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Editorial Foreword

This volume contains the proceedings of the *Second International Conference Europe in Discourse: Agendas of Reform* which took place in Athens, Greece from September 21st to 23d, 2018. The conference is a sequel to the highly successful 2016 First International Conference Europe in Discourse: Identity, Diversity, Borders. The Second Conference was again hosted by Hellenic American College. Unlike its predecessor, this conference focused on agendas of reform and thus on solutions for both continuing and new problems facing the European Union. The conference featured keynote speeches, plenary panels on values-based Reform, from enlargement to legitimization, Completing the EMU, Greece and the EU, Franco-German Relationship, The Transatlantic Dimension, EU Security and Defence, and EU and Islam. Last but not least, the conference also featured many oral presentations of papers by international scholars dealing in one way or another with the overall theme of reform agendas for the EU.

We have in this volume put together the proceedings of the conference based on the submission of papers that were presented at the conference and that passed the reviewing process. In line with the major topics of the conference, we have divided the papers in this volume into the following broad 4 sections:

Section 1: Values, Identity, Enlargement and Integration
Section 2: Migration, Refugees, Brexit, EU Crisis
Section 3: Regional EU issues: Greece, France-Germany, Turkey, Western Balkan, Romania
Section 4: EU and Islam, Climate Change, Energy Security

We hope that readers of this volume will appreciate the rich variety of the topics discussed in the papers united here.

Juliane House and Themis Kaniklidou

The actorness of the EU and the Western Balkans: towards permanent liminality?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines the EU's identity in relation to the concept of external Other. It is argued that the EU identity formation represents a relational process shaped not only by its interaction with national identity but also with significant others, necessary for the defining/redefining and manifesting of the EU's identity. The paper focuses on the Western Balkans as an external Other in the process of constructing and shaping the EU actorness. It goes beyond the clear-cut dichotomy in the self/other relation, introducing the concept of liminality as a useful analytical tool in explaining the identity of these two actors. The article suggests that both the EU and the Western Balkans are "stuck" in a liminal position, i.e. trapped in-between different sets of role expectations which could lead to the permanent liminality.

Keywords: EU, Western Balkans, liminality, enlargement, identity.

INTRODUCTION

What represents the international identity of the European Union? How do we define the EU as an international actor? When speaking of EU actorness in international relations, many scholars use different concepts to describe the specific nature of the EU in international relations, in order to highlight the difference between the EU and other actors, to define the EU as something that is not what the other actors are (cf. Ojanen, 2018). However, the purpose of this article is not to debate different concepts used to define the *uniqueness* of the EU as an international actor. Rather, the article looks at EU actorness through the self-other identity nexus. It starts from the premise that the EU identity-creation is a relational process, shaped not only through its interaction with national identity, but also with significant others. The EU cannot be the sole author of its identity and the different others are necessary to define/redefine and manifest its identity (cf. Triandafyllidou 2008; Neumann, 1998). Accordingly, EU actorness is regarded in this article as a particular identity of the EU vis-à-vis external others, reflected in its ability to change others through the spreading of particular norms. It is argued that the EU enlargement policy is the main tool of the EU's capacity to project its norms and values. Among a variety of others that are significant in the constitution of the EU identity through the process of enlargement, the article focuses on the Western Balkans as the EU's external Other. In this article, the EU- Western Balkans identity construction is perceived not as a clear-cut dichotomy in the self/other relation, but as a possibility of different juxtapositions that can be theorized as constituting processes of linking and differentiation. Hence, the article focuses on the concept of liminality as a "middle position" in the self/other relation. The concept of liminality refers to "in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (Horvath, Thomassen, Wydra, 2015, p. 2). Thus, the concept of liminality makes a useful analytical tool which could demonstrate the oscillation between binary oppositions and questioning of stable identities and hierarchies.

