

European Studies – Master of Arts  
Centre for Languages and Literature  
Spring 2021



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

# Reporting Europe

A Narrative Analysis of  
*Euractiv* and *Politico Europe*  
on EU Affairs

Julia Kaiser

*Master Thesis*  
EUHR18

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Tomas Sniegon  
Submitted: May 2021

# Abstract

The EU is home to uncountable media outlets whose narratives are vastly impacted by their national identity. Yet, in recent years, Europe witnessed a growth in transnational media. While the European public sphere is vastly researched, little attention has been paid to these newly established newsrooms. This master's thesis seeks to investigate the framing by the pan-European press. Aside from determining narratives, the question of whether these narratives contribute to European identity-building and the Europeanization of the public is taken up, as well as in which way transnational media can be considered a viable alternative to national media.

In order to provide a solid background, the concepts of European public sphere, Europeanization and European identity-building are defined. Furthermore, multiple studies on the quantity and quality of EU-affairs, as well as the history of Europe's transnational press, is presented. Concerning the methodological approach, this thesis follows the narrative analysis. Concretely, Labov's six-part model is applied. The news website *Euractiv* and the newspaper *Politico Europe* provide the material. The articles selected for the analysis were published during the German EU Council Presidency in 2020 and cover either Hungary's and Poland's veto on tying the rule of law to the EU budget, or policies vis-à-vis the enlargement in the Balkans.

The analysis found that *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe* are similar as they seem to side with European values and the enlargement, despite some differences in framing. It remains debatable if and to what extent this press contributes to Europeanizing the public, considering that their outreach is rather limited. Moreover, their contribution to Europe's cultural identity is questionable, as their narratives are rather built on "civic" identity. Yet, both newspapers can be considered an alternative to national media, as they clearly provide decentralized coverage and offer a pro-European point of view.

The pan-European public sphere most likely will develop further. Future research might be able to evaluate its impact on Europeanization and European identity, and if pan-European media advances European integration.

**Keywords:** Transnational media, European public sphere, European identity, Europeanization, journalism, narrative analysis, integration, culture.

# Table of Abbreviations

EC: European Communities

ECSC: European Coal and Steel Community

EEC: European Economic Community

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

EURATOM: European Atomic Energy Community

*FAZ: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

MEP: Member of the European Parliament

MS: Member State

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PM: Prime Minister

TWF: Television Without Frontiers

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

# List of Tables

<i>Table 1: Overview of Euractiv and Politico Europe</i>	28
<i>Table 2: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Rule of Law/1</i>	32
<i>Table 3: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Rule of Law/2</i>	34
<i>Table 4: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Rule of Law/3</i>	36
<i>Table 5: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 1</i>	37
<i>Table 6: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 2</i>	38
<i>Table 7: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 3</i>	40
<i>Table 8: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 4</i>	41
<i>Table 9: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Enlargement/1</i>	43
<i>Table 10: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Enlargement/2</i>	44
<i>Table 11: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Euractiv/Enlargement/3</i>	46
<i>Table 12: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Enlargement/1</i>	48
<i>Table 13: Example for Labov's six-part-model in Politico Europe/Enlargement/2</i>	49

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Theoretical Framework	4
2.1 The European Public Sphere	4
2.2 Europeanization of the Public Sphere	7
2.3 European Identity and the Media	9
3. Background: Europe in the Media	12
3.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Coverage of the EU	12
3.1.1 Considering Europe: The Amount of Europe in National Media	12
3.1.2 Narrating Europe: The Framing of Europe in National Media	14
3.2 The Creation of a Pan-European Press	17
4. Methodology	21
4.1 Narrative Analysis	21
4.1.1 Narrative Research	21
4.1.2 Application of Labov's Six-Part Model	22
4.1.3 Limitations of the Method	25
4.2 Material	26
4.2.1 <i>Euractiv</i> and <i>Politico Europe</i>	26
4.2.2 Articles: Period of Publication and Topics	29
5. Findings	31
5.1 Rule of Law	31
5.1.1 <i>Euractiv</i>	31
5.1.2 <i>Politico Europe</i>	36
5.2 Enlargement	42
5.2.1 <i>Euractiv</i>	42
5.2.2 <i>Politico Europe</i>	47
5.3 Summary	51
6. Discussion and Conclusion	54
7. Bibliography	60
Appendices	69

# 1. INTRODUCTION

“If we were beginning the European Community all over again, we should begin with culture.” Rumor has it that this line is to be attributed to none other than EU founding father Jean Monnet. Even though sources claim that this short but powerful statement is nothing but fiction,<sup>1</sup> the actual originator of this quote implicitly assumed that culture is a vital factor, perhaps even the core, of European integration. Culture, in this sense, might include sharing a history or maintaining the same customs. Another decisive feature would be belonging to the same public sphere—following the same websites, watching the same news broadcasts, or listening to the same socio-political podcasts.

Nowadays, in a union that counts twenty-seven member states (MS) and twenty-four official languages, and that is fragmented into individual national public spheres, it shall come as no surprise that news outlets of each MS not only have a different political affiliation, but they are also impacted by their nation’s cultural heritage. Therefore, there are different narratives in journalism—a crucial pillar of democracy.

## *Research questions*

While there are uncountable news outlets in each MS, there are only a handful of transnational media that operate independently from any national affiliation. These newspapers are based in Brussels and possess additional offices across Europe. They address a European audience and focus predominantly on EU-related issues. The question now is how Europe is reported by its transnational press. With the objective to provide a response, the following research questions will be investigated:

1. Does the pan-European press share a narrative when covering the EU versus when covering EU-critics, and how can that narrative be characterized?
2. Do these pan-European news outlets and their narratives contribute to the Europeanization of the media landscape and to a European identity?
3. With regards to the quality of EU-coverage, in which way does transnational media offer an alternative to national newspapers?

---

<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Łukaszewski, *Cel: Europa. Dziewięć esejów o budowniczych jedności europejskiej*, 90 cited in Karol Jakubowicz, “European Melting Pots? European Integration and EU Audiovisual Policy at a Crossroads,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 273.

### *Research status*

European newspapers are an often-investigated subject within the field of European and Media Studies. Yet the status quo of research regarding the European public sphere—the EU’s presence in public discourse—is not the only relevant question when tackling transnational media. In fact, it is closely interlinked with the rather abstract question of whether there is a European identity—a feeling of a cultural belonging—as well as with the prominent topic of the Europeanization of media, meaning EU integration in communications. Various scholars have taken up specific angles to investigate said topics. This includes, on the one hand, the comparative analysis of the share of EU-related issues in national newspapers (see Trenz 2004). On the other hand, much research is dedicated to the national framework of narratives and framing (see Vidra 2006).

Some of the first few approaches in the study of the transnational European press include Peter Varga (2011), who investigated how pioneers of the pan-European media spectrum handle challenges, or Martin Herzer (2019), who studied the narrative of, as he calls it, “Euro-journalism” from the 1950s to the 1970s. Today, the EU is ever-changing with the dawning enlargement in the Balkans, reported violations of the rule of law in Eastern Europe, and a decade-defining global pandemic. Therefore, the news coverage by transnational press provides valuable material for comparative analyses. This thesis seeks to build upon Varga and Herzer by analyzing the media coverage of contemporary issues.

### *Structure of the thesis*

With the intent to contextualize the epistemological approach of this thesis, first the theoretical background of Europe’s public sphere as it manifests in the media will be presented. As a basis for both the background and the analysis, the public sphere will be defined, followed by an examination of how a public sphere functions within a European context. However, defining and discussing possible conceptual approaches to the European public sphere is not sufficient; when grasping the meaning of a European public, two further major issues must be considered. The second subchapter of the theoretical background seeks to outline 1) Europeanization, and 2) which concepts concerning the Europeanization of media exist. The following subchapter seeks to tackle the question of whether there is a European identity and how it is constructed through the media.

The following chapter “Background: Europe and the Media” seeks to draw the practical implementations of the theories outlined in the previous chapter. Due to the scope of this thesis and with regard to the material for the analysis, only newspapers will be considered. First, the presentation of studies carried out by both scholars and the EU itself concerning the number of European affairs in national media will be taken up. This first sub-chapter provides a general overview of the presence and amount of EU-related issues in national periodicals. Following the quantitative examination of EU issues, their qualitative depiction is discussed in the second sub-chapter. Hence, this chapter will present narratives on the EU in different MS. The second subchapter, “The Creation of a Pan-European Press,” moves away from the national arenas. It highlights primogenitor transnational newspapers, those currently in circulation, and what challenges they are facing.

The fourth chapter will introduce the methodology—namely, the narrative analysis. In this thesis, William Labov’s six-part model will be adapted for the analysis of newspapers. Moreover, Robert Entman’s understanding of frames and narratives will be presented. Subsequently, this chapter will outline the advantages as well as the limitations of Labov’s method. The second sub-chapter will clarify which material will be used for the analysis. Aside from presenting the two sources that provide the material, the news website *Euractiv* and the newspaper *Politico Europe*, their foci and features—as well as the criteria for article-selection—will be explained. The time period of the articles’ publication is the German EU Council Presidency from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

The chapter “Findings” will present the results of the articles’ analysis according to Labov’s model. Sorted by topic and periodical, multiple examples of the analysis will be given, followed by a summary of the results. Based on this, the previously-formulated research questions will be answered sequentially in the following chapter “Discussion and Conclusion.” Here, the results will be compared to previous studies outlined in the early chapters. Potential differences in the narratives will be discussed and contextualized. Moreover, it will provide future prospects for the pan-European press.

It should be noted that throughout this thesis, the terms “Europe” and “EU” will be used interchangeably for the sake of avoiding repetition. The research is intended to contribute to the rather small number of studies within the field of transnational media, and to better comprehend how the narratives of news are constructed.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The debate of the European public sphere is a central subject in European Studies. The first subchapter provides a general introduction by referring to selected theories on the characterization, construction, and implementation of the European public sphere. With regard to the second research question, the following subchapters take up the question surrounding the Europeanization of the media as well as the construction of a European identity.

### 2.1 The European Public Sphere

There is no consensus amongst scholars and politicians when it comes to defining the elements of the public sphere, in what way it is constructed, and for whom. Another doubt concerns whether it is a cause or a consequence of democracy. Yet, Jürgen Habermas' *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* offers a valuable definition of the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> Following Habermas, there are two basic domains of the public sphere: the political public sphere and the cultural public sphere, characterized by literature and art. According to Habermas, the public sphere developed within Western Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and was characterized by the enlightened pursuit of knowledge and freedom. It included a range of milieu and media, such as clubs, salons and coffeehouses, or newspapers and books and pamphlets.<sup>3</sup> Thus, not only was the institutional basis of importance, but so too was the way in which communication took place. With the growth of mass literacy and the press in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Habermas saw the public sphere expanding. But then, it experienced a decline due to commercialism, journalism lost its reason, and public discourse disintegrated. With the twentieth century, Habermas pessimistically notes the trivialization of politics through, for instance, the electronic media, or the industrialization of public opinion.<sup>4</sup>

For investigating the existence of a European public sphere of today, Peter Dahlgren offers a helpful definition that can be used as a point of departure:

---

<sup>2</sup> Slavko Splichal, "Transnationalization/Europeanization of the Public Sphere/s," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Dahlgren, "Public Spheres, Societal Shifts, and Media Modulations," In *Media, Markets and Public Spheres: European Media at the Crossroads*, ed. by Jostein Gripsrud and Lennart Weibull (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-1.

The political public sphere comprises the institutional space where political will formation takes place, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas. This space is constituted by both mediated communication and face-to-face interaction. That is, while in the modern world the institutions of the media are the structural core of the public sphere, it is face-to-face interaction, the ongoing talk between citizens, where the public sphere comes alive, so to speak, and where we find the actual bedrock of democracy. In recent years, of course, such civic interaction also takes place via the newer interactive digital media.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, the newer digital media is of interest in this thesis, as the materials for analysis were published on the newsrooms' websites. But first: when applying this definition for the EU, the audience that engages in the pan-European debate beyond their national framework must be defined.

Philip Schlesinger offers a valuable description of the transnational citizen, a potential participant in the European public sphere.<sup>6</sup> He notes that the transnational citizen, beyond the European elite, must have “(a) an equal and widespread level of communicative competence, (b) relatively easy access to the full range of the means of communication, and (c) a generalized communicative competence that embodies sufficient background knowledge, interest, and interpretive skills to make sense of the EU and its policy options and debates.”<sup>7</sup> The European public sphere in which transnational citizens could engage would:

(a) involve the dissemination of a European news agenda, (b) need to become a significant part of the everyday news-consuming habits of European audiences, and (c) entail that those living within the EU have begun to think of their citizenship, in part at least, as transcending the level of the member nation-states. Moreover, these rational attributes need to be accompanied by an affective dimension.<sup>8</sup>

Now the question arises on *how* the public sphere enables the participation of European citizens in democratic life. Slavko Splichal differs between three subsections of the practical implementation of the public sphere. The first subsection constitutes decentralization. First, it is crucial to differ between the public(s) and the public sphere(s), even though they are interconnected. The public are different actors or groups associated with certain important social issues. The public sphere, on the other hand, is an infrastructure established by the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity*. (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 129.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schlesinger, “Changing Spaces of Political Communication: The Case of the European Union,” *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999): 276, doi: 10.1080/105846099198622.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 276-7.

state in civil society that enables public discourse. Without the public sphere, the public would not be visible—in turn, an active public is the condition for a public sphere to truly exist.<sup>9</sup>

Nowadays, with the rise of communication media, there are even more opportunities for the formation of new publics relating to specific social issues. Therefore, it is conceivable that as many publics exist as social issues. However, one major difference between the public and the public sphere must be emphasized: relation to the government. The public sphere is directly connected to those in power—actors of the public sphere—while a public can be rather seen as their opposition.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the media is connected to the power in Brussels.

The second subsection constitutes the transnationalization. When debating the European public sphere, it is vital to tackle the question of whether the “national” and “European” public sphere ought to be regarded as two separate entities. The public sphere is often conceived as a national phenomenon. One could indeed state that there are as many (national) public spheres as there are nation-states. This implies that publics uncorrelated to the state do not exist.<sup>11</sup> Yet, this is not the case: within the cultural scene, the magazine *Eurozine* is an example of a medium uncorrelated to a state. While these cultural periodicals approximate the European public sphere, they are not connected with organized power.<sup>12</sup> Such newspapers will be discussed in the following chapter.

The third subsection is the strong European public sphere. Essentially, it designates the strength of a democracy being dependent on the strength of the citizens’ participation in central issues of public debate—hence, on a strong public sphere.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, it is safe to say that a fully functioning and integrated European public sphere is no impossibility. However, two other major points are interrelated to the emergence of the European public sphere, as Schlesinger’s and Splichal’s approaches have shown: the question of Europeanizing the media sector and the issue of creating a pan-European identity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Slavko Splichal, “Transnationalization/Europeanization of the Public Sphere/s,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 30-1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

## 2.2 Europeanization of the Public Sphere

The debate of the European public sphere is inextricably interconnected with the debate of the process of integration heading towards Europeanization.<sup>14</sup> This chapter first discusses the theoretical framework of “Europeanization,” and then takes on the question of if and how Europe’s media arena can be Europeanized.

According to Robert Ladrech, “Europeanization” can be defined as follows: “Europeanization is an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree the EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policymaking.”<sup>15</sup> An example of general Europeanization would be the gradual incorporation of post-Communist countries into the European community after the break-up of the USSR.

While Ladrech’s definition is rather simplistic, Johan Olsen addresses both the alignment with EU governance as well as the implementation of EU-policies. He identifies five dimensions of Europeanization: the first dimension are the “changes in external boundaries”—that is, the territorial expansion of the EU’s political space across the continent. The second dimension is the “development of institutions at the European level”—the creation of bodies for the coordination of policies following EU’s principles. The third dimension is the “central penetration of national systems of governance”—the distribution of responsibilities and powers of the EU’s multilevel governance. The fourth dimension is “exporting forms of political organization”—the export of the EU’s political organization and governance to non-European countries and international arenas. The last dimension is the “political unification project.” It signifies Europe’s development into a more unified and stronger political entity.<sup>16</sup>

While these differentiations affect exclusively the political and governmental level of Europeanization, they disregard a central issue: cultural integration, which also includes the European media landscape. The political entity of Europe does not inevitably lead to the ever-

---

<sup>14</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Ladrech, “Europeanization of Domestic Politics and Institutions: The Case of France,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32, no. 1, (1994): 69, <https://heinonline-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/jcmks32&i=69>.

<sup>16</sup> Johan P. Olsen, “The Many Faces of Europeanization,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 5 (2002): 923-4, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00403>.

closer *cultural* union.<sup>17</sup> The question then arises how the European media landscape, with all of its uncountable national media outlets and publics, can be Europeanized.

Regarding the transnationalization of the public sphere, Splichal referred to Ruud Koopmans and Jessica Erbe, who conceptualized three types of Europeanization in communication and discursive mobilization. The first form is the emergence of a supranational European public sphere created through the collaboration of EU-institutions and collective actors, which is (ideally) complemented by the development of Europe-wide mass-media. The second form is vertical Europeanization, which is characterized by the communicative ties of the nation state and the EU. In this type, the MS would tackle European issues (bottom-up) and the EU addresses domestic affairs (top-down). The third type, horizontal Europeanization, consists of the communicative ties among the distinct MS. This means that the debate in one country might be covered by “foreign” national press and eventually be addressed by an actor of the respective MS.<sup>18</sup>

A first aspiration to harmonize—and thus Europeanize—the media landscape was the directive “Television without Frontiers” (TWF), adopted in 1989 and revised in 1997. It intended to put in place minimal regulations regarding advertising and audiovisual production as well as to create a common set of rules for pan-European TV channels. Moreover, it sought to make media competitive in both the European and the global market. Another side effect was, possibly, to shield European cultural heritage from the “American challenge.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the Europeanization of existing media and legislative frameworks could serve as a groundwork for the eventual emergence of a broader pan-European media landscape. The notion of Europeanization of the national public sphere addresses yet another major topic closely interconnected with the European public sphere: the theory of a European identity. How the conflict of identity relates to the discussion will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

---

<sup>17</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ruud Koopmans and Jessica Erbe, “Towards a European public sphere?,” *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 17, no. 2 (2004): 101, doi: 10.1080/1351161042000238643.

<sup>19</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 64-5.

## 2.3 European Identity and the Media

Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine claim that, while the institutions of the EU can exist without public support and acceptance, the greater “project” ought to be the creation of a European citizenry.<sup>20</sup> Thus the question whether or not European citizens share a certain identity. First, the construction of identities is explained, followed by an introduction to how the media plays a key role in creating this feeling of belonging, which is of particular interest in this thesis. Finally, the number of Europeans that identify as Europeans are presented.

“Identities are constructed, not in nature, but in specific cultural contexts, where sameness and otherness, belonging and difference are produced and reproduced, and where the markings of us/them are first structured, and policed.”<sup>21</sup> Thus does Farrel Corcoran define the construction of identities—a pattern detectable in the European context. When it comes to determining the meaning of “Europeanness,” it is safe to say that there are different narratives of the past which, without doubt, influence envisionings of the future. David Dunkerley notes: “‘Europe’ and ‘European’ are ideas, and as such the way they have been defined has altered since the Middle Ages, when...interest began to grow in them.”<sup>22</sup> He believes that the meaning of Europe has shifted significantly throughout the last five hundred years and has never been clearly defined; the inclusion and exclusion of various groups has fluctuated. Moreover, starting from the seventh century, the idea of “Europe” symbolizing certain values was gradually defined through its opposition to the Islamic world.<sup>23</sup>

During the Cold War, the Iron Curtain provided a solid basis to differ between “them” and “us.” Nowadays, without ex-members of the then–Warsaw Pact, “othering” has become more convoluted. A prime example is the “othering” of Russia, Turkey, or Ukraine. As Inka Salovaara-Moring puts it, “the political variant of Europe is increasingly revolving around the triumphal march of liberal democracy that has, over the last decades, become the only

---

<sup>20</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 152.

<sup>21</sup> Farrel Corcoran, “The Politics of Belonging: Identity Anxiety in the European Union,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 199.

<sup>22</sup> David Dunkerley, *Changing Europe: Identities, Nations and Citizens*, 110 cited in Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 152.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

‘game in town’ and the mode of European governance.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, the EU enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe has been depicted as a victory over authoritarianism.<sup>25</sup>

It is open for debate if and how the media and their coverage of the EU matters in terms of contributing to the creation of a European cultural identity. Scholars agree with the concept that national media contributes to the creation or reinforcement of respective national identity, in spite of a diverse cultural landscape and class differences. The media might have taken up symbolic resources, markers of distinctness from outsiders, or the country’s social memory in order to accomplish this. Thus, the transnational media—or the EU giving a basis for such media—could take the same top-down approach. The directive TWF and its goal to boost the ability of citizens to communicate has already proposed that communication technologies can in fact have a significant impact on cultural identity.<sup>26</sup> However, it is disputable if the media should go beyond reporting and take on an advocacy role in representing the EU to assist the unification and integration process.<sup>27</sup>

The alternative to a “cultural” national identity would be the EU’s promotion of a common “civic” identity. This identity would be built upon a common political culture consisting of respecting democratic principles and the rule of law, emphasizing universal human rights, embracing cultural diversity, and improving democracy at a local level, as implied by the EU’s slogan “united in diversity.” Individual cultural and religious questions would rather be a personal matter.<sup>28</sup> According to Michael Bruter, “civic” identity is much easier to create as it links to identification with the governmental dimension of the EU, while cultural identity designates a sense of belonging.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Inka Salovaara-Moring, “What Is Europe?: Geographies of Journalism,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Farrel Corcoran, “The Politics of Belonging: Identity Anxiety in the European Union,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 207.

<sup>27</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>28</sup> Farrel Corcoran, “The Politics of Belonging: Identity Anxiety in the European Union,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 210.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Bruter, *Citizens of Europe?*, 109, cited in Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 159.

At present, there is indeed an increase of citizens identifying as European. A survey carried out in 2013 by Eurobarometer surveyed citizens' identification with their nation and Europe. According to the results, the majority considers themselves "European," with the proportion increasing from 51 percent to 63 percent since 1992. A minority ranging from 33 percent to 46 percent in the last twenty years identified as "national only." Just as well, socio-demographic features of these identities be identified: the (various forms of) feeling of being European is strongest among men, people until forty, and those with higher education.<sup>30</sup>

The Standard Eurobarometer 83 on "European citizenship" from 2015 came to similar conclusions. The results show that 52 percent of Europeans—an absolute majority—define themselves first by their nationality and then as Europeans. Hence, the identification with the nation state does not cancel out the identification as European. Moreover, the survey demonstrates that no more than 2 percent of Europeans see themselves as "European only." When it comes to defining oneself as European citizen, an absolute majority of respondents do so in the then–twenty-eight MS. The different shades of this identity were "nationality and European," "European and nationality" and "European only," with the highest concentration being in Luxembourg with 82 percent. In the United Kingdom (64 percent), in Cyprus (57 percent) and Greece (51 percent), the majority defined themselves exclusively by their nationality.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, it remains unclear if this kind of identification is related to "civic" or cultural identity.

In conclusion, the issue surrounding a cultural European identity is quite abstract, as the definition of Europeanness shifts over time. Unlike the national state, the EU clearly does not utilize the same ample media sector that could reinforce the narrative of a European identity. Likewise, a stronger identification with the EU could be a bedrock for the further development of a European public sphere.

---

<sup>30</sup> "EU Citizenship," Eurobarometer, accessed April 3, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/fs5\\_citizen\\_40\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/fs5_citizen_40_en.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> "Standard Eurobarometer 83 'European citizenship,'" Eurobarometer, accessed April 3, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83\\_citizen\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_citizen_en.pdf), 21.

### **3. BACKGROUND: EUROPE IN THE MEDIA**

This third chapter seeks to provide a background on both the coverage of European affairs in national media as well as present the first aspirations of a transnational European press. The studies presented in the following chapters provide a solid basis in order to respond to the first and third research question.

#### **3.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Coverage of the EU**

First, the representation of the EU in the national media is discussed. This includes both the share of EU affairs in comparison to domestic affairs, as well as studies on the framing of EU policies in national newspapers.

##### **3.1.1 Considering Europe: The Amount of Europe in National Media**

An often-echoed objection against the EU is the claimed lack of transparency. This alleged flaw could also affect the amount of coverage of EU-affairs. With regard to the third research question, this chapter seeks to take on the question regarding the extent to which the EU is visible in national media, before discussing the narratives used to transmit European issues.

Papathanassopoulos and Negrine argue that an adequate amount of EU coverage can be used as an indicator of the existence of a European public sphere, even though there is no objective or approved measure of what could be considered “sufficient coverage” of EU-affairs.<sup>32</sup> Generally speaking, the amount of media coverage of national political issues is significantly higher than of European issues. But one must consider that certain major topics such as health care or tax policy are primarily national topics; the EU often plays a secondary role. Therefore, it should be evident that domestic politics dominate the national press.<sup>33</sup>

The EU-funded project Europub carried out a study that analyzed newspapers in France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Inter alia, the study found that when it comes to topics that are decided in Brussels, nearly all newspapers

---

<sup>32</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 137.

<sup>33</sup> Leonhard Hennen, “European Public Sphere and the Internet,” in *Electronic Democracy in Europe: Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting*, ed. Ralf Lindner, Georg Aichholzer, and Leonhard Hennen (Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2016), 34.

indeed covered the EU extensively.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the study found that national actors of executive, legislative and civil society receive balanced media coverage. When it comes to European policymaking, however, the EP and civil society were less covered than the European Commission.<sup>35</sup>

A study carried out by Hans-Jörg Trenz partially contradicts the general perception that the EU is underrepresented in distinct national media outlets: EU coverage tends to be extensive within the “quality” media. The study found that European political communication is part of approximately 35,2 percent—in the German *FAZ* even 55 percent—of all the political news articles in the researched European quality newspapers.<sup>36</sup> Trenz concludes that “by simply adding these figures we must concede an astonishingly high level Europeanization of national newspapers, which contradicts all previous findings on the scarce visibility of Europe in the media.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, one also must take into account that politically more defining events, such as the European elections or the appointment of the Commission, will understandably produce more news.<sup>38</sup>

Concerning the audience of said media, the European Commission carried out a pilot study seeking to examine the key conditions affecting the coverage of EU affairs. Even though about two thirds of EU citizens do not believe themselves to be well-informed on EU politics, the number of Europeans who considered themselves well-informed is growing. The Commission concluded that “Europe remains a beacon of press freedom, but a worrying decline has occurred in recent years.”<sup>39</sup> Regarding the factors impacting the amount of EU-coverage, the study found that the interest in the EU or political issues in other countries might hinge on education. Moreover, the amount of coverage of EU affairs also depends on

---

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Pfetsch, *The voice of the media in European public sphere: Comparative analysis of newspaper editorials* cited in Leonhard Hennen, “European Public Sphere and the Internet,” in *Electronic Democracy in Europe: Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting*, ed. Ralf Lindner, Georg Aichholzer, and Leonhard Hennen (Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2016), 34.

<sup>35</sup> Koopmans, *European Journal of Political Research*, pp. cited in Leonhard Hennen, “European Public Sphere and the Internet,” in *Electronic Democracy in Europe: Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting*, ed. Ralf Lindner, Georg Aichholzer, and Leonhard Hennen (Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2016), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Jörg Trenz, “Media Coverage on European Governance: Exploring the European Public Sphere in National Quality Newspapers,” *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 3 (2004): 297, doi:10.1177/0267323104045257.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Stylianos Papatthanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 137.

<sup>39</sup> “Media Coverage of European Affairs - Final Report,” European Commission, last modified September 22, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/media-coverage-european-affairs-final-report>.

cultural, historical and language factors. For instance, smaller MS that share a language with a bigger MS, like Austria with Germany, tend to have a higher amount of coverage on the subject. When it comes to EU-friendly and EU-critical media, the study found that these outlets are both more likely to report on the EU, albeit with a substantially distinct framing.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, it may be said that the quantity of coverage of EU-affairs compared to the quantity of national affairs must be relativized. Quality newspapers do understand reporting about the EU and there is a trend showing that the audience seems to have a growing interest, which could eventually benefit the EU's visibility in the press as well as the demand for transnational media.

### **3.1.2 Narrating Europe: The Framing of Europe in National Media**

While the previous chapter has outlined if and how much the media covers the EU, the even more crucial question for the research questions might be *how* the media covers the EU. This subchapter examines how Europe is framed from the Treaty of Rome to today. While there are uncountable studies on EU-narratives in national media throughout time, this chapter provides a general overview.

Martin Herzer argues that journalists covering European affairs ever since the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 co-transformed the European Communities and therefore contributed to shaping the *sui generis* of today's EU. These pioneering "Euro-journalists," a term established by Herzer, wrote for Western European outlets advocating for integration through the supranationalist bodies ECSC, EEC and EURATOM. Their support to further the European project became apparent through their application of a specific "Euro-narrative": a narrative that was established not only among journalists, but also among policymakers, businessmen, and civil society actors.<sup>41</sup>

This "Euro-narrative" that Herzer identified is of particular interest for our first research question. It can be characterized as follows: First, it framed the EEC as an international organization that slowly transformed into a democratic European polity whose objective was

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Herzer, *The Media, European Integration and the Rise of Euro-journalism, 1950s-1970s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2-3, 295.

achieving European unity. Secondly, the EEC was a requirement to achieve economic prosperity, peace, and to make Europe an international player. Moreover, Europe might have faced economic stagnation or war if it was not guarded by the EEC. Thirdly, “Euro-journalists” framed the EEC as the leverage of successful European integration as it functions as a counterforce to potential national egocentrism.<sup>42</sup>

Further, Herzer argues that the “Euro-narrative” represents an outstanding Europeanization of Western European journalism. Pioneering journalists, who were focused on EU-affairs, promoted the European project and educated their audience—Western European publics—about its merits.<sup>43</sup> Regarding the Europeanizing of the audience, however, it split the elite and broader public.<sup>44</sup>

While Herzer particularly researched the role of journalists in the context of European integration over two decades, other scholars have a closer look at contemporary narratives of the press for the broader public. For instance, Salovaara-Moring conducted interviews with journalists from Eastern and central European countries and found that, generally speaking, there are three different ways to frame “Europe.”<sup>45</sup> The first way is “territorial Europe is constructing ‘Otherness’” and relates to othering and the definition of “Europeanness,” for instance, the differentiation between democratic and authoritarian regimes.<sup>46</sup> “Europe as an Institution,” the second discourse constructed around Europe, implies that the interaction of people, technologies, as well as the regulation and legislation made in Brussels are “Europe.” Salovaara-Moring concludes that “Europe also means a Foucauldian regime imposed from the regulative center with Brussels serving as a modern day Panopticon.”<sup>47</sup> The interviews conducted by Salovaara-Moring show that the third discourse constructed is “Europe as an experience.” Hence, Europe also is emotionally charged with both hopes and fears, containing collective and individual historical narratives.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>45</sup> Inka Salovaara-Moring, “What Is Europe?: Geographies of Journalism,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 50.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 53, 67.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 68-9.

Nevertheless, the way EU affairs are framed largely depends on the history and identity-building background of a nation, the citizens' socio-cultural experiences, as well as the domestic political contexts. Additionally, this coverage is influenced by journalists' cultural and professional values.<sup>49</sup> Heikki Heikkilä and Risto Kunelius have found that journalists are impacted by their own nation: "It is hardly surprising but still impressive, how strong and naturalised a position the category of national identity still holds in journalism. It is only slightly provocative to conclude that mainstream journalism is a nationally fundamentalist profession."<sup>50</sup>

István Hegedűs (2011) provides a concrete example by referring to a study by Zsuzsanna Vidra (2007) of twenty-five national newspapers of different post-communist countries throughout the accession negotiations whose discourse was predominantly pro-European. The most often echoed narratives evolved around obedience, resentfulness, and fear, while the EU was presented as an almighty institution.<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to this observation is the case of Hungary. The country was among those that went through the "communist trauma," being isolated from the West and having suffered oppression of the Hungarian Uprising.<sup>52</sup> With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, a romanticized and traditional nationalism was revived.<sup>53</sup> Towards the EU, the country showed a "yes, but" attitude as Hungarians were skeptical towards the future as an EU-member.<sup>54</sup> The EU was

---

<sup>49</sup> István Hegedűs, "Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 74.

<sup>50</sup> Heikki Heikkilä and Risto Kunelius, "Journalists Imagining the European Public Sphere," *Javnost - The Public* 13, no. 4 (2006): 77, doi: 10.1080/13183222.2006.11008925.

<sup>51</sup> Zsuzsanna Vidra, *Regio* no. 4, 35-55 cited in István Hegedűs, "Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 93-5.

<sup>52</sup> István Hegedűs, "Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>53</sup> Bozóki, *Post-Communist Transition. Emerging Pluralism in Hungary*, 13-29 cited in István Hegedűs, "Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>54</sup> István Hegedűs, "Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 98.

covered rather negatively during the negotiation talks, with the “complicated” or “imperative” character of the EU being emphasized.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Hungary serves as a prime example for how history and culture can determine the way news are presented.

All things considered, there is no doubt that narratives have an impact on their audience. Like Herzer’s study has shown, the endorsement of European integration has had a long-term effect on the construction of the EU. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the current Hungarian government is notorious for its Euroscepticism. Nowadays, with the enlargement and the accession of other post-communist countries, it is plausible that more emotional and historical narratives can be found in media coverage, as well as nationally oriented journalists.

### **3.2 The Creation of a Pan-European Press**

In recent years, there have been precursory aspirations to create media not for a national, but for a European public. This chapter seeks to outline which obstacles they are facing, and which successfully established transnational newspapers exist. With regard to the research question, the focus is exclusively on newspapers and online news portals, leaving out TV and radio channels.

When it comes to the history of the first pan-European newspapers, there were first ambitions for them in the 1970s. British and Western European newspapers initiated a transnational cooperation, the magazine *Europa*. From 1973 onwards, *Le Monde*, *The Times*, *La Stampa*, and *Die Welt* co-produced the magazine which would be published as a monthly supplement in all four newspapers. The articles and layout were the same, but each national edition was translated into the respective language. The target group were businesspeople in Western Europe. The production of *Europa* ended in 1981 due to its economic failure.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, despite its disappointment, leading journals have had faith in the potential economic success of a transnationally produced newspaper and have demonstrated their dedication to European

---

<sup>55</sup>Vidra, *A magyarok bemenetele. Tagállamként a bővülő Európai Unióban [The Marching In of the Hungarians. As a Member State in the Enlarging European Union]*, 143, 150 cited in István Hegedűs, “Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 107-8.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Herzer, *The Media, European Integration and the Rise of Euro-journalism, 1950s-1970s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2-3, 204.

integration. Plus, it is safe to say that the EC provided a point of departure for the cooperation of elite Western newspapers.<sup>57</sup> Aside from the magazine, Brussels turned into a stronghold for “Euro-journalism,” like Rome, Bonn, or London. The Brussels-based journalists rose, and the EC press corps established an association for foreign correspondents.<sup>58</sup>

Nowadays, there are only a handful of successful publications that have left national borders behind and address a public across the continent. Particularly in the written press, one can identify a specific, more elitist readership; global and English-speaking periodicals, for instance *Financial Times*, or weekly magazine *The Economist*, focus on business, trade, academia, or diplomacy.

Yet, there are indeed media-outlets that intend to reach a broader and general, pan-European public. Most of them are in Brussels and seek to give space to EU-affairs.<sup>59</sup> While previous studies have investigated national media or their Europeanization, Peter Varga is a forerunner when it comes to examining the first pan-European media outlets that are “free” from any national framework. Most of the studied transnational newspapers were founded from 1995 onwards which proves that a market for pan-European readers is in fact alive and well.<sup>60</sup>

Each outlet seems to have discovered its niche in the pan-European print media landscape and appears to follow a unique strategy to connect with readers without interfering into each other’s audiences.<sup>61</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the obstacles these outlets face were categorized into language, national identity, and advertising.

The first obstacle designates Europe’s linguistic diversity and the absence of a universal lingua franca. Aside from communication, a language is also interconnected with the respective national identity and reporting tradition. Therefore, there are differences in framing, as multiple content analyses of newspapers across the content have demonstrated. An evident solution would be the designation of a lingua franca, in addition to the mother tongues; the

---

<sup>57</sup> Martin Herzer, *The Media, European Integration and the Rise of Euro-journalism, 1950s-1970s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2-3, 208-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>59</sup> Peter J. Varga, “Pan-European Media: Attempts and Limitations,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 119.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

effectiveness of this approach has already been shown by the success of English-speaking periodicals like *Financial Times* or the *Wall Street Journal Europe*.<sup>62</sup> The news website *Euractiv* stands out thanks to its multilingual offer. It has the clear objective of, aside from increasing readership, to promote dialog amid readers and contributors.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, *Euractiv* pursues yet another strategy: the website links to partners based in different MS which provide content in the respective languages. In contrast, *EUObserver* and *European Voice*, which now is *Politico Europe*,<sup>64</sup> are exclusively English-speaking, but it does not seem as if their monolingual coverage has jeopardized their success. Following the editors interviewed by Varga, their English-only coverage did indeed benefit from the EU enlargement.<sup>65</sup>

The second obstacle is national identity. When it comes to reporting, it is indisputable that there are national differences, as aforementioned studies have shown. Within the framework of Varga's research, he conducted an interview with Giuseppe Zaffuto, the then-director of programs for the European Journalism Centre. According to Zaffuto, there are significant cultural differences regarding the styles of reporting, for instance, between the Latin and Anglo-Saxon way. Furthermore, there are no indications for a pan-European style of reporting.<sup>66</sup> Aside from the multiple official languages of the EU, there is yet another issue related to language and national identity: overcoming the less reader-friendly EU-jargon; covering domestic affairs is less complicated than the EU bureaucracy. Vis-à-vis potential readers, it is fair to state that the audience is significantly limited as those readers with exclusively national concerns would not consult Brussels-based news outlets.<sup>67</sup>

The third challenge faced by transnational media is advertising—or, put differently, the absence of a pan-European advertising market.<sup>68</sup> Just like in terms of linguistic diversity, *Euractiv* also stands out when it comes to advertising. The website depends on sponsors that provide funds to their distinct “policy sections,” such as EU enlargement, climate change, or

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 135-7.

<sup>64</sup> Dylan Byres, “POLITICO Europe acquires European Voice,” *Politico*, October 12, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2014/12/politico-europe-acquires-european-voice-199775>.

<sup>65</sup> Peter J. Varga, “Pan-European Media: Attempts and Limitations,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 135-7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 138-41.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 139-40.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 124.

trade and industry. Moreover, their articles are linked to press releases and position statements. This approach raises, evidently, concerns regarding editorial objectivity.<sup>69</sup> However, on its website, *Euractiv* claims no public or private contractor, so members, corporate sponsors, or franchise partners supply more than 10 percent of annual revenues, and that this very mix of public and private revenue ensures their editorial independence.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, some approaches toward the creation of a pan-European press seem more successful, like *EUObserver*'s application of English as a lingua franca; others are more arguable, such as the advertising of *Euractiv*. A target audience indeed exists, even though it is not yet the broad European public. Yet, when taking into consideration the apparent increase in the interest in EU-affairs, this very target audience might be growing and shifting in its character.

---

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>70</sup> "Other FAQs," *Euractiv*, last modified May 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/other-faqs/#1b>.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodological approach—qualitative narrative analysis—of this thesis is introduced. Following an introduction to William Labov’s narrative analysis and method, the applied material is presented.

### 4.1 Narrative Analysis

First, the general application of narrative research is presented. Next, the narrative analysis according to Labov is examined, particularly the six-part model, and its application in this thesis.

#### 4.1.1 Narrative Research

A narrative, in the broader sense, can be defined as “the product of agency; they are the means by which someone communicates a story to someone else. Narratives represent their stories, and do so in a special way characteristic of communication between agents.”<sup>71</sup> The way the content of a narrative, the story, is told depends on the communicative intention of the maker. This affects both fictional and non-fictional stories.<sup>72</sup>

Researching narratives has generated a growing interest in recent decades and can be found in a wide range of fields, among them anthropology, folklore, communication studies, political science, and psychology.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to other qualitative research approaches, the researcher is free to apply the narrative analysis on any suitable material. This includes speeches, interviews, newspaper articles, or TV programs. Additionally, the researcher’s goal may vary widely under this analytical framework, the aim could be to determine objectivity, or to identify the epistemological significance of narratives. A narrative analysis enables the investigation of the underlying mechanisms of narratives, such as how stories are structured, who produces them and by whom they are consumed, or how narratives are sup-

---

<sup>71</sup> Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2010), 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews and Maria Tamboukou, “Introduction: what is narrative research?,” in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2008), 1./James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, “Introduction: establishing a balance,” in *Varieties of narrative analysis*, ed. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (London: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 1.

pressed, opposed, or accepted. In short: this method helps deconstructing and comprehending critical aspects of the world.<sup>74</sup>

There are three theoretical divisions in narrative research. The first kind focuses on interviews with the narrator about their lives, lived events, or topics they have heard about. The second type includes variable media and narrations of objects and actions, which is of interest in this thesis. The third kind encompasses dialogues or email exchanges. The latter does not, unlike the first two forms, focus on events or experiences, but rather on the social code according to which stories are constructed.<sup>75</sup> In other words, narrative research can be summarized as a “multilevel, interdisciplinary field and any attempt to simplify its complexity would not do justice to the richness of approaches, theoretical understandings and unexpected findings that it has offered.”<sup>76</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Application of Labov’s Six-Part Model

The approach according to Labov (1972) is a classic in the field of narrative research, creating a point of departure for a wide array of studies working with narratives.<sup>77</sup> The analysis of this thesis is based on Labov’s six-part model for analyzing transcripts. The newspapers’ articles—the research material—therefore function as transcripts. In its essence, Labov’s model was built upon the idea that a narrative is a series of answers to implicit questions. In order to deconstruct a narrative, the following six questions must be answered:

1. **Abstract – what is the story about?:** Its main purpose is to introduce the story.
2. **Orientation – who, when, where?:** Its main function is to provide the setting. It may be provided at the beginning or more background information will be added later in the text.
3. **Complicating action – then what happened?:** it designates the complicating action of the story, following a linear order.

---

<sup>74</sup> Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews and Maria Tamboukou, “Introduction: what is narrative research?,” in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Wendy Patterson, “Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations,” in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 27.

