

***Western Balkans:  
EU enlargement through the 'Little Bang'***

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### Abstract

Although the Western Balkan countries followed a similar historical path under socialism, replaced by an exhausting period of political and economic transition, they are not equally prepared to be members of the European Union. With the divisions of the countries among the frontrunners and lagers, as repeated at the Sofia Summit, the process of EU enlargement will result with many fierce consequences and will lead to additional years of isolation and decades of strained relations. On the Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo road towards EU integration precedes deep and complex constitutional settlement, in which creation EU played one of the major roles. Even though the regatta principle is a current mechanism on which each of the countries is assessed on its process of integration, it seems that a common WB6 entrance in the EU is the most feasible scenario. In that way, for a more prosperous and unified Western Balkans and for a secure and finally completed European Union, *Catch-all*, or a *Little Bang Approach* is the best solution for the stakeholders.

Keywords: *Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, European Union, EU enlargement, EU integration, Western Balkans, Little Bang*

## Introduction

Fifteen years have passed after the EU established the perspective for the Western Balkans in order to include the region to take a membership in the European Union. In 2003 in Thessaloniki, the EU emphasized that the Western Balkans is an integral part of Europe, European history, tradition, identity. The Thessaloniki agenda was also implemented to compel the countries to implement certain prerequisites and reforms that will bring them closer to EU membership. However, the WB road(s) towards the European Union is not an easy mission to accomplish, taking into account the EU conditions and expectations, based on the Copenhagen criteria and EU conditionality, relying on the prerogatives of EU conditionality, based on the principle of carrots and sticks.

During the last two decades, the enlargement strategy has fundamentally changed. Apparently, the experience that EU gained during the past waves of enlargement (big-bang Enlargement of 2004, Bulgaria and Romania entrance in 2007 and Croatian entrance in the EU in 2013), contributed to greater EU skepticism and hesitance to accept new members. This situation has negatively affected the WB states, leaving them on the middle road towards EU membership and process of Europeanization.

Although the Western Balkan countries followed a similar historical path under socialism, replaced by an exhausting period of political and economic transition, they are not equally prepared to be members of the EU and they demonstrate different success in the process of EU enlargement. Deep and complex constitutional settlement precedes the BiH, Macedonian and Kosovo road towards EU integration. In this regard, the BiH, Macedonian and Kosovo path towards EU integration was much more complicated and obstructed than their neighbours- Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. We should keep in mind the fact that the EU had a very important and sometimes even deciding role in the creation of these agreements and plans, which basic points were constructed in the constitutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo.

Thanks to the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the Sofia Summit, the Western Balkan countries once again captured the EU interest and were on the agenda of EU enlargement. As it was emphasized on the summit, Serbia and Montenegro are the frontrunners in the process of EU integration and there is a possibility to enter and to gain a membership in the European Union in 2025. Next on the list of EU enlargement are Macedonia and Albania, for which the EU Council has agreed to open Albania's and Macedonia's path for starting the accession talks on June 2019. In response to their political and constitutional complexity, BiH and Kosovo remain backwardly stocked in the process of EU enlargement. According to the EU skeptics, the geopolitically inspired concept of *catch-all approach* will never be repeated, concerning the Western Balkans. However, due to the anticipated consequences of the opposite scenario, it seems that the joint Western Balkans entrance in the EU, or *little bang approach* is the most feasible outcome. Otherwise, the

evident problems that the EU faces in relation with the WB6, and problems that recently labeled the Western Balkan region, would only be terminologically replaced with WB4 and a population of 10+ million inhabitants, but the same security, economic and social challenges as geostrategic and geopolitically undefined European will continue to exist.

## Sofia Summit as a new chance for the Western Balkans?

During the last ten years, a lot of internal and external crises obstructed the Western Balkan road towards the European Union. Following the contemporary events, the EU was and is still surrounded by security economic and political challenges, as a response to the economic and political crises of global importance, such as the migration crises, the terrorist attacks on the European cities, lack of cohesion in the Trade agreement with the USA, the need for the introduction of new mechanisms for environmental protection, etc.