The article will be structured as follows. We will first discuss the impact of the external Other and its significance for the EU identity-creation. In addition to analysing the neatly set dichotomy of the self/other relation in international relations theory, the concept of liminality is introduced as a useful analytical tool in order to explain the changing nature of identity. The second part of the article focuses on the Western Balkans as the EU's external Other. The article argues that the relation between the EU and the Western Balkans in the enlargement process is characterised by the liminal position of both actors. Although by definition temporary, the liminal position of the EU and the Western Balkans could lead to a permanent state, given that both actors are trapped in-between differing sets of expectations.

The EU identity and impact of external Other

Gerard Delanty points out that the term "identity" is widely used but also often abused (Delanty, 2005, p. 51), while Bo Strath argues that identity is "a problematic and fluid concept" (Strath, 2002, p. 387). Notwithstanding the numerous definitions of identity in a variety of disciplines, certain features of identity can be distinguished as such (Stojadinović, 2011). Identity arises as a product of social interaction and thus is socially constructed. Identity is not given, fully formed, but is created in social action as an expression of a social actor's self-understanding and self-recognition. Therefore, identity is not a fixed, unchangeable category but a dynamic, contextual, flexible one. Identity is a mode of self-understanding, a wider conceptual framework that enables understanding and explaining the world around us (Stojadinović, 2012, pp. 27-8). Also, identity is two-faced, simultaneously implying similarity and difference. Every search for identity implies differentiating oneself from what one is not. The self/other relation is dialectical: there is no self without the other.

The concept of other is widely explored in academic research studies. This is evidenced by myriad important studies in social sciences that provide us with the useful insights into the conceptual analysis of self and other.   Some scholars introduced the self/other identity differentiation into EU integration studies (Delanty, 1995; Neumann, 1998, 1999; Rumelili, 2004; Diez, 2005; Hansen, 2006, Neumann and Welsh, 1991). They underlined the dichotomy between self and other as pivotal in the making of the European identity. Accordingly, EU identity is regarded by these authors as a relational process, shaped not only by the interaction with national identity, but also with significant external others (Triandafyllidou, 2008, p. 280).

Yet, despite the fact that the notion of identity and the process of identity-formation in relation to other has gained considerable attention, the impact of the external Other on the process of identity-formation remains underexplored in international relations studies (Lucarelli, 2011, p.149). This lack of interest is related to the fact that identity as a constitutive element of international politics was for a long time neglected in international relations theory due to the domination of state-centric approaches to international relations. However, with the development of the constructivist approach in international relations theory and its conceptualisation of global politics in terms of the social interaction processes in which actors engage, identity has become a key variable in the domain of European integration studies. Mainstream constructivism (conventional constructivism) concentrates on the role of norms and ideas in shaping international political outcomes (Checkel, 2006). The focus of this approach is on social ontology, i.e. question how ideational or normative structures constitute agents, their interests and their identity. However, by attempting to answer the question how collective identities relate to other identities, conventional constructivism neglects the relationship between identity and difference. Specifically with regard to the EU, it considers that the EU identity is constituted by characteristics that are internal to the EU, ignoring the effect of Others in the constitution of this identity. Hence, the EU is perceived as a new type of international actor with a value-based or normative identity ("normative power"), based on its singularity in terms of its evolution and character (Manners, 2002; Whitman, 2011). Positive/inclusive forms of differentiation contribute to the process of EU identity construction, while the impact of Other is downplayed in the process of EU identity construction.

Contrary to conventional constructivism, the poststructuralist approach of identity in international relations (Campbell, 1992; Delanty, 1995; Doty, 1996; Diez, 2005; Hansen, 2006; Neumann, 1999, Neumann and Walsch, 1991) underlines the importance of the nexus between collective self and its others in the process of identity construction. It views identity on the basis of the clear-cut self/other dichotomy, i.e. mutually exclusive oppositions. The constitution of identity does not thus mean the dynamics of homogenisation and association, but a continuous delineation of the self from the other. In the poststructuralist view, identity formation through differentiation implies a hierarchy and subordination. Central to the construction of identity is asymmetry of power in the self-other relation. According to the poststructuralist approach, discourse represents the key mechanism in the social construction of reality and the definition of power relationship in society. Discourses have performative power, i.e. rhetorical strategies inherent in discourses contribute to the way we perceive social facts (Carta, Morin, 2013, p. 22). Through discourse, identity is produced and reproduced in contrast to Other. The poststructuralist standpoint argues that the EU identity is not constituted only by characteristics that are internal to the EU, but also by its external others.

