
THE WESTERN BALKANS IN A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY – A PRIVILEGED PARTNERSHIP INSTEAD OF FULL MEMBERSHIP?

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Abstract. The following paper represents the author’s attempt to shed some light on the number of hypothetical alternatives regarding the seemingly stalled process of the European integration of Western Balkan states in the new geopolitical reality initiated firstly by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently deepened by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Through qualitative content analysis as the primary research tool, the authors have established that the explored “plan B” options are still not considered serious alternatives by mainstream politics in the EU and the negotiating countries, although some academic interest and sporadic political suggestions regarding the topic can be noticed from time to time. The main challenge in the European Union’s indecisiveness towards the region remains the dilemma of how the Union should express its unwillingness to repeat previous mistakes and accept unprepared Balkan newcomers while avoiding giving too much ground to their rival regional competitors.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU Enlargement, Geopolitical Changes, Regional Integration, EFTA/EEA, Multi-tier Europe.

The world of tomorrow

WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WELL PAST ITS ZENITH AND ITS EFFECTS gradually wearing off, it is clear that the wars in Ukraine and Gaza became the main geopolitical concern of the world today. It is fair to say that, three years after its inception in late 2019, the pandemic *per se*, as Nye Jr. (2020) points out, actually did not represent a major global geopolitical turning point. However, one could say it still „irreversibly impacted geopolitics worldwide“ in several ways (Chaudry, 2020: 27). Firstly, in Europe it exposed a huge „solidarity gap“ among

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the EU27, whose disunity, and above all, „a lack of vision for the nearest future and for the future of the European political project“ have proven to be a geopolitical problem that cannot be ignored, which was especially evident in the early months of the pandemic when member states, in an unquestionably realist manner, reverted to „pure nation-state settings“ (Coratella, 2020: 35). Europe’s persistent problem of strategic (dis)unity is visible even today in the member states’ response to Russian actions in Ukraine, which is an event that unified the West like no other in recent history. Secondly and more importantly, the crisis expectedly revealed that there are contested regions in which rival powers are trying to establish a foothold. With Russia’s vaccine diplomacy and Chinese foreign policy „displaying an astonishing level of assertiveness“ (Bacon, 2020: 100), it is clear that the EU cannot afford a „geopolitical free space“, since other powers „with their political gravity have tendencies to almost naturally fill that free space“ (Tilev et al., 2021: 8).

It is not a surprise therefore, that the aforementioned crises have prompted the EU into action and gave an impetus to a renewed European interest in the Western Balkans. Knowing that „geopolitics does not recognize mistakes“ (Tilev et al., 2021: 8) there is a sense of urgency to integrate the region to the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical block, particularly after February 2022. Given that it is not an easily achievable task, the question remains – what to do with this region?

For the past 17 years, EU membership has been a pivotal element of every government agenda and a central ideological tenet of all mainstream academic communities, public intellectuals, cultural and political elites in the Western Balkans region. After an arduous decade of painful transition and war that brought the word “balkanization” to English dictionaries, a glimmer of hope was in sight: under the condition of fulfilling the partially adjusted Copenhagen criteria, a possibility (but not a definite promise) of full membership was presented to them at the Thessaloniki summit of 2003. Ever since, the Balkan “end of history” in the EU has been the mandatory rhetorical mantra of both sides, and the “unequivocal support for the European perspective” became the default motto, most recently repeated at the EU-Western Balkans summits in Sofia (2018), Zagreb (2020), Brdo (2021) and Tirana (2022) (European Council, 2022).

