

WHAT IF THE WESTERN BALKANS NEVER BECOMES PART OF THE EU?

**This paper was submitted to the call for papers on "What if the Balkans Never becomes Part of the EU?" and presented at the Belgrade Security Forum 2017*

Denisa Sarajlić¹

Sarajevo, August 2017

Summary

The future of the Western Balkans cannot be viewed in isolation from the future of Europe. Leaving the Western Balkans outside the EU would have wider consequences that would challenge the EU beyond its current capacities. That is why the main recommendation is that the EU as a peace project is not mistaken for a conflict-prevention mechanism. The EU can most successfully manage stability of the region if its future is inside the EU. To do that, the EU needs to review the accession process, which is already now proving too demanding for the already weak states of the Western Balkans. The accession process is exposing most countries to demands that are already causing political instabilities in some countries of the region. This is most evident through democratic backsliding, political crises, reform stalemates, and appearance of authoritarian practices, which give us taste of what life would be like if the Western Balkans was left out of the EU.

Introduction

In the context of the rising populism in Europe, political and popular opposition to further enlargement, and Brexit, the enlargement to the Western Balkans appears vaguer than ever before. Whereas in the past the EU could be blamed for its lack of vision and strategy for the Balkans, its overly bureaucratic approach and inconsistent approach to conditionality, what becomes apparent in this new context is the EU's complete lack of awareness of the devastating consequences of leaving the Balkans out.

While populism is still lurking over Europe, nationalism continues to dominate Balkan politics. The Balkan nationalisms are indigenous and not a product of a spill-over from the rising populism in the EU, which is why the EU behaves if it is all 'business as usual'. However, the EU's strategy of pretending that it is all 'business as usual' and that the sheer implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Process would

¹ Denisa Sarajlić is a president of Assembly of Foreign Policy Initiative Bosnia and Herzegovina

bring stability to the region, is creating more risk that if left out, such a vulnerable and unstable region could destabilise Europe, which is itself at a most volatile stage since WWII.

The EU's approach towards the Western Balkans is somewhat different in comparison to its approach to countries in previous enlargements, and this also needs to be noted. During previous enlargements, the objectives were clear and straight-forward; the process was more technical with a primary focus on: democracy, economy, stabilization. However, it appears that the enlargement in the Balkans is increasingly seen in the EU as a conflict-prevention strategy, which in itself is an indication of where things could go if the region does not integrate. And that could well be true, as discussed in this paper.

However, what is confusing is that the SAP appears to be mistaken for a conflict-prevention strategy. This is why it needs to be emphasised that the lack of strategy on addressing the problems of the Balkans in such a challenging international context is no longer a Balkan problem alone. With a higher risk of instabilities in the region, the risk of jeopardizing the EU's own stability is increasingly high too. The lack of proper strategy also invites external actors with adversarial position on the EU to come and play a more prominent role in the Balkans.

The question that thus imposes itself is – do EU standards and processes matter more than peace? With that in mind, one does not need to have too wild imagination to think about what life would look like if the Western Balkans never entered the EU. Recent developments in some of the countries provide clear indication what direction political developments would take, how political elites would behave, and what role would all other actors play, whether democratic or non-democratic, internal or external. This relates primarily to Macedonia during the previous government, authorities in Republika Srpska, and to some extent Serbia.

The EU accession has for a long time been the cover-up for corrupt Western Balkan politicians to endlessly delay any progress while taking advantage of the murkiness of the process. Accession to them is not a reward – the EU accession might in fact be a form of punishment to the illiberal elites, which would thus lose the privileges of operating in a status quo. However, instead of discussing the 'worst case' scenario, which is possible with or without the EU accession in sight, this paper instead focuses on already visible features of illiberal regimes as potential contours of what political life in the Balkans would look like if the region remained outside the EU. This includes but is not limited to:

- democratic backsliding,
- increased role of undemocratic external actors,
- decline of political parties,
- opening up of unresolved border disputes,
- pressure on independent actors,
- reversal of EU-sponsored reforms.