Therefore, the EU as an international actor represents a construct which not only designates the EU as a distinctive kind of actor in international politics, but also determines the nature of the relationship the EU has with Others (Diez, 2005; Hansen, 2006; Rumelili, 2004).

However, "the stability of social order relies not only on neat oppositions but also on the acceptance of the unclassifiable, of surprises and coincidences, and of ambiguity and fuzziness" (Giesen, 2012, p.789). Although the poststructuralist standpoint argues for the relational understanding of identity and is interested in deconstructing social and discursive structures (Rumelili, 2012), it fails to explain "what falls between neat clean-cut categories" (Malksöo, 2012, p. 483 and p. 486). The concept of liminality, as a space "in between the opposites, as the third possibility, the transition between inside and outside, the "neither...nor" or the "as well as" (Giesen, 2012, p. 788), has been generally neglected in international relations theory as well as in European integration studies (cf. Rumelili, 2012, Malksöo, 2012).

Introduced and developed in the field of anthropology by Arnold van Gennep (Gennep, 1960), the concept of liminality, in Gennep's view, relies on the universal constant of transition of human beings from one social status to another. There is a pattern (French: schema) that always occurs in this process of transition i.e. rites de passages, which involves three distinct stages: rites of separation, liminal or threshold rites and post-liminal rites. Through this three-stage structural change, each individual rejects the old identity and acquires a new one. The liminal or threshold stage is characterized by a temporary period of timelessness and social structurelessness. Thus, the concept of liminality can be defined as a condition "neither here nor there, betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Liminality is a temporary condition, a moment, when the past is suspended and the future has not yet begun. As a process of transition, it involves ritual processes or practices of imitation, led by a master of ceremonies (absolute ruler), as a leader who shows the way how to acquire the new identity through imitation.

Although a liminal situation is by definition temporary, transitory, it might happen that a temporary situation becomes extended, lasting, even a permanent state. Permanent liminality happens "when a temporary suspension of the normal, everyday, taken for granted state of affairs becomes permanent, generating a loss of reality, even a sense of unreality in daily existence" (Szakolczai, 2017, p. 233). It comprises a constant state of social limbo, involving a deep-rooted sense of ambivalence (Szakolczai, 2017). Also, apart from celebrating the creativity of the concept of liminality, the term also allows us to understand "the manner in which a painful situation of uncertainty can emerge and, in particular, how and why such situation can be explicitly used and even artificially provoked" (Szakolczai, 2014, p. 34).In a broad manner, liminality can be applicable to both space and time. Therefore, single moments, longer periods or even whole epochs can be liminal (Thomassen, 2009, p. 16). According to some authors, liminal places can be more extended areas, like "borderlands" or even whole countries, placed in-between positions between larger civilizations (Thomassen, 2009, p. 16). Also, liminal experiences can be "artificially produced" as in rituals, or they can simply happen (Thomassen, 2009, p.18).

In recent years, some authors have focused on the concept of liminality in the international relations (IR) theory (Rumelili, 2012, Malksöo, 2012, Neumann, 2012). By highlighting that IR theory is mostly concentrated on the construction of rigid formal dichotomies, they underline the importance of the concept of liminality because "most of international politics happens in between different political subjects that are themselves "happening" as a result of multiple relational links to others" (Malksöo, 2012, p. 483). They put an accent on the importance of the permanent liminality as emerging from the painful experience of a prolonged state of political ambiguity (Malksöo, 2012). According to some authors, liminality should be examined in IR theory as both a temporal and spatial category, as well as a characteristic experience accompanying the transformative situations and transitions in international politics. These transitions can be sudden, as in the case of revolutions, or prolonged, as in the case of wars or states of enduring political instability (Malksöo, 2012, p. 486). On the other hand, some scholars focus on how discourses of international politics construct liminal spaces, position certain actors within those spaces, and how the actors constituted as liminal, in turn, practice their liminality (Rumelili 2012, p. 497).