4. **Evaluation – so what?:** According to Labov, the evaluation is “perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause”<sup>78</sup> as it reveals the narrator’s point of view. Labov (1972) differentiates between the external, embedded, and evaluative action. The external evaluation is explicit, while the embedded evaluation can be described as more dramatic, for example, by only describing feelings. The evaluative action designates the revelation of emotions without the use of speech, for instance, “bursting into tears.” Moreover, Labov identifies methods that can help reinforce the evaluation, such as intensifiers (exclamations and repetition), comparators (comparisons between what happened and what did not happen), and explicatives (explanation of casualties).
5. **Result – what finally happened?:** It reveals how the story ends.
6. **Coda:** At the end of the story, the narrator might return to the present time, emphasizing that the told story lies in the past. Hence, it links the past to the present.<sup>79</sup>

Aside from the fact that narrative research can generally be applied in a wide range of academic fields and is not bound to a specific form of material, this method has been chosen because the Labovian model is a thorough and precise method that comes with clear advantages. First, the method allows identifying and understanding event narratives. Moreover, narratives can be compared, for instance, in terms of evaluation, and the narrator’s perspective and therefore their social, cultural, political identity can be determined.<sup>80</sup>

The material used for analysis are articles taken from pan-European newspapers. Hence, each editing will be treated as an above-described personal narrator. The individual identity of contributing journalists will be disregarded as they represent the statute of the editorships. However, the method must be slightly adapted to the journalistic nature of the material. In this analysis, the focus is on the following elements of Labov’s narrative research: abstract, orientation, evaluation, and coda, leaving out the complicating action and result. The latter do not align with the journalistic genre as there is no clear starting and ending point; while

---

<sup>78</sup> Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, 366 cited in Wendy Patterson, “Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations,” in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 31.

<sup>79</sup> Wendy Patterson, “Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations,” in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 30-31.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

newspaper articles can be attributed to greater discourses, they do not start *ab ovo*, and do not come to a concrete conclusion, unlike personally narrated stories.

The abstract and orientation give the reader all necessary information to follow the content and to contextualize the covered issues. Just as Labov has pointed out, the evaluation is the most valuable and telling element of the analysis. When researching how the covered news are evaluated, concrete indications on which frames the newspapers—or rather, which narratives the narrators—are creating will emerge. Of course, Labov’s intensifiers, comparators, and explicatives will also be taken into account. The fourth element of interest, the coda, will help understand how the newspaper editings contextualize the covered issues and events to the present and, in this case, to the future. Hence, the coda will tell which potential consequences and results can be expected.

Furthermore, under analysis, journalism must not be regarded as a monologue by the author; a journalistic article also includes quotes by those affected by certain events, or political and social actors. These quotes will be treated like references by the author. Thus, quotes that do not originate from the newspaper itself will indeed be included in the analysis as the choice which quotes to include also underlies the implicit journalistic narrative.

Moreover, this thesis differs between the terms “frame” and “narrative.” While these two nouns are often and generally used interchangeably—also in previous studies on the topic—this analysis makes a clear differentiation between the act of framing news and the newspaper’s narrative. Concretely, this thesis will follow the understanding of Robert Entman, according to whom news frames can be filtered through keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images: “Since the narrative finally consists of nothing more than words and pictures, frames can be detected by probing for particular words and visual images that consistently appear in a narrative and convey thematically consonant meanings across media and time”<sup>81</sup>. Thus, the narrative is the result of the different frames.

With regard to the first research question, the articles will be arranged according to their frames. These (potentially) different frames will enable drawing comparisons between subjects and, more importantly, help identifying underlying narratives.

---

<sup>81</sup> Robert Entman, “Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents,” *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 4 (1991): 7, doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1991.tb02328.x.

### 4.1.3 Limitations of the Method

Methodological and theoretical problems of Labov's approach have been identified. Relevant for this study is the criticism by Jonathan Culler, as he states that referential clauses and evaluative clauses must not be differentiated. In fact, a reference could entail an evaluation as well without serving "only" a referential purpose.<sup>82</sup> According to Labov, "the narratives themselves may serve only as a framework for the evaluation."<sup>83</sup> Hence, one must consider that the narrator's perspective and experience predetermine the way references are chosen. This study will not differentiate a reference and evaluation.

Another point of critique is raised by Wendy Patterson and affects the selection of past tense clauses when chronologically following the Labovian model. Taking specific clauses out of their original context will lead to an overly simplistic and distorted analysis and interpretation.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, a clause that exemplifies the underlying narrative will always be analyzed according to its respective context.

Aside from criticism by scholars, the application of Labov's six-part model is connected to certain obstacles in this study. Labov's approach does not offer any element that tackles how images that are part of the material can be analyzed. In the case of journalism, images, embedded tweets, or links to videos complement the narrative. Yet, in this case, only the written material can be taken into account. Moreover, like any study carried out, there is always the possibility of researcher bias. In this case, it is made sure that certain pre-existing expectations will not impact the analysis.

Apart from Labov's six-part model, a crucial limitation of the analysis is the limited scope of the thesis. Future research could not only consider a greater range of articles, but also conduct interviews with editors-in-chief, in order to achieve even greater representative results.

---

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 201-2.

<sup>83</sup> Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, 371 cited in Wendy Patterson, "Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations," in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 36.

<sup>84</sup> Wendy Patterson, "Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations," in *Doing narrative research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 37.

## 4.2 Material

In this subchapter, the source of the material—the newspapers *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe*—are introduced in order to provide background knowledge of their readership, financing, and objectives. Subsequently, the selection criteria of the articles, such as topic and the time period, is presented. All analyzed articles can be found in the appendix.

### 4.2.1 *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe*

The newspapers whose articles will be analyzed according to Labov have been chosen according to specific requirements: First, it must be ensured that they provide enough material to detect a specific narrative. Second, the periodicals must be comparable so that a sound basis for a potential comparison is present. Aside from reporting on a transitional level, they must have a clear European focus, which means that rather global newspapers like *The Financial Times* or *The Economist* were excluded. Third, the material at hand must be influential enough to be relevant for an analysis. This means that, unlike websites like *My Country? Europe.* or *Café Babel*, these media must not be voluntary projects. Following these criteria, the newspaper *Politico Europe* and the news network *Euractiv* have been selected. Initially, the website *EUObserver* was also to be included in the analysis. However, due to the limited scope of the thesis, it had to be excluded as it was the weakest in terms of influence.<sup>85</sup>

The first news outlet to be analyzed is *Euractiv*. Founded in 1999 by Christophe Leclercq, it now consists of over 100 employees and about fifty editors, journalists, and translators.<sup>86</sup> The Europe-wide news network declares itself to be “fully dedicated to EU affairs, providing free in-depth information to the Community of EU Actors.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, it claims to help the EU by bringing debates between Brussels and national capitals. As of 2019, *Euractiv* counted over one million unique readers per month.<sup>88</sup> What makes *Euractiv* stand out from other websites that address EU-policies is the fact that it provides its news in twelve different languages, therefore reaches 80 percent of its readership in their mother tongue, and has

---

<sup>85</sup>“Burson-Marsteller Media-Consumption 2018,” ComRes, last modified June 2018, [https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki31qqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller\\_Headline-Report\\_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf](https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki31qqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller_Headline-Report_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf), 3.

<sup>86</sup>“Other FAQs,” *Euractiv*, last modified May 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/other-faqs/#1b>.

<sup>87</sup>“Readership,” *Euractiv*, last modified June 11, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/euractiv-readership/>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

(partner) offices in Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain.<sup>89</sup>

The website aims to provide in-depth analysis of key EU policies and therefore covers topics such as agriculture, health, energy and environment, economy and transport, politics, trade, defense, social development, enlargement, and neighborhood policy. In its netiquette, it declares, inter alia, that the network seeks to “create a platform where debates about European issues are triggered, analysed and maintained,” and to provide a space in which the readers can “enter into an open, interesting and constructive dialogue.”<sup>90</sup> Aside from revenues from memberships and various sponsors, *Euractiv* receives funding from the European Commission. However, the network claims that its coverage is not influenced or determined by its sponsors. The editorship follows guidelines that envisage transparency, efficiency, and independence. Besides, the *Fondation EURACTIV* consists of impartial people from academia, NGOs, other media and think-tanks and counsels *Euractiv* on independent coverage.<sup>91</sup>

The second news outlet to be analyzed is the newspaper *Politico Europe*. Founded in April 2015, this fairly young journal is a business enterprise between *POLITICO LLC*, based in the USA, and the leading digital publisher in Europe, Axel Springer<sup>92</sup>. When founded, *Politico* acquired and rebranded the Brussels-based journal *European Voice* and established the objective of becoming “a leading media player in European politics and policy.”<sup>93</sup> The owner and publisher of *European Voice*, Shéhérazade Semsar-de Boissésou, took over the position as managing director for the new newspaper.<sup>94</sup> *Politico Europe* employs 200 people and consists of 100 journalists. It has additional offices in London, Berlin, and Paris.<sup>95</sup>

Aside from its print version, *Politico Europe* also offers daily morning newsletters, such as *The Brussels Playbook* that covers EU-policies, as well as live events. Home delivery aside,

---

<sup>89</sup> “EURACTIV – The Media Network For Europe,” *Euractiv*, last modified March 9, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/about-EURACTIV/media-partners-network/>.

<sup>90</sup> “Netiquette,” *Euractiv*, last modified October 20, 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/euractiv-netiquette/>.

<sup>91</sup> “Other FAQs,” *Euractiv*, last modified May 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/other-faqs/#1b>.

<sup>92</sup> “About POLITICO Europe,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/press/>.

<sup>93</sup> Dylan Byres, “POLITICO Europe acquires European Voice,” *Politico*, October 12, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2014/12/politico-europe-acquires-european-voice-199775>.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> “About POLITICO Europe,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/press/>.

the print version of the newspaper is also available free of charge at select locations in Brussels, London, Paris, and Frankfurt.<sup>96</sup> On its website, *Politico Europe* claims: “We connect and empower professionals through nonpartisan journalism and actionable intelligence about European politics and policy.”<sup>97</sup>

Regarding its funding, *Politico Europe* relies on advertisement as well as articles funded by outside sponsors, which are marked as “sponsored content” or as “presented by.” However, the newspaper defends its independence: “When an advertiser funds a series or other project, the topic is proposed by senior *Politico* editorial staff. Advertisers have no other input into the editorial process and do not approve copy. Like other readers, they see the content only after it has been published.”<sup>98</sup> It describes its coverage as the “go to source for EU affairs.”<sup>99</sup>

According to a 2018 Burson-Marsteller-Brussels Media Consumption Survey, *Politico Europe* is, with 69 percent of respondents indicating as much, the most influential media source for EU news. Over three in five consider the newspaper “very” or “fairly” influential. *Euractiv* is considered influential by 52 percent of the respondents.<sup>100</sup>

	Founded	Language(s)	Locations	Particularities
<b><i>Euractiv</i></b>	1999	English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian & Serbian	12 partner offices across Europe	Reaches 80% of its readership in their native language
<b><i>Politico Europe</i></b>	2015	English	Brussels, Berlin, London, Paris	Daily newsletters on EU-policies Printed editions

*Table 1: Overview of Euractiv and Politico Europe*

<sup>96</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/frequently-asked-questions/>.

<sup>97</sup> “About POLITICO Europe,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/press/>.

<sup>98</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/frequently-asked-questions/>.

<sup>99</sup> “About POLITICO Europe,” *Politico*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/press/>.

<sup>100</sup> “Burson-Marsteller Media-Consumption 2018,” ComRes, last modified June 2018, [https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki3lqqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller\\_Headline-Report\\_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf](https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki3lqqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller_Headline-Report_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf), 3.

#### 4.2.2 Articles: Period of Publication and Topics

All selected articles have been published during the period of Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union: between 1 July 2020 and 31 December 2020. The Trio consisting of Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia defined various goals in its programme. Aside from creating a climate-neutral Europe and strengthening the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, one central goal of the trio is protecting citizens and freedoms.<sup>101</sup> In this context, the Trio highlights that it is prepared to "support the full application of the Values of the Union, including the Rule of Law throughout the EU."<sup>102</sup> Further, the Trio states that it "looks forward to the setting up a European rule of law mechanism that applies equally to all Member States. This preventive tool shall deepen a constructive dialogue among Member States and foster a joint awareness of the rule of law in all of them."<sup>103</sup> During the German presidency, the topic of the rule of law was vastly covered due to the quarrel about tying the rule of law to the budget. The two MS are accused of disrespecting democratic standards such as the independence of the judiciary or media freedom. Therefore, one topic the articles must cover is thus the conflict between the EU and Warsaw and Budapest.

Another goal of the trio is promoting Europe's interests and values in the world,<sup>104</sup> which includes enlargement policies:

The Trio welcomes the decision to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia and reaffirms the EU-perspective of the Western Balkans and its objective to proceed with the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans based on the recent Commission communication on the enhanced enlargement methodology, where relevant, and deepen cooperation, including as agreed at the Zagreb Summit.<sup>105</sup>

In the light of the accession talks, the Trio plans to tackle the economic impact of the health crisis, developmental discrepancies, promoting democracy, rule of law and media freedom, as well as fight take on disinformation.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, the second topic that the articles must cover are accession talks or relevant political events for the accession.

---

<sup>101</sup> "Taking forward the Strategic Agenda 18-month Programme of the Council (1 July 2020 - 31 December 2021)," Council of the European Union, last modified June 9, 2020, <https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2354332/d2f4bc33ade0af634ae79552060d6332/06-19-pdf-trioprogramme-en-data.pdf>, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

These rather juxtaposed topics represent the EU “in a nutshell”: those outside the EU must meet democratic standards and those inside the EU must safeguard European values. Therefore, the articles are likely to express a specific narrative on the EU. Moreover, these very issues touch upon the previously discussed Europeanization.

All articles can be accessed via the search function at *Euractiv and Politico Europe*’s website. All journalistic genres have been considered, this includes classic news features, interviews, or opinion pieces. In the case of *Euractiv* only the English-speaking articles have been studied. Articles provided by press agencies will not be taken into account as they do not represent the outlet’s editorship. This thesis seeks to analyze exclusively the narrative on EU-affairs, in this case, on the rule of law and accession talks.

## 5. FINDINGS

Following Labov's six-part model, the analysis of *Euractiv's* and *Politico Europe's* articles has been carried out. In the first subchapter, the results of the analysis, thus, the detected frames, are presented. The second subchapter summarizes the results.

### 5.1 Rule of Law

First, the question of how the issue of tying the EU budget to the rule of law has been framed by the two newspapers is presented. In order to provide a structured comparison, first *Euractiv* is taken up, followed by *Politico Europe*.

#### 5.1.1 *Euractiv*

In total, fourteen articles published during the German presidency have been eligible for the analysis (see Appendix 1). *Euractiv*, apparently, did not conduct any interview on the topic of rule of law. Moreover, it clearly marks their opinion pieces as not representative of the news website, as they are provided by outside sources such as politicians and MEPs, which is why they have been excluded from the analysis. Therefore, all selected articles belong to the genre of classic news feature.

Throughout the analysis, three recurring frames were detected: (1) "Hungary and Poland keep the budget hostage," (2) "Hungary's and Poland's arguments are unstable or weak," and (3) "Poland is not as 'harsh' as Hungary." In the following, each frame is presented together with an example.

The first and strongest frame is "Hungary and Poland keep the budget hostage." *Euractiv* indirectly frames Hungary's and Poland's criticism as a jeopardy for millions of lives as well as for future finances of the EU. Furthermore, the news website repeatedly underlines that the two MS are under investigation for violating the rule of law. One example is the article "Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland."

<b>“Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	The European Commission is considering options to evade Hungary and Poland’s veto and might have found an alternative.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: European Commission When: 2 December 2020 Where: Brussels
<b>Evaluation</b>	Explicit and embedded through repetitions and explicatives
<b>Coda</b>	Not only the funds, but also financing the future are at stake

Table 2: *Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Euractiv/Rule of Law/I*

This article comprises both an embedded and explicit evaluation. The embedded evaluation can be found in the beginning, in which the numbers of the envisioned budget, €1.8 trillion including the €750 billion recovery fund, are repeated once again.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, *Euractiv* explains how the “provisional twelfths”-system is an alternative to the budget if Poland and Hungary continue to block its adoption. The author highlights:

The EU, however, won’t be able to commit to new projects under most of its programmes, such as Cohesion or Horizon, and rebates would not be paid to some of the net contributors to the EU budget. In addition, around €25-30 billion in Cohesion funds will be lost even once a new budget for 2021 is adopted under the current MFF, given that the 2014-2020 budget has lower budgetary ceilings compared with the next seven year budget.<sup>108</sup>

It is striking that the author explains which negative consequences the “provisional twelfths” would bring, indirectly highlighting that future financing will be heavily restricted. The author clearly “blames” Hungary and Poland for the current powerlessness of the EU, which can be interpreted as an explicit evaluation. The journalist states: “Budapest and Warsaw’s opposition to the EU budget deal has further complicated the transition to the next EU’s seven-year budget and the adoption of the draft budget for 2021 under the next MFF.”<sup>109</sup> Alternatively, he could have framed the EU for the failure of reaching an agreement by pointing out that, as Hungary and Poland claimed, it jeopardizes national sovereignty or that the pandemic must not be abused to gain more competences with the conditionality.

<sup>107</sup> Jorge Valero, “Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland,” *Euractiv*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/commission-considers-options-for-recovery-fund-without-hungary-and-poland/>.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

The frame of prioritizing citizens' lives, the indirect hostages, over national identity can also be found in "Hungary and Poland veto stimulus against pandemic." The embedded evaluation becomes apparent through highlighting the necessity of the funds for severely hit countries like Spain and Italy. Moreover, the embedded evaluations show through the choice of quotes. In this article, the author refers to the disappointment of the Commissioner for Budget who says that the budget package was not about ideologies, but about helping citizens in the worst crisis since World War II.<sup>110</sup> The author also included a statement by the Polish Justice Minister Ziobro: "The question is whether Poland... will be subject to political and institutionalised enslavement."<sup>111</sup> The statement was, possibly, chosen as it conveys a radical stance toward the EU. Thus, *Euractiv* indirectly portrays Poland as "extreme" and as a "hurdle," while, according to the news website, the EU seeks to save millions of livelihoods across the continent.

Another example is the "Pressure mounts on Hungary, Poland to lift EU budget veto." Aside from highlighting once again that Poland and Hungary are under investigation for violating the rule of law, as well as the emphasis on how helpful the funds would be, the authors refer to a quote by the French and German ambassadors to Warsaw, in which they highlight that only together, the EU will manage to overcome the pandemic and its consequences.<sup>112</sup> Subsequently, they use a comparator by mentioning that Poland rejected help from Germany. Additionally, they included a quote by the Polish PM that can be interpreted as a contradiction: "We are in favour of adhering to European treaties. But it has to be said clearly that nobody will force us to implement other people's visions."<sup>113</sup> Hence, a slight positive undertone when it comes to EU officials is detectable, while Poland is presented in a rather negative light.

In the article "Poland, Hungary propose two-track way out of EU budget deadlock," the author states: "The proposal is unlikely to go down well with the rest of the EU27, who are

---

<sup>110</sup> Jorge Valero, "Hungary and Poland veto stimulus against pandemic," *Euractiv*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/hungary-and-poland-veto-stimulus-against-pandemic/>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Aleksandra Krzysztosek, Alexandra Brzozowski and Zeljko Trkanjec, "Pressure mounts on Hungary, Poland to lift EU budget veto," *Euractiv*, November 25, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/pressure-mounts-on-hungary-poland-to-lift-eu-budget-veto/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/pressure-mounts-on-hungary-poland-to-lift-eu-budget-veto/).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

keen to unlock the badly needed EU funds but also safeguard basic EU values.”<sup>114</sup> Aside from underlining once more the funds’ importance, the news website recognizes that European values, thus the rule of law, are at stake.

All in all, *Euractiv* clearly considers the help for European citizens and the defense of European values, such as the rule of law, more important than the concerns of the Hungarian and Polish government. The latter are, rather, represented as radical and responsible for the dispute regarding the budget.

The second reoccurring frame is “Hungary’s and Poland’s arguments are unstable or weak” that covers three articles. One central example is the Slovene PM Janša supporting Hungary’s and Poland’s veto, whose support then is dismissed by his Slovene colleagues.

<b>“Jansa’s backing of Hungary and Poland’s rule of law veto is ‘his opinion’”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Slovene high-profile politicians openly distance themselves from Janša backing of Hungary and Poland.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Slovenian President Borut Pahor, Prime Minister Janez Janša, Slovenian Defense Minister Matej Tonin, Zdravko Počivalšek, leader of the junior partner SMC party, Justice Minister Lilijana Kozlovič (SMC), Health Minister Tomaž Gantar When: November 19, 2020 Where: Slovenia
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through quotes by distinct Slovene politicians.
<b>Coda</b>	Hungary and Poland do not receive support from other MS after all.

Table 3: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Euractiv/Rule of Law/2*

In the article “Jansa’s backing of Hungary and Poland’s rule of law veto is ‘his opinion,’” the author provides an embedded evaluation by quoting exclusively Slovene politicians that openly disagree with the PM.<sup>115</sup> For instance, it is stated: “Health Minister Tomaž Gantar (DeSUS-RE) said it ‘certainly does not benefit Slovenia’s interests, it puts us among the problematic countries we have never belonged to’ and he called for a serious discussion to

<sup>114</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski and Zoran Radosavljevic, “Poland, Hungary propose two-track way out of EU budget deadlock,” *Euractiv*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/poland-hungary-propose-two-track-way-out-of-eu-budget-deadlock/>.

<sup>115</sup> Zeljko Trkanjec, “Jansa’s backing of Hungary and Poland’s rule of law veto is ‘his opinion,’” *Euractiv*, November 19, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/jansas-backing-of-hungary-and-polands-rule-of-law-veto-is-his-opinion/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/jansas-backing-of-hungary-and-polands-rule-of-law-veto-is-his-opinion/).

be held.”<sup>116</sup> Two further examples affect the Polish case. In the article “Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget,” the authors write: “According to an EU source, the letter was ‘confusing’, also due to factual inaccuracies.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, the embedded evaluation is that Poland is misinformed and, hence, its position must not be taken as seriously. A similar evaluation is found in the article “Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle.” It is stated that the Polish politician Wójcik makes claims about the Dutch law on euthanasia, “without providing proof of such claims.”<sup>118</sup> Based on these findings, *Euractiv* even might “ridicule” certain positions by discrediting them through certain formulations and quotes.

The third detected recurrent frame is “Poland is not as ‘harsh’ as Hungary,” meaning that despite Poland’s criticism of the conditionality, its Hungarian colleague is still stricter and more radical.

The article “Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget” includes the statement: “Both Warsaw and Budapest do oppose the mechanism, but Morawiecki’s comments were less critical and literal than those by his Hungarian counterpart’s.”<sup>119</sup> Another example is the article “‘It’s not gonna work’, Orbán says about Polish veto retreat,” in which *Euractiv* writes that Poland’s deputy Prime Minister Gowin believes that it is in the interest of all and possible to reach an agreement. Compared to that, the author refers to a quote by the Hungarian PM Orbán who insists that this solution will not work, adding it could be discussed later.<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski and Monika Mojak, “Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget,” *Euractiv*, November 13, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget).

<sup>118</sup> Aleksandra Krzysztozek, “Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle,” *Euractiv*, December 2, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/dutch-government-urged-to-sue-poland-in-top-eu-court-over-rule-of-law-debacle/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/dutch-government-urged-to-sue-poland-in-top-eu-court-over-rule-of-law-debacle/).

<sup>119</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski and Monika Mojak, “Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget,” *Euractiv*, November 13, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget).

<sup>120</sup> Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, “‘It’s not gonna work’, Orbán says about Polish veto retreat,” *Euractiv*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/its-not-gonna-work-orban-says-about-polish-veto-retreat/>.

<b>“It’s not gonna work’, Orbán says about Polish veto retreat”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Unlike Hungary, Poland may be changing its position on the veto.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Hungarian PM Orbán, Polish PM Morawiecki, Polish deputy PM Gowin When: 4 December 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded: comparator between Poland tending to lift the veto and Orbán’s persistence
<b>Coda</b>	There might be a solution to the dispute, but Hungary is not interested in it.

Table 4: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Euractiv* /Rule of Law/3

Aside from these three frames, another characteristic was striking: most of the articles were covering the issues in a rather one-sided manner, meaning they presented only one perspective. Most present the perspective of the opponents of the conditionality. It remains doubtful as to why the EU’s approaches and perspectives are presented less. The reason could be that the editorship assumes that its readership is already familiar with the EU’s position, and instead sought to present the critical side as vastly as possible.

All things considered, the first group of articles analyzed gave a strong indication that *Euractiv* follows a narrative that portrays the EU in a more positive light than its Polish and Hungarian counterparts. While the news website clearly stands on the side of defining European values, like the rule of law, it recognizes that Poland is not as radical as the Hungarian government.

### 5.1.2 *Politico Europe*

As for the coverage of the dispute around the rule of law by *Politico Europe*, twenty-nine articles have been selected for the analysis (see Appendix 2). This newspaper’s coverage was much broader than that of *Euractiv*. Besides, *Politico Europe* provided more journalistic genres, such as analyses and opinion pieces. Unlike *Euractiv*, the coverage was more cross-party regarding the selection of direct and indirect quotes from different political spectra.

When analyzing the articles, four main frames were detected. Those are 1) “Hungary and Poland keep the budget hostage,” by far the most recurrent, 2) “Hungary and Poland are the

‘problem child’ of Europe,” 3) “Hungary’s and Poland’s arguments are unstable or weak,” as in the analysis of *Euractiv*’s articles, and 4) “EU actors also jeopardize European values and unity.” This latter frame can be detected in several articles, particularly in an opinion piece. In the following, several examples are presented.

The first and most dominant frame of the articles published on the rule of law is “Hungary and Poland keep the budget hostage.” In fact, the metaphor “keep hostage” has been repeatedly used: see the title “Hungary threatens to hold EU’s coronavirus recovery fund hostage over rule of law.”<sup>121</sup> Instead of framing the two MS as acting in the interest of a united Europe—as Morawiecki insisted<sup>122</sup>—the editorial staff “blames” the two countries for the deadlock of the budget which, consequently, puts many livelihoods across Europe at risk.

In Taylor’s column “How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary’s vetoes,” it is explicitly stated: “Budapest and Warsaw are threatening to veto the bloc’s €1.8 trillion long-term budget and coronavirus recovery fund in a cynical attempt to shield themselves from seeing payments linked to respect for the rule of law.”<sup>123</sup>

<b>“How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary’s vetoes”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	EU actors need to find an alternative in order to circumvent the dispute around rule-of-law.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: EU Members When: 2 December 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Explicit and embedded through statements and repetitions
<b>Coda</b>	There are possibilities to avoid the deadlock by Poland and Hungary.

Table 5: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 1

<sup>121</sup> Lili Bayer, “Hungary threatens to hold EU’s coronavirus recovery fund hostage over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-recovery-fund-hungary-rule-of-law-fight/>.

<sup>122</sup> Hans von der Burchard, “Hungary and Poland escalate budget fight over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-budget-democracy-rule-law-orban-morawiecki-merkel/>.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Taylor, “How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary’s vetoes,” *Politico Europe*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-europe-can-bypass-poland-and-hungarys-vetoes/>.

Moreover, it is explicitly stated: “They are trying to exploit a public health emergency to secure *carte blanche* to go on undercutting European democratic values with impunity.”<sup>124</sup>

Another example is the article “Hungary and Poland escalate budget fight over rule of law” that includes an embedded evaluation. The author repeats how important the budget is for the entire EU: “If the veto threat isn't lifted soon, the EU will have no budget as of next year and would have to rely on emergency mechanisms.”<sup>125</sup> Additionally, the article reads: “While Warsaw and Budapest are adamant that they won't accept what they call ‘arbitrary’ rule of law provisions, the rest of the bloc and the European Parliament insist they won't give way on a principle they feel defines the EU's fundamental values.”<sup>126</sup>

Hence, *Politico Europe* clearly highlights that the bloc has the European values on its side, thus contributing to the idea that the EU can be divided between those that seek to defend fundamental principles and those that jeopardize them for the sake of their own advantage.

The second frame is “Poland and Hungary are the ‘problem child’ of Europe.” In the above-mentioned news feature article “Poland threatens to veto EU budget over rule of law,” the journalist provides another embedded evaluation.

<b>“Poland threatens to veto EU budget over rule of law”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Warsaw will not refrain from its controversial reforms.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Polish government When: 13 October 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through references and repetition.
<b>Coda</b>	The budget is jeopardized due to rule of law violations.

Table 6: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 2*

Aside from using intensifiers, such as the repetition of the words “block” and “threaten” and the amount of the budget, there are many references to how the rule of law was violated in

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Hans von der Burchard, “Hungary and Poland escalate budget fight over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-budget-democracy-rule-law-orban-morawiecki-merkel/>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

Poland and it has worsened in the last years, for instance: “Since taking power in 2015, Poland’s position on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders, a nonprofit group, has dropped from 18th to 62nd this year.”<sup>127</sup> The journalist also picked a quote from Kaczyński, leader of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, in which he compares Brussels with the Soviet Union.<sup>128</sup> Quotes in connection to the USSR and allusions to the Communist past were also often taken up by *Euractiv*. Furthermore, the teaser of the article reads: “It’s part of a signal that Warsaw has no intention of retreating from its controversial reforms.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, the newspaper emphasizes the Polish government’s growing estrangement to European values. The country is presented as the “other,” or the “problem child” of Europe.

The article “Orbán threatens to veto EU budget, recovery fund over rule of law” provides another example for this frame. Inter alia, *Politico Europe* reminds the reader that “EU institutions, international organizations and rights groups have all accused the governments of Hungary and Poland of undermining democratic standards and the rule of law.”<sup>130</sup> In the article “Commission, 5 EU members clash in court with Poland over rule of law,” the author provides an explicative by exemplifying the violation of the rule of law:

The Commission argues that a new disciplinary regime for Polish courts — which Warsaw started to roll out in 2017 — allows judges to be sanctioned based on the content of their rulings. Sanctions can range from lifting judges’ immunity to suspending them from their duties and cutting their salary.<sup>131</sup>

Thus, the reader is given an explicative of the background of the then-dispute, as well as an indirect idea of which side is “causing troubles” within the Union. Moreover, the article ends with: “The court did not appear convinced, with one judge repeatedly asking Dalkowska how a breach of the preliminary ruling could be justified.”<sup>132</sup>

This indirect dismissal is connected to *Politico Europe*’s third recurring frame of “Hungary’s and Poland’s arguments are unstable or weak,” parallel to *Euractiv*’s frame of “Hungary’s

---

<sup>127</sup> Maïa de La Baume and Lili Bayer, “Poland threatens to veto EU budget over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-eu-budget-veto-rule-of-law/>

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Maïa de La Baume and Lili Bayer, “Orbán threatens to veto EU budget, recovery fund over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, November 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-eu-budget-veto-rule-of-law/>.

<sup>131</sup> Hans von der Burchard, “Commission, 5 EU members clash in court with Poland over rule of law,” *Politico Europe*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/five-eu-countries-and-commission-clash-with-poland-over-rule-of-law-at-court-hearing/>.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

and Poland’s position is unstable or weak.” An example for the Hungarian case is provided by the article “EU will eventually resolve budget deadlock, Hungary’s Orbán says.” The journalist refers to a survey according to which 44 percent of Hungarian experiences income losses ever since the beginning of the crisis.<sup>133</sup> Following *Politico Europe*, Orbán seemed to change his mind after the survey’s publication: “His remarks came as a survey showed that Hungarians have been the worst-hit in terms of income loss over the course of the pandemic.”<sup>134</sup> Hence, the author indirectly suggests that Orbán is under pressure and that he might not be so “convinced” of his standpoint.

<b>“EU will eventually resolve budget deadlock, Hungary’s Orbán says”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	According to Orbán, the bypass of the long-term budget and coronavirus recovery package could be resolved.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Hungarian PM Orbán, EU When: 20 November 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through references and explicatives
<b>Coda</b>	There might be hope that eventually, the budget will be adopted

Table 7: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Politico Europe/Rule of Law/3*

Another example is the news feature on “Poland blinks first ahead of showdown at the EU budget corral.” Aside from the personification “blinks first” in the title, underlining the tension, the article covers the possibility of launching the budget with only twenty-five MS, intending to circumvent the deadlock by Poland and Hungary.<sup>135</sup> According to *Politico Europe*, the Deputy Prime Minister of Poland Gowin, then reconsidered: “[...] Gowin’s comments came a day after the European Commission warned that it was prepared to push ahead and create a new coronavirus recovery fund without the support of Warsaw and Budapest.”<sup>136</sup> Additionally, it is stated: “Gowin acknowledged that such a provisional system would hurt all EU countries. It would be especially painful for those like Poland and Hungary

<sup>133</sup> Laurenz Gehrke, “EU will eventually resolve budget deadlock, Hungary’s Orbán says,” *Politico Europe*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/orban-goes-soft-on-recovery-fund-after-survey-reveals-virus-hit-hungarians-incomes-worst/>.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> David M. Herszenhorn, Lili Bayer and Zosia Wanat, “Poland blinks first ahead of showdown at the EU budget corral,” *Politico Europe*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-eu-budget-compromise-jaroslawn-gowin-agreement/>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

that traditionally rely on EU funds.”<sup>137</sup> Consequently, there is an embedded evaluation of Poland, just like that of Orbán in the example above, as changing its approach due to threats from the EU and being under pressure, and not because of a compromise or acceptance of the terms.

The fourth frame, at first, seems to stand in contradiction to the first frame. “Other EU actors also jeopardize European values and unity” means that, even though certain politicians and MS oppose the “hostage keeping” of the budget by Poland and Hungary, they are not necessarily “innocent.” The above-mentioned column by Taylor provided an interesting comparator by referring to past examples of MS taking advantage of their veto:

Cyprus, for example, recently used its veto to hold up EU sanctions against Belarus officials responsible for election-rigging and repression, in an effort to force tougher measures against Turkey over illegal drilling for gas. Austria delayed the launch of an EU maritime mission in the central Mediterranean to enforce an arms embargo on Libya out of opposition to migrant rescues at sea. Both ultimately dropped their objections.<sup>138</sup>

Yet, an even more explicit example for this frame is the opinion piece “Angela Merkel’s rule-of-law legacy: A divided Europe.”

<b>“Angela Merkel’s rule-of-law legacy: A divided Europe”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Merkel is partially to blame for the escalation of the impasse of the budget.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: German chancellor Merkel When: Her time in office Where: Europe
<b>Evaluation</b>	Explicit though statements
<b>Coda</b>	The dispute reading the rule of law and the budget could have been prevented.

Table 8: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Politico Europe/Rule of Law/ 4

The journalist provides another comparator to reinforce the evaluation: “For while Merkel deserves credit for resolving the impasse, she also bears responsibility for creating the problem in the first place. For years, she sat quietly as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Poland’s

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Taylor, “How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary’s vetoes,” *Politico Europe*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-europe-can-bypass-poland-and-hungarys-vetoes/>.

Jarosław Kaczyński set about dismantling their countries' democracies.”<sup>139</sup> Even though the author acknowledges that Germany bears a certain responsibility towards Poland, this statement can be evaluated as clearly explicit. Thus, the newspaper sought to explain that, even though Poland and Hungary are undoubtedly the obstacle in this dispute, the lines of “good” and “bad” are indeed blurred.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that *Politico Europe* sticks to a certain narrative when covering EU-policies. These frames demonstrate that the newspaper opposes violations of the rule of law and stands behind European values. Even though it clearly presents Hungary and Poland as an unjustified obstacle in the adoption of a much-needed budget, it seeks to avoid portraying their counterpart, the EU, as flawless.

## 5.2 Enlargement

In this subchapter, the results of the article covering EU enlargement is presented. First, the frames by *Euractiv* are outlined, before drawing a comparison to *Politico Europe*.

### 5.2.1 *Euractiv*

When it comes to *Euractiv*'s coverage of the enlargement, only eight articles in the six months of German presidency were eligible for the analysis (see Appendix 3). The range of articles shows different characteristics in terms of style, length, and structure in comparison to those covering the dispute around the rule of law. Apart from the fact that, on the topic of enlargement, *Euractiv* received much material from press agencies, the news website also published many opinion pieces on the topic, which have been marked as not representative of the editorship. Hence, they had to be excluded from this analysis. However, the average length of the articles is significantly greater than that of the articles covering the rule of law. Moreover, two out of the eight selected articles have been sorted into the journalistic genre of an analysis. The rest are classic feature news stories.

Unlike in the previous analysis, the topic of enlargement covers not only one dispute between two parties, but also investment policies or bilateral relations. In total, there are three ways

---

<sup>139</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, “Angela Merkel’s rule-of-law legacy: A divided Europe,” *Politico Europe*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkels-rule-of-law-legacy-divided-europe/>.

of framing, one per thematic field: 1) “Enlargement in the Western Balkans is supported,” 2) “Kosovo is more ‘European’ than Serbia,” and 3) “the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia is too complex.”

First, there are three articles that are framed in a way that shows support for the accession of the Balkan countries. For instance, in the analysis “Enlargement agenda: Investment plans, reforms and elections,” it becomes clear that *Euractiv*, generally, supports the enlargement.

<b>“Enlargement agenda: Investment plans, reforms and elections”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	<i>Euractiv</i> explains the status and progress of all EU hopefuls in the South and East.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: EU hopefuls When: August 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through terms and metaphors.
<b>Coda</b>	The shape of the EU might change soon.

Table 9: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Euractiv/Enlargement/1*

This position becomes apparent through the embedded evaluation. *Euractiv* uses the metaphor “[...] who see the glass as half-full [...],”<sup>140</sup> referring to the progress the accession process has made. Hence, the enlargement is considered a desirable goal. Moreover, it talks about “positive signals”<sup>141</sup> in terms of the Pristina-Belgrade relations. Thus, amicable ties between Serbia and Kosovo are endorsed by the news website.

Another example for *Euractiv* apparently supporting the enlargement policies provided the article “Road and rail at centre of EU investment plan for Western Balkans.” Also, in this coverage there is an embedded evaluation and an optimistic undertone throughout the article. The editorial staff uses intensifiers through repetition and explicatives of how the investments benefit the countries, for instance: “The EU has already earmarked €3.3 billion to help the stressed economies of the region and immediate COVID needs, with the new investment

<sup>140</sup> Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, “Enlargement agenda: Investment plans, reforms and elections,” *Euractiv*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/enlargement-agenda-investment-plans-reforms-and-elections/>.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

plan focusing instead on longer time horizons.”<sup>142</sup> An alternative way to cover these policies would have been the criticism of how much money is being “wasted.” It also optimistically speaks of “former arch-foes Pristina and Belgrade.”<sup>143</sup> Besides, only the Commission and its plan are represented, not any opposition. The only critical question on the rule of law was answered by a direct quote by Várhelyi.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, it conveys the impression that no one is disagreeing.

The third article “Commission seeks to revive enlargement with new package” is similar to the previous one, as it does not cover any statement from potential opponents in the EP. The report presented in the EP was summarized and highlighted both positive and negative developments in the pre-accession countries. However, in this case, the journalist refers to an outside report, so it should be treated like a quote.<sup>145</sup> All in all, it is fair to state that *Euractiv* seems rather optimistic and supportive in terms of the accession talks progress.

The second detected frame “Kosovo is more ‘European’ than Serbia” encompasses two articles. In the article “Belgrade-Pristina deal only way to counter ‘influences from the East’, Kosovo PM says” it is clear that Kosovo is presented in a more positive light than its Serbian counterpart, as it aligns more to the EU protocol.

<b>Belgrade-Pristina deal only way to counter ‘influences from the East’</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Serbia and Kosovo must stabilize relations to avoid influence from the East.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Kosovo’s PM Hoti, MEPs When: 10 September 2020 Where: Brussels
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through references and quotes
<b>Coda</b>	The complicated foreign affairs issues complicate the accession of the countries, particularly Serbia

Table 10: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in *Euractiv/Enlargement/2*

<sup>142</sup> Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, “Road and rail at centre of EU investment plan for Western Balkans,” *Euractiv*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/road-and-rail-at-centre-of-eu-investment-plan-for-western-balkans>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, “Commission seeks to revive enlargement with new package,” *Euractiv*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/commission-seeks-to-revive-enlargement-with-new-package/>.

For instance, Hoti is quoted, who considers Kosovo to be “pro-European.”<sup>146</sup> Moreover, the journalist writes “[...] Kosovo committed to recognise Israel, while Serbia pledged to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, setting off alarm bells in Brussels.”<sup>147</sup> The article continues: “Aligning itself to the EU’s foreign policy positions is an expectation of candidate countries like Serbia.”<sup>148</sup> Even though the article features quotes from Kosovo’s PM and the EU, it only describes Serbia without quoting directly. Serbia’s concrete positions and motivations are not mentioned. Therefore, the reader gets the impression that Kosovo is performing better than Serbia.

The second article framed this way is “Serbia, Kosovo leaders gear up for tough US talks,” which provided more bipartisan coverage—it covers both Serbia and Kosovo, even though Serbia was quoted more. It is striking that, even though the article is mainly about the talks regarding economy and recognition in Washington, Kosovo is represented as more Western-oriented than its Serbian counterpart. This tendency becomes apparent through a reference of a quote by Kosovo’s PM Hoti, who stressed his country’s interest in dialogue and Euro-Atlantic alignment.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, the journalist states: “Meanwhile, Belgrade has also hinted at building closer relations with Russia and China.”<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the article closes with a reference to the EU: “Belgrade and Priština have talked for years under EU auspices about normalising relations and reaching a comprehensive agreement, a requirement for their progress towards European integration.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore, enlargement in general seems to be a priority for *Euractiv*.

The third frame affects the complicated dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and it includes three articles. It is striking that all the coverage found in all three are quite balanced, so different perspectives are presented: the Bulgarian, the North Macedonia, and the German Presidency’s. No side is “blamed” for the dispute. For example, in the article “Revolutionary hero’s identity stands in the way of Skopje’s EU path” the author mentions that Bulgaria is not categorically against North Macedonia as a MS and that North Macedonia is

---

<sup>146</sup> Vlagyislav Makszimov, “Belgrade-Pristina deal only way to counter ‘influences from the East’, Kosovo PM says,” *Euractiv*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/belgrade-pristina-deal-only-way-to-counter-influences-from-the-east-kosovo-pm-says/>.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Julija Simić, “Serbia, Kosovo leaders gear up for tough US talks,” *Euractiv*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbia-kosovo-leaders-gear-up-for-tough-us-talks/>.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

optimistic about finding a solution. It is also striking that the whole dispute is evaluated as very complicated, both in an embedded and explicit way. Moreover, the role of history is highlighted.<sup>152</sup>

In “Bulgaria says to block EU accession talks with North Macedonia,” an article focusing predominantly on Bulgaria, there is even a subheading reading: “Difficult to explain.”<sup>153</sup> Additionally, a quote by Bulgaria’s President Radevit is included who highlighted that “as a responsible EU member, Bulgaria wanted to solve the problems with the candidate country, instead of importing another problem inside the Union.”<sup>154</sup> In the analysis “Bulgaria spells out conditions for unblocking North Macedonia’s EU path,” another example for the embedded evaluation of the complicated common history between the two countries can be found.

