

ARTICLES

THE ROCKY ROAD OF WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES TOWARD EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: THE NEED FOR A CREDIBLE AND EFFECTIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

The EU enlargement has been considered as a one of EU's most powerful policy tools which has helped to transform Central and Eastern European Countries from communist regimes to modern, well-functioning market economy and functional democracies. Such transformative power has not been replicated in the case of Western Balkan countries. Since 2003, when the EU leaders promised the European future to Western Balkan countries, save Croatia, which joined in 2013, other Western Balkan countries are backsliding on the rule of law, media freedoms, and democratic accountability. State capture and the growth of corrupt patronage networks are becoming more present in the society. Recently, with the legislative measures to prevent Covid-19, the Western Balkan countries are becoming more authoritarian. The paper argues that lack of EU to become a 'transformative power' in the Western Balkan countries hinders the risk of this region to return to authoritarianism and opens the 'Pandora box' for non-EU actors to advance their agenda, which impede NATO expansion and the EU enlargement. Therefore, the current enlargement strategy should be revised to address problems faced by Western Balkan countries and most importantly, EU Member States should not politicize enlargement process by exerting their veto power during accession process. A credible enlargement approach needs to be adopted where rules and principles are clearly set.

Keywords: Credible and Effective Enlargement policy, EU Conditionality, Western Balkan countries.

Introduction

The EU enlargement policy is defined as the process of 'gradual and formal horizontal institutionalization of organizational rules and norms' (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005, p.5). It is considered as the most effective tool of the EU in spreading democracy, the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and other values on which the EU is founded. In 2004, the EU succeeded to transform Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) from communist regimes to modern, well-functioning market economy and functional democracies. Despite high expectations of EU as a 'transformative' (Grabbe, 2004) or 'normative' power (Manner, 2002), such success was not replicated in the case of the Western Balkan countries (WBc).

The European integration has become both a journey and final destination for the WB countries. After the cold war, the EU policy towards the WBc was ambiguous and this region

was a European question. Security matters represented a major challenge to the stability of the region and for the Union itself. Bosnian conflict revealed the incapacity of the EU to manage the conflict in its own backyard due to the lack of political unity (Skara, 2014, 26). It was only after the decisive involvement of the United State of America (USA) and starting of the implementation of the Dayton agreement that relations were normalized. It was assumed that the region would make steps forward in terms of democracy, stability and economic development.

However, the Kosovo conflict showed once again the lack of EU capability to deal with security matters in the Western Balkans (WB) due to the EU Member States reservation about the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This conflict played an important role in developing a strategy for the WB. Until that time, the WB was seen as a foreign policy of the EU dealing more in terms of aid rather than offering a membership perspective as in the case of CEECs. Only after the lessons learned in the Balkan crises, did the EU start to develop a more comprehensive strategy that was in tune with the goals of the EU to export peace and prosperity to the WB with the eventual aim of full membership: namely Stabilization and Association Process (SAP).

As the name of the strategy shows, the EU policy toward the WBc has been characterized as standing between two alternatives, those of ‘containing’ and ‘transforming’ (Balfour, 2008). The deployment of civilian and military troops has contributed to preventing possible inter-ethnic tensions and conflict in the region. So far, the EU has deployed in total 6 civilian and military mission; 4 completed and 2 still ongoing (Skara, 2014, 30 - 35). On the other hand, the EU ‘transformative’ or ‘normative’ power has failed to bring the WBc closer to the EU, save the case of Croatia. Some authors argue that such failures are attributed to domestic factors, which have undermined and delayed the EU transformative power (Elbasani, 2013).

This paper aims to analyze the effectiveness of the EU strategy toward the WBc. The analysis shows that transformative power has not been replicated in the case of the WBc. Save Croatia, which joined in 2013, all other WBc countries are backsliding on the rule of law, media freedoms, and democratic accountability. State capture and the growth of corrupt patronage networks are becoming more present. The paper argues that lack of the EU to become a ‘transformative power’ in the WBc hinders the risk of this region to return to authoritarianism and opens ‘Pandora box’ for non EU actors to advance their agenda which impede NATO expansion and EU enlargement. Therefore, the current enlargement strategy should be revised to address problems faced by the WBc and most importantly, the EU Member States should not politicize enlargement process to advance their political agenda. A ‘credible and effective enlargement policy’ for opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania needs to be adopted where rules and principles are set clearly. It remains to be seen under German European Council its success.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I set forth the EU strategy toward the WBc, which is characterized between stabilization of the regions after bloody conflicts and transformation toward the EU integration. Then, I analyze the effectiveness of the EU conditionality to Europeanize the WBc (section 3), which is undermined by non-EU actors (section 4). The fifth section provides a discussion whether the EU enlargement methodology should be changed and what consequences will have for these countries. Finally, the paper provides a conclusion.