The Sofia Summit that occurred in the time of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU gave a priority to the process of EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries. At the Sofia summit, the Declaration and plan of action were approved, comprising about a number of important proposals in order to strengthen the cooperation with the countries of the region, and to support democracy, rule of law and fight against corruption, as well as to increase the collaboration in areas of energy, connectivity, digital economy, investment and trade, in the future (European Western Balkans, 2018). In the point thirteen of the decisions delivered on the Sofia Summit, the *EU welcomes the contribution of the Western Balkans countries to its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in all its aspects and expects a progressive deepening of cooperation in this area, especially an enhanced level of alignment on issues where major common interests are at stake* (EU- Western Balkans Summit Declaration, 2018).

## EU role in the constitutional building in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo

BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and their independence (successively in 1991, 1995 and 2008), base their form of government on the consociational model. For these three countries, the consociationalism was the most relevant outcome, considering the complexity arising from the ethnically mixed structure of the population. *Although the ethnically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous countries can be built on democracy, as a societal order, the homogenous countries are found in a better position, being suited by the democratic rule by the majority* (Bieber, 2008).

The creation and the practice of the constitutions in the three countries are based on the political decisions, delivered on Dayton Peace agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ohrid Peace Framework in Macedonia and Resolution 1244 and Ahtisaari Plan in Kosovo. The existence and the functionality of these constitutions is a challenge for young and inexperienced democracies in the Balkans because as Bieber states: *Consensual democracies are not phenomena born overnight and that quickly reach their highest development. On the contrary, this is a hard process, based on conflicts and cooperation, taking considerable time* (Bieber, 2008, p.54).

Although BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo belong in the same consociational family, the constitutional structures in these three countries differ in the degree of interpretation of the consociational model. In that way, BiH encompasses all of the consociational principles, implemented through institutional mechanisms as it is provided in the consociational theory (Belloni, 2006). In reality, many BiH authors deny accepting such model, preferring and advocating the model of liberal democracy based on individual and citizens rights. In spite of BiH, where the international community in order to keep and protect the borders of the country, created a specific federal system that forced the warring parties to reconcile and to respect common institutions (Agir, Gursoy, 2016), the consociational models of Macedonia and Kosovo are based on consociational principles in which some constitutional premises diverge from the pure consociational model. The segmental autonomy in Macedonia and Kosovo was granted through extensive decentralization in a formally unitary state.

The EU's interference in the constitutional building in BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo was unique because of the merits of its participation, as well as because of the myriad number of obstacles influencing the process. A crucial prevalence for the creation of the three cases was the process of EU enlargement and the possibility for these states to join the European Union. The enlargement policy came out as a powerful mechanism of exerting influence by emphasizing the conditionality of EU integration on the implementation of post-conflict peace agreements, and constitutional framework documents and reform (Galyan, 2014).

#### A selective strategy of EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries.

The Thessaloniki Summit confirmed that the *regatta principle* would be applied in the examination of each individual country's performance. This means that EU does not provide equal progress to the WB countries and favors individual progress on each of them. In other words, the progress of each country would depend on its own ability and its own political will to accomplish the necessary and proclaimed reforms, as well as to implement and to respect the necessary rules and standards. Acknowledging the individual component of the enlargement, the countries in the region were committed to enhancing their regional cooperation (Petričušić, 2004). As the name of this EU tailor-made strategy for the Western Balkans clearly states, the goal was at first to stabilize and then to associate the countries on the EU membership track, which is a two-step policy that did not occur in the previous waves of enlargement (Barbulescu, Troncota, 2013).

