

The Limits of the EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans

Written by Spyridon Plakoudas

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SPYRIDON PLAKOUDAS, NOV 14 2020

In 1999, the European Union (EU) adopted the Stability Pact for South East Europe, a rather ambitious road-map for the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity for nine post-communist countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Moldova, Romania and Serbia) – most of which are in the Western Balkans. Four years later, the EU issued another enthusiastic declaration for the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU in the near future (Ganou 2010: 23-25, 28-29). Sixteen years onwards, the status quo has not changed significantly. Although all states have applied for a membership, only two have been admitted (Croatia and Slovenia). The outlook for the Western Balkans is bleak as several problems inhibit the realization of the dream for a liberal and democratic order under the auspices of the EU. The rise of populism (e.g. in Albania) and hyper-nationalism (e.g. the idea of a Greater Albania), the revival of “old passions” (e.g. the Kosovo or Bosnian Issues), the antagonisms of Great Powers (e.g. Moscow vs Washington over North Macedonia) and other structural issues (e.g. corruption and organized crime) undermine the future of this volatile region (Dizdarević, 2018: 3-4).

Shattered World, High Hopes (1999–2004)

The EU may not have successfully resolved the Yugoslav Wars (Dover, 2005: 297-318; Radeljić 2012), but at least resolved to stabilize this volatile region. The rise to power of reformist politicians in all five countries of the Western Balkans in the early 2000s seemed to signal a ripe moment. In June 1999, the Cologne Summit adopted the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe which declared, inter alia, that these post-communist countries should accede (in due course and only under specific terms) to the EU and NATO (Kotios, 2001: 196-207). Just a month earlier, another policy had been instituted by the EU: the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). This policy in effect would act as the necessary framework for the eventual accession of the Western Balkans to the EU (Kotios, 2001: 196-207). The Zagreb Summit just one year later confirmed the willingness of these countries to assume, inter alia, the status of a candidate country for the EU (Ganou, 2010: 27).

Was such an optimism well-founded? In theory yes; in reality no. Indeed, the Stability Pact improved certain (low-politics) areas such as the liberalization of the market but did not address at all the dire security issues. The armed uprisings by the Albanians in south Serbia and north-western North Macedonia (Daskalovski, 2004) between 1999 and 2001 rang the first alarm bells and showcased that the model for the EU’s expansion in Central and Eastern Europe could not be replicated (Bachev, 2004: 7-80).

The EU dealt with the Western Balkans in a pro-active (i.e. a genuine desire for expansion in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe) and re-active way (i.e. the military and political crises in the region). Despite ongoing crises (e.g. the Kosovo Question), the officials in Brussels were imbued with a millennial-fashion optimism. The French-German Axis of the EU operated effectively, the Eurozone was established in 2001 and the EU was considered the “Holy Grail” by politicians and peoples of post-communist European countries (Smith, 2000: 806-822; Smith, 2013: 103-113).

In March 2003, the EU deployed its first-ever peacekeeping mission in North Macedonia in the aftermath of the separatist uprising by the country’s Albanian minority (Rodt and Wolff, 2012: 142-143). A few months later, the Thessaloniki Summit between the EU and the Western Balkans affirmed the interest of Brussels for the inclusion of

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the region's six countries (Albania, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia) and the intention of Athens to assume a protagonist role to that end (Tsoukalis 2004, 319-329; Economides 2005, 471-491; Bakoyannis 2006). The Western Balkans, surprisingly, were the domain of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Commission at the same time: the EU would guarantee (in theory) the stabilization of the volatile region as well as the harmonization of the post-communist countries with the *acquis communautaire* (Bachev, 2004: 1).

The EU pursued the simultaneous objectives of state-building (for Bosnia – Herzegovina and Albania in particular), democratization and (economic and political) liberalization – a daunting enterprise for a supranational organization that could not speak in one voice (Bachev, 2004: 4-5). Sometimes the EU performed adequately – as in the case of the velvet divorce between Serbia and Montenegro – and sometimes not so well. The EU, unlike the USA, possessed no prior experience and expertise in state-building. Despite this serious shortcoming, Brussels pushed forward with this agenda – to a certain extent because of Athens. Indeed, Greece was the most ardent supporter for the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU. According to the prevalent opinion in Athens at the time, this region (already economically penetrated by private Greek businesses) would ideally be converted into an area of joint EU-Greek influence (Ioakimidis, 1999: 169-191).