A Strategy for Western Balkan Countries: From Stabilization to Integration

Security matters represented a major challenge to the stability of the region and for the Union itself. On June 28, 1991 the then foreign Minister of Luxemburg, Jack Poos, made a statement declaring ‘...if one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem. This is a European country and it is not up to the Americans. It is not up to anyone else’ (Skara, 2014, 29). The creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy as a second pillar of the Maastricht Treaty assumed a more unified foreign policy. However, the lack of political unity among the 12 members of the European Community to prevent Belgrade’s military offensive against Slovenia and Croatia showed ‘Achilles’ weakness of the EU to reflect the ambition laid down in the Maastricht Treaty: an active role in the international area.

It was only after the decisive involvement of the United States of America (USA) and starting of the implementation of the Dayton Agreement that relations were normalized. It was assumed that the region would make steps forward in terms of democracy and stability. The failure to manage the Bosnian conflict and the intervention of the USA put the EU under pressure to develop a new policy with the WB.

As a starting point, the EU adopted the ‘EU Regional Approach’ in Luxembourg (October 1996), which marked ‘a new beginning for the formulation of EU policies toward the region’ (Knezović, 2009, 98) and provided substantial changes of the region through political stability, economic development, and cooperation among the countries themselves. The EU Regional Approach aimed at: i) supporting peace in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) which would serve as a starting point for ensuring stability and good neighborly relations in the region; ii) reconstruction and harmonious economic development; and iii) the cooperation of the EC with UNHCR so that refugees and displaced people could return to their country of origin (General Affairs Council, 1996).

The expectations of the EU Regional Approach were very high, but it failed due lack of sufficient financial resources (Papadimitriou, 2002, 197) and due to being limited to one or few areas (Uvalic 2001). Furthermore, relations under the EU Regional Approach were marked by ‘negative conditionality, in the form of limited contractual relations, exclusion from the Association Agreement, and in the case of Serbia, outright sanction’ (Anastasakis and Dimitar Bechev, 2003, 7). It lacked a EU membership perspective. Türkes and Göksöz have argued that:

The manner in which the conditionality applied in the case of the Western Balkans clarified the contours of a distinctly different mode of relations that EU would maintain with the region: there was no prospect for rapid membership, but the countries meeting the conditions were to be rewarded with trade concessions, financial assistance and economic cooperation on the part of the EU (2006, 676).

The escalation of violence in Kosovo in 1999 showed that the EU policy for stabilising the region was insufficient and ill conceived. Consequently, the EU officials understood that the future credibility of the EU international actorness depended on stability in the Balkans. As the High Representative for CFSP Javier Solana stated:

The experience of the Balkans has been a sobering one for the European Union. But it has, I believe also provided us with an opportunity. It is a test of our commitment to the region, to a wider Europe, and to a mature common foreign and security policy. The Balkans has shown that the European Union

can no longer remain a force for peace simply through example. It has also to be forthright in defending the basic values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law on which it is founded (2000).

By offering the perspective of EU membership, the EU attempted to dilute the role of USA in the state building process in the WBc and take responsibilities in its own backyard.

In order to prevent further war in the WBc and to move the region from stability and security to the accession process, a new strategy was introduced – Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) (General Affairs Council, 1999). Another factor that had influenced the need to develop a more sustainable policy by offering membership for the

WBc related to the role of the USA in the region. The conflict in BiH and the Kosovo war are perfect examples of the so-called ‘Clinton Doctrine’. The most explicit definition of this doctrine is provided at the Clinton’s speech that foreshadowed the decision to bomb the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Clinton stated that, ‘Where our values and our interest are at stake, and where we can make a difference, we must be prepared to do so’ (Poulain and Teleki, 2010, 28 – 29).

The SAP represent a transformative strategy for the region toward European integration by using conditionality as a ‘stick’ for the WBc to carry out the reforms toward democratization, prosperity, and peace (Commission, 2006a). In contrast to conditionality applied in the case of CEECs which referred to Copenhagen criteria (European Council, 1993), the EU conditionality in the WB ‘is a multi-dimensional instrument geared towards reconciliation, reconstruction and reform. It is regional, sub-regional and country-specific; it is economic, political, social and security-related; it is positive as well as negative’ (Anastasakis and Dimitar Bechev, 2003, 8). The conditionality imposed on the WB has relied in: i) the treaty provision article 49 of TEU; ii) the Copenhagen criteria; iii) the Regional Approach; iv) country-specific conditions to be met, laid down in the SAA, and v) conditions that aroused from Resolution 1244 of the United Nation Security Council (UNSC), the Dayton Agreement, the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Belgrade Agreement. One of the building blocks of the SAP is the contractual relationship between each country and EU; while on the other hand; the SAP encourages regional cooperation between countries themselves and with other neighboring nations. The given promise of membership was intended to transform the region from a post-conflict situation toward ‘Europeanization’. In terms of this promise, the question is not whether the WBc can join to the EU but is rather when (time) and how (what criteria have to be fulfilled).