The EU actorness and the liminality of the Western Balkans in the enlargement process

One of the most powerful features of the EU international actorness is its tendency to "reproduce itself outside its own borders, i.e. to domesticate relations with non-member states and to project internal solutions onto its external relations" (Renner, Trauner, 2009, p. 451). The process of EU enlargement became the important focal point for the EU identity formation. Through the process of enlargement, the EU strengthens and legitimises its identity. When an EU candidate country successfully adapts the EU norms, the EU identity is legitimized, while the unsuccessful candidates are perceived as "the other". Thus, EU enlargement is a process that continuously produces sites of liminality around it (cf. Rumelili, 2004). At the same time, however, through the enlargement process, the EU has been undergoing a transitional process of becoming (Pace, Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). As David Campbell points out, "collectivities are always in need of reproduction, which implies that they "are (and have to be) always in a process of becoming" (Campbell, 1992, p. 12).

Thus, the end of the Cold War and the creation of the EU as a new political actor required the search for a new identity of the EU that went together with the (re)definition of the EU's external Others. The EU identity-building after the end of the Cold War and the underlying discourse on its political responsibility for the eastern and southern parts of the European continent, i.e. in terms of spatio-temporal narrative of "Europe whole and free". This representation of the EU was followed by the construction of the EU identity towards others. In parallel with the process of enlargement of the EU to the Central and Eastern part of the continent, the Balkans occupied a specific place as the European Other in the process of the EU identity construction. The newly created Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU (CFSP) was put into the practice during the war in Yugoslavia. After a failed attempt of the EU to "Europeanise the Balkans" during the war, the identity of the Balkans in this new post-Cold war context has been constructed on the dichotomies of integration/fragmentation, unity/disunity, peace/war, Europeanisation/Balkanisation, civilisation/barbarism, i.e. in terms of clear-cut binary opposition. By the inclusion/exclusion binary, the ghettoisation of the Balkans occurred (cf. Todorova, 2009). The symbolic spatial bordering enabled the constitution of the EU's normative order as a place of governance and upholding of the EU values, in opposition to the "threatening stranger" that violated these values (Vukasović, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, the EU represented the Balkans as the "frontier region", a symbolic feature that transcended its immediately visible feature and represented an instrument of EU power which created a space of exclusion and inclusion (cf. Cocco, 2017, p. 294).

At the same time, the EU enlargement policy became an important focal point for the EU identity formation. The success of the EU enlargement policy in the Central and Eastern Europe led to the construction of a stable EU identity which enabled the EU to categorise the Balkans in a more "benign" manner, by portraying itself as "exceptional" and as example to be followed by others (Vukasović, 2018). In the post-conflict settlement of the region, the introduction of the term "Western Balkans", including the countries of ex-Yugoslavia except Slovenia but including Albania, marks a change in the EU's approach to the region. The label "Western Balkans" is no longer a synonym for conflict, but, on the contrary, is a new term coined in a new context to denote a region with a "European perspective". Therefore, the liminality of the Western Balkans as partly-self/partly-other replaces the binary opposition in the EU identity discourse. The Western Balkans were placed in a situation "in-between", neither here (EU) nor there (Balkans), neither excluded nor included, as a region with a "European perspective". The region represented the Other not as anti-EU Self or non-EU Self, but a less-EU Self. At the same time, the legacy of the disintegration of Yugoslavia posed the greatest challenge for the EU in the process of the region's "Europeanisation".

