NAVIGATING NEW CHALLENGES: WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS OF EU INTEGRATIONS

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Abstract

For several years now, European integration has been recognized as a key strategy to achieve dual goals in the Western Balkans: peace and stability. The European perspective is a commitment not only to the foreign policy of this region but also a great expectation of the citizens of these countries.

The Western Balkans, as the European Union calls it after the integration of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, is a political notion with more than a geographical definition. The Western Balkans, a region which includes: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo, throughout the Cold War period was the area where East and West were divided. After the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, which followed the signing of the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the European Union, euphoria and enthusiasm for joining a united Europe grew. Thus, the prospect of a common future of the Western Balkans in a democratic and prosperous Europe now seemed more than feasible.

Today, the countries of the Western Balkans that have passed the transition period, still encounter the difficulties of their consolidation or the stability of bilateral agreements. Although they are located in the European continent with cultural diversity in a narrow space, they continue to remain out of place in the Euro-integration process. Economic development, commercial exchanges, investments, unemployment, etc., are another dimension of the countries of the Western Balkans, but also the initiatives of some countries for an opening within the area called a mini-Schengen, and then turned into "Open Balkan" which was specifically replaced by the "Berlin Process", which began in 2014, as a proposal by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkan countries.

The difficult economic situation combined with inherited political problems has created large discrepancies between countries of this region in relation to the benefits that come from the EU. The created situation has contributed to some states expanding and increasing their influencing power in this region, such as the influence of Russia.

These issues represent some of the main points of view of the conference, which aims to bring together researches from the countries of the region to present their studies and views on the issues of the integration of Western Balkans into the EU and to exchange experiences, ideas and discuss other relevant issues related to the topics of the conference.

Keywords: European Union, Western Balkans, peace, stability, integrations, enlargement.

Introduction

Since the end of the communist dictatorships at the beginning of the nineties of the 20th century in the Western Balkans region, once again in history the "barbarism of politics" was being witnessed every day before the eyes of the established democracies. The events after 1989 in the Balkans gave the impression that the end of the policy of establishing and ensuring peace had been reached rather than the end of history.

With the end of the communist regime in the Western Balkan region, it seems that only the hope for a close integration of the Western Balkans in the EU can put an end to the ongoing political and economic instability. The socio-political phenomena of nationalism and integration in the Western Balkan region are interconnected in a special way. It is precisely this connection that clarifies the need to examine both phenomena in this paper. A central

dimension of this paper provides the areas of interaction between democracy, rule of law, nationalism and integration.

Starting from the basic hypothesis that integration in the EU represents an instrument of conflict resolution and ensuring peace, in which case it seems necessary to identify in a differentiated manner the preconditions and conditions under which integration in the EU, in a truly sustainable way, it can create peace in the Western Balkans, especially in the case of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. The motive and goal of this paper are to contribute to a better and more peaceful future in the Western Balkans region with the hope that the inhumane events in this part of Europe of the 21st century, represent the end of a process and not carrying over into the future periods.

The main integration tasks can be summarized in four points:

- Keeping the peace;

- Achieving a greater multipurpose potential;

- Solving a specific task; and

- Gaining a new self-understanding and role identity.[1]

The EU's support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans is clear. A clear perspective on membership is essential for the stability of the region. Enlargement should remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the many challenges it is currently facing. The accession process must be pursued with vigor and rigor as one of the EU's top priorities, according to the clear and strict conditions that are the basis of all accession processes - nothing more, nothing less.

It would be advisable for all countries in the Western Balkans region to set up national councils on European integration or other similar bodies that would bring together high-level political authorities and key civil society organizations on a regular basis, with in order to make the process towards EU integration more transparent and to publish it more widely.

Enlargement policy

The EU's main enlargement strategy, from the beginning, has been based on the policy of conditionality. In 1993, the European Council meeting in Copenhagen proposed the Copenhagen Criteria, the successful completion of which would determine the level of success in terms of integration for all countries aspiring to join the EU. The criteria aim at the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities, the existence of a functional market economy, as well as the capacity to withstand competitive pressure and market forces within the European Union; as well as the ability to undertake the obligations of membership, including the realization of the goals of the political, economic and monetary union. In 1995, the Madrid European Council added two more conditions: the regulation of administrative structures and the transposition of EU legislation into national legislation.

In addition to these general conditions which determine and evaluate the individual merits of the candidate countries, the EU offers the "regional approach", with political and economic conditions for the Western Balkans as a basis for a coherent and transparent policy in terms of developing relations in the field of trade, financial assistance, and economic cooperation, as well as contractual relations, allowing a necessary degree of flexibility. This EU strategy is intended to serve as an incentive, not a deterrent, for countries aspiring to membership.

