ofavfkfy8j/YouGov%20Eurotrack%20EU%20membership%202.pdf)

8 Smith, M. (2019). 'Eurotrack: which countries do Europeans think should be in the EU?' *YouGov*, 5 March 2019. Available at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2019/03/05/eurotrack-it-was-mistake-admit-romania-and-bulgari>

2. Second, existing polling does not allow us to draw conclusions about whether views on Western Balkan countries joining the EU are specific to the appraisal of these countries or reflective of other, broader issues with EU enlargement. While the French public is opposed overall, their disapproval of most of the Western Balkan countries joining is somewhat lower than their disapproval of EU enlargement per se. To what extent are evaluations of these countries related to views on the EU, and of EU enlargement more generally?
3. Third, we do not know to what extent views on the Western Balkan countries joining the EU are based on stereotypes, well-founded knowledge of the region, or knowledge of the proceedings of EU enlargement.

This report addresses these questions. It provides deeper insights into the views of the French population on whether or not the countries of the Western Balkans should join the European Union. Using a combination of new survey data representative of the adult French population and in-depth focus groups with French voters<sup>9</sup>, we identify different and nuanced attitudes and salience profiles, and explore what characterises and drives attitudes about the Western Balkans and EU enlargement in France. This report summarises the main findings of both the survey and the focus group research. It provides a new and nuanced view of how the French public thinks about the Western Balkans and the future of the European Union, and provides clear recommendations on communication regarding the issue.

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9 N=2,025 French adults, aged 18 and older, representative of the adult French population by gender, age, region, and level of education, surveyed in March 2020. Focus groups with a total of 28 participants, recruited to represent diverse views on EU enlargement, held in Lyon in September 2020. All names given in this report are pseudonyms reflecting the gender of the participants. See appendix for more details on the methods.



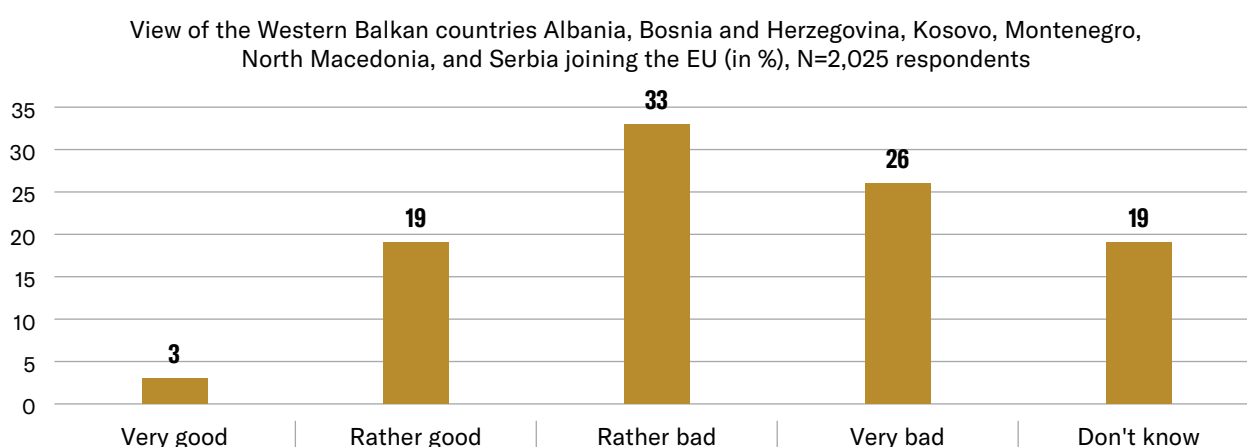
# 1. MOST PEOPLE IN FRANCE ARE OPPOSED TO EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS, BUT THEY DO NOT VIEW IT AS A SALIENT ISSUE

Even though a majority of respondents in France say they are opposed to the Western Balkan countries joining the EU, for most respondents, this issue is not a salient one and attitudes do not seem to be firmly

held. Combining attitudes and issue salience on the question of whether or not the Western Balkan countries should join the EU, we can distinguish several distinct profiles among the French public.

## FIGURE 1

### Attitudes towards Western Balkan countries joining the EU<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Question wording: “Do you think overall it would be good or bad, if we saw EU enlargement with/the accession of the Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia joining/to the European Union?” Please note each question wording (“enlargement with” or “the accession of”) was used randomly for half of all respondents respectively to check for sensitivity of the wording. Results were not statistically different for each group, so all responses are analysed jointly.

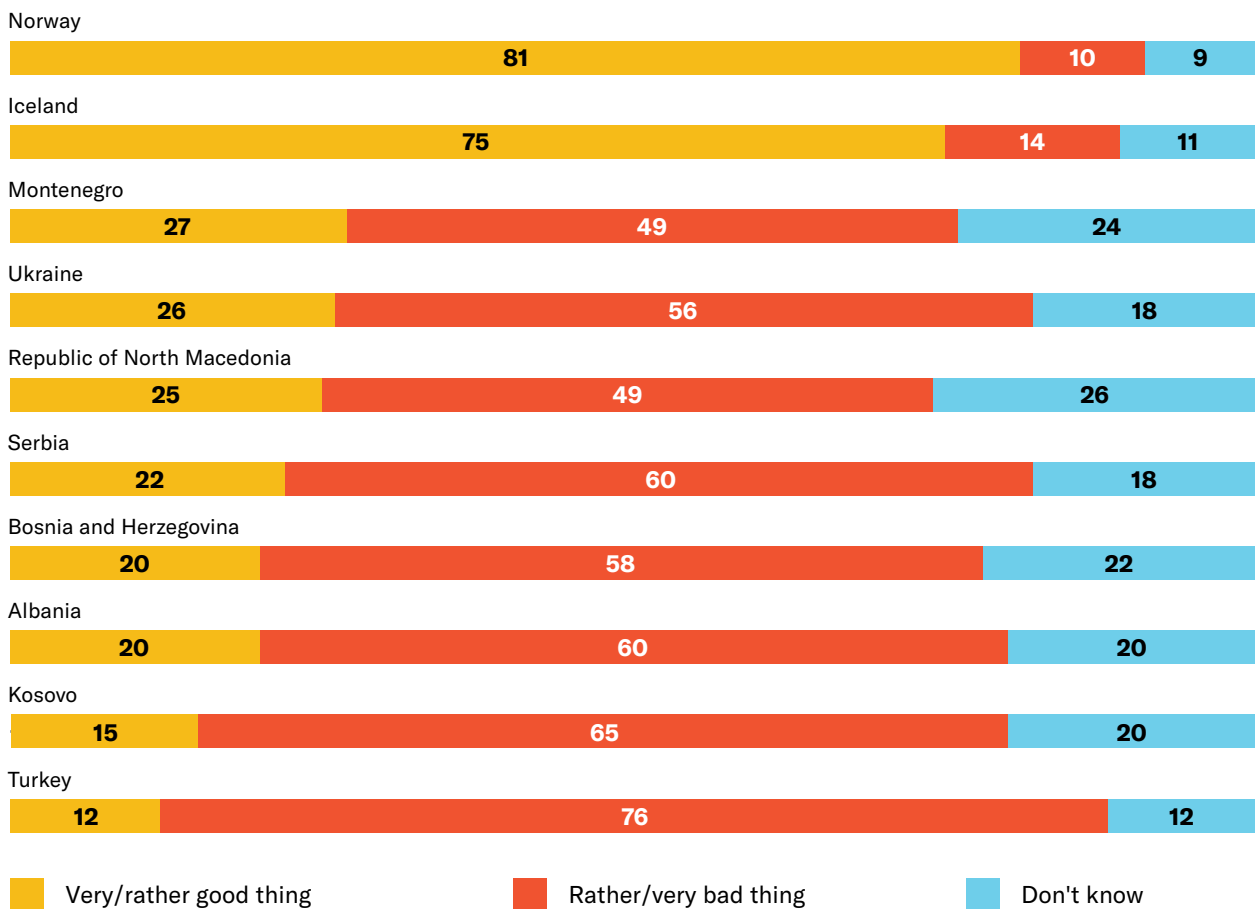
To gauge the views of the French public on Western Balkan countries joining the European Union, we asked respondents and focus group participants for their views of the issue and how salient they thought it was for them personally. Results on the former confirm findings from previous polls (Figure 1). With close to 60 percent disapproval, the majority of respondents said that it would be rather (33 percent) or very (26 percent) bad if countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia joined the EU. On the other hand, 22 percent of people considered this to be very or rather good, and a further 19 percent said that they didn't know how to evaluate the question.

Disapproval rates for individual countries in the Western Balkans are broadly comparable at between 49 and 65 percent, and much higher than for Norway and Iceland, yet lower than for Turkey (Figure 2). Roughly half of respondents state that they are against Montenegro and North Macedonia joining the EU (49 percent, with 27 and 25 percent respectively approving). Up to 60 percent state their disapproval of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Albania joining (opposed to around 20 percent approving) and as many as 65 percent are against Kosovo joining the EU (with only 15 percent in favour).

## FIGURE 2

### Attitudes towards individual Western Balkan countries joining the EU<sup>11</sup>

Views of the following individual countries joining the EU in the future in comparison (in %), N=2,025 respondents



11 Question wording: "For each of the countries shown below, please indicate to what extent you think it would be a good or a bad thing overall, if they joined the European Union in the future."