Europeanization of the Western Balkan Countries: the EU Conditionality and its Effectiveness

Traditionally, the impact of European integration process, denoted as Europeanization, has been focused on the EU Member States. From the late 1990’s, the attention of Europeanization process shifted toward candidate countries, as the later were required to adopt not only the EU *acquis* but also principles and rules, such as democracy and rule of law, in which EU did not had competences (Sedelmeier, 2014, 825). Various studies suggested that the EU and its conditionality played an important role in successful post-communist democratization and Europeanization of public policies (Grabbe, 2002; Vachudova, 2015; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005b; Pridham, 2005). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, in their article have argued that the effectiveness of EU conditionality on compliance depended on four factors: i) the determinacy and consistency of EU conditions;

ii) the size and speed of rewards; iii) the credibility of accession; iv) the size of adoption costs (2004, 664).

In the case of the WbC, the membership perspective remains very high. Since 2003, the European Council declared that ‘the future of the Balkans is within the European Union’ (European Council, 2003). Such political statement made by heads of state or government was a clear promise once the WbC would fulfil Copenhagen criteria and other conditions set forth in the SAP. Ten years later, only Croatia succeeded to join the EU. At the same time, the EU has provided financial assistance to improve economic capacities of the WbC (Skara, 2014, 38). For the period 2000 – 2006, under the CARDS instruments, the EU allocated around EUR 4.65 billion (Council Regulation 2666/2000). In 2006, the IPA I program replaced CARDS instrument and provided a budget of € 11.5 billion for the period 2007 – 2013 focusing on following goals: i) strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law; ii) reforming public administration; iii) carrying out economic reforms; and iv) fostering regional cooperation as well as reconciliation and reconstruction, and alignment of domestic legal system with EU *acquis* (Council Regulation 1085/2006, Arts 2 and 26). For the period 2013 – 2020, IPA II allocated a budgeted around € 11.7 billion (Regulation 231/2014, Arts 2 and 15).

In terms of the *determinacy and consistency of the EU conditionality*, the enlargement strategy has been upgraded several times by embodying lessons learned through previous enlargement, especially Bulgarian, Rumania and Croatia. Firstly, after the successful accession of the CEECs in 2004 and the failure of the European Constitution in 2005, the European Commission published the 2006 Enlargement Strategy that gave Member States control over the enlargement policy (Hillion, 2010, 18). This shift towards a more restrictive policy came as a result of experience with the newcomers, especially Romania and Bulgaria and the failure of the Constitutional Treaty (Commission, 2006b, 3-4). Secondly, experiencing problems with Croatia negotiation related with the implementation of laws and rule of law, in 2011, the Commission upgraded its enlargement strategy. The upgrade concerned with the role of Member States expert to monitor the benchmark (Commission, 2011, 6). The purpose was ‘to improve the quality of the negotiations, by providing incentives for the candidate countries to undertake necessary reforms at an early stage’ (Commission, 2006b, 6).

Thirdly, in 2013, the EU adopted a more comprehensive approach by emphasizing the political criteria related to democracy, rule of law and human rights and reforms in economic sphere (Commission, 2013). Such changes reflected lessons learned from the negotiations with Croatia and understanding that chapters 23 ‘Judiciary and Fundamental Rights’ and 24 ‘Justice, Freedom and Security’ were too important to address from the beginning of the negotiations as these countries have been experiencing problems with democracy, rule of law and human rights (Dimitrova, 2016, 10). In contrast to previous accession rounds, Chapters 23 and 24 would be open in the beginning of the negotiation and would not be closed until the end of negotiations. With regards to economic sphere, the EU’s approach increasingly focuses on structural economic reforms, competitiveness, and fundamentals of economic governance programs (Commission, 2013, 4-5). To facilitate these reforms, the Commission provided a detailed framework for political and economic reforms including progress evaluation, monitoring, and financial and technical assistance.

Again, in 2015, the Commission introduced a strengthened approach to its assessment in the annual reports (Commission, 2015, 4). Firstly, the new approach provides even clearer

guidance for what the countries are expected to do in both the short and long term. Secondly, besides reporting on the progress achieved, the new approach put much more emphasis on the state of play and their preparedness for taking on the obligations of membership. A harmonized assessment scale was introduced to assess both the state of play and the level of progress. The clear language and harmonized assessment scale of preparedness was meant to give a new impetus of EU enlargement process and encourage the WBc to compete with each other in fulfillment of vital reforms (Dimitrova, 2016, 11).

