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The Netherlands as a champion of EU enlargement?

This policy brief examines how the Netherlands can credibly propagate its priorities regarding EU enlargement in the context of the EU's revised accession methodology. While this methodology warrants increased engagement from EU Member States in the accession process, that does not mean Dutch priorities on Rule of Law and democratisation will automatically be addressed, nor that support for the accession process or its effectiveness is guaranteed. The Netherlands is keen to utilise the new entry points for greater engagement during the negotiations and vis-à-vis other Member States, the European Commission and the aspiring members themselves. However, the Netherlands could embed its positions within a more generic European vision on, for instance, the Rule of Law to ensure that its concerns about and interest in EU enlargement find greater resonance in the enlargement debates.

Introduction

The European Union's revised enlargement methodology, adopted in March 2020, contains new elements but cannot be regarded as revolutionary. As former revisions have shown, only adopting a new methodology will not suffice to counter state capture mechanisms found in varying levels throughout the South-East European six, or SEE6 for short.¹ Despite formal progress in the European Union (EU) accession process, some countries in the region have stagnated or even reversed on democratic consolidation in recent years, with North Macedonia and

(to a somewhat lesser extent) Albania being notable exceptions.

A technical revision of the enlargement strategy alone is unlikely to turn the tide. The European Commission has therefore set out an ambition to engage in more 'political steering' to hold the SEE6 accountable. In this respect the Commission needs to balance itself among the 27 Member States, given its role as 'an honest broker who must unite interests'.² This could prevent the Commission from being as outspoken as is needed. Accordingly, the intended political steering towards the SEE6 will be dependent even more on the engagement from the Member States.

1 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia. Not all countries suffer from state capture mechanisms to the same level. See for a detailed analysis: SELDI (2020). 'State Capture Assessment Diagnostics in the Western Balkans 2020: Risks and Policy Options', *Seldi Policy Brief no. 10*.

2 A. Schout and A. Nunes (2019). 'The European Commission in balance? Ambition, organisation and power', *Clingendael Report*, p. 8.

However, increased political engagement from Member States is unlikely to automatically translate into serious pressure to end endemic corruption in the SEE6. A growing number of EU Member States find themselves tangled up in illiberal reforms, leaving the EU at large in a Rule of Law crisis. EU Member States in which the Rule of Law is gradually dismantled may be more inclined to prioritise rapid enlargement over adequate Rule of Law reforms. More political steering and engagement from Member States in enlargement policies will therefore not mean that Dutch priorities are automatically featured more clearly in the process nor that state capture is more effectively addressed. This implies that if the Netherlands wants to make this process more effective and ensure that Dutch priorities regarding democracy and Rule of Law are adequately considered, it cannot stand on the sidelines.

This policy brief examines how the Netherlands could credibly propagate its priorities regarding EU enlargement in the context of the EU's revised accession methodology.³ It first assesses the opportunities for enhanced engagement afforded by the revised accession methodology. Second, the policy brief discusses the troublesome perception of the Netherlands in the EU debate on enlargement, asking how the Netherlands could propagate its position more effectively and credibly. Third, this policy brief zooms in on relations between the Netherlands and the SEE6, asking how Dutch strategies towards that region could be further optimised. The paper puts forth recommendations for the Netherlands to ensure that the revised accession methodology does not end up as a paper tiger, particularly with regard to Dutch priorities on democracy and the Rule of Law.

1 The revised methodology opens much-desired new opportunities for Member States

The EU's enlargement policies have in the past decade not led to the desired results. The EU accession process for the countries in the Western Balkans lacked efficacy and was unable to spur rapid democratisation and other reforms in line with the EU *acquis*. Given the lack of decisive results, EU Member States have often halted the process, leading to frustration among all involved. For instance, no winners emerged when France and the Netherlands blocked the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia due to a lack of results – especially in Albania, except for the fact that it had become more obvious that something in the process needed to change.

Triggered by the insistence of France and the Netherlands in particular to adjust the process, the Commission worked towards a revision of the accession methodology that would enhance the effectiveness of the process and warrant the engagement of all sides throughout the entire accession process. It should come as no surprise that the Netherlands welcomed the Commission's proposal, as it enables the Dutch to play a more constructive role throughout the process, rather than being forced to hit the brakes at landmark political moments.