Regional integration is a necessary process as it encourages peace and stability in the region, through the encouragement of reconciliation, good neighborliness, and good political

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[1] Karl W. Deutsch: Frieden und die Problematik politischer Gemeinschaftsbildung auf internationaler Ebene [Peace and the problem of the creation of political communities on the international plane], in: Dieter Senghaas (ed.): Den Frieden denken, Frankfurt 1995, p. 363.

relations, helps to overcome nationalism and tolerance, and promotes mutual understanding and political dialogue. in the region. Such treatment was considered useful to be institutionalized especially after the end of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. For this purpose, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe was created, which aimed to create and strengthen peace and security in Southeastern Europe, to restore stability and prevent conflict. EU institutions and EU Member States should regularly include representatives from Western Balkan countries in EU summits, as proof that the EU considers this region as part of its future and to encourage an informed debate about the political, economic and social impact of enlargement policy.

After political tensions in the Republic of North Macedonia in 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) undertook an exploratory mission in Skopje and Kumanovo in July 2015, demonstrating its commitment, together with other EU institutions to help solve the crisis of this EU candidate country. Violent turmoil in the region has proven how fragile stability is in the Western Balkans and how imperative it is to provide a clear membership perspective for the region.

The Western Balkans has certainly been affected by major radical changes in Europe. Unfortunately, it did not have the same fate as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to go peacefully towards the European road, but was caught in the tragedy of the wars of the nineties. Only after endless suffering was a regional system of states created, and all these states have chosen the only reasonable option for their citizens, which is the path to Europe.

The Western Balkan states are now facing similar challenges, as other European states have in the past. The first and foremost task is to create the conditions for lasting peace. This is possible only through dialogue and the creation of trust, building the way for partnership and eventual friendship among the people in the Balkans.

The challenge of European integration can stimulate the advancement and functioning of democratic institutions, capable of managing and progressing in the cultural, economic, institutional, and political fields. The efforts made in the direction of integration in the EU will create the conditions of a modern market economy and increase the country's capacity to compete within the EU and on world markets.

The EU should develop specific policies towards countries with a high risk of ethnic tensions. Further, given that the unresolved status of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina may have an impact on stability in the region, despite the EU's advocacy of an individual approach to the applicant America, the Union's relations with the countries of the Western Balkans will characterized by a more regional approach, in terms of both the accession models used (applying the same criteria and evaluating achievements through the Stabilization-Association Process) and the EU's insistence on regional cooperation.

The regional necessity of cooperation in the Western Balkans has been emphasized as political, economic, and social common to all countries in the region. The EU's insistence on regional cooperation should be seen as an incentive to address cross-border issues, not as a threat that the individual can thwart.

Progress reports of the Western Balkans on the road to integration

Serbia – until 2000, during the period of the leadership of the FRY by Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia had no relations with the European Union. On the domestic front, Serbia has faced serious crises. This causes an economic slowdown and a significant decline in the living standards of the majority of the population, resulting in frustration among citizens that is evident in every aspect of public life. However, at the same time, democratic institutions have consolidated progress in EU integration.

Serbia is a potential candidate country for EU membership after the European Council in Thessaloniki in June 2003. Visa liberalization with Serbia entered into force in December 2009. The Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia was expected to be approved. by the Council of Ministers of the EU on January 28, 2008, which was opposed by the Netherlands, which remained determined in the request that Serbia does not provide accurate evidence that it cooperates with the Hague Tribunal until it submits it to The Hague war criminal, General Ratko Milladiq, the Netherlands will not give up blocking the signing of the Stabilization-Association agreement. Finally, on April 29, 2008, the EU allowed Serbia to initial the Stabilization and Association Agreement as a conditional SAA, with the condition that the start of its ratification would begin only after Belgrade fulfilled the condition of cooperation with the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia.

A negative development in Serbia-EU relations was also marked by the Resolution of the Assembly of Serbia, with which Serbia requested not to join the European Union, provided that the EU would support Kosovo's independence. This was the first time that a Western Balkan country with its own state document refused EU membership. On December 22, 2009, Serbia officially applied for EU membership.

Bosnia and Herzegovina – Although twenty-eight years have passed since the Dayton agreement, which stopped the conflict, started the process of building Bosnia and Herzegovina and the institutional reintegration of the state, still BiH continues to have internal and regional problems.

