

THE FUTURE OF THE BALKANS IS IN EUROPE WHAT ABOUT THE PAST AND THE PRESENT?

This article examines the current dynamics of the EU enlargement process towards the Western Balkan countries. Despite the fact that this region has historically been an integral part of Europe and the EU's reassurance to eventually integrate the Western Balkan states, several problems remain. With the exception of Croatia, that will become an official EU member state in 2013, all the other Western Balkan countries still face significant political, economic, administrative and diplomatic problems, and are not ready to join the EU. On the other hand, EU's enlargement fatigue and the current economic crisis have further complicated the situation.

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Despite the fact that the EU has not turned into the “United States of Europe”¹, it has become a leading international actor in a rather short period of time, which created the need to formulate and implement its own foreign policy. The main pillars of EU’s foreign policy are based on: moral obligations that frame the relations between member states and their overseas territories and past colonies – which have played a crucial role for the accumulation of wealth in Europe; history and culture; economic interests; transatlantic relations; enlargement-based relations with various countries at the EU’s periphery.²

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EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is summed up in the Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in 2009 which states the EU’s intention “[...] to implement a common foreign and security policy including the progressive framing of a common defence policy, which might lead to a common defence in accordance with the provisions of

Article 42, thereby reinforcing the European Identity and its independence in order to promote peace, security and progress in Europe and in the world.”³

Therefore, the EU’s Balkans policy –some call it external/foreign while some others internal/domestic– can be best captured by the phrase “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”⁴ There is nothing wrong with this expression as long as some historical and cultural facts will be taken into account.

A glance at the Balkan Peninsula brings to one’s attention several typical characteristics of this troubled region, such as the existence of a Balkan nation whose people still celebrate a battle which was fought (and lost) in a location that is beyond their present boundaries and pay respect to their leader King Lazar (now a Saint) who has fallen nearly seven centuries ago – Sultan Murad who led the Turkish forces to victory in that battle was also killed on the same field and is buried there. The Serbs are proud of the fact that one of their forefathers, Sokullu Mehmet Paşa or Mehmet Paşa Sokoloviç, had made his way up to the highest administrative position of the “hated invaders”, namely the Ottoman Empire. The Serbs are among some Balkan nations who refer to Istanbul as “Carigrad” –

¹ The expression was used for the first time by Sir Winston Churchill in his famous speech at the University of Zurich (19 September 1946).

² Funda Tezok, *Bir Türk Diplomatinin Gözüyle Avrupa Bütünleşmesi [European integration through the eyes of a Turkish diplomat]* (Istanbul: Bülke Yayıncılık, 2002), pp. 115-6.

³ 2007/C 306/01, *Official Journal of the European Union*, Vol. 50, December 2007, p. C 83/16.

⁴ EU – Western Balkans Summit Declaration, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003.

which can be expressed as “Imperial City” or Capital– as if they were still awaiting guidance from the “Sublime Porte”.

Further South, Macedonia and Greece quarrel over a name –both claiming that their position is based on solid historical and cultural facts– which has become an international issue affecting the former’s Euro-Atlantic integration. Another Balkan nation claims to be the founder of the first (still existing) state in the Balkans and maybe in Europe. The same people proudly affirm that their forefathers played a crucial role in the dawning of the Slavonic culture and identity by introducing the Cyrillic alphabet. Additionally, the Balkans are obliged to live with Kosovo’s unresolved status – which has declared its independence in 2008 but has not been recognized by five EU member states among others. Finally, Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-H) is another case where tension and mistrust among its ethnic communities still haunts the country. Last but not least, one Balkan country –which also gave the Continent its name– is acknowledged as the cradle of Western Civilization.

The Balkan peninsula is also the only region in Europe which accomodates predominantly Muslim countries. At first glance, this should have complicated the region’s relations with the EU since the latter has the tendency to identify Christianity as its “binding force”. These worries, however, are groundless because the people of these countries –as well as their representatives– have shown no inclination to abandon their secular way of living. In fact, Lord Ashdown, who served as the International Community’s High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina until 2006, argued: “we have an asset in the West Balkans that we do not sufficiently value and that is European Islam. It is not Islam as we see it on the streets of our cities and in Bradford, a generation or two generations old; it is Islam that goes back 400 years, quintessentially European in its nature [...]”⁵

One more feature worth mentioning is that –with the exception of Bulgaria where the defunct King had the opportunity to become Prime Minister for two Parliamentary terms– the Monarchy seems to have left this area for good.

The complex situation in the Balkans is also the result of its strategic location which made the area a battleground between the Ottomans, Habsburgs and later the Romanovs who set to dominate the Peninsula, each one using as a pretext the spread of the “Word of God”. Consequently, the region’s destiny has been determined from distant centers such as Vienna, Paris, Istanbul and Berlin for centuries.⁶ Nowadays, it seems that they have been replaced by Turkey, the EU (with Germany at the forefront) and the Russian Federation.

⁵ Adele Brown and Michael Attenborough, “EU Enlargement: The Western Balkans”, Research Paper submitted to the House of Commons, No. 07/27, (March 2007), p. 9.