It seems, however, that by the present day, the initial optimism has all but melted away. The region is still a gaping hole in EU’s maps and infographics, while the accession dynamics could only be described as a “history of mutual hypocrisy”, where “the block pretends to enlarge and Western Balkans countries pretend to reform” (Cherneva, 2019). Hindered by a large extent by EU’s internal problems, the project of regional accessions seems to be „dead in the water“, mostly because Balkan states, still entangled in ethnic problems and persisting structural weaknesses, objectively are not ready to become full members, although many of their economic indicators are comparable to those of Bulgaria

and Romania when they joined in 2007 (Grievson et al., 2018: 13). Furthermore, what is especially sobering is that signals of “enlargement fatigue” are sent even when painful reforms are undertaken, which is probably best illustrated by the frowning grimace of Macedonia’s former prime minister Zoran Zaev, after France vetoed the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019. Adding the most to the erosion of EU’s credibility is the fact that the latter was, ironically, the most collaborative in terms of EU conditioning, having changed its very name and completing the majority of the technical work “in a process of 120 days” (Koutsokosta, 2019), only to be rewarded with a French veto, an altered accession methodology, a plethora of rhetorical encouragement, and finally, a 2020 Bulgarian veto that was not lifted until July 2022 (Nikolov, 2022) .

It is fair to say that in some way, the EU has fallen victim to “its own long-term rhetoric of pan-European unification” (Dinan, 2010: 249), as the already over-stretched union in a dire need of consolidation still ideologically adheres to its proclaimed openness to all European countries (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 2012: 13-390). Perhaps it would still be early to claim that the Balkan states are seeking alternatives, but the growing number of pundits and politicians ready to examine this option ought be enough to bring to EU’s attention that its soft power of attraction in the region could be seriously challenged.

The uncertainty of the current prospects of integration allows us to explore a number of hypothetical options with three underlying assumptions. Firstly, the Western Balkans will not patiently sit in the EU’s eternal waiting room forever. Secondly, the EU would have to address this issue honestly at some point and finally, whatever the alternative might be, it would have to satisfy the “win-win scenario” criterion at least to some extent, as it would not be politically reasonable to create embittered and unstable countries in such proximity to the Union’s core.

Bribe money – the stabiliocracy scenario

The first potential shift in policy towards Western Balkans might not be a consistent, long-term plan with a specific final result in mind, but a rather Churchillian strategy of dealing with urgent issues firstly. In this case, such an issue would primarily be China. It might be argued that the PRC’s huge financial thrust westwards through the “One Road and One Belt” initiative could be its way to strategically anchor itself to the Balkans as the “soft underbelly” of Europe, but the EU’s main problem lies elsewhere. Unlike the European Union, China apparently “does not rely on any form of political or other conditionality” (Babić, 2016:62). For small, deindustrialized Balkan countries accustomed to a top-down style of

communication from a position of power and exclusivity, such a model of cooperation is understandably attractive. To no surprise, this represents a major propaganda challenge for the EU, which, despite already being the biggest donor to the region in the long run, simply can't shake off its negative image*. Considering that, according to Babić (2016), the New Silk Road is more of a Chinese "New Deal" than a Chinese "Marshall plan", one could assume that it is much easier for China to present its initiatives as mutually beneficial endeavours instead of geopolitical projects in disguise. Truth be told, it is quite "strategic" of the PRC to focus on investing primarily in large infrastructure objects, something pretty obvious to the average voter.

To counterbalance the allure of China, the EU could consider opting for a more realistic approach. Instead of insisting on reforms and the "change of values", they might decide to "snooze" the final decision regarding the region's future by simply diverting a substantial amount of aid, which "could be used to delay bankruptcy and at least start some infrastructural projects that are visible" (Ђурковић, 2015: 240). A mandatory disclaimer that "it would not be a substitution for membership" would expectedly come attached to such policy, but the political realism behind this strategy would lay bare – by doing so, the EU would admit that it has been misleading the Balkan candidates for years, and that loyalty is a bargaining chip to be traded with. Without a clear plan, a bribed stabilocracy of the semi-authoritarian regional regimes might seem like a second-best solution. Today, even the most ardent regional Europhiles have to disappointedly admit that the "membership carrot is rotten", and that this "weakens the stick that could be used to discipline WB strongmen" (Cvijić, 2017).

