In an interview with The Economist released November 7, French President Macron laid out a grand strategic vision for the EU. He called for the creation of an EU military, stronger technological sovereignty, and reforms to deepen the political unity of the EU instead of just growing the single market. Other European leaders immediately pushed back, especially against his strong critique of the purpose of NATO today. However, the timing—in the midst of a flurry of events that put Macron in the spotlight—gives his statements a particular potency, even if his ideas are controversial and somewhat contradictory. Macron chose his moment well, and the coming months will show if he can nudge the path of the EU to match his vision, or if Brussels will push back harder.

Brussels, we have a problem

“Strategically and politically, we need to recognise that we have a problem,” Macron said in the interview, and he has a point. His plan for a sovereign, cohesive, and well-functioning EU is an important call for structural change for a bloc that is often at odds with itself. But this strategic and political crisis for Europe has seen him put the brakes on EU Enlargement by vetoing the start of accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania at an early October European Council meeting. Ultimately, further stalling on EU enlargement is the wrong way to make the EU more relevant on the world stage, since enlargement is a vital part of EU foreign policy.

The interview—conducted October 21—demonstrates calculated timing on Macron’s part that bolsters his hard position against EU enlargement and NATO, even if he reaches many wrong conclusions that undermine his message. This past summer saw Macron’s approval rating reach a high point for the year—nearing 40% in some polls—giving him increased confidence to embark on a campaign to change more than France. And apart from his growing domestic support, this interview took place during a frighteningly busy month for French leadership. Macron sat down for the interview less than two weeks after he had condemned Turkey’s invasion of Syria on October 9 as “madness,” and just one week after the European Council meeting where France torpedoed progress on EU enlargement. The day the interview was released, Macron
was probably still shaking off jet-lag after returning from a successful visit to China, where Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed deals worth $15 billion. Macron dropped these words into a period framed with strong actions.

However, with the boldness of Macron’s vision comes many controversies, and the first casualty of Macron’s reboot as the leader of Europe is EU enlargement. According to Macron, one of the main obstacles for a strong, sovereign Europe on equal footing with China and the U.S. is a lack of political unity within the bloc. He has prioritized political cooperation amongst member states over the size of the market. That means halting the accession of North Macedonia and Albania, which he argued would only contribute further to political disunity between the member states. Europe, he said, finds itself at the “edge of a precipice” and “has forgotten that it is a community, by increasingly thinking of itself as a market, with expansion as its end purpose. This is a fundamental mistake,” argued Macron, “because it has reduced the political scope of its project, essentially since the 1990s. A market is not a community. A community is stronger: it has notions of solidarity, of convergence, which we’ve lost.”

There are enough problems in the EU as it is, Macron seemed to say. “This crisis is right here among us, advocated by a number of parties in our democracies.”¹ The populist movements in the EU itself are undermining its ability to stand up for itself on the world stage. Adding more member states with fragile political balances would stoke this fire, Macron protests. But addressing instability at home does not excuse creating it abroad. The decision to veto the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia led Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to call snap elections for April 2020. Zaev had run on a platform of EU accession, and North Macedonians had put up with tough reforms for the promise of advancing that process.² Now, his coalition’s narrow majority in the National Assembly (67 of 120 seats) will be put to the test to determine if Zaev still has the support for his agenda despite the veto from France.³

Right idea, wrong conclusion

The generally pro-enlargement European Commission and European Parliament view Macron’s take on EU enlargement as cutting off the nose to spite the face. European Commission President-elect Ursula Von der Leyen responded to the French veto of the accession process for North Macedonia and Albania by arguing that any vacuum in the Western Balkans would be filled by Russia, China, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia.⁴ EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini called the move a “historic mistake.”⁵ In giving up enlargement to focus on political unity, the French president has driven a wedge between leaders in Europe and further cut the credibility of the EU amongst the increasingly skeptical Western Balkan EU hopes. And indeed, the illiberal forces Macron has called out actually curtailed Brussels’ ability to react, creating a dilemma for the incoming Von der Leyen Commission. The European Parliament has rejected one Hungarian candidate for Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement—a necessary position to fill in order to complete the European Commission and move forward with its agenda—and delayed approving a second, expressing skepticism that an individual close to the Hungarian leadership and its illiberal reforms could be expected to push for improvements to rule of law in accession candidates.⁶ ⁷

Chance to reverse course?

For Macron, advancing the grand European project means shoring up political unity across the EU to take on critical geopolitical challenges like Chinese and U.S. technological power, security threats from Russia, and the aftermath of Brexit. But for the Commission and Parliament, that project will remain tragically unfinished as long as there are European countries seeking membership. The latter approach is not without its own flaws, and Macron is correct in bringing existential issues to the fore, but the path forward for the EU must include the incorporation of new members while adequately addressing common problems. Even if reforms are needed, they should not prevent the EU from keeping its word to accession candidates, especially given the long list of disappointments they’ve experienced.

Looking ahead to the December 13-14 European Council meeting, where North Macedonia and Albania may be on the agenda again for the EU heads of state, and beyond to the May 2020 Western Balkan Summit in Zagreb, Croatia, which has been designated the deadline for a decision on the accession delay, there are important dates on the horizon for the Enlargement question. In a twist, Macron may get his wish to pause accession due to the very disunity he hopes to remedy, but that will be little consolation for his great hope of a stronger, more sovereign EU.

Endnotes
5. https://twitter.com/JasminMaj/status/1185507478911448800
8. https://apnews.com/6f6c7061433d286c2f188551439a588