In 2000, the Western Balkans were included in EU enlargement process. The European Council in Santa Maria de Feira in June 2000 affirmed that the countries of the Western Balkans have become "potential candidates for EU membership"(European Council, Santa Maria de Feira, 2000). The inclusion of the Western Balkans in the process of European integration was reaffirmed during the European Council in Thessaloniki in June 2003 which stated that "the EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries" and that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union" (European Council, Thessaloniki, 2003). Due to the double challenge of the post-war consolidation and Europeanisation, the accession process of the Western

Balkans was based on double conditionality: in addition to the obligation to fulfill the general criteria, known as "Copenhagen criteria", laid down for the Central and Eastern Europeancountries, specific criteria foreseen for the Western Balkans resulted from the legacy of wars ("political conditionality") and related to the full cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, respect of human rights, the return of refugees and regional cooperation (Lopandić, 2001, p. 172). As a region in transition from one state to another, the Western Balkans found themselves in the liminal position. At the same time, the EU was supposed to play the "master of ceremonies" role, determining the transitional process that the region must undergo through accession frameworks and democracy promotion efforts. The EU was seeking to repeat the success of its Eastern enlargement in the Western Balkans (O'Brennan, 2014).

Today, twenty years on from the introduction of the Stabilization and Association Process for the countries of the Western Balkans, certain progress has been made in "relocating" these countries from the "extreme European periphery" to the European mainstream (Đukanović, Dašić, 2018, p. 6). In 2013, Croatia joined the Union. Serbia and Montenegro are negotiating the membership status and are considered as leading countries in the region. The European Council from June 2018 discussed the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Republic of North Macedonia (ex-FYROM), after the latter reached the agreement with Greece on 12 June on their name dispute. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Metohija hold the status of "potential candidates". Speaking about the Western Balkans at the London Summit on the Western Balkans in July 2018, the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini said: "In these years we have been all working together to draw the region closer and closer to the European Union, politically, economically and security-wise. And we have seen remarkable results, solutions to the most difficult bilateral issues. The Western Balkans are steadily moving forward. And today we reconfirm that we are together with the region on that path, sharing the commitment towards our common future" (European Commission, 2018).

However, despite the optimistic rhetoric, the success of the EU enlargement policy has been far from evident in the case of the Western Balkans. In spite of some progress in political and economic reforms, two decades after, the Western Balkans region still looks like an "unfinished project" (Milovanović, 2017, p. 43). The region remains in a liminal position, "neither here, nor there", "European" but still not fully "European". Despite the political conditionality through which the EU has sought to bolster democratic reforms in the Western Balkans, the EU has not been able to replicate its success from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) enlargement. Although the region has formally progressed towards EU membership through partial compliance with the membership requirements, the profound political reform remains elusive (Richter, Wunsch, 2019, p. 2), creating decoupling between formal compliance and the progress in democratisation. This discrepancy leads to the "pathological effects" of Europeanisation and casts doubt on the transformative power of the EU in the process of enlargement. Or, as some authors contend, "conditionality works well if membership criteria are clear, if the same criteria are applied to all applicants, if they are strictly but fairly monitored, if the findings are transparently communicated, and if there is no doubt that the reward will come once conditions are met" (BIEPAG, p. 5). Therefore, the identity of the EU, successfully constructed through the enlargement process, was faced with instability. Thus, apart from the Western Balkans, the EU also found itself in a liminal position.

It is possible to identify several reasons that account for the slow pace of the enlargement process of the Western Balkans and their persisting marginality on the EU's agenda. First, due to the Union's post-Lisbon economic stabilisation and internal consolidation topping the political agenda, the enlargement policy progressively lost importance for the EU (Wunsch, 2011, p. 27). Since 2008, the EU's internal problems, caused by the global financial and economic crisis, have made the enlargement policy "a second-rate issue" both for the EU and its member states" (Stojić, 2016, p. 2). This was followed by the rise of Eurosceptic voices among the member-state elites, marked by negative attitudes towards the European integration process which is seen as technocratic, undemocratic and damaging to European citizens. Second, critical evaluation of the last two EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 has strengthened opposition inside the EU to the admission of new members (Szpala, 2018). This was followed by the "evaluation fatigue" and "implementation fatigue" of the EU in the Western Balkans after 2008 (O'Brennan, 2018, p. 2). This situation had a

