

EUROPEAN UNION – WESTERN BALKANS RELATIONS: A TWO-WAY STREET WHERE NO ONE KNOWS WHERE THEY ARE HEADED

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ОТНОШЕНИЯТА МЕЖДУ ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЯ СЪЮЗ И ЗАПАДНИТЕ БАЛКАНИ: ДВУПОСОЧНА УЛИЦА, КОЯТО ВОДИ НЕИЗВЕСТНО КЪДЕ

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Abstract: *In this article, we will try to answer questions such as whether the EU is interested in activating its enlargement policy in practice, whether regional integration remains the only option in the Western Balkans and what this means for small states such as those in the Western Balkans in theoretical conception, respectively how this whole process affects the redefining of their foreign policy goals and the creation of foreign policy in general.*

Keywords: *European Union, Western Balkans, integration, difference, goals*

Резюме: *В статията се проучва интеграционният процес на Западните Балкани към ЕС, започнал в Солун през 2003 г. и намиращ се понастоящем в застой. Основните въпроси, които се разискват, са: доколко ЕС е заинтересован да активизира политиката си на разширяване по отношение на Западните Балкани, дали регионалната интеграция е единствената възможност в теоретичен план за ефективна външна политика и как този процес влияе върху предефинирането на целите на глобалната външна политика. Коментират се обществените настроения в страните на Западните Балкани, как европейското членство се използва едва ли не като механизъм за изнудване, поради което става все по-непопулярно и тромаво, губещо своята привлекателност.*

Ключови думи: *Европейски съюз, Западни Балкани, интеграция, различия, цели*

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Major foreign policy goal of Western Balkan states and Kosovo¹ represent fully integration in the EU². After disintegration of Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the wars from 1990s on the ground of former socialist republics, all officials of newly established states in the region of Western Balkans have determined European integration as its major foreign policy goal. In that process Thessaloniki Summit (EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2003) held in June 21 2003 was a kind of milestone in the relations between European Union's officials with the authorities of Western Balkans. From that perspective Thessaloniki Agenda adopted in 2003 was the right decision, the right guideline for both sides, for European Union and for Western Balkan states. European integration of Western Balkans was realistic idea during the 2010s. From one side, officials in the Brussels was ready, politically and economically strength for horizontal integration, followed up by vertical integration, while, from the other side, officials from Western Balkans states, but also societies and political elites willing to prepare themselves and work on their key foreign policy goal – fully EU membership. During the 2010s most of the Western Balkans actors have got candidate status, except Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo*. Republic of Croatia has gone further, it is already member of EU, so it has reached its key foreign policy goal, but other partners, Republic North Macedonia, Republic of Montenegro, Republic of Serbia and Republic of Albania did not reach any concrete stage that could even provide a prediction of the visibility for the EU membership.

From today's perspective, there are no doubts that both sides have contributed to such situation. But, although the perspective of full integration is not at this moment on the Brussels agenda, we should to point out that cooperation between Western Balkans partners with EU, in many areas, especially in economy as a crucial field, was deepened throughout the years. EU has funded numerous projects in the region, on loan basis, but also through a numerous financial grants in public infrastructure, as well as in supporting private economic sector within the Western Balkans. Numerous of infrastructural projects within the Western Balkans were realized by the European financial resources, including projects in the areas of rule of law, building democratic institutions, civil society, boosting small and medium-sized entrepreneurship. In fact, the

phenomenon of crisis is also present in European integration (Dabić, 2020:5). Although EU, as well as member states of EU have on different ways invested in the Western Balkans, there was no concrete political will for fully integration, except the so-called official will visible in declarations and official statements. During the years such circumstances have had a real negative effect on the ground, because beside the huge amount of European investments, as well as investments from EU member states, there was no any sign for moving forward toward EU, to fully political integration. Such flows have had negative impact even within societies in Western Balkans. Especially, when other global actors, while the EU dealt with its internal financial, economic and institutional crisis, have showed certain interest for the region, no matter whether their interests were economically or geopolitically motivated.