Finally, in 2018, Commission published a new enlargement strategy to reinvigorate the process. It qualified EU perspective of Membership for the WBc as ‘a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values’ (Commission 2018, 1). For the first time, beyond diplomatic language used in the EU Progress Report, the Commission acknowledged lack of progress and established that all ‘the countries show clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests’ (Commission, 2018, 3). Moreover, Commission added that ‘none of the Western Balkans can currently be considered a functioning market economy nor to have the capacity to cope with the competitive pressure and market forces in the union’ (ibid, 3).

Another factor of the effectiveness of EU conditionality is *credibility of the EU membership*, which depends on both on: i) a credible threat to withhold the membership if the conditions are not fulfilled; and ii) a credible membership perspective if the conditions are met. The upgraded enlargement strategy was to make enlargement more credible for EU Member States and push WBc toward domestic reforms. On the contrary, the WBc face lower credibility of the EU membership due to: i.) EU citizen’s perceptions and ii) EU Member States behavior (referring to Article 49 TEU as a weapon for ‘nationalization of enlargement policy’.

Firstly, Eurobarometer survey shows a decrease of the enthusiasm of EU citizens toward future enlargement of EU. In the 2019 Eurobarometer survey, 42% of the respondents at the EU opposed for the future enlargement. Opposition majorly comes from Netherland (60%), France (58%), Austria and Germany (57%), Belgium and Denmark (56%) (Commission 2018, T 87). This decrease of enthusiasm has been reflected as well in the WBc. Compared to 27 percent in 2014, according to the data from the 2018 Balkan Barometer, only 12 percent of respondents today foresee their economy joining the EU as early as 2020. Overall, 26 percent of citizens in the Western Balkans believe their country will never join the EU, with particularly high rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina (39 percent) and Serbia (32 percent) (Regional Cooperation Council, 2018, 52).

Members States’ control over future enlargement has been strengthened through the interpretation and implementation of the application procedure foreseen in Article 49 (1) TEU.

Since 2009 when Commission recommended opening the negotiations, the advancement of North Macedonia – at that time FYROM –has been blocked by the Greece veto concerning the name dispute. In 2009, the Albanian submitted an application for candidate status. Germany held up the decision arguing the approval by

German Bundestag. Only after consultation with German Bundestag, did Germany invite the Commission to prepare an opinion report and to apply the procedure under Article 49 (1) TEU (Hillion, 2010, 24). Similarly, on 22 July 2016 the Albanian parliament voted in favor of constitutional amendments regarding the judicial system, which complied with the 5 key

priorities set by the EC. It was supposed that Albanian will start negotiations but instead, German Bundestag announced to block the start of negotiations as long as certain judicial and political reforms were not made (Independent Balkan News Agency, 2016).

While the case of Greece and Germany mentioned above relate to interpretation and implementation of the application procedure (Art 49 TEU), France has changed its Constitutional rules vis-à-vis the ratification of the Accession Treaty. According to Article 49 (2) TEU, the Accession Treaty will be negotiated and concluded by the Member states and the applicant state and then ratified in accordance with the constitutional requirements. Article 88 – 5 of the French Constitution stipulates that any future accession of the candidates' countries to the EU will be determined by a referendum. This article is not applicable to accessions that 'result from an Intergovernmental Conference whose meeting was decided by the European Council before July 1, 2004' (French Constitutional Act no. 2008-724 of 23 July 2008, Art 47). Overall, Member States control over enlargement process – be either Treaty interpretation provision or accession referendums - increase the number of veto players and make future enlargement uncertain.

The fourth factor depends to *the capacity of candidate countries* whether target governments have capacities to meet the EU's conditions and comply to transfer more than 80,000 pages of EU acquis and ensure its proper implementation (Leonard, 2005, 45; Toshkov, 2008, 380). Even in the case that candidate country enjoys sufficient administrative resources to implement EU acquis, still may face adoption cost which obstruct the process. Adoption costs are generally political in nature in the sense that they depend on the preferences of government or other actors for EU implementation of norms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, 666-667).

All the WbC have signed Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and are required to approximate their domestic and future legislation in line with the EU acquis and ensure proper implementation. This in turn, requires both financial and administrative resources. Currently, in terms of economic performance, the WbC are characterized by low level of economic growth, high level of unemployment, informal economy, trade deficits and slow liberalization of the market (Osbold and Bartlett, 2019, 5-6; The World Bank and WIIW, 2020, 13-15). Moreover, according to the World Bank, the WbC is expected to enter a recession in 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 (The World Bank 2020). On the other hand, the public sector is characterised by the politicization of bureaucracy, uneven distribution of human resources, ineffective law enforcement and high level of corruption (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019, 28; Hajdini and Skara, 2017, 54 – 59; Linotte, 2019).

Unlike the accession of CEECs where adoption costs related to Eurosceptic parties in government or in parliament (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019, 29), new types of domestic player appear in the WbC and at certain moments, these factor have reduced both the willingness and capacity to implement EU acquis (Börzel, 2013, 173) or have had produced deadlock with regards to EU accession. The most prominent example is the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, which had led Greece to block the start of accession negotiations from 2009 until 2018 with Prespa Agreement. Additionally, the non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by several EU Member States may also block Serbia's accession.