**Asked about the personal impact of a potential accession of Turkey, 53 percent of French respondents—nearly twice as many as for the same question for the Western Balkans—said that a decision on this question would affect their lives.**

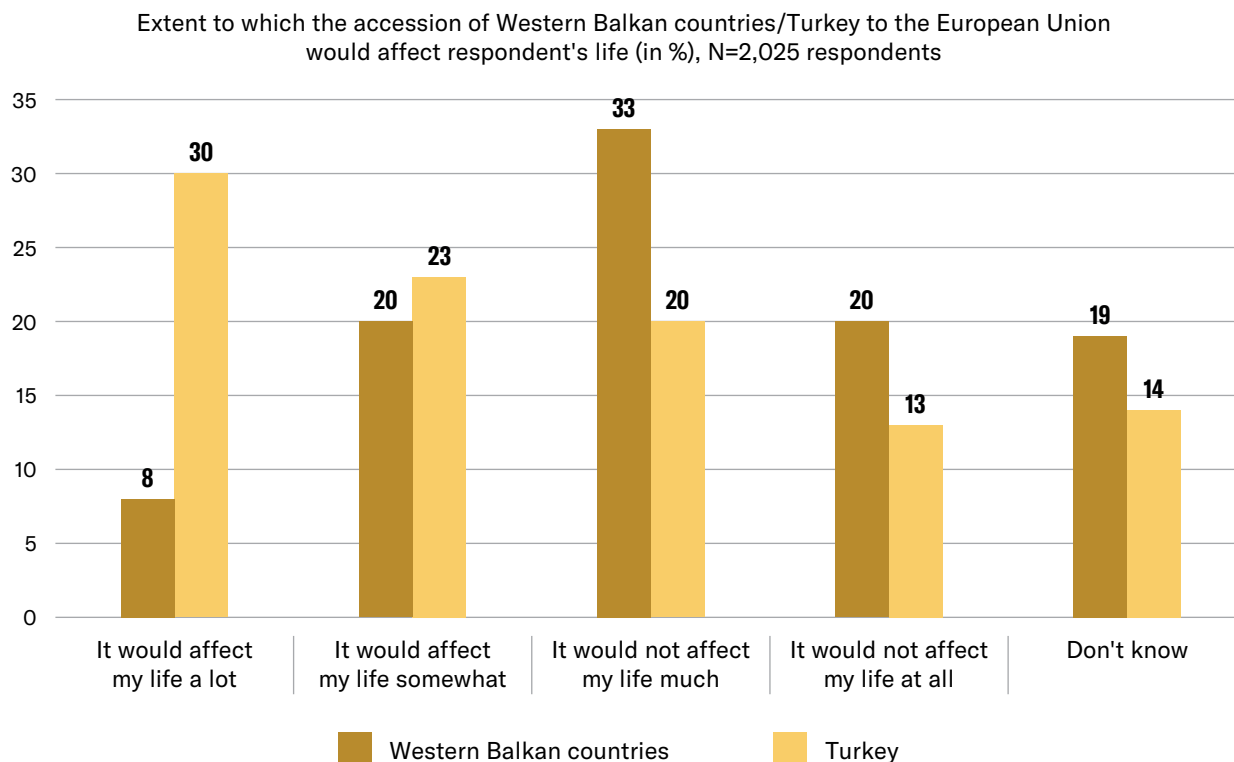
However, the second question, regarding the salience of the issue, reveals that a majority of French respondents does not feel strongly about EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Less than a third (28 percent) said that the addition of the Western Balkan countries to the EU would affect

their lives a lot or at least somewhat (Figure 3). The majority of respondents felt that this part of EU policy would not affect their lives much or at all (53 percent) and a further 19 percent had no opinion regarding the salience of the issue.

This low salience is particularly striking when we compare respondents’ views regarding the accession of the Western Balkan countries with their views on the accession of Turkey (Figure 3). Asked about the personal impact of a potential accession of Turkey, 53 percent of French respondents—nearly twice as many as for the same question for the Western Balkans—said that a decision on this question would affect their lives. What is more, the proportion of respondents saying that Turkey joining the EU would “affect their lives a lot” (30 percent) is more than three times that of the proportion saying the same about the Western Balkan countries (8 percent).

**FIGURE 3**

**Salience of Western Balkan EU enlargement compared to Turkey joining the EU<sup>12</sup>**



12 Question wording: “To what extent, do you think, would the accession of Western Balkan countries/Turkey to the European Union affect your life?”

We also find that a substantial share of French respondents does not seem to hold very firm views on the question of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Almost half of respondents (43 percent) changed their views on the issue between the beginning and the end of the survey, giving a different answer when asked about their views on the entire region joining the EU versus when asked explicitly about the respective countries.<sup>13</sup> Nine percent even changed their answers markedly from good to bad or vice versa. This impression was confirmed in the focus groups, where a number of participants conceded that they did not have strong opinions regarding EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Others explicitly acknowledged that the question was a difficult one and that they did not know what to think about it.

Taken together, the low overall salience of the issue combined with indications that a fair share of respondents does not seem to hold firm views about it suggests that, for a substantial part of the French population, the question of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU is not of great importance. Attitudes are scarcely deeply ingrained, and it is unlikely that the issue would strongly influence the public's voting choices and policy evaluations—at least not for the large part of the population for whom the issue is of low salience.

To understand both the nuances in peoples' views on the question of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU as well as the variation in views held across France, discussions of the issue need to move past simple approval-disapproval binaries. Evaluations of French public opinion should also distinguish between those who consider the issue of great importance and expect it to personally affect them, and those who do not.

**For a substantial part of the French population, the question of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU is not of great importance. Attitudes are scarcely deeply ingrained, and it is unlikely that the issue would strongly influence the public's voting choices and policy evaluations.**

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The combination of attitudes to and salience of the issue reveals at least five distinct groups of people, who all have different views regarding whether the Western Balkans countries should join the EU (Table 1):

A sizable group of people (22 percent of the total sample) who are opposed to the Western Balkan countries joining the EU and for whom this represents a salient issue, i.e. a strong concern (**high salience disapprovers**).

A very small group of people (4 percent of the total sample) who have positive attitudes to the Western Balkans joining the EU and who think it is going to make a big difference to their own lives, i.e. for whom it is a salient issue (**high salience approvers**).

A majority of people (54 percent of the total sample) for whom the issue of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU is generally of low salience. Even though these people do not hold strong beliefs about the issue, they express attitudes when asked. This group also includes respondents who expressed an attitude but said that they are unsure how important the issue is for them.<sup>14</sup>

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13 The two questions were: (1) "Some people think that Western Balkan countries joining the EU would be a good thing, while others think it would be a bad thing. Which of the following comes closest to your view?" and (2) "Do you think overall it would be good or bad, if we saw EU enlargement with/the accession of the Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia joining/to the European Union?"

14 We can either treat this as a distinctive "Don't know"-response to the salience of the issue, or we can consider it as an expression of low salience overall. The latter seems to be justified: if a person says "Don't know", they do not feel that the issue is important or do not want to engage with it strongly.

Of these low salience respondents, 18 percent are principally in favour of the Western Balkans joining the EU (**low salience approvers**), while 36 percent show some concern (**low salience disapprovers**).

A group of people (19 percent of the total sample) who are **unsure** or have no opinion on the issue of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU.

**TABLE 1**

Attitude and salience profiles towards the EU's Western Balkan enlargement

		ATTITUDES TOWARDS WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES JOINING THE EU		
		Very/rather good	Very/rather bad	Don't know
<b>Salience of Western Balkan countries joining the EU</b>	Would affect life somewhat / a lot	4% (Approval – high salience)	22% (Disapproval – high salience)	19% (Unsure)
	Would not affect life much / at all / Don't know	18% (Approval – low salience)	36% (Disapproval – low salience)	

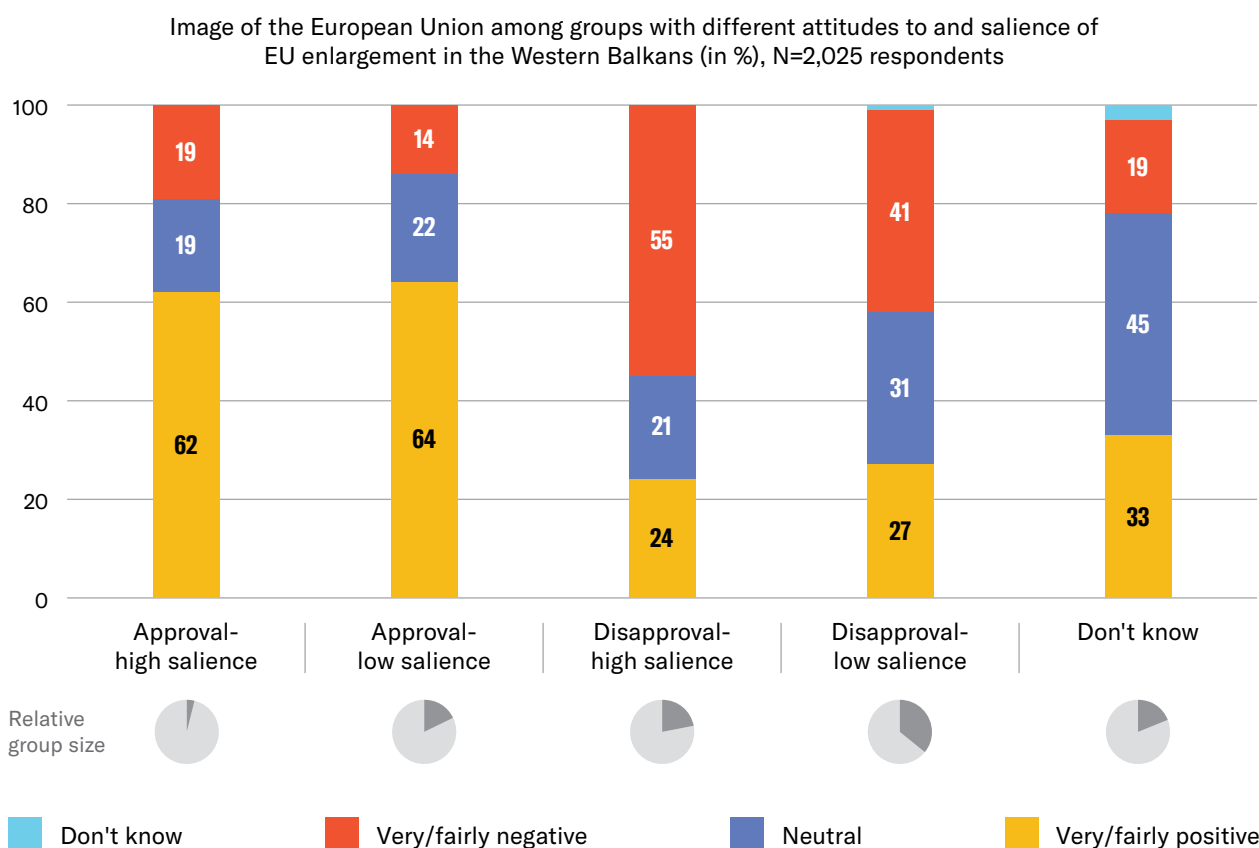
To account for both the nuances in peoples' views on the question of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU as well as the variation in views held across France, in the rest of this report we distinguish respondents and focus groups participants based on both their attitudes to the issue, as well as by how much this issue mattered to them. We characterise the following groups, each representing a sizable share of the French population, according to their attitude and perceived importance of whether countries in the Western Balkans should join the EU or not:

- (i) **High salience disapprovers** (22 percent of the total sample);
- (ii) **Low salience disapprovers** (36 percent of the total sample);
- (iii) **Approvers** (22 percent of total sample regardless of salience, combining high and low salience approvers)
- (iv) An **unsure group** of participants (19 percent of total sample).