Democratic backsliding

The current democratic backsliding in almost all countries in the region is not new. The EU accession has been held hostage by political elites in most countries for decades, demonstrated in the form of reform stalemate, state-capture, political crises, obstructive individuals, divisive rhetoric, and corrupt political elites. Instead of confronting those developments directly, the EU has relied on nationalist parties and elites as credible partners, hoping that the 'pull' of the EU would provide sufficient incentives for them to comply with the EU requirements. The EU as an external democratizer has therefore struggled from a lack of consistency, weak identity, and a mismatch between its normative basis and its bureaucratic approach to democratization of the countries in the Balkans.

The core of that effort should have been the promotion of democratic values that would have brought Western Balkan countries closer to the EU normative framework that could have been achieved only through a strong promise of eventual membership. However, instead of acting as a normative power, the EU positioned itself as a bureaucratic power that was least associated with the democratic values that it should have strived to promote – and more associated with bureaucratic benchmarks and conditionality that it inconsistently applied. Now that its own framework of values is increasingly put in question, and especially if the promise of membership for Balkan countries is gone, the EU would find it even harder to defend and promote democratic values in the region.

Meanwhile, the dominant narrative of political parties throughout the region has remained nationalistic, and has not allowed any room for substantive discussion on key reforms that are required. The EU as a liberal role-model is therefore not serving its purpose, and in the full absence of such ideological framework in future, there would be an ideological vacuum that would be almost naturally filled by populism, nationalism and divisive rhetoric.

At the same time, the current tolerance of undemocratic practices in some EU member states encourages the mimicking by regional leaders, while weakening popular faith in democracy. If the Balkans was left out of the EU, the popular faith in democracy would further diminish with the increasing of illiberal practices that would go unsanctioned by an external democratizer. The absence of the European or Western democratic model would have different reflections on individual countries, depending on their current state of democracy and stage of democratic development. Countries with stronger democratic tradition may prove more resilient to illiberal trends and recover their particular style of democracy over time. However, countries in which democracy never truly entrenched may struggle to anchor themselves in the type of democracy which the EU was trying to promote as an external democratizer over the past 20 years in the Balkans. The EU itself would certainly find it difficult to reinstate the image of an external democratizer, and it would be much harder for the EU to impose itself as any kind of authority in the Balkans without giving even implicit promise of membership.

By losing faith into the EU as a democratic framework and without the prospect of an institutional set-up that would bring prosperity and stability to the region, citizens of our countries would again fall victims to the campaigns of fear and intimidation, which political leaders have successfully sustained since 1990s. That way, the EU would not only be seen as a failed concept in the eyes of political elites, but also in the eyes of citizens. The weakening of democracy as a system of values in the EU, and its worsening image,

are certainly factors that would contribute to the general feeling of apathy and disillusionment with democracy.

To put it even more simply - the European framework of democratic values is the scaffolding that can hold the construction of democratic systems in Western Balkan countries. Without that scaffolding in place, it could prove difficult or even impossible to hold together democratic systems in the Balkans – especially given the fact that they never fully developed or consolidated in the first place.

Other external role-models

The next feature that would become more prominent if the Balkans did not enter the EU is the emergence and strengthening of the role of external role-models, which would aim to fill in the gap produced by a lack of the EU as an external democratiser. The absence of the EU framework would create a void, which other powers, especially Russia and Turkey would try to fill more resolutely. Their current influences in the Balkans can be described as preparing the field in case they each need to challenge the EU more strongly. This is not necessarily due to any ambitions they currently have in the region, but can be seen more as a part of their wider effort to undermine the EU and democracy, and challenge them more openly in case the Balkans lose prospect of membership.

The way Russia has behaved in the region so far gives clear indication of how it would make influence in future. Sometimes, this influence is more direct, as in Serbia, sometimes it is covert – as in Montenegro, and in the case of BiH Russia's influence is still institutionalised through the Peace Implementation Council, and also through the UN Security Council in which it has over the past few years shown open support for the position of political leaders of Republika Srpska (RS).

There are, of course, soft influences by both Russia and Turkey – evidenced primarily by regular meetings of high ranking Russian and Turkish official with regional leaders as well as joint demonstrations of power, including military. Both Russia and Turkey have managed to fill the void left by weak civil society by using their “soft power” to provide financial and diplomatic support to politicians, impregnate the local and social media with disinformation, stir inter-ethnic animosities and threaten pro-Western governments. Turkey has found fertile ground for planting the seeds of nationalist rhetoric in BiH and using key political leaders to inoculate the political rhetoric with the feelings of fondness and sentiments between the Bosniac and Turkish people. This has resonated very strongly among Bosniac citizens, especially and quite worryingly among young people, which have demonstrated unprecedented support for Erdogan during the coup, during referendum campaign, and in its aftermath. Although all of those can still be considered symbolic, the potential and willingness to exert direct influence on political processes in the Balkans would further expand should the EU framework be removed.