While membership credibility appears to be high, internal domestic challenges of the WBs seems to dilute the transformative power.

As the analysis shows, the EU conditionality applied by the EU in the WbC has become more stringent

compared with CEECs. Moreover, enlargement fatigue, increasing euro skepticism, Brexit and recently COVID-19 have made the prospect of EU membership uncertain. This in turn has opened the possibility of non-EU foreign actor to have a presence in the WBc. As HR/VP Federica Mogherini stated in a press conference asked about Russian interference, ‘the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played’ (EEAS, 2017).

The Western Balkan as a Chessboard for non-EU Actors

Following the wars in the 1990s, the EU increased its influence in the region through offering financial aids to undertake the necessary reforms and later, offering the prospective of EU membership. Montenegro applied for accession in 2008. Since June 2012 when negotiations started, Montenegro has opened all EU *acquis* chapter and closed only three chapter. Serbia applied for accession in 2009 and started negotiation in 2014. So far, Serbia has opened 18 out of 35 EU *acquis* chapter and provisionally closed only two (European Western Balkans, 2020). In the best scenario, Serbia and Montenegro, as the frontrunners, will be EU members by 2025 (Juncker, 2017, 32). North Macedonia applied for accession in 2004. Since 2005 when became an official candidate, North Macedonia has not been allowed to start negotiations due to name dispute with Greece. Albanian applied for membership in 2009 and so far has not started negotiations. Kosovo and BiH are facing internal stalemates and contested statehood.

In this context, tired with long waiting to become EU member and plagued by high unemployment and social discontent, the WBc are exposed by other non EU actors that have long histories with the region (Russia and Turkey) or relatively newcomer’s actors which lately their engagement is seen as a potential threat to the liberal values and democratization process induced by EU enlargement perspective (China and the Gulf States). As a common denominator, all these countries use a variety of tools, exerting economic, political, military, cultural and religious leverages over the WBc. While some political elites and experts tend to observe their increasing influence with great suspicion, other see as an opportunity to build up infrastructure, energy projects or to establish special partnership as a leverage for delayed membership.

Russia and Turkey are traditional player involved in the region. Both countries have considerable political, economic, historical and cultural stakes in the country. For Russia, the Western Balkan region is not a sphere of vital interest but, it is symbolically important to assert its power in a region. In 1990, as Jarosław Wiśniewski emphasizes, ‘many in Russia viewed the fall of Yugoslavia as an example of humiliation, where the West ignored Moscow’s views – and the post-Soviet world first saw the blueprint for “color revolutions” (Wiśniewski, 2016). Only after Putin consolidated its political power and strengthened Russian’s global position, he used Kosovo independence to maintain its leverage with Belgrade and ‘as his justification for asserting Russia’s power by fighting in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014’ (Wiśniewski, 2016). Thus, for Russia, the Western Balkan is a region where it can extend its global power.

According to European Commission, in 2017, major Western Balkan trade partner is the EU with 47.558 EUR million, followed by China (3.717 EUR million), Russia (3.103 EUR Million) and Turkey (2.830 EUR million). As table 1 shows, Russia’s biggest partner is Serbia, BiH, North Macedonia and in the end Albania. While Russia lags far behind in terms

of financial terms compared to EU, a survey conducted in 2015 found that ‘47% of respondents believed that Russia provides more financial aid than EU’ (Bechev, 2017). Only for the period between 2000 and 2013, the EU contributed €3.5 billion in grants; whereas Russia has only committed to extend a loan of \$338m to the Serbian railways (Bechev, 2017). Main reason of the misperception relates to the Russian outlet operating in Serbia since 2015. Russian *Sputnik* news service provides free content in Serbian languages, making it more likely for local media agencies to republish Russian-friendly news, often without verification. This in turn has increased Russian support from 47.8% to 60 % in June 2017 (Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate 2018, 82).

Table 1: Major Western Balkan Trade Partners in 2017 (EUR million)

	EU	China	Russia	Turkey
Serbia	22,278	1,689	2,322	1,041
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9,642	624	511	601
North Macedonia	8,236	446	173	371
Albania	4,768	465	97	423
Kosovo	1,412	283		301
Montenegro	1,222	210		93
Total	47,558	3,717	3,103	2,830

Source: Aydıntaşbaş 2019, 15.