The revised methodology builds on four main principles: enhanced credibility, stronger 'political steering', a more dynamic process, and more predictability for both sides.⁴ It enables Member States to participate more systematically in the accession process by contributing directly to annual assessments, through sectoral expertise and

3 This policy brief is primarily based on desk research, building partially on earlier Clingendael studies. The authors furthermore conducted several short interviews with diplomats and experts to contextualise the desk research.

4 European Commission (2020). *Enhancing the process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf, (accessed September 2020), p. 1.

via monitoring developments on the ground.⁵ It also invites Member States to engage in enhanced ‘political steering’, especially with regard to fundamental reforms such as in the field of Rule of Law. Lastly, by introducing the possibility of reversibility and enhanced conditionality, the revised methodology seeks to ensure that Member States’ concerns are incorporated into the process.

These revisions aim to lead to more predictability and understanding. Currently, the new methodology is being formalised into the negotiating frameworks for North Macedonia and Albania. It will serve as a basis for future candidates and may be applied to negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, which have been ongoing for several years.

2 The Netherlands: getting it right or being inflexible in allowing enlargement?

The Netherlands is keen to capitalise on the opportunities provided by the revised accession methodology, but arguably it also needs to consider the (diplomatic) language and strategy it uses. While seen as relatively effective in EU negotiations, a 2019 Clingendael study on perceptions in other EU Member States of Dutch interest representation found that the Netherlands is not considered flexible, nor empathic or solidary during negotiations.⁶ Furthermore, the Netherlands is not seen as a strong ‘bridge builder,’ but rather considered to be rigid and measured. Above all, the report found that the Netherlands does not sufficiently succeed in encapsulating its national interest in a more European agenda.⁷ Despite the fact that, generally, Dutch civil servants are considered pragmatic, skilled

and well prepared, this may have contributed to the Netherlands being rated the fourth most disappointing Member State in the EU in the latest European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) coalition explorer.⁸

In the field of enlargement, the Netherlands is seen by several other Member States as a country blocking progress and sticking mostly to national interests. The Dutch position not to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019 was considered exemplary of that inflexible approach.⁹ On the contrary, it could be argued that the Netherlands acted in line with the requirements of the accession policy by judging each country on its own merits, and keeping a close watch on the fulfilment of enlargement criteria. It did not block progress over extraneous demands outside the accession framework, as other Member States have tended and still tend to do.¹⁰

In negotiations, however, it is not always about being right or wrong. Gaining a status of being an inflexible partner and not willing to compromise may have detrimental effects on one’s negotiation position. This, in turn, might affect the ability to achieve one’s priorities. The question of whether and when to compromise is therefore a strategic one and worth reflection: to what extent is it beneficial to compromise on one’s position in order to gain more influence over the rest of the process leading to the final negotiating outcome?

Events that unfolded after October 2019 European Council are telling in that regard. The green light to opening accession

5 *Ibid.*, p., 3.

6 B. Dekker *et al.* (2019). ‘Weinig empathisch, wel effectief. Percepties van Nederlandse belangenbehartiging in de Europese Unie’, *Clingendael Report*, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/perceptions-dutch-interest-promotion-inside-eu>, p. 28.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

8 C. Busse *et al.* (2020, July). *EU Coalition Explorer*, <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>.

9 See for example: Jasmin Mujanović (2019). ‘France is Undermining Balkan – and EU – Stability’, *BalkanInsight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/21/france-is-undermining-balkan-and-eu-stability/>.

10 Take, for example, the bilateral concerns of Bulgaria regarding North Macedonia. See DW (2020). *Bulgaria asks EU to stop ‘fake’ Macedonian identity*, <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-asks-eu-to-stop-fake-macedonian-identity/a-55020781>.

talks with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020 brought about, at least for some months, a new spirit of cooperation in the EU. From March 2020 the Netherlands was no longer in a relatively isolated position and a new impetus had been given to the accession process, within the EU, North Macedonia and Albania. In the meantime, however, Bulgaria's position on North Macedonia, as well as concerns in various Member States on further progress in Albania, have made it more uncertain when the negotiation frameworks will be adopted and when the first intergovernmental conferences, which mark the actual start of negotiations, will be held. While the decision on whether to compromise should be made on a case-by-case basis, opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia had notable positive effects in the months thereafter.