## 2. ATTITUDES TO EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS REFLECT GENERAL VIEWS OF THE EU MORE THAN SPECIFIC CONCERNS OR KNOWLEDGE

In France, attitudes to the question of whether the Western Balkan countries should or should not join the EU are most closely related to people's general attitudes to the EU and to feeling represented by elected politicians. For most research participants, their stance on the issue was not so much connected to their level of knowledge about, specific experiences with, or stereotypes of the Western Balkan countries that would potentially join the EU. Instead, attitudes to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans were most closely associated with more general evaluations of the state of the EU, its future, EU enlargement in general, as well as with how well people felt France was represented in the EU.

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 (55 percent among those for whom the issue had a lot of salience and 41 percent among low salience disapprovers, Figure 4). In contrast, close to two thirds of approvers—regardless of how salient they felt the issue was—said they held a very or fairly positive image of the EU (between 62 and 64 percent), compared to only a quarter of disapprovers (24 and 27 percent, depending on issue salience).

**FIGURE 4****Image of the European Union, by attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans**

More specifically, those who disapproved of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, and to some extent those who were unsure of their opinion on the issue, were much more likely to say that European integration had gone too far than those who were in favour (56 percent, compared to just 11 percent among approvers). This feeling that European integration had gone too far was clearly expressed by disapprovers in the focus groups. For the most part, their views were based on the perception that there were serious problems with cohesion and collaboration among current EU member states.

The current health crisis caused by COVID-19 as well as previous European debt crises, and political fallout over migration, brought these problems to the fore.

Participants in focus groups that brought together disapprovers of EU enlargement echoed arguments used by Emmanuel Macron in a speech at a Western Balkans summit in 2018<sup>15</sup>: they were of the opinion that the EU needed to tackle recent crises and problems within the current group of member states first, before bringing further countries into the union.

*“I think we find it hard to build unity in Europe. So, if you had new states, I think you are going to make things even more difficult. (...) I think for the moment, we should harmonise and unify before accepting new states.”*

— Madeleine, 29, high salience disapprovers

15 Radosavljevic, Z. & Morgan, S. (2018). ‘The Brief – Macron pulls the Balkan rug.’ *EURACTIV*, 25 April 2018. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/the-brief-macron-pulls-the-balkan-rug>

*“At the moment, particularly with the health crisis that has hit us, we really are in a time period where I think we need to put the brakes on a bit.”*

— Carine, 53, high salience disapprovers

*“If the crisis gets even worse, yes, if it gets worse, well, I think why should we not, first of all, bring Europe together as it stands with the number of countries that are currently in Europe, before we start welcoming other countries? Yes, because they might just come along with all their problems.”*

— Cecile, 47, low salience disapprovers

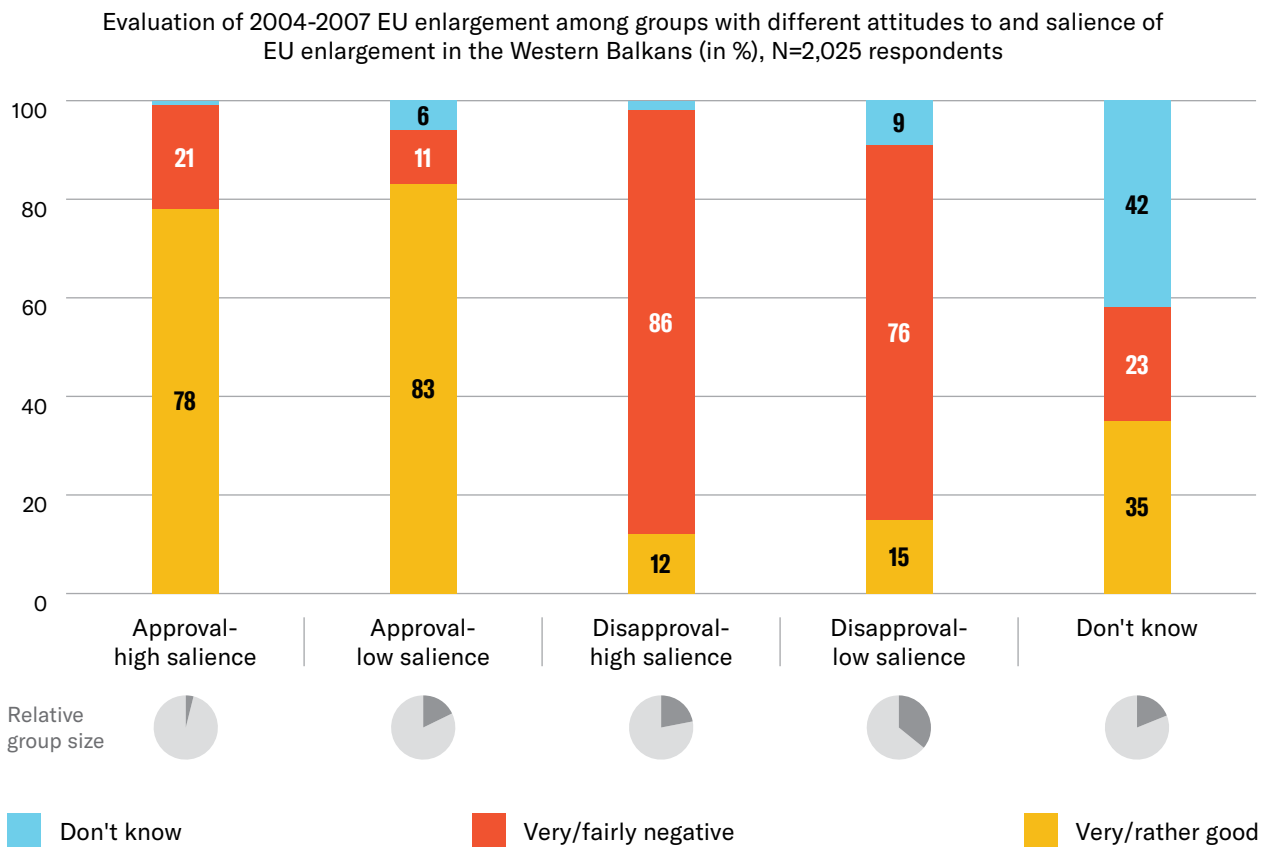
Even though this was a general sentiment that related to the state and future of the EU overall, several participants also explained how this perception explicitly and directly impacted their attitudes regarding EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

*“I know there’s an ongoing discussion about the Balkans, and their membership but I don’t believe at the moment it would be a good thing to bring them in. Maybe in 10 years. But in the current situation with COVID, we find it hard enough to manage ourselves, let alone managing other countries that join us.”*

— Valerie, 29, unsure group

**FIGURE 5**

**Evaluation of 2004-2007 EU enlargement, by attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans<sup>16</sup>**



<sup>16</sup> Question wording: “Between 2004 and 2007 twelve new members joined the European Union (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). According to you, was this rather good or bad for the EU?”



Disapprovers also tended to evaluate previous rounds of EU enlargement negatively. The overwhelming majority of those who opposed the Western Balkan countries joining the EU were also of the opinion that the addition of twelve countries to the EU between 2004 and 2007 had been bad for the EU (between 76 and 86 percent depending on the salience of the issue, Figure 5). There was broad agreement among focus group participants in the high and low salience disapproval groups that the EU worked better—and would work better in the future—when limited to fewer member states.

The reasons for these negative views of previous rounds of EU enlargement and additional countries joining the EU are varied. In the focus groups, some said EU enlargement had been pushed forward too quickly and that the EU tried to integrate too many aspects of governance too soon, particularly in terms of economic matters. Others felt more generally that there were too many differences between the member states to be able to establish cohesion in cultural, economic, and strategic matters and that the whole idea of the EU would only work with fewer countries.

*“My point of view personally is that Europe wanted to do everything very quickly —economic, social, cultural, military Europe—everything straight away. And today with hindsight—I’m not a visionary, I’m not a politician—but I think maybe we should have had economic Europe first of all with five, six, seven, eight countries that economically speaking could work and then a cultural Europe at 18, a military Europe even bigger.(...) Why did we move ahead so quickly?”*

— Pierre, 65, low salience disapprovers

*“There are too many differences. For example, the more countries there are, the more different we are.”*

— Sebastien, 38, high salience disapprovers

*“I think there are already lots of member states. I’m trying not to be negative, but I do think it’s complicated. The more countries there are, the more complicated it is. I think there are lots of differences and gaps between the different countries (...) Specifically, at the level of Europe, we’ve got so many countries that are so very different.”*

— Thierry, 34, low salience disapprovers

## **While a number of those who disapproved of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans expressed a lack of trust in elected representatives in general, approvers felt generally well represented in the EU and by elected European politicians.**

This is in stark contrast to views among those in favour of the countries in the Western Balkans joining the EU. Of this group, around 80 percent believed that previous rounds of EU enlargement had been rather or even very good for the EU (Figure 5)—despite some approvers acknowledging that they themselves held concerns prior to the enlargement. The focus group participants who represented the approvers explained that they were in favour of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU due to their hope that additional EU member states would make the union stronger overall, geopolitically as well as economically.