Slow Progress (2004–2010)

Although Greece would squander much diplomatic capital in the name dispute with North Macedonia (Huliaras and Tsardanidis, 2006: 465-483), Athens would energetically support the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans – sometimes without any tangible payoffs. The region, nonetheless, appeared on the edge of full membership within the EU. In 2004 Slovenia acceded to the EU and three years later, Romania and Bulgaria. In 2013 it was the time of Croatia to become a full member. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, even Serbia, petitioned their accession to the EU between 2008 and 2009. But they never achieved that objective. Why?

Nationalism would prove a far bigger force than federalism in the Western Balkans. In 2008 Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in a controversial act, dividing the EU's member-states on that matter. This act strained the still ongoing negotiations between Brussels and Belgrade and thrust Serbia into the open arms of a resurgent (in the Balkans) Russia (Bátora, Osland and Peter, 2017: 19-20). The same year, the Bucharest Summit (NATO's 20th Summit) did not unfold as originally calculated. Although Albania and Croatia were invited to accede to NATO, North Macedonia was not owing to the name dispute with Greece and the veiled threat of a veto by Athens (Gallis, 2008: 9-18). In a similar way, Greece would use the accession discussions between the EU and Albania since 2009 as an instrument of pressure to exact the compliance of Tirana with its treaty obligations towards the Greek minority in southern Albania (Skoulidas, 2012: 203-223; Cela, 2018: 5-16).

The Kosovo Question brought to the fore the idea of “Greater Albania”. Though largely a by-product of populist rhetoric by leaders in Pristina and Tirana (Hilaj, 2013), the irredentist idea threatened to destabilize “fragile states” with a substantial Albanian minority such as North Macedonia and Montenegro and, in essence, re-draw the map of the Balkans. However, such a development would open Pandora's Box: what would then dissuade the Serbs of Bosnia or others in the Balkans not to secede from their nominal governments?

The Bosnian Issue deserves a closer attention. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a “fragile state” which, beset by constant interventions by outside actors (most notably Turkey and Russia), could explode into an open conflict (Toal and Maksić, 2011: 279-293; Kartsonaki, 2016: 488-516). The existence of hundreds of volunteers amidst the ranks of ISIS from Bosnia underlined the potential for homegrown terrorism and renewed sectarian violence among the country's divided communities (Plakoudas, 2018: 87, 91-92). A similar trend was witnessed in Kosovo; in fact, Kosovo topped all other countries in the Western Balkans in the “export” of volunteers for ISIS (Azinović, 2018: 4). And although Muslims from other countries in the Western Balkans joined ISIS (e.g. North Macedonia or Serbia), only in Bosnia did the danger of a sectarian war loom on the horizon (Azinović, 2018: 4; Plakoudas, 2018: 87).

The appearance of the “Green Corridor” of the jihadists in the Balkans would only add up to another chronic problem in the Balkans: organized crime. The Western Balkans is a hotspot for organized crime syndicates (most notably the

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Albanian Mafia) as the “Southern Route” recently, overtook the “Central” and “Northern” routes in the domains of human trafficking, drug trade and weapons smuggling into the heart of Europe (Tarantini, 2016). Albania produces and traffics most of the drugs in circulation all over Western Europe and is considered a “narco-state” (Daragahi 2019; Reed, 2019) while the self-proclaimed Kosovo Republic is described as a “mafia state” by several scholars due to the strong ties between criminals and politicians in this impoverished and corrupt statelet (Briscoe and Price, 2011: 9-10, 13-15; Naím, 2012: 100-111).

In Serbia and the newly-independent Montenegro, notorious mafias appeared during the Yugoslav Wars that still operate throughout the Balkans and Western Europe (Komlenovic, 1997: 70-73; Štrbac *et al.*, 2016: 46-63), whereas mafia bosses in Bosnia still exert an acute influence over the affairs of this fragile state (Donais, 2003: 359-382; Belloni and Strazzari, 2014: 855-871). Only Croatia and Slovenia have taken strides in their fight against organized crime and, thanks to assistance by the EU, they significantly curtailed the power of the once powerful organized crime syndicates (Anastasijevic, 2010: 149-168). As the case of the strong cooperation between ISIS and local mafias attests, an unholy alliance between mafias and terrorists emerged by their mutually beneficial exploitation of the “Southern Route” (Bamiatzis, 2019).

Obviously, the prevalence of organized crime in the Western Balkans is intrinsically connected to rampant corruption and, by extension, political opacity in these countries. Although in the early 2000s the desire for accession to the EU had propelled the democratization of these war-torn post-communist countries, this impetus has been reversed in recent years. Populist leaders assumed power in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia and adopted policies in defiance of the sanctions by the EU (Brentin and Trošt, 2016: 1-16; Kaufmann, 2017). For example, the ex-prime minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, was implicated in several scandals (even the wiretapping of the opposition) and resigned in 2016 only after mass public protests and pressure by Brussels and Washington. The rise of the populists occurred at the same time with another worrisome development: the renewed rivalry amongst external actors.

