



UDC 316.4.052(497-15:4.672EU)
<https://doi.org/10.22182/spt.1712018.1>
Manuscript received: 11.01.2018.
Accepted for publishing: 18.02.2018.
Review article

Serbian Political
Thought No. 1/2018,
Year X,
Vol. 17
pp. 5-27

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Current Challenges of the European Integration Process of the Western Balkans Countries²

Abstract

In this article, the authors analyze the most significant achievements of the current dynamics of the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU (Process of Stabilization and Association), with a special emphasis on numerous issues that stand in the “European way” of these countries. In this context, a specific analysis will be linked to numerous internal problems in the Western Balkans countries, as well as in their bilateral relations, and how does this affect the possible acceleration of the European integration process.

Of course, the authors in this paper devoted considerable attention to the role of “non-EU” countries in the region of the Western Balkans, especially the Russian Federation, the Republic of Turkey and the People’s Republic of China. Also, the presentation will discuss how the countries of the Western Europe, which obviously will remain dominant in the European Union in the next period (Germany, France and Italy) will position themselves concerning a new enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans. Also, the unfinished process of *Brexit* (2016) opens up some problems when it comes to the entering the countries of the Western Balkans into the European Union. Certainly, there are some “weak points” in the European integration process of the Western Balkans countries (corruption and organized crime in the case of Montenegro, relations with the government in Pristina when it comes to Serbia, etc.).

Key words: European Union, European integration, Western Balkans, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania.

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- 2) The research has been carried out within the project Political Identity of Serbia in regional and global context of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, No. OI 179076 for the 2011–2017 period.

Introduction

Over the past decade and a half and after 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, affected by armed conflicts during the 1990s, to the European mainstream. (Sajdik, Schwartzinger 2009: 313-320) Namely, these countries came into such a very difficult position, among other things, because of the process of building nation states in a rather heterogeneous area of the Balkans. (Mulaj 2008: 79-120) Today, when we generally observe the achievement of the European integration process which started more than fifteen years ago, we can conclude that there is some progress. On the one hand, Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia are leading this process, which they started together within the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2001. These two sovereign states are negotiating the membership in the European Union, but Montenegro has more open chapters and an accelerated European perspective.³

On the other hand, certain backlogs in this process are mainly expressed by the Republic of Macedonia, which since the acquisition of the status of a candidate for the membership in the Union at the end of 2005, failed to speed up the process for twelve years in any respect. (Đukanović 2015: 247-259) Determination of the beginning of this process by addressing the issue of the name of Macedonia on which the official Athens insists has been *de facto* blocking the possibility of acceleration of this process for more than a decade. (Shea 2008: 211-277) Although Macedonia had a significant initial advantage over the rest of the Western Balkan countries, it is obvious that thanks to the right-populist government of VMRO-DPMNE this country remained “trapped” in its own reassessment and construction of identity frameworks (primarily the revision of ancient and contemporary history), and less related to the European and Euro-Atlantic perspectives. (Đukanović, Arnaudov 2016: 277-295) It should be noted that since 2008, Macedonia has not received the invitation for the membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) due to the stubborn attitudes of the Macedonian authorities. Also, the access protocol has not yet been granted. After the change of power in this former southernmost Yugoslav republic,

3) By the end of August 2017, Serbia opened 10 chapters in the negotiations on membership with the European Union, and Montenegro 28 out of 35 chapters.

there were numerous announcements of acceleration of the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations. In this sense is also mentioned the resolution of two and a half decades long dispute over the name of the state. (Murray: 2017) Moreover, it is obvious that this track of events followed after the strengthening of the role of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans in the second half of the past decade, whose dominant goal is to stop the Euro-Atlantic and certainly the European integration of the countries in the region. (Helsinki bilten 2017: 6-7)

The situation with Bosnia and Herzegovina is similar, where due to the persistent political conflicts of the three ethnoelites (Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian), which has *de facto* paralyzed this country and its functioning, the process of European integration is not actually a fundamental foreign policy priority. (Đukanović 2016: 53–68) On the contrary, it is clear that there is a certain resistance to the acceleration of this process, first of all, in the Bosniak leadership and the dominant political structures (gathered around the Party of Democratic Action), and also in the leadership of the Republic of Srpska, which is increasingly openly connected with the authorities in Moscow, on which even the authorities in Belgrade do not have a significant influence. (*Ibidem*: 53–68) The authorities of the Republic of Srpska express a special animosity towards the Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in NATO, although there is still very little effort to be taken to obtain an invitation to the membership.⁴ This can be also explained by the constant tendencies of strengthening the Russian influence in Bosnian entity – the Republic of Srpska. (Mujanović 2017) In a certain way, the Croatian component in Bosnia and Herzegovina sees in the European integration a possibility of approaching its “mother country” – the Republic of Croatia, which became a member of the Union four years ago.