*“We want economic clout. If we’re to have this, we need to stick together.”*

— Gerard, 62, approval group

*“A united Europe is not easy, but a strong, global Europe could be good.”*

— Juliette, 29, approval group

*“I think we need to look at the geopolitical perspective. The stronger we are, the more successful we’ll be when it comes to counteracting China, the US, etc.”*

— Marie-Laure, 44, approval group

In addition to general evaluations of the state of the EU and EU enlargement, attitudes regarding the prospect of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU were also related to how represented people felt politically, and specifically how represented they felt as citizens in the EU. While a number of those who disapproved of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans expressed a lack of trust in elected representatives in general, approvers felt generally well represented in the EU and by elected European politicians.

Among disapprovers overall, but especially among those who felt strongly about EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and who thought it was a salient issue, there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with regard to decision making on European matters, and a lack of trust in elected representatives. Half of all low salience disapprovers and 63 percent of all high salience disapprovers felt France's interests were badly represented in the EU (Figure 6). Part of this may be due to a feeling of lack of political control over European decision-making, a sentiment clearly expressed in the focus groups:

*"The last time there was a European referendum, what happened? People voted no. And what did the president say? He said yes. So, how can we trust our political representatives. There is a European democracy crisis. (...) We have this crisis: we lack trust in our authorities."*

— Monique, 25, high salience disapprovers

Conversely, the vast majority of those in favour of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU (between 75 and 83 percent depending on salience, Figure 6) and also a plurality of those who were unsure about the question thought France's interests were well represented in the EU (45 percent). In contrast to disapproving groups, there was a clear consensus among approvers that elected European

representatives can be trusted to make decisions on complex matters such as EU enlargement on behalf of the population.

*"We don't believe we should decide if a country joins or not. Parliament is made up of representatives from our countries."*

— Julien, 39, approval group

*"It's these European politicians, they debate over the laws and budget so it's up to them to decide. They are the people who are far more familiar with the subject, they know what the geopolitical subjects are, they know what the challenges are, so I'd argue it's up to them to decide. That's part of their role."*

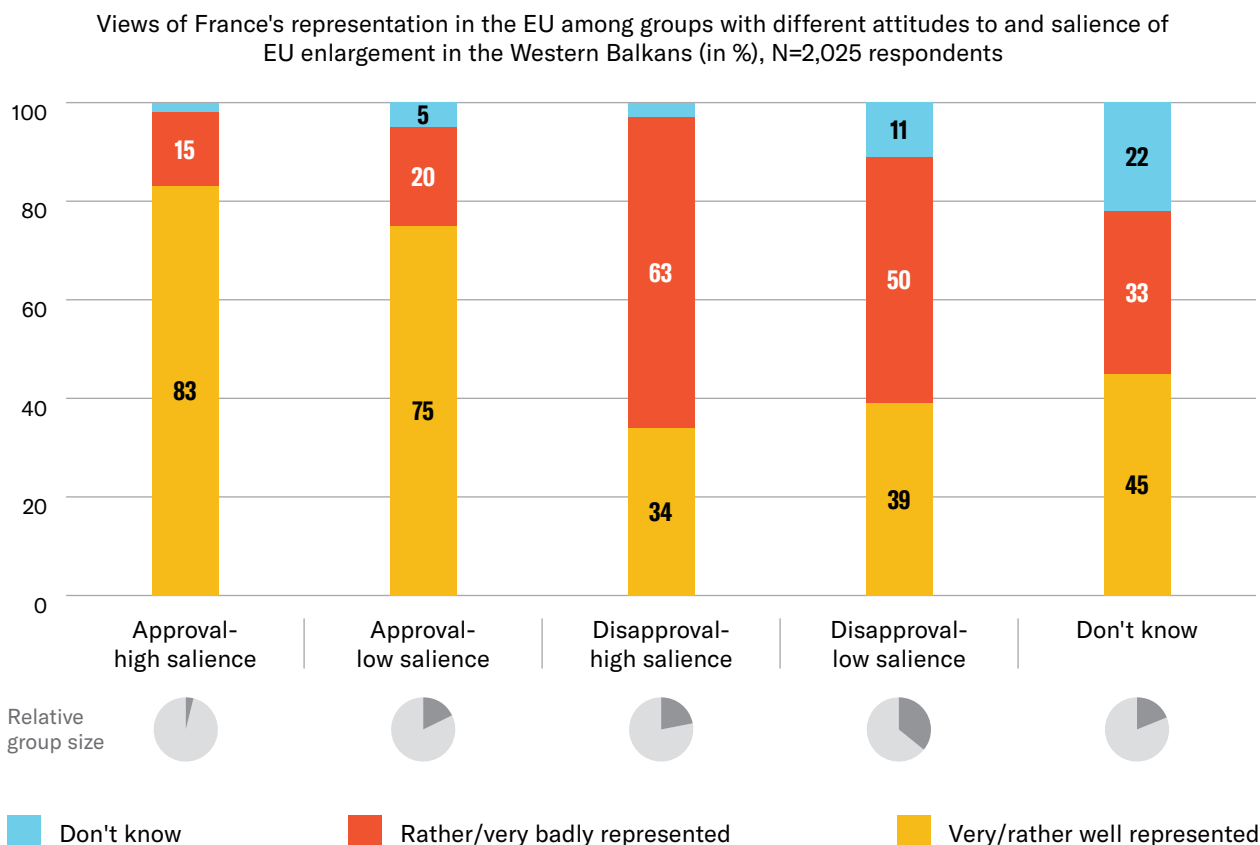
— Luc, 49, Unsure group

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**In contrast to disapproving groups, there was a clear consensus among approvers that elected European representatives can be trusted to make decisions on complex matters such as EU enlargement on behalf of the population.**

### FIGURE 6

Views on the representation of France’s interests in the EU, by attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans<sup>17</sup>



While general EU attitudes and the degree of trust in the political process play a significant role in shaping French opinion on the EU’s Western Balkan enlargement process, several other factors do not. Most importantly, how much factual knowledge respondents had about the countries in the region and the enlargement process did not make a difference in how they evaluated the issue. On

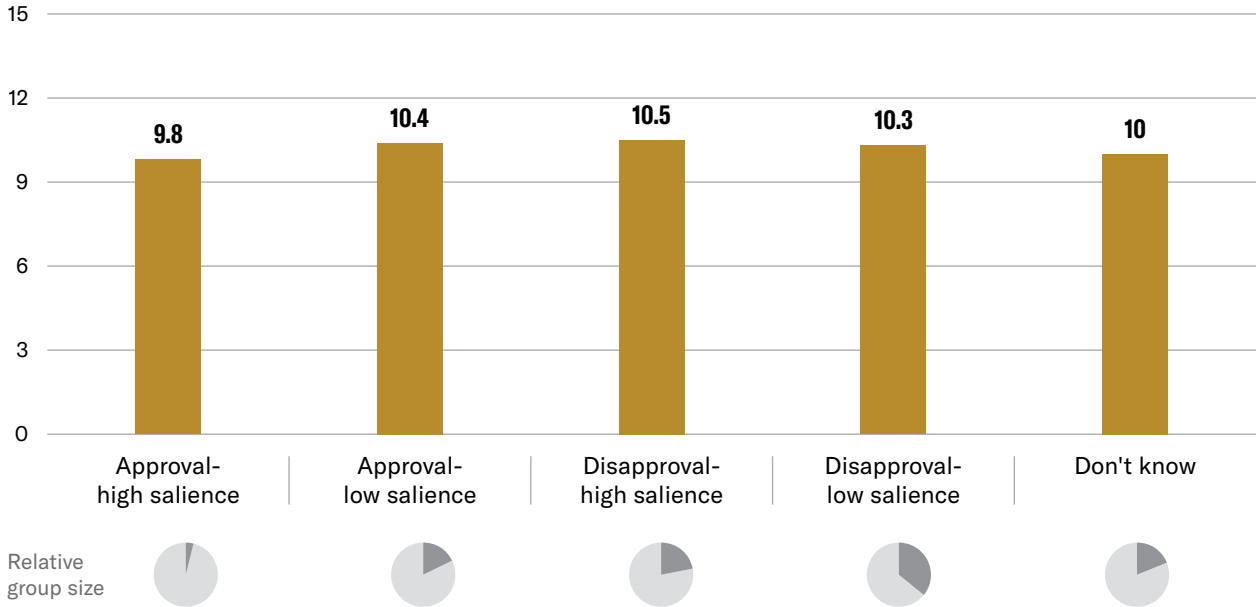
average, approvers, disapprovers, and also those who said they were unsure of their opinion towards the issue all scored similarly on a range of questions testing respondents’ factual knowledge (Figure 7). This is what would be expected given the low salience of the issue and the extent to which latent and more general feelings about the EU and EU enlargement seem to drive attitudes.

17 Question wording: “How well or badly do you think France’s interests are represented in the European Union?”

**FIGURE 7**

**Knowledge about Western Balkans and enlargement procedures by attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans<sup>18</sup>**

Average knowledge score of correct answers in true/false question on 15 statements, among groups with different attitudes to and salience of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, N=2,025 respondents



Similarly, few of the differences in attitudes towards the Western Balkan countries joining the EU align with demographic factors in the French population. Gender and age have little impact on attitudes on the issue, with women and young people tending to say they are unsure about their attitude a little more often than men. Older people are somewhat more likely to express a firm view on the question than younger people, more often disapproval, while younger people are more likely to approve. Furthermore, in contrast to other questions concerning the EU, there is only a small relationship between level of education and attitudes on EU

enlargement in the Western Balkans, with people who approve having somewhat higher levels of education on average.