⁶ One exception to these locations would be Sremski Karlovci, a small town next to Belgrade, where the Ottoman Empire for the first time in history lost ground in the Balkans (and in Europe) as a result of a Peace Treaty signed on 26 January 1699.

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The picture would be incomplete if the U.S., which is the only political, economic and military superpower, was left out. In fact, it can be said that the U.S. was in a sense “dragged in” after the failure of the UN/EU to stop the massacres and bloodshed in Bosnia and shortly afterwards when it took the decision to intervene in Kosovo in order to prevent the repetition of the Bosnian tragedy.⁷

So here we have an area where troubles, worries and suspicions about internal and external factors still persist. On the other hand, whatever their differences, the people of this uneasy area seem to want a “EU membership perspective” and have the U.S. support for this prospect.

Bringing the Balkans back to Europe

Having briefly explained what the EU is facing concerning the integration of the Balkans, we also need to examine what it has done about it. Going back a few decades ago –when Europe was trying to recover from two devastating World Wars that caused death and destruction beyond anybody’s imagination– we come across the fact that the “Marshall Plan” was originally devised as a tool to save two Balkan nations, namely Greece and Turkey, from falling into “communist hands”.⁸

A few decades later, Greece became the first Balkan country that joined the European Community. This development significantly affected trade between Greece and the other Balkan countries –whose economies were primarily dependent on agriculture– especially since Greece was obliged to abide by the rules dictated by the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).⁹

This along with some other developments, that affected the economic and political well-being of their nationals, obliged the Balkan as well as some other Eastern Block countries to seek direct relations with the EU despite Moscow’s warnings. Their opening was welcomed from Brussels which saw it as an opportunity to bring the Balkans closer to the European family.

⁷ The U.S. is now regarding Kosovo as an important country they can use as a springboard in a future (co)operation with the Near and Middle East. For that purpose the “Camp Bondsteel” established to accommodate the U.S. (NATO) forces in Kosovo is humoristically mentioned as “being the only location on earth, outside the Great Wall of China, that can be clearly viewed from outer space”.

⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States – 1947*, Vol. 3, US Government Printing Office, Washington, (1972), p.197 (official publication consisting of a collection of related documents).

⁹ This refers to the Yugoslav government authorities’ complaining about the drastic drop on their country’s fresh veal exports to Greece in the 1980s.

After the fall of the Eastern Block and the collapse of the Soviet Union the openings aiming to strengthen EU relations with the Balkans gained momentum. It was clear for the EU that the political and economic integration of the Eastern Block countries –especially of the Balkans– would not be an easy task. Therefore, the Eurocrats in Berlaymont created some special programs with the aim to provide assistance for these countries’ political, social and economic re-structuring in order to help them eventually join the EU.

The first of these Programs was PHARE (Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy) that aimed to bring these countries to a political, economical and social level that would enable them to fulfill the pre-conditions for membership. PHARE was put forward in 1989 and within a few years it also covered other potential candidates like Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. The Program’s main target was the restructuring of those countries’ economic and administrative systems –giving particular attention to their administrative and legal capabilities– in order to make them able to adopt EU’s *acquis*. The program was focused on technical assistance, know-how and financial aid mostly aiming at infrastructure investments.

The PHARE was later followed by the Instrument for Structural Policies for pre-Accession (ISPA) and the Special Accession Programme for Agricultural and Rural Development (SAPARD) in conjunction with the “Agenda 2000”, which put forward “measures to reinforce the pre-accession strategy for all the applicant countries in Central and Eastern Europe for the period 2000-2006.”

This period reached its climax with the Thessaloniki Declaration of 21 June 2003 that came after the endorsement by the European Council of the “Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving Towards European Integration”, that reiterated the EU’s “unequivocal support to the perspective of the Western Balkan countries.”¹⁰ In other words the EU would welcome the accession of Western Balkan countries provided that certain conditions would be met.

To ensure the smooth functioning of the process, an “Instrument for pre-Accession Assistance” (IPA) was launched replacing the PHARE Program that had expired in 2006. The IPA envisaged pre-accession funding amounting to 11.5 billion euros for the years 2007-2013 in the following fields: transition assistance and institution building, cross-border cooperation, regional development, human resources development, rural development.

On 1 May 2004, ten countries joined the EU – a development which was met with tremendous enthusiasm by those countries’ citizens. Only a year later, the European Constitution was rejected in separate referendums in France and the

¹⁰ This expression is used to denote countries that were once part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, plus Albania.

Netherlands. This was taken as a sign that not everyone in the EU was happy about the way things were going especially with regard to enlargement.

Dismayed but not discouraged, the EU decided to go on with the enlargement process, putting more emphasis, however, on the “pull” rather than on the “push” factor.¹¹ In other words, the emphasis was put on conditionality and progress but also to the EU’s ability to accept new members. Considering all the pros and cons, the European Commission produced a new Enlargement Strategy Paper in November 2005, which was based on three key elements: regional cooperation, conditionality and tailored country strategies.