The EU does not envisage all six Western Balkan countries to join the union at the same time. In spite, the Commission has named Serbia and Montenegro as frontrunners in the process of EU integration. In that way, on June 25, 2018, the EU opened new chapters in the accession negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, bringing the two countries a step closer to join the European Union. Regarding Macedonia and Albania, the EU foreign

ministers agreed on a compromise to open negotiations in June 2019, providing a string of conditions on the judiciary, security services, public administration, and anti-corruption to be met. On the other hand, BiH and Kosovo remain lagging behind in the process of EU enlargement.

The whole process of negotiation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries will be put under question if EU continues with the politics of failed compromises and if does not provide a clear perspective of EU enlargement. The consequences of EU indifference would be a bad scenario for both sides in the time of a multi-year trend of loss of trust by the non-governmental sector and the wider public, i.e. the noticeable resistance of the WB countries to the EU enlargement process.

For example, the population in BiH is less interested in giving its support for joining the EU. Unlike previous years, such as for example in 2013 when vast majority, *over 82.1% of BiH citizens* (DEI, 2014) supported BiH accession to the EU, *today that support is decreased to 56.5 %*. Nowadays, the majority of the citizens in BiH consider *the European path BiH has an alternative (52.5%)* (DEI, 2018).

#### “Little bang” instead of regatta principle for a more prosperous and secure European Union

EU hesitance to develop a clear perspective for the Western Balkans gives an opportunity to other important international actors, such as Russia, Turkey, and China to get more space to spread their interests. The EU should not permit this open space in the EU neighborhood to become a more concentrated sphere of interest to other international players.

In that way, joint accession of the Western Balkan in the EU is the most feasible scenario for both- the EU and the Western Balkans. If the Western Balkan countries gain a chance jointly to access the EU, they will finally succeed to resolve one of the major problems in the societies, especially targeting the young population. The fact is that many young individuals of the Western Balkans are every year intensely moving to the EU, searching for better working and living circumstances. The *brain drain trend* will possibly decrease if the EU provides equal chances to the states that are lagging behind in the process of EU enlargement.

In addition, as it is stated in the document of *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*:

*Within the scope of the current enlargement policy, the challenges of migration, energy security, terrorism and organized crime are shared between the EU, the Western Balkans, and Turkey. They can only be addressed together. Yet the resilience of these countries cannot be taken for granted. The EU enjoys a unique influence in all these countries. (...)EU support for and cooperation with these countries must*

*deliver concrete benefits today and must be communicated well. This means cooperating. A credible enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in Europe's security and prosperity and has already contributed greatly to peace in formerly war-torn areas. European Union Global Strategy 25 on counter-terrorism, security sector reform, migration, infrastructure, energy, and climate, deepening people-to-people contacts and retailoring some of the EU's assistance with the aim of visibly improving citizens' well-being. (Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, 2016, p. 24).*

Indeed, the inclusive, comprehensive security perspective for the region needs to be implemented in the Western Balkans, with the EU, enhancing in that way their capacity. This close collaboration would also provide a strong basis for permanent joint action after all the states in the region have joined the EU.

Otherwise, a selective EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries will contribute to greater discord among the states. Apparently, if EU opens its gates to Serbia and Montenegro, and leave the enlargement of the other WB states on a later date, many of the problems in the region, such as: illegal trafficking, abuse of power, the neighboring unresolved disputes, economic and political crisis, problems with migrants, will remain. Moreover, a selective enlargement will create an even greater vacuum that will be further used by the already mentioned, or by the other international actors. In addition, the population, which took apart in the last period of elections, predominantly and traditionally was accustomed to give their vote to the nationalistic political parties will continue to grow with greater intensity, resulting with greater EU skepticism and reduced EU support.