Having personal experience of one or more of Western Balkans countries does have the potential to affect attitudes about these countries becoming EU members, but it is not clear how much of a difference it makes for the French public overall. Few people in France have personal experience of the Western Balkans: only one in ten (10 percent) have ever travelled to a country there, and just over one in six (18 percent) personally know someone

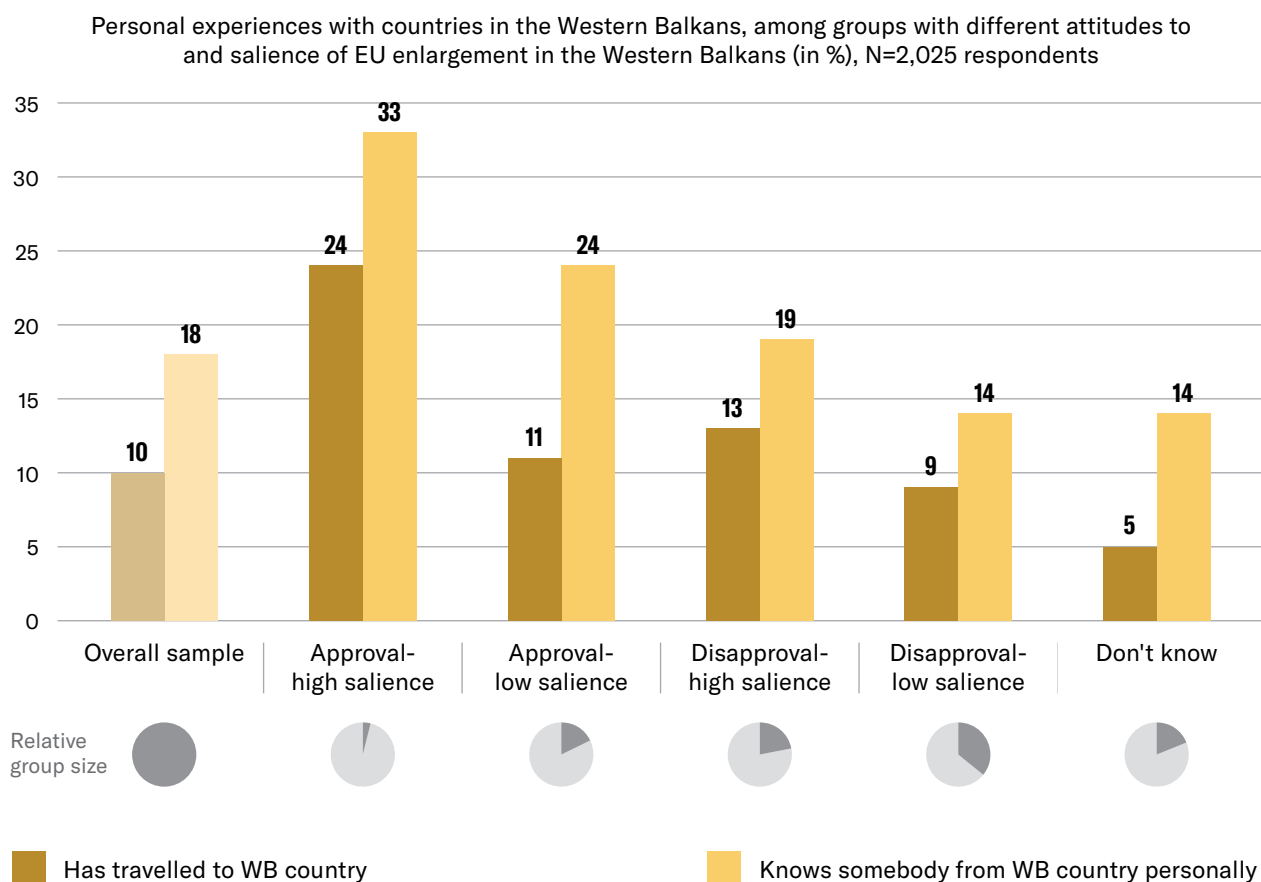
18 An index of correct answers in true/false question on the following statements: (i) "A decision about joining the European Union can only be made for all Western Balkan candidate countries together. Decisions are not made on a country-by-country basis.", (ii) "If the Western Balkan countries join the European Union, it means that Turkey also gets to join the European Union automatically.", (iii) "Even if France voted against new countries joining the European Union, a majority of other EU member states could overrule the French position in the European Council.", (iv) "The population of Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo together is roughly the same size as the population of France." and (v) "Of the following countries, please select all those that you think are currently member states of the European Union." Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Albania, Bosnia, None of these

from the region. Respondents who approved of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans were more likely to say they knew someone from the region (between 24 and 33 percent of approvers, compared to 14 to 19 percent among disapprovers and those who are unsure) or had travelled there (24 percent

among high salience approvers compared to only 5 to 9 percent among disapprovers and those who are unsure, Figure 8), but focus group participants shared various kinds of personal experiences regardless of their attitudes toward the issue.

### FIGURE 8

**Personal experiences with Western Balkans, by attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans<sup>19</sup>**



<sup>19</sup> Question wording: (i) “Have you ever travelled to one of the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia or Serbia?” and (ii) “Do you know anybody personally who comes from one of the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia or Serbia?”

### 3. APPROVERS AND DISAPPROVERS SHARE SPECIFIC CONCERNS ABOUT THE WESTERN BALKANS, BUT SEE THEM ADDRESSED DIFFERENTLY

When it comes to specific evaluations of the countries in the Western Balkans, people with different attitudes towards EU enlargement in the region share a range of concerns. Research participants—regardless of attitude and salience profile—acknowledged, for example, economic disparities in the union, potential labour migration and its impact on France's economy, and problems with the democratic stability of countries in the Western Balkans and the EU as a whole.

Yet approvers and disapprovers showed clear differences in how they weighed these concerns and saw them addressed by the EU at large. Fundamentally, those in favour of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU believed that the EU can cope with such challenges, while those against were less optimistic about its ability to integrate the Western Balkan countries. This further illustrates how attitudes to the issue are largely related to overall evaluations of the state of the EU, and not so much to stereotypes and concerns specific to the Western Balkan countries.

Across the spectrum of opinions in France, there is a sense that EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has more advantages for countries in the region than for the EU and its current member states. In all focus groups, regardless of attitudes to the issue, participants agreed that Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia would benefit more from becoming EU member states, in terms of their economic opportunities, democratic development, and overall stability in the light of past tensions and conflict, than the EU would from enlargement in the region.

*“Maybe it's more beneficial for them than for us.”*

— Elise, 59, approval group

*“It would be in their interests. I don't see any interests for us.”*

— Carine, 53, high salience disapprovers

While the argument that countries in the Western Balkans might benefit more from their integration into the EU than current member states was a cause for concern among disapprovers, for approvers it was another reason to be in favour. In their opinion, it was the duty of the EU to support the Western Balkan countries and many agreed that strengthening the region as a whole would eventually be in the interest

of the EU. Drawing on past experiences, for example with Portugal, approvers were optimistic about the EU's ability to provide for and raise the standard of living in the countries. Disapprovers, on the other hand, believed that in its current state the EU did not have the capacity to provide for any new members, in particular not those that would need a lot of support and subsidies (Table 4).

**TABLE 4**

Interpretations of concerns regarding economic impact, democratic development, and peace and stability among approvers and disapprovers

	APPROVERS	DISAPPROVERS
<b>Economic impact</b>	<p><i>"If these countries were to join the European Union, it would enable them to develop economically."</i> – Julien, 39, approval group</p> <p><i>"I think it would be a new market or a set of new markets for the European Union. (...) We could go and build in these countries. Build and develop and also the labour, from a geographic perspective, I think it would be ideal."</i> – Christophe, 46, approval group</p>	<p><i>"We'd have to subsidise their economy, and so as a result, we'll find ourselves in a position where we're paying more money and our budget is already tight."</i> – Fleur, 48, low salience disapprovers</p> <p><i>"When it comes to the Balkan countries, well it's quite possible that one day they have a crisis because they're weak economically speaking and so if they did have a crisis in these countries, obviously one of the European countries that would have to help them the most and that would have to take out more debt would be France."</i> – Aimee, 18, low salience disapprovers</p>
<b>Labour migration and impact on jobs</b>	<p><i>"I think competition is healthy and if they become members of the European Union, it means as you say, it can be a win-win situation in terms of the exchanges. Yes, okay, the first thing we see is cheap labour and we get scared of our jobs, but we've got engineers who will travel to these countries nevertheless, to develop business. I think overall it's a win-win situation for everybody."</i> – Julien, 39, approval group</p>	<p><i>"And a lot of them [citizens of the Western Balkan countries] would move west. That would be a problem as well. They already do it to a certain extent. I think it would be even worse."</i> – Nicolas, 47, high salience disapprovers</p> <p><i>"What I'm afraid of as well is that these countries that have got a lower standard of living than ours—is that our companies move to these countries, so that way they can benefit from low labour costs."</i> – Matthieu, 69, low salience disapprovers</p> <p><i>"I'm certain that a certain number of companies will relocate if these countries join. Some companies will relocate. (...) A lot of French people are impacted by the fact that other Eastern European countries have joined the EU."</i> – Valerie, 29, unsure group</p>

	APPROVERS	DISAPPROVERS
<b>Democratic development</b>	<p><i>“And also, it would bring to Europe a slightly less stable set of societies that would hopefully become more stable as the others are stable.”</i></p> <p>– Elise, 59, approval group</p>	<p><i>“We will help the state. (...) And if we help the state, given the corruption that exists in the country today, I don’t think the population would necessarily benefit from the aid.”</i></p> <p>– Nicolas, 47, high salience disapprovers</p>
	<p><i>“It could generate more democracy and be beneficial for Europe if these countries head in the right direction.”</i></p> <p>– Julien, 39, approval group</p>	<p><i>“The disadvantages are also from a democratic perspective. Human rights are not always respected, and these countries are gangrened by the Mafia and by corruption. (...) To help their institutions function, yes, I think we’d have to pay more.”</i></p> <p>– Fleur, 48, low salience disapprovers</p>
<b>Peace and stability</b>	<p><i>“I’m in favour (...) because this would provide stability in the Balkans. And it would enable Europe to become a better place and be more successful.”</i></p> <p>– Christophe, 46, approval group</p>	<p><i>“When you talk about the Balkans, I think about tension. (...) I see it as a potential source of tension. These are countries that are always niggling at one another and if for whatever reason things suddenly spark and it turns into a fully-fledged conflict.”</i></p> <p>– Pierre, 65, low salience disapprovers</p>
	<p><i>“A lot of countries, if you look at their historical past, we can see that they’ve achieved peace since they’ve joined Europe, and that’s a very good point. (...) I think it can be beneficial for them and the EU, a promise of peace and stability.”</i></p> <p>– Julien, 39, approval group</p>	

Both high and low salience disapprovers, as well as those who were unsure of their attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, shared concerns—particularly about the potential economic consequences of enlargement for the EU and its member states. While some hoped that the addition of countries in the Western Balkans might turn out to be beneficial for trade in the EU or strengthen the single currency, with the exception of the approvers, the vast majority of participants voiced concerns about the potential impact of the EU’s Western Balkan enlargement on the European and French economies.