Battleground for Outside Powers (2010–Present)

The “European Dream” for the Western Balkans was conceived and implemented by the pro-EU Balkan elites and officials in Brussels (Exadaktylos 2008). The plunge of Greece into a recession spiral for an intermittent period of 7 years (2010-2013 and 2015-2017) removed from the scene the most ardent supporter for the Euro-Atlantic accession of the Western Balkans. Berlin, the “reluctant hegemon” of the EU, was equally beset with the high mission of navigating a divided and indebted EU out of the treacherous waters of economic depression and political fragmentation; as Brexit and the 2015 Migrant Crisis attested, the EU could not eventually avoid “stagnation” (Webber, 2018; Barber, 2019; Luo, 2019). With the Western Balkans no longer a top priority, other powers outside Europe tried to fill the vacuum – the USA and Russia. This does not imply that the two powers were absent in the previous period; they were just not as active as now.

As the “European Dream” receded in the Western Balkans, so did the converse southwards expansion of NATO progress. An alliance with the superpower appeared to be still a conscious option for the elites of the post-communist Balkan countries – as their continuous support for Washington’s policy against Iraq or Russia between 2003 and 2008 amply demonstrated. At the same time, another extra-European power, Russia, re-emerged in a region that was regarded as its sphere of influence in the past. Russia under Putin unveiled a new vision for the world (and for the country itself) that aspired to largely undo the post-1989 geopolitical losses of the Kremlin (Roberts, 2017: 28-55). But Putin is not just a revisionist; he is an opportunist par excellence. He exploits every possible opportunity to open the access of Russia to the “warm waters” of the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, Moscow orchestrated an abortive coup d’état in Montenegro just before the accession of Podgorica to NATO, supported the ex-prime minister of North Macedonia after the latter’s fallout with Washington and Brussels and capitalized on the anger of Republica Srpska and Serbia over the West’s perceived injustices against them on the Bosnian and Kosovo issues (Secieru, 2019; Stronski and Himes, 2019). Alarmed by Russia’s renewed vigor, the USA essayed to accelerate their accession to NATO. Podgorica joined the alliance in 2017 but Skopje, the “apple of discord” between Moscow and Washington, could not in spite of the fact that the name dispute with Greece was eventually settled in 2019.

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The Way Ahead

When the first shots of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) were exchanged in Slovenia, the (then) Prime Minister of Luxemburg memorably uttered “the hour of Europe has dawned”. Despite this over-optimistic declaration, the EU proved entirely unable (and unwilling often) to prevent or stop the bloodshed in its own backyard: indeed, only the military might of the USA and NATO concluded the most destructive wars in post-1945 Europe (Lucarelli, 2000, Kaufman, 2002). Almost two decades after that “moment of truth”, the EU has not yet achieved to integrate fully the Western Balkans into the sui generis confederation – with the exception of Slovenia and Croatia; indeed, NATO was far more successful in that respect.

The outlook is not very positive; the “European Dream” appears to be untenable for the other countries of the Western Balkans. But even the current situation within the EU is quite tumultuous; indeed, the 2015 Migrant Crisis and Brexit attested to the structural problems within the EU. This supra-national organization is currently undergoing a transitional phase which may eventuate to either the substantive reinforcement of this sui generis experiment in federalism or the dissolution of the union. The decline of the “soft power” of the EU is definitely not a good omen (Van Ham, 2014: 14-15).

The “America First” doctrine by the Trump Administration and the quarrel between the USA and EU will relegate once again the Western Balkans to the bottom-end of the “priority sheet” for Washington. With an introvert EU and neo-isolationist USA, maybe the Western Balkans should better try to foster a robust cooperation amongst themselves on a new basis – not just in the security sector (mostly under the umbrella of NATO) but also in economic and diplomatic terms.

The key challenges for the Western Balkans still persist. Corruption continues to plague most of the countries of that volatile region – partly because of the allure of organized crime and partly because of the rise of populism. The networks between organized crime, terrorism and political circles still thrive – as the analysis of the various threats behind the recent terrorist strike in Vienna would indicate. Organized crime still dominates the economy of several countries (e.g. Kosovo) and affects the political developments as well.

As if these challenges were not enough, COVID-19 also impacted severely on the economy and societies of the Western Balkans. The EU, once again, proved unable to extend a helping hand to these countries. Other countries outside Europe, such as China, the UAE or Turkey, on the other hand, filled this vacuum with their “COVID-19 diplomacy” (in other words, the provision of medical staff for the pandemic) and undermined the EU’s soft power even further.

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