The intensified role of external actors, which would fill the void created by the absence of the EU in the region, would be even more worrying from security perspective – particularly for NATO. That then opens up another question – in which way would leaving the Balkans out of the EU affect the NATO accession of those countries which are still keen to join? Would NATO accession be possible without the EU accession

of the Balkans, and would it be equally acceptable from a security perspective as it might be from a political perspective. Therefore, the question of the Balkans in NATO might be more urgent and even more relevant than the questions of the Balkans in the EU. Or at minimum, they cannot be treated independently of each other.

Decline of political parties

The pattern of post-ideological politics that is emerging within Europe and elsewhere is noticeable in the Balkans to some degree as well. There is already visible corroding of structures of political parties in a sense that they should exist in a fully functioning democratic system. Political parties in the Balkans are experiencing growing internal rifts, expansion of ethnicity-based differences and divisions, ideological and interest-based conflicts. The cleavages that have arisen recently are rooted within political parties themselves, and between former political partners and allies. The culture of antagonistic and conflictual politics has been raised to a whole different level, completely undermining and even making obsolete any consensual thinking and a need for making compromises. This trend would likely continue and deteriorate if the Balkans did not join the EU to the extent that political parties would attempt to extinguish each other in order to establish more control and power, in which case smaller parties would suffer most. Strongest and biggest political parties (in most cases – nationalist parties) would seek to create an illusion of a multi-party system, while gaining full political control through autocratic practises. This has to some degree already started to take place in Republika Srpska. In the most extreme cases, this would include purges of political opponents and any kind of opposition, including independent actors. This is again an area in which undemocratic practices of external role models would become prominent, especially, for example, given the recent experience of democratic backsliding in Turkey.

Ethnic politics would squeeze out any political competition especially in ethnically heterogeneous countries, which would further increase the prospects for internal conflicts. Some signs of this could be seen in the case in Macedonia during the attempt to form a bi-ethnic government with Albanians, which resulted in extreme use of violence by actors that are close to the previous ruling party. Ethnic separatism would also be exploited by leaders of Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina amidst widespread corruption, weak economy, low standards of living and general public discontent with government's policies. Independence of Republika Srpska would become more realistic without the prospect of EU membership, which would potentially instigate a renewed conflict in BiH.

Border disputes

The issue of border disputes and the non-acceptance of statehood for some countries in the region would quickly come to the fore if the prospect of EU membership would be gone. Serbian leadership have not refrained from raising tensions over the status of Kosovo and even staging open provocations, as was the case with a train plastered with Serbian flags and insignia which attempted to enter Kosovo. At the same

time, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's statement on potential unification with Kosovo aggravated fears of Greater Albania that would be another cause for violence in a wider region.

Initiatives that have promoted regional cooperation would be further demoted without the political backing and necessary support from the EU. The EU has already significantly failed to use the existing mechanisms for promoting regional cooperation, while the participating states would further lose interest without the EU behind the regional initiatives.

Pressure on independent actors

Without the EU's democratic framework serving as a role model, it would become very hard for civil society to make an argument that authoritarian or undemocratic practices in the region could not be tolerated because that would be incompatible with the democratic standards that exist within the EU. The weakening of democracy in Hungary and Poland, levels of corruption in Bulgaria or Romania, the rise of populist rhetoric and policies in many of the 'old' EU member states, especially the anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric deployed by some populist politicians, and the general levels of intolerance, resonate very strongly among nationalist politicians in the Balkans already. In that sense, populism that is on the rise in Europe serves to legitimise the existing nationalist rhetoric in the Balkans and it is used to justify undemocratic behaviour by some political leaders. Civil society organisations which have advocated for faster EU accession, or which have promoted EU standards in any related field, would struggle immensely if there was a vacuum created by the absence of prospect of EU accession. Another problem for civil society would be the lack of any prospect of sanctioning of illiberal practices of Western Balkans leaders.

