

The Western Balkans: The Ultimate Test for the European Union

Written by Ajdin Perco

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AJDIN PERCO, FEB 7 2011

The region of Western Balkans consists of ex-Yugoslavian federal republics, minus Slovenia, and plus Albania. Even though it is small in size and population compared to other European regions, its complex history reflects the genuine importance and influence that it can have on European events. Once despised by Bismarck as "not worth the life of a single German soldier" and described by Churchill as "having too much history to consume", the region of Western Balkans is returning to the agenda of European politics. The transitional and post-conflictual nature of this region is still a source of possible trouble and this fact keeps the focus of the European Union and the USA firmly set on bringing the Western Balkans into the European Union and NATO fold. But the importance of this issue lies also in the fact that the European Union is determined to unite Europe, and this determination will be tested in the Western Balkans.

Will the European Union succeed in reforming one of the most complex regions in Europe, or will it fail and lose the credibility it needs to become a great power?

Twice in the 20th century, the Balkans has destabilized Europe. The first time was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which ignited World War I and turned Europe into a great battlefield. The second time was the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia that produced hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled to the European Union. It was also the war that resulted in the unthinkable atrocities and genocide committed against Bosnian Muslims and Bosniaks. This war revealed the limitation of the European Union and proved just how weak it was in its disunity and inability to stop the war. Only the firm action by the USA and the military defeat of Bosnian Serbs stopped the conflict. But it was the turning point in the perception of Balkan by the European Union. From that period onward, the European Union became interested in the Balkans for three important reasons. First, the war in the region would destabilize the European Union because it occurred on its borders. Second, if conflict occurred it would show just how weak the European Union is since it can not maintain peace even in its own "backyard". Finally, the Western Balkans is the sole remaining island of non-EU states located in the heart of Europe. Its inclusion into the European Union would complete the unification of Europe, and thereby the European Union would then be regarded as a capable and strong actor able of solving critical problems.

Up till now, the European Union efforts resulted in limited success. The closest to becoming an EU member is Croatia, with the rest and especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo lagging behind. Of all the Western Balkan's states, there is one country more than any other, which reflects the uniqueness of Balkan region. This country is Bosnia and Herzegovina with its three ethnic groups, three different religions, and divided into two entities. It represents the greatest challenge for the decision-makers in Brussels. Recent election and the post-electoral trauma that this country is going through attracted the interest of the European Union and especially Germany. Meetings were held in Brussels to discuss what measures are to be undertaken against the political leaders in Bosnia, but nothing has been decided yet. On the other hand Germany invited the representatives of the political parties that won the highest share of votes in the last elections in an attempt to break the deadlock that Bosnian politics is currently facing. The present status quo in Bosnia is the result of the nationalistic rhetoric by political leaders used as an attempt to divert the attention of the public from the criminal record of these same politicians. It is in this kind of complex political situation that the European Union must step in and take the control. This task is not

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simple because from both the local and geopolitical perspective it will involve the interests of several stakeholders. From a local perspective, the European Union must confront powerful local politicians that will not hesitate from using any means at their disposal to remain in power. Looking from a geopolitical perspective, the European Union must work together with the USA, but also remember Russians interests in the Balkans, projected through Serbia, are at stake. Altogether this is a formidable test for the European Union.

Besides Bosnia, one other state is also proving to be a tough challenge to handle. It is the new state of Kosovo that gained its independence with support of Western powers, most notably the USA, and whose independence Serbia is disputing and disrupting at every point. Kosovo is still seen by most Serbians as a rebellious province and not the neighboring state. Accordingly, the politicians in Serbia reflect the opinion of their voters and are not at peace with the new state of Kosovo. On the other hand, Kosovars are proud of their new country and rejects any idea of giving up what they achieved for the sake of peace and stability with Serbia. This deadlock is also an issue that the European Union must handle since Serbia wants to join the European Union, but it is not giving up from its previous stand on Kosovo's independence. Since the European Union is supporting Kosovo's independence, it remains to be seen how things will evolve since it is obvious that the European Union cannot accept Serbia if the former does not change its attitudes toward its neighbor. Another angle on the problem is whether Serbia will try to repay its loss of Kosovo by increasing its influence on Republika Srpska and destabilizing Bosnia and Herzegovina remains to be seen. The European Union must step in and handle the situation; otherwise the reprisal of 90's could well be seen in Western Balkans.

To understand and solve the complexity of the Western Balkan's political situation one must be heavily involved in its affairs. The USA has much experience when it comes to the Balkan region and it is an asset that the European Union could use. With recent comment by Carl Bildt the European Union will step in the Balkans, especially Bosnia, and will be more heavily involved in its political affairs and reforms, the experience of USA in this matter could be of extreme importance. It is worth noting that it was the USA that created the present day Bosnia and Herzegovinian political system through the Dayton accord, and that it was also the USA, which supported the independent state of Kosovo. Thereby the European Union officials will have to rely on the experiences and recommendations of the US diplomats that have been dealing with the Western Balkan leaders for many years. It must be noted that the European Union lacks the willingness and decisiveness of their American colleagues, which is necessary for one to succeed in Balkan. If the European Union wants to transform the Western Balkans it will have to offer a carrot and a stick. The stick being a threat great enough for political leaders to compel them. Otherwise, we could be seeing endless discussions and talks without any real and decisive breakthrough in much needed reforms in Western Balkans countries. The fight against corruption, organized crime, constitutional reforms, and much more is needed for Balkan countries to finally become modern European states. It is the task of the European Union, together with the USA, to step in and show that they are up to this ultimate test of bringing last remaining non-EU island into the orbit of the European Union and NATO.

Ajdin Perčo is a recent graduate in International and Public Relations at the International University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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