3 From domestic concerns to a European narrative

Apart from a lack of flexibility, the Netherlands is also generally seen as not sufficiently couching its position in a European narrative, instead pursuing national interests mostly.¹¹ There seems to be a kernel of truth in that perception, also when it comes to the Dutch position towards EU enlargement.

In a statement to the media after the October 2019 European Council, Prime Minister Rutte, for example, clearly expressed Dutch concerns about Albania's outstanding reform challenges and praised some of the improvements North Macedonia had made.¹² What Rutte, however, failed to do on this occasion was to explain why the concerns of the Netherlands on the current status of the

Rule of Law in Albania were important for the EU at large. This is characteristic of the Dutch discourse, which tends to highlight domestic concerns at the expense of a more European narrative. There is a difference in saying that the Netherlands pursues better Rule of Law requirements for its own interest or for the functioning of the EU, and the EU's capacity to act on the international stage. While more Member States are adept at pursuing national interests, shifting the emphasis towards the EU dimension could be an adequate step to counter the idea that the Netherlands mostly pursues narrowly defined national interests in Brussels.

The ingredients for a more European narrative are already there. The Rule of Law, as well as a focus on pragmatic cooperation, might be a solid basis for a Dutch vision for the EU. It is not hard to argue that solid improvement in the Rule of Law standards in Member States and in future accession countries is in the interests of the EU internally, geopolitically and economically. In his 2018 speech for the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Berlin, Prime Minister Rutte did in fact search to encapsulate Dutch priorities, such as the Rule of Law, in a vision for the EU.¹³ Notwithstanding the fact that, within certain margins, politicians need to adjust their messages depending on their audiences, it could be opportune to translate such a vision into everyday politics and communication, both within the Netherlands and within the EU.

Domestically, this would require an open debate with and within the Dutch parliament, often rather critical on EU integration and EU enlargement, in which such an EU vision is actively discussed. In Brussels, it would require explaining clearly how the Dutch position provides ideas that are the interest of the EU at large. Bringing European interests to the core of daily debates

11 B. Dekker *et al.*, (2019). 'Weinig empathisch, wel effectief', *Clingendael Report*, p. 17.

12 Departure and doorstep by Mark Rutte, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, following the European Council, on 17 October 2019, in Brussels. Available at: <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20191017-european-council-october-2019-day-1/125627-departure-and-doorstep-rutte-nl-20191017> (accessed September 2020).

13 Speech by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, at the Bertelsmann Stiftung Berlin (2018, 2 May). Available at: <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2018/03/02/speech-by-the-prime-minister-of-the-netherlands-mark-rutte-at-the-bertelsmann-stiftung-berlin> (accessed September 2020).

on different aspects of EU enlargement (and other policy fields) could contribute to the credibility of the Dutch position on those issues in Brussels, as well as to a more open debate within the Netherlands on the benefits and costs of the European project.

4 Coalition formation on EU enlargement

In general, the Netherlands is seen in the EU as an important Member State in coalition formation.¹⁴ The Netherlands could employ this status to benefit from the opportunities for enhanced engagement in EU enlargement provided by the revised accession methodology.

When it comes to EU enlargement, Member States can generally be divided into proponents of faster integration, either for historical, geopolitical or geographical reasons, and countries stricter on compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria.¹⁵ For some Member States, such as Greece and Bulgaria, relations with candidates are marked by specific bilateral relations and concerns stemming from their close geographical proximity and shared history.¹⁶

To challenge its status as a rather strict or even unconstructive partner when it comes to enlargement, the Netherlands reaches out to both like-minded and non-like-minded countries. According to a Dutch diplomat, 'Enlargement is one of the policy areas that the Netherlands discusses the most with other Member States.'¹⁷ This shows that the Netherlands does not want to be in an isolated position and acknowledges the importance of engaging with non-like-

minded countries. To further capitalise on those efforts, the Netherlands could further invest in informal contacts with other Member States, for example prior to Council meetings, ensuring that diplomacy efforts take place on all levels, and going the extra mile also in fields which may not feature on the top of the Dutch priority list – for example by organising informal events.¹⁸ Doing so would counter the prevailing idea in other Member States that the Netherlands is measured in its interest representation, and could help to build a profile of the Netherlands as a champion of EU enlargement.