Participants in the disapproving groups and those who were unsure worried about large-scale labour migration from the Western Balkans to France,

about relocation of jobs from France to the region, and about strain on the EU and, ultimately, France’s budget. In particular, the potential loss of jobs in France was a major and often personal concern, with some participants directly relating it to worries about their own financial situation. Some participants also related their worries about EU enlargement in the Western Balkans to experiences of the recent European public debt crisis, claiming that, as with

**In contrast to economic concerns, cultural worries do not seem to be a prominent reason for opposing the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU.**



Greece, new member states might run into financial difficulties and force France to contribute more to the EU budget to finance subsidies and future bailouts.

In contrast to economic concerns, cultural worries do not seem to be a prominent reason for opposing the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. Even though participants across the different focus groups shared various stereotypes regarding criminality, the level of corruption, cultural cohesion, and religious tensions in the countries of the Western Balkans, for most participants these seemed to play little role in their evaluations of potential EU enlargement in the region. Only a few of participants, and only high salience disapprovers, connected these concerns to their evaluations of the question whether countries in the Western Balkans should join the EU or not.

*“I think there is a massive amount of corruption. I think we see that quite clearly. And I don’t think it is good for the countries next door, and it wouldn’t be good for us.”*

— Nicolas, 47, high salience disapprovers

Contrary to widely shared concerns, there are few advantages that people accept as potential benefits regardless of their attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Across all focus groups, participants recognised that the integration of the countries in the Western Balkans into the EU would bring geopolitical advantages (Table 5)—especially so after seeing the geographic position of the countries on a map vis-à-vis the EU’s current member states.

**Across all focus groups, participants recognised that the integration of the countries in the Western Balkans into the EU would bring geopolitical advantages. This was so even for participants in the disapproval groups: when shown a map of Europe with current member states highlighted, a number of participants expressed surprise about the Western Balkan countries not being part of the EU yet.**

This was so even for participants in the disapproval groups: when shown a map of Europe with current member states highlighted, a number of participants expressed surprise about the Western Balkan countries not being part of the EU yet.

Participants explained that geopolitically, EU membership could protect the region from malign Russian, Chinese, or even US influence. For some, bringing the Western Balkan countries into the EU would even see “a geographical error” corrected. Crucially, this latter part of the geopolitical argument also sets apart countries in the Western Balkans from other accession candidates, first and foremost Turkey.

**TABLE 5**

Reactions to a map of Europe with current member states and countries in the Western Balkans highlighted in different colours

APPROVAL GROUP	DISAPPROVERS – HIGH SALIENCE
<p><i>“Their geographic position puts them at the centre of Europe. They are fully fledged members of Europe; they have to be.”</i></p> <p>– Juliette, 29, approval group</p>	<p><i>“If we reason from a geographic perspective, it is very obvious they should be part of Europe.”</i></p> <p>– Sebastien, 38, high salience disapprovers</p>
<p><i>“You don’t want the Russians to grab hold of them [the Western Balkans], do you? Yes, you never know with the Russians. I think it’s much better to have them with us than against us.”</i></p> <p>– Elise, 59, approval group</p>	<p><i>“Geographically speaking, yes absolutely. They are European.”</i></p> <p>– Nicolas, 47, high salience disapprovers</p>
UNSURE GROUP	DISAPPROVERS – LOW SALIENCE
<p><i>“Yes, if we accepted Bulgaria, it would seem logical to accept them.”</i></p> <p>– Yves, 35, unsure group</p>	<p><i>“Yes, they’re in Europe and in this case, I find it rather shocking that they’re not members of the European Union when I look at this specific map.”</i></p> <p>– Fleur, 48, low salience disapprovers</p>
<p><i>“More cohesion, a bigger entity might mean that we’ve got more clout, we’re more powerful, at least if the outside world looks at us. So, if Donald Trump thinks about hitting us on the head he’ll think twice before he does so because we’ve got better cohesion and because Europe is bigger.”</i></p> <p>– Francois, 48, unsure group</p>	

Other widely shared arguments in favour of integrating countries in the Western Balkans into the EU related to the potential enrichment of cultural life in the EU and new opportunities for travel and tourism. The latter argument was particularly evident for participants who were otherwise unsure of their attitudes towards the issue, because it directly related to their personal experience of the countries in question.

*“Maybe these countries could provide us with a great deal of added value, a great deal of culture and so on.”*

– Francois, 48, unsure group

*“Maybe it would [be good] from a tourist perspective. These are nice countries. If we were to all travel to these countries and their currency is the same as ours, it would be an advantage. So, good for tourism.”*

– Luc, 49, unsure group

Lastly, participants also shared the sentiment of lacking information about—and to some extent control over—the decision-making process regarding further EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. However, while approvers agreed that enough information was available and they just had not yet accessed it, disapprovers and also those who

were unsure of their opinion on the issue were of the opinion that they lacked information about processes in EU decision-making (Table 6). For some participants, this perceived lack of information was associated with a lack of control over the process and, ultimately, with a feeling of resignation with regard to the issue.

## TABLE 6

### Attitudes regarding information on EU decision-making about EU enlargement in the Western Balkans

ENOUGH INFORMATION	NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION
<p><i>“The EU has made a lot of efforts to communicate. In the towns and cities there are EU information centres where you can go and get all kinds of information. As an individual you have to make the effort to go to the office. There’s a lot of communication between states, they make an effort.”</i></p> <p>— Gerard, 62, approval group</p>	<p><i>“Well, we don’t know, the problem is we do not know. We don’t have the information. We get bits of information left, right and centre that we can see on television, but that’s all we have. Well, I have an impression, but it’s not based on anything tangible.”</i></p> <p>— Pierre, 65, low salience disapproval group</p> <p><i>“No, the majority of us don’t even know what’s going on, why give us the decision-making powers.”</i></p> <p>— Margot, 65, unsure group</p> <p><i>“I personally don’t understand. I am under the impression I have no control.”</i></p> <p>— Carine, 53, high salience disapproval group</p>

## 4. COMMUNICATION NEEDS TO ADDRESS FIRST AND FOREMOST GENERAL EU CONCERNS

This research has shown how attitudes on the EU's Western Balkan enlargement are rather latent. The issue is not salient for many people in France. Approval or disapproval of Western Balkan enlargement is most closely associated with overall evaluations of the state of the EU, feelings of political control, and to an extent with attitudes towards previous rounds of EU enlargement, rather than with factual knowledge of the Western Balkans or explicit worries concerning them. How much people knew about the region or the EU accession process had little to no impact and, apart from concerns over the economic consequences, few explicit worries specific to the Western Balkans played a crucial role in shaping participants' views of the issue.

Given how much latent concerns, rather than factual knowledge, drive attitudes towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans in France, opportunities to shift attitudes on the issue are very limited. Without addressing the wider concerns people have with regard to European cohesion and the future of the EU, it will be hard to convince those who oppose EU enlargement because of its potentially adverse consequences for the EU, and France within the EU. In the long run, the best way forward is thus to address concerns regarding the future of the EU (starting with the Conference of the Future of Europe) and to ensure that communication on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans does not encourage negative views of European cohesion amongst French voters.

One way of doing that is for communication around the issue to provide transparency and to ensure that people, not just in France, feel taken along in the process. This can reassure those who disapprove because of latent concerns as well as those who are unsure of their opinion on the issue. It can also address the perceived lack of control over the decision-making process that was expressed in some of the focus groups. Providing people with information about the accession process, the associated criteria for integration into the EU and how far along individual countries are in the process is particularly pertinent given that discussions about the potential integration of countries in the Western Balkans into the EU are ongoing and a political issue in several member states, not just in France.

Germany's *Westbalkanregelung*—legislation that allows citizens of Western Balkan countries to come to Germany to work and study—illustrates how information about legislation and ongoing policy

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work can impact attitudes among voters in France. None of the focus group participants knew of this regulation, but upon hearing about it a number of participants in the approval, high salience disapproval, and unsure group thought that it sent an interesting message that could potentially change views on the issue if only more people knew about it.

*“Well, I’m thinking that if already we’ve got one country that has opened up its borders to these countries, then it would seem very sensible to open up the rest of Europe to these countries. In other words, the process has already been entered into.”*

— Juliette, 29, approval group

Another crucial step towards establishing an image of European cohesion is that the criteria set out for the enlargement process are equally applied to all candidate countries—also to new and current member states. A number of research participants said that they lacked information on the progress candidate countries had made with regard to the criteria set out in the enlargement process. There was also a call for more clarity on how these criteria apply to the different countries under discussion for integration into the EU, as well as to current member states. Many participants knew that there were specific criteria applied to candidate countries, but few could name any of them.

*“My question [to the president]: Based on what criteria do you want to enable the Balkans to join the EU and how do you plan to proceed? That’s the question and I think that’s the main and most important point for me. To know more about it, what are the criteria and what will be the added value for us.”*

— Francois, 48, unsure group

Some also explicitly referred to the fact that while there were strictly monitored benchmarks the candidate countries had to achieve, for example on the rule of law and the level of corruption, current member states regularly failed to meet the same

standards—seemingly without any consequences. These breaches make it very difficult for people to develop trust in the enlargement process and to trust in the candidate countries’ compliance with the EU’s criteria. For this reason, some participants echoed calls for a reversible enlargement process, or rather for the opportunity to dismiss new member states when crucial criteria for EU membership are broken.