The revived Berlin Plus agenda could serve as one such example. Proposed in 2017 by the former German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel as an extension of the existing Berlin process for boosting regional cooperation, a speculated 2 billion € program was envisioned as a special fund for regional economic development, especially in the field of "startup business, vocational training and IT infrastructure development" (Cero, 2017). Other EU and EFTA members were also seen as donors alongside Germany, and the idea was labelled by some as a "Mini Marshall Plan" for the Western Balkans. What is interesting, however, is that by focusing solely on infrastructure and economy, the proposal didn't seem

* Similar to the 2014 Balkan floods, a suitable example of the Union's persisting "bad PR" problem could be the way it handled the covid-19 crisis of March and April 2020. Seemingly indifferent at first, the EU eventually did provide medical help in some form (a total of 93 million euros to be gradually allocated) but not before damage was done: the response of rival illiberal powers was quicker and more organized, ensuring them yet another small victory in the propaganda war for the hearts and minds in the region. This was recognized as a problem and openly criticized by the former Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt, who expressed his discontent about China getting praised on billboards for "symbolic aid", without a "corresponding 'thank you' for a far more substantial help from the EU" (Bogdanović and Heil, 2020).

to “address the question of stagnating democratic development and the rise of authoritarianism in the region”(Cero, 2017). This could lead to the conclusion that, behind closed doors, the logic of political realism is slowly taking over, as this initiative appeared to mirror China’s OBOR program, though much more humble in scope. Such suggestions, forced out by the illiberal competitors’ generous investment campaigns, can be interpreted as test balloons for checking if the public opinion in the region could be “bribed” to avoid bringing up the question of uncertain and distant membership, and settle for the benefits of an immediate injection of material aid.

The argument for such policy could be the fact that according to Eurostat, stable, long-term enlargement scepticism still prevails in many of the old members, meaning that something concrete would have to be offered in return. However, “China-blackmailing” the EU to send more funds couldn’t be prolonged indefinitely. Should it be overdone, the EU’s inner six could easily switch to a more unsophisticated stick approach at some point. Ultimately, the candidate countries’ perception of the EU as a free money machine can certainly lead to Europe’s elites asking themselves why they should reward someone for not reforming? But this kind of unprincipled behaviour could be a plausible short term strategy for one reason: to merely keep the dream afloat, and prevent the region from venturing too far of the path until a more stable solution is agreed upon.

EEA backdooring – the consolation prize scenario

Another somewhat controversial option, explored so far only occasionally and timidly, is a suggestion similar to a Brexit-inspired proposal brought forward by a group of UWE Bristol researchers in 2016 (Dadomo and Quéniwet, 2016). In this scenario, Balkan candidates should lower the bar and set the EEA membership through EFTA as a new, substitute goal.

The so-called “Norwegian model” deserves more academic attention for one main reason: it would enable the Western Balkans candidates to gain access to some of the most beneficial elements of EU membership, while bypassing other, more complex programs whose standards they either don’t meet or don’t wish to be a part of any way, as in the case of Serbia and the Common Security and Foreign Policy, the former second pillar (CFSP). Joining the EEA would primarily mean access to the single market and all four freedoms-related “horizontal... and flanking policies”, leaving out the mentioned CFSP, Customs Union, Economic and Monetary Union and Justice and Home Affairs (Dadomo and Quéniwet, 2016: 4). Related to this is also the less comprehensive “Swiss model”, where an EFTA country retains the possibility of separately regulating its relations with the EU and the third countries on a bilateral basis like Switzerland for

example, that has separately concluded free trade agreements with Japan and China. Separate agreements are an option for EFTA countries, “but they have generally preferred to negotiate within EFTA”, which is the EU’s preference as well (Dadomo and Quénivet, 2016: 3).