When it comes to citizens, the existing apathy and lack of appetite for any form of activism would further aggravate. An illustration of how things would work in future, one can simply look into the examples from the past few years. As reported by the Freedom House, Macedonia under the previous government experienced government involvement in mass surveillance, electoral fraud, corruption, and criminal activities. The situation is similar in most other countries in the region, and this has been a cause for some civic activism in the form of protests. Political protests have taken place on regular basis over the past two years in Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. However, with the exception of violent escalation in Macedonia, all those protests had little effect on the style or form of governance. In many cases, protesters had ulterior political motives and often turned out to be incited or motivated by a political party against their political opponents. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, mass citizen protests were organised in 2014, but were soon hijacked by political parties. Even though some civic initiatives continued as a legacy of those protests, they refused to have the backing of civil society (in order to be seen as 'real' citizens' protests), and hence lacked a structure and infrastructure, as well as content and articulation of interests. Although international community and donors tried to support that effort, the failure to embed that endeavour within the existing civil society, resulted in wasted financial support that did not result in any concrete policy changes.

In Kosovo and Montenegro, protests were high jacked in a different way. In Kosovo, tear gas was used against protesters that challenged a deal granting greater autonomy to the country's Serb minority and that turned violent. Strikingly, opposition lawmakers repeatedly set off gas canisters in the parliament chamber that obstructed the work of parliament for months. In Montenegro, opposition protests and demands for the resignation of prime minister Milo Đukanović turned into anti-NATO and pro-Russia demonstrations, which was later attributed to Russia itself having direct influence in organisation of protests. Two Russian intelligence operatives were arrested as a result, and it was yet another example of increased involvement of external actors.

The situation is similar when it comes to media freedoms. In 2016, Transparency International warned of direct and indirect pressure exerted on the media. Increasing attacks, smear campaigns, vilification of investigative media, hate crimes and defamation suits against journalists, and de facto impunity can be observed throughout. Self-censorship, triggered by both subtle and overt factors, is also on the rise. There are also increasing attempts to spread 'fake news', especially by Russia.

Intimidation of journalists is a common thread to all countries in the region. However, the severity of attacks on journalists differs from one country to another. In Serbia and Montenegro, the concern is still the impunity for crimes against journalists. In Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, there are numerous cases of intimidation and sometimes open threats to journalists (and their families). Besides threats, undermining the credibility of journalists and verbal attacks are almost a daily appearance in many countries, and in particular in Republika Srpska in BiH.

The Public Service Broadcasters (PBS) in most countries are in peril by the lack of funding, political interference and open pressure, and in some cases (BiH most recently) open call for dismantling of PBS by the government. PBS' are often the tool used most for political purposes, and independence in most cases is an unrealistic goal at the moment. Political pressures are not only exerted on editors and management (mainly selected by the government), but in some cases even at the level of journalists.

Privately owned media is often put in the service of specific political parties, engaging in smear campaign of their political opponents (including civil society and independent individuals). Ownership of private media is often undisclosed, while the content is unregulated. In some countries, e.g. BiH and Macedonia, ownership of media is associated with individuals close to government or even within the government. The print media is more easily politically influenced due to their high dependence on funding than web-based media.

Reversal of EU-sponsored reforms

The possibility of reversal of reforms which had been implemented as part of the EU accession process is very high, especially given the amount of pressure and conditionality which the EU had to put on individual countries in order to pass those reforms in the first place. It could be said that the speed at which respective reforms would be reversed is indirectly proportional to the amount of pressure that that to be exerted to adopt them – i.e. reforms which were hardest to adopt, would be reversed most quickly.

Probably hardest hit would be the rule of law and judiciary, which never fully consolidated in the region anyway. However, this would likely take place also in areas which are considered 'softer', such as environment or human rights. The more 'transversal' areas are (e.g. environment, illegal immigration, human trafficking), the more devastating effect the reversal of those reforms would have on the EU itself. The issues which seemed to have been put under control to some degree would swell up in short time – border management, cross-border crime, human trafficking, etc.