negative impact of the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. According to some authors, the EU developed a "wait-and see" approach towards the region, placing it at the "periphery of the periphery" (Bechev, 2012, p. 1). Thus, the lack of drive from the EU for the intense involvement in the region was accompanied by the slow pace of the necessary reforms in the region. Meanwhile, however, the EU sent optimistic messages, such as promises of membership, declarative support for the fulfilment of the required criteria etc. This inconsistency in the EU's rhetoric lowered the confidence of the Western Balkans elites to continue with reforms (Miščević, 2016, pp. 143-4). Third, the so-called "migration crisis" highlighted the ambiguity of the relationship between the region and the EU. Faced with a large number of refugees transiting through the region, the Western Balkans countries became the key factor for the effective management of migratory flows towards the EU. Due to the absence of common solutions at the EU level - with the member states divided between those calling for solidarity and those advocating for a complete closure of borders- the EU's internal problems spilled over to the Western Balkans, causing bilateral tensions between states in the region. In this situation, the enlargement policy was "used" by the EU to keep candidate countries along the Western Balkans migration route highly motivated to cooperate. The Western Balkans countries, especially Serbia and Macedonia, were used as the EU "gatekeepers" against the refugee flows from the Middle East (cf. Milovanović, 2017, p. 44). However, the EU's pressure on some countries to be more "European" in this situation, called into question the credibility of the EU enlargement policy, especially in terms of conflict resolution and regional cooperation. This was particularly evident in the case of Serbian-Croatian dispute, leading to mutual accusations marked by inflammatory rhetoric. Thus, despite the EU rhetoric that its enlargement policy is about "exporting stability", i.e. about "reinforcing peace and stability in Europe" (European Commission, 2009), the "migration crisis" was an example of "exporting instability" from the EU to the Western Balkans (BIPAG, p.15). The EU primarily views the Western through the security lens while the question of democratic practices is left aside. Fourth, from a technocratic process involving the European Commission and candidate countries, enlargement has become highly politicised. This has been accompanied by anti-accession discourses and Eurosceptic messages which have a negative effect on the accession process as such. Furthermore, far-reaching political and economic consequences of the June 2016 UK vote in favour of leaving the EU also had an impact on the enlargement policy, making the future of EU reforms unclear.

The impact of all these factors was evident in the 2015 EU Enlargement Strategy, which fails to provide precise mid- and long-term priorities for the Western Balkans region (Stojić, 2016, p. 2). The Strategy stated that "while there has been important progress by many countries in many areas over the past year, the challenges faced by these countries are such that none will be ready to join the EU during the mandate of the current Commission, which will expire towards the end of 2019" (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). The overall tone of the Strategy is sober and reflects the state of affairs in the EU enlargement process to the Western Balkans. The Strategy reaffirms the "strong focus on the principle 'fundamentals first' in the accession process i.e. rule of law, fundamental rights, strengthening democratic institutions, including public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness and stresses that the progress is being made, particularly with the introduction of legislation and establishment of necessary administrative structures, but that the countries have a low level of preparation for membership. Although the Strategy outlined that "the clear perspective of EU membership is a key stabilising factor for the countries of the Western Balkans" (European Commission, 2015, p. 4), the overall approach of the Commission is cautious and lacks enthusiasm for future members.