- Regional cooperation was of utmost importance and it required from the candidates to settle any bilateral disputes –no matter how deep and wide– before joining the EU.
- Conditionality called for the introduction and implementation of several political, administrative and economic reforms in order the candidate countries to eventually meet the EU standards.
- Tailored country strategies were introduced in order to ensure that the prospect of the frontrunner countries would not be negatively affected by the laggards of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) which (initiated in 1999) is an updated version of the tried and tested “carrot and stick” approach that the EU had adopted in previous enlargements to encourage reform and prepare candidates for membership.

The SAP precedes candidacy and is composed of two stages. Firstly, the candidate state is expected to build institutions and adopt reforms in order to meet the EU standards. For this purpose, it receives financial and technical assistance from the EU institutions. Once it is proven that this stage has been successfully completed, the candidate is invited to enter a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. The signing of the SAA also denotes that the particular country has entered the “Pre-accession Stage” and has earned the title of “potential candidate”. The second stage is the “Partnership Agreement”, where once more the candidate state will have to take a series of tests in order to prove its ability to fulfil the “Copenhagen Criteria” – which are the basic political and economic requirements that the potential candidates need to meet before their request for membership can be considered. Only after that can a country gain the “candidate status” and can begin negotiations on some 35 different fields.

In the meantime, the French and Dutch “No” to the EU Constitution, as well as the attitude of some other European states that expressed their dislike for the EU’s

¹¹ “Push” is used to denote the intention of the Community to extend its borders while “pull” identifies the aspiration of the non-members to accede to the EU.

rapid enlargement caused shock and disappointment to many Balkan leaders and citizens who suspected that some EU-members did not appreciate the region's importance to Europe.

In order to address these concerns, the March 2006 EU Council meeting in Salzburg reiterated that “the future of the Western Balkans lies in the EU” but mentioned that “the EU also denotes that its absorption capacity has to be taken into account.”¹²

These statements did not satisfy the concerned parties. Among them was the International Commission on the Balkans that showed its dissatisfaction by arguing that: “Regrettably at Salzburg the accession date for those in the Western Balkans aspiring to EU membership drifted into the unforeseeable future. The countries of the Western Balkans were offered never-ending accession talks. What constitutes a breach of promise is that this date will be determined not only by the readiness of the accession countries, but also by the so-called “absorption capacity” of the EU.”¹³

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The entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009 was welcomed as a positive move by all, since most of the uncertainties as to “who is going to be responsible for what?” in the EU had thus been overcome. The new institutional framework, however, needs to be analysed in order to see whether it makes the accession of new members easier. Unfortunately, almost immediately after the Lisbon Treaty, the EU was struck with one of the worst economic/financial crises of its history. The EU has taken gigantic efforts in order to rescue some of its members (especially Greece) from a complete meltdown. These efforts led to a significant re-allocation of European resources, which were originally meant to be used for other purposes. It also obliged the EU decision makers to tidy up their own household first and put some other issues aside, if only temporarily.

In the meantime, the SAP process faces challenges by the candidate states themselves. Serbia is still “not doing enough” in order to settle its differences with Kosovo, Macedonia has not been able to start accession negotiations yet because of

¹²“Salzburg EU/Western Balkans Joint Press Statement”, *Council of the European Union*, http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/declarations/88760.pdf

¹³“Statement from the International Commission on the Balkans”, *Balkan Commission*, 9 May 2006, <http://www.balkan-commission.org>

its insufficient pace of reforms and opposition from Greece while Montenegro is lagging behind in its reforms. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania face political turmoil which, in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, undermines the very existence of the country.

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The uncertainty concerning Kosovo's status remains since a solution addressing the situation in North Kosovo has not been reached. The EU can not oblige Serbia to recognise Kosovo since five of its own members are also refusing to do so – which in fact makes it impossible for Kosovo to even formally apply for membership. In the foreseeable future, it seems that the best that Kosovo might get from the EU is some kind of a "privileged

partnership", something that has been already proposed by some European leaders.¹⁴

A Few Last Words

Currently, four West Balkan countries are official candidates for EU membership. Croatia is the only country among them that has fulfilled the necessary conditions and will become a full member on 1 July 2013, while the accession negotiations with Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro have not started yet. Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are still "potential candidates", which practically means that they will not be able to join the EU in the foreseeable future. As a conciliatory move aiming to address the frustration within these countries, the EU has decided to relax visa requirements for the citizens of the candidate states in the Western Balkans. Consequently, the citizens of all the Western Balkan states can travel visa-free in the EU, a privilege which has been denied to citizens of Turkey whose "association" with the Community goes back nearly half a century.¹⁵

¹⁴ It is likely that Angela Merkel who is among the Leaders that support this idea, being from Eastern Germany, has been inspired by the privileged position enjoyed by the Deutsche Demokratische Republik in its trade relations with the Community prior to the "einheit".

¹⁵ "The Association Agreement between the Republic of Turkey and the EEC" better known as the "Ankara Agreement", signed on 12 September 1963.