Three Factors of the Crisis of EU Integration of Western Balkans

Financial crisis. In this analysis we have focused on three key factors in the period during the 2010s that has led to certain slowing down of the process of fully EU integration of the Western Balkans states and Kosovo*. First one is economic global crisis, followed by financial crisis in EU. It was extremely complicated period for the whole EU, as a global, before all economic actors. Financial crisis within EU has brought into question its economic attractiveness on global level. Perception that EU is fully integrated single market without any possibilities to be endangered by foreign economic or political factors is relativized. Certain states within Union, for example Greece, were facing serious financial difficulties which have had influence to the whole European financial and monetary system. In such circumstances the relations with Western Balkans, including Western Balkans integration were not a priority at all on the agenda in Brussels. Doubts that such pervasive crisis could bring into question the existence of the European system in that moment has influenced to the marginalization of the process of Western Balkans states integration.

The financial crisis that started in the middle of 2007 has had a significant negative impact on the EU member states, especially on the

new members, integrated few years before, such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, as well as Slovenia. The reasons and circumstances of the economic crisis that followed were different in different states, and this global crisis created an indicator of how even the strong regional, but big economies, such as the European single market, is not fully able for successful resolving the new challenges, respectively with the problem of crisis. As a result, each individual member state of the EU was trying to resolve ongoing crisis on its own way.

The diversity of the economic structures, economic characteristics, goals of the economy and the financial activities conditioned the various measures that were chosen in order for individual states to overcome the crisis in the shortest possible time. From the other side, there were different positions related to the enlargement policy of EU during the financial and economic crisis. For example, former Czech ambassador Hana Hubáčková to Serbia in 2009 has pointed out that EU remains committed to the strategy of expansion to the Western Balkans states, despite serious problems such as the global economic crisis (Živanović, 2009). But the fact is the only Republic of Croatia has become full member state of EU in the after crisis period, while other Western Balkan states and partners are still in the process of candidacy or negotiations for EU membership.

Public opinion. Second factor, followed by economic and financial crisis was the changed perception of citizens in European states and in their societies related to the EU enlargement policy or the process of horizontal integration. Majority of the European citizens, who were faced with huge economic and financial complications, even on daily level, were not interested for new European member's states. It is from a political aspect absolutely negative political message, so the European leaders, no matter of their personal political views or positions to the integration of Western Balkans states, were under pressure by their voters to slow down the processes with Western Balkan partners and to propose different alternative ways of integration, but not classical fully membership. European public opinion in that moment has led the leaders of the states of the Western Balkans even further away from EU than it was expected with the financial and economic crisis. In the *Open Society* Foundation report from 2021 is stated that as many as 59% of the French

people said that the integration of the Western Balkans states with EU would be bad decision, while only 22% said it could be good (Hübner, 2021). It looks similar when the question is asked about individual states.

While the vast majority of the French would welcome the admission of Kingdom of Norway (81%) or Iceland (75%), in the case of other states, a thin minority supports it: from Montenegro (27%), Ukraine (26%), North Macedonia (25%), Serbia (22%), BiH (20%), Albania (20%), Kosovo* (15%) to Republic of Türkiye (12%) (Hübner, 2021).

The topic of EU enlargement has a long history in the foreign policy strategies of the officials of the Republic of France. As the former president of the French Republic, Jacques Chirac he called on the citizens to vote for the European Constitution in 2005 by promising to change the French Constitution – so that from the citizens will be required to confirm the integration of each new EU member states in a referendum. In that period, it was loudly said that Republic of Turkey could become a member state, to which the French always harbored majority resistance (Rujević, 2021).