Considering that the region is already on the path towards the Turkish scenario of never-ending accession, this idea doesn’t seem unreasonable. Offering the possibility of EEA membership (but again, as an achievable “interim goal”) is a central tenet of a policy recommendation by researchers from the European Stability Initiative (ESI), according to whom “joining the single market by 2030 would be a realistic goal for all Balkan countries” (European Stability Initiative, 2020: 18). ESI researchers also pointed out that for countries like Austria, Finland, and Sweden, EFTA/EEA membership was an important school of integration and a major stepping-stone for becoming full EU members. Most importantly, they claim that it was the participation in the single market that contributed the most to the substantial improvement of economic indicators of former communist countries, underlining the examples of Romania, Lithuania and Estonia, whose GDP *per capita* in 1999 was comparable to that of some Western Balkans countries today. Obviously, joining the largest single market in the world would still require transformative reforms, but this time, a clear goal of a “realistic promise of a better life” could serve as a much more powerful incentive (European Stability Initiative, 2020: 17).

As of today (late 2023), this sort of “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” policy hasn’t been advocated by any official representative, neither in the region nor in the EU. Nevertheless, it does have its proponents. Those who view the current EU as a huge, overly-bureaucratized, German-dominated super-entity, will certainly be more inclined to support a more sovereignist and less paternalistic conception of European cooperation, embodied in the formerly UK-led EFTA concept that was once rival to the EEC/EU. For example, some time ago, this backdooring strategy was openly supported by the Serbian opposition party “Dosta je bilo” (Билић, 2018), while the economic perks of single market membership were praised by the Albanian journalist Veton Suroi, who ambitiously stated that in such a scenario, “the passport of Kosovo would have the same strength as the Norwegian one”, while the Serbian *slivowitz* “would have the same access to European markets as the Swiss brandy” (Рувич and Позднякова, 2019).

Of course, settling for the EEA alternative certainly has some downsides. The most obvious would be the fact that the EFTA/EEA country has no option of legally defending its interest in EU courts in the way that a member state can, as the EEA Joint Committee, the highest EEA dispute-settling body, is not of legal, but of diplomatic nature (Dadomo and Quénivet, 2016: 7). Also, such countries have *de facto* no participation in the EU law-making procedure, apart from a

merely consultative role in the Joint Committee. Theoretically, they can delay or even temporarily suspend EU decisions, but this practically never happens, which is why some authors characterize them as bare “rule takers” due to their lack of actual veto powers. One might assume that, in the case of Balkan states which are all much weaker and more susceptible to outside pressure than the current EFTA, reservations and exemptions could hardly ever be applied. The Western Balkans’ humble international rankings and prestige would mean that the Swiss scenario could also be effectively written off, at least for now. With a “mass of separate agreements” that are “increasingly difficult to manage (Dadomo and Quénivet, 2016: 9)”, the EU finds this model to be unnecessarily complex, and thus highly unlikely to be replicated in five or six additional cases. Nonetheless, it is possible for the post-Lisbon EU to conclude “single agreements covering the whole range of EU fields of cooperation with third countries” (Hillion, 2011b: 21).

The Norwegian scenario is, if not the best, perhaps the least unfavourable one. It is arguably the highest achievable level of integration without membership, offering deeper harmonization than the stabilisation and association program and the neighbourhood policy. With all of the listed shortcomings, it might still be the best deal the Western Balkans could get. Given the latest unemployment statistics of 9,5% in Serbia, 15,4% in Montenegro, 15,1% in North Macedonia, 14,1% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 11,8% in Albania (The World Bank, 2023) the economic aspects of single market membership are probably the most attractive asset in the EU’s soft power arsenal in the region, and it might be politically wise of the EU to utilize this fact. Reaching such an agreement would also add a dose of mutual honesty to the EU-WB relations, as the key element of European power of attraction in the region was never really about common values in the first place. This was exactly what the Fidesz government of Hungary used as main communication strategy in 2002/2003, emphasizing that Hungary’s EU accession is “simply a ‘marriage of convenience’ that was about common interest rather than common EU values” (Semanić, 2016: 105).