<b>Bulgaria spells out conditions for unblocking North Macedonia’s EU path</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Bulgaria vetoed opening EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, a decision which indirectly also affects Albania.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Bulgarian, NM, Greek government When: November 18, 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through references to history and explicatives
<b>Coda</b>	The process to the accession talks is long and complicated due to unresolved historical narratives and might take longer than expected.

Table 11: Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Euractiv/Enlargement/3

The analysis provided a historical explicative, as well as detailed descriptions of suggestions for a compromise. Furthermore, unlike in the Polish and Hungarian case, Bulgaria seems to be supported by the EU—in this case, the German presidency. In the article, it is stated: “German European Affairs Minister Michael Roth, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, told reporters following the General Affairs Council that ‘there were some open

<sup>152</sup> EURACTIV Bulgaria and Zoran Radosavljevic, “Revolutionary hero’s identity stands in the way of Skopje’s EU path,” *Euractiv*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/revolutionary-heros-identity-stands-in-the-way-of-skopjes-eu-path/>.

<sup>153</sup> Gotev Georgi, “Bulgaria says to block EU accession talks with North Macedonia,” *Euractiv*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bulgaria-says-to-block-eu-accession-talks-with-north-macedonia/>.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

questions from the Bulgarian point of view that have to be clarified.”<sup>155</sup> All in all, it is fair to state that, apparently, the news website “sympathizes” both with Bulgaria and North Macedonia. It has, apparently, no intention to frame anyone as “the one to blame” either. The dispute is a multilayered and complicated issue, and no side is being “preferred” over the other.

In conclusion, the resulting narrative can be summarized as follows: While *Euractiv* seems to support the enlargement in general and tends to highlight the development of Kosovo in comparison to Serbia, the editorial staff does not “pick a side” in terms of the tensions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. A reason could be that Bulgaria does not seek to “harm” the EU and benefits from its support.

### ***5.2.2 Politico Europe***

The last range of articles to analyze is *Politico Europe*’s reporting of policies related to the EU-enlargement. In comparison to the rule of law, the coverage is significantly smaller: In the entire period of the German presidency, only seven articles were published in this context (see Appendix 4). Aside from the classic news feature, an opinion piece and an analysis were also issued by the editorship.

Despite only being seven articles in total—three on North Macedonia’s elections and four on Bulgaria’s veto—two recurring frames could be detected: 1) “North Macedonia: international success versus domestic challenges,” and 2) “Bulgaria keeps membership talks hostage.”

The first frame becomes apparent in the first article published on the subject in the period of the German presidency. The article “Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia’s election” provides an embedded evaluation through quotes, explicatives, and references.

---

<sup>155</sup> Georgi Gotev, Sarantis Michalopoulos and Zeljko Trkanjec, “Bulgaria spells out conditions for unblocking North Macedonia’s EU path,” *Euractiv*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bulgaria-spells-out-conditions-for-unblocking-north-macedonias-eu-path/>.

<b>“Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia’s election”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Despite its recent successes, the North Macedonian government now faces domestic challenges.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: North Macedonian government When: July 2020 Where: North Macedonia
<b>Evaluation</b>	Embedded through quotes, explicatives, and references.
<b>Coda</b>	Even though the country now faces several challenges due to the COVID-19-crisis, there might be a better tomorrow.

Table 12: *Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Politico Europe /Enlargement/1*

The author highlights the discrepancy between North Macedonia’s international and domestic affairs already in the teaser: “Party that won plaudits internationally faces pressure at home.”<sup>156</sup> Additionally, the article starts with a reference to the country’s latest diplomatic achievements: “They won praise across Europe for ending a decades-long dispute with Greece, getting their country into NATO and opening a path to EU membership talks.”<sup>157</sup> However, the author avoids portraying the government as exclusively unblemished. For instance, she explains: “But North Macedonia’s Social Democrats (SDSM) face a struggle to retain power in a general election on Wednesday due to more everyday concerns — such as the coronavirus, the economy and corruption.”<sup>158</sup> Yet, it is striking that the article closes with a quote by the PM Zaev, in which he expresses his optimism for the country’s future as a member of NATO and an EU hopeful.

Another example for this frame is provided by the article “Ruling Social Democrats on course to win North Macedonia election,” in which an embedded evaluation manifests through references and explicatives. On the one hand, the article reads:

Zaev is seeking another term as prime minister, hoping to be the leader who opens the country’s long-awaited EU accession talks. His coalition, in power since late 2016, won plaudits internationally for the landmark name change

<sup>156</sup> Nektaria Stamouli, “Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia’s election,” *Politico Europe*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-casts-shadow-over-north-macedonia-election-zoran-zaev/>.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

agreement with Greece, which paved the way to EU entry. Zaev’s government also secured NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country.<sup>159</sup>

On the other hand, it is stated: “But critics of Zaev’s government say he neglected reforms to improve everyday life, the economy and the rule of law, while the conservative VMRO-DPMNE opposition painted the Greek deal as ‘treason.’”<sup>160</sup> Thus, the coverage shows a pattern, just like the coverage of EU actors in terms of the rule of law: The author refrains from depicting North Macedonia’s governmental activities as exclusively successful and seeks to highlight the domestic struggles. At the same time, however, it also mentions its accomplishments on the international scale.

A prime example for the second frame, “Bulgaria keeps membership talks hostage,” is an opinion piece published on the topic of Bulgaria vetoing the membership talks of its neighbor.

<b>“Bulgaria’s standoff with North Macedonia is a lose-lose”</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>	Bulgaria potentially blocking the accession of North Macedonia due to old disputes impedes the entire region’s economic boost.
<b>Orientation</b>	Who: Bulgarian and North Macedonian government When: 17 November 2020 Where: EU
<b>Evaluation</b>	Explicit and embedded through references and statements
<b>Coda</b>	The future of the economic growth for the entire West Balkan might be affected as the negotiation press will take longer—provided Bulgaria lifts its veto.

Table 13: *Example for Labov’s six-part-model in Politico Europe /Enlargement/2*

In fact, similar to the coverage on the rule of law, the author uses the term “hostage” in the introduction: “Once again, the European Union’s enlargement process is hostage to an emotionally charged dispute that is, to outsiders, baffling.”<sup>161</sup> In this case, rather than the budget—and, indirectly, the livelihood of many European citizens—being kept hostage, it is

<sup>159</sup> Nektaria Stamouli, “Ruling Social Democrats on course to win North Macedonia election,” *Politico Europe*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ruling-social-democrats-on-course-to-win-north-macedonia-election/>.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Dimitar Bechev and Julian Popov, “Bulgaria’s standoff with North Macedonia is a lose-lose,” *Politico Europe*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-standoff-north-macedonia-is-a-lose-lose/>.

the future of the integration process in the West Balkans. Furthermore, the article contains explicit evaluations, such as: “Sadly, it looks likely to be delayed further”<sup>162</sup> or “[...] Bulgaria has now become the most problematic naysayer.”<sup>163</sup> These statements convey the idea that the editorial staff regrets these recent developments as it supports the accession of North Macedonia. Moreover, the authors explain how Bulgaria would benefit from North Macedonia’s potential membership and vice versa: “If Sofia and Skopje can work together to modernize their economies—using a blend of the EU’s recovery fund, other EU funding instruments and their own national budgets—it would serve the reassure investors and make both countries more attractive for new industries.”<sup>164</sup> The article concludes with: “But there is a win-win option too, for those who want to see it. And that, in the end, is what the EU is really about.”<sup>165</sup> Thus, Bulgaria is damaging the ongoing negotiation process and might even harm itself by not letting North Macedonia enter. Moreover, Bulgaria is depicted as the only “side to blame” in this context; the role of North Macedonia in the language and identity dispute is not mentioned.

Another example of this frame is the analysis article “Tongue-tied: Bulgaria’s language gripe blocks North Macedonia’s EU path,” in which an embedded evaluation emerges through references and explicative on the historical background. For instance: “When Macedonia was a republic inside socialist Yugoslavia, its leaders were allowed to define their own identity, which included standardizing the language.”<sup>166</sup> In addition to that, the journalist refers to a quote in which North Macedonia is said to be “punished” for its fairly young history. This kind of “victimization” is reinforced through the statement: “After 15 years of frustration, North Macedonia finally got a green light from the EU this year to begin membership talks — only to find another red light at the next junction.”<sup>167</sup> Besides, the article includes a reference to the resolution of the dispute with Greece and its eagerness to join the EU: “For North Macedonia, the Bulgarian block is a gut punch. The country, perhaps the most eager

---

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Una Hajdari, “Tongue-tied: Bulgaria’s language gripe blocks North Macedonia’s EU path,” *Politico Europe*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-north-macedonia-eu-accession-talks-language-dispute/>.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

candidate for EU membership, had only recently overcome another challenge to its identity and accession to the bloc.”<sup>168</sup>

The news feature article “Bulgaria blocks EU membership talks for North Macedonia” follows a similar pattern as disappointment and frustration at the negotiation table is highlighted through statements like: “Multiple EU officials and diplomats expressed frustration that Bulgaria was using bilateral issues to hold up a process that is between North Macedonia and the EU as a whole,”<sup>169</sup> or the reference to Germany unsuccessfully trying to convince Bulgaria otherwise.<sup>170</sup>

Hence, a rather positive depiction of North Macedonia in comparison to its Bulgarian neighbor can be detected. Unlike in *Euractiv*’s case, there is no representation of voices that support or “comprehend” Bulgaria’s position. The authors could have framed the quarrel the other way round by highlighting the importance of language and national identity, or, just like *Euractiv*, emphasizing the complexity of the dispute. Instead, the article conveys the impression that only Bulgaria is “to blame” for this diplomatic tension.

Overall, the newspaper is pro-enlargement and tends to favor the prospective membership of North Macedonia while regretting Bulgaria’s (seemingly exaggerated) rejection. *Politico Europe* focuses on the future and what might be at stake, such as the economic growth in both countries. However, the newspaper makes sure not to “blindly” depict North Macedonia as the perfect EU hopeful. Just like in the case of the rule of law, favoring EU values and membership does not automatically mean that these (future) members must not be represented as “perfectly apt” actors in and for the EU.

### 5.3 Summary

To begin, *Euractiv* relies more on material provided by press agencies as well as opinion pieces written by outside sources, while *Politico Europe*, an outlet that belongs to the renowned Axel Springer, can afford to publish more of its own coverage; while thirty-six articles by *Politico Europe* were eligible for the analysis, only twenty-two articles by *Euractiv* could be selected. In both cases, published articles on the dispute concerning the rule of law

---

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Jacopo Barigazzi, “Bulgaria blocks EU membership talks for North Macedonia,” *Politico Europe* November 17, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-blocks-eu-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia/>.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

outnumber published articles concerning EU-enlargement policies. Considering such, in comparison to the talks between Serbia and Kosovo in Washington or future investments in the Western Balkans, the adoption of the budget was a highly important and domestic issue.

Moreover, it is striking that the style of coverage differs between outlets. While *Euractiv* tends to publish rather short news features focusing on one point of view, the articles by *Politico Europe* provided more mixed sources and quotes from voices of different political spectra. The latter also published a wider range of journalistic genres, such as opinion pieces and analyses, and therefore provided a much broader insight to the topic than *Euractiv*.

Nevertheless, in both cases, recurring frames were detected. *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe* use the frame of “Hungary and Poland keep the budget hostage.” Both highlight the importance of the budget and “blame” the Hungarian and Polish governments for jeopardizing the livelihoods of European citizens, future financing, and projects, all while trying to blackmail the EU to their advantage. In addition to framing the two MS as a menace—instead of asking the question of whether or not their objection is justified or not—both newspapers tend to frame “Hungary’s and Poland’s arguments are unstable or weak” by either dismissing or relativizing arguments put forward by the governments.

Aside from these two frames that the newspapers have in common, there are slight differences in the modes of framing. *Euractiv* sought to represent Poland not as “harsh” as Hungary, also because the government seems to change its position on the conditionality. The news website mentions repeatedly that Warsaw’s ally in Budapest takes a more radical position. This observation, however, was not made in the case of *Politico Europe*. Instead, the latter provided two other frames that could not be found in *Euractiv*. The frame “Hungary and Poland are the ‘problem child’ of Europe” is closely connected to the first frame. While *Euractiv* also provided references and explicatives on the violation of rule of law in both countries, *Politico Europe* paid special attention to more background knowledge on how the rule of law was violated and which groups accused the respective governments of disrespecting democratic principles. Moreover, the fourth frame “EU actors also jeopardize European values and unity” is of particular interest. While the governments of Hungary and Poland are clearly represented as the opponent of the EU, the newspaper still emphasized that other EU actors—namely, those that criticize Hungary and Poland—are also guilty of having jeopardized European values.

When it comes to the reporting of European enlargement policies, however, it is not possible to determine any frames that both newspapers have in common, partially also due to the fact that the topics covered differ. For instance, *Euractiv* did not cover the elections in North Macedonia, while *Politico Europe* did not mention the talks between Kosovo and Serbia in Washington. In *Euractiv*'s case, support for the enlargement is conveyed through the frame "enlargement in the Western Balkans is desirable." References, quotes and explicatives impart an impression that investment in the region is supported by the editorship. The frame "Kosovo is more 'European' than Serbia" is detectable through references to Kosovo's Western orientation and Serbia's refraining from "EU expectation," e.g. the rapprochement to Russian and China or the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Considering support of the enlargement, one can assume that Pristina was—purposefully—represented in a more positive light than Belgrade. Another interesting and most distinctive frame is "the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia is too complex." Unlike in the case with Hungary's and Poland's veto, *Euractiv* does not seem to consider Bulgaria a "hostage-taker" of the membership talks. Rather, the editorial staff explains the background of the dispute, and, despite its somewhat one-sided articles, includes both parties in its articles. Hence, *Euractiv* does not have the intention to indirectly "accuse" Bulgaria or North Macedonia; instead, it proved a rather impartial coverage.

In *Politico Europe*'s case, however, Bulgaria is indeed framed as the "hostage-taker." Through statements and references, it becomes clear that the newspaper supports North Macedonia's membership just as it regrets Bulgaria's seemingly exaggerated rejection. Skopje is rather represented as a victim. Still, despite its "sympathy" with North Macedonia, *Politico Europe* does not represent its government as perfectly apt for the EU. Through the frame "North Macedonia: international success versus domestic challenges," the newspaper seeks to represent its accomplishments in the international arena, but not without mentioning the domestic challenges the small country is facing as well as mistakes of the government in the COVID-19 crisis. Just like in the coverage of the rule of law, a pattern can be recognized: favoring EU values and membership does not automatically mean that these (future) members must not be represented as "perfect." Once again, no single countries are favored, but rather the common good—in this case: the accession of North Macedonia and subsequent economic growth in the region.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After having analyzed the selected articles and summarized the results, the research questions can be taken up again. In the following, each research question is answered and compared to previously conducted studies. Ultimately, a final conclusion is drawn.

The first research question raised asks if the pan-European press shares a narrative when covering the EU versus EU-critical parties, and how that narrative can be characterized. When disregarding differences in genres and styles and focusing solely on the resulting narratives of the frames, *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe* only tend to share a common narrative when covering the EU versus its current critics.

On the one hand, it is not possible to concretely describe what the EU designates for the newspapers since there are barely unambiguous, recurring descriptions, rather embedded evaluations. Yet, both convey the impression that they side with European values, such as the rule of law, and prioritize the adoption of the budget over the objections of the two MS. Additionally, both seem to support the enlargement policies in the Western Balkans. Apart from following a pro-European alignment, one shall also consider that enlargement also means a potential greater audience for both media. This stance could, thus, also be economically motivated. As Varga found, English-only coverage benefitted from the enlargement (see chapter 3.2).

When comparing these results to previous studies, this narrative is reminiscent of Salovaara-Moring's study and identification of narratives as outlined in chapter 3.1.2. In the case of the rule of law, there is also a certain "othering" between what the newspapers consider "European-democratic" and the authoritarian-leaning regimes<sup>171</sup> in Poland and Hungary. In Salovaara-Moring's identified narrative, "Europe as an experience," Europe also is emotionally charged with both hopes and fears, containing collective and individual historical narratives.<sup>172</sup> This is reflected in the reporting of the enlargement, when bearing in mind the investment plans or North Macedonia's long-winded and difficult road to membership.

---

<sup>171</sup> Inka Salovaara-Moring, "What Is Europe?: Geographies of Journalism," in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 53, 67.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-9.

Furthermore, this pro-European narrative reminds of Herzer's study on "Euro-journalism" and his identification of a "Euro-narrative," as presented in chapter 3.1.2. As in bygone decades, there is a certain contemporary "Euro-narrative" that embraces European unity, economic prosperity, and rejects national egocentrism.<sup>173</sup>

On the other hand, *Politico Europe*'s criticism of EU actors crystallizes a difference regarding the narrative: the newspaper does not differ between Poland and Hungary and those that oppose them, but instead covers any kind of disrespecting of European values. This tendency can also be observed in their coverage of the enlargement: while *Politico Europe* sympathized with North Macedonia in the dispute with Bulgaria, it also mentions deficiencies in the country's current government. Arguably, the outlet's pro-European stance becomes more credible this way.

*Euractiv*, despite having demonstrated a supportive stance on enlargement, has chosen a more impartial way to cover the bilateral dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. A reason could be that the MS does not infringe European values or attack Brussels out of an ideological motivation. Another reason could be the fact that *Euractiv* operates Europe-wide, and the national identity of journalists could impact the coverage. Moreover, *Euractiv* depends on sponsoring from partners and the European Commission. A potential influence in this particular case cannot be excluded, even though the editorship claims to be independent.

The second research question to be answered is: Do these pan-European news outlets and their narratives contribute to the Europeanization of the media landscape and to a European identity?

First off, the theories around Europeanization are mostly of a political, territorial, and institutional nature, leaving out the cultural aspect of integration. The newspaper *Politico Europe* and the website *Euractiv* clearly are part of the latter. Koopmans and Erbe differ amongst three types of Europeanizing in the communication sector, as explained in chapter 2.2. While the second and third forms rather address the EU and national level, the first type foresees the emergence of a supranational European public sphere through the collaboration of EU-institutions and collective actors. Ideally speaking, this collaboration will be complemented by Europe-wide mass-media. Following this concept, *Politico Europe* and *Euractiv* can be

---

<sup>173</sup> Martin Herzer, *The Media, European Integration and the Rise of Euro-journalism, 1950s-1970s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2-3, 296.

attributed to the first form of Europeanization of the mass media, even though the absolute installation of a supranational European public sphere remains a far cry.

When it comes to the rather pro-European narrative, it is questionable to which extent it can Europeanize the readership in the sense of raising awareness for EU-affairs and democratic principles. As chapter 3.1.2 on the framing of Europe has shown, narratives have an impact on their audience. Herzer argues that “Euro-journalists” with their “Euro-narrative” have contributed to the EU of today, while Hungarian newspapers were rather skeptical of the EU before their accession.

On the one hand, it is indeed thinkable that *Euractiv* has a certain impact on its audience. Generally speaking, its multilingual character reaches a wider audience, especially those without any proficiency in English. Aside from those that are interested in the EU by default, *Euractiv* has the potential to address those that “only” consume national media as well as has the potential to offer them a new, transnational perspective. When it comes to further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether there are major differences in *Euractiv*’s narrative depending on the language and audience of the coverage.

On the other hand, *Politico Europe* is only available in English and the printed version is only distributed in a few places in Europe. It is assumed that it fails to reach a wider public and is mostly consumed by a rather elite and pro-European audience that is already familiar with EU mechanisms. Therefore, it is doubtful whether the newspaper’s narrative has an impact in terms of Europeanization. It might even contribute to splitting once again the elite and broader public, just like Herzer has observed in his research (see chapter 3.1.2).

Closely connected to this topic is identity building through media. National media contributed to the creation of the national identity, for instance, through addressing symbolic resources or collective memory, as well as through the othering of outsiders.<sup>174</sup> Now it is questionable if transnational media operates the same way. When looking at the narratives, both *Politico Europe* and *Euractiv* work with what can be considered a “civic” identity rather than a cultural identity, as discussed in chapter 2.3. Important chapters of pan-European history are mentioned, such as Communism and World War II; however, those are mostly

---

<sup>174</sup> Farrel Corcoran, “The Politics of Belonging: Identity Anxiety in the European Union,” in *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, ed. by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 207.

quotes from outside sources and do not form the *fil rouge* of the articles. The fact that both newspapers work with European values, such as the othering of Hungary and Poland by mentioning violations of the rule of law, indicates that they “only” contribute to the identification with the EU on an institutional level—hence, the identification with democratic principles. Moreover, it is debatable if the newspapers take on “an advocacy role” as mentioned by Papathanassopoulos and Negrine,<sup>175</sup> thus assisting the EU in the integration process. Following neofunctionalism, the “civic” identification could have a spill-over effect on cultural identification with the EU. This rather abstract and long-term goal might be achieved decades from now.

Thus, the actual impact of a newspaper and its narrative on raising awareness for EU-affairs within Europe depends on the question of whether or not it succeeds in leaving its echo-chamber. Whether there are indeed long-lasting consequences on engagement with European affairs and the cultural identification with the EU, as desired by those that embrace an ever-closer union, might be an interesting research question for future dissertations. Either way, it is beyond question that both newspapers contribute to the European public sphere, as they enable dialogue and discourse. These media—in particular *Euractiv*—could build their success on the electronic media, which Habermas, ironically, noted as the trivialization of politics,<sup>176</sup> as mentioned in chapter 2.1.

The third and final research question is in which way these transnational media can be considered an alternative to national newspapers.

Vis-à-vis quantity, Trenz found an adequate quantity of EU-coverage. However, it is still questionable if and to what extent Europe’s newspapers covered the elections in North Macedonia or Bulgaria’s veto. Therefore, both news sites are apt sources for more detailed coverage on European affairs if national media does not consider certain events.

When it comes to quality, both *Politico Europe* and *Euractiv* cover news independently from any national framework. In general, their coverage is free from any special preference or special reference to any MS, unlike domestic media, as several studies outlined in chapter

---

<sup>175</sup> Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>176</sup> Peter Dahlgren, “Public Spheres, Societal Shifts, and Media Modulations,” in *Media, Markets and Public Spheres: European Media at the Crossroads*, ed. by Jostein Gripsrud and Lennart Weibull (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), 20-1.

3.1.2 have shown. Generally speaking, if the potential reader seeks to read news written from a pan-European point of view, then both newspapers are appropriate. The latter is another argument for *Politico Europe* and *Euractiv* comprising an alternative for rather Euro-critical national newspapers: the pro-European narrative provides another point of view and contributes to a wider media spectrum as well as democratic pluralism.

Summing up, the results of the analysis are comparable to previous studies, even though most of them tackled national media or the potential audience of said transnational press. The narratives found are quite similar as only a few frames differ. The reason for these slight differences can, for now, only be speculated. Further, this transnational press' role in Europeanizing the public is rather limited, as the broader public is only reached in a limited way. The transnational press does not directly contribute to building a European cultural identity since its narrative is rather built upon "civic" identity. Nevertheless, it does indeed represent an alternative to national media, as it offers a transnational point of view, as well as a pro-European perspective. Overall, the results provide a point of departure for future comparative and qualitative research in transnational media as well as its audience.

As a final conclusion of the discussed theories, presented studies, and the analyzed articles, it remains to be said that, without a doubt, the Habermasian notion of the public sphere slowly seems to flourish within a pan-European context. Thanks to an English and multilingual offer, more citizens can read about EU affairs in the fairly young and niche media that focuses on reporting from a European point of view.

However, the similar or nearly identical narratives of *Euractiv* and *Politico Europe* might as well limit the European public sphere. But it is also certain that there is indeed a growing interest in the EU, English as a lingua franca is expanding, and the enlargement in the West Balkans is approaching. Therefore, more and new social and political publics might establish themselves independently from the national state. Consequently, the public sphere could expand not only in its size, but also in its offer. It might even be thinkable that media with a distinct or even opposite narrative may be established in the upcoming years, giving a voice to those that criticize or wish to fundamentally transform the EU. Potentially, the European Commission may also begin to consider the role of transnational pioneers and launch surveys on their audience and its characterization, in the same way that previous surveys tackled national media.

Another very central issue in this context is the impact on Europeanizing the media audience as well as the press' role for the creation of a European identity. It remains to be seen if "civic" identity indeed has a spillover effect on conventional cultural identity. Potentially, future narratives of the transnational press could indeed feature references to a common historical culture, such as World War II or the Iron Curtain, as well as folklore or symbols that cross national borders.

Harkening back to the introductory quote attributed to founding father Jean Monnet, who considered culture the most important aspect of European integration: It is ironic that the bare fact of suspicion as to the validity of the quote could be the best proof of why more pan-European press is needed. Or, better said: why a media landscape that manages to transcend political borders and linguistic obstacles so that misunderstandings like this can be avoided is needed. Such a media landscape would wholly encourage debate and exchange among its public, thus giving the EU an invaluable democratic boost.

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adkins, William. “Jourová: EU won’t use rule of law powers in ‘activist’ way.” *Politico Europe*. December 15, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/top-commissioner-vera-jourova-warns-corruption-will-diminish-taxpayer-trust-rule-of-law/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Barigazzi, Jacopo. “Bulgaria threatens to veto North Macedonia’s EU talks.” *Politico Europe*. October 21, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-threatens-veto-on-north-macedonia-accession/> (accessed March 26, 2021).
- Barigazzi, Jacopo. “Bulgaria blocks EU membership talks for North Macedonia.” *Politico Europe*. November 17, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-blocks-eu-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia/> (accessed March 26, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “No EU budget if rule of law discussed, Orbán says.” *Politico Europe*. July 10, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/no-budget-if-rule-of-law-discussed-orban-says/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “Hungary threatens to hold EU’s coronavirus recovery fund hostage over rule of law.” *Politico Europe*. September 2, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-recovery-fund-hungary-rule-of-law-fight/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili and Wanat, Zosia. “Hungary and Poland block EU coronavirus recovery package.” *Politico Europe*. November 16, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-and-poland-block-progress-on-e1-8-trillion-package/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “Viktor Orbán rejects rule of law compromise idea.” *Politico Europe*. December 4, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-rejects-rule-of-law-compromise/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili and Wanat, Zosia. “Orbán: Agreement close on rule of law in EU budget battle.” *Politico Europe*. December 8, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/orban-agreement-close-on-rule-of-law/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili, Wanat, Zosia, von der Burchard, Hans. “Poland signals rule of law budget deal within reach.” *Politico Europe*. December 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-closes-in-on-rule-of-law-budget-compromise/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “EU budget plan lets Hungary, Poland off the rule-of-law hook (for now).” *Politico Europe*. December 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-budget-plan-lets-hungary-poland-off-the-rule-of-law-hook-for-now/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “Germany presents plan to end EU budget blockade by Hungary, Poland.” *Politico Europe*. December 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-presidency-proposes-rule-of-law-compromise-text/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Bayer, Lili. “EU leaders back deal to end budget blockade by Hungary and Poland.” *Politico Europe*. December 10, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/deal-reached-to-unblock-eu-budget-and-recovery-fund/> (accessed March 24, 2021).

- Bechev, Dimitar and Popov, Julian. "Bulgaria's standoff with North Macedonia is a lose-lose." *Politico Europe*. November 17, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-standoff-north-macedonia-is-a-lose-lose/> (accessed March 28, 2021).
- Boyer, Dominic, and Miklós Sükösd. "European Media and the Culture of Europeanness." In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 21-48. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Bozóki, András. "Post-communist transition: political tendencies in Hungary." In *Post-Communist Transition. Emerging Pluralism in Hungary*, edited by Bozóki, András, András Körösnéyi and George Schopflin, 13-29. London: Pinter Published and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Bruter, Michael. *Citizens of Europe?* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005.
- Brzozowski, Alexandra and Gerdžiūnas, Benas. "VILNIUS/WARSAW – Lithuania's PM backs Warsaw in rule of law dispute with Brussels." *Euractiv*. September 18, 2020. VILNIUS/WARSAW – Lithuania's PM backs Warsaw in rule of law dispute with Brussels – EURACTIV.com (accessed March 12, 2021).
- Brzozowski, Alexandra. "Commission seeks to revive enlargement with new package." *Euractiv*. October 6, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/commission-seeks-to-revive-enlargement-with-new-package/>(accessed March 17, 2021).
- Brzozowski, Alexandra and Mojak, Monika. "Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget." *Euractiv*. November 13, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/poland-and-hungary-unite-to-veto-budget/) (accessed March 13, 2021).
- Brzozowski, Alexandra and Radosavljevic, Zoran. "Poland, Hungary propose two-track way out of EU budget deadlock." *Euractiv*. November 26, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/poland-hungary-propose-two-track-way-out-of-eu-budget-deadlock/> (Accessed March 15, 2021).
- Byres, Dylan. "POLITICO Europe acquires European Voice." *Politico*. October 12, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2014/12/politico-europe-acquires-european-voice-199775> (accessed February 23, 2021).
- ComRes. "Burson-Marsteller Media-Consumption 2018" Last modified June 2018. [https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki31qqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller\\_Headline-Report\\_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf](https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki31qqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Burson-Marsteller_Headline-Report_Media-Consumption-2018.pdf).
- Corcoran, Farrel. "The Politics of Belonging: Identity Anxiety in the European Union." In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 199-222. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Council of the European Union. "Taking forward the Strategic Agenda 18-month Programme of the Council (1 July 2020 - 31 December 2021)." Last modified June 9, 2020. <https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2354332/d2f4bc33ade0af634ae79552060d6332/06-19-pdf-trioprogramme-en-data.pdf>.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

- Currie, Gregory. *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2010.
- Dahlgren, Peter. "Public Spheres, Societal Shifts, and Media Modulations." In *Media, Markets and Public Spheres: European Media at the Crossroads*, edited by Jostein Gripsrud and Lennart Weibull. Bristol: Intellect, 2010.
- de La Baume, Maïa, von der Burchard, Hans, and Herszenhorn, David M. "Poland joins Hungary in threatening to block EU's budget and coronavirus recovery package." *Politico Europe*. September 18, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-joins-hungary-in-threat-to-block-eus-landmark-budget-and-recovery-package/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- de La Baume, Maïa and Bayer, Lili. "Orbán threatens to veto EU budget, recovery fund over rule of law." *Politico Europe*. November 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-eu-budget-veto-rule-of-law/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- de La Baume, Maïa. "Von der Leyen urges Hungary and Poland to end EU budget hold-up." *Politico Europe*. November 25, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/von-der-leyen-urges-hungary-and-poland-to-end-eu-budget-hold-up/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- de La Baume, Maïa and von der Burchard, Hans. "Von der Leyen threatens EU recovery fund without Hungary and Poland." *Politico Europe*. December 2, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-commission-proposes-eu-recovery-without-hungary-and-poland/> (accessed March 23, 2021).
- Dunkerley, David. *Changing Europe: Identities, Nations and Citizens*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Entman, Robert. "Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents." *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 4 (1991), 6-27. Accessed February 21, 2021. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1991.tb02328.x.
- Euractiv Bulgaria and Radosavljevic, Zoran. "Revolutionary hero's identity stands in the way of Skopje's EU path." *Euractiv*. September 11, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/revolutionary-heros-identity-stands-in-the-way-of-skopjes-eu-path/> (accessed March 17, 2021).
- Euractiv/ Euractiv – The Media Network For Europe. "EURACTIV – The Media Network For Europe." Last modified March 9, 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/about-EURACTIV/media-partners-network/>.
- Euractiv/ Netiquette. "Netiquette." Last modified October 20, 2017. <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/euractiv-netiquette/>.
- Euractiv/Other FAQs. "Other FAQs." Last modified May 11, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/other-faqs/#1b>.
- Euractiv/Readership. "Readership." Last modified June 11, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/press-office/euractiv-readership/>.
- Eurobarometer. "EU Citizenship." Accessed April 3, 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/fs5\\_citizen\\_40\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/fs5_citizen_40_en.pdf).

- Eurobarometer. “Standard Eurobarometer 83 ‘European citizenship.’” Accessed April 3, 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83\\_citizen\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_citizen_en.pdf).
- European Commission. “Media Coverage of European Affairs - Final Report.” Last modified September 22, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/media-coverage-european-affairs-final-report>.
- Gehrke, Laurenz. “EU will eventually resolve budget deadlock, Hungary’s Orbán says.” *Politico Europe*. November 20, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/orban-goes-soft-on-recovery-fund-after-survey-reveals-virus-hit-hungarians-incomes-worst/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Georgi Gotev. “Bulgaria says to block EU accession talks with North Macedonia.” *Euractiv*. November 16, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bulgaria-says-to-block-eu-accession-talks-with-north-macedonia/>(accessed March 17, 2021).
- Gotev, Georgi, Michalopoulos, Sarantis and Trkanjec, Zeljko. “Bulgaria spells out conditions for unblocking North Macedonia’s EU path.” *Euractiv*. November 18, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bulgaria-spells-out-conditions-for-unblocking-north-macedonias-eu-path/>(accessed March 18, 2021).
- Hajdari, Una. “Tongue-tied: Bulgaria’s language gripe blocks North Macedonia’s EU path.” *Politico Europe*. December 8, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-north-macedonia-eu-accession-talks-language-dispute/> (accessed March 28, 2021).
- Hegedűs, István. “Media Representations of EU Matters in National Media Systems: The Hungarian Case.” In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 73-118. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Heikkilä, Heikki and Risto Kunelius. “Journalists Imagining the European Public Sphere” *Javnost - The Public*, 13:4 (2006), 63-79. Accessed February 22, 2021. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2006.11008925.
- Hennen, Leonhard. “European Public Sphere and the Internet.” In *Electronic Democracy in Europe: Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting*, edited by Ralf Lindner, Georg Aichholzer, and Leonhard Hennen. Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2016.
- Herszenhorn, David M. and Bayer, Lili. “EU in crisis over Hungary and Poland’s €1.8T hold-up.” *Politico Europe*. November 16, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-in-crisis-over-hungary-poland-budget-hold-up/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Herszenhorn, David M., Wanat, Zosia and Bayer, Lili. “Polish premier points finger at EU in budget fight.” *Politico Europe*. November 19, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/polish-premier-points-finger-at-eu-in-budget-fight/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- Herszenhorn, David M., Bayer, Lili, Wanat, Zosia. “Poland blinks first ahead of showdown at the EU budget corral.” *Politico Europe*. December 3, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-eu-budget-compromise-jaroslaw-gowin-agreement/> (accessed March 23, 2021).

- Herzer, Martin. *The Media, European Integration and the Rise of Euro-journalism, 1950s-1970s*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Holstein, James A. and Gubrium, Jaber F. "Introduction: establishing a balance." In *Varieties of narrative analysis*, edited by James A. Holstein, and Jaber F. Gubrium, 1-12. London: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. "European Melting Pots? European Integration and EU Audiovisual Policy at a Crossroads." In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 271-320. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Karnitschnig, Matthew. "Angela Merkel's rule-of-law legacy: A divided Europe." *Politico Europe*. December 18, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkels-rule-of-law-legacy-divided-europe/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Koopmans, Ruud and Jessica Erbe. "Towards a European public sphere?" *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 17:2 (2004), 97-118. Accessed February 20, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/1351161042000238643.
- Koopmans, Ruud. "Who inhabits the European public sphere? Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanised political debates." *European Journal of Political Research*, 46:2 (2007), 183-210.
- Krzysztozek, Aleksandra, Brzozowski, Alexandra and Trkanjec, Zeljko. "Pressure mounts on Hungary, Poland to lift EU budget veto." *Euractiv*. November 25, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/pressure-mounts-on-hungary-poland-to-lift-eu-budget-veto/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/pressure-mounts-on-hungary-poland-to-lift-eu-budget-veto/) (Accessed March 13, 2021).
- Krzysztozek, Aleksandra. "Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle." *Euractiv*. December 2, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/dutch-government-urged-to-sue-poland-in-top-eu-court-over-rule-of-law-debacle/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/dutch-government-urged-to-sue-poland-in-top-eu-court-over-rule-of-law-debacle/) (Accessed March 15, 2021).
- Labov, William. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972.
- Ladrech, Robert. "Europeanization of Domestic Politics and Institutions: The Case of France." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32, no. 1, (1994), 69-88. Accessed February 20, 2021. Hein Online, <https://heinonline-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/jcmks32&i=69>.
- Łukaszewski, Jerzy. *Cel: Europa. Dziewięć esejów o budowniczych jedności europejskiej*. Warsaw: Noir sur Blanc, 2002.
- Maksimov, Vlagyiszlav. "Enlargement agenda: Investment plans, reforms and elections." *Euractiv*. August 25, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/enlargement-agenda-investment-plans-reforms-and-elections/> (accessed March 17, 2021).

- Makszimov, Vladyislav. “Belgrade-Pristina deal only way to counter ‘influences from the East’, Kosovo PM says.” *Euractiv*. September 11, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/belgrade-pristina-deal-only-way-to-counter-influences-from-the-east-kosovo-pm-says/> (accessed March 17, 2021).
- Makszimov, Vladyislav. “Road and rail at centre of EU investment plan for Western Balkans.” *Euractiv*. October 6, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/road-and-rail-at-centre-of-eu-investment-plan-for-western-balkans/> (accessed March 17, 2021).
- Makszimov, Vladyislav. “Orbán and Morawiecki threaten budget and recovery veto over rule of law.” *Euractiv*. November 9, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/orban-and-morawiecki-threaten-budget-and-recovery-veto-over-rule-of-law/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/orban-and-morawiecki-threaten-budget-and-recovery-veto-over-rule-of-law/) (accessed March 12, 2021).
- Makszimov, Vladyislav. “‘It’s not gonna work’, Orbán says about Polish veto retreat.” *Euractiv*. December 4, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/its-not-gonna-work-orban-says-about-polish-veto-retreat/> (Accessed March 15, 2021).
- Mojak, Monika. “Poland ready for EU budget veto trade-off.” *Euractiv*. December 4, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/poland-ready-for-eu-budget-veto-trade-off/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/poland-ready-for-eu-budget-veto-trade-off/) (Accessed March 15, 2021).
- Olsen, Johan P. “The Many Faces of Europeanization.” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 5 (2002), 921-952. Accessed February 20, 2021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00403>.
- Papathanassopoulos, Stylianos and Ralph Negrine. *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011.
- Patterson, Wendy. “Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations.” In *Doing narrative research*, edited by Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, 27-46. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013.
- Pfetsch, Barbara. *The voice of the media in European public sphere: Comparative analysis of newspaper editorials*. Integrated Report WP 3, 2004.
- Politico/Frequently Asked Questions. “Frequently Asked Questions.” Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/frequently-asked-questions/>.
- Politico/Press. “About POLITICO Europe.” Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/press/>.
- Radosavljevic, Zoran. “Orbán: If rule of law debate stalls, we can bypass EU framework for financing.” *Euractiv*. October 2, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/orban-if-rule-of-law-debate-stalls-we-can-bypass-eu-framework-for-financing/> (accessed March 12, 2021).
- Rosca, Matei. “Hungary and Poland must back down in EU budget fight, says Romania’s PM.” *Politico Europe*. November 19, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-should-hold-firm-against-hungary-poland-in-budget-fight-romanian-pm/> (accessed March 22, 2021).

- Salovaara-Moring, Inka. "What Is Europe?: Geographies of Journalism." In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 49-72. Central European University Press, 2011.
- Schlesinger, Philip. "Changing Spaces of Political Communication: The Case of the European Union." *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999), 263-279. Accessed February 19, 2021. doi: 10.1080/105846099198622.
- Seoane Pérez, Francisco. *Political Communication in Europe The Cultural and Structural Limits of the European Public Sphere*. New York: Palgrave, 2013.
- Simić, Julija. "Serbia, Kosovo leaders gear up for tough US talks." *Euractiv*. September 1, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbia-kosovo-leaders-gear-up-for-tough-us-talks/> (accessed March 17, 2021).
- Splichal, Slavko. "Transnationalization/Europeanization of the Public Sphere/s." In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 21-48. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Squire, Corinne, Andrews, Molly & Tamboukou, Maria. "Introduction: what is narrative research?" In *Doing narrative research*, edited by Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, 1-21. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2008.
- Stamouli, Nektaria. "Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia's election." *Politico Europe*. July 14, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-casts-shadow-over-north-macedonia-election-zoran-zaev/> (accessed March 26, 2021).
- Stamouli, Nektaria. "Ruling Social Democrats on course to win North Macedonia election." *Politico Europe*. July 16, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ruling-social-democrats-on-course-to-win-north-macedonia-election/> (accessed March 29, 2021).
- Stamouli, Nektaria. "Social Democrats win North Macedonia election." *Politico Europe*. July 16, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/social-democrats-win-north-macedonia-election-zoran-zaev/> (accessed March 29, 2021).
- Taylor, Paul. "How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary's vetoes." *Politico Europe*. December 2, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-europe-can-bypass-poland-and-hungarys-vetoes/> (accessed March 23, 2021).
- Trenz, Hans-Jörg. "Media Coverage on European Governance: Exploring the European Public Sphere in National Quality Newspapers." *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 3 (2004), 291-319. Accessed February 10, 2021. doi:10.1177/0267323104045257.
- Trkanjec, Zeljko. "Janša: Hungary and Poland expressed view, did not veto." *Euractiv*. November 18, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/jansa-hungary-and-poland-expressed-view-did-not-veto/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/jansa-hungary-and-poland-expressed-view-did-not-veto/) (accessed March 13, 2021).
- Trkanjec, Zeljko. "Jansa's backing of Hungary and Poland's rule of law veto is 'his opinion.'" *Euractiv*. November 19, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/jansas-backing-of-hungary-and-polands-rule-of-law-veto-is-his-opinion/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/jansas-backing-of-hungary-and-polands-rule-of-law-veto-is-his-opinion/) (Accessed March 13, 2021).