The attitudes of citizens in the EU states have mostly changed regarded to the enlargement policy. While during nineties there was a huge optimism related to integration of new EU members states, contemporary challenges which is Brussels facing has led to the changed perception related to the enlargement policy. Now we have a new phenomenon that many citizens in EU member states believe that the EU is in crisis due to the new member states that negatively affect its authenticity. Such process has led us also to the changes of policies by leaders of the states in the EU. Although majority of them was focused to the EU enlargement policy, negative internal political effect as a consequence of supporting enlargement policy has pressured them to accept new discourse of the public opinion which is mostly against enlargement policy. That tendency has led us to the complication in the relations between EU officials and political authorities of the Western Balkans. The leaders of the member states of the EU continued to speak continued to talking about Western Balkans integration, as a long-term goal of EU, while from the other side Western Balkans states leaders have continued to talking about fast integration of the region in EU, while the reality was quite different.

Associate of the Carnegie Europe Foundation and lecturer at the School of Global and Regional Studies of the University of Oxford Dimitar Bechev estimates that the Western Balkans region is constantly on the European agenda, but it has never been the most important item – besides the debt crisis, the first Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the migrant wave in 2015-2016, the corona virus pandemic and finally the aggression of the Army of the Russian Federation February 24 2022 in Ukraine (Demostatp 2022). The unnecessary current armed conflict in the state of Ukraine should be ended. As a consequence of a long period on the European integration path also citizens from Western Balkan states and Kosovo* are providing less support to EU. For example, according the results from the last IPSOS survey, against EU integrations are 44 percent of Serbian citizens, while 35 are in favor and 21 percent do not have precise answer (Mastilović-Jasnić, 2022). Such results show us that we have unclear goals from both sides. From one side, EU is interested to keep the role of key actor in the region, which depends of the speed of the EU accession of Western Balkans states and Kosovo*. From the other side, leaders of the states from the Western Balkans region continue to promote European integration as a key foreign policy goal, but current political processes are not leading this region closer to the EU.

Different Interests on the Western Balkans. Third factor, EU officials are also criticizing leaders states from Western Balkans because its cooperation with the leaders of states whose policies are not always in line with their principles. Political and economic influences of People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans states are critical item in the relations between Western Balkans officials and officials from the EU. In the annual reports of European Commission, cooperation between Russia and China from one side and partners from Western Balkans is mentioned as an open issue on the EU path, as well as refusal from the Western Balkans partners to synchronize their foreign policy with common foreign and security policy of EU. But, from realistic point of view, Brussels has also responsibility for such influences which are in different ways opposite of the European politics at all levels, from political level, through economy to the security issues.

The states of the Western Balkans region have become a kind of territory for interweaving different foreign interests. While the officials of

the EU dealt with their internal economic and financial issues, Chinese authorities has restructured its economy, also activated *Belt and Road* global project, from one side, and, Russia, from the other side, has empowered its foreign policy instruments, thanks to its national resources such as gas and oil, and using them in its foreign policy mechanism for negotiations and realization of Russian national interests. Officials in the Western Balkans region, whose states depend on Russian natural resources, as well as attracted by China's new economic policy based on quick loans for huge infrastructure projects, have expanded their focus to new international partners, not only on EU integration. While the officials and bureaucrats of the EU were primarily concerned with their own reform, keeping the issue of the integration of the Western Balkans mostly aside, Chinese and Russian officials have recognized the economic potential of the mentioned region and did not miss the opportunity to realize their economic, but also political interests.

The consequences are visible today, but they are also long-term. If the EU wants to regain its role as a key actor in the states Western Balkans region, not only clear promises and political messages about integration are needed, but concrete activities that will enable both the political elite and citizens to regain support in the EU and in the speed up integration process as something that is really achievable.