5 Strict, fair, and... engaged? Strengthening the credibility of the Dutch position on EU enlargement towards the SEE6

The revised accession methodology calls for more engagement and more 'political steering' from Member States, not only within the EU but also towards candidate countries. As a relatively critical voice in the enlargement debate, the Netherlands could improve the credibility of its position by actively answering that call and working towards increased engagement with the SEE6.

According to Steven Blockmans, The Hague has been quite consistent in offering a helping hand in strengthening the Rule of Law in countries wishing to accede to the EU.¹⁹ When it comes to financial commitments, the Netherlands supports the accession countries through its Matra programme, aiming to promote 'security and stability' by fostering 'the transition towards

14 B. Dekker *et al.* (2019). 'Weinig empathisch, wel effectief', *Clingendael Report*, p. 42.

15 J. Ker-Lindsay, I. Armakolas, R. Balfour and C. Stratulat (2017). 'The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans', in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17(4): 511-522.

16 See R. Balfour and C. Stratulat (editors) (July 2015). 'EU Member States and enlargement towards the Balkans', in *EPC Issue Paper* 79, p. 67.

17 Interview, Dutch policy maker.

18 B. Dekker *et al.*, (2019). 'Weinig empathisch, wel effectief', *Clingendael Report*, p. 19-20.

19 S. Blockmans (2015). 'The Netherlands', in: R. Balfour and C. Stratulat (editors) (July 2015), 'EU Member States and enlargement towards the Balkans', *EPC Issue Paper* 79, p. 221.

democracy'.²⁰ The 2012–2014 programme was assessed positively by a consulting agency in 2015²¹ and the Dutch Parliament has since pleaded for a further increase in the programme's budget.²² Since then, financial reservations for the Matra programme have not, however, been structurally increased. The Matra budget for 2020–2024 is projected at an annual EUR 11.822 million,²³ which is comparable to the previous decade.²⁴

The proven effectiveness of individual Matra projects can be regarded as further motivation for the Netherlands to structurally increase the allocation of financial resources to this programme.²⁵ Such a step might not only lead to positive results on the ground but might also allow for enhanced bilateral relations between the Netherlands and the respective SEE6 countries. The recent adjustment of the Dutch unofficial mantra in the enlargement process from 'Strict and

Fair' to 'Strict, Fair and Engaged' attests that the Netherlands itself understands the importance of engagement for its credibility and the effective propagation of its priorities.²⁶ The gains in political capital that enhanced engagement could bring can be expected to add credibility to the Dutch position on the Rule of Law and other fundamental issues in the future.

6 The Western Balkans: 'Not just a stopover on the Silk Road'

An aspect sometimes overlooked in the Netherlands is that enlargement and many other aspects of the European integration project are inherently politically driven. Relations with the aspiring EU members in the Western Balkans go well beyond traditional foreign policy relations. As European Commission President Von der Leyen noted in her 2020 State of the Union address, the SEE6 should be seen as a 'part of Europe – and not just a stopover on the #SilkRoad.'²⁷ However, Dutch political actors have not yet dared to invest political capital in developing and defending such a vision.²⁸ It is not impossible to combine such a vision with the dominant discourse in the Netherlands, which tends to emphasise the economic nature of the EU and downplay further political integration.²⁹ At the same time,

20 Grant Policy Framework for Matra 'government to government' 2020–2024, p. 1., <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/europese-subsidies/nederlands-fonds-voor-regionale-partnerschappen-nfrp/nfrp-matra-subsidie>.

21 Evaluation Report Matra Programme (in pre-accession countries: Western Balkan and Turkey) 2012–2014. Final Report, (2015, April) available at: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2016/01/08/final-report-evaluation-report-matra-programme/15010die-final-report.pdf> (accessed September 2020).

22 Motion from M. Servaes and J.H. Ten Broeke, 'Nr. 14 Amendement van de leden Servaes en Ten Broeke', <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-34300-V-14.html> (accessed September 2020).