Thus, with the EU's economic and financial crisis, accompanied by the migrant crisis, Brexit and politicisation of the enlargement process, the EU's identity has become ambiguous, i.e. unstable and insecure. On the one hand, the EU wants to repeat the success of its Eastern enlargement in the Western Balkans, but on the other, its enlargement approach suggests that the EU's transitional process has come to an impasse on the issue of its transition outcome. Is the EU capable of re-examining its future enlargement, as well as fully integrating the Western Balkans region? Faced with new challenges, enlargement policy has changed and so has the EU identity as an "exporter of stability". The liminality of the EU renders the transition process in the Western Balkans difficult, especially because the governments adopt unpopular reforms and politically costly measures for the sake of implementing the values and principles imposed by the European Union.

The EU dynamism towards the Western Balkans re-surged in 2017. In his State of the Union address in September 2017, the European Commission President announced: "If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must also maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament (...) but thereafter, the European Union will be greater than 27 in number" (Juncker, 2017). The new signals that the Western Balkans are back on the EU agenda were visible in February 2018, when the European Commission presented the new Enlargement Strategy, offering a "credible enlargement perspective" to the Western Balkans. The Strategy outlines that the WB "are part of Europe, geographically surrounded by EU Member States", stresses their "common heritage and history" as well as "a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges", to conclude that a European future is the only option for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2018, pp. 1-2). However, the document highlights that "much remains to be done across the board to align with the EU's acquis", that the Western Balkans show "clear elements of state capture" and that "none of the Western Balkans countries can currently be considered to have a functioning market economy nor capacity to cope with the competitive pressures and market forces in the Union" (European Commission, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, it is emphasized that the 2025 membership perspective "is extremely ambitious" and that the "Union must be stronger and more solid before it can be bigger". The latter statement points to the direct link between future enlargement and a possible EU reform process until 2025. At the same time, the Commission reaffirms the merit-based approach to enlargement, having in mind significant differences among countries in the region in the accession process. Thus, the possible accession of all countries as a group is officially dismissed, although that approach was de facto abandoned already with the accession of Croatia in 2013. It is also stressed that the EU has long been "strongly" engaged in the region in order to support the future of the region as an integral part of the EU and that the Western Balkans membership would be in the EU's "own interest".

On the face of it, the new EU Enlargement policy puts the enlargement process back on the EU timetable, as part of its agenda for a new EU in 2025. However, by avoiding to clearlyspecify when the Western Balkans will become members of the EU and without offering new instruments to facilitate the process, including financial ones, the EU policy overall remains unchanged, insisting that the Western Balkans should "redouble their efforts" in order to complete "their political, economic and social transformation" (European Commission, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, the message of the Enlargement Strategy is clear: it renews the EU's political will and commitment, but without new supportive and more credible initiatives. However, the role of the Western Balkans as external Other was significant for this "revival" of the EU's enlargement policy and exit from passivity towards future steps in the process of enlargement. The Western Balkans revived the "uniqueness" of the EU as a transformative power and made the EU a relevant actor mainly due to the rise of influence of other international powers in the region at the expense of the passivity of the EU[1]. As the European Commission President declared, "we must find unity when it comes to the Western Balkans and their future membership. Should we not, our immediate neighbourhood will be shaped by others" (Juncker, 2018). This was confirmed by Commissioner Johannes Hahn, who stated that "it would be unwise and almost *negligent* to leave behind a vacuum that other international actors, *whose values do not agree with ours*, make use of" (Vytiska, 2018).

The EU's ambiguity in the enlargement process leads to the ambiguity in the perception of the EU by the Western Balkan countries. At the beginning of the enlargement process, the prospect of EU membership was taken for granted by the Western Balkans countries as the only option to move forward. Therefore, joining of the "European club" was presented to the region by the EU as the only valid option, especially in the light of the legacy of war and the possibility of sliding back to the "violent past". Any other alternative but the "European" one would be connected with the "retrograde politics of the past", with the "non-European", "non-civilised", i.e. with the "Balkans" (Brkić, 2011, p. 71). In the process of enlargement, the discursive power of the EU to portray itself as a community of "progressive", "role model" values creates the standard of "normal" which is accepted as such by Western Balkans as external Other. However, gradually, with the changing identity of the EU in the enlargement process, the change of the attitude of the countries towards EU membership occurred. This ambiguity is reflected in the perception of the EU as both positive and negative, as a process both of approval and disapproval, acceptance and denial, as a mixture of