- Valero, Jorge “Parliament and Council near agreement on rule of law conditionality.” *Euractiv*. October 29, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/parliament-and-council-near-agreement-on-rule-of-law-conditionality/> (accessed March 12, 2021).
- Valero, Jorge. “Hungary and Poland veto stimulus against pandemic.” *Euractiv*. November 16, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/hungary-and-poland-veto-stimulus-against-pandemic/> (accessed March 13, 2021).
- Valero, Jorge. “Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland.” *Euractiv*. December 2, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/commission-considers-options-for-recovery-fund-without-hungary-and-poland/> (Accessed March 15, 2021).
- Varga, Peter J. “Pan-European Media: Attempts and Limitations.” In *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*, edited by Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz, 119-52. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Vidra, Zsuzsanna. “Az EU reprezentációja a magyar médiában a csatlakozási folyamat alatt. [The Representation of the EU in the Hungarian Media During the Accession Process]” In *A magyarok bemenetele. Tagállamként a bővülő Európai Unióban [The Marching In of the Hungarians. As a Member State in the Enlarging European Union]*, edited by István Hegedűs, 115-154. Budapest: Demokrácia Kutatások Magyar Központja Közhasznú Alapítvány, Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem Politikatudományi Intézet, 2006.
- Vidra, Zsuzsanna. “Az Európai Unió képe néhány közép-kelet-európai és egy balkáni ország sajtójában” [The Image of the European Union in the Press of Some East-Central European Countries and in One Country on the Balkans]. *Regio* 18, no. 4 (2007), 35-55. Accessed March 11, 2021. doi: <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00036/00068/pdf/035-055.pdf>
- von der Burchard, Hans and Bayer, Lili. “European Parliament clashes with Merkel over rule of law in budget talks.” *Politico Europe*. July 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-clashes-with-merkel-over-rule-of-law/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- von der Burchard, Hans and Bayer, Lili. “Merkel defends EU rule-of-law plan despite budget blockade.” *Politico Europe*. November 19, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-to-continue-search-for-budget-compromise/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- von der Burchard, Hans. “Heiko Maas optimistic on EU breaking budget deadlock.” *Politico Europe*. November 24, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-foreign-minister-optimistic-budget-deadlock-can-be-resolved-in-the-coming-days/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- von der Burchard, Hans. “Hungary and Poland escalate budget fight over rule of law.” *Politico Europe*. November 26, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-budget-democracy-rule-law-orban-morawiecki-merkel/> (accessed March 22, 2021).
- von der Burchard, Hans. “Commission, 5 EU members clash in court with Poland over rule of law.” *Politico Europe*. December 1, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/five-eu-countries-and-commission-clash-with-poland-over-rule-of-law-at-court-hearing/> (accessed March 23, 2021).

- von der Burchard, Hans. “EU top court gears up for rule-of-law battle (of its life).” *Politico Europe*. December 17, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-rule-of-law-court-of-justice-of-the-european-union-gears-up-battle-of-its-life/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Wanat, Zosia and Herszenhorn, David M. “Polish deputy PM: Room for compromise in EU budget standoff.” *Politico Europe*. December 3, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/polish-deputy-pm-room-for-compromise-in-eu-budget-standoff/> (accessed March 24, 2021).
- Wanat, Zosia. “Poland threatens to veto EU budget over rule of law.” *Politico Europe*. October 13, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-threatens-a-budget-veto-over-rule-of-law/> (accessed March 22, 2021).

# Appendices



# VILNIUS/WARSAW – Lithuania's PM backs Warsaw in rule of law dispute with Brussels

Lithuanian Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis has vowed to support Poland in its ongoing rule of law dispute with Brussels, adding that Vilnius could follow Warsaw's example to "de-sovietise our justice system".

Skvernelis and his Polish counterpart, Mateusz Morawiecki, held a joint government meeting in Vilnius on Thursday (17 September), the first since 1989 Polish-Lithuanian intergovernmental consultations, which Skvernelis called a historical event in Lithuanian-Polish cooperation.

With the improvement of Lithuanian-Polish relations in recent months, the Commonwealth period is seeing renewed attention by the countries' politicians.

Asked by reporters about Lithuania's position regarding the EU's plans to sanction Poland over its judicial reforms, Skvernelis said "we will never support or agree to that".

In 2017, the European Commission launched legal action against Poland, saying its judicial reforms undermine the rule of law in the country, but it has not resulted in any punishment for Warsaw so far. Meanwhile, Poland's nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) government has argued it is trying to rid the country of the communist legacy in its court system.

At the same time, the European Parliament said on Thursday (17 September), the situation surrounding the rule of law in Poland has seriously deteriorated, adding to pressure on Warsaw amid an EU investigation that could lead to Poland losing voting rights in the bloc.

"Many countries, not just Poland, have done reforms in various areas they inherited from the Soviet regime," said Skvernelis, adding that Lithuania has more understanding for Poland than Western European countries due to their Soviet history.

"Perhaps we [*Lithuania*] haven't done enough to de-sovietise our own justice system," Skvernelis said.

12.3.2021

VILNIUS/WARSAW – Lithuania's PM backs Warsaw in rule of law dispute with Brussels – EURACTIV.com

During the meeting, Skvernelis also agreed to back the Polish proposal for a €1 billion economic rescue plan for Belarus, while Poland agreed to support Lithuania's opposition against the EU's mobility package.

The talks in Vilnius were another move by the Polish government towards the coordination of international activities on Belarus.

(Benas Gerdžiūnas | LRT.lt/en; Alexandra Brzozowski, EURACTIV.com)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Orbán: If rule of law debate stalls, we can bypass EU framework for financing



*German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (R) at the start of second face-to-face EU summit since the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Brussels, Belgium, 01 October 2020. [EPA-EFE/OLIVIER HOSLET / POOL]*

3.3.2021

Orbán: If rule of law debate stalls, we can bypass EU framework for financing – EURACTIV.com

If the debate about tying rule of law to EU finances delays setting up the recovery fund, member states could make intergovernmental deals outside the EU institutional framework, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán suggested before leaving for an EU summit in Brussels on Thursday (1 October), according to state news agency *MTI*.

EU leaders have a full agenda today discussing foreign policy issues such as tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, EU-China relations, the flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh, the poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and the volatile situation in Belarus.

A discussion on the single market is scheduled for Friday, and Orbán said he expects to have a “formal or informal” discussion on the summer decision to borrow from the markets to finance recovery efforts.

Calling the attempts to link rule of law to disbursement of money “badly timed” because of the ongoing crisis, Orbán suggested that if these debates prevent the recovery fund from becoming operational, there is still a possibility for the member states to set up the fund on an intergovernmental basis, outside the institutions of the EU.

In this way, the fund can be relieved of the burden of disputes within the union and the money can be delivered quickly to countries in need, Orbán said.

On Wednesday, the Council adopted its negotiating position on the so-called rule of law conditionality after a compromise text was put forward by Germany, the current EU presidency holder.

The proposed text scrapped all language referring to “generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law,” replacing it with more general references to “breaches of principles,” and made it significantly more cumbersome to suspend EU payments.

EURACTIV understands that besides Hungary and Poland, the Frugal Four — Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden — were joined by Belgium and Luxembourg in voting against the compromise, which passed nevertheless.

Orbán’s arch-foe during the summer marathon talks when it comes to rule of law, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, said upon arrival to the summit on Thursday that the German “proposal is not good enough, it should be better,” emphasising that the rule of law conditionality was part of the package agreed in July.

The Council, with Germany at its helm, will now enter into negotiations with the Parliament, which already said that it will want to see strong links between rule of law and EU spending before signing off on the next seven-year budget.

Orbán also told *MTI* that he is yet to receive a reply to his letter sent to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday, in which he said his government would suspend “all political contacts” with the European executive’s values and transparency chief Věra Jourová over her comments that Hungary was an “ill democracy.”

3.3.2021

Orbán: If rule of law debate stalls, we can bypass EU framework for financing – EURACTIV.com

“No official of the European Union can speak disrespectfully to the citizens of Hungary,” he said.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Parliament and Council near agreement on rule of law conditionality



*German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (R) at the start of second face-to-face EU summit since the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Brussels, Belgium, 01 October 2020. [EPA-EFE/OLIVIER HOSLET / POOL]*

The European Parliament and the Council were close to reaching an agreement on Thursday (29 October) on the rule of law conditionality attached to EU funds, but they continued to disagree on how to trigger the mechanism.

The respect of the rule of law in order to access EU funds is one of the main stumbling blocks in the budget talks between the Council, which brings together the 27 member states, and the Parliament. They also clash over the additional funds requested by MEPs for the multi-annual-financial framework (MFF), the EU's seven-year budget.

The disagreement has delayed the approval of the €750 billion recovery fund and the €1.074 trillion long-term budget, against the backdrop of the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and the risk of a double-dip recession. The recovery funds are not expected until the second half of 2021.

A senior EU official said that the two sides were "close" to reaching an agreement on the rule of law, after the latest round of negotiations held on Thursday.

The Council made some concessions requested by the Parliament in terms of the scope. As a result, EU funds would be frozen in cases of corruption or conflict of interests, but a preventive function will also be added in case of a risk of breaching EU laws. In addition, the importance of the independence of the judicial system will be highlighted.

Expectations were high on Thursday. German Green MEP Daniel Freund said before the meeting that they were "getting close to a compromise". But the Parliament said after the discussion that "everything is still to be agreed".

The bone of contention is how to trigger the rule of law mechanism. The Council's starting position was a qualified majority to approve a Commission recommendation to suspend EU funds, which would have allowed countries like Hungary and Poland to gather a blocking minority.

The Parliament initially defended a reverse qualified majority, which would have implied that the Commission's proposals would pass unless a qualified majority opposed in the Council, making things harder for Budapest or Warsaw.

The Parliament and the Council are now exploring various avenues to narrow their differences. One of the ideas is to include a 'non-activation clause', under which Commission proposals will be adopted if the Council fails to reach a decision in a defined period of time, which is yet to be agreed.

This clause, however, is a 'no-go' for the Council. The Parliament's political groups will discuss internally how to move forward, and the next round of talks will take place in November.

The Greens and Renew Europe are the groups pushing harder for a stronger Rule of Law mechanism.

The results of the negotiations, however, will find opposition in Hungary and Poland, who have threatened to veto the recovery fund if they are unhappy with the agreement.

The pair have already disagreed with expanding the scope of the mechanism to include the preventive function.

## Additional funds

The 27 national governments and MEPs also clash over the additional money for the MFF. The Parliament has requested €39 billion more to reinforce 15 programmes, including Erasmus and Innovation (Horizon Europe).

In particular, the EU chamber requested €13 billion in fresh money, above the ceilings agreed by the EU leaders in July, to cover the interest payments of the recovery fund, given that the EU will borrow the €750 billion from the markets.

EU leaders rejected this month the idea of reopening the July agreement. Instead, they are ready to find up to €10 billion in “fresh money” from various sources, including the potential fines that companies would pay into EU coffers in the future, and to allow for moving unspent funds between programmes.

A senior EU official admitted that there is “a wide gap” on the top-ups to the MFF between the two institutions. The same source hoped that the Parliament “will use the next couple of days to look for ways out of the deadlock”, in order to find an agreement swiftly.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Orbán and Morawiecki threaten budget and recovery veto over rule of law



*In his letter, Orbán reportedly said that while Hungary is committed to co-operation, in light of developments, it will not be able to secure the unanimity required for the package agreed by EU leaders in July. [EPA-EFE/JACEK SZYDŁOWSKI POLAND OUT]*

3.3.2021

Orbán and Morawiecki threaten budget and recovery veto over rule of law – EURACTIV.com

As long as EU spending is tied to rule of law criteria, Hungary is prepared to veto the bloc's long-term budget and recovery fund, wrote Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a letter to the leaders of the current and next year's EU Council presidencies – Germany, Slovenia and Portugal – as well as to EU Council President Charles Michel and European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, mandiner.hu reported.

Meanwhile, Poland would exercise its "right to protest" if no "agreement on the link between the rule of law and the EU budget" is reached, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Friday, noting that Poland continues to provide all information related to the use of funds but does not accept the rule of law to be interpreted according to the EU's vision.

In his letter, Orbán reportedly said that while Hungary is committed to co-operation, in light of developments, it will not be able to secure the unanimity required for the package agreed by EU leaders in July.

For his part, Morawiecki pointed out that it would not be appropriate to link budgetary expenditure to the different institutions' or other member states' interpretation on the rule of law.

Everyone has a different opinion on how the Polish state operates and independent its institutions are, he added.

The Council and the European Parliament struck a deal last week linking the disbursement of funds to the rule of law, clearing a major hurdle in the wider negotiations on the bloc's budget between the EU's co-legislators.

(Vladyislav Maksimov | EURACTIV.com; (Mateusz Kucharczyk | EURACTIV.pl)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget



*Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (L) shakes hands with his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orbán 03 January 2018. [EPA-EFE/Tibor Illyes]*

In a letter to EU leaders, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki threatened to veto the EU budget if the payment of funds is made conditional on members adhering to the rule of law.

With this expected step, he echoed previous threats by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had stated in a letter of his own, that “Hungary is committed to cooperation, in the light of developments, it cannot provide the unanimity required for the package adopted in July.”

3.3.2021

Poland and Hungary unite to veto budget – EURACTIV.com

Both Warsaw and Budapest do oppose the mechanism, but Morawieck's comments were less critical and literal than those by his Hungarian counterpart's.

The rule-of-law mechanism was "based on arbitrary, politically motivated criteria" and accepting it "could lead to a legitimisation of the use of double standards" regarding the treatment of different EU members, Morawiecki said on Facebook.

He added that the "proposed solutions are incompatible with the European Council's conclusions from July", when EU leaders held a marathon summit where they agreed the bloc's unprecedented virus bail-out package of grants and loans.

"That is why Poland cannot accept this version of the mechanism, which would lead to the primacy of political and arbitrary criteria over a substantive assessment," Morawiecki said.

Morawiecki said last week that Poland would exercise its "right to protest" if no "agreement on the link between the rule of law and the EU budget" is reached.

As Polish authorities, in this case, have been hiding behind Hungary from the beginning of the discussion, Morawiecki's comments were seen as less literal than Orban's.

According to an EU source, the letter was "confusing", also due to factual inaccuracies.

(Monika Mojak, EURACTIV.pl | Alexandra Brzozowski, EURACTIV.com))

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Hungary and Poland veto stimulus against pandemic



*Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki (R) and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban (L) during a greeting ceremony in the courtyard of the Royal Castle in Warsaw's Old Town on 1 May 2019. [EPA-EFE/MARCIN OBARA / POLAND OUT]*

Hungary and Poland blocked the approval of the EU's seven-year budget and the recovery fund totalling €1.81 trillion, as both countries continued to oppose the rule of law mechanism attached to the EU funds.

The veto – which could still be overcome at the level of EU27 national leaders – further complicates the arrival of the badly needed EU funds in hard-hit countries like Spain or Italy, at a time when the pandemic continues to spread across Europe and the reinstated restrictive measures are hampering the recovery.

The 27 EU ambassadors (Coreper) met on Monday (16 November) to approve a series of compromises reached between the European Parliament negotiators and the German presidency of the Council representing the member states.

It included the multi-annual financial framework (MFF), the EU's seven-year budget of almost 1.1 trillion, and the €750 billion recovery fund to tackle the worst recession in EU's history caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The package also included the new rule of law mechanism, which would allow for the suspension of EU funds in case of mishandling European money or breaching EU principles.

In spite of Hungary and Poland's opposition to the mechanism, the rule of law conditionality was approved by the required qualified majority in the Council.

In retaliation, Budapest and Warsaw blocked the MFF and the recovery fund on Monday, given that the unanimity was needed in both cases through the so-called own resources decision.

Their veto will be discussed at a meeting of EU European affairs ministers on Tuesday and then at a video-summit of EU leaders on Thursday.

A spokesperson of the Germany presidency said on Twitter the EU ambassadors had failed to reach "the necessary unanimity for initiating the written procedure due to reservations expressed by two member states."

In addition, the own resources procedure must be completed by the ratification in all the member states, mostly through their national parliaments, which will further prolong the approval process at least until next spring. The bulk of the EU recovery funds is not expected until the second half of 2021.

The EU's long-term budget compromise was also blocked in the Coreper. A German spokesperson said that two member states "expressed reservations with regard to their opposition to one element of the overall package", in a reference to the Rule of Law mechanism, "but not to the substance of the MFF agreement".

In an earlier letter sent to the Commission, Hungary and Poland had threatened to block the approval process of the MFF and the recovery fund if the rule of law mechanism was approved, as they considered it an encroachment on their "national sovereignty".

The Hungarian government spokesperson, Zoltan Kovacs, explained their veto by saying that the rule of law compromise "runs contrary to the July Council conclusions", referring to the summit where EU27 leaders agreed the budget.

3.3.2021

Hungary and Poland veto stimulus against pandemic – EURACTIV.com

During the negotiations with the European Parliament, this conditionality included more cases under which EU funds could be suspended, such as endangering the independence of the judiciary, and a preventive orientation, which sparked the criticism of Hungary and Poland.

“The question is whether Poland... will be subject to political and institutionalised enslavement,” Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro said on Monday.

The impact of the second wave of the pandemic has forced the European Commission to cut its growth forecast for next year.

“We are back in a crisis”, a senior EU official said commenting on Budapest and Warsaw’s expected veto.

The Commissioner for Budget, Johannes Hahn, expressed his disappointment with the outcome of the Coreper meeting

He urged member states to “assume political responsibility” and take the necessary steps to pass the EU budget package.

“This is not about ideologies but about help for our citizens in the worst crisis since World War II, he said.

It remains to be seen how the veto of these two countries could be overcome, given that the Council already endorsed the rule of law mechanism.

The Commission considers that it is the German presidency’s role to find a way out of this standoff, but it may require the intervention of EU leaders, who are meeting online on Thursday to discuss Brexit, the state of play of the pandemic, and their efforts to fight against the virus.

Meanwhile, the German presidency and the Parliament negotiators are discussing the details of the €672 billion Recovery and Resilience Facility, the main pillar of the recovery fund and the outstanding piece in the negotiation of the EU budget.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Janša: Hungary and Poland expressed view, did not veto



*Janša: "Poland and Hungary have only given their views, while no decisions or objections have yet been put to the vote". [EPA-EFE/Szilard Koszticsak]*

Slovenian PM Janša told parliament during a budget debate on Tuesday that the **media had falsely reported the news concerning Poland and Hungary vetoing the EU budget and recovery fund**, sta.si reported.

Poland and Hungary have only given their views, while no decisions or objections have yet been put to the vote, Slovenia's prime minister told parliament, adding that European institutions have not yet given their decisions on the matter.

3.3.2021

Janša: Hungary and Poland expressed view, did not veto – EURACTIV.com

Janša is convinced that the agreement must be respected in the form negotiated in July, otherwise “Europe may wake up early next year in a situation that will be bad, completely unnecessary and cooked up by itself”.

According to Janša, there were complications in making EU funds conditional on the rule of law. “The media is telling you that some countries do not accept the principle of the rule of law and that this threatens to block the agreement,” he claimed. (Željko Trkanjec | EURACTIV.hr)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Jansa's backing of Hungary and Poland's rule of law veto is 'his opinion'



*Slovenian President Borut Pahor (L) receives Janez Jansa (R), president of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) after his party's win in the Slovenian Parliamentary Elections 2018, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 07 June 2018. [EPA-EFE/IGOR KUPLJENIK]*

The agreement between the budget and rule of law agreed between European Parliament and Council needs to be respected, Slovenian President Borut Pahor said in response to Prime Minister Janez Janša's letter to EU leaders on Wednesday, in which he backed Poland and Hungary's opposition.

3.3.2021

Jansa's backing of Hungary and Poland's rule of law veto is 'his opinion' – EURACTIV.com

**Read also: Slovenian PM backs Hungary, Poland in rule of law row**

Partners in the government coalition have distanced themselves from the PM's letter.

The government did not discuss the letter, it is just the opinion of PM Janša. said Defence Minister Matej Tonin (NSi-EPP).

For his part, Zdravko Počivalšek, leader of the junior partner SMC party, has criticised Janša for letting his personal views overshadow Slovenia's interests. While Počivalšek agrees with parts of the letter, he regrets Janša's statement about SMC stealing the 2014 election.

And while Justice Minister Lilijana Kozlovič (SMC) distanced herself from the letter, Health Minister Tomaž Gantar (DeSUS-RE) said it "certainly does not benefit Slovenia's interests, it puts us among the problematic countries we have never belonged to" and he called for a serious discussion to be held. (Željko Trkanjec | EURACTIV.hr)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)



# Pressure mounts on Hungary, Poland to lift EU budget veto



*It seems Budapest and Warsaw will remain firm in their position, which is also openly backed by Slovenia.  
[EPA/François Lenoir]*

The French and German Ambassadors to Warsaw, Frédéric Billet and Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven, called on EU countries to show solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic in a joint message to the Polish government published Monday by *"Rzeczpospolita"* daily. The message also made a reference to the new EU budget, which Poland and Hungary have blocked.

Both countries have been under EU investigation for undermining the independence of courts, media and non-governmental organisations. With the recovery fund conditions in place, the two risk losing access to funding over rule of law shortcomings.

Last week, EU leaders agreed in a virtual summit to allow more time for an agreement.

Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki will meet his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orbán in Budapest on Thursday to discuss their veto of the EU's budget and recovery fund, a Polish government spokesman has said.

It seems Budapest and Warsaw will remain firm in their position, which is also openly backed by Slovenia.

"Only together will we manage to overcome the pandemic and its consequences", the French and German ambassadors said in a joint message.

They emphasised the role of EU member states in helping each other, particularly when it comes to providing medical equipment and receiving patients from other countries.

EURACTIV Poland commented that this was a clear reference to the fact that Poland rejected Germany's offer to send ventilators last week.

Billet and Freytag von Loringhoven also praised the European Parliament and the Council's compromise on the EU budget and the "Next Generation EU" fund.

The ambassadors stressed that the Recovery Fund is "a good plan for Poland", adding that under the 2021-2027 EU budget, Poland will receive €67 billion from the Cohesion Fund, €28.5 billion from the Common Agricultural Policy and €3.5 billion from the Just Transition Fund.

However, the ambassadors made it clear that "EU funds have to be spent as intended and with respect to the rule of law". Conditionality "will serve the protection of the EU budget, so it is beneficial for all EU member states," they added.

Morawiecki and Orbán will meet in Budapest on Thursday to discuss their veto of the EU's budget and recovery fund, a Polish government spokesman has said.

### **Read also: How most Hungarian media helped discrimination**

"We say a loud 'yes' to the European Union and a loud 'no' to the reproachful mechanism," Morawiecki said in a statement on Monday.

"We are in favour of adhering to European treaties. But it has to be said clearly that nobody will force us to implement other people's visions", he added.

3.3.2021

Pressure mounts on Hungary, Poland to lift EU budget veto – EURACTIV.com

Meanwhile, Slovenia's FM Anže Logar has said that traditional democracies have a different view of the rule of law than countries that emerged from repressive systems only 30 years ago.

"The debate erupted during the crisis. We have to come to terms with looking at the matter from different angles," he told a Berlin Conference organised by the Körber-Stiftung.

Slovenian PM Janez Janša recently sent a letter to the EU backing the Polish-Hungarian rule of law veto.

*(Aleksandra Krzysztosek | EURACTIV.pl, Alexandra Brzozowski, EURACTIV.com, Željko Trkanjec | EURACTIV.hr)*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Poland, Hungary propose two-track way out of EU budget deadlock



*Prime Ministers Mateusz Morawiecki and Viktor Orban. [Krystian Maj/KPRM]*

Poland and Hungary reaffirmed on Thursday (26 October) their opposition to tying EU funds with the rule of law in member states and instead offered their own proposal for breaking the deadlock that is holding back the EU's €1.81 trillion seven-year budget and the recovery fund.

In the joint proposal, published after the two prime ministers met in Budapest, the two countries insisted they want to continue to limit any rule of law conditionality tied to the EU budget and that such a link should further be discussed.

The proposal is unlikely to go down well with the rest of the EU27, who are keen to unlock the badly needed EU funds but also safeguard basic EU values.

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, standing alongside his Polish counterpart Mateusz Morawiecki, said in a press statement in Budapest that the current proposal on the table was unacceptable to Budapest and Warsaw, who will form a tandem in the debate after a joint veto, which Orban called a legitimate tool in the dispute.

"We are uniting our interests and arguments in the discussion, Hungary does not accept any arguments that would be unacceptable to Poland," Orban told reporters.

The declaration also includes a sentence that neither country – neither Poland nor Hungary – will accept the EU proposals without the consent of the other.

"The use of veto is the baseline scenario. We are faced with a mechanism that, through its arbitrariness, would lead to the fragmentation of the EU. This mechanism is the regulation on the so-called rule of law," Morawiecki said.

"This is a bad solution and it may collapse the EU in the future – argued the Polish head of government," he said.

"Conditionality formulated in this way is a bait for any country," Morawiecki said. "We do not need a Union of two contradictory interpretations, we don't need a two-speed Union, which is why we will defend the sovereignty of the treaties," he added, saying that Poland and Hungary would act for the good of the entire bloc.

According to the document, both countries suggest a "two-track process", which is meant to facilitate the speedy adoption of the EU 2021-2027 budget, but might also involve changes to EU treaties.

The EU should drop the rule-of-law conditionality for now to speed the flow of billions in aid to countries suffering record economic downturns amid the COVID-19 pandemic and to approve the 2021-2027 budget, both leaders said.

The EU could return later to how it wants to enforce democratic standards, though that would require amending its treaty, which requires a unanimous decision, they said.

"On the one hand, to limit the scope of any budgetary conditionality to the protection of the financial interests of the Union" according to what member states agreed in the July EU summit.

3.3.2021

Poland, Hungary propose two-track way out of EU budget deadlock – EURACTIV.com

On the other, the statement said, the European Council should discuss “whether a link between the rule of law and the financial interests in the Union should be established”.

For the adoption of the budget and the reconstruction plan, unanimity is required.

“We gave ourselves and the German presidency time to try to find a compromise between the approach of various member states in the context of the EU budget by the end of this year,” Orban said.

The new proposal by Warsaw and Budapest is likely to put them straight on a collision course with frugal net contributors like the Netherlands, which advocated for the current law-of-rule provision as the bare minimum needed to protect the bloc’s funding and most basic values.

If no consensus is reached by the end of the year, the EU will act on a provisional budget.

This means that only funds resulting from previous commitments will be disbursed, such as subsidies for farmers or funds for the maintenance of the EU administration.

Funds for new investments will be frozen, including infrastructure and a separate fund for reconstruction after the COVID-19 pandemic.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us

3.3.2021

Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle – EURACTIV.com



# Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle



*In September, an Amsterdam court said the Netherlands would stop extraditing suspects or convicts to Poland over concerns that the country's courts are no longer independent. [EPA-EFE/BART MAAT]*

The lower house of the Dutch parliament adopted a resolution on Tuesday obliging the government to file a claim against Poland at the European Court of Justice, for disrespecting the rule of law.

3.3.2021

Dutch government urged to sue Poland in top EU court over rule of law debacle – EURACTIV.com

Poland, together with Hungary, vetoed the EU budget and recovery programme due to the rule of law mechanism attached to the EU funds.

The resolution referred to “political interference in the appointment of judges”, as well as the still-active Supreme Court’s “disciplinary chamber that has already been declared unlawful” by the Court of Justice in Luxembourg. The “non-observance of the rule of law in Poland undermines the foundations of the functioning of the EU,” the resolution added.

In September, an Amsterdam court said the Netherlands would stop extraditing suspects or convicts to Poland over concerns that the country’s courts are no longer independent.

The same court had already asked the EU Court of Justice, in a similar case in July, whether the extradition of Polish suspects must be halted as “the independence of Polish courts and thus the right to a fair trial have come under increasing pressure.”

In response to the Amsterdam court’s request, Minister Michał Wójcik told state-owned TV TVP that the Netherlands may be the one that have problems with the rule of law, as the Dutch system “influences the functioning of the European Arrest Warrant.”

“This is a double standard, but the Netherlands is used to being able to afford it for years”, because Poland’s previous Civic Platform (PO) government allowed Western countries to go unpunished with rule of law violations, said Wójcik.

“Today, we just defend our interests”, he added. According to him, the Netherlands has “a serious problem” with the rule of law, which “calls for certain actions”.

“I’ve analysed the Dutch system in detail. They have a law allowing euthanasia. There are a few hundreds of such procedures conducted each year, some concerning children. Euthanasia can be done to a patient suffering from dementia or mental disorders”, said Wójcik, without providing proof of such claims. “To my mind, it is against human rights. And this is why people flee from the Netherlands to Poland, and the Dutch know this”, he continued.

Commenting on Poland’s EU budget veto, the minister said Poland no longer wanted “to bow to other countries”, adding that while Dutch Prime minister Mark Rutte said it was “outrageous to veto the budget, this is what the Netherlands did in 2011.”

(Aleksandra Krzysztozek | EURACTIV.pl)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland



*Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (R) and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (L) attend a press conference after their meeting in Budapest, Hungary, 26 November 2020. [EPA-EFE/Andrzej Lange POLAND OUT]*

The European Commission is assessing options to circumvent Hungary and Poland's veto to the EU budget and the recovery fund, and could come up with a proposal early next year if their blockade remains, a senior EU official confirmed on Wednesday (2 December).

The Commission's "central scenario" is that a solution will be found by late next week, when EU leaders will meet on 10-11 to discuss the two countries' veto on the €1.8 trillion package which includes the €750 billion recovery fund to counter the economic fallout of the pandemic and €1.1 trillion multi-annual financial framework, the EU's next seven-year budget.

Hungarian and Polish leaders, Viktor Orban and Mateusz Morawiecki, have insisted that they won't give their blessing unless the Rule of Law conditionality attached to the EU funds is substantially watered down or scrapped.

If both member states persist with their veto, a senior EU official was "pretty confident" that a solution could be found and implemented "quite quickly" to "replicate the effects" of the recovery fund without them.

The Commission could come as early as January with a "bridge" solution based on EU law. The options being considered include enhanced cooperation among member states or a system of national guarantees to back the borrowing of €750 billion for the fund.

The official declined to enter into details, and did not clarify what would happen with Hungary and Poland's portion of the recovery fund.

Even if member states are forced to use the bridge solution, recovery funds could still be channelled to member states by next summer as planned, once the ratification process of the mechanism is completed in member states.

Budapest and Warsaw's opposition to the EU budget deal has further complicated the transition to the next EU's seven-year budget and the adoption of the draft budget for 2021 under the next MFF.

The deadline for the European Parliament and member states to reach an agreement on the annual budget is 7 December.

Given that there is no unanimity for the new MFF, under which the 2021 draft budget was prepared, the Commission will have to put forward a new draft budget for 2021 based on the budgetary ceilings of the current MFF.

The proposal would be ready by early next year, and would be adopted by the European Parliament and the member states by qualified majority, leaving no prospect of any vetoes.

Until the adoption of the new budget for next year is completed, the EU will have to operate under the 'provisional twelfths' system for the first time since 1988.

This means that each chapter of the budget will be funded monthly, up to a maximum of one twelfth of its appropriations of the previous year or of the draft budget, whichever is the lowest.

3.3.2021

Commission considers options for recovery fund without Hungary and Poland – EURACTIV.com

The EU, however, won't be able to commit to new projects under most of its programmes, such as Cohesion or Horizon, and rebates would not be paid to some of the net contributors to the EU budget.

In addition, around €25-30 billion in Cohesion funds will be lost even once a new budget for 2021 is adopted under the current MFF, given that the 2014-2020 budget has lower budgetary ceilings compared with the next seven year budget.

[Edited by Benjamin Fox]

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# 'It's not gonna work', Orbán says about Polish veto retreat



*Brussels, Belgium. 20th March 2019. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gives a press conference at the end of the European People's Party (EPP) Political Assembly at the European Parliament. [Shutterstock/Alexandros Michailidis]*

Hungary and Poland have committed to supporting each other's position in the budget row, and attaching a declaration to the rule of law regulation does not work for Budapest, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in a weekly radio interview on Friday (4 December), following news that Poland may be softening its position on the veto.

3.3.2021

'It's not gonna work', Orbán says about Polish veto retreat – EURACTIV.com

Hungary and Poland have vetoed the EU's 1.8 trillion financial package consisting of the seven-year budget and recovery fund over a proposed regulation linking Union spending to rule of law criteria.

Orbán said Hungary and Poland had signed a joint declaration during Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's visit to the Hungarian capital last Thursday (26 November), which included a sentence that neither Poland nor Hungary will accept the EU proposals that are "deemed unacceptable by the other."

For Hungary the solution "to add some declaration, like to a *Dazibao*, a little reminder with a pushpin, it won't work, so Hungary insists that the two things [the budget and the rule of law regulation] have to be separated," the Hungarian prime minister said. *Dazibao* is a Chinese term for a wall poster written in large characters, expressing a political opinion.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Poland's deputy Prime Minister Jaroslaw Gowin said:

"I believe it is in the interest of all ... to find a good compromise. Such a compromise is possible ... through a binding declaration interpreting (the rule of law regulation)," which could be "a clear statement from the European Council that the conditionality rule would not be used to exert unjustified pressure on individual member states in areas other than the proper use of EU funds."

Orbán reiterated that Hungary's proposal to the German presidency is to quickly adopt "without any difficulty" the EU's long-term budget and recovery fund, and "set aside and discuss later" the rule of law regulation.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Poland ready for EU budget veto trade-off



*Jarosław Gowin, leader of the Agreement party, a junior ruling coalition member attends a parliamentary debate in Sejm (lower house) in Warsaw, Poland, 02 June 2020. [EPA-EFE/Radek Pietruszka]*

A compromise for the EU budget is possible, said Polish Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin, who recently admitted that Poland should not have vetoed the EU budget.

“Poland needs EU funds for dynamic development, including funds from the Recovery Fund. Therefore, I hope [...] it will be possible to work out a compromise on the final shape of the ‘rule of law’ ” said the politician.

3.3.2021

Poland ready for EU budget veto trade-off – EURACTIV.com

However, Gowin also said he supports the government's position.

“The current shape of these provisions [concerning the rule of law mechanism] is harmful not only from the point of view of Poland and Hungary but also from the perspective of the long-term interests of a united Europe,” he argued.

During the Thursday meeting with several EU Commissioners in Brussels, Gowin argued that a compromise can be worked out “if not in the form of reopening the discussion on the shape of this regulation, then in the form of binding interpretative declarations”.

Gowin also explained why Poland continues to have reservations regarding the current rule of law mechanism, emphasising that Poland wanted to be sure that the conditionality principle would only apply to a transparent and fair use of EU funds and not for their distribution.

Gowin suggested that a so-called “interpretative declaration” could be prepared by the European Commission’s legal services and then confirmed by the European Council.

However, such a declaration would not be legally binding.

Read the full story [here](#).

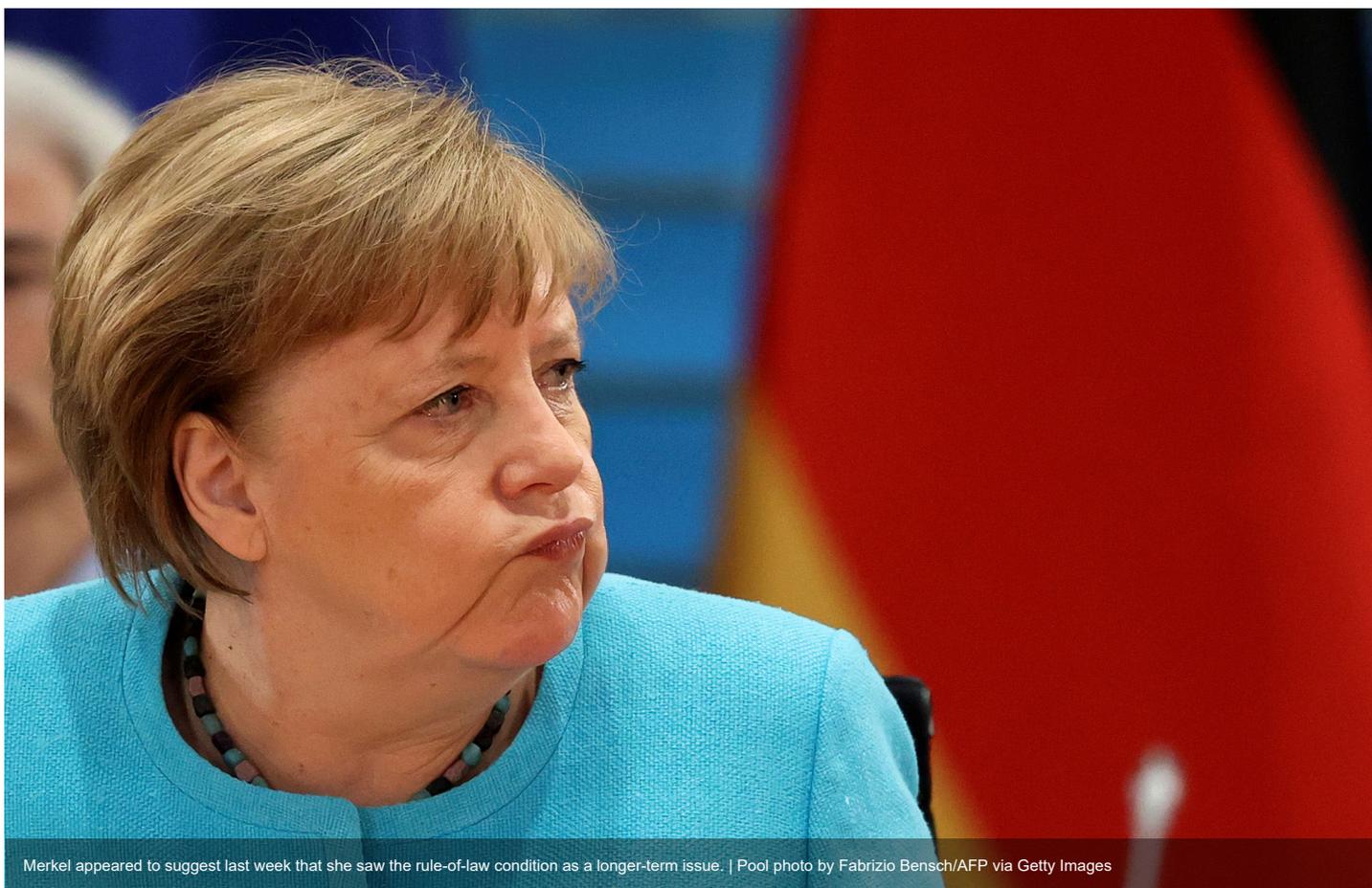
(Monika Mojak | EURACTIV.pl)

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)



# European Parliament clashes with Merkel over rule of law in budget talks

Lawmakers criticize German chancellor over what they see as plans to soften rule-of-law demands in budget deal.



Merkel appeared to suggest last week that she saw the rule-of-law condition as a longer-term issue. | Pool photo by Fabrizio Bensch/AFP via Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD AND LILI BAYER

July 9, 2020 | 10:18 pm



German Chancellor Angela Merkel is coming under fire from the European Parliament over what MEPs see as plans to soften rule-of-law conditions in an effort to reach a quick EU budget deal.

EU leaders will meet in Brussels next week for tough negotiations on the bloc's seven-year budget and post-coronavirus recovery fund — and the thorny question of linking respect for the rule of law to the distribution of EU money is on the agenda.

The German government has long supported efforts to find a way to make EU funding contingent on adhering to certain democratic norms. The coronavirus crisis, however, may have changed Merkel's approach.

Before the crisis, wealthy states like Finland, Sweden, Germany and France were confident that they could eventually push through such a mechanism as countries like [Poland](#) and [Hungary](#) — which both currently face Article 7 disciplinary proceedings over rule-of-law concerns — fear delayed budget payments if talks are prolonged over rule-of-law debates.

But leading MEPs now warn that faced with the risk of a deepening economic crisis and a possible surge of populism in southern European countries, Merkel will try to avoid any potential budget vetoes by dropping her insistence on a directly linked rule-of-law mechanism.

"I can see the pressure that the German government is facing, that we have to move very quickly on the budget and the recovery fund, because the money has to come very quickly," Caspary added, threatening that the Parliament could veto the deal "as long as there is no meaningful solution to the rule-of-law issue."

Merkel, for her part, appeared to suggest last week that she saw the rule-of-law condition as a longer-term issue. Rule of law, she said, "is not just a money issue, it's an overarching theme that will run through the years."

"For funds to be associated with the rule of law at all, funds are needed in the first place," she added. "We need an agreement, and that is why the focus [of next week's summit] will be on the issue of first making progress with the recovery fund and the [budget], so that we have a basis on which we can then work in the described way."

Some politicians said Merkel's comments indicate that she could try to bring back the rule-of-law mechanism at a later stage of the negotiations, when the detailed regulations governing different budget programs are finalized.

"Plan B could be the [negotiations on] specific programs, in which the Parliament is involved intensively," said Caspary.

But this may not be enough for the so-called "frugal four" — Austria, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands — which could threaten to veto a budget deal that does not offer explicit guarantees on the rule of law.

"Anchoring the rule of law in our budget is not optional," said one diplomat from a frugal country. "How do we otherwise defend what we spend towards our voters?"

## Parliamentary backlash

A spokesperson for the German government told POLITICO that Berlin "supports the work in the context of the [long-term budget] for a mechanism to protect the EU budget in connection with rule of law deficits."

The spokesperson added that the inclusion of such a mechanism in next week's negotiations was up to Council President Charles Michel, who is set to issue an updated compromise proposal on Friday. The German government "assumes that the mechanism will continue to be part of the negotiations," the spokesperson added.

Meanwhile, during a Parliament debate on Thursday, the apparent change in Germany's position triggered a cross-party backlash.

"You can be sure that you will meet with decisive resistance if you want to prevent, dilute or render this [rule-of-law] mechanism as useless as possible," Katarina Barley, one of the Parliament's vice presidents and a member of the German Social Democrats (SPD), Merkel's coalition partner in Berlin. Barley was aiming her comments at Germany's Europe Minister Michael Roth, a fellow SPD member representing the Berlin government at the debate.

Spanish Socialist lawmaker Eider Gardiazabal said the rule-of-law mechanism was not just "priority but a sine qua non for the good development of the budgetary negotiations we will be holding over the next months."

Moritz Körner, a German MEP from the Renew Europe group, said that Merkel's previous statements on the importance of the EU's core values "also requires the chancellor to be consistent in her commitment to ... this rule-of-law mechanism."

Daniel Freund, a German MEP from the Greens, spoke of a "last chance to show that values are not negotiable for us" and issued a plea to Berlin: "Please don't surrender next week."

*This article is part of POLITICO's coverage of the EU budget, tracking the development of the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework. For a complimentary trial, email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) mentioning Budget.*

---

## Also On POLITICO



### Merkel sees tough road to EU budget and recovery deal

By David M. Herszenhorn, Maïa de La Baume and Jacopo Barigazzi

### Merkel calls for swift deal on EU budget and recovery package

By David M. Herszenhorn, Maïa de La Baume and Hans von der Burchard

# No EU budget if rule of law discussed, Orbán says

'Let's put this debate aside now,' said the Hungarian prime minister.



Orbán's comments drew criticism in the European Parliament. | Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images

BY LILI BAYER

July 10, 2020 | 2:20 pm



There will be no new EU budget if the negotiations are mixed up with rule of law debates, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Friday.