Also, Moscow has been able to play an opportunistic spoiler in the WbC by approaching political elite or impeding NATO and the EU enlargement, by using very little political and economic capital. The most pronounced example is BiH, where Moscow has supported vocally Milorad Dodik, the *de facto* leader of Republika Srpska, considered as most solid ally in the Balkans (Bassuener, 2019, 8). Concerning NATO and EU expansion, in 2014, during the discussion at UN Security Council to extend for another year the mandate of EUFOR, Vitaly Churkin Russia’s Ambassador to the UN agreed on the mission important role and made it clear that Russia is ‘against having an international presence in the field of security that could be viewed as an instrument to accelerate the integration for the country into the European Union and NATO’ (DW, 2014). Recently, after the negative decision by French President Emmanuel Macron to veto a date for the start of EU accession negotiations between Albania and North Macedonia, Russia’s Permanent Representative to the EU Vladimir Chizhov invited Albania and North Macedonia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as an alternative of the EU. During the Eurasian Economy Forum, Russian diplomat noted that ‘I am sure that the countries, which are candidates for EU membership and have recently been “put on ice” by Brussels, could find more understanding in the Eurasian Economic Union’ (European Western Balkan, 2019a).

As far as Turkey, after the end of Cold War and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Turkey foreign policy toward the WbC has changed profoundly from defensive realpolitik to the approach ‘zero problem with the neighbors’ and ‘win – win’ politics (Mitrovic, 2014, 9). In the end of 1980s and early 1990s, Turkey started to restructure its foreign policy from ‘being the tail end of Europe into the center of its own newly emerging world’ (EGF, 2013, 6). Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Turkey engaged diplomatically on behalf of Bosnia Muslims in international organization. In 1992, Turkey organized a dedicated special meeting for the Bosnian conflict at the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Also, it presented a ‘Action Plan’ for Bosnia at UN Security Council and participated in the London conference

organized by EC concerning the situation in Bosnia (Mitrovic, 2014, 31). After Bosnia war (1992 – 1995), Turkey joined multilateral force to maintain peace and security in Bosnia; a country where Muslim population suffered mostly (Chrzová, 2019, 11). During Kosovo conflict and the quest for independence as well as prolonged time for name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece, Turkey extended its influence in the WBs striving for a mediator role in the region (Vračić, 2016,8).

As AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey begun to intensify its relations with the WBc in two lines: i) promoting culture, religion and education with the WB countries with Muslim population (Bosnia, Kosovo, Albanian and to some extent North Macedonia) and ii) intensifying economic relations with non-Muslim population countries (Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Ahmet Davutoğlu, the mastermind of Turkey's new Balkan foreign policy, in his famous book, *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, provided the basis and principles of new Turkish policy which shaped profoundly the approach with the WBc. Davutoğlu took geography as being the first determinant of foreign policy, and history as second, particularly stressing the significant number of Turks with Balkan origin and people from Balkan countries living in Turkey (Mitrovic, 2014, 9; Vračić, 2016).

In the beginning, Turkey paid particular attention to the enhancement of cultural, religious and educational linkages with two Muslims communities of the region: Bosnia and Albania. To enhance its Islamic influence in the Muslim population areas, Turkey has used several state institutions. Firstly, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*TIKA*) has financed the restoration of several Ottoman period monuments and several mosques in the areas populated by Muslims (TIKA, 2013). Another institution very active is the Yunus Emre Foundation, a public foundation whose task is to promote Turkey and its language, history, culture and art. The Yunus Emre Foundation has opened offices across the region (Yunus Emre Institute, 2020), offering Turkish course attended by thousands of students in the region (Vračić, 2016, 13). Finally, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which is an official public whose task is to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, ethics of Islam and administer the sacred worshipping places, has provided religious education and facilities for the Muslim communities. *Diyanet* is financing the project of the “Central Mosque” in Kosovo with an estimated cost of \$35- \$40 million and at the same time is financing to build a similar mosque on a 10,000-square-meter parcel in the center of Tirana (Ben-Meir and Xharra, 2018).

Additional to promotion of its Islamic agenda to the Muslim population areas, economic interest came to the fore. According to Meir and Xharra, trade between Turkey and the WBc increased from \$430 million in 2002 to \$3 billion in 2016. Interestingly, roughly one-third of this trade was with Serbia (Ben-Meir and Xharra, 2019). While Turkey supports integration of the WBc both with the EU and at Euro-Atlantic level (Commission, 2010, 37), various academician or politician fears whether Turkey's shift toward more authoritarian rule would have a negative impact on the region.

As for China, the WBc are geographically strategic for the Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, in 2012, China launched the 16+1 initiative for cooperation with the countries of Central and South Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Seven years later, in Dubrovnik Summit, the 16+1 initiative extended to Greece (now 17+1 minus Kosovo), which previously had observer status. During the summit, China signed approximately 40 bilateral agreements with partner countries, which included the opening of credit lines between the China Development Bank and Hungary worth €500

million, Croatia worth €300 million, Romania worth €100 million, Bulgaria worth €300 million, and Serbia worth €25 million (Jakóbowski and Seroka, 2019).