*“The credibility of new integration means that the states that are already members of the EU must be consistent, must manage each other efficiently.”*

— Margot, 65, unsure group

*“Greece joined and a few years later we realised that they’d told a load of lies, that they’d cooked the books (...). So, I’m saying let’s capitalise on this experience. If we let Albania in tomorrow, for example, and (...) we realise ten years later that they’ve cheated on the accounts, they’ve cooked the books, we should be able to do something about it. (...) I think we have to be conscious of the fact that those countries that join, have to join based on strict criteria and why not have a trial period. They can join temporarily, and we see how it goes.”*

— Pierre, 65, low salience disapprovers

While keeping people in France up to date on the criteria for decision-making in EU enlargement processes will not suddenly turn disapprovers into fervent approvers of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU, there are some messages that—if highlighted—have the potential to speak to different groups of French voters. One is the geopolitical argument: that integrating the Western Balkans into the EU would complete the European puzzle, strengthen democratic processes in the core of Europe, and protect the region from malign outside influence. Similarly, communication addressing European cohesion and the democratic basis of the EU as a league of nations would speak to all types of voters in France, as well as messages that highlight potential opportunities for trade and tourism.

*“So, if all of a sudden, they [the Western Balkan countries] couldn't do whatever they wanted in terms of disobeying human rights [that would be something positive]—there is a massive amount of progress that has been made in terms of prison sentences in the European Union. We are very good at working on human rights.”*

— Madeleine, 29, high salience disapprovers

*“It seems pretty obvious to include them and create a corridor for tourism, trade, and all kinds of things”*

— Juliette, 29, approval group

Other messages, in contrast, have very little potential to speak to a variety of groups. According to the focus group participants, communication that emphasises the EU's efforts to strengthen countries in the Western Balkans will certainly not convince many disapprovers, since their opposition is not really about the countries of the region joining the EU. While an important and compelling argument for those in favour of EU enlargement in the region,

some disapprovers explained how they were tired of appeals to their moral responsibility and the issue being reduced to kindness and support. Similarly, disapprovers were also fed up with appeals to support enlargement for its potential to strengthen the single currency in the EU. More than anything, after the experience of the debt crisis in Greece, this argument symbolised lost ground for them.

*“Well, people who say you have got to accept everybody. You have got to be kind. You have got to accept it is in their interests. They will feel better. It will be better for human rights. (,,) Yes. But I am fed up to the teeth. We don't live in teddy bear land. Why should we be kind?”*

— Monique, 25, high salience disapprovers

*“Something that really annoys me is when I hear people talk about the single currency. We will be stronger thanks to the single currency. I must admit, I am fed up with that.”*

— Sebastien, 38, high salience disapprovers

# CONCLUSION

The question of whether or not countries in the Western Balkans should join the EU has become a feature in political debates in France. The French government's interim position of opposing further EU enlargement left a lasting mark on the debates about EU enlargement in France as well as the wider European Union. To what extent do these high-level discussions about EU enlargement in the Western Balkans reflect the views of the French population?

This study shows that the majority of people in France have rather latent attitudes towards the EU's Western Balkan enlargement. For most, the issue is not very salient. Three in four people in France believe that it would not affect their lives much or at all if Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia joined the EU. Although opposition to further EU enlargement is widespread among the French public, much of this enlargement fatigue is the result of wider concerns regarding European cohesion, evaluations of previous rounds of enlargement, the future of the EU, and, to some extent, France's role in it.

Given the low salience of the issue amongst the French electorate, 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. Compared to respondents' disproportionate opposition towards Turkey's integration into the EU, the question of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU is of low salience. This is not to say that policy makers should

**Three in four people in France believe that it would not affect their lives much or at all if Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia joined the EU.**

not be careful of disenfranchisement. Indeed, they should be particularly careful to ensure that the process does not exacerbate feelings of distrust (in the EU) and lack of control.

The study finds that approval or disapproval of Western Balkan enlargement in France is most closely associated with evaluations of the image of the EU in general, feelings of political control and representation in the Union, and previous rounds of EU enlargement rather than with specific concerns regarding the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. While approvers and disapprovers shared specific concerns—for example, regarding the economic impact of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, labour migration and jobs in France, as well as the democratic development in the region and peace and stability in Europe as a whole—they fundamentally differed in their evaluations of the EU's ability to cope with such challenges.

Most focus group participants, except for those with the strongest opposing views, did seem to agree that the EU's Western Balkan enlargement would have geopolitical benefits, would make geographic sense,



**Given the low salience of the issue amongst the French electorate, 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.**

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and would offer Europeans wider opportunities. If, as it stands, the EU and its member states (including France) move forward with the enlargement process, they could appeal to these apparent benefits. Yet ultimately, the most effective strategy for building public trust in the enlargement process is to build trust in the EU, its institutions, and its rules and procedures more generally. This is obviously a long-term effort, but ultimately the best strategy for lasting change, ensuring that the enlargement process does not contribute to further voter alienation and dissatisfaction.

Addressing such concerns is important, seeing that progress is being made in the accession negotiations, at least for some of the countries. While certain hurdles are taken at the government level, being able to take the public along should be in the interest of political actors. Several discussants looked favourably upon ideas that the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU would complete the

European puzzle, would strengthen democracy across the continent, and mean Europe would be stronger in the world. However, only those who trusted the EU and France to manage such a step were willing to entertain it. For many disapprovers, their opposition to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans reflects general concerns over European cohesion and a lack of trust in the EU, its institutions, and elected representatives to realise a strong and united Europe.

This means it is necessary to establish trust in the process and enhance its credibility. As this report has shown, there are significant gaps in knowledge across all groups and the discussions revealed that some worries were based on a perceived lack of information. Keeping people up to date with accession criteria and countries' progress on them in an honest and transparent manner is likely to help build trust in the process. Confidence in the EU's ability to ensure good standards is greater when people see those standards being applied to current member states if problems arise. Positive change will therefore require looking at the issue of Western Balkan enlargement explicitly connected to debates about the functioning of the EU and France's role within it. Taking the population along is possible but requires more ambitious engagement than simply thinking of them as "for" or "against" an issue in a closed and immovable way.

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**Confidence in the EU's ability to ensure good standards is greater when people see those standards being applied to current member states if problems arise.**





# APPENDIX

## METHODS

For this project, an online survey designed to interview a representative group of people in France about their perceptions of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans was followed by in-depth focus group discussions to learn how different parts of the population engage in discussions about the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. The questions guiding both the survey as well as the focus group were developed in a day-long workshop with experts from a range of European and French institutions involved in debates on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

### Survey

The survey consisted of 30 questions summing up to a total of 42 survey items. It was designed to take up no more than 15 minutes of the respondent's time. Where possible, survey items were adopted from existing standard surveys on political attitudes (such as the European Social Survey and the European Value Survey). The survey was programmed to be conducted and administered online in cooperation with Bilendi, a French survey company. Respondents were recruited via Bilendi's panel and offered an incentive in the form of Maximiles reward points. They were invited to participate in the survey by email and were directed to a web interface that was accessible on and geared towards smartphones, tablets as well as desktop computers. To avoid self-selection bias, participants were invited to 'take a survey' or 'let their voice be heard' and specific project details were not included in the invitation.

### Sampling

Respondents were invited to participate in the survey between 9 and 25 March 2020. A total of 4,017 people accepted the invitation to participate. At the beginning of the interview, respondents were classified according to a sampling frame. They were included in the final sample if they completed the entire interview and passed a data quality check. Answers were checked for basic population characteristics (minimum age 18 years, resident in mainland France, disclosing level of education), completeness and technical omissions, speeding, and consistent refusal to answer questions. 297 respondents abandoned the survey mid-interview and a further 558 interviews were closed after data quality checks (see Table 7).

**TABLE 7**  
Response rates

INDICATOR	VALUE
Number of respondents in survey	4,017
Qualified completes	2,025
Partial completes	298
Terminated interviews	558
Interviews with overfulfilled quotas	1,136
Incidence rate	85%
Average completion time (in min)	10:44
Median completion time (in min)	7:57

The sampling frame was based on detailed quotas and stratification variables aimed at achieving an accurate representation of the French population of adults (18 years and older). Stratification variables included gender, age groups, regions, and levels of education. Targets were chosen based on the most recent data from INSEE and Eurostat, including cross-targets of age groups and regions as well as education levels and regions. Within this setup of stratification objectives, sampling was random from within the panel to approximate representativeness meaningfully and reduce biases.

When the expected quotas that represented the characteristics of the population were filled, further respondents with those characteristics were not allowed to take part in the survey. From 9-18 March 2020, all respondents invited to participate were included in the sample by natural fallout (43 percent of all complete interviews). The remainder of the sample was filled with respondents falling into specific stratification quotas. To avoid an over-representation of certain groups a total of 1,136 interviews (28 percent of all respondents sampled) were started but closed in the period from 18-25 March 2020 for respondents not fulfilling stratification targets (see Table 7).

**TABLE 8**

**Devices used to access the survey, of all completed interviews**

DEVICE	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
PC/laptop/netbook	1224	60%
Tablet	86	5%
Smartphone	715	35%
TOTAL	2025	100%

Respondents were able to choose which internet-enabled device they wanted to use to answer the questions. The majority of respondents answered the survey on a PC or laptop. A total of 35 percent of respondents chose to answer the survey on a mobile device such as a tablet or smartphone (see Table 8). Respondents were able to start, abandon and continue the survey at their own convenience.