Speaking on state-owned Kossuth Rádió, the Hungarian leader said that if arguments over the rule of law are included in the bloc's funding decisions "there will not be an economic restart, there will not be a budget, there will be drawn-out debates."

When EU leaders gather in Brussels for a budget summit starting July 17, they are expected to also discuss a proposal to link EU funding to respect for certain rule of law criteria. Debate is currently centering on the details of how a new rule of law mechanism would be triggered.

"Let's put this debate aside now," Orbán said in his radio interview. "Let's resolve the economic problems, restart our economies, start creating jobs, then we can continue the rule of law debates."

Hungary, along with Poland, is currently facing so-called Article 7 proceedings over rule of law concerns.

Orbán's comments drew criticism in the European Parliament.

"It is a disgrace for Viktor Orbán to threaten the recovery of a whole continent from COVID-19, just so he can continue to dismantle democracy in Hungary," said Dacian Cioloș, a former Romanian prime minister and now president of the Renew Europe group. "We need a strong recovery fund to invest in our common European destiny, but our future must also be built on basic common democratic values," he said. **Appendix 2**

*This article is part of POLITICO's coverage of the EU budget, tracking the development of the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework. For a complimentary trial, email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) mentioning Budget.*

---

## Also On POLITICO



### Orbán expects EU budget talks to continue over summer

By Lili Bayer



### Michel presents compromise plan for EU budget and recovery fund

By Lili Bayer

---

MORE FROM ... **LILI BAYER**

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

**View the Latest Issue**

# Hungary threatens to hold EU's coronavirus recovery fund hostage over rule of law

Budapest wants to limit any rule of law criteria on spending.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán | Pool photo by Stephanie Lecocq/AFP via Getty Images

BY LILI BAYER

September 2, 2020 | 12:18 pm



The Hungarian parliament will withhold its consent for the EU's coronavirus recovery plan if a proposal to link the bloc's funds to rule-of-law criteria is not first finalized to its liking, MEPs were told.

The EU is planning a €750 billion [recovery fund](#) to drag the bloc out of the crisis prompted by the pandemic. That requires the vast majority of national parliaments to sign off on a so-called Own Resources Decision — a legal move that provides the bloc with extra financial guarantees from member countries.

But Hungary is threatening to withhold its agreement, which would prevent the bloc from launching the fund, according to three people with knowledge of a meeting between budget negotiators on Thursday.

At the meeting, the German presidency of the Council of the EU told the European Parliament's team that Hungary's parliament will not provide its consent until a regulation on a proposed rule of law mechanism is finalized, two MEPs and a parliamentary staffer said.

Thursday's meeting was part of ongoing discussions between EU countries and MEPs on the budget deal for the 2021-2027 period, which needs the consent of the Parliament to take effect from January 1 as planned. The German presidency is representing EU countries after leaders reached a deal on the budget plans in July.

“ Viktor Orbán's government has sought to water down plans to link the distribution of EU money to respect for the rule of law.

Despite leaders reaching a compromise on most aspects of the planned €1.82 trillion package, they fudged an agreement on plans to link EU funding to respect for certain rule-of-law criteria amid strong opposition from Hungary and Poland.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has sought to water down plans to link the distribution of EU money to respect for the rule of law, with Justice Minister Judit Varga warning of budgetary sanctions “based on vague concepts and non-transparent procedures.”

The threat to withhold consent for the €750 billion recovery fund is seen in the European Parliament as a heavy-handed negotiating tactic from Budapest to prevent the bloc from implementing tough rule-of-law conditionality in the next long-term budget.

Hungary's government did not respond to a request for comment.

The situation is “a difficult scenario where we need to work,” said one MEP, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the negotiations.

---

## Also On POLITICO



### Hungary to close borders starting September 1

By Lili Bayer



FORUM

### Hungary's African immigrants hope for #BLM reckoning

By Kasia Kovacs

---

MORE FROM ... **LILI BAYER**

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

[View the Latest Issue](#)

# Poland joins Hungary in threatening to block EU's budget and coronavirus recovery package

Warsaw and Budapest join forces against rule of law mechanism that would deny funds to violators.



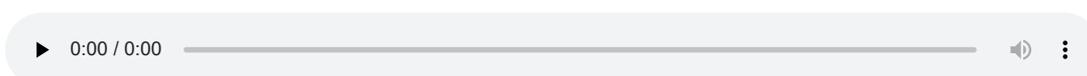
Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán | Wojtek Radwanski/AFP via Getty Images

BY MAÍA DE LA BAUME, HANS VON DER BURCHARD AND DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

September 18, 2020 | 7:51 pm



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

Poland joined Hungary on Friday in threatening to block the EU's historic €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package, fearing that the European Parliament and other EU nations will impose conditions that deny access to funds for countries that violate the rule of law, diplomats said.

Hungary, which like Poland has been accused by Brussels of violating the rule of law and fundamental principles of democracy, [issued a similar threat](#) earlier this month.

The blocking threats were widely expected, but nonetheless put Warsaw and Budapest at risk of being portrayed as trying to obstruct emergency money amid the economic shock of the pandemic.

It will now be up to the German presidency of the Council of the EU, and Chancellor Angela Merkel, to negotiate some sort of compromise.

While all 27 EU heads of state and government approved the budget and recovery package at a summit in July, national parliaments must still ratify the budget and a so-called Own Resources Decision, which provides the EU with legal guarantees from its member countries regarding budget revenues.

“ While Hungary’s initial threat was focused on withholding ratification by its national parliament, EU diplomats said the threat issued by Poland and Hungary on Friday was to stop the Own Resources Decision ...

The Own Resources Decision, which also requires unanimous approval in the Council, is needed to create new revenue streams for the Multiannual Financial Framework, the bloc’s seven-year budget blueprint, as well as to launch the €750 billion recovery fund.

At the European Council summit in July, the 27 heads of state and government fudged an agreement on plans to link EU funding to respect for certain rule-of-law criteria amid strong opposition from Hungary and Poland.

After the summit, Council President Charles Michel declared triumphantly that he had succeeded in ensuring there would be strong rule-of-law protections as part of the package. But Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also claimed victory, saying the wording had been softened enough to give them the ability to veto any proposed regulation.

While Hungary’s initial threat was focused on withholding ratification by its national parliament, EU diplomats said the threat issued by Poland and Hungary on Friday was to stop the Own Resources Decision at an earlier, procedural stage by blocking its approval in the Council.

A senior Polish diplomat said Warsaw’s position was being mischaracterized. “Saying that we would block something is an overstatement,” the diplomat said. “We can’t block something that we haven’t seen yet. We’re waiting for legal acts that would describe the political agreement to comment on it.”

In her State of the European Union speech this week, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke about a link between the rule of law and the budget package, but she focused mainly on preventing fraud, corruption and conflict of interest — rather than suggesting that funds might be blocked for countries that violate the EU’s broader, fundamental principles.

“The Commission attaches the highest importance to the rule of law,” von der Leyen said. “This is why we will ensure that money from our budget and NextGenerationEU is protected against any kind of fraud, corruption and conflict of interest. This is non-negotiable.”

She added, “But the last months have also reminded us how fragile it can be. We have a duty to always be vigilant to care and nurture for the rule of law. Breaches of the rule of law cannot be tolerated. I will continue to defend it and the integrity of our European institutions. Be it about the primacy of European law, the freedom of the press, the independence of the judiciary or the sale of golden passports — European values are not for sale.”

It was not clear what she meant. And when pressed on the matter during a debriefing for reporters on Thursday, von der Leyen effectively ducked, saying it was up to the German presidency in the Council and the European Parliament to work things out.

“At the moment being, on the question of conditionalities, we are waiting that the presidency, the German presidency, or in the negotiations it is awaited that the German presidency is putting forward a proposal, how to proceed now on this matter, with Parliament,” she said. “So I know that my position is very clear. I have put forward a proposal. But now it is up to the Parliament and the Council to negotiate a common landing zone.”

*Lili Bayer and Zosia Wanat contributed reporting.*

---

## Also On POLITICO

### Animal rights bill threatens to break Poland’s ruling coalition

By Zosia Wanat

### Hungary threatens to hold EU’s coronavirus recovery fund hostage over rule of law

By Lili Bayer

# Poland threatens to veto EU budget over rule of law

It's part of a signal that Warsaw has no intention of retreating from its controversial reforms.



Kaczyński was adamant that his government won't back down over the rule of law | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

BY ZOSIA WANAT

October 13, 2020 | 7:34 pm



Poland will veto the EU's €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery plan if Brussels imposes rule of law conditions, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, said in an interview published Tuesday.

"There will be a veto. If the threats and blackmail continue, we'll firmly defend Poland's vital interests," he told the right-wing Gazeta Polska Codziennie newspaper, comparing Brussels' actions to the Soviet Union's rule in the past over Poland, adding: "We're on the right side of history, and those who want to take away our sovereignty based on their own whims are headed for a fall."

EU leaders agreed on a €1.074 trillion seven-year EU budget and a new €750 billion recovery fund during a marathon summit in July. But national parliaments — including the Polish parliament — still need to sign off on guarantees that would allow the bloc to borrow money on the markets in order to create the recovery fund. National parliaments also need to agree to any possible new sources of funding for the long-term budget.

Warsaw could also use a step that is usually just a formality — the passing of a regulation laying down the budget in the Council of the EU, after a final deal has been struck with the European Parliament — to block the spending plan.

Kaczyński was adamant that his government won't back down over the rule of law, something that's provoking similar levels of consternation in Hungary, which has also threatened to block the recovery fund. Talks on the final shape of the conditionality mechanism are ongoing, but some member countries and MEPs insist that countries violating the rule of law should have limited access to EU funds.

“ The Polish government has also been chastised by the EU for its control of the publicly-financed state media.

“Today, the EU institutions, their different officials, some politicians that the Polish people have never elected, demand that we verify our whole culture, reject everything that is very important for us, just because they like it,” Kaczyński added.

That prompted a sharp retort from Manfred Weber, chairman of the center-right European People's Party, the European Parliament's largest group.

"Nobody is 'blackmailing' anybody Mr Kaczyński. Citizens all over Europe are concerned about rule of law and don't want their taxes to support governments that undermine the independence of the judiciary or the freedom of the media. What are you afraid of?" he tweeted.

## No retreat

The latest dust-up with Brussels is just one of a series of actions taken by Poland's ruling nationalists showing they haven't lost their appetite for their program of reforming the country.

On Monday, the disciplinary chamber of Poland's Supreme Court suspended and waived the immunity of Beata Morawiec, a Kraków judge. That allows prosecutors to investigate her on corruption allegations, charges she denies.

Critics say that the chamber acted because Morawiec is in a personal conflict with the country's powerful Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro. She sued him and won after he tried to remove her from her post. She is also a president of an association of judges that is openly critical of Ziobro's sweeping judicial reforms.

The Court of Justice of the EU ruled in April that the Polish chamber should be suspended from hearing disciplinary cases until the EU court could rule on the body's legality; Morawiec's case is criminal, not disciplinary, so the EU court's ruling doesn't apply.

The European Commission complained in 2019 about the body's independence as it is dominated by judges chosen by PiS. The Polish Supreme Court also ruled that the disciplinary chamber is illegitimate.

"The Disciplinary Chamber of the Polish Supreme Court is not a court and cannot continue to act as one," the European Association of Judges said in a statement, stressing that the chamber was acting in "blatant disobedience" to the top EU court.

## More changes ahead

The Polish government has also been chastised by the EU for its control of the publicly-financed state media — which have become one-sided backers of the ruling party. But PiS wants an even firmer grip over the country's press and television.

On Tuesday, Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński said Polish state-owned companies should buy private media operators. The government has long tried to rein in critical independent media, but has been slapped down by U.S. Ambassador Georgette Mosbacher, who has defended U.S.-owned broadcaster TVN from government attacks.

The government is taking aim at German companies, which have a strong position in Poland.



▲ Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński said Polish state-owned companies should buy private media operators | Ari Perilstein/Getty Images

"It's not a normal situation if almost all local press was in the hands of one corporation, a German corporation in Poland. This situation is not in line with European standards, because the media market is especially sensitive due to its influence on the functioning of democracy. That's why we have to change this situation in Poland," Gliński told RMF radio.

He was reacting to a report in the Economist that Polish energy giant Orlen is in talks to buy Polska Press, a subsidiary of Germany's Verlagsgruppe Passau that owns 20 Polish regional dailies.

"Where it's possible certainly state companies should buy the media, but I don't think that's destructive to the media," Gliński said, adding that there is "an enormous preponderance of media which aren't in the hands of capital linked to the Polish government."

Since taking power in 2015, Poland's position on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders, a nonprofit group, has dropped from 18th to 62nd this year.

*CORRECTION: This article has been corrected to reflect the legal options for vetoing the long-term budget, and to correct the application the Court of Justice of the EU's ruling on the actions of the Polish disciplinary chamber.*

## Also On POLITICO

### OPINION

#### Linking Europe's recovery package to rule of law is 'suicidal'

By Judit Varga



#### Poland hits Gazprom with the world's largest competition fine

By America Hernandez and Thibault Langer

MORE FROM ... **ZOSIA WANAT**

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM



# Orbán threatens to veto EU budget, recovery fund over rule of law

Hungarian PM sets out position in letter to Charles Michel seen by POLITICO.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán | Pool photo by Johanna Geron/AFP via Getty Images

BY MAÏA DE LA BAUME AND LILI BAYER

November 9, 2020 | 9:30 pm



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has threatened to block the EU's budget and recovery package over a deal to link payouts of EU funds to respect for the rule of law.

In a letter to European Council President Charles Michel, seen by POLITICO, Orbán said last Thursday's agreement among negotiators from the EU's three main institutions did not appear to meet criteria set by Budapest.

"On the basis of the reports available about the content of this agreement, I understand that it does not meet the requirement which Hungary clearly expressed several times in the course of negotiating the deal, therefore I shall not be able to support it," Orbán wrote.

EU institutions, international organizations and rights groups have all accused the governments of Hungary and Poland of undermining democratic standards and the rule of law. Budapest and Warsaw dismiss the allegations and have tried to make any scheme linking EU funds to the rule of law as weak as possible, arguing it is biased against them.

EU leaders agreed last July on a historic €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package. But Hungary and Poland have indicated they would block the budget deal if they could not accept the terms of the rule-of-law mechanism, even though it is a separate measure. **Appendix 2**

“In accordance with the agreed practice according to which nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, I have to inform you that the situation leaves no other option for Hungary but to not agree to the other elements of the package on the next MFF [Multi-Annual Financial Framework, the EU’s seven-year budget] and Next Generation EU [coronavirus recovery fund], including those requiring unanimity,” Orbán wrote.

But some MEPs made clear they thought Orbán was bluffing and would ultimately not hold up a budget and recovery fund when the bloc is in deep economic trouble and leaders across the EU are demanding that the money should start flowing sooner rather than later.

"I think we have to go forward and Viktor Orbán will not change the outcome of last Thursday," said Manfred Weber, the leader of the European People's Party group in the European Parliament, which includes members of the Hungarian leader's Fidesz party.

---

MORE FROM ... **MAÏA DE LA BAUME** AND **LILLI BAYER**

---

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

---

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

---

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

---

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

---

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU’s soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue

# EU in crisis over Hungary and Poland's €1.8T hold-up

Budget and coronavirus recovery fund blocked in rule-of-law wrangle.



BY DAVID M. HERSZENHORN AND LILI BAYER

November 16, 2020 | 9:14 pm

f t in ✉ 🖨

PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE

▶ 0:00 / 0:00 🔊 ⋮

Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

Hungary and Poland blocked the EU's historic €1.82 trillion budget-and-recovery package on Monday, setting off what top officials and diplomats branded an institutional crisis with no evident path out of the stalemate.

Even for Brussels, which often sees itself as never better than when managing an emergency, the crisis over the carefully-negotiated response to the coronavirus crisis seemed to confront the bloc with one crisis too many.

The standoff will now be the top item on the agenda when EU heads of state and government meet via videoconference on Thursday, but senior officials warned that they did not expect any resolution by then. Officials were left contemplating an open-ended delay even as EU countries are

being battered by a second wave of the pandemic, with many countries in various forms of lockdown, partially paralyzing their economies.

## Appendix 2

While both Budapest and Warsaw blocked progress, many diplomats and officials placed most of the blame on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has often railed against the EU and its institutions.

"Everybody knows that this is a deadlock," a senior official said. "We are at a crossroads and nobody knows where this is leading. We only know that the whole package cannot be approved as long as we don't have the Hungarians on our side."

"We will continue with consultations, but at a certain point in time, the Hungarians will have to show their cards on the table," the official said. "Otherwise we are in deep shit."

Hungary and Poland blocked the package during a meeting of EU ambassadors on Monday, citing opposition to a new mechanism that would allow the EU to cut off funds to a country found to be violating the rule of law in certain circumstances tied to the budget. The ambassadors were able to approve the rule-of-law mechanism itself despite those objections because it required only a qualified majority. But Hungary and Poland then used their veto power to block a step toward finalizing the so-called Own Resources Decision, a prerequisite for the bloc to borrow money for its new €750 billion recovery fund.

The two countries also signaled that they are withholding political support for the bloc's €1.074 trillion seven-year budget, which is due to start on January 1. Officials were quick to point out that the budget-and-recovery package includes tens of billions for Hungary and Poland, essentially accusing Budapest and Warsaw of harming their own citizens.

Poland and Hungary are both major recipients of EU funds — and have been very heavily hit by the second wave of the coronavirus. Officials and diplomats said that Orbán had refused to budge even after a series of meetings and personal entreaties, including from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Council President Charles Michel, and top officials from France, Italy, Spain and Portugal — some of the countries worst affected by the coronavirus.

"Even after having had discussions with the German chancellor and the pressure from the southern countries," the senior official said. "Even after all that, and even with all the money that is at stake ... there is no movement. They are just fully entrenched."

"Even in tête-à-têtes or very private conversations, nobody sees how this can be solved. If you are confronted with one partner who doesn't understand what's at stake, how urgently this is needed, there is no sense of logic," the official said.

### Fudge found wanting

Some diplomats said the EU was paying the inevitable price for not fully resolving the rule-of-law dispute during the July summit when the budget-and-recovery package was approved. To clinch a deal after long negotiations, leaders agreed there would be a link in the budget to rule-of-law standards, but left the wording open to interpretation.

"It's not the end of the story, we are now entering a political phase," one senior EU diplomat said. "But if the paralysis goes on, we risk finding ourselves with a very reduced budget and only mandatory spending, and no commitment on structural funds, foreign policy etc."

In fact, the options are quite limited.

Even if the 25 other heads of state and government on the European Council were willing to surrender, the seven-year budget requires agreement of the European Parliament, which fought hard in protracted negotiations to fashion the rule-of-law mechanism. Some MEPs had only reluctantly accepted the deal, saying the provision was not tough enough.

And while, theoretically, the recovery plan could be adopted outside the EU's budget — as an "intergovernmental agreement" between countries — European Commission officials had carefully considered that route last spring, and dismissed it as overly complicated and time-consuming, potentially causing a repeat of many difficulties faced in managing the eurozone debt crisis.

The EU institutions and many EU national governments have complained for years about what they view as backsliding by Warsaw and Budapest when it comes to rule of law and other fundamental principles of democracy. But Hungarian and Polish officials said they were being blackmailed by Brussels, and refusing to surrender after years of being held to unfair double standards.

"There is no clear objective criteria or clear definition of principles of rule of law, so you cannot use it as a tool for [a] concrete sanctioning mechanism," Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga told reporters.

"The political blackmailing is a very bad and irresponsible tactic from the European Parliament and some member states," the minister said. "It is not our task to find [a] solution to the problem."

Polish officials were equally defiant.

"This is an issue that will determine if Poland is a sovereign subject in the EU community, or it will be politically and institutionally enslaved," Poland's justice minister, Zbigniew Ziobro, told reporters. "It's not about a rule of law ... but about political and institutional slavery."

### More obstacles ahead

There is still a long road ahead — and multiple potential hurdles — for the bloc's €1.8 trillion package to become a reality. The seven-year budget will need to win support in the European Parliament and garner unanimous support in the Council before it can come into effect. The Own Resources Decision also needs unanimous support in the Council, before being ratified by member states' national parliaments.

Even if a temporary political fudge could be found in the Council with Poland and Hungary, national parliaments in Budapest and Warsaw will have the opportunity to in effect veto the funding arrangements for the €750 billion recovery fund, if they so choose — adding extra pressure on negotiators. The national parliaments' ratification is, however, a double-edged sword. Some parliaments in countries such as Finland are unlikely to ratify the Own Resources Decision if legislators feel that Hungary and Poland were given too many concessions on the rule-of-law front.

While the decision to block progress did not come as a surprise, there was still an explosion of outrage at Hungary and Poland for standing in the way of what many view as a landmark funding plan.

Germany's Europe minister, Michael Roth, said no country had any reason to oppose the rule-of-law provision unless it intended to violate EU principles. "If you adhere to the principles of the rule of law, then you have nothing to fear," he said.

France's Europe minister, Clément Beaune, insisted a compromise would be found but said Paris was not backing down from its support for the rule-of-law mechanism. "The blocking by Hungary and Poland of the European budget does not call into question our determination on recovery and on the rule of law," Beaune [tweeted](#).

Manfred Weber, the German leader of the center-right European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament, insisted that the rule of law provision did not unfairly target Hungary, Poland or any country. "The peoples of Europe have one single enemy at the moment, and that is the coronavirus, and they expect us to deliver now," he said.

Iratxe García, the leader of the socialist group in the Parliament, said: "Blocking the EU budget is unfair to all Europeans and it only hurts citizens, also Polish and Hungarians."

Still, the senior EU official said it appeared that Orbán was enjoying his spot at the center of the storm.

"This drama is part of the negotiations and he knows that," the senior official said. "The more we talk about him the more he likes it."

*Jacopo Barigazzi, Maia de La Baume, Hans von der Burchard and Zosia Wanat contributed reporting.*

*Want more analysis from POLITICO? POLITICO Pro is our premium intelligence service for professionals. From financial services to trade, technology, cybersecurity and more, Pro delivers real time intelligence, deep insight and breaking scoops you need to keep one step ahead. Email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) to request a complimentary trial.*

---

MORE FROM ... [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#) AND [LILI BAYER](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

[View the Latest Issue](#)



# Hungary and Poland block EU coronavirus recovery package

Budapest and Poland oppose scheme to link EU funds to rule of law.



BY LILI BAYER AND ZOSIA WANAT

November 16, 2020 | 4:15 pm



Hungary and Poland Monday blocked a key step to establishing the EU's €750 billion coronavirus recovery fund due to their opposition to linking EU funds to respect for the rule of law, diplomats said.

During a meeting of EU ambassadors in Brussels, the Hungarian and Polish envoys withheld their consent from a written procedure to adopt the so-called Own Resources Decision, which sets out the income the bloc can raise and is a prerequisite to borrow money for the recovery fund, according to four diplomats.

"EU Ambassadors could not reach the necessary unanimity for initiating the written procedure due to reservations expressed by two member states," a spokesman for the German presidency of the Council of the EU said.

The recovery fund is linked to the bloc's 2021-2027 budget, which also still requires final approval from the Council and from the European Parliament. The budget and recovery fund together make up a €1.8 trillion EU financial package.

In advance of the meeting, Hungary and Poland had declared they would block both the budget and the recovery fund due to their opposition to the rule-of-law scheme. Under that plan, the EU could cut funds to a country found not to be upholding the rule of law. EU institutions have accused both Budapest and Warsaw of backsliding on core EU values.

The Council spokesman said two member states — confirmed by multiple diplomats to be Hungary and Poland — had "expressed reservations" linked to one element of the overall package. That element was the rule-of-law mechanism, diplomats said.

However, the spokesman said the two countries had not objected to "the substance" of the long-term budget agreement sealed by Council and European Parliament negotiators last week.

At the same meeting, the ambassadors confirmed a compromise text on the rule-of-law mechanism. That measure required only a qualified majority to pass.

---

MORE FROM ... [LILI BAYER](#) AND [ZOSIA WANAT](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# Polish premier points finger at EU in budget fight

Ahead of virtual summit, Morawiecki insists Brussels is violating rule of law by pushing for rule of law provision.



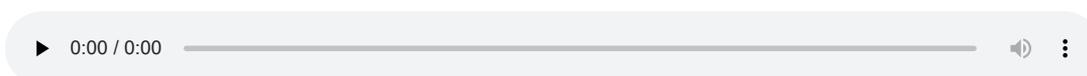
Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki | WPA Pool photo by Niklas Halle'n/Getty Images

BY DAVID M. HERSZENHORN, ZOSIA WANAT AND LILI BAYER

November 19, 2020 | 12:15 am



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

After joining with Hungary to stall the [EU's €1.82 trillion budget-and-recovery package](#), Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki sharply escalated tensions on Wednesday, accusing Brussels of spreading propaganda, likening the bloc to Poland's former Communist regime, and railing against "arbitrary decisions" by "Eurocrats" and "the European oligarchy."

Poland and Hungary blocked progress toward finalizing the budget package during a vote of EU ambassadors on Monday because of their opposition to a mechanism that would allow Brussels to cut off funding to countries found to violate rule of law principles in a way that impacts the EU's financial interests. In addition to the EU's €1.074 trillion budget, which is supposed to start on January 1, the deadlock is delaying a €750 billion coronavirus recovery plan even as the Continent is being slammed by a second wave of infections and many countries are in some form of lockdown, partially paralyzing their economies.

EU heads of state and government are due to discuss the matter at a virtual summit on Thursday but no resolution is expected, as the vast majority of EU countries support the rule of law mechanism. Leaders are also due to discuss the continuing pandemic, as well as the negotiations for a post-Brexit trade deal with the U.K., which are now in a critical phase.

Only Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša has suggested the EU should bow to Poland and Hungary's demands. Other leaders are refusing to surrender after years of complaining about backsliding by Warsaw and Budapest on the EU's fundamental principles of rule of law and democracy. Experts on EU finances noted that Poland and Hungary, as major beneficiaries of the EU budget, were harming their own citizens.

But in a speech to the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, that largely amounted to a fit and a tantrum, Morawiecki insisted that Poland was a victim and, without irony, he complained about Brussels treating Poland like a child to be disciplined. He said it was the EU that is flouting the rule of law.

"The rule of law and breaking the rule of law have become a propaganda stick in the EU," he said. "We reject this position, we reject this approach. We know well from the times of PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party], from the Communist times, the use of these propaganda sticks."

At another point, Morawiecki raged: "The EU must be built on a foundation of law and legal certainty. This is also the principle we are fighting for. Because without this principle of legal certainty, the EU is a mechanism for making arbitrary decisions by Eurocrats, and de facto by the European oligarchy, sometimes by a few stronger countries just to dominate the weaker ones. And we do not agree to this."

Other EU leaders have said that Poland and Hungary have no reason to oppose the rule of law mechanism if they indeed uphold the rule of law as they claim. And they rejected the allegation that the rule of law provision could be used arbitrarily, when in fact the use of it is narrowly prescribed to protecting the EU budget. But both Poland and Hungary are now run by governments with authoritarian tendencies, particularly in Budapest where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government wields significant influence over the media and has sought to trample the opposition.

The standoff has become so tense that Hungary's six major opposition parties issued a joint statement on Wednesday arguing that Orbán was not acting in the country's national interest.

"Viktor Orbán and his government does not equal the entirety of Hungary as a country," the opposition wrote. "With the inhibition of the European, hence Hungarian, crisis management, the Orbán government acts against the interests and rightful expectations of European and Hungarian citizens."

The six parties, which come from across the political spectrum, also emphasized that their country is in dire need of assistance.

"Hungarian citizens and their enterprises are in desperate need of the EU's recovery fund," the opposition parties wrote. "We, therefore, call upon the institutions of the European Union and the governments of Member States to find a solution in order to stop the Orbán government's selfishness from putting obstacles before the remedies for the European and Hungarian economic crisis and to help Hungarian citizens, who now fear to lose their existential stability, and their enterprises access the funding provided by EU to Hungary."

One senior EU official said that Morawiecki and Orbán had agreed, at a leaders' summit in July, to include a rule of law mechanism with the historic budget package. The rule of law provision is also strongly supported by the European Parliament, which agreed on the details of how the mechanism would function during negotiations with the Council and Commission.

"This is common sense," the senior EU official said. "This is what we had agreed in July."

In a sign that criticism from other capitals was touching a nerve, Poland and Hungary made a formal complaint against Germany, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, accusing the presidency of misrepresenting the outcome of Monday's ambassadors' meeting and disclosing the outcome of the discussions prematurely in a tweet, according to a diplomat familiar with the communications. The complaint was rejected as baseless.

Some EU officials suggested that a short-term delay to the formal adoption of the long-term budget and an accompanying "own resources decision" would not be especially problematic, and they seemed inclined to let the complaints and anger build against Hungary and Poland. But there are also worries about the potential impact of a longer delay on EU spending and the broader recovery effort.

In Warsaw, Morawiecki tried to portray Poland as a solitary hero fighting an evil empire, but he struggled to square his country's professed support for the EU with his complaints about virtually every aspect of how the Union is actually run. He pledged to restate his gripes against Brussels during the videoconference summit on Thursday, though summit observers say that such rhetoric geared to a home audience is rarely repeated.

"We're swimming against the current at this point," Morawiecki proclaimed in the Sejm, "against the mainstream, this mainstream in Brussels, which has a specific vision of the European Union. One that, in my opinion, has no chance of surviving. That is why we have decided to fight, fight for Poland, but also fight for the future of the European Union."

"We say a loud 'yes' to the EU, but we say a loud 'no' to various mechanisms that chasten us like children and treat Poland and other EU member states unequally," Morawiecki declared.



# Hungary and Poland must back down in EU budget fight, says Romania's PM

The two countries are blocking a €1.82T budget deal over rule-of-law stipulations.



Romanian Prime Minister Ludovic Orban | Daniel Mihailescu/AFP via Getty Images

BY MATEI ROSCA

November 19, 2020 | 3:07 pm



Hungary and Poland should accept rule-of-law conditions attached to EU funds to expedite a deal on the bloc's long-term budget and coronavirus recovery fund, Romanian Prime Minister Ludovic Orban told POLITICO.

EU leaders reached a [historic agreement in July](#) on a €1.82 trillion budget and recovery package that involved the bloc taking on collective debt, but the two countries are preventing the package from being finalized because of their opposition to a new mechanism that would allow the EU to cut off funds to member countries found to be violating rule-of-law principles.

“The governments of the countries that oppose this conditionality must understand that it is necessary to build public trust around this program, which is extremely important for relaunching the economy of the whole of Europe, for the benefit of citizens in Poland and Hungary,” said Orban.

Both governments are now blocking the EU's giant budget-and-recovery package over the issue, with Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša lending some support to Budapest and Warsaw. The Polish prime minister [said](#) the EU was itself in violation of rule-of-law principles. But despite growing pressure to unlock badly needed cash to support European economies hit hard by the coronavirus crisis, the EU should not give up on its demands for the sake of a quick deal, said Orban.

“I don’t believe that a government can tell its own citizens that this plan should be blocked,” he said. “All taxpayers from EU member countries should have the guarantee that the money is used correctly.”

Romania, itself the subject of a justice system monitoring mechanism from Brussels, is unlikely to have difficulties accessing funds with rule-of-law strings attached, Orban said. The country’s share of the recovery and resilience facility is estimated at around €30.4 billion.

At home, Orban is under political pressure to show he is not losing control of the pandemic, which has been raging despite tough restrictions, including a curfew and the closure of schools. The country is scrambling to expand intensive care capacity in hospitals and cold storage facilities for vaccines.

Disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories have flourished in Romanian cyberspace since the onset of the pandemic, fueling existing anti-vaccine sentiment. An outbreak of measles in 2016 led to 64 deaths as parents refused to vaccinate their children.

Orban said he would set a "personal example" by taking the vaccine when it becomes available. “We will conduct a communications campaign to explain the advantages of vaccination,” he said.

Parliamentary elections take place on December 6 under strict coronavirus alert measures: social distancing, mask-wearing and using disinfectant on the way in and out of polling stations. “My message to Romanians is they will not be in danger of infection as long as they follow the rules,” Orban said.

His government depends on shaky support of the opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD), which has a larger number of MPs. In order to remain at the helm after the election, Orban will need a majority. He said he was willing to consider a coalition between his Liberal Party and the USR-PLUS center-right group. The same alliance proved successful this fall in municipal elections in Bucharest, and both parties support changes to the country’s constitution to enshrine the independence of the judiciary and ban those with criminal records from public office.

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, though nominally independent, was a member of the same party as Orban, and has renamed him as prime minister after a no-confidence vote ousted the government in February this year. A similar move against Orban's administration failed in August.

Brexit is another issue of national importance in Romania, whose citizens form one of the largest migrant groups in the U.K. Orban said he was hoping for the process to have “a negotiated outcome,” but that the EU should not make further compromises. “I believe the EU has shown enough willingness to compromise in the negotiations so far. More flexibility from the U.K. is necessary,” he said.

---

MORE FROM ... [MATEI ROSCA](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU’s soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

[View the Latest Issue](#)



# Merkel defends EU rule-of-law plan despite budget blockade

But leaders say they'll keep talking to Hungary and Poland.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks to the media following a virtual meeting with the European Council on November 19, 2020 in Berlin, Germany | Pool image by Andreas Gora/Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD AND LILI BAYER

November 19, 2020 | 11:10 pm



German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday defended a plan to link EU payouts to respect for the rule of law that prompted Hungary and Poland to block the European Union's €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package.

But, speaking after a videoconference of EU heads of state and government, Merkel and other leaders said they would keep talking to Budapest and Warsaw to try to end the stalemate.

Hungary and Poland earlier this week blocked progress toward finalizing the package over their opposition to a new mechanism linking EU money to rule-of-law criteria, raising concerns across the Continent about possible delays to the disbursement of EU funds next year, when the new budget cycle begins.

In a videoconference focused on the coronavirus, the leaders spent less than 20 minutes discussing the stalemate. Merkel told reporters afterward that she emphasized the current rule-of-law plan — a compromise between the Council of the EU and the European Parliament — was a good solution.

"I also made it clear that I believe we found a very good and balanced compromise," she told reporters.

But she said Berlin, which holds the presidency of the Council of the EU, will push forward with efforts to find a way out of the impasse: "The German Council presidency will continue to talk with Hungary and Poland."

The chancellor declined to speculate on alternatives should the package remain blocked. "We want to work, we want to explore all the options that are possible, and we are still at the very beginning," she said.

At a separate news conference, European Council President Charles Michel said, "We'll continue the discussions to find an acceptable solution to all."

Some leaders emphasized that a quick agreement is needed — but also said a deal can still be reached even this late in the negotiating process.

"People in Europe and the businesses, the companies in Europe, are urgently waiting for the funding in this unprecedented crisis and deep recession," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, standing alongside Michel. "Now we sit down, we negotiate, we listen to what the issues are, we try to solve them," she said.

"Europe in many, many very critical situations in the very end has found solutions to move forward," von der Leyen said.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte took a less conciliatory tone, placing the responsibility to fix the situation firmly with Hungary and Poland.

"If you were to ask me [about how to solve the problem] then I would say: Ask these two how they want to solve it," Rutte told reporters.

---

MORE FROM ... [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#) AND [LILI BAYER](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# EU will eventually resolve budget deadlock, Hungary's Orbán says

'In the end we'll come to an agreement, that's how this usually goes,' the prime minister said.



BY LAURENZ GEHRKE

November 20, 2020 | 11:15 am



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has suggested that the standoff over the European Union's long-term budget and coronavirus recovery package could soon be resolved.

Hungary and Poland, backed by Slovenia, are currently blocking the €1.82 trillion package's progress over a proposal to link the disbursement of EU funds to rule-of-law standards.

"The talks should be continued and in the end we will come to an agreement, that's how this usually goes," Orbán told Hungarian state radio Friday morning, Reuters reported.

Without going into details, he added that he saw several ways to solve the impasse "that are acceptable to Hungary and Poland ... where legal aspects decide and not a political majority."

His remarks came as a survey showed that Hungarians have been the worst-hit in terms of income loss over the course of the pandemic.

The [survey](#), commissioned by the European Parliament and published Friday, found that 44 percent of Hungarians surveyed said they experienced income loss since the beginning of the crisis, a higher proportion than in any other EU country.

Hungary was followed by Spain (42 percent), Cyprus (41 percent) and Greece (40 percent) in the income-loss ranking. Overall, 27 percent of EU citizens surveyed indicated they had lost income.

Earlier this week, Hungary's and Poland's obstruction of the budget-and-recovery package were [met with exasperation](#) in Brussels and EU capitals, with German Europe Minister Michael Roth calling it a "continual test of our patience."

---

MORE FROM ... [LAURENZ GEHRKE](#)

---

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

---

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

---

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

---

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

---

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

[View the Latest Issue](#)



# Heiko Maas optimistic on EU breaking budget deadlock

German foreign minister expects blockade by Hungary and Poland to be overcome by December summit.



German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas | Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images | Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD

November 24, 2020 | 12:33 pm



German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Tuesday he is "confident" that the deadlock over the EU's €1.8 trillion budget and recovery fund package due to a dispute over the rule of law can be solved soon.

"I am sure that due to the great pressure that exists now, it will also be possible to find a solution by the December Council," Maas said, referring to a planned European Council summit of EU leaders on December 10-11.

Negotiators from the German presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Parliament earlier this month reached agreements on the [bloc's next seven-year budget](#) and a related [scheme](#) that could lead to a withdrawal of EU budget payments if a country violates certain rule-of-law criteria. But Hungary and Poland [last week blocked the approval](#) of the budget deal and the related coronavirus recovery fund as they oppose the rule-of-law scheme.

"We need a solution and we need it now, and we need it fast. And I am confident that everyone is aware of their responsibility and will do their part to help us solve this in the coming days," Maas said in a panel discussion at the [Berlin Policy Forum](#), an event organized by the Körber Stiftung foundation.

Alongside Maas on the panel were the foreign ministers of Portugal, Augusto Santos Silva, and Slovenia, Anže Logar — the two countries that will next year hold the rotating Council presidency.

Santos Silva raised the possibility of issuing a "guarantee" to Hungary and Poland to assure them "that there is legal certainty in the [rule-of-law] mechanism that we created" and that countries accused of breaching rule-of-law criteria will have "the opportunity to defend themselves and to appeal to the Council and so on."

Logar, whose Prime Minister Janez Janša last week rushed to the defense of Hungary and Poland, said the EU must "find an agreement that is acceptable to all citizens" and respects "the balance between [EU] institutions and member states."

"It's important to have the rule of law, but we do not have to over-politicize because those are topics that can be used as weapons by some," he said.

*Want more analysis from POLITICO? POLITICO Pro is our premium intelligence service for professionals. From financial services to trade, technology, cybersecurity and more, Pro delivers real time intelligence, deep insight and breaking scoops you need to keep one step ahead. Email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) to request a complimentary trial.*

---

MORE FROM ... [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# Von der Leyen urges Hungary and Poland to end EU budget hold-up

Rule-of-law plan is 'appropriate' and 'proportionate,' Commission president says.



European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen | Pool photo by Olivier Hoslet/AFP via Getty Images

BY MAÍA DE LA BAUME

November 25, 2020 | 10:29 am



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen bluntly told Hungary and Poland on Wednesday to stop blocking the EU's budget and recovery fund, daring them to go to court with their complaints about plans to link EU payouts to the rule of law.

In a speech to the European Parliament, von der Leyen defended the scheme that would link EU payments to respect for certain rule-of-law criteria as "appropriate," "proportionate" and "necessary."

"It's very difficult to imagine that anybody can have anything against that," she said.

EU leaders agreed in July on a historic €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package. But Hungary and Poland have blocked the approval process over the terms of the rule-of-law mechanism, even though it is a separate measure.

Von der Leyen made clear that if Poland and Hungary thought the measure was illegal, they should take the matter to the Court of Justice of the European Union — and not hold up much-needed funds in the middle of a pandemic.

"That is the place that difference of opinions about legislative texts are usually settled, and that is not done at the expense of millions and millions of European citizens who are urgently waiting for our help," she said.

Want more analysis from **POLITICO**? **POLITICO Pro** is our premium intelligence service for professionals. From financial services to trade, technology, cybersecurity and more, Pro delivers real time intelligence, deep insight and breaking scoops you need to keep one step ahead. Email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) to request a complimentary trial.

MORE FROM ... **MAÏA DE LA BAUME**

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue





# Hungary and Poland escalate budget fight over rule of law

Orbán and Morawiecki warn that tying cash to democratic standards risks the 'breakup' of the bloc.



Both countries are under EU investigation for backsliding on democratic standards | Aris Oikonomou/AFP via Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD

November 26, 2020 | 8:57 pm



The leaders of Poland and Hungary doubled down on their threat to veto the EU's €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package on Thursday, rejecting efforts to tie the spending to the rule of law.

Following a meeting in Budapest, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orbán released a [joint declaration](#) that committed them to continue the fight: "We have decided to align our positions on these issues. Neither Poland, nor Hungary will accept any proposal that is deemed unacceptable by the other."

Both countries are under EU investigation for backsliding on democratic standards as their ruling parties tighten their grip on the judiciary, media and other institutions. They insist they'll only give way on the budget if there is a "substantial modification" to a contested rule of law mechanism that would allow the EU to block funding if a country breaks the EU's fundamental principles.

Morawiecki warned that tying cash to democratic standards is "extremely dangerous for European unity. This is a bad solution which creates the danger of the breakup of the union."

The hardening of the Polish-Hungarian position — which comes despite intensive attempts by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to settle the dispute — means EU leaders are now heading for a major clash on rule of law at their upcoming European Council summit on December 17. **Appendix 2**

While Warsaw and Budapest are adamant that they won't accept what they call "arbitrary" rule of law provisions, the rest of the bloc and the European Parliament insist they won't give way on a principle they feel defines the EU's fundamental values.

"It is clear that there is absolutely no support for reopening the conditionality mechanism in the European Parliament or in the Council," said a senior EU diplomat. "With their statement, Poland and Hungary are moving deeper and deeper into isolation."

The Hungarian-Polish declaration is a blow to Germany, which leads negotiation efforts as it holds the rotating Council of the EU presidency and has invested great political capital in the budget and recovery fund deal.

The Polish and Hungarian position is that the conditionality mechanism does an end-run around the EU treaties and "applies vague definitions and ambiguous terms without clear criteria on which sanctions can be based, and contains no meaningful procedural guarantees."

Their statement also complains that the rule of law scheme allegedly goes beyond what EU leaders agreed in their budget deal in July. They insist that if the EU wants to make a link between rule of law and the budget it should be done by amending the bloc's founding treaties — which effectively gives each member country a veto.