The question remains, what is in it for the EU? What would make such a policy a potential “win-win” scenario, is primarily the fact that it could satisfy the EU’s security-related strategic goals. To anchor the region via the single market would significantly weaken the influence of Russia, Turkey and China. They would still have the upper hand in terms of cultural capital, but with the financial element out of the equation, that would become less influential, which is proven to some extent by the Bulgarian experience. The other question is, which new challenges might arise should such a strategic plan be adopted? For example, how would the existing EFTA members be pressurized to accept impoverished and corrupt Balkan states, since EFTA and EU countries are the only parties to the EEA agreement? Could some new legal solution be worked through? Should

Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia ask for the same terms at some point? After all, former EC President Romano Prodi had once mentioned that the EEA could serve as a model for “integrated relations with our (EU’s) neighbours”, while similar recommendations were made even for the South Mediterranean countries in the aftermath of the Arab spring (Hillion, 2011: 20).

With the accession process this far off, relegating the Western Balkans to the “neighbourhood” league would seem nonsensical and controversial, although the post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet states share enough similarities for such a demotion to be sensible. Once again, arguments against the consolation scenario might be propagandistic in nature, as it could ironically be in EU’s best short-term interest to maintain the *status quo*. The present relations with the Western Balkans could just be a game of who needs whom more - with its prestige affected by Brexit, the EU needs to do some damage control and keep the candidate countries in the waiting room, in order to maintain an image of desirability and exclusivity, and to continue presenting itself as a “beacon” and an end goal. For example, this kind of thinking was criticized by historian Laughland (2020), who ironically noticed that replacing the UK with “poor and crime-ridden Balkan territories” is like “swapping Manhattan for Managua”. Furthermore, without a consensus on this geostrategic issue, a change in official policy could not be made in an abrupt manner.

Meanwhile, what has to keep the region “on track” is the very promise of membership. Here, it would be suitable to quote the words of Natasha Wunsch, who in 2011 wrote that by granting the candidate status to all countries of the Western Balkans, “the EU would achieve much by doing little”, and that “the ‘symbolic value’ (underlined by the authors) of such a step would be huge, as it...reinforces the credibility and leverage of EU in the region” (Wunsh, 2011: 28). One could argue that the same reasoning seems to be behind Ukraine and Moldova’s hurried candidacy. While Serbia and Bosnia received full candidate status four and six years after applying respectively, Ukraine applied only five days into the war, with Moldova following suit (Vagner, 2022). Both countries received candidate status after just four months, in June 2022, implying that it indeed was more of a geopolitical symbolic gesture evoked by the war, and that candidate status by itself is “no longer a cause for celebration it once was” (Karcic, 2022).

On the other hand, should the official enlargement agenda be discarded without a proper substitution, there would be nothing to prevent fragile democracies of the Western Balkans from slipping into the embrace of rival powers. Also, without EU membership as an end goal for which they claim to be the only guarantee, stabiliocratic regimes from Macedonia to Bosnia would lose their *raison d’être* and risk being replaced. For these reasons, it would require a lot of political courage and statesmanship to reach a consensus regarding the “plan

B". A move, which would perhaps be the most prudent, given the current trends and state of affairs in the EU itself.

The Third League – a multi-tier scenario

Assuming that all of the aforementioned was hypothetical and that the current enlargement agenda and the regatta principle remain unchanged, the question that remains is: what kind of Union would the region be joining at some point in the future? Would it still be the same EU it is today? Since its inception in 1957, it has been an ever-evolving organism, and is likely to remain such.

As mentioned previously, if the maximum extent of enlargement has been reached, then a period of consolidation and reform lies ahead. President Macron's notion that, if "we can't make it work with 27 of us", how "do you think it will work better if there is 30 or 32 of us" (European Stability Initiative, 2020: 5), appears to be a prevalent opinion among the original member states. What is more, the principle of American-backed premature accession as a reward for NATO membership (which worked for Bulgaria and Romania), doesn't seem to be something that Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro could count on. The reason behind this might be that the old Europe must have realized by now that the overstretched and unmanageable EU is in the best interest of the United States and not the EU, which is why the USA is "eager to push-in Turkey and the Western Balkans" (Ђурковић, 2015: 152) and further weaken the continentalist vision of a compact and functioning Union. Additionally, the old Franco-German rivalry apparently still lingers, as the French frown upon the idea of switching the EU's "center of mass" further eastwards.