"resigned and fatalistic Euro-realism and growing Euro-scepticism" (Belloni, Brunazzo, 2017, p. 29). This is accompanied by a drop of EU's popularity as well as its transformative power among the Western Balkans citizens, i.e. its ability to influence, in an efficient way, the legal, political and economic changes within the countries aspiring to become future EU members. This is notably due to the EU's requirements that candidate countries comply with the values and principles which are challenged within the EU itself, with the rise of far-right Eurosceptic parties (Belloni, Brunazzo, 2017, p. 31). Also, by insisting on regional cooperation, the EU and its member states have often used enlargement policy to put pressures on the countries in the region to act in a certain way regardless of the process of implementing the EU Acquis, especially in the field of rule of law[2]. This was followed by the practice of some EU Member States of blocking the enlargement process in order to force the states of the region to make concessions in bilateral disputes (cf. Szpala, 2018, p. 3) [3]Overall, the EU enlargement policy, represented as its most successful policy and enabling the construction of an EU as an example to be followed by others is losing its credibility among Western Balkan countries. As some authors underline, it could take 200 years for the Western Balkans to catch up with the EU average level of GDP per capita (Bonomi, 2018, p. 7). Although the EU has been an indispensable actor of stability in the region so far, the Western Balkans region requires much more engagement from the EU. The 2018 EU Enlargement Strategy represents a positive step in that direction, notably by foreseeing a progressive increase of EU funds that provides for a gradual transition from IPA to structural funds. However, without any concrete promises regarding accession or the next steps in the accession process to Western Balkans, the credibility of the EU enlargement strategy will be called into question and consequently, detrimental to its political leverage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Twenty years after the introduction of the Stabilisation and Association Process, as a specific framework which will enable the Western Balkans to progressively advance towards EU membership, the Western Balkans are still in the "European waiting room" (cf. Belloni, Brunazzo, 2017). Although the region has made some progress on its path to European integration, it is still betwixt and between, neither here nor there, European but not yet European. The region tends to be captured in the permanent liminality. The EU, on the other hand, as a master of ceremony in the process of guiding the region towards new, "European" identity, is also challenged by liminality. The Western Balkans as external Other played a significant role for the stability of the EU identity as a "norms exporter", values community, "an example to be followed by others". However, in the new context, the EU identity is facing new challenges challenge the stability of its identity as a norm exporter, leading to an ambiguous, i.e. instable and insecure identity. On the one hand, the EU wants to repeat the success of its Eastern enlargement in the Western Balkans, but on the other, the EU enlargement approach suggests that the EU's transitional process has come to an impasse on the issue of its transitional outcome. Therefore, the EU could be also captured in a "constant state of social limbo", especially due to the reawakening of the old debate of "deepening *vs*. widening".

Endnotes

[1]In recent years, China and Turkey are developing deeper economic relations with the countries of the region, making the EU financial support less attractive, due to the absence of conditionality in their financial loan offers to the countries of the Western Balkans. Also, after the deterioration of relations between EU and Russia, the latter is gaining more influence, notably in Serbia and RepublikaSrpska. The EU responded by actively engaging in the resolution of internal political crises in some countries of the region. This is notably the case with Macedonia during the political crisis toward the end of 2014, when the EU acted as a mediator during 2015, and with Bosnia and Herzegovina, during 2014 and 2015, in order to prevent a further long-term stalemate of reforms.

[2]For example, the compromise between Serbia and Kosovo in the process of normalisation of their relations was a priority over the implementations the necessary reforms, especially in the field of rule of law.

[3]This mainly concerns Republic of North Macedonia (ex-FYROM), which was granted candidate status in 2005, but whose negotiations did not start dueto the veto used by Greece in the bilateral dispute over the name-issue.

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