Speaking at a joint press conference following the meeting, Orbán said he was unconcerned about the prospect of a halt in EU funding. The two countries are among the largest recipients of EU cash, which is crucial to their economies. If the veto threat isn't lifted soon, the EU will have no budget as of next year and would have to rely on emergency mechanisms.

"Hungary faces no financial loss if the European crisis management budget does not come together," Orbán said.

Both leaders also insisted they were within their rights to wield the veto threat.

"I see that the larger member states and the media would like to apply pressure saying that the Hungarian veto was somehow inappropriate," Orbán said, adding: "I would like to emphasize that the veto is a legal tool."

Morawiecki said Warsaw "won't hesitate to use a veto for the good of the whole EU," adding that the rule of law conditionality was a tool to attack certain countries.

*Jan Cienski contributed reporting.*

---

MORE FROM ... **HANS VON DER BURCHARD**

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

**View the Latest Issue**

# Commission, 5 EU members clash in court with Poland over rule of law

Governments join forces with Brussels to demand the Polish disciplinary system for judges be scrapped.



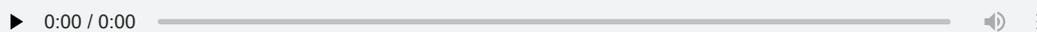
The Commission and five EU member countries have taken Poland to task at the CJEU over rule-of-law issues | John Thys/AFP via Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD

December 1, 2020 | 7:55 pm



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

LUXEMBOURG — Five EU governments joined with the European Commission in the bloc's highest court on Tuesday to accuse Poland of violating EU law by establishing a new disciplinary regime for judges.

Appearing before red-robed judges, lawyers representing Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden lined up alongside the Commission at the Court of Justice of the European Union in Luxembourg. They are asking the court to order Poland to withdraw the new regime.

The case, heard in a light wooden-paneled courtroom, is part of a bigger battle over the rule of law that pits Western European countries and EU institutions against the governments of Poland and Hungary. Brussels and the Western governments, backed by rights groups, accuse Warsaw and Budapest of undermining core EU values — charges the two capitals fiercely deny.

Poland and Hungary are currently [blocking](#) approval of the EU's €1.8 trillion budget and recovery package as they oppose a related mechanism that would link budget payments to respect for certain rule-of-law criteria.

Tensions at Tuesday's hearing in Luxembourg were heightened by accusations that Poland ignored a previous ruling from the court to freeze its controversial reform.

But the Polish government, represented by Deputy Justice Minister Anna Dalkowska, flatly rejected the criticism and shot back by declaring that the Commission and other EU countries were presenting "political manifestos" instead of legal facts.

The Commission has repeatedly warned of Polish backsliding on rule of law and launched [Article 7 disciplinary proceedings](#) against Warsaw in December 2017. But that process has gone nowhere, bogged down in the Council of the EU by other member governments reluctant to take action.

The Commission also launched several infringement procedures against Poland — legal action that Brussels can take when it believes a member government is violating EU law. The case discussed on Tuesday stems from one such action.

The Commission [argues](#) that a new disciplinary regime for Polish courts — which Warsaw started to roll out in 2017 — allows judges to be sanctioned based on the content of their rulings. Sanctions can range from lifting judges' immunity to suspending them from their duties and cutting their salary. The measures "undermine the judicial independence of Polish judges by not offering necessary guarantees to protect them from political control," the Commission argued in a statement.

The Polish government and officials from the ruling Law and Justice party argue that the disciplinary measures are necessary to ensure that judges themselves are not above the law. They also say that the reform is meant to modernize an outdated system.

"Since the collapse of the Communist system and the transformation in 1990, Poland has not done a reform of its justice system," Dalkowska said at Tuesday's hearing. "The Polish system requires to be reformed. It does not function well. And the reform must be continued."

She also argued that the introduced measures are "aimed at increasing the impartiality and independence of judges."

Representatives from Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden, however, begged to differ. They said they had decided to come forward and support the Commission because of gravity of the matters at stake.

"We are not intervening in this case in support of the Commission merely to attack Poland ... but because we are concerned that there is serious threat to the independence of judges and the rule of law," said Marie Jacobs, a lawyer from the Belgian government.

Her Danish colleague Maria Wolff said, "Poland is failing to comply with the treaty requirement that the member states should provide effective legal protection through the courts." She added that if no action is taken now, "there is a risk that cracks will appear in the EU's foundations."

The Netherlands and Finland warned of the "chilling effect" that even a single disciplinary measure against a judge could have, because it could lead others to refrain from ruling against the government out of fear that they could also be targeted.

The five countries raised particular concern over a disciplinary decision last month to lift the immunity of Igor Tuleya, a Warsaw-based judge who had been particularly critical of the Polish government and its judicial reforms.

That move appeared to ignore a [preliminary ruling](#) from the Court of Justice in April — following an application by the Commission — that Poland must suspend the activities of the disciplinary regime until the court makes its final decision on the case.

In Luxembourg on Tuesday, judges from the EU top court asked Dalkowska about the apparent violation of the court ruling. That prompted a long, legalistic answer from the Polish representative about the necessity to hold judges accountable if there is a "manifest and flagrant violation of the law."

The court did not appear convinced, with one judge repeatedly asking Dalkowska how a breach of the preliminary ruling could be justified.

A final ruling in the case is expected next year.

---

MORE FROM ... [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM



EUROPE AT LARGE

# How Europe can bypass Poland and Hungary's vetoes

EU partners need a credible option to circumvent rule-of-law deviants tying up recovery funds.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (left) and Polish Law and Justice party leader Jarosław Kaczyński | Attila Kisbenedek, Janek Skarzynski/AFP via Getty Images

BY PAUL TAYLOR

December 2, 2020 | 4:01 am



*Paul Taylor, a contributing editor at **POLITICO**, writes the Europe At Large column.*

PARIS — European partners should prepare for bypass surgery, if necessary, to overcome the blockage by Hungary and Poland of the EU's urgently needed COVID-19 recovery package.

Budapest and Warsaw are threatening to veto the bloc's €1.8 trillion long-term budget and coronavirus recovery fund in a cynical attempt to shield themselves from seeing payments linked to respect for the rule of law.

Rather than bow to their demands, the other 25 EU states should find a way to work around this attempted hostage-taking by two of the biggest beneficiaries of European subsidies.

If the painstakingly negotiated spending and revenue plan is not agreed unanimously this month, the EU will fall back on hand-to-mouth emergency funding based on the previous year's budget. All new programs — including grants to the countries hardest hit by the pandemic and investments in the transition to a low-carbon, digital economy — would be delayed.

Central Europe's illiberal duo of conservative nationalists — Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Polish Law and Justice party leader Jarosław Kaczyński — think they have the rest of Europe over a barrel. They expect they can force their peers to back down at a mid-<sup>Appendix 2</sup> summit on the rule-of-law mechanism, which they claim is a political weapon to punish them arbitrarily.

After years of systematically dismantling the impartiality of their courts, the neutrality of state institutions and media freedom, Warsaw and Budapest are banking on a last-minute compromise to remove or defang any measure that would condition EU payments on judicial independence.

They are trying to exploit a public health emergency to secure *carte blanche* to go on undercutting European democratic values with impunity.

Three possible bypass routes have been identified. Former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, a leading liberal in the European Parliament, has suggested launching the recovery fund as a so-called enhanced cooperation among a group of willing states under the EU's Lisbon Treaty.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has mused aloud about the possible “nuclear options” of “re-establishing the EU without Hungary and Poland” or implementing the entire recovery package outside the existing treaties via an agreement among the 25 other governments.

Seasoned European lawyers say each of these paths is fraught with legal difficulty. The treaty stipulates that any enhanced cooperation “shall not undermine the internal market or economic, social and territorial cohesion” and “shall respect the competences, rights and obligations of those Member States which do not participate in it.”

Above all, the unanimity of the 27 would still be required to use EU budget receipts (known in Euro-speak as “own resources”) to underwrite joint borrowing for the recovery fund, which is the crux of the landmark deal signed off in July.

It is possible to create a standalone special purpose vehicle with paid-in national guarantees to borrow the money, as eurozone countries did when they created the European Stability Mechanism, the eurozone's bailout fund for members that lose access to financial markets. But that would add extra liabilities to member countries' national balance sheets, defeating the purpose of leveraging the community budget.

Nevertheless, to hedge against Polish-Hungarian obduracy, the other 25 should at least start the legal drafting work to establish the recovery fund outside the EU framework as a last resort.

There is a precedent. In 2011, when the survival of Europe's single currency hung in the balance, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron vetoed an EU-wide deal to tackle the eurozone crisis by tightening fiscal discipline.

Outraged at his strong-arm tactics, EU partners bypassed Britain and adopted the fiscal compact as an intergovernmental treaty a few weeks later. Only the Czech Republic sided with the U.K. The others signed up to the agreement, with the European Commission as enforcer.

Such bypass threats are more often tactics to apply political pressure on recalcitrant partners than statements of genuine intent.

It's ironic that it was Rutte who invoked the idea of going outside the treaty. Just six months ago, French officials were hinting that Paris and Berlin might have to create a €500 billion recovery fund via a coalition of the willing — if frugal northern EU states like the Netherlands did not drop their opposition to joint borrowing and to handing out the money in grants rather than loans. The “frugals” eventually acquiesced in return for assurances on how spending would be supervised, including via a rule-of-law mechanism.

It's hard to imagine Germany, holder of the rotating EU presidency, being willing to shove Poland aside, given Berlin's historical responsibility toward its eastern neighbor and the depth of their economic integration. Chancellor Angela Merkel made it her top priority to hold the EU together after Britain voted in 2016 to leave. She will be loath to split it on her watch.

Several other EU states would have misgivings about bypassing a member country's veto for their own reasons, however frustrated they may be with Orbán's and Kaczyński's blackmail.

Cyprus, for example, recently used its veto to hold up EU sanctions against Belarus officials responsible for election-rigging and repression, in an effort to force tougher measures against Turkey over illegal drilling for gas. Austria delayed the launch of an EU maritime mission in the central Mediterranean to enforce an arms embargo on Libya out of opposition to migrant rescues at sea. Both ultimately dropped their objections.

There is no harm in offering Warsaw and Budapest extra guarantees, if that helps them save face and lift their blockade. Reassurances could include the fact that the rule-of-law mechanism will itself be subject to depoliticized judicial oversight within the EU and that the principle of proportionality will be respected.

But if Poland and Hungary are hell-bent on preventing any linkage between EU subsidies and democratic standards of judicial independence, as their escalating rhetoric suggests, then other EU countries must be ready to face them down.

Hungary and Poland need the money. As their ideological soulmate U.S. President Donald Trump sulks off into the sunset, they have no alternative friends to the EU. Furthermore, recent opinion polls suggest a clear majority of voters in both countries agree with the principle that EU cash should be conditional on respecting the rule of law and strongly support EU membership.

Orbán and Kaczyński must be told clearly, as David Cameron was during the eurozone crisis: If you try to hold the EU to ransom in the middle of an economic emergency, you will be bypassed.

# Von der Leyen threatens EU recovery fund without Hungary and Poland

In video call, Commission president says she will propose fund with 25 countries if no progress soon.



European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen | Olivier Hoslet/EFE via EPA | Olivier Hoslet/EPA

BY MAÍA DE LA BAUME AND HANS VON DER BURCHARD

December 2, 2020 | 10:55 pm



The European Commission will move to launch the EU's proposed €750 billion recovery fund without Hungary and Poland if there's no breakthrough in the budget deadlock at next week's European Council, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told European Parliament President David Sassoli on Wednesday, according to two Parliament officials.

In a video call with Sassoli, von der Leyen said she wanted to "salvage the recovery fund," and "propose reinforced cooperation at 25," one of the two officials said — adding that such a move would mean the European Parliament would not vote to approve the related seven-year EU budget plan currently on the table.

The proposed recovery fund is part of a bigger €1.8 trillion financial package that also includes the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027. Budapest and Warsaw are blocking the adoption of the financial package over their opposition to a mechanism that would tie budget payments to rule of law criteria.

One senior Commission official said that alternative "solutions," including enhanced cooperation within the framework of EU law, could be put in place "rapidly" if Hungary and Poland maintain their veto on the financial measures. But the official did not specify which approach the Commission planned to take.

"We have not taken a final view on which of those solutions should be taken forward," the official said, adding that the "central scenario" remained that the standoff could be resolved at a meeting of EU leaders scheduled for Brussels on December 10-11.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel indicated Monday that she could be willing to make some concessions to Budapest and Warsaw, which [have vowed to remain united](#) in opposing the current proposal.

Enhanced cooperation is a specific process allowed for [under EU treaties](#) for a group of countries to move forward if all 27 countries cannot reach agreement, with the remaining countries permitted to join later if they choose.

Another option for capitals to circumvent Hungary and Poland would be to set up a fund outside of EU structures, through an intergovernmental treaty.

“If you go for an intergovernmental solution you would have to reinvent the wheel completely, and this takes quite some time,” the Commission official said.

In such a scenario, “any borrowing we would undertake to fund our national progress would immediately increase the debt levels of the member states supporting the intergovernmental borrowing, which would be very unattractive,” the official added.

Besides an intergovernmental treaty or enhanced cooperation, “in fact there may also be other solutions,” according to the official.

Launching a recovery fund involving 25 countries could affect approval of the MFF, the Parliament official said, with the seven-year budget and recovery fund having been agreed as a package in July.

If the MFF is not signed off before the end of the year, the bloc would move onto an emergency budget.

That would have big consequences for EU spending, the Commission official said, particularly for cohesion policy: “We reckon that we would have to cut by 50-75 percent.”

The official also said that in the case of an emergency budget, the rule of law clause still applies.

---

MORE FROM ... [MAÏA DE LA BAUME](#) AND [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU’s soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue

# Poland blinks first ahead of showdown at the EU budget corral

Polish deputy premier signals possible compromise on €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery plan.



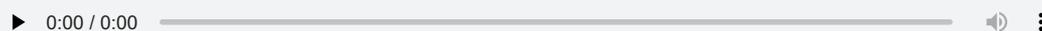
Jarosław Gowin, a Polish deputy prime minister, signaled the country could compromise on the EU budget | Radek Pietruzka/EPA-EFE

BY DAVID M. HERSZENHORN, LILI BAYER AND ZOSIA WANAT

December 3, 2020 | 10:59 pm



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

With the EU's plans for a landmark €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package stalled, a first glimpse emerged Thursday of a way out of the crisis.

A Polish deputy prime minister, Jarosław Gowin, told reporters that Warsaw could potentially accept a "binding" declaration — approved by the EU's 27 heads of state and government — to clarify how Brussels would use a new "conditionality" mechanism tying EU budget funds to respect for the rule of law.

With Hungary and Poland blocking the historic spending program over opposition to the rule of law mechanism, Gowin's comments came a day after the European Commission warned that it was prepared to push ahead and create a new coronavirus recovery fund without the support of Warsaw and Budapest.

Gowin's remarks offer no guarantee that the deadlock will be resolved, amid conflicting signals from other Polish officials and no immediate similar gesture from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

## Appendix 2

Gowin is a moderate within Poland's government, and it was far from clear if his remarks reflected a change in position by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. Asked if Gowin's comments indicate a compromise is near, a senior Polish official said: "I wouldn't say that at all. Almost no progress."

But the scenario outlined by the Polish minister may offer hope to those in Brussels grappling with a range of unpalatable fallback options, ahead of a crucial summit of EU leaders in Brussels next Thursday and Friday.

EU officials and diplomats concede that launching a new recovery fund with only 25 countries would be a complicated backup, requiring several months to design and negotiate. And in the absence of a deal over the bloc's seven-year budget, an emergency procedure would kick in, leading to some delayed payments and, at least temporarily, an inability to commit funding to new projects in key areas such as health and research.

Gowin acknowledged that such a provisional system would hurt all EU countries. It would be especially painful for those like Poland and Hungary that traditionally rely on EU funds.

"There's a possibility of compromise," Gowin said, adding "The provisional budget ... will be unfavorable for Poland and unfavorable to all the other 26 countries. It's in all Europeans' interest to find a good agreement, a good compromise when it comes to the conditionality rule."

The European Parliament will not approve the bloc's seven-year budget without the rule of law mechanism, which is supported by the overwhelming majority of EU heads of state and government. Gowin said he believed the "binding interpretation declaration" could be used to reach an accord without "reopening the discussions about the shape of this law."

Germany, which holds the Council's rotating presidency, negotiated the details of the rule of law mechanism with the European Parliament, and has been trying to broker some sort of deal with Hungary and Poland to break the deadlock.

With Budapest and Warsaw dug in, frustration has been mounting across the rest of the bloc — particularly in countries hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, which are eager to initiate the €750 billion rescue program. Meanwhile, net contributors to the EU budget such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland have insisted they will not bow to extortion.

For weeks, no one had been willing to budge, and some officials in Brussels said there was only narrow space for an agreement.

"We know that the room for movement is very limited," a senior EU official said Thursday. "We have to come up with a creative solution that is acceptable to all and we know we can't step out of the agreement that was reached with members of Parliament that was actually a work of art."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel earlier this week called for compromise, saying the politicians had a responsibility "to turn apparent incompatibilities into a result with which everyone can live."

The rule of law fight has risked spilling over into other policy debates. Without confidence that the overall budget will be approved, senior officials and diplomats warned that heads of state and government on the European Council almost certainly would not adopt more ambitious climate targets at next week's summit.

The German presidency has been trying to develop a compromise that would leave the deal with Parliament in place, but would give Hungary and Poland assurances in the form of a written declaration that they would not be unfairly targeted by the rule of law mechanism.

Creating an explicit role for the Court of Justice of the European Union might also help convince the two countries that they would not end up unfairly in the crosshairs of the Commission.

Katja Leikert, deputy chair of Germany's Christian Democrat Union/Christian Social Union parliamentary group, called for a deal that would maintain unity among all 27 EU countries.

"We need a de-politicization of the conflict and a stronger involvement of judges and legal experts not politicians no matter from which party," Leikert said. "That means solutions, which will be in the interests of objectivity and clarification in order to avoid a possible historic split in the EU."

"At the moment we have no absolute guarantee that it will work out well," the senior EU official said. "A solution in parallel to the European Parliament agreement could work out well but it hasn't been accepted — by anyone."

But an alternative recovery plan would also likely spark new political debates and questions in member countries.

Some officials have floated the idea that Article 122 of the treaties could be used to construct a recovery fund that does not require greenlighting from Budapest and Warsaw. But it remains unclear how the new fund would be structured, and whether participation would formally add to member countries' debt levels — a serious concern particularly in southern Europe.

An official from Merkel's CDU party said any new agreement on the recovery fund would face hurdles in Berlin, including potentially lengthy debate. "It took them two months with hearings etc. to accept the current solution [on the budget and recovery fund] in the Bundestag," the official said. "So any new deal would take some time."

Valérie Hayer, a French MEP from the Renew Europe group who took part in the budget negotiations, said an effort that forced an emergency budget to kick in would not be acceptable to many MEPs.

## Appendix 2

“The Commission’s objective is simple: put pressure on governments to agree on the next MFF,” Hayer said. EU cohesion funds would be among the programs to take a steep cut should the bloc be forced into a temporary backup budget. “It would be very heavy, in particular for Hungary and Poland,” she said.

While some officials speculated the Commission’s warning that the EU could move ahead without all members was an effort to raise pressure on Hungary and Poland, one EU diplomat said the Commission was serious in looking at different options — even if it remains unlikely an alternative recovery fund for 25 countries would ultimately be adopted.

“I don’t think the Commission is bluffing, but I think the chance of it being achieved at the end is limited,” one EU diplomat said. “I cannot see this passing before mid-February.”

A second, senior diplomat insisted that despite the challenges, a solution could be found that did not involve Hungary and Poland. “There are various options, some are more difficult than others,” the diplomat said. “I think the most important conclusion is that it is feasible. So it’s doable, it’s feasible, and it will work.”

However, a third diplomat indicated that the recovery plan currently on the table, with the participation of all 27 member countries, is still very much the preferred path forward. “Other options are not easy,” the second diplomat said. “Unity is our common interest.”

*Maïa de La Baume, Jacopo Barigazzi and Hans von der Burchard contributed reporting.*

---

MORE FROM ... [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#), [LILI BAYER](#) AND [ZOSIA WANAT](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU’s soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# Polish deputy PM: Room for compromise in EU budget standoff



Polish Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin | Wojtek Radwanski/AFP via Getty Images

BY ZOSIA WANAT AND DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

December 3, 2020 | 8:25 pm



Poland could drop its opposition to the EU's landmark €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package in exchange for a "binding" declaration on rule-of-law plans, Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin said Thursday.

Speaking to reporters in Brussels, Gowin signaled the first potential breakthrough in the standoff over the financial package, which Hungary and Poland are blocking in protest at plans to tie rule-of-law conditions to EU funding.

Warsaw could potentially accept a declaration approved by the EU's 27 heads of state and government to clarify how Brussels would use the new "conditionality" mechanism, Gowin said.

His comments come a day after the European Commission warned it was prepared to push ahead and create a new coronavirus recovery fund without the support of Warsaw and Budapest. EU officials and diplomats concede that approach would be a complicated fallback, requiring several months to design and negotiate — and likely forcing the bloc to fall back on an emergency budget from January.

"There's a possibility of compromise," Gowin said, adding: "The provisional budget ... will be unfavorable for Poland and unfavorable to all the other 26 countries. It's in all Europeans' interest to find a good agreement, a good compromise when it comes to the conditionality rule."

The European Parliament will not approve the bloc's seven-year budget without the rule-of-law mechanism, which is supported by the overwhelming majority of EU heads of state and government.

Gowin said he believed the "binding interpretation declaration" could be used to reach an accord without "reopening the discussions about the shape of this law."

MORE FROM ... [ZOSIA WANAT](#) AND [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#)

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# Viktor Orbán rejects rule of law compromise idea

The Hungarian prime minister insisted that the EU budget and rule of law must be separated.



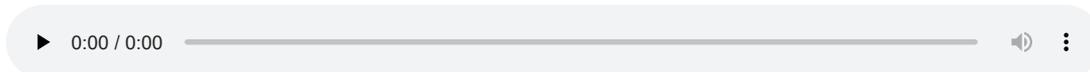
Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán | Johanna Geron/EFE via EPA

BY LILI BAYER

December 4, 2020 | 12:43 pm



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Friday that a possible compromise to unblock a stalemate over the EU's €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package "will not work," lowering hopes that it might open a path to a deal.

Hungary and Poland have blocked the spending plan over their opposition to a new mechanism linking EU funding to respect for rule of law criteria, fuelling tensions ahead of a meeting of EU heads of state and government next week.

Nevertheless, on Thursday Polish Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin [said](#) Warsaw could potentially accept a "binding interpretation declaration" — approved by the bloc's 27 heads of state and government — to clarify how Brussels would use the mechanism.

But on Friday morning, a Polish government spokesperson reiterated that Warsaw "maintains its position in its entirety."

"Only provisions consistent with the treaties and conclusions of the European Council may be accepted by Poland," the spokesperson continued, pouring cold water on the notion that Gowin's comments hinted at a possible way forward in the weeks-long stalemate. Appendix 2

When asked by state-owned Kossuth Rádió about the Polish deputy prime minister's statement, Hungary's Orbán dismissed the declaration as unworkable. He said the Hungarian government "insists" that the issues of funding and the rule of law be separated. While the Hungarian leader had agreed in July to European Council conclusions which had mentioned the rule of law mechanism, Budapest and Warsaw have interpreted the text differently from their counterparts in other European capitals.

Speaking of an idea — floated by the European Commission — to move ahead with creating a new recovery fund without Budapest and Warsaw, the Hungarian leader questioned whether such a solution would be possible under the bloc's rules and said that Hungary's planned participation in the recovery fund currently on the table is a "favor" and "gesture of solidarity" to other member countries.

The prime minister also argued Hungary would not lose out financially if the bloc's 2021-2027 EU budget is not adopted on time. That is disputed by EU officials who say the country would experience funding cuts and delayed payments if the bloc is forced to start 2021 with a limited backup budget.

Referring to the U.K.'s decision this week to approve the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, Orbán implied that the country was able to move faster because of Brexit, raising questions for Brussels that go beyond the pandemic.

A country that left the bloc and sought its own way "can protect the health and life of its citizens sooner than us who stayed inside," the prime minister said.

*Zosia Wanat contributed reporting .*

*This article is part of POLITICO's coverage of the EU budget, tracking the development of the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework. For a complimentary trial, email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) mentioning Budget.*

---

MORE FROM ... [LILI BAYER](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

[View the Latest Issue](#)



# Orbán: Agreement close on rule of law in EU budget battle

Leaders of Hungary and Poland hold talks ahead of summit of EU leaders.



BY LILI BAYER AND ZOSIA WANAT

December 8, 2020 | 10:57 pm



Hungary and Poland have a "good chance" of getting their way in the EU budget fight, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Tuesday.

Budapest and Warsaw are blocking the EU's €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package because of opposition to a mechanism linking access to European funds to respect for rule of law criteria. The Hungarian and Polish stance has sparked fears that the bloc will not have a new budget in place on January 1, and has led the European Commission to float ideas for an alternative recovery fund consisting of 25 member states.

The German presidency of the Council of the EU has been working to broker a compromise ahead of a summit of EU leaders which is set to begin on Thursday in Brussels.

Discussions with the German presidency are "quite promising," Orbán told Polish broadcaster TVP following talks in Warsaw with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Law and Justice party leader Jarosław Kaczyński. "I think we are close to reach an agreement, which is a victory, and a good outcome for Poland and Hungary as well, and could be very good for [the] European Union," the prime minister said, without giving any details.

While there have been signals that Poland's government is divided about its strategy over the past days, the meeting with Orbán was attended by leaders of both of Law and Justice's coalition partners, Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro — a hardliner — and Deputy Prime Minister **Appendix 2** Gowin, a moderate.

Speaking with PolSat, another broadcast, Orbán said he believes there is a fair chance of reaching an agreement during Thursday's session.

"If the talks over the next days go in a preferable direction, then we have a good chance of winning," he said.

---

MORE FROM ... **LILI BAYER** AND **ZOSIA WANAT**

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# EU budget plan lets Hungary, Poland off the rule-of-law hook (for now)

EU leaders to discuss compromise designed to convince Budapest and Warsaw to stop blocking the EU's €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package.



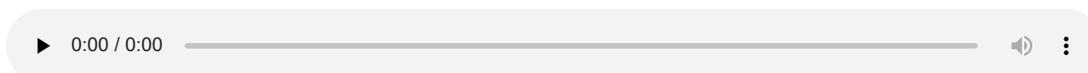
Political pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel helped pave the way for Budapest and Warsaw to begin backing down | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

BY LILI BAYER

December 9, 2020 | 11:54 pm



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

Hungary and Poland have managed to avert the threat of losing EU funds over rule of law breaches — but only temporarily.

EU ambassadors on Wednesday discussed a new compromise proposal designed to convince [Budapest and Warsaw](#) to stop blocking the EU's [€1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package](#) — currently held hostage due to their opposition to a planned new mechanism linking EU money to respect for rule of law criteria.

The compromise plan, which heads of state and government are hoping to approve at a summit in Brussels starting on Thursday, could see the implementation of the new mechanism delayed in a bid to break the impasse.

Initial reactions in Brussels, national capitals and the European Parliament suggest that the compromise is likely to win broad support, including from governments and MEPs that have been vocal about getting tougher on Warsaw and Budapest.

## Appendix 2

First proposed in 2018 in response to growing concerns about the state of democracy in some EU members, the rule of law mechanism was designed to allow the bloc to use one of the few weapons in its arsenal — cash, or rather withholding it — to hit back at countries that do not respect EU values.

And while the proposal pertains solely to rule of law breaches that impact the bloc's financial interests and has been watered down in recent months, for some governments and MEPs it remains a key pillar and an important symbolic gesture in the bloc's struggle to tackle democratic backsliding.

Under the new plan, negotiated by the German presidency of the Council of the EU, leaders would approve asking the European Commission to refrain from implementing the mechanism while a member country challenges its legality at the Court of Justice of the European Union.

The proposed deal would also stipulate that the mechanism only applies to the 2021-2027 EU budget and recovery fund, thus exempting payments made in the future for projects committed to under the current budgetary framework.

The deal would also include language saying that "the European Council will strive to formulate a common position" should a country facing penalties request a discussion of its case, while reiterating a commitment to applying the mechanism in a fair manner.

### Everyone's a winner?

On the surface, these concessions are a win for Hungary and Poland, which are both major recipients of EU funds. In practice, the compromise could mean the effects of the new mechanism would not be felt for months or even years.

"Victory!" tweeted Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga on Wednesday evening. "We succeeded in separating ideological expectations from financial aid during a pandemic & prevented political blackmail," she wrote, adding that "the deal respects the EU Treaties & our national identity" and referring to the deal as a "triumph" for Hungarian-Polish cooperation.

But in reality, Budapest and Warsaw did not achieve some of their core aims. The mechanism itself was not rewritten, and language on the rule of law remains in place, despite efforts from Hungary and Poland to prevent any link between it and getting EU money. Budapest and Warsaw could still face the full weight of the mechanism, just later than originally planned.

"Nothing in the draft conclusions limits or changes the scope of the regulation," said one EU diplomat.

Political pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as the prospect of disruptions to the flow of EU funds should the bloc be forced to adopt an emergency budget, helped pave the way for Budapest and Warsaw to begin backing down.

"The closer we got to the end of the year and the financial consequences of not benefiting from recovery funds and MFF [Multiannual Financial Framework] money, that they need, I think it pushed them to reconsider their position and look at the interpretive guarantees brought forward in a different way," said one Elysée official.

At the same time, the deal currently on the table is broadly seen as one that a diverse set of politicians can sell back home.

"Southern EU countries were very positive about the text whereas some northern countries, which form part of the frugals group, had some questions but showed a generally constructive approach," the diplomat said of Wednesday's EU ambassadors' meeting.

A senior official from a northern EU country expressed confidence that the agreement will ultimately be accepted.

"There are a few concerns, for example, the procedure regarding the [Court of Justice] and the emergency brake," the official said. "These need to be scrutinized, but I think the elements for the deal are there. It's not something that instantly turns black into white, but sufficiently strong."

For many officials, the red line in the negotiations has been the text of the regulation itself, which remains unchanged.

The "main issue is that the regulation stays as it reads now. It's a major achievement which will have a significant role when it enters into force," the northern official noted.

Some diplomats say that the number of pressing policy issues on leaders' plates is also playing a role in facilitating a compromise.

"I am optimistic about a deal, as the European Council has to focus on equally important issues like climate and external relations," said one diplomat.

Another diplomat said the "chances are real that this difficult situation has been demined," adding that "we're not there yet. If it will be done, it will be done at the European Council."

A third diplomat, however, warned that "it is very important for us that Council, Commission and [the] European Parliament jointly agree to the European Council conclusions on this particular issue."

Not everyone is happy.

Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, a hardliner within the Polish government and the head of a junior coalition partner, tweeted that “‘interpretive conclusions’ and ‘guidelines’ are not a law!”

“If the regulation combining the budget with ideology enters into force, it will be a significant limitation of Poland's sovereignty and a breach of European treaties. We do not agree to it!!! Let's fight for Poland's interest,” he added.

Some MEPs have also signaled discomfort with elements of the draft compromise — for very different reasons.

Moritz Körner, a German MEP from the Renew Europe group, said the text is “in general not problematic” but that the clause on the Court of Justice is “really bad” as it could lead to a delay of “1.5 to 2 years.”

“That's exactly the time [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán needs to win the elections,” Körner said, referring to Hungary's next parliamentary election, which is set to take place in 2022.

But with pressure intensifying for the bloc's spending package to be in place in January, it is unlikely that MEPs will take on the political risk of appearing to block much-needed financial assistance should leaders reach a compromise.

“Basically, this deal pretty much ensures that Orbán continues to get EU funding for his re-election in 2022,” said German Green MEP Daniel Freund.

However, asked whether the Parliament could support the proposal, Freund said “yes.”

*Maïa de La Baume, Hans von der Burchard, Barbara Moens, Rym Momtaz and Zosia Wanat contributed reporting*

---

MORE FROM ... [LILI BAYER](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

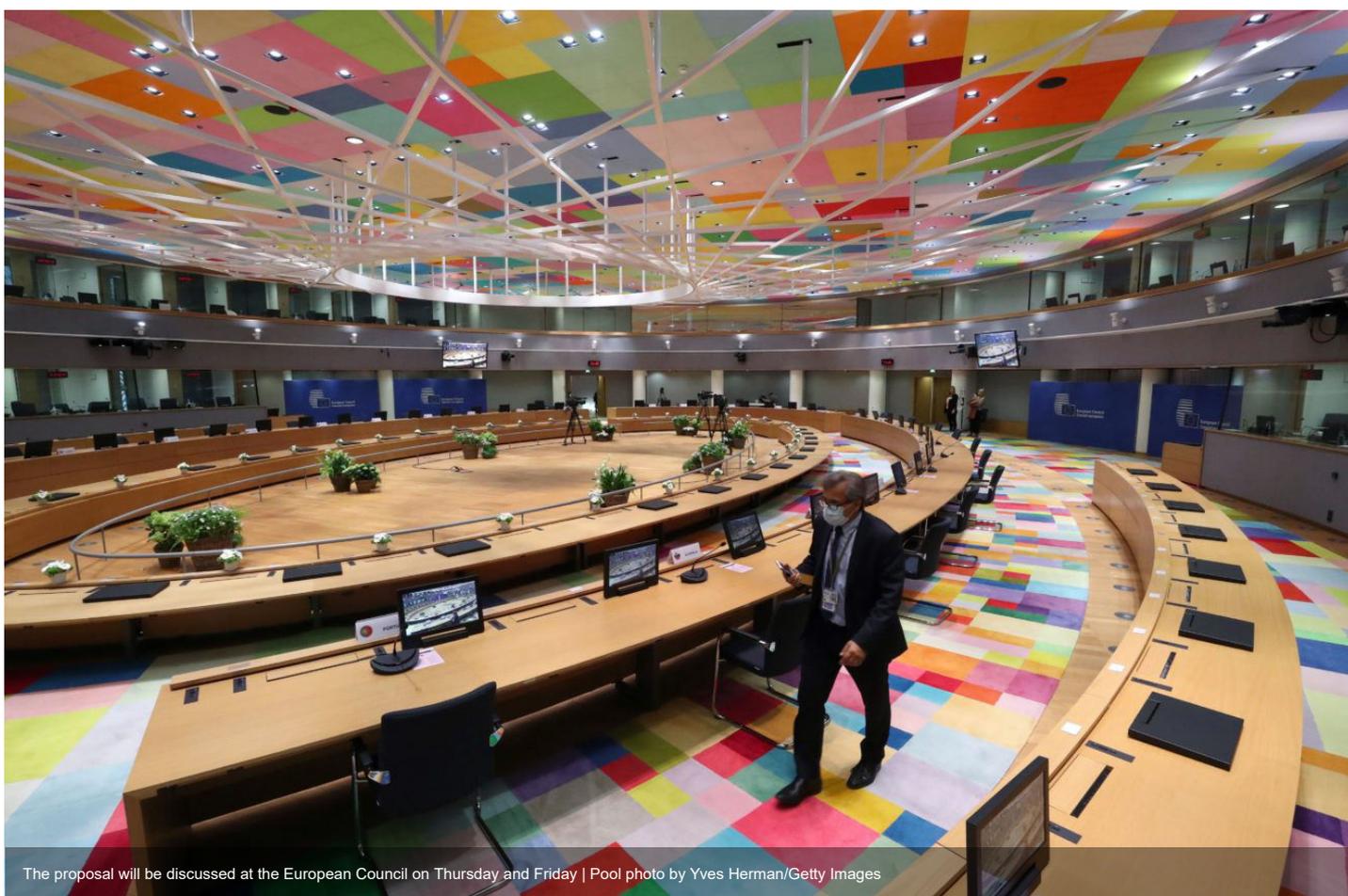
### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue

# Germany presents plan to end EU budget blockade by Hungary, Poland

Compromise suggests scheme to link payouts to rule of law would be used only after court ruling.



The proposal will be discussed at the European Council on Thursday and Friday | Pool photo by Yves Herman/Getty Images

BY LILI BAYER

December 9, 2020 | 5:53 pm



A new scheme linking EU funding to rule-of-law criteria may not be applied until the bloc's top court has ruled on its legality, according to a [compromise plan](#) to end a blockade by Hungary and Poland of the EU's budget and coronavirus recovery package.

The text is contained in draft conclusions prepared by the German presidency of the Council of the EU for a summit of EU leaders taking place on Thursday and Friday.

Hungary and Poland have argued that the rule-of-law mechanism is designed to unfairly target them — accusations rejected by the European Commission and other EU members. The German text seeks to offer enough reassurance to Budapest and Warsaw to get them to drop their objections.

"The application of the conditionality mechanism under the Regulation will be objective, fair, impartial and fact-based, ensuring due process, non discrimination and equal treatment of Member States," the proposed conclusions state.

According to the draft text, "should an action for annulment be introduced with regard to the Regulation," the European Commission's guidelines for applying the mechanism "will be finalised after the judgement of the Court of Justice so as to incorporate any relevant elements stemming from such judgement."

"Until such guidelines are finalised, the Commission will not propose measures under the Regulation," the text says.

The text states that a member country concerned could turn to the European Council, which would "strive to formulate a common position on the matter."

Under the proposed compromise, the rule-of-law mechanism would only apply to the new 2021-2027 EU budget and recovery fund, and thus not impact payments connected to projects from the current budgetary period.

MORE FROM ... [LILI BAYER](#)

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

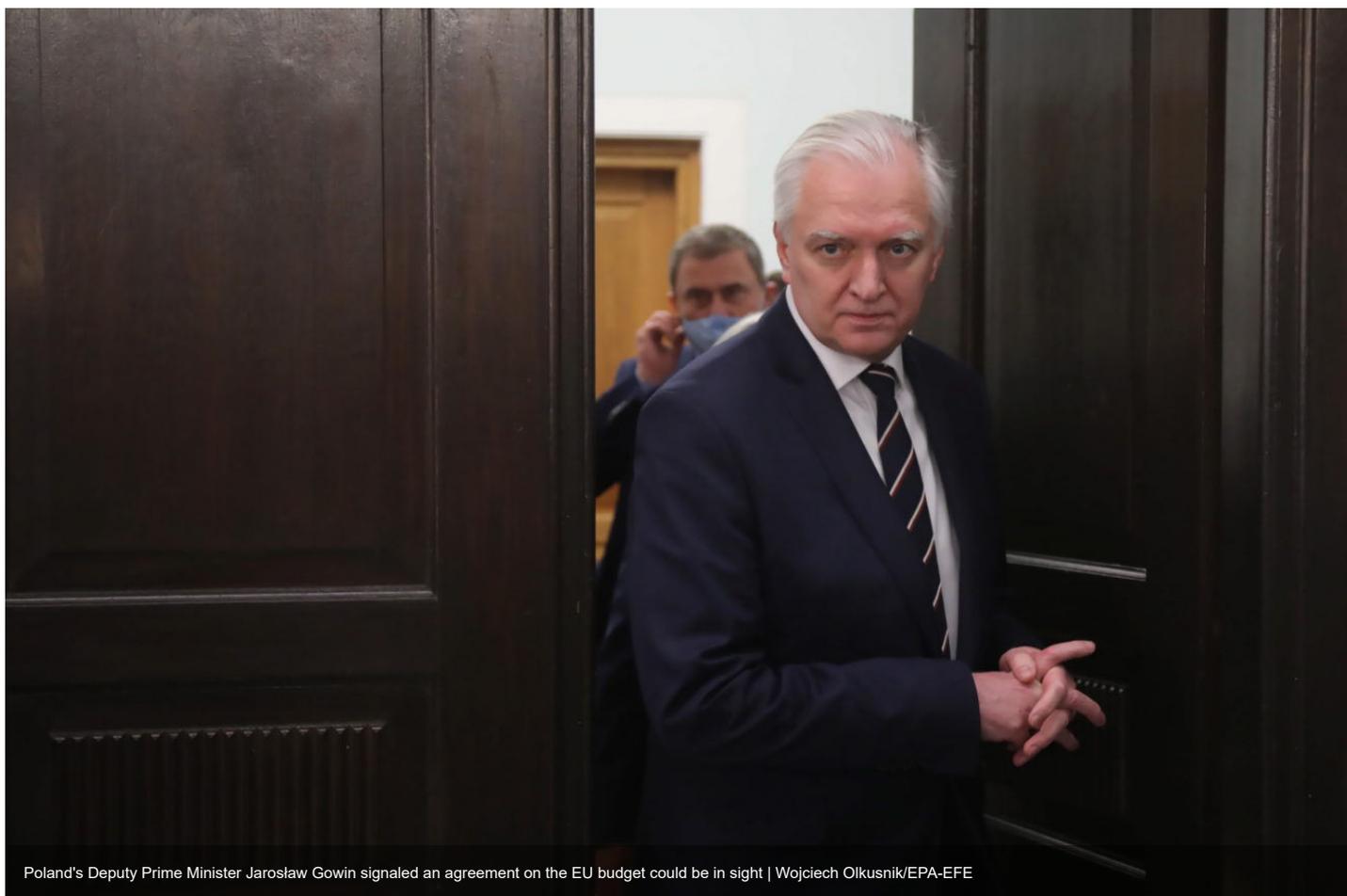
## View the Latest Issue





# Poland signals rule of law budget deal within reach

Deputy PM says he expects agreement by Friday at latest.



Poland's Deputy Prime Minister Jaroslaw Gowin signaled an agreement on the EU budget could be in sight | Wojciech Olkusnik/EPA-EFE

BY LILI BAYER, ZOSIA WANAT AND HANS VON DER BURCHARD

December 9, 2020 | 3:28 pm



A moderate Polish deputy prime minister said on Wednesday that Warsaw and Budapest have reached a deal with the German Council presidency on a mechanism linking EU funding to the rule of law, but a spokesperson for Poland's government cautioned that the sides are still in the "negotiation stage."

Hungary and Poland have blocked progress on the package over their opposition to a mechanism linking EU funds to respect for rule of law criteria, but there are now signals that a compromise is within close reach ahead of a summit of EU leaders scheduled to begin on Thursday.

Jarosław Gowin, who leads a small party in the ruling coalition, told reporters "I believe that tomorrow, on Friday at the latest, an agreement will be reached" among all EU member countries.

The German presidency of the Council of the EU has been engaged in talks with the Hungarian and Polish governments during recent weeks, with officials considering a written declaration that would accompany the rule of law mechanism and offer some assurances to Budapest and Warsaw.

"There is progress on the declaration, but no agreement on it yet," one EU diplomat said. Discussions are ongoing in capitals "with progress assessed as good," the diplomat added. A second diplomat said that "we are waiting for a final confirmation" on a deal. Appendix 2

While the Hungarian government has yet to comment on whether an agreement has been reached that is acceptable to Budapest, following talks with his Polish counterparts on Tuesday evening Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said that discussions with the German presidency are "quite promising" and that an agreement is "close."