While 16+1 initiative with EU Members States is channeled within China – EU dialogue, China supports the EU integration of the WbC. The partnership is seen only in economic terms: as an opportunity to provide entrance to the European market. Using the need of the WbC for infrastructure and connectivity, China is acting in the WbC as an investor, disposing billions of dollars in the form of low interest to finance the building of transport infrastructure, heavy industry and energy projects (Tonchev, 2017). Covering about 85% of the capital, these loans are offered on favorable conditions with long maturity period (around 20 years) and low interest rates (of around 2%) (ibid, 4). So far, Beijing has announced the reconstruction of a Belgrade–Budapest railway; the construction of the Bar–Boljare highway (connecting Montenegro and Serbia); the construction of a highway between Albania and Montenegro; and the construction of highways within Albania, Bosnia and North Macedonia (Tonchev, 2017, 2-3; Zeneli, 2019). Recently, of particular importance is the Huawei Chinese company involvement in the 5G in Albania through a partnership with Vodafone Albania. Immediately after the announcement of the partnership, US Embassy reacted opposing the threats that may come from 5G (Albania News, 2019). Few days later, Albanian government decided to withdraw from the project and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with US Government on 4G and 5G (Tirana Times, 2019).

Finally, the Gulf States – primarily Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Kuwait - represent another player in the region. The involvement of the Gulf States can be tracked back during dissolution of Yugoslavia when helped Muslim fellows with financial aid to purchase arms, volunteers' fighter and supplying humanitarian aid (Hänsel and Feyerabend, 2018, 7). Once the war ended (Bosnia and later in Kosovo), many religious foundations became involved in constructing mosque, schools and spreading Wahabi interpretation of Islam which served as a connection with transnational Islamic terrorism like Al Qaida or Islamic State (IS) (ibid, 7).

The influence of the Gulf States is not limited only on the religious aspects or only to the Muslim population countries. The Gulf States have made substantial investment to other non-Muslim countries in the area of construction, agriculture, defense and aviation (Rustemi et al., 2019, 37-87). The two most iconic cases invested by the Gulf States are without doubt the 'Belgrade Waterfront' and 'Buroj Ozene City'. The first is a US \$3 billion project by *Eagle Hills*, an Abu Dhabi-based company, for the redevelopment of the 1.8 million m² site of the Sava riverbank in Belgrade, with the construction of 5,700 homes to accommodate 14,000 people, eight hotels comprising in total 2,200 rooms, the largest shopping mall in the Balkans which includes 140,000 square metre and a 200-meter-high tower (Bartlett et al., 2017, 103-104). The second project, *The Buroj Ozene City*, is a US \$2.5 billion project by Buroj Property Development, a Dubai-based company, for the construction of a tourist city in Trnovo, Bosnia, that would contain thousands of housing units, luxurious hotels, a shopping mall and a hospital (Brunwasser, 2016). Also, Abu Dhabi Fund for development provided EUR36.7 million concessionary loan for development of Tirana-Elbasani road project, of which €13.9 m was disbursed in 2012 (Bartlett et al., 2017, 99).

In conclusion, as the EU shifts its attention to WbC, the influence of these countries became more obviously. The WbC political elite in several public speeches, indirectly, have emphasized the possibility to focus their strategy toward non-EU countries as long as the EU does not provide the promised EU perspective. Therefore, considering the lack of progress of

the WBc to fulfill accession criteria, the enlargement strategy should be revised to make accession more credible.

Revision of the EU Enlargement Methodology and Uncertain future

In June 2018, the Council suggested to open accession negotiation with Macedonia and Albania by June 2019 (General Secretariat of the Council, 2019). However, in the last Brussels summit (October 2019), the French President Macron, vetoed the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The EU Member States were divided among themselves whether the veto should be for both candidate countries. The French leader was alone in rejecting Macedonia after successfully resolving a 27-year-old dispute over the Macedonia's name in 2018 by signing the Prespa Agreement, that led to Macedonia changing its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. While in the case of Albania, Macron was supported by the leaders of Denmark and the Netherlands (ESI Report, 2020, 4). Macron defended its decision arguing that the EU should focus on getting its own house in order before considering new members. In Macron words, this momentum 'is a dispute about vision' and 'the enlargement rules need reform' (Bechev, 2019).

Macron veto had two unintended consequences. Firstly, a day later after refusal, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev called for early elections and resigned. Such decision jeopardized the North Macedonia stability. During the electoral campaigning, VMRO-DPMNE has promised to annul the Prespa Agreement with Greece (Shqiptarja.com, 2020) and would have consequences for the entire region if the conservative-nationalist VMRO-DPMNE parties win elections (Santora, 2019).