In 2004, the EU showed a great readiness for an association and a common future with other 10 new member states. Most of these states, such as Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were under the Soviet sphere of influence. Unquestionably, at that moment they were not equally prepared to join the union, but EU certainly included all in once, in order not to leave someone behind (Slovakia under the governance of Meciar for example). After the *big bang enlargement* of 2004, although it began to appear the enlargement fatigue, the EU in 2007 opened its doors to another two unprepared states which also shared socialist ideological, political and economic past-Romania and Bulgaria. In that way, the enlargement conditionality has never been static, it has evolved (Arkan, Soeren, 2015).

In addition, *the total number of the population of the six Western Balkan states is (19.0 million), is quite identical to the number of population of Romania 19.5 million* (Eurostat, 2018). Taking into account the Romanian vote in the European Parliament, and comparing with the potential vote of the Western Balkans, it can be concluded that in comparison to the other EU countries, Romania (in accordance with the demographic data) does not have a big number of MEP in the European Parliament (the total number of seats is 33). The

Lisbon Treaty introduced a radical reform regarding voting in the Council with the so-called *double majority* from 1 November 2014. *First, an approval requires 55% of the member states, which meant 15 of the then 28 members, and second, that 55% of the states must also represent 65% of the total EU population. A blocking minority can thus be established by little more than 45% of the member states or by countries representing at least 35% of the member states as long as there is a minimum of four states. This new voting system gives the biggest member states much stronger voting power in the Council of Ministers than the previous system* (European Parliament, 2014). In conclusion, the small Balkan states cannot cause any damage, nor can block any decisions proposed by the big EU states. An additional detail that goes in favor of the Western Balkan states are *the 46 free seats in the European Parliament that will be kept for future enlargements, after the Brexit and the UK decision to leave the EU* (Council of the EU, 2018).

Apparently, the EU should reconstruct its enlargement policies of the Western Balkan countries, in a way that will increasingly rely on a common WB approach, or the big-bang approach, excluding the regatta principle which will not only ruin the entire enlargement process but will also differentiate the long-standing regional policies and initiatives. Particularly questionable is the functioning of the Berlin process, aiming to promote and support regional cooperation between the Western Balkan countries.

EU should reconsider the WB to resolve some of the disputable and unanswered questions, such as public administration, fiscal consolidation, improvement in productivity, reform of education requesting more administrative competencies and capacity building within the EU, and for that purpose, EU can provide extensive assistance measures. With this approach, all countries would then negotiate simultaneously for membership. In this way, the shortcomings of the regatta would be avoided. Such a *caravan approach* would also reinvigorate the accession process and create a truly new regional dynamic, increasing the bargaining power of the candidate countries (Solioz, 2014).

## Conclusion

EU as a key state-builder in the fragile societies of the Balkans should take a greater responsibility for their future and greater stability in the field of international relations, especially regarding the process of EU enlargement. The Western Balkan states have repeatedly demonstrated that they are prepared to follow the EU prerequisites and by implementing the necessary reforms to take a part in the EU. They deserve an equal chance of the European future, a chance that was granted to the Central European states, or to the other Balkan states.

In BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo, the EU succeeded to establish peace, but not to create functional states. The internal functioning in these three cases lags because of the inability of the parties involved to reach a consensus. Among the other things, the constitutional fragility is also one of the reasons why BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo in spite of Serbia and Montenegro (and potentially Albania) lag in their roads towards EU integration.

EU should also provide greater consistency, clearer politics, and programs to keep the WB closer to their perspective throughout which in the foreseeable future they would jointly join the EU. This does not mean that they will enter in the European Union immediately, but if EU gives a promise date and if encourages the most fragile Western Balkan states in their final goal, then they can solve all of the challenges together, with united forces. This is of a particular relevance because the EU hesitance towards new, possible enlargement, it could further encourage and consequently intensify some other political, economic and cultural influences.

Influence of other actors in the WB has been also recognized in the State of the Union address, that Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the Council, made to the European Parliament in September 2018: *We must find unity when it comes to the Western Balkans – once and for all. Should we not, our immediate neighbourhood will be shaped by others* (Juncker, 2018).

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