*Maïa de La Baume contributed reporting.*

---

MORE FROM ... [LILI BAYER](#), [ZOSIA WANAT](#) AND [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#)

---

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

---

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

---

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

---

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

---

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue

# EU leaders back deal to end budget blockade by Hungary and Poland

Compromise defuses clash over rule of law in short term but deep divisions remain.



Poland and Hungary put up a blockade in recent weeks | Olivier Hosley/EPA

BY LILI BAYER

December 10, 2020 | 7:15 pm



EU leaders on Thursday clinched a deal to end a blockade of the bloc's historic €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package by Hungary and Poland over plans to link EU payments to respect for the rule of law.

The standoff threatened the implementation of the EU's next seven-year budget, beginning in January, which would have meant cuts in payments to member countries just as their economies are being hit hard by the coronavirus crisis. It also put at risk the recovery fund, to be financed by an unprecedented amount of joint debt and meant to fuel the revival from the pandemic.

“Now we can start with the implementation and build back our economies,” European Council President Charles Michel tweeted after agreement was reached at a summit in Brussels. “Our landmark recovery package will drive forward our green & digital transitions.”

The clash over the rule-of-law scheme also revealed deepening divisions within the EU over its fundamental values, which threaten to widen in the months and years ahead. Under the scheme, the EU would be able to cut off payments to a country if it judged that certain rule-of-law criteria related to the budget were not being met.

In the end, all sides agreed to a [compromise](#) negotiated by Germany, the current holder of the presidency of the Council of the EU. Under the deal, the text of the new measure remains unchanged but will not be used until Hungary and Poland have the chance to challenge its legality in the EU's top court and get a verdict.

Some leaders, notably Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, sought additional legal and political assurances about the compromise but declared themselves satisfied on Thursday evening.

Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša described the deal to POLITICO as "not good, not bad. As good as possible."

"Typical EU compromise," he said.

Time pressure played a major role in bringing all member countries on board, as capitals feared the economic impact of relying on an emergency EU budget and delaying the disbursement of recovery money.

"It was time to move forward," said one EU diplomat.

While the European Parliament still needs to greenlight the long-term budget and national parliaments have to provide consent in order for the €750 billion recovery fund to become operational, Thursday's deal was likely the last major political hurdle at EU level to the implementation of the package.

The compromise allowed all sides to claim victory. "Common sense has prevailed," Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared in a Facebook [video](#), while French President Emmanuel Macron [tweeted](#) that "we just adopted a robust agreement on the mechanism to put in place, to respect the rule of law. Europe goes forward, united, and carrying its values."

In the text of their summit conclusions, leaders asked the European Commission to refrain from implementing the rule-of-law mechanism pending any challenge in the Court of Justice of the European Union. Poland and Hungary confirmed on Thursday they would mount such a challenge.

In practice, this concession to Budapest and Warsaw means that the implementation of the mechanism will be delayed — at least by months, possibly longer.

The text also stipulates that the mechanism only applies to the 2021-2027 EU budget and recovery fund, and that "the European Council will strive to formulate a common position" should a country facing penalties request a discussion of its case. That means the matter could go all the way to EU leaders — but it does not say that they would be able to block any penalties.

Thursday's discussion among leaders, widely seen as the last opportunity to greenlight the bloc's long-term budget in order for it to come into effect on January 1, was "mainly about the role of the Court of Justice," according to an Élysée official.

A request from Hungary and Poland to refer any rule-of-law sanctions to the European Council for a unanimous decision was rejected, according to the official.

The final details were agreed after Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki huddled together with Macron, Michel, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Janša and Rutte during a break from the formal part of the summit.

Rutte — a longtime proponent of a strong link between EU money and respect for democratic norms — initially raised questions on Thursday morning about the compromise text, along with like-minded countries such as Belgium.

The Dutch leader had three requests: to hear the European Parliament's perspective on the proposed deal, to get assurances from Council lawyers that the scope of the mechanism has not changed, and to be reassured that even if implementation of the mechanism is delayed, the European Commission would be able to retroactively address rule-of-law breaches.

He later declared himself satisfied on all counts. "Rutte got assurances on the three questions he raised this morning," one diplomat said.

The European Commission, which originally proposed the mechanism and had already seen it watered down in negotiations with member countries, said it expected a swift decision on the legality of the scheme.

"In my view, we are talking about months rather than years," Věra Jourová, the Commission's vice president for values and transparency, said in a statement late Thursday.

*Hans von der Burchard, Rym Momtaz and Zosia Wanat contributed reporting*

Want more analysis from [POLITICO](#)? [POLITICO Pro](#) is our premium intelligence service for professionals. From financial services to trade, technology, cybersecurity and more, Pro delivers real time intelligence, deep insight and breaking scoops you need to keep one step ahead. Email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) to request a complimentary trial.



# Jourová: EU won't use rule of law powers in 'activist' way

The EU cannot pay for 'the wrong things, the wrong people, the wrong systems.'



European Commission Vice President Věra Jourová | Pool photo by Virginia Mayo/AFP via Getty Images | Pool photo by Virginia Mayo/AFP via Getty Images

BY WILLIAM ADKINS

December 15, 2020 | 11:42 am



The EU will closely assess all countries' adherence to the rule of law as the bloc prepares to unleash the “river of money” from its €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package, but won't do so in an “activist” fashion, European Commission Vice President Věra Jourová said.

“When you distribute more money, you should also bring in more guarantees so people can trust you will protect it,” Jourová said in a Financial Times [interview](#) published Tuesday. Without that, “the willingness of taxpayers to contribute to the European budget will go down.”

EU leaders last week [clinched a deal](#) to end Hungary's and Poland's veto over plans to link EU payments to respect for the rule of law. Under the deal, the rule of law mechanism will not be used until Hungary and Poland have the chance to challenge its legality in the EU's top court.

Jourová said the new EU powers will not be used in an “activist” way, but warned: “I do not leave anyone in any doubt that I am ready to use this tool when necessary.”

Jourová said she expected “incredibly severe scrutiny” from EU countries, the European Parliament and the public over the new powers: “It will be a stress test also for us, but I am sure we can do it,” she said.

“There is a big demand for accountability from EU institutions,” Jourová said. “And one of those biggest demands for accountability is: ‘We are giving you the money, but you need to make sure that it will not pay for the wrong things, the wrong people, the wrong systems’ — I am talking about political systems.”

This article is part of POLITICO’s coverage of the EU budget, tracking the development of the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework. For a complimentary trial, email [pro@politico.eu](mailto:pro@politico.eu) mentioning Budget.

MORE FROM ... [WILLIAM ADKINS](#)

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU’s soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

## View the Latest Issue



# EU top court gears up for rule-of-law battle (of its life)

The Court of Justice of the European Union has become the final arbiter over what to do about Hungary's and Poland's democratic backsliding.



A woman holds Polish and EU flags in front of the Polish Prime Minister's office in Warsaw | Wojtek Radwanski/AFP via Getty Images

BY HANS VON DER BURCHARD

December 17, 2020 | 4:34 am



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE

▶ 0:00 / 0:00



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

LUXEMBOURG — The European Union's battle over the rule of law is set to be decided in the bloc's highest court of law.

After EU countries and the European Commission deadlocked over how and whether to sanction democratic backsliding in countries like Hungary and Poland, they kicked the problem up to the Court of Justice of the European Union.

The court is no stranger to tricky political and legalistic problems — often those that politicians failed to resolve. But this case means risking an unprecedented level of politicization that its justices have long sought to avoid.

Last week, EU leaders agreed to a measure that could cut off EU funds to countries like Hungary or Poland that were found in breach of the rule of law — but they also decided to suspend implementation until the court could rule on its validity.

More accustomed to ruling on technical issues — like definitions of market dominance, EU competences in trade policy or standards for privacy protection — the Luxembourg court has increasingly been called upon to decide whether actions by Budapest and Warsaw are reconcilable with EU laws and values. Now, the court’s 27 red-robed justices will have to rule on one of bloc’s hottest political disputes.

Kees Sterk, a Dutch judge and former member of the Netherlands’ Supreme Court, said that the court had traditionally taken a “de-escalatory approach” when issuing rulings, finding legalistic solutions to problems of EU integration without allowing them to spill over into a big political fight.

This approach is now about to reach its limits, he said: “Things have escalated quite a bit. There will be a point where the court in Luxembourg has to show its true colors. And I think this will happen quite soon.”

## ‘Cracks’ in the EU’s foundations

The European Commission and Western EU countries have for years accused Hungary and Poland of backsliding on democratic standards, undermining the independence of their courts and attacking media freedom. Yet political talks with those countries have failed to yield progress, and Article 7 disciplinary procedures, which were launched against both countries, got stuck in the Council of the EU, where some countries have shown reluctance to take steps that could lead to sanctions.

Even before EU leaders kicked the conflict to the judiciary, there were several rule-of-law cases against Hungary and Poland ongoing at the Luxembourg court.

One regards the European Arrest Warrant and doubts raised by courts across the EU over whether they should still transfer criminals or suspects to Poland for prosecution, considering the concerns about the independence of the country’s judiciary.

“The courts from Ireland, from the Netherlands and Germany are asking the European Court of Justice: Can we still execute the European Arrest Warrant with Poland? There’s an [Article 7] procedure going on against Poland — does that mean the courts there are no longer independent? Can we still trust them?” said Hess. “Here the Court is now involved in a very big political dispute.”

A ruling is expected early next year. Should the court rule that the Polish juridical system can no longer be trusted, this would put judicial cooperation between Warsaw and other EU countries on ice — a dramatic blow to intra-EU relations that could have spill-over effects into other areas as well.

Early indications hint that the Court of Justice may, at least in this case, stick to its traditional attempts to de-escalate. A nonbinding opinion by one of the court’s advocates general issued in November proposed that the extradition of individuals to Poland should be examined on a case-by-case basis, instead of generally suspending cooperation with Polish authorities.

Another case concerning Poland may not be so easy to finesse.

The European Commission has filed action against Poland, arguing that a new disciplinary regime for Polish courts — which Warsaw started to roll out in 2017 — allows judges to be sanctioned based on the content of their rulings. Punishments can range from lifting judges’ immunity to suspending them from their duties and cutting their salary.

The measures “undermine the judicial independence of Polish judges by not offering necessary guarantees to protect them from political control,” the Commission argued in a statement.

At a hearing in Luxembourg in early December, five EU countries — Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden — backed the Commission’s request that the court order Poland to reverse its reforms. Maria Wolff, a lawyer representing the Danish government, warned that if no action is taken now, “there is a risk that cracks will appear in the EU’s foundations.”

“This case boils down to the core question of the independence of the judiciary,” said Sterk. “The Court of Justice will have to clearly say whether it’s OK what is happening here, or not. This makes it a sensitive case with enormous political consequences.”

## Financial penalties

In a sign that the EU’s top court is aware of the high stakes of the upcoming ruling, its president, Koen Lenaerts, issued in January an unusual public warning to Poland over its judicial reforms: “You can’t be a member of the European Union if you don’t have independent, impartial courts operating in accordance with fair-trial rule, upholding Union law,” Lenaerts said in a debate at Warsaw University.

The court president declined an interview for this article. His spokesperson said he could not express himself at this moment given the sensitivity of the upcoming decisions.

One EU diplomat following the court cases closely said there were concerns that given the high political tensions at hand, the court could face attacks from Polish or Hungarian politicians or pro-government media for being unfair, biased or even corrupt. The court got a foretaste of politically motivated attacks during the Brexit discussions, when Brexiteers accused it of being an instrument that undermined the UK's sovereignty.

In addition to the two cases against Poland, the court will rule in another explosive case next year, dealing with the question of whether Hungary's judiciary is still independent.

For their part, both Poland and Hungary are expected to ask the court early next year to rule on the legality of the conditionality mechanism in the EU's next seven-year budget, which ties payments to certain rule-of-law criteria. EU leaders agreed last week that the highly anticipated measure — which is linked to hopes that EU countries will be held more accountable for respecting EU values — can only be used after the court has given its approval.

The judicial showdown will probably happen soon, as there are indications that the court will issue its verdict in an accelerated procedure given the major political implications.

“In my view, we are talking about months rather than years,” Commission Vice President Věra Jourová said last week.

What gives the court's decisions the possibility of breaking the EU's rule-of-law stalemate — something that the Article 7 proceedings are unlikely to ever achieve — is its sweeping powers to enforce its rulings.

Should the court rule, concerning the cases against Hungary and Poland over the independence over their judiciary, that these countries must change course, any non-compliance could lead to financial penalties that hit Budapest and Warsaw where it hurts them most: their reception of EU budget payments.

EU treaties [allow the European Commission](#) to propose unlimited penalties against a country that “has not taken the necessary measures to comply with [a top court] judgment,” and it's up to its justices to decide whether a ruling has been ignored.

Gunther Krichbaum, a senior politician from German Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU party and the chair of the Bundestag's European Affairs Committee, warned Hungary and Poland to not even think of letting things get that far.

“If judgments of the European Court of Justice are not implemented, then a red line is definitely crossed here,” said Krichbaum. “That is what makes us in the European Union; that law and justice are respected, and justice is spoken by the Court of Justice.”

---

MORE FROM ... [HANS VON DER BURCHARD](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Brexit has crippled EU's soft power over financial rules

DECEMBER 23, 2020 | 6:18 PM

Next up

# Angela Merkel's rule-of-law legacy: A divided Europe

By failing to rein in authoritarian leaders in Hungary and Poland early, the German chancellor has made a bad problem worse.



BY MATTHEW KARNITSCHNIG

December 18, 2020 | 4:00 am



BERLIN — It shall be remembered as Chancellor Angela Merkel's final Christmas miracle.

As Europe's mood darkened amid a worsening pandemic and stricter lockdowns this month, the German leader cajoled Hungary and Poland into accepting a compromise on rule-of-law sanctions, clearing a blockade on the EU's emergency coronavirus aid that had threatened the Continent with a winter of switches and ashes.

Yet as is true of most yuletide tales, the real story is a bit more complicated.

For while Merkel deserves credit for resolving the impasse, she also bears responsibility for creating the problem in the first place. For years, she sat quietly as Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński set about dismantling their countries' democracies.

In both Budapest and Warsaw, the inaction of Europe's de facto leader was perceived as quiet acquiescence, giving them little reason to temper their pivot to authoritarianism.

The chancellor's failure to act early led to a bitter public confrontation, pitting the EU against Hungary and Poland, driving a new wedge between the Western and Eastern halves of the bloc and fanning nationalist flames. Bilateral relations between Germany and its eastern neighbors have also suffered, culminating over the summer with Warsaw's refusal to approve Germany's new ambassador to Poland. When Warsaw finally relented, it did so on September 1, the anniversary of the 1939 German assault on Poland that triggered World War II.

Of course, it's always difficult to avoid the war when it comes to Germany's relations with Central and Eastern Europe. That's particularly true in Poland, where Germany's steadfast refusal to address the question of war reparations remains a sore point in the two countries' bilateral relationship.

That is one of the main reasons that Merkel tread lightly in the face of Hungary and Poland's rule-of-law abuses. The last thing she wanted was to leave the impression that Berlin was intervening in its neighbors' domestic affairs — a fear that's never far from the surface in the region.

## Eastern conservative

But there was also another dynamic at play. Given her own history of growing up in communist Germany and witnessing its democratic transformation, Merkel couldn't believe that Hungary and Poland would really try to turn the clock back and curb fundamental rights, people familiar with her thinking say.

"She never expected Orbán to go this far," recalled one of Merkel's political allies.

That's because the Hungarian has been a fixture in Merkel's political universe ever since she first joined Helmut Kohl's Cabinet in the early 1990s. For a generation of German conservatives, Orbán, who describes Kohl as his mentor, epitomized the victory of democracy over communism. The Hungarian leader was the conservatives' standard-bearer in the East, a role he insists he still plays.

"Our Christian-nationalist government in Hungary takes more or less the same ideological position as the CDU under Helmut Kohl," Orbán recently told German weekly *Die Zeit*.

The same can't be said for the woman he calls "Angela," whom Orbán likes to greet with a traditional hand kiss.

The relationship between the two remained friendly even after Orbán, who returned to power in 2010 after several years in opposition, began to tinker with Hungary's constitution to strengthen his Fidesz party's grip on power.

The ties didn't sour until Orbán's decision in the summer of 2015 to send thousands of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan to Austria and Germany, unleashing a crisis that shook the EU to its core.

In contrast to Orbán and Hungary, Merkel has little history with Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party or its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. In Merkel's chancellery, Poland's de facto leader is viewed as ideological and unpredictable.

That helps explain why Merkel, who prizes pragmatism, has maintained an arms-length stance towards both PiS and Kaczyński since they took power in 2015.

## Interdependence

A more immediate reason Merkel has taken a hands-off approach with her Eastern neighbors is that it's good for German business.

Often lost in Brussels' high-brow deliberations about European values and the importance of safeguarding the rule of law across the EU is the behind-the-scenes role of German business.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, German industry has transformed Central Europe into its shop floor, investing more than €30 billion in Poland alone. For big German carmakers such as VW and Daimler to lesser-known companies like boat maker HanseYachts, the region has become an integral part of the manufacturing base. Just this week, Mercedes announced plans to produce a new electric vehicle south of Budapest in the town of Kecskemét, where it will invest more than €140 million. BMW, Audi and the auto-parts giant Robert Bosch are also big investors in Hungary.

That engagement, which has gradually deepened over the last 20 years, has created an interdependence that is impossible for politicians in either Budapest or Berlin to ignore.

Members of Merkel's CDU acknowledge quietly that if it weren't for the auto companies' reliance on Hungary, Germany would have reckoned with Orbán a long time ago.

Instead, they opted to tolerate him. That has meant turning a blind eye to what Orbán and his allies have done to Hungarian democracy, while trying to ignore the persistent provocations of Fidesz officials in Brussels.

As usual, the EPP decided not to get tough, opting instead to suspend Deutsch's speaking rights in the plenary on behalf of the EPP and barring him from holding formal positions representing the group "until further decisions are made."

It's a showdown the German chancellor would rather sit out.

"Merkel would postpone [the vote] until eternity," one [German MEP](#) said.

Polish MEP Rosa Thun, whose Platforma party belongs to the EPP, wanted to expel Fidesz, but said that in the end it was up to the Germans, who comprise the biggest delegation in the group.

"They have a very special attitude with countries behind the Iron Curtain," she said. "Nobody has so much patience with Poland as the Germans ... They did so much evil to this country. They feel bad."

Whatever the EPP eventually decides on Fidesz, the reality on the ground is unlikely to change. Fidesz and PiS will continue to run roughshod over the rule of law and democracy, while Germany will continue to protest, all the while doing brisk business in the region.

The grand compromise Merkel brokered with Hungary and Poland last week is likely to delay the rule of law provisions from taking effect until after Hungary's next general election.

In the meantime, the deal will allow EU budget money to flow to Hungary unhindered, helping Orbán to cement his hold on power for another term.

In other words, Merkel didn't really save Europe's Christmas. Orbán stole it.

*Maïa de La Baume contributed reporting.*

---

MORE FROM ... [MATTHEW KARNITSCHNIG](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

### 5. Europe's vaccination program is a success story

APRIL 6, 2021 | 4:01 AM

Next up

# Enlargement agenda: Investment plans, reforms and elections



[Shutterstock]

*This article is part of our special report All aboard: EU policy train builds up steam after summer.*

In the wake of an “enlargement summit” in May that omitted the word enlargement altogether, the Western Balkans region is set to stay high on the Brussels agenda this autumn and possibly even mark one or two milestones in the drawn-out process.

The Commission, armed with a shiny new methodology for joining the bloc, is expected to publish in the autumn its long-delayed enlargement package that will analyse the entire process and contain detailed country-specific reports on the progress of the candidates and EU hopefuls.

The executive is also expected to present its investment programme for the Western Balkans, initially envisioned for May, which is touted to focus on energy, transport, green and digital agendas, with an aim to thwart brain-drain and bring the region as close as possible to the EU economy.

The Commission will have less budgetary space to manoeuvre after the Council slashed the proposed €10.5 billion top-up to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) that will channel the biggest share of external action funds. It also shaved off an additional €4.7 billion from the executive's proposal to reduce the overall funding for the instrument to €70.8 billion.

Those who see the glass as half-full, however, point out that the European leaders did agree on a €12.6 billion envelope of pre-accession assistance for the next seven-year budgetary period, still subject to the European Parliament's approval.

Elections in North Macedonia, which many said would set the pace of EU accession, led to another premiership for Social Democrat leader Zoran Zaev, who delivered the domestically divisive name deal that resolved a long-running dispute with Greece and opened the doors to EU membership.

The recent coalition pact with a party representing the country's Albanian ethnic minority — which includes a promise to hand over the premiership to an Albanian for the first time during the last 100 days of the government's mandate — suggests North Macedonia should formally kickstart accession talks under the German presidency of the EU Council towards the tail-end of the year. The risks are linked to what Bulgaria sees as persisting attempts by some circles in Skopje to "falsify" the common history of the neighbouring countries.

More conditions still weigh on Skopje's western neighbour Albania before it can begin talks, after it got the coveted enlargement green light this spring.

After praising Albania for passing electoral reforms, one of the pre-conditions, the EU was less than enthusiastic to hear of constitutional changes pushed through by the ruling Socialists, which the opposition said were politically motivated. Further delays to the start of EU accession negotiations appear to be in the offing.

Meanwhile, Montenegro edged closer to joining the club after this summer opening the final policy area of EU law implementation — competition — but the long journey is far from over with only three out of the 35 so-called negotiating chapters provisionally closed thus far.

Controversial parliamentary elections set for this Sunday (30 August), and continuing rule of law worries may yet put spokes in the wheels of the enlargement frontrunner.

Following the resumption of dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo this summer, positive signals may mean Belgrade and Pristina are edging closer to wrapping up a comprehensive legally-binding agreement to normalise their relations this year, though, as always, nothing is certain on this rocky road.

So far, Montenegro and Serbia have been treated as enlargement 'frontrunners', despite Montenegro being clearly ahead, and it remains to be seen if it will be allowed to progress alone or be kept back until Serbia catches up.

### **Eastern Partnership**

In the East, all eyes are trained on Belarus, the *enfant terrible* of the EU's prized neighbourhood policy, and sanctions are the word *du jour*.

Following a low-key summit between heads of state and governments as well as European institution leaders in June, and despite earlier promises to pay more attention to the bloc's Eastern borders, no major developments are on the agenda south of Minsk.

In the South Caucasus, after securing the electoral reform deal, Georgia is headed into a heated campaign period in the run-up to general elections at the end of October, while after a flare up of tensions between arch-foes Azerbaijan and Armenia in July, the situation now appears to be stable.

Closer to the EU's borders, while the fragile ceasefire in Donbas continues to more or less hold, expect a German push for a new round of so-called "Normandy Format" talks, with representatives of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia, on the implementation of the Minsk agreements, perhaps as early as the end of September. The Kremlin will have the last say.

At the 1 October EU-Ukraine summit, Kyiv hopes to finally sign the Common Aviation Area agreement that would liberalise access to the common market and set common standards. While Ukrainian representatives will likely push for a review of quotas under the country's trade deal with the bloc, expect European officials to politely point out that if fully executed, the pact foresees the implementation of a vast majority of EU law.

The European Commission is also likely to follow closely the political developments in Ukraine, as eyebrow-raising high-level reshuffles, concerns of politically motivated persecution, accusations of systemic political pressure on independent institutions and press freedom fears continue to reach Brussels.

After the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) representative in Kyiv declined to say whether its programme with Ukraine is off-track, look out for the international lender of last resort's review of its cooperation with Kyiv, which could come in the fall. The Commission is set to watch it closely.

And finally relations with Moldova are on the back burner since the country is governed by a pro-Russia cabinet.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic/Georgi Gotev]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)

# Serbia, Kosovo leaders gear up for tough US talks



*Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti talk face to face in Brussels on 16 July 2020. [BETAPHOTO/European Council/Mario Salerno/DS]*

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is travelling to Washington this week for talks between Belgrade and Priština in the hope of discussing the economy while Kosovo Premier Avdullah Hoti insists that mutual recognition is the only topic he can discuss with Serbian officials.

However, Vučić also says he expects the 4 September meeting in Washington to throw a surprise in the form of a demand for mutual recognition of Serbia and its former province, Kosovo. The meeting is organised by the US president's special envoy for Belgrade-Priština dialogue, Richard Grenell.

Vučić told the Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia on Monday (31 August) he is aware that Serbia must cooperate with the Europeans and the Americans where Kosovo is concerned. He also said that political status would be discussed under the EU's auspices, while economic issues would be under US auspices.

According to some announcements, if the talks make quick headway, US President Donald Trump might also take part in the meeting. Analysts say a good result of the meeting would be a small foreign policy boon for Trump, who is gearing up to try to win another term in office in the presidential election in November.

Vučić cautioned that if Washington demands mutual recognition of Serbia and Kosovo he would refuse to meet with the US president.

In that case, he told Pink TV on 29 August, he would be "the first president of Serbia to be offered a bilateral meeting with a US president and the first president of Serbia to refuse it".

Vučić also said Serbia had received the official agenda for the talks where "just one item was unacceptable," but did not specify what it was.

The head of Serbia's 'Office for Kosovo and Metohija', Marko Đurić, has announced that Belgrade's negotiating team will come with concrete projects for economic connectivity, proposals for infrastructure projects, support for youth, farmers and business people of all nationalities in Kosovo.

Đurić also said that the Serbian delegation in Washington would aim to "avoid drawing Serbia into the geopolitical games of the great powers."

In an interview with Happy TV, Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said creative solutions in the interest of both sides should be sought in the Belgrade-Priština talks because "the current situation on the ground is unconstitutional, given that Belgrade does not have its entire territory under control, nor does Priština."

Meanwhile, Kosovo's Prime Minister Hoti stressed the continued commitment of Kosovo – currently the last in the queue of Western Balkans EU hopefuls – to dialogue because it was "a European country with a clear Euro-Atlantic orientation."

However, he added that for him the only topic was "reaching an agreement on mutual recognition, without jeopardizing the territorial integrity of Kosovo."

Representatives of Kosovo and Serbia will meet at the White House on Friday. After that, a new round of expert-level dialogue is scheduled two days later in Brussels, while top-level political talks are planned for 7 September, with the participation of the Serbian president and the Kosovo premier.

The meeting of Kosovo and Serbian officials in the US was initially planned for 27 June but was postponed after the Specialist Prosecutor's Office in The Hague announced it had filed a draft indictment against Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Democratic Party of Kosovo leader Kadri Veseli.

Belgrade and Priština have talked for years under EU auspices about normalising relations and reaching a comprehensive agreement, a requirement for their progress towards European integration. Meanwhile, Belgrade has also hinted at building closer relations with Russia and China.

After a long standstill caused by Kosovo's imposing import tariffs on Serbian goods, as well as by changes of government in Kosovo, the talks have resumed and are now mediated by the EU special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, Slovak diplomat Miroslav Lajčák.

The EU has hinted that it would also welcome any positive development that could come out of Washington's initiatives.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us

# Belgrade–Pristina deal only way to counter ‘influences from the East’, Kosovo PM says



*Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti speaks during a Committee on foreign affairs at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium, 10 September 2020. [EPA-EFE/STEPHANIE LECOCQ]*

Unless Serbia and Kosovo normalise their relations, the Western Balkans will remain vulnerable to foreign influence coming from the East, Kosovo’s Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti warned MEPs on the European Parliament’s foreign affairs committee Thursday evening (10 September).

Achieving a final deal that will include mutual recognition between the former arch-foes “is the only way for the EU and the US to make sure that this region is closed from the influences coming from the east,” Hoti said.

The prime minister was quick to add that Kosovo is “pro-European but not all countries in the region fully share this view.”

The comments are particularly interesting in the light of Serbian President Aleksander Vučić’s overtures to China earlier this year.

The declaration signed by Kosovo and their Western Balkans counterparts during a summit in May demanded Balkan countries follow EU foreign policy objectives, a veiled reference to concerns about countries aligning themselves too closely to Russia and China.

European lawmakers also grilled the prime minister about the role of Washington in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina.

Kosovo and Serbia signed a pact to normalise economic relations at the White House last Friday (4 September), hailing the agreement as “historic”.

Hoti said that the US “involvement should be seen as complementing the EU’s role in this process.”

As part of the pact signed brokered by the Trump administration, Kosovo committed to recognise Israel, while Serbia pledged to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, setting off alarm bells in Brussels.

Aligning itself to the EU’s foreign policy positions is an expectation of candidate countries like Serbia.

“In this context any diplomatic steps that could call into question the EU’s common position on Jerusalem are a matter of serious concern and regret,” EU foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano told reporters in Brussels earlier this week.

Last week’s deal quickly appeared to be fragile when Israeli media reported that Serbia will backpedal on its commitment to move its embassy to Jerusalem if Israel recognises Kosovo.

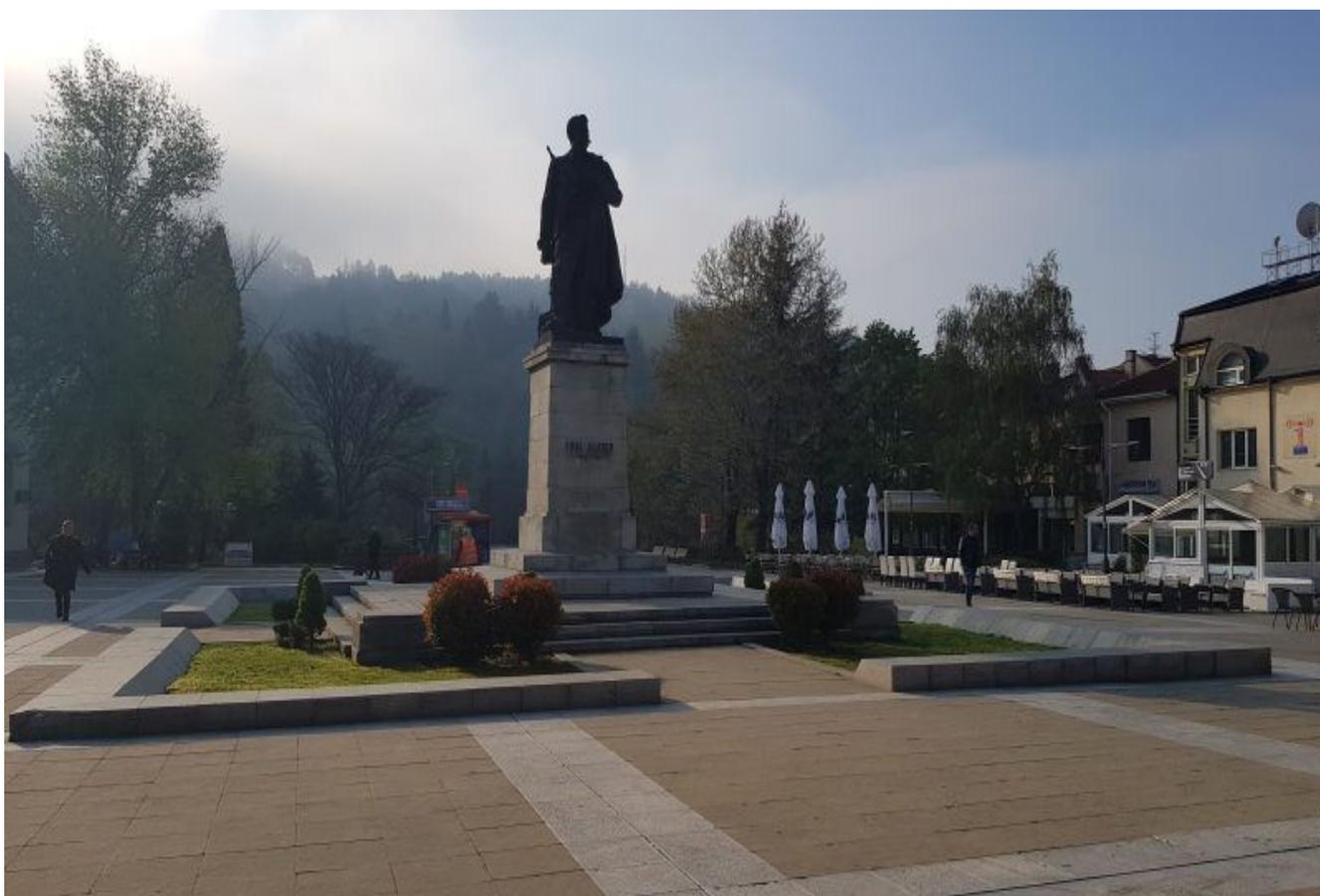
“The agreement is a list of commitments that we have as a country, and Serbia has as well. I expect now that Serbia will now respect those commitments,” Hoti told MEPs.

The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo will reconvene in Brussels later this month, which will be dedicated to the politically sensitive issues of Serb municipalities in Kosovo and the settlement of financial claims such as war damages.

*[Edited by Benjamin Fox]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)

# Revolutionary hero's identity stands in the way of Skopje's EU path



*Monument of Gotse Delchev in the Bulgarian city of Blagoevgrad. [Georgi Gotev]*

Skopje's progress towards EU membership has hit another snag. Historic figure Gotse Delchev, considered as a national hero both in Bulgaria and North Macedonia, now appears to stand in the way of its EU path. EURACTIV Bulgaria reports.

Bulgaria's Deputy Prime Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, who is also the leader of the nationalist VMRO party, threatened on Thursday (10 September) that Bulgaria would block North Macedonia's first intergovernmental conference with the EU – which essentially kickstarts its accession talks – unless the dispute over Delchev's identity is resolved.

Any EU member country holds veto powers during accession negotiations.

Delchev (1872-1903) was an important Bulgarian revolutionary figure in Ottoman-ruled Macedonia and Thrace at the turn of the 20th century. He was the most prominent leader of what is known today as Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO), a paramilitary organisation active in Ottoman territories in the Balkans.

Although considering himself to be an inheritor of Bulgarian revolutionary traditions, Delchev was disillusioned by the reality in the post-liberation Bulgarian monarchy and went on to fight for the independence of Macedonia. He is considered as a national hero both in Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

Karakachanov spoke to *Macedonian TV 24* on Thursday, complaining that Skopje has no desire to engage in a genuine dialogue and is avoiding meetings of the 'bilateral historic commission', established under the terms of the two countries' neighbourhood agreement.

"As early as November last year, the work of the intergovernmental commission, which is supposed to review historical problems, stopped. This is reason enough for Bulgaria to raise this issue very clearly," Karakachanov said.

North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev commented that a common solution will be reached with Bulgaria, through which both sides would emerge victorious in the dispute.

However, Karakachanov says the Bulgarian authorities have raised the issue of the historical commission "at least 100 times" in the last ten months.

According to him, the authorities in North Macedonia are aware that if no agreement is reached on important historical issues, Bulgaria will object to holding North Macedonia's first ambassadorial conference on the European integration.

A month ago, Germany openly called on Bulgaria and North Macedonia to leave the controversy to historians and to put an end to bilateral political scandals.

Until now, the authorities in Skopje have unofficially justified the lapse by the absence of a government with a clear mandate, which is now no longer the case as Zaev started his second mandate on 30 August.

Karakachanov has so far been the sharpest critic of Skopje, having repeatedly threatened to block its European accession, but his threats were always defused by Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.

Now, Karakachanov is complaining of a lack of cooperation from Skopje, which has at the same time made big concessions to Greece by agreeing to change its name to North Macedonia in order to appease Athens.

“You agreed to change your flag, to change your name. But vis-à-vis the country that has always helped (North) Macedonia, you think that that you can behave incorrectly,” he said.

Bulgaria, which has repeatedly said it does not want to stop North Macedonia’s EU progress, has hardened its rhetoric in the past year, mostly due to pressure from Karakachanov’s nationalists, a junior coalition partner in the government.

### **‘Sofia and Skopje must be winners’**

Zaev told the national television on Friday he believed “we will find a solution with Bulgaria. Both sides must emerge victorious. History is important, but it must be a starting point for the future.”

Asked about Gotse Delchev’s identity, Zaev said the archives should be discussed “transparently and publicly” and voiced confidence that a solution would be found quickly with Bulgaria.

“I am sending a message to neighbouring Bulgaria that we are ready to negotiate on the issue of Gotse Delchev.”

He said he had not yet discussed the issue with his Bulgarian counterpart.

“I am talking to Borissov, but we have not discussed this topic. It is inconvenient to open the issue when there are protests there. We are waiting for them to be ready for a conversation. I believe that this will happen soon and I believe in the success of the negotiations,” Zaev said.

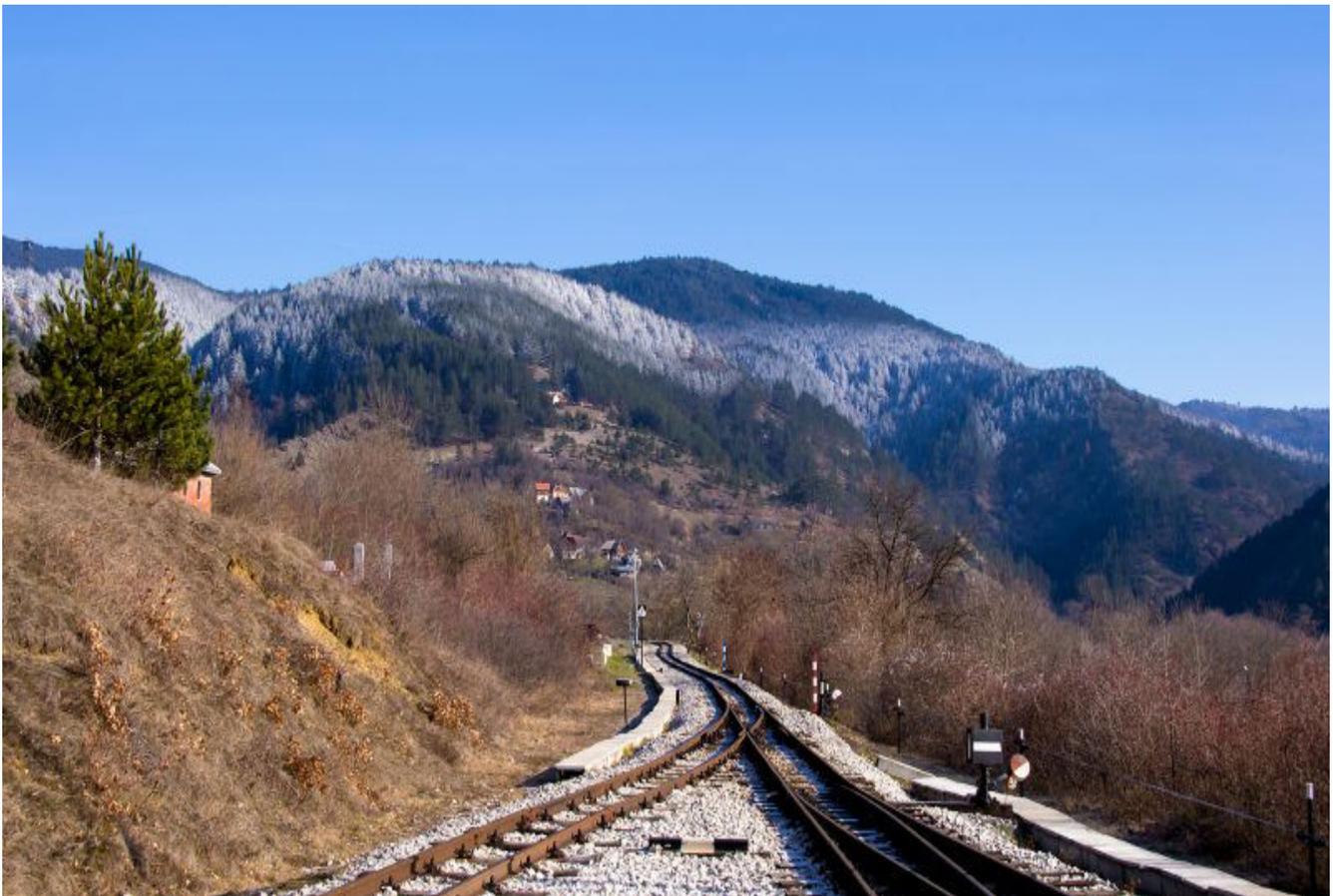
During the last two months, Bulgaria has been rocked by protests as citizens took to the streets, asking for the resignation of Borissov.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Road and rail at centre of EU investment plan for Western Balkans



*Shargan retro railway, Mokra Gora, Western Serbia. [Veronika Kovalenko/Shutterstock]*

Alongside the annual country-specific enlargement reports on all EU hopefuls, the European Commission presented on Tuesday (6 October) an investment plan for the Western Balkans, which it hopes will bring investment to the region, spur greening and enhance regional cooperation.

Assuming pre-accession assistance budgets stay at the €12.6 billion figure agreed by European leaders this summer, the Commission plans to invest almost 70% of the available enlargement financing, or €9 billion, for the six countries planning to join the club through the investment strategy.

On top of that, the Commission also foresees establishing a guarantee facility to encourage up to €20 billion euros of additional public and private investments.

Altogether, injections could represent almost a third of the total GDP of the region, currently at about €100 billion, and lead to a growth of 3.6%, the Commission hopes. The region includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The EU has already earmarked €3.3 billion to help the stressed economies of the region and immediate COVID needs, with the new investment plan focusing instead on longer time horizons.

Improving transport infrastructure will be a major focus of the seven-year plan, with three out of 10 flagship projects focusing on links in all directions.

“We need to link the region with Europe, much better, but also we need to link the region within. So we decided to provide plans to link up all the capitals with road and rail,” the Commission’s enlargement and neighbourhood chief Olivér Várhelyi said.

“Highways and railways highway connections are incomplete and themselves prevent new trade flows within and with the region,” Várhelyi told MEPs.

Plans include wrapping up the Kosovo portion of the “Peace Highway” connecting former arch-foes Pristina and Belgrade, from there enhancing the connection to Podgorica and Sarajevo.

Even though the European executive said it wants to invest in “sustainable transport,” about a half of the suggested transport projects focus on highways, with the Commission planning to finance about a fourth their costs.

“For each road infrastructure project, the Commission will promote developing green multimodal transport solutions,” the investment plan reads.

Proposed investments in renewable energy only focus on hydropower in the region, with the exception of solar and wind projects in North Macedonia.

The Commission is also betting on gas to help the transition away from coal in the region, where carbon burning is still the main source of power, accounting for 70% of electricity production.

“The transition role of gas is of utmost importance,” said Várhelyi, adding that switching to gas could reduce carbon emissions by 60%, while the new pipelines built under the plan could later be used for hydrogen.

In the area of environment, the Commission is planning to invest into wastewater management, cleaning rivers and bottlenecks.