Bosnia is facing its worst crisis since the end of the war in 1995, and integration into the EU remains a distant goal. The persistence of nationalism has dealt a heavy blow to the integration process, with ethnic blocs bypassing the EU agenda. Moreover, despite signs of public support for EU integration, statistics show a bleak picture of the situation in BiH, reflecting the depth of the country's social divisions and the lack of a common vision for the future. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate country for EU membership after the Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003. The EU established a partnership for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004 and in November 2005 negotiations for the Stabilization and Association Agreement were officially opened. The agreement was signed and entered into force on 1 January 2008. The EU initiated Stabilization and Association with Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2007 and it was signed on 16 June 2008. In May 2010 the European Commission adopted a proposal to enable citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to travel with a biometric passport to the Schengen countries without a visa. The final decision on the proposal is made by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

BiH's geostrategic position in the region, delays in the implementation of internal reforms, and the normalization of relations with Croatia and Serbia, in cooperation with the Hague tribunal for war criminals in the former Yugoslavia, bring serious delays for the Western Balkans on the way to integration in the EU.

Montenegro – is the only country in the Western Balkans region that had the same party in power from 1991 to 2022, the Democratic Party of Socialists DPS, led by Djukanovic, who was then defeated by the Albanian counter-candidate, Dritan Abazovic.

The EU candidate country status for Montenegro was granted in December 2010, which offered many opportunities and challenges in its governance. However, there are still very serious problems, issues that need to be addressed urgently to speed up the process of integration and overall democratization of Montenegro. These problems are well-known internally and most of them are addressed in the seven demands set by the EU as a condition to provide a date for the opening of EU membership negotiations. It is up to the Montenegrin government to show that it can meet these conditions.

The unanimous ratification of the Stabilization-Association Agreement emphasized the strong support of the European Union member states for the European future of Montenegro. For this

reason, Montenegro will have to build a convincing plan for the implementation of the agreement by going ahead with the appropriate reforms and intensifying its progress in the implementation of the European integration agenda.

Republic of North Macedonia – the main obstacle towards EU integration has been the resolution of the name dispute with Greece, which was finalized with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018. Although it has taken very successful steps towards democratic political, institutional and economic reforms, getting very close to the Copenhagen criteria and has completed the negotiations within the Stabilization-Association Process, gaining the status of a candidate country for the European Union, Macedonia again of the North has challenges towards the European journey. The implementation of the elements of the Ohrid Agreement also is seen as a basic contributing instrument in favor of the consolidation of multi-ethnic democracy in the country.

Membership in NATO has guaranteed the country's stability and security from destabilizing currents, and the chairmanship of the OSCE has raised the country more in the international arena, as well as made it a factor of stability in the entire Western Balkans region.

Kosovo – continues to remain the most serious challenge in the Balkans, the most difficult issue of the European Union and one of the most complicated cases for a definitive solution in today's international system.

After the decision of the International Court of Justice of August 2010, which declared that the declaration of independence was not contrary to international law, a new context is developing. Although independence was the product of an international process, it faced problems of international legitimacy. Kosovo has been recognized only by 22 of the 27 EU Member States, which hinders the unity and effectiveness of the EU. Kosovo must address several challenges ranging from weak institutions to the fight against organized crime. However, it tries to establish new relations with Serbia and integration into the EU.

The biggest problems for Kosovo remain:

- Establishment of Institutions;
- Preparation of human capacity;
- Further democratization of society;
- Strengthening the rule of law;
- Freedoms and human rights, especially of minorities;
- Decentralization of local government;
- The economy;
- Preparation for final status negotiations;
- Dialogue with Belgrade until the solution of the final status.

The assistance and commitment of the EU are a powerful support for the European integration of Kosovo. The European sensitivity for Kosovo appeared immediately, especially at the end of May 2010, when the rapporteur of the European Parliament for Kosovo, Ulrike Lunacek, presented in Vienna the recommendations for the EU's policy towards Kosovo, when it was underlined that it should proceed immediately under the direction of aspects that lead Kosovo towards full liberalization of visas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to mention that countries of the Western Balkans have been slow to reform compared to the countries of Central and Baltic Europe as a result of the decade of devastating ethnic conflicts that followed the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. However, since 2000, the Western Balkans have managed to move forward on the front of political and

economic reforms, mainly thanks to the prospect of EU membership opened for them by the Thessaloniki EU summit of 2003. They have also achieved convergence in partial revenue sharing with the EU, although it still has a long way to go. In particular, since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the convergence process slowed down and, in most countries, even temporarily went in the opposite direction. Economic growth has started to accelerate again only recently, following the economic recovery in the EU.

The slow pace of reform and the EU accession process can be frustrating for many and is the result of many unresolved legacies of the 1990s conflict era, domestic political obstacles, and a declining appetite on the part of existing member states. of the EU for further enlargement. The integration of the Western Balkans into the EU is more than just a bureaucratic process: it is a return to the origins, it is a reconstruction of the culture and values of peace and stability, and a vision for the common future of our peoples.

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