Concluding remarks

The cracks in the stability of democracies in the Western Balkans are already visible. There is plenty of evidence of democratic backsliding, illiberal practices, dismantling of the multi-party systems, pressure on independent actors, reversal of EU-reforms, etc. If the Balkans were actually left out of the EU, all of the above would magnify multi-fold. With that in mind, and viewed in the context of possible new conflicts in the region at worst – the EU's strategy that is based on a bunch of terms such as 'having no alternative' or 'needing to make credible effort', terms like 'realistic timetable', 'sticks and carrots', 'conditionality', 'road-maps', 'parallel tracks', 'front-runners and laggards', 'regatta', etc. – seem at best naïve.

Many of us enjoyed the irony of the joke that the EU would fall apart by the time the Balkans joined. After the referendum on Brexit in the UK, many thought the time had come for that joke to come true. The shockwaves created by Brexit obviously opened a huge number of questions about the future of the EU, but also – provided some useful answers. Through the whole Brexit situation, the EU has demonstrated strong resilience, which many did not expect. It showed to the world, and to the Western Balkans in particular that it is a structure which is not so easily dismantled, however ineffective it may seem at times.

It was another proof that some of the EU-related myths which many in the Balkans believe - mainly live in jokes. The EU is there to stay, the question is remains though – where will the Balkans be in future? Although it remains true that the EU has lots of problems of its own, that does not mean that it has lost capacity to deal with expansion into the Balkans. That is one of the myths that needs to be busted – but it needs to be busted by the EU itself. With that in mind the following recommendations are proposed:

- Although the EU needs to handle in parallel a number of crises - the rise of populism, the shaken partnership with the US, the challenges posed by Russia, Brexit, immigration and influx of refugees, as well as remaining consequences of the financial crises, etc. – it must nonetheless continue to zoom in on the Western Balkans. It is not just a matter of keeping an eye on developments in the region – the EU needs to contextualise the Western Balkans in the light of all the above global developments.
- The EU's own lack of identity, over-bureaucratisation of the accession process, and a lack of vision for the Balkans continue to thwart its approach to this region. It is thus recommended that the EU addressed the burning question - whether the price of keeping the Balkans in the waiting room, or even outside the EU, could be higher than the price of letting the region in – even if not fully prepared for membership? Is it the waiting itself which is bringing to the front the dilemmas which would otherwise not come to the fore so prominently?

- Another Balkan-related myth needs to be addressed and busted – the one claiming that ‘by keeping the Balkans busy, attention will be diverted away from making problems’. Keeping the Balkans ‘too busy’ with meeting the EU standards proved too demanding and hard for countries in the region. The accession process is revealing all the weaknesses of the states too fast – too soon, which is why it is recommended that the EU re-considers the nature of the accession process from the point of view of the future stability of the region. The EU needs to make an assessment whether such a demanding accession process is taking its toll on the stability of countries, and thus weakening the prospects of joining the EU.
- The EU needs to resume its original purpose - minimising and diminishing the possibility of inter-state conflicts. The EU remains to be a peace-building project, but it should not be mistaken for a conflict-prevention mechanism. The EU can serve its original purpose if including the Western Balkans inside. Managing the Balkans outside the EU would force the EU to work as a conflict prevention mechanism, and we know from the past the EU is not very good at that. That is why the EU’s renewed political commitment to the region, and especially to the peace in the region, is more important than the bureaucratic process of accession.
- In the end, it needs to be born in mind that imagining the Balkans outside the EU cannot be done in isolation from imagining the future of the continent as a whole.

Sources and literature

1. Bechev, Dimitar. ‘The Influence of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans’, European Western Balkans, July 2016.
2. Fraenkel, dr. Eran. ‘The EU and the Western Balkans: Do They Share a Future?’, Barcelona Center for International Affairs, March 2016.
3. Gjeta, Altin. ‘Backslide of Democracy in the Western Balkans to be Tackled by the EU’, The New Federalist, April 2017.
4. Macdowall, Andrew. ‘Albanian prime minister: EU faces ‘nightmare’ if Balkan hopes fade’, Politico, 18.4.2017.
5. Policy Paper, ‘The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy’, BiEPAG, March 2017.
6. Puka, Arlind. ‘The approach the EU should take to the Western Balkans’, Euroactiv, January 2017.
7. Rankin, Jennifer, ‘Russian destabilisation of Balkans rings alarm bells as EU leaders meet’, The Guardian, March 2017.
8. Sarajlic, Denisa. ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina – something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue’, South East Europe Facing Western Upheavals and Regional Backslide Policy Recommendations, Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (SG RSSEE), May 2017.