23 Rijksoverheid (2020), Rijksbegroting 2020 Artikel 2: Veiligheid en stabiliteit, https://www.rijksbegroting.nl/2020/voorbereiding/begroting.kst264843_11.html.

24 Vaststelling begroting Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (V) voor het jaar 2012 (2011, November 14), <https://rijksbegroting.nl/2012/kamerstukken.2011/11/23/kst163339.html> (accessed September 2020).

25 Evaluation Report Matra Programme (in pre-accession countries: Western Balkan and Turkey) 2012–2014. Final Report (2015, April). Available at: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2016/01/08/final-report-evaluation-report-matra-programme/15010die-final-report.pdf>, p. 54.

26 Interview, Dutch Policy maker.

27 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary, *Building the word we want to live in: A Union of vitality in a world of fragility* (2020, 16 September). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655 (accessed September 2020).

28 W. Zweers (2019, 25 October). "'Strict – but Fair?": Dutch Approach to EU Enlargement', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/25/strict-but-fair-dutch-approach-to-eu-enlargement/> (accessed September 2020).

29 C. de Gruyter (2020, 16 September). 'The Dutch Don't Love Europe – and Never Did', *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/16/the-dutch-dont-love-europe-and-never-did/> (accessed September 2020).

there is a growing realisation that we need the EU to shield us against increasingly assertive great powers, and the Western Balkans typically is a region where geopolitical power plays are on the rise.³⁰

To strengthen the credibility of the membership perspective, the SEE6 should be treated as future members of the European Union. However, the first reflex of EU Member States at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was to impose export bans on key medical equipment, making it clear that such an understanding was not yet internalised in the modus operandi of EU policy makers.³¹

In addition to financial commitment, other factors can testify to the Dutch interest in stable and prosperous countries in the Western Balkans. Apart from efforts to promote the Rule of Law, democracy and good governance, the Netherlands could simultaneously focus on a wider array of issues, including agriculture, media, business opportunities, tourism, ICT and innovation, sustainability, etc. Organising programmes and activities in those sectors for the benefit of local citizens, small and medium-sized enterprises, civil society organisations and (lower levels of) government, could well strengthen the perception of the Netherlands as a constructive partner. Dutch Embassies already play a key role in that respect. Now that actual accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania might begin shortly, the level of such bilateral engagements with these countries could be gradually increased.

7 Smart engagement to fight state capture

While this policy brief has so far focused on enhanced engagement with the SEE6, such enhanced engagement could, if not done carefully, have unintended consequences of legitimising or even supporting the undemocratic practices of incumbent governments in the region. Both EU financial commitments and political engagement might contribute to state capture, or ‘systemic political corruption in which politicians exploit their control over a country’s decision-making processes to their own advantage’.³²

Regarding finances, EU funds could inadvertently contribute to state capture if they empower networks of patronage and corruption. Such a risk lies not only with potential fraud, but lies especially with the continuation of funding even if candidates experience stagnation or backsliding in key enlargement fields. The revised methodology foresees the increased allocation of Instrument for Pre Accession (IPA) funds only for candidates making adequate progress on reform priorities,³³ and the Commission proposal for IPA under the new 2021–2027 MFF envisions a 13% increase in total funds available.³⁴ In order to ensure the adequate functioning of conditionality in these funds, detailed and adequate assessments of actual progress are crucial. Countering high-level

30 See W. Zweers *et al.* (2020). ‘China and the EU in the Western Balkans – a Zero-sum game?’, *Clingendael report*, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/china-and-eu-western-balkans>.

31 Lili Bayer *et al.* (2020). ‘EU moves to limit exports of medical equipment outside the bloc’, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-eu-limit-exports-medical-equipment/>.

32 M. Lemstra, (2020, September). ‘The destructive effects of state capture in the Western Balkans. EU enlargement undermined’, *Clingendael Policy Brief*, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Policy_brief_Undermining_EU_enlargement_Western_Balkans_September_2020.pdf (accessed September 2020).

33 European Commission (2020, 5 February). *Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkan*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf, p. 5 (accessed September 2020).