Consequences of Failure the EU Enlargement Policy towards Western Balkans

In the last ten years, while the process of EU integraton of the Western Balkans states was in the waiting phase, officials from the People's Republic of China and Russian Federation have become more and more important actors in the region, from economic, but also political and security point of view. The Chinese officials, through the *Initiative 17+1*³, has agreed numerous loans with Western Balkans partners, activating on that way its construction companies in the region, but also it has realized different huge investments in attractive sectors in the states Western Balkans, such as mining sector, energetic sector, but also high technology sector. From the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans have come huge investments by the officials of the state company

Gazprom in the energy sector, thus making these states significantly dependent on Russian resources on the long term basis.

In such circumstances, the role of EU has been brought into question because the activities of the state-owned companies from China and Russia were quite visible to the citizens from Western Balkans states. While the investments from the EU, aimed at creating a stable institutional framework, were anything but attractive for the majority of citizens from the Western Balkans, who were mostly interested in new highways, infrastructure construction, reopening already closed factories from the socialist period, as well as new jobs.

Although the officials of the EU have found themselves in many different crises since its inception, this all-encompassing crisis not only within it, but also on a global level has led European states to redefine their enlargement policy, especially in the so-called old members.

On the other hand, actors from the states of the Western Balkans have started to led policies that are not always in line with the principles of the EU and the expectations of their officials.

First, regional stability is fragile as a consequence of the self-proclaimed independence of the Republic of Kosovo, which the officials of the Republic of Serbia do not recognize, considering that territory as an autonomous province Kosovo and Metohija, part of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, as it is stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia.

It should be recalled that Kosovo is not an internationally recognized state as a full member state of the United Nations, according the Security Council Resolution 1244 from June 10 1999. Also, all problems in Kosovo and related to it in the relations between officials from Belgrade and Pristina should be resolving and at the end resolved through so-called technical and status political dialogue, which are conducted in Brussels under the facilitation of the current Special Representative of the EU for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina Miroslav Lajčak.

Second, certain political elites in Western Balkan states have started to led politics which is not in accordance with European values and principles and on that way bringing into question the standards of rule of law, media freedom, freedom of expression and democracy

standards. Such circumstances have been visible in European Commission annual reports and they have also led Western Balkans integration far from EU.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Partnership policy of the EU is in huge crisis. It is also one of the reasons that there are no expectations for intensification of the process of enlargement of the EU to the states of the Western Balkans region and Kosovo*. Security issues within the full member states of the EU related to the migrant crisis and the security crisis on the eastern border have also contributed to the reorientation of their policy, primarily in the interest of stability, without any possibility for the interest in accelerating the enlargement process.

Very important in the context of the enlargement of the EU was the referendum for the exit of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – BREXIT⁴ June 23 2016 as a phenomenon that had a huge impact on European public opinion and, at the same time raised the question of the direction in which the EU should be further developed and reformed. Brexit have had a negative impact not only on the citizens of the member states of the EU, but also on the citizens of the states from the Western Balkans region. Although many experts on the EU and international relations have seen the Brexit as a chance for faster integration of the states of the Western Balkans and Kosovo into the same, it did not happen.

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Circumstances in the states of the Western Balkan region have partially changed. Officials of the EU are talking about the integration of the states of the Western Balkans and Kosovo* into it, but different political leaders of the Union interpret this issue differently. Various strategies are mentioned in the media, starting with the European political community and ending with the European Commonwealth. The Western Balkans has now become a kind of region where the leaders and citizens of the states do not have a clear perspective on membership in the EU.

Also, the leaders of the states of the Western Balkan region do not have a clear vision of the perspective of sustainable development. Economic and security problems should stop piling up. There are still no concrete solutions for open regional issues, while the member states of the EU, which are in the immediate vicinity of the region, contribute minimally to the

stabilization of the region and the actualization of the issue of European integration. From an objective point of view, the Western Balkans region is facing with complicated process, in which different interests of actors from the region and outside are merged and separated. Without a clear agenda of the EU officials on the integration of the states of the Western Balkans and Kosovo*, integration within the region remains the one of the viable options that can contribute to regional stabilization in the long term and conditionally, as well as the resolution of regional disputes.

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