The internal turmoils in Albania point to the fact that the authorities are more preoccupied with solving the so-called Albanian national issue in the west of the Balkans, putting it before the European integration, as an actual foreign policy priority and task. (Đukanović 2016a: 107-110) On the contrary, it seems that the crisis of the authorities in Tirana and the continued and large divisions between the ruling Socialist Party of Albania and the leading opposition Democratic Party indicate that there will be insufficient progress in the process of European integration. Although Edi Rama's Socialist Party of Albania managed to convincingly win the parliamentary elections, it is obvious that these tensions will

4) These conditions are mainly based on the necessity of the registration of military property of the former Army of Republika Srpska to the Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Kovačević: 2017).

continue. (Mali 2017) On the other hand, the European Union has already postponed several times the beginning of negotiations with Albania due to insufficient implementation of certain internal reforms in the field of justice, the rule of law and the fight against corruption. However, the statements of Albanian Prime Minister from the beginning of 2017 regarding the potential unification of Albania and Kosovo, and then probably the “unification” of other Albanians inhabited areas of the Western Balkans, do not create a real precondition for a very important issue of normalizing relations with individual countries of this region, primarily with Serbia but also with Macedonia. (Mejdini 2017) On the contrary, such statements have only strengthened the right-oriented public in Serbia and Macedonia.

After a one-sided declaration of independence at the beginning of 2008, Kosovo is besides visibly accelerated process of accession to the European Union still burdened by strengthening of the ethnic-nationalist tendencies. Namely, the new government in Kosovo, as well as a great part of the opposition, are dominantly focused on the further delay of the initiated dialogue process with Belgrade which started in 2011. (Feilcke 2017) Moreover, it is evident that the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo has not yet been formed even four years after the founding agreement on its establishment (the agreement was signed on April 20, 2103 in Brussels).⁵ Also, the unwillingness of Pristina authorities to actually integrate the Serb community in a proper manner into the Kosovo’s legal, security, educational and economic system is undeniable. After two-year long avoidance of the ratification of the border agreement with Montenegro, the Pristina authorities pressed by the radical opposition further show some unwillingness to improve the relations in the Western Balkans and to get rid of the accumulated historical heritage to a certain extent. (Radio Free Europe, 2017) This will unquestionably affect the extension of the visa liberalization suspension from the European Union.

In general terms, the Western Balkans is, therefore, in a sort of a turning point. On the one hand, there is an evident progress in the European integration after 2000, but the completion of this process is not even close. Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, pointed out in August 2017 the disparity between the necessity of acceleration of the “European perspective” of the countries of the region and their lack of readiness. (Eder 2017) This again unleashes

5) See integral version of the agreement – First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations. Brussels. 20. April 2013. [online] Available at: <http://www.kord-kim.gov.rs/eng/p03.php> [Accessed 7 September 2017].

a number of frustrations in the region, ranging from strengthening of ethnic nationalism and mentioning of nationalist mega-state projects to the potential emergence of secessionist movements. To this has also often contributed the constant revival of the idea of “border rearrangements” in the Balkans, in which way, in fact, all countries in this region are moving away from the full perspective of the EU membership. Moreover, the above-mentioned ideas, which are reviving and strengthening in the period of the still unfinished project of the „post-conflict Western Balkans“, point to the fact that the European Union is fundamentally incapable of re-examining its current legal framework for future enlargement, but also the full integration of this region into the Union. (Đukanović, Gjurovski 2016: 87-107) It is certain that without ending this process, which is objectively complicated by the internal crisis in the European Union, there is not a real possibility of consolidation of the stability in the western parts of the Balkans. Naturally, this process should be observed in relation to the enlargement of the NATO in the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the countries that have made the most progress in this process, and who, after removing certain obstacles, could soon become its Member States.

I

The Most Important Problems of the Western Balkans Countries In the Region In the Context of Accession to the European Union

A general view of the dynamics of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union shows the division on at least three groups into which we can include the countries of the region. The more successful countries in this process are Montenegro and Serbia. On the other hand, we can notice that Albania, which by the end of this year should start the membership negotiations, is lagging behind in the process. Also, due to the failure to provide recognition of its 2008 independence declaration by five EU member states, Kosovo has a “special” treatment compared to the rest of the Western Balkans.⁶

In the third group of countries we can count in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, which are *de facto* stopped in this process

6) Five member states of the European Union – Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Spain did not recognize Kosovo’s independence.

due to numerous internal political problems for