## Survey representativeness

Table 9 illustrates the sample composition according to social demographic indicators and geography compared to the most recent available INSEE and Eurostat data. Sample representativeness was evaluated based on gender<sup>20</sup>, age<sup>21</sup>, region<sup>22</sup>, and education<sup>23</sup>. The group of respondents matches the adult French population closely, with only a very small overrepresentation of women, people aged 55-64 years and those who completed higher education. In addition, we evaluated the political preferences of respondents vis-à-vis the latest available general poll on political party preference, conducted by Elabe for BFMTV in February 2020.<sup>24</sup>

20 "Are you .....?" Male/Female

21 "How old are you?" 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+ years

22 "Which region do you live in?" See list of regions in Table 3

23 "Please select the highest level of education you've completed." Recoded to Less than primary, primary and lower secondary, Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary and Tertiary education

24 "Without thinking only about elections, which party or political movement do you feel the closest to?" See list of parties in Table 3, according to [BFMTV/Elabe poll](#).

**TABLE 9**

Unweighted and weighted sample for France (N=2,025) compared to targets (in %)

	TARGET*	UNWEIGHTED SAMPLE	DIFFERENCE	WEIGHTED SAMPLE	DIFFERENCE
Male	48	47	-1	48	0
Female	52	53	+1	52	0
18-24 years	10	9	-1	10	0
25-34 years	15	15	0	15	0
35-44 years	16	16	0	16	0
45-54 years	17	17	0	17	0
55-64 years	16	17	+1	16	0
65+ years	26	26	0	26	0
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	12	12	0	12	0
Bourgogne-Franche-Comté	4	4	0	4	0
Bretagne	5	5	0	5	0
Centre-Val de Loire	4	4	0	4	0
Corse	1	1	0	1	0
Grand Est	9	8	0	9	0
Hauts-de-France	9	9	0	9	0
Ile de France	19	19	0	19	0
Normandie	5	5	0	5	0
Nouvelle-Aquitaine	9	9	0	9	0
Occitanie	9	9	0	9	0
Pays de Loire	6	6	0	6	0
Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	8	8	0	8	0
Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education*	21	20	-1	21	0
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education*	43	43	0	43	0
Tertiary education*	37	38	+1	37	0
DLF - Debout la France	2	1	-1	1	-1
EELV - Europe Écologie - Les Verts	8	8	0	8	0
Génération.s	1	1	0	1	0
FI - La France Insoumise	6	6	0	6	0
LO - Lutte Ouvrière	1	1	0	1	0
LR - Les Républicains	9	8	-1	8	-1

	TARGET*	UNWEIGHTED SAMPLE	DIFFERENCE	WEIGHTED SAMPLE	DIFFERENCE
LREM - La République En Marche	9	13	+4	13	+4
MoDem - Le Mouvement démocrate	2	3	-1	3	+1
NPA - Le Nouveau parti anticapitaliste	1	1	0	1	0
PC - Le Parti communiste	1	1	0	1	0
PS - Le Parti socialiste	5	8	+3	8	+3
RN - Le Rassemblement National	12	12	0	12	0
UDI - Union des démocrates et indépendants	1	1	0	1	0
Another party or political movement	1	1	0	1	0
Without political party preference	36	29	-7	29	-7

\* Gender, age, region based on latest data from INSEE 2020, education based on Eurostat 2019, political party preference based on [BMFTV/Elabe poll September 2019](#) (excluding 'Prefer not to answer')

It is worth noting that the analyses for this project are more representative of voters or people with a political party preference than they are of non-voters. This is common in political survey research and does not impact the results vis-à-vis other survey research. Sensitivity checks were carried out in which we weighted the sample for reported party preference, so as to match the distribution reported by the Elabe/BFMTV poll, in addition to the demographic weights applied (see details on weighting procedure below). Weighting by political party preference changed overall survey results only slightly; substantive results with implications for the comparison did not change. Details of these analyses can be obtained upon request.

## Additional weighting

The sample featured a minor overrepresentation of female respondents, those aged 55-64 years and degree holders. To compensate for this and ensure that results are representative of the national population in terms of demographics and geography, additional weighting was carried out. Targeting the nationally representative split in gender, region, age

brackets, and education based on the most recent INSEE and Eurostat data, weights were created using simultaneous iterative proportional fitting.

With this process, an individual weight is created for each respondent. Taken together these individual weights adjust the total sample such that the selected demographic variables conform to actual known values in the population at the same time. Weights were created such that individual values did not surpass a minimum weight of 0.8 and a maximum weight of 1.25 per respondent. The standard deviation of all weights was set to not exceed 0.1.

When applying these respondent-specific weights to the unweighted sample, the minor overrepresentation in terms of gender, age and education is eradicated. Sensitivity tests were carried out on the final weighted sample compared to the unweighted sample and revealed only small differences between the findings presented in the report (weighted) and unweighted results.

## Focus groups

Based on the survey results, focus group discussions were designed to learn how people who hold the most different attitudes identified in the population engage in discussions about the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. The groups represented the following attitudes:

- (i) High salience disapprovers (those who were against EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and considered it a higher salience issue)
- (ii) Low salience disapprovers (those who were against EU enlargement in the Western Balkans but for whom it was not a high salience issue)
- (iii) Approvers (combining those who saw EU enlargement in the Western Balkans as a high salience issue with those for whom it was a low salience issue or who were not sure how they felt about the salience of the issue)
- (iv) Participants who were unsure what they thought of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, regardless of how salient they felt the issue was

Participants were recruited by telephone in and around the city of Lyon in France, and sorted into one of four groups according to answers to survey questions that determined attitudes to and evaluations of the salience of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Lyon was chosen for all focus groups to ensure comparability across groups and for its access to a diverse population, both urban and rural.

The focus groups were held on 23 and 24 September 2020 (postponed initially from 14 and 15 May 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions). Focus group

discussions were designed to gather participants' thoughts and evaluations of (a) the EU and EU enlargement in general, (b) their views of the Western Balkans broadly as well as EU enlargement in the Western Balkans specifically. The participants were further (c) prompted to think about EU enlargement in particular ways (e.g. through an economic lens or a humanitarian lens) and (d) different kinds of scenarios and messages concerning EU enlargement in the Western Balkans were tested.

A total of 28 people participated across four focus group discussions, with seven participants present in each group. Discussions lasted between 1 hour and 45 minutes and 2 hours each. Table 10 provides an overview of participants, groups, and key characteristics. Participants have been given pseudonyms reflecting their gender.

Focus group participants were between 18 and 69 years of age, with an average age of 47 years in all groups but (i) high salience disapprovers, whose participants were a little younger on average (38 years on average). The participants represented a range of professions such as teachers, school administrators, nurses and hospital workers, electricians, lawyers, designers, and engineers. One participant was studying at university, one was retired and one unemployed. They lived in inner-city locations, suburbs, and in more rural settings outside of Lyon and had varying levels of education, ranging from no completed education to postgraduate and professional levels (BAC +5). Participants said they felt close to a range of political parties (EELV, LREM, LR, DLF, PS, UDI), with no pattern specific to any of the groups, and four participants saying they did not feel close to any political party.

**TABLE 10****Overview and key characteristics of focus group participants**

#	Group	Alias	Gender	Age	Occupation	EU enlargement in the Western Balkans would be	Impact of Western Balkan EU enlargement on their lives
1	Disapprovers, high salience	Monique	Female	25	Teacher	Very bad	Somewhat affected
2	Disapprovers, high salience	Madeleine	Female	29	Lawyer	Quite bad	Somewhat affected
3	Disapprovers, high salience	Guillaume	Male	31	School keeper	Quite bad	Strongly affected
4	Disapprovers, high salience	Sebastien	Male	38	Bank employee	Quite bad	Somewhat affected
5	Disapprovers, high salience	Etienne	Male	40	Accounting manager	Very bad	Somewhat affected
6	Disapprovers, high salience	Nicolas	Male	47	Sales manager	Very bad	Somewhat affected
7	Disapprovers, high salience	Carine	Female	53	Textile designer	Quite bad	Somewhat affected
8	Disapprovers, low salience	Aimee	Female	18	Student	Quite bad	Not at all affected
9	Disapprovers, low salience	Thierry	Male	34	Insurance manager	Quite bad	Little affected
10	Disapprovers, low salience	Cecile	Female	47	School assistant	Quite bad	Doesn't know
11	Disapprovers, low salience	Fleur	Female	48	Legal expert	Quite bad	Little affected
12	Disapprovers, low salience	Eleonore	Female	59	Operator	Quite bad	Little affected
13	Disapprovers, low salience	Pierre	Male	65	HR consultant	Quite bad	Little affected
14	Disapprovers, low salience	Matthieu	Male	69	Retired	Quite bad	Little affected
15	Approvers, high + low salience	Juliette	Female	29	Leisure centre coordinator	Pretty good	Little affected
16	Approvers, high + low salience	Julien	Male	39	Manager	Pretty good	Little affected
17	Approvers, high + low salience	Marie-Laure	Female	44	Technical executive	Pretty good	Little affected
18	Approvers, high + low salience	Christophe	Male	46	Real estate advisor	Pretty good	Not at all affected
19	Approvers, high + low salience	Adel	Male	50	Electrician	Pretty good	Little affected
20	Approvers, high + low salience	Elise	Female	59	Hospital worker	Pretty good	Little affected
21	Approvers, high + low salience	Gerard	Male	62	Consultant	Very good	Little affected
22	Unsure group	Valerie	Female	29	Graphic designer	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
23	Unsure group	Yves	Male	35	Bakery manager	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
24	Unsure group	Dominique	Female	46	School teacher	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
25	Unsure group	Francois	Male	48	Salesman	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
26	Unsure group	Luc	Male	49	IT Engineer	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
27	Unsure group	Agnes	Female	56	Medical-psychological worker	Doesn't know	Doesn't know
28	Unsure group	Margot	Female	65	Sales manager	Doesn't know	Doesn't know

The focus group discussions were video recorded, translated into English, and fully transcribed. The transcripts were analysed thematically according to the questions outlined (a-d) and comparisons across groups were drawn up for all key questions. Quotations in this report rely on translations by the

authors and represent the participants' choice of words as closely as possible. Quotations are marked in italics, editorial additions for context are set out in square brackets [...], and omissions to shorten the original quotation are marked with (...) throughout this report.

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