“But the single biggest lowest hanging fruit, when it comes greening, is of course energy efficiency,” the enlargement chief said.

According to EU calculations up to 40% of all emissions in the region can be tied to buildings, and so investment will heavily focus on retrofitting buildings to diminish their carbon footprint.

Moreover, digital infrastructure will also be a focus of EU financing the Commission, with a special focus on national broadband development, “something completely missing in the region.”

“Brain drain is a serious problem of the Western Balkans,” Várhelyi said.

“When the region becomes more attractive for investors, the economic environment will become more attractive for the elite and highly skilled and educated people will return to the region.”

One of the Commission proposals to tackle the issue will be to extend the European Youth Guarantee to Western Balkans, created in 2013 in the aftermath of the financial crisis to tackle dramatic youth unemployment numbers in the EU.

A number of parliamentarians asked the Commissioner how he will ensure that the bloc successfully links monetary support to rule of law concerns pervasive in many countries in the region.

“This is a message I will be echoing in the region, that if we see any backsliding, or non-continuation of reforms, it is going to be very difficult for us to continue the funding,” Várhelyi said.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavjevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us

# Commission seeks to revive enlargement with new package



*European Commissioner in charge of neighborhood and enlargement policy, Hungarian, Oliver Varhelyi during a press conference to present EU enlargement package 2020 in Brussels, Belgium, 06 October 2020. [EPA-EFE/OLIVIER HOSLET]*

The European Commission published its long-awaited enlargement package on Tuesday (6 October) in a fresh attempt to revive the stalled process with promises of more substantial economic assistance in exchange for reforms. The package included country-specific reports on the progress of the six Western Balkans countries and Turkey.

The overall tone of the Commission's documents was more positive than during the EU's "enlargement summit" earlier in May, which had sent mixed signals by omitting the word enlargement altogether.

The country reports came together with a Commission investment plan for the Western Balkans region, which Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi warned need to be accompanied by concrete results in key reforms.

"We have very clear rules in the new methodology. You will see that we tend to carry out the economic part hand in hand with reforms. "If we see a setback or a stalemate in reforms, it will be impossible to continue financing," Varhelyi told the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee.

Varhelyi confirmed he would soon visit the Western Balkans and convey to politicians in the region "what they can lose if they do not meet the conditions".

### **Candidate countries**

Earlier this year, the European Council gave the green light for starting accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, after the enlargement process was effectively frozen last year over France's veto.

In the reports, the Commission confirmed further progress in the implementation of reforms in the two countries.

**North Macedonia**, which together with Albania hopes to start accession talks already later this year, has the most positive assessment out of the six.

The Commission acknowledged this year's elections, which led to another premiership for Social Democrat leader Zoran Zaev, who delivered the domestically divisive name change deal that resolved a long-running dispute with Greece.

However, it warned that "corruption is prevalent in many areas and a more proactive approach from all actors engaged in preventing and fighting corruption needs to be ensured."

It failed to address the risks linked to what neighbouring country Bulgaria sees as persisting attempts by some circles in Skopje to "falsify" the common history of neighbouring countries.

On **Albania**, the Commission pointed towards progress in judicial reforms and the fight against corruption, but warned that "the political dialogue in the country needs to be improved" and that "the political environment in Albania continued to be marked by intense polarisation."

One requirement for the opening of accession negotiations was a fully functional Constitutional Court. So far, the Court has only four of its nine members but needs at least five to reach a decision-making quorum.

Varhelyi said he sees “engagement to nominate the missing vacancies” and will address the matter during a visit to Tirana this week.

The Commission criticized **Montenegro**, a frontrunner which started EU accession negotiations in 2012 and edged ever closer to joining the bloc this summer, after opening the final policy area chapter — competition — over its lack of progress on freedom of expression.

The report stated that “although there has been progress on the media legislation, this has been overshadowed by arrests and proceedings against editors of online portals and citizens for the content they posted or shared online in the course of 2020.”

The Commission noted that “the growing volume of region-wide disinformation further polarized the society in the aftermath of the adoption of the law on freedom of religion and during the electoral campaign.”

The Commission criticised **Serbia** over its parliamentary elections held in June, marred by an opposition boycott.

“The newly constituted Serbian parliament is marked by the overwhelming majority of the ruling coalition and the absence of a viable opposition, a situation which is not conducive to political pluralism in the country,” the report noted.

“While contestants were able to campaign and fundamental freedoms were respected, voter choice was limited by the governing party’s overwhelming advantage and the promotion of government policies by most major media outlets,” it added.

The Commission acknowledged the resumption of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue this summer but cautioned that especially Belgrade “needs to make further substantial efforts and contribute to reaching a comprehensive legally binding agreement with Kosovo,” the report states.

### **Potential candidates**

On **Bosnia-Herzegovina**, still not an official EU candidate, the Commission criticized Sarajevo for the political deadlock since the start of this year.

“No progress was made in improving the electoral framework in line with European standards and ensuring transparency of political party financing,” the document reads.

It added that “corruption remained widespread”, with “all levels of government showing signs of political capture directly affecting the daily life of citizens.”

The country report on **Kosovo** highlighted that “corruption is widespread and remains an issue of serious concern”, and stressed the need for “strong political will to effectively address corruption issues, as well as a robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption.”

## Special case: Turkey

The Commission stated that **Turkey** has moved further away from democracy, rule of law, and basic rights and had severe setbacks in judicial independence. It said Ankara has made no progress in the fight against corruption, flagging the non-existent separation of powers and serious concerns about the functioning of the economy.

On a positive note, the report said that “Turkey has continued to align with the EU acquis, albeit at a very limited pace and in a fragmented manner”.

It emphasised that Turkey had “played a key role in ensuring effective management of migratory flows along the Eastern Mediterranean route” in implementing the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, a phrase set to raise eyebrows among member states and human rights activists as Ankara has repeatedly used migration as a pressure point against the bloc in the past months.

However, Turkey’s foreign policy “increasingly collided with the EU’s security and foreign policy priorities”, the report said, naming Ankara’s illegal drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

“The EU has repeatedly stressed the need to respect the sovereign rights of EU member states,” the report said

The report urged Turkey to “commit itself unequivocally to good neighbourly relations, international agreements and peaceful settlement of disputes” in accordance with international law.

The comments come only a few days after a crucial EU summit where leaders warned Ankara it could face “immediate” sanctions if it persists with gas exploration in Cypriot waters.

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us

# Bulgaria says to block EU accession talks with North Macedonia



*VMRO flags are waving above the heads of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov (L) and Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev (R) who attend the inauguration of a monument to Bulgarian Colonel Konstantin Kavarnaliev who died in the battle of Dojran during the second Balkan war in 1913, near Dojran, Republic of North Macedonia, 1 August 2019. [Georgi Licovski/EPA/EFE]*

Bulgaria plans to voice its opposition on Tuesday (17 November) to starting European Union accession talks with neighbouring Republic of North Macedonia as the two countries have yet to settle disputes over history and language, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said.

The EU's European Affairs ministers are expected to discuss launching accession negotiations with North Macedonia on Tuesday. If any country votes against the framework for negotiations, accession talks cannot be formally launched.

"Bulgaria is saying 'No' to the start of negotiations, we are not saying 'No' to North Macedonia's accession to the EU," Zaharieva told private broadcaster BTV on Sunday.

She said North Macedonia is not delivering on the friendship treaty between the two Balkan neighbours signed in 2017 and has policies based on hatred towards Bulgaria.

Sofia wants its neighbour to recognise that its nation and language have Bulgarian roots and it wants it to put an end to anti-Bulgarian rhetoric. Skopje argues that its identity and language are not open to discussion.

Despite talks in the past month that also included Germany, which hopes negotiations with North Macedonia can begin while Berlin has the EU rotating presidency until the end of the year, the Balkan neighbours have yet to reach an agreement.

"No-one is disputing their right to self-define their nation and call their language what they like. But we cannot agree that this right will be based on hatred, history theft and denial of Bulgaria," Zaharieva said.

There is consensus in Bulgaria that the Republic of North Macedonia should stop its anti-Bulgarian rhetoric and "falsifications of history", before it obtains Sofia's green light to start negotiation. A bilateral historic committee was set up under the terms of the friendship treaty to sort out problems of interpretation of common history. However, the Skopje side of this committee hasn't reportedly allowed any progress.

Bulgaria also deplores that Skopje deliberately blocks common infrastructure projects. Strange as it may seem, there is no railway line between Skopje and Sofia, as a result of obstructions dating back to Yugoslav times. The road connection between the two capitals is also in a very bad shape.

The junior coalition partner of the government of Boyko Borissov, the United Patriots and in particular the VMRO party of deputy PM Krassimir Karakachanov, has led the stern policy vis-à-vis Skopje. Karakachanov has been spearheading the policy that the Republic of North Macedonia should officially acknowledge its Bulgarian roots – possibly by signing an annex to the 2017 treaty.

Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev, who is a critic to the government on many other issues, is on the same board as far as Skopje is concerned. Speaking on BNT public television channel on Friday, he said that a possible solution could be adding an additional chapter 35 on outstanding bilateral issues to the negotiations framework.

Such a solution has been used in the context of Serbia's negotiations framework to reassure EU member Croatia. But reportedly the Commission and EU members are against such a compromise.

Radev also said that as a responsible EU member, Bulgaria wanted to solve the problems with the candidate country, instead of importing another problem inside the Union.

### **Difficult to explain**

Bulgarian diplomats acknowledge off-the-record that their EU colleagues don't understand Sofia's position vis-à-vis Skopje. During its presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2018, Bulgaria pushed hard for giving a EU perspective for the Western Balkans.

Bulgaria was also among the most active countries in efforts last year to overcome the French and Dutch veto on opening accession talks with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania.

Although they belong to different political families, Borissov (EPP) and his colleague from across the border Zoran Zaev (PES) have had very good chemistry. Bulgarian diplomats acknowledge that this has led Skopje to assuming that Sofia would close its eyes over outstanding issues.

Reportedly, some EU countries are very comfortable that after Athens and Paris, it is now Sofia that has now taken the lead in opposing Skopje's EU bid.

Former Bulgarian foreign minister Ivailo Kalfin commented on Evropa TV channel that the blocking of North Macedonia's EU talks by Bulgaria will only make worse the situation of the Bulgaria-friendly voices in Skopje and lead to a disaster in bilateral relations.

On the same program, the mayor of Skopje Petre Shilegov said that Sofia's veto "will cause more harm to Bulgaria than to Macedonia". He also qualified Zaharieva's position as "alibi for stupidity".

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us



# Bulgaria spells out conditions for unblocking North Macedonia's EU path



*Ekaterina Zaharieva screenshot [EURACTIV Bulgaria]*

Bulgaria vetoed the decision to open EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia on Tuesday (17 November), a move which indirectly also affects Albania, another Western Balkans candidate which has advanced on its EU path in tandem with Skopje.

The decision is hardly surprising. The Bulgarian Parliament unanimously adopted a tough declaration in October 2019, warning North Macedonia that Sofia will not tolerate the distortion of historical events, documents and artefacts, as well as the role and views of personalities from Bulgarian history.

The former Yugoslav republic, which was ruled by the Ottoman Empire from the mid-14th until the early 20th century, insists on its own version of history, based on events from Bulgaria's medieval and more recent history. A bilateral historic committee was set up under the terms of the 2017 friendship treaty to sort out problems of interpreting common history. Both sides have since accused the other of not allowing any progress.

German European Affairs Minister Michael Roth, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, told reporters following the General Affairs Council that "there were some open questions from the Bulgarian point of view that have to be clarified".

The obstacles thrown up by Bulgaria effectively threw off course Germany's efforts to have that issue wrapped up by the end of the year.

Bulgaria, Roth said, objected to the name North Macedonia — arrived at last year after Greece refused to allow it the name "Macedonia", the same as one of its provinces — rather than "the Republic of North Macedonia".

Bulgaria officially uses the full name 'Republic of North Macedonia', instead of the shorter version 'North Macedonia', to avoid confusion with the geographic term of Macedonia, comprising Aegean Macedonia in Greece, Vardar Macedonia in the Republic of North Macedonia, and Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria.

### **The conditions**

However, the name was not among the three conditions spelled out by Bulgaria's foreign minister Ekaterina Zaharieva for lifting the Bulgarian veto.

As the first condition, Zaharieva said Bulgaria does not accept the mention of 'Macedonian languages' in the negotiating framework but would accept the formulation "the official language of the Republic of Northern Macedonia".

Sofia considers the language of its neighbour a dialect of Bulgarian, although it admits the language of the neighbouring country had been modified under the Serb influence in Yugoslavia after 1947.

Bilateral agreements between Skopje and Sofia have been signed with the mention that they have been written in the official languages of both countries. Apparently, Bulgaria wants the same arrangement at the EU level.

Zaharieva also said Bulgaria wants a roadmap for the implementation of the 2017 Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborliness included in the negotiating framework, which would require an additional chapter in the framework, Number 35.

Bilateral disputes with North Macedonia are not part of the criteria for EU membership or the start of the negotiation process, which is why a number of EU countries were reportedly against such a solution.

Bulgaria also wants an explicit text in the roadmap saying that claims for a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria will not be supported in any form.

As Bulgaria considers the Slavic population of the Republic of North Macedonia its own brothers with whom it has been separated by history, Sofia rejects the concept of “Macedonian minority” in Bulgaria.

According to the 2011 census, 1,600 Bulgarian nationals have called themselves Macedonians. According to Bulgarian historians, these people are not a minority but refugees who migrated to the Bulgarian territory following the 1913 Balkan war.

### **Reactions in Skopje**

After changing its name, thereby giving up any claims to ancient Greek history under the Prespa agreement, North Macedonia is very sensitive in questions concerning its identity.

“Macedonian identity and language are non-negotiable”, was one of the first reactions from the government in Skopje after the news of the Bulgarian veto.

“This is a failure of EU enlargement policy, a bad message for the entire region and a defeat of the fundamental European values and principles,” the government said in a statement. Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani said “an opportunity was missed today ... but the next one is the General Affairs Council in December. Discussions will continue to find a way to overcome these differences”.

One more GAC council will take place on 8 December under the outgoing German presidency, and the upcoming Portuguese presidency is unlikely to have the capacity to untie the Gordian knot.

“The accession negotiations should not become a negotiation with Bulgaria. Our progress in EU integration should depend on domestic reforms related to chapters, EU legislation and acquirement of European standards”, Osmani said.

Prime Minister Zoran Zaev told a TV channel on Tuesday evening that the development was very hard for him because he believed this was not the will of the Bulgarian nation or Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.

Zaev and Borissov indeed had good chemistry, but Sofia says that his government has wrongly taken Bulgarian support for granted.

Zaev did not spell it out, but it is clear that he was blaming Krasimir Karakachanov, Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the nationalist party VMRO. This party claims to be a legal successor of VMRO – Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation. And Karakachanov was the first to say that Bulgaria will block Skopje’s accession negotiation.

A year ago, when France blocked the opening of accession talks, a political crisis erupted in Skopje and Zaev resigned. Now the situation is different. North Macedonia is a NATO member, the toxic impact of Russian politics is limited, ethnic Albanians are on the same page with the ruling SDSM (Social democrats) and stability of the state is secured.

### **Greeks 'discreetly' celebrate**

In Greece, there has been no official reaction from the ministry of foreign affairs.

While it was in opposition, the ruling New Democracy (EPP) fiercely opposed the name change deal reached between leftist Syriza party and Zaev's government. But when it took the power the conservative party said it would implement the Prespa agreement.

Meanwhile, three memoranda of understanding with North Macedonia as part of the Prespa Agreement still need to pass through the Greek parliament and it seems that the government has delayed the process.

Greek media report that New Democracy cannot find a rapporteur to speak positively about the Prespa agreement, as the political cost will be high.

Athens's reluctance over the issue was also obvious in a joint statement signed on 28 September between the US and Greece.

The draft US-Greece statement referred to a "historic" Prespa Agreement. The English version of the statement was immediately published on the Greek foreign affairs ministry website but the Greek version was not published at all.

However, a couple of hours later, the word "historic" disappeared from the joint statement posted the website of the Greek Foreign Affairs Ministry.

*[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic]*

Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens © 1999-2018. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Contact us

# Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia's election

Party that won plaudits internationally faces pressure at home.



A woman walks near the electoral billboard of Zoran Zaev, Leader of the ruling SDSM party, in Skopje on July 14, 2020 | Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

BY NEKTARIA STAMOULI

July 14, 2020 | 9:24 pm

[f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#) [🖨](#)

PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE

▶ 0:00 / 0:00 🔊 ⋮

Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

They won praise across Europe for ending a decades-long dispute with Greece, getting their country into NATO and opening a path to EU membership talks.

But North Macedonia's Social Democrats (SDSM) face a struggle to retain power in a general election on Wednesday due to more everyday concerns — such as the coronavirus, the economy and corruption.

The SDSM-led government under Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was hailed internationally as a role model for others in the western Balkans — willing to put historic disagreements aside for a better future, even agreeing to add the word “North” in front of the country’s old name. **Appendix 4**  
relations with Greece.

Its efforts were rewarded in late March when, with the Continent in lockdown, EU foreign ministers gave the long-sought-after green light for North Macedonia and its neighbor Albania to begin talks to join the bloc.

The parliamentary election was due to follow on April 12 but was postponed due to the pandemic. The country of some 2 million people has been run by a caretaker government since January, led by the SDSM but also containing members of the party’s main rival, the nationalist-conservative VMRO-DPMNE.

“ Zaev dismissed criticism that the government had been too lenient on the religious celebrations.

The main task of the cross-party government was meant to be to ensure even-handed preparations for the election. But it ended up having to take charge of the coronavirus crisis in one of the poorest countries in Europe.

The country weathered the early stages of the crisis reasonably well but after restrictions eased in late May, it recorded a sharp rise in cases and deaths and is currently among the European nations most badly affected in health terms. Reported daily infections rose from around 20-30 in May to more than 100 in June and since then the alarming trend continues unabated, while the mortality rate is the highest in the Balkan region.

“I think it’s a second wave,” Zaev, the SDSM’s leader, told POLITICO in a video interview. “In our country, it started earlier because of our big Muslim community, which celebrated Ramadan [in late April and May] ... After that, big numbers started to appear.”

Zaev dismissed criticism that the government had been too lenient on the religious celebrations.

“We could do nothing more, because we are a democratic party and our constitution mentions that there are freedoms that cannot be controlled even during war or emergency. One of these is freedom of religion,” he said.

But their opponents accuse the SDSM of lifting lockdown restrictions prematurely to support their push to hold the election.

“What went wrong is Zaev’s willingness to do elections as soon as possible,” VMRO-DPMNE Vice President Aleksandar Nikoloski said in a telephone interview.

“In March and April there was a good performance [on the coronavirus], the government’s popularity rose in polls and SDSM wanted to use it and have snap elections. In order to do that, they relaxed all measures, then the numbers exploded.”

For his part, Zaev said the situation will soon be under control and that the economy will be one of the least impacted by the virus in Europe, with a contraction in GDP of around 4 percent — because the country does not rely much on tourism and due to emergency measures that amount to some 10 percent of GDP.

## Virus alters voting

The coronavirus has forced major changes to the normal electoral routine. Voting is not taking place on the normal polling day of Sunday in an attempt to reduce the chances of voters choosing a summer weekend break over casting a ballot.

Voters must wear masks and maintain 2-meter social distancing. Elderly people, other vulnerable groups and those in quarantine were able to vote on Monday and Tuesday.



# Ruling Social Democrats on course to win North Macedonia election

Zoran Zaev is seeking to return as prime minister, hoping to be the leader who opens the country's long-awaited EU accession talks.



Zoran Zaev's SDSM is poised to win North Macedonia's general election | Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

BY NEKTARIA STAMOULI

July 16, 2020 | 2:34 am



North Macedonia's ruling Social Democrats (SDSM) were poised to win the country's general election, [preliminary data](#) showed early Thursday, after an extremely tight race with the conservatives.

The national election was the country's first since it [changed its name](#) from Macedonia early last year, ending a decades-long dispute with neighboring Greece.

Data published by the State Elections Commission showed that with some 90 percent of votes counted, SDSM had won 36.15 percent of votes, in a race neck-and-neck race with the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party on 34.73 percent. Final results are expected later on Thursday.

"Citizens chose security and punished VMRO-DPMNE, because they wanted to bring fear," SDSM's Secretary-General Ljupcho Nikolovski said during a [press conference](#) Thursday. "The policies we implemented over the past three years have been confirmed, the brave decisions of [SDSM leader and former Prime Minister] Zoran Zaev, the government and the coalition have been confirmed."

The electoral commission's [official website](#) crashed shortly after polls closed and remained offline throughout the night. State electoral commission head Oliver Derkoski said this was probably due to hackers, but insisted vote counting proceeded normally.

As expected, no single party secured an outright majority in the vote, setting the stage for talks to form a coalition government with at least one partner, most likely representing the country's sizeable ethnic Albanian minority.

Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), SDSM's former coalition partner, was leading in the Albanian bloc with some 10 percent of votes, followed by Alliance for Albanians with around 8 percent. But before the election, DUI said it would not even negotiate with either of the two leading parties this time around unless its candidate is named prime minister — a precondition both rejected.

"The formation of the government will be quick and fast, as there won't be many alternatives," said Veli Kreci, the director of the Max van der Stoep Institute of the South East European University. "Based on the election results, it seems that DUI will be again the key player."

Zaev is seeking another term as prime minister, hoping to be the leader who [opens the country's long-awaited EU accession talks](#). His coalition, in power since late 2016, won plaudits internationally for the landmark name change agreement with Greece, which paved the way to EU entry. Zaev's government also secured NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country.

But critics of Zaev's government say he neglected reforms to improve everyday life, the economy and the rule of law, while the conservative VMRO-DPMNE opposition painted the Greek deal as "treason."

Wednesday's poll, the country's 10th general election since its independence, was initially scheduled to take place in April 12, but was postponed due to the coronavirus.

The pandemic dominated the vote, which took place with strict safety rules. All voters had to wear masks, only briefly removing them for identification purposes, and maintain 2-meter social distancing. Elderly people, other vulnerable groups and those in quarantine were able to vote on Monday and Tuesday.

Turnout was around 51 percent, significantly lower than in previous elections.

The new government faces an ongoing public health and economic challenge as a result of the pandemic, which is [currently at its peak in the country](#).

While North Macedonia initially appeared to handle the outbreak of the coronavirus relatively well, its decision to ease lockdown restrictions in late May saw it recording an alarming rise in cases and deaths. It is currently among the European nations most badly affected, with the highest mortality rate in the Balkans.

---

## Also On POLITICO



### Coronavirus casts shadow over North Macedonia's election

By Nektaria Stamouli

### North Macedonia experiences new spike in corona cases

By Nektaria Stamouli

---

MORE FROM ... [NEKTARIA STAMOULI](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

# Social Democrats win North Macedonia election

Just 12,000 votes separated the two main parties.



Zoran Zaev, leader of the ruling SDSM party | Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

BY NEKTARIA STAMOULI

July 16, 2020 | 10:52 pm



North Macedonia's [Social Democrats \(SDSM\)](#) scored a narrow victory in the country's general election, official data showed on Thursday evening, and are now bracing for tough coalition talks.

The national election was the country's first since it changed its name from Macedonia last year, [ending a decades-long dispute with neighboring Greece](#).

[Official data](#) published by the State Elections Commission nearly 24 hours about voting booths closed showed that SDSM secured 46 seats in the country's 120-seat parliament, with the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party on 44 seats. Just 12,000 votes separated the rivals.

"Our path to progress is confirmed," SDSM leader Zoran Zaev said in his victory speech. "The citizens went out and voted for a clear future, for unity and solidarity, for economic patriotism, for law and order and to choose a better present and a better future."

The parties representing the country's sizable ethnic Albanian minority managed to increase their power in parliament significantly and will be kingmakers in the upcoming talks on forming a government.

the Alliance for Albanians with 12, while two smaller parties won a combined three seats. Before the election, DUI said it would not negotiate with either of the two leading parties unless its lead candidate was named prime minister — a precondition both rejected. Appendix 4

Zaev will now seek to secure another term as prime minister, hoping to be the leader who opens the country's long-awaited EU accession talks. His coalition, in power since late 2016, won plaudits internationally for the landmark name change agreement with Greece, which paved the way to EU entry. Zaev's government also secured NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country.

But critics of Zaev's government say he neglected reforms to improve everyday life, the economy and the rule of law, while VMRO-DPMNE painted the Greek deal as "treason."

Zaev has two options, either to repeat the coalition with DUI and have a wafer-thin majority in parliament, or try to build a government with all the other smaller parties. If he fails to do either, the conservatives will get a chance to form a government.

VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski said he is willing to discuss government formation with all political stakeholders, but won't accept blackmail.

"People are disappointed in politicians. We have to learn our lesson and stop failing them," he said after the election.

Turnout was around 51 percent, significantly lower than in previous elections.

Interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski called for the quick formation of a government, saying the country needs "legitimate institutions as soon as possible to cope with serious decisions due to the COVID-19 situation, but also because of the European integration process."

While North Macedonia initially appeared to handle the outbreak of the coronavirus relatively well, its decision to ease lockdown restrictions in late May saw an alarming rise in cases and deaths. It is currently among the European nations most badly affected, with the highest mortality rate per capita in the Balkans.

---

## Also On POLITICO



### North Macedonia, Albania get green light for EU membership talks

By Jacopo Barigazzi

#### OPINION

### The best thing Brussels can do in Bulgaria is stay out

By Dimitar Bechev

---

MORE FROM ... [NEKTARIA STAMOULI](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was 'a shambolic, shameless clot' says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world's most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia's trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Europe's vaccination program is a success story

APRIL 6, 2021 | 4:01 AM



# Bulgaria threatens to veto North Macedonia's EU talks

Sofia says it wants language and history disputes resolved but Skopje warns EU success could turn to failure.



North Macedonia's and EU flags fly in front of the Government in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia | Georgi Licovski/EFE via EPA

BY JACOPO BARIGAZZI

October 21, 2020 | 10:24 pm



Bulgaria said it will veto the formal launch of EU accession talks with North Macedonia unless its concerns about language and history are taken into account, diplomats said after a meeting of EU ambassadors on Wednesday.

One diplomat who took part in the meeting said the Bulgarian representative gave “a very long and emotional speech” on the topic.

The ambassadors were having their first discussion on the framework for negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia that was put forward by the European Commission last summer. Once the member states have backed the framework, the presidency of the Council of the EU, currently held by Germany, will present the so-called “agreed General EU Position” to the two countries hoping to join the bloc, marking the formal start of accession negotiations.

It was expected that the EU’s support for the negotiating framework would be signed off at a ministerial meeting of the General Affairs Council on November 10 — but Sofia could derail those plans.

Opening talks with the two Balkan countries has already been difficult as North Macedonia and Greece first had to resolve a near 30-year-long dispute over the former’s name. An agreement between the two was ratified last year, paving the way for Skopje’s NATO accession.

leaders last October, France [blocked](#) approval of the opening of the accession talks with both countries. Approval was [granted](#) in March after a compromise was found that included revamping the accession process. Appendix 4

The discussion among ambassadors on Wednesday was mainly about this new methodology, with some member states having doubts about how negotiations could be suspended, two diplomats said.

In recent weeks, Bulgaria distributed documents to the other member states to explain its position. In one of the documents, seen by POLITICO, Sofia stressed that Bulgaria cannot “accept that the still ongoing nation-building process in the Republic of North Macedonia be conducted through the revision of our common history, the denial of our common ethnic and linguistic roots or the unfounded claims for the existence of a ‘Macedonian minority’ in Bulgaria.”

The two countries signed an accord in August 2017 to resolve these problems “but the implementation of the Treaty has been stagnant,” said Sofia.

Nikola Dimitrov, North Macedonia’s deputy prime minister for European integration, said his country is committed to implementing the friendship agreement with Sofia. He noted Bulgaria had played a positive role in putting EU enlargement back on the bloc’s agenda but said that success would be at risk if a solution is not found to the impasse.

“It is simply not right for the Macedonian language to be an obstacle to our European future if the EU is a community of values that celebrates diversity,” Dimitrov told POLITICO.

Diplomats said that Wednesday’s session was just a first discussion and there’s still a chance to avoid the process being derailed, with more talks planned. “There’s still room for diplomacy,” said one of the diplomats involved in the discussion, pointing to preparatory meetings for the [next summit](#) as part the so-called Berlin process, that will bring together leaders from the Western Balkans and the EU, to be held in Sofia on November 10, the same day as the General Affairs Council.

*Andrew Gray contributed reporting.*

---

MORE FROM ... [JACOPO BARIGAZZI](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Europe’s vaccination program is a success story

APRIL 6, 2021 | 4:01 AM

### 5. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

## Next up



# Bulgaria blocks EU membership talks for North Macedonia

Bilateral dispute holds up start of negotiations with Balkan country.



The stalemate was confirmed at a videoconference of EU affairs ministers | Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

BY JACOPO BARIGAZZI

November 17, 2020 | 10:49 pm



Bulgaria on Tuesday blocked the start of EU membership talks for its neighbor North Macedonia due to disputes over history and language.

The stalemate was confirmed at a videoconference of EU affairs ministers — a meeting already marked by another deadlock, over the bloc's budget and coronavirus recovery fund.

After years of wrangling, the EU agreed in March to invite North Macedonia and Albania to begin membership negotiations. But Bulgaria on Tuesday blocked the next key step in the process — agreement on a negotiating framework before the two Western Balkan countries can start talks at an intergovernmental conference.

“All delegations today expressed their support for a successful conclusion on the negotiating framework with one exception, Bulgaria,” said Michael Roth, the EU affairs minister of Germany, which holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

kotn said Germany has been trying to bridge positions but “we haven’t managed to convince our Bulgarian friends to agree on the negotiating framework.”

Sofia had signaled in advance that it would not approve the framework but the decision was still a blow to North Macedonia, whose path to EU talks was long blocked by a long-running dispute over history and identity with another neighbor, Greece. That standoff was resolved by a deal that involved the country adding “North” to its name.

“We cannot change our history or geography, but we can certainly change our future. Sadly, today we missed a great opportunity to do so,” Nikola Dimitrov, North Macedonia’s deputy prime minister for European integration, said in response to Tuesday’s news.

Multiple EU officials and diplomats expressed frustration that Bulgaria was using bilateral issues to hold up a process that is between North Macedonia and the EU as a whole.

But some diplomats said even if that dispute is resolved, other countries such as the Netherlands — which has a hawkish stance on EU enlargement — could still oppose the launch of talks with Albania due to dissatisfaction over its progress on reforms such as an overhaul of the judiciary.

Such a step could further hold up the start of talks for both countries as EU governments have closely linked the cases of the two Balkan neighbors and opposed decoupling them, arguing that could create tensions in the volatile region.

Roth was cautious on Tirana’s prospects: “Albania is on the right track, whether we can reach a successful conclusion by the end of the year is something I can’t say yet.”

Countries that strongly support EU enlargement, contending that it will help stabilize and raise democratic standards in the Western Balkans, expressed disappointment at the outcome of Tuesday’s meeting.

“It is important to launch the process as soon as possible. Both countries are ready for accession negotiations. Some open issues would require fine-tuning, but this should not delay the convening [of the intergovernmental conference] in the near future,” Andreja Metelko-Zgombić, Croatia’s state secretary for European affairs, told POLITICO.

“We need to think strategically: Such a decision is of utmost importance for the credibility and leverage of the EU in the Western Balkans, but also for the security of the EU in the long-run,” she added.

---

MORE FROM ... [JACOPO BARIGAZZI](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Europe’s vaccination program is a success story

APRIL 6, 2021 | 4:01 AM

### 5. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

Next up

OPINION

# Bulgaria's standoff with North Macedonia is a lose-lose

Stalling EU accession over old grievances will hold back entire region's economic growth.



The distance between Skopje in North Macedonia and Sofia in Bulgaria is a mere 240 kilometers | Georgi Licovski/EFE via EPA

BY DIMITAR BECHEV AND JULIAN POPOV

November 17, 2020 | 4:02 am



*Dimitar Bechev is a Europe's Futures Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Julian Popov is Bulgaria's former environment minister and a fellow at the European Climate Foundation.*

Once again, the European Union's enlargement process is hostage to an emotionally charged dispute that is, to outsiders, baffling.

On Tuesday, EU affairs ministers will decide whether or not to begin EU membership talks with North Macedonia. Given that the European Commission first judged the country fit to join back in 2009, this step is long overdue. Sadly, it looks likely to be delayed further.

Where Greece was once the most vocal opponent to starting talks — over a dispute over North Macedonia's name, which was finally resolved last year — Bulgaria has now become the most problematic naysayer.

Sofia has revived old grievances, calling on its neighbor to acknowledge ethnic Macedonians' historical and linguistic ties to Bulgaria — and threatening to veto the start of accession talks unless it does so, creating a likely stalemate.

The Bulgarian government's bellicose tone, however, has dashed those hopes and made it increasingly likely the EU is headed for an impasse on the issue. It's not too late, however, for Borissov and Zaev to turn things around.

The Bulgarian leader is aware of the potential pitfalls of playing the spoiler. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has already sent him a pointed message — essentially, “you need to sort this out” — as he met with Zaev to co-chair a summit of the so-called Berlin Process for the Western Balkans in Sofia.

Both leaders have an inherent interest in overcoming the impasse and shifting the focus away from what they call their “shared history.” The chances of arriving at a single narrative about historical events and figures from the late 19th and early 20th century are, as the emotional dispute has shown, slim.

That's why it is high time for both sides roll up their sleeves and look toward the future rather than the controversy-ridden past. If they were to busy themselves with the present, they would see there is a whole lot that could be done in the interest of citizens.

Breaking the deadlock now would present a rare opportunity to accelerate the integration, not just of North Macedonia, but of the entire Western Balkan region into the EU.

The EU is negotiating the final parts of its [ambitious recovery package](#) that, in combination the next long-term budget, will provide some €1.8 trillion in funding to EU members — a large part of which will be spent on the modernization of the EU economy and upgrading its infrastructure.

Cross-border infrastructure stands to benefit. The distance between Sofia and Skopje is mere 240 kilometers, but there is neither a high-speed road nor a railway connection. For all the talk of regional connectivity and integration, the border is a testament of what is wrong about the Balkans. (Anyone who has braved the hair-pin turns along the narrow road descending from the Deve Bair (Camel Hill) crossing would probably agree.)

Improving these links will boost trade and investment. The potential is out there: In 2019, Bulgaria was the third most important destination for Macedonian exports following Germany and Serbia. North Macedonia is among Bulgaria's top 20 export markets, though Sofia usually runs a surplus.

The start of EU accession talks for North Macedonia will drive governance and regulatory reform and open new opportunities for Bulgarian investors, some of whom have complained about unfavorable treatment in the past. It will also encourage Macedonian entrepreneurs, many of whom already have business in Bulgaria.

Allowing talks to start now is also likely to be a boost for cooperation on energy policy and help both countries make use of relevant EU funds. The European Commission's guidelines on the implementation of its green agenda in the Western Balkans offers good, constructive directions for cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and offers a path for deeper integration of North Macedonia into the European Green Deal.

Working together on the EU's climate neutrality target for 2050 will create a solid basis for the development of clean energy infrastructure connecting the two countries. It will help them integrate their electricity markets, reduce emissions and hit other targets that could boost both economies.

If Sofia and Skopje can work together to modernize their economies — using a blend of the EU's recovery fund, other EU funding instruments and their own national budgets — it would serve the reassure investors and make both countries more attractive for new industries. That, in turn, would accelerate economic transformation on both sides of the border and strengthen the region's security, allowing them to move past their historical grievances and into the future.

None of this is to say it will be an easy process. Political calculations in both Sofia and Skopje, coupled with long-standing grudges awakened by Bulgarian arm-twisting, have already done significant harm. But there is a win-win option too, for those who want to see it. And that, in the end, is what the EU is really about.

*This article has been updated to clarify the description of Tuesday's ministerial meeting.*

---

MORE FROM ... [DIMITAR BECHEV](#) AND [JULIAN POPOV](#)

---

# Tongue-tied: Bulgaria's language gripe blocks North Macedonia's EU path

Sofia holds up start of membership talks over linguistic dispute.



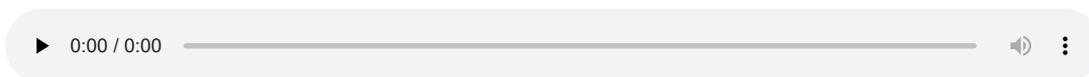
For North Macedonia, the Bulgarian block is a gut punch | Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

BY UNA HAJDARI

December 8, 2020 | 4:01 am



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

SKOPJE — After 15 years of frustration, North Macedonia finally got a green light from the EU this year to begin membership talks — only to find another red light at the next junction.

Membership negotiations take years and focus on the nitty-gritty of questions about a country's readiness to join the bloc. But Bulgaria is holding up the start of these talks with demands that raise a rather different question: What is a language?

According to Sofia, the language spoken in North Macedonia isn't a separate language at all, but a regional variant of Bulgarian. Skopje dismisses this, and also rejects Sofia's demand that it should submit to this view before talks can begin.

But that’s nothing compared to the outrage felt in North Macedonia.

“If any nation in Europe has to choose between their identity and joining the EU, then there is something wrong with that set of options,” North Macedonia’s Deputy Prime Minister Nikola Dimitrov told POLITICO.

Like many, he sees the linguistic dispute as a matter of national identity.

“Who we are is our business. It’s a question for the Macedonian people. We think that this should by no means be a precondition for our European future,” Dimitrov said.

“There is also a stake here for the European Union,” he said. “The decision to start accession talks was unconditional. How Europe handles this will send a message to the whole region regarding the credibility of the process.”

For North Macedonia, the Bulgarian block is a gut punch. The country, perhaps the most eager candidate for EU membership, had only recently overcome another challenge to its identity and accession to the bloc.

In 2019, the country, then called the Republic of Macedonia, changed its name to resolve a dispute with Greece, which had claimed the country had usurped the name of its northern Macedonia region. Athens then lifted its vetoes on Skopje’s EU and NATO accession.

### ‘Linguistic engineering’

All 27 member states — including Bulgaria — agreed to launch talks with North Macedonia and Albania in March, with no conditions attached.

But Bulgaria has sent a memorandum to the other 26 countries insisting that EU documents need to acknowledge that “the official language used in today’s Republic of North Macedonia can be only considered as a written regional norm of the Bulgarian language.” (POLITICO has seen the memorandum, which is not public.)

Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva has also alleged North Macedonia is not delivering on a 2017 friendship treaty between the neighbors signed and that Skopje has policies based on hatred toward Bulgaria.

“No one is disputing their right to self-define their nation and call their language what they like. But we cannot agree that this right will be based on hatred, history theft and denial of Bulgaria,” Zaharieva told private broadcaster BTV last month.

Bulgaria ruled the area that is today North Macedonia for several periods throughout history until the 1940s, when it became a self-governing part of Yugoslavia.

Some Bulgarian nationalists never quite got over this. And Prime Minister Boyko Borissov’s beleaguered government, which was long a proponent of North Macedonia’s accession to the EU, has changed its tune as it seeks to appease the small nationalistic VMRO party in his ruling coalition ahead of elections next year.

As a result, the Bulgarian memorandum is heavy on historical assertions. Among others, it claims that Macedonian identity was artificially created by the communist Yugoslavian government, and that because communism was defeated in Europe it should not be imported into the EU by North Macedonia.

“The Enlargement process must not legitimize the ethnic and linguistic engineering that has taken place under former authoritarian regimes,” the memorandum reads.

Zaharieva insisted Sofia has not switched to opposing North Macedonia joining the EU — but it is opposed to starting membership talks now.

### Language vs. dialect

When Macedonia was a republic inside socialist Yugoslavia, its leaders were allowed to define their own identity, which included standardizing the language.

Bulgarian and Macedonian remain mutually intelligible — but that is the case with many Slavic languages spoken in countries that border one another.

Petar Todorov, a Macedonian historian, believes his country is effectively being punished for being a comparatively young nation. He says it’s absurd to treat a country differently just because its ancestors did not separate their identity from Bulgarians early enough.

“The creation of the Macedonian national identity,” Todorov said, “is not different from the creation of any national identity worldwide. To say that the ethnic identity of Macedonia was created merely by a political decree in 1945 does not have any grounds in contemporary science.”

Ultimately, neither “language” nor “dialect” is a clearly defined category, and it’s unlikely the dispute will be settled by linguists.

North Macedonia and Bulgaria do have a forum to resolve at least some of their differences: The two countries set up a joint historical commission in 2017 to agree on mutually acceptable interpretations of historical figures and events. (Their disagreements also involve, among others, a national hero both countries claim as their own.)

But this is far from a speedy process.

“Both sides, over the past decades, created narratives that are firmly cemented in the minds of the Bulgarian and Macedonian people,” said Stefan Detchev, a Bulgarian historian. “To expect to resolve these issues by December is ridiculous.”

## Growing frustration

This month, the first intergovernmental conference between EU member states and North Macedonia was meant to take place. It’s a key step in the accession process, but now it looks like it won’t happen.

And a stroll through Skopje shows that Bulgaria’s challenge to Macedonian identity might ultimately stir up nationalist sentiment on the other side of the border, too.

The right-wing government of Nikola Gruevski pursued a so-called “antiquization” policy during their time in power from 2006 to 2016, effectively turning their capital into a nationalist theme park as a response to the constant challenges directed at Macedonian identity. They stepped up their efforts after Greece vetoed the country’s NATO accession in 2008.

As a result, enormous monuments to every historical figure they believed North Macedonia had a right to claim appeared all over the city — from Alexander the Great to St Cyril and St Methodius, who created a precursor to Cyrillic script.

Meanwhile, frustration over the slow pace of the EU accession process is growing in North Macedonia.

Many say that while they want EU membership for the country, they are tired of having their identity arbitered at every step of the way.

“The language issue is important for us,” says Trpe Ristoski, 49. “Our language is Macedonian, and we won’t accept anything else. While average people cannot affect politics, I can’t accept that the language isn’t Macedonian. Everything else is artificial.”

---

MORE FROM ... [UNA HAJDARI](#)

---

## Most Read Articles

### 1. Boris Johnson was ‘a shambolic, shameless clot’ says former colleague

APRIL 3, 2021 | 3:04 PM

### 2. Meet the world’s most powerful doctor: Bill Gates

MAY 4, 2017 | 12:00 PM

### 3. Meet Sputnik V, Russia’s trash-talking coronavirus vaccine

APRIL 1, 2021 | 7:20 PM

### 4. Europe’s vaccination program is a success story

APRIL 6, 2021 | 4:01 AM

### 5. Bavarian leader Söder calls for short and strict lockdown in Germany

APRIL 4, 2021 | 3:27 PM

Next up