Putting the geopolitical issues aside, the fragmentation of the EU to "circles" or "leagues" is actually something that would come very natural and logical, since every functional club is primarily a gathering of the similar. This is well noticed by Professor Maciej Kisilowski from the Central European University, who argues that European institutions were "designed to govern a community of like-minded, established democracies", and not to act as a "development aid agency for politically confused middle-income countries traumatized by decades of poverty and oppression" (Kisilowski, 2017). Interpreted in a Huntingtonian manner, this means that the pre-2004 EU was the last "good EU", a last logical and cohesive block of culturally similar nations and that it was never supposed to grow larger than the EU 15. To expect membership before the fragmentalisation into an inner and an outer EU is quite ambitious, since the Western Balkan countries, perfectly fitting the description given by Professor Kisilowski, would only reinforce the Polish-Hungarian block of illiberal democracies, which is already an *enfant terrible* of liberal European bureaucracy. Coincidentally, the

Visegrád group has always been supportive of the Western Balkans (and recently, Ukrainian and Moldovan) EU accession (Juzova et al, 2023: 12-16).

Knowing this, we could conclude that the best the region could hope for is some sort of a third tier or a second rank within the outer EU. Read between the lines, the French proposal of an alternative accession methodology through step-by-step sector integration with a “reversibility component” is perhaps a hint of the upcoming relegation to a future second league (Tcherneva, 2019). As the “core Europe” pushes forward with the establishment of an ever-closer Union, which is already an aim set in the Treaty on European Union (Viëtor, 2011: 11), countries like Serbia and Ukraine could meet in some hypothetical third ring where the lines between enlargement and neighbourhood policy are blurred, or in some yet to be designed “overlapping communities detached from EU membership and transcending EU borders” (Viëtor, 2011: 14). Possibly, the reason why programmes like the Berlin process put so much emphasis on regional cooperation, or why there are ideas like the Open Balkan Initiative, could be this - the space of former Yugoslavia might just be re-established as peripheral outer EU ring of its own.

Conclusions

With the ever-present problem of forecasting in international relations, making an accurate prediction on any issue is always a daunting challenge, and foreseeing the fate of the Western Balkans is no exception to that. Nevertheless, regardless of the hypothetical character of assumptions layed out here, we dare to make a few estimations regarding some long-term trends.

Firstly, the name of the game is “political realism”. Troubled by a plethora of internal problems, from the functioning of the EMU to the migrant crisis and recession, the EU seems to be ready to abandon the enlargement policy as a value in itself and replace it with a much more raw, honest, and pure form of pragmatism. In other words, the Union is now prioritizing stability at the expense of the norm projection elements of enlargement policy, which allows the candidate states to have some leverage and a better negotiating position. Meanwhile, accepting any idea that resembles the Norwegian model wouldn’t necessarily be a mistake. On the other hand, should the accession process keep its present course, decisions should be a result of a thorough cost-benefit analysis instead of blind dogmatism.

Secondly, it would be fallacious to presume that identity politics and cultural divisions are a thing of the past. The now cancelled Icelandic accession would have been welcomed much more warmly, not just because of Iceland’s size, or the fact that it would be a net-contributor to the budget (Souček, 2011:

31). As Viëtor (2011, 11) noticed, “to become a closer union on the inside” is hardly separable from “becoming a closed union to the outside”, as the “otherised” outside in some form will always be necessary to define the boundaries of one’s cultural space. This could lead to the conclusion that the perceived level of “Europeanness” is still an important factor and that even within the EU, the region of the Western Balkans will still be seen as an anteroom to the „real Europe“. Whether such a suboptimal, secondary league scenario would be an improvement to the current state of being an outsider, remains an open question for politicians and analysts.

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