Secondly, the French veto opened a political debate on enlargement policy (Delevic and Prelec, 2020). Considered by the then European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker as a 'historic mistake' (European Western Balkans, 2019b), on 15 November 2019, French government circulated to EU diplomats a six-page letter on the 'gradual association' of the WBc, which was the basis for a 'reformed approach to the [EU] accession process' (Politico.eu, 2019). Reaffirming 'unequal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries' which 'belong to Europe by virtue of their history, culture and geography', the French paper justified Macron's veto emphasizing that the past 20 years of EU intervention in the Western Balkans had yielded 'too slow' progress and 'insufficient benefits' for its people.

Pursuant to French proposal and the call of several experts and think tanks to revise the EU enlargement methodology (ESI Report, 2020; Kacarska, 2019; Delevic and Prelec, 2020), on 5 February 2020, the Commission published its new methodology (Commission, 2020a). As stated by the European Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, the purpose of revised methodology is to 're-establish a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' (Commission, 2020b).

The new enlargement methodology consists on a more credible process built on trust, mutual confidence and clear commitment by both the EU and the WBc.

The proposal suggests the reinforcement of credibility through even stronger fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law; functioning of democratic institutions and public institution and market economy. According to the Commission, the

political nature of accession process requires a strong political steer and engagement at the

highest levels. Therefore, the Commission proposes to increase the involvement of high level political and policy dialogue through EU and WBc in a form of a summit or ministerial meetings. Additionally, Member States should be involved in monitoring and reviewing processes. Involvement of high political actors or experts from Member States may politicize the accession talks and put into the question the credibility of the Commission's technical assessments. However, it remains to be seen in the future. The third principle is a more dynamic process. Instead of French proposal suggesting 7 stages, Commission proposes to group the negotiation chapters in 6 thematic clusters. Negotiation on the fundamentals would be open in the beginning. Each cluster will be open as a whole and the Commission proposes a timeframe to open and close the cluster. Finally, the Commission will provide more clarity on the rewards expected in different stages of process and negative consequences when no progress has been achieved.

The revised methodology remains silent on the reversibility of the process, as proposed by French government, for the candidate countries, which no longer meets certain criteria or ceases to fulfill the commitments undertaken (Politico.eu, 2019). Furthermore, the revised methodology left open the issue whether Serbia and Montenegro will follow this strategy or to continue with the old one. It remains to be seen whether new rules will satisfy France and confirm the European perspectives, or whether Albania and North Macedonia have to spend more time in 'waiting room'.

On 1 July 2020, Commission presented to the Council draft negotiating frameworks for both Albania and North Macedonia, laying out the guidelines and principles for their accession talks. The draft negotiating framework is divided into three parts: i) principles governing the accession negotiations, ii) substance of the negotiations, and iii) negotiations procedure (Commission, 2020c). The ultimate goal of negotiations is the adoption of the EU *acquis* in its entirety and ensuring full implementation.

Conclusion

The EU enlargement policy of EU towards the WBc shows the complex relationship characterized by the two main driving forces of maintaining security within the region and transforming the region through achieving economic prosperity and growth. Both of these forces are interrelated and overlap with each other. The EU has deployed several civilian and military missions aiming to maintain security and help these countries in state building processes. In this regard, the EU policy for the region is twofold: the stabilization of the region in terms of security, and the accession of these countries to the EU. For this reason, the EU introduced SAP, which deals with these two issues and is specially designed to stabilize and strengthen security in the region and to make accession more likely.

On the other hand, association of the countries in the EU is linked with conditionality, aiming to enhance democratic reforms, market economy, good governance and legal approximation, with the ultimate aim of reaching EU standards and being admitted into EU.

In the case of WBc, lack of the EU to replicate the 'transformative power' in the WBc hinders the risk of this region to return to authoritarianism. The paper argued that all WBc are losing ground on the rule of law, media freedoms, and democratic accountability. State capture, erosion of independent media, and the growth of corrupt patronage networks are omnipresent. Also, a disagreement over regional cooperation exists among WBc leaders.

Recently, the North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania came up with the idea of a Mini-Schengen. The initiative aims at creating a free trade and free-travel zone between the three countries by 2021 (European Western Balkan, 2019c). On the same day, the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci wrote a status on his official Facebook page arguing that the initiative is meaningless since neither Serbia nor BiH recognize Kosovo as an independent state. With the new Kosovo Prime Minister Hoti, it is questionable whether the 'mini-Schengen' idea will succeed. It is obvious that without clear prospects of EU membership, the WbC could very well shy away from the EU.

Furthermore, the ambiguity of EU strategy toward WbC exposes the region to other non-EU actors like Russia, Turkey, China, and several Persian Gulf states which are exerting greater economic, political and religion influence in the Western Balkans. The EU needs to follow a credible approach with the WbC and most importantly, to give the WbC government a sense of certainty of future accession based on clear criteria. If the region remains in the 'waiting room', an alliance with Turkey and Russia will become more attractive than waiting indefinitely to become part of the EU. Consequently, EU membership should be based on its own merits principle and not be considered as a bureaucracy issue or left in the hand of Member States to assert their veto power.

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