34 European Parliament, (2019, November). *Financing EU external action in the new MFF, 2021–2027. Heading 6 ‘Neighbourhood and the World’*. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644173/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)644173_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644173/EPRS_BRI(2019)644173_EN.pdf), p. 8, (accessed September 2020).

corruption or even state capture requires that the EU be wary of simulation of reforms in the SEE6, which, according to some authors, has reached the level of tailor-made laws.³⁵

The Netherlands, with its rich legal tradition, could make a good contribution to Commission reporting on the progress of reforms in the candidate countries regarding the fundamental chapters on democratisation and the Rule of Law. Apart from the annual enlargement package, the European Commission's non-papers on the state of play regarding Chapters 23 and 24 are key in this respect. These documents could be further promoted publicly and discussed by the EU and its Member States with key stakeholders to ensure that the EU's assessment of the state of play on the issue of democracy becomes more widely known to the general public. By organising public debates on these issues with civil society, the Netherlands and other Member States could better explain why the accession process is a long-term one, and why progress is sometimes not possible. Apart from engaging with incumbent governments, engagement is to be sought at multiple levels, both in government and among civil society. Aggrandisement of the executive at the cost of the *trias politica* means few societal actors have the structural strength to provide counterweight to elites engaging in state capture. The Netherlands could therefore continue to seek engagement beyond the executive powers in the SEE6 in order to promote independent media, civil society initiatives, a strong and pluralist parliament, and an independent judiciary.

Not only EU funds, but also political contacts between the EU and SEE6 political leaders can have unintended consequences. That is because engagements with the EU can provide legitimising effects to incumbent leaders in the SEE6 countries. The EU and its Member States could engage with the SEE6 in a smarter manner so as not to further

legitimise undemocratic governments, and thereby avoid the 'legitimisation trap'. Such smart engagement could start from the premise that democratic principles are more important than perceived stability. That means welcoming without hesitation the democratic transition of power, rather than focusing on potential risks related to the geopolitical orientation of a new governing coalition, as media such as Foreign Policy did in the case of Montenegro's 2020 election outcomes.³⁶ By doing so, one could avoid that domestic politics become caught up by geopolitical debates of whether certain parties are leaning predominantly towards Russia or the EU. Such a focus often takes attention away from important reforms, such as depoliticising political institutions.

Recommendations

This policy brief has examined how the Netherlands could credibly propagate its priorities regarding EU enlargement in the context of the EU's revised accession methodology. It is clear that the country is keen to capture the new entry points offered and wants to avoid future situations where it might only block or approve accession at landmark political moments. Several recommendations can be made based on the analysis provided in this study:

- There is an opportunity to further encapsulate Dutch interests in and concerns about EU enlargement in a European narrative that provides a constructive vision of how the Netherlands sees the EU. Such a narrative could be promoted more consistently in both public communication and negotiations with other Member States.
- The Netherlands would do well to develop a vision on (the future of) the European Union that includes the SEE6 as an integral part of that Union, so as to strengthen the credibility of the accession perspective for these countries.

35 G. Vurmo (2020, 11 May). 'Tailor-made laws in the Western Balkans. State capture in disguise', *CEPS report*, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/tailor-made-laws-in-the-western-balkans/> (accessed September 2020).






36 See, for example, Foreign Policy (2020). *Montenegro Is the Latest Domino to Fall Toward Russia*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/17/montenegro-latest-domino-fall-russia-pro-west-europe-nato/>.

- The Netherlands could continue to invest in bilateral exchanges with like-minded and non-like-minded Member States to avoid isolated positions in the enlargement debate. As an example, such exchanges could take the form of informal meetings prior to European Councils.
- In order to further build on the image of an engaged partner, the Netherlands could, in line with the EU's 'more for more' principle, gradually increase its funds for Matra programme activities in countries that move forward in the accession process.
- In order to ensure transparency and the adequate functioning of conditionality in the enlargement process, the Netherlands could actively contribute to and publicly disseminate European Commission reports on the state of play with regard to democratisation and the Rule of Law in the accession countries, making use of the opportunities provided by the revised accession methodology in that regard.
- To avoid contributing to the 'legitimisation trap', the Netherlands could focus its engagement on an enhanced array of actors at both political and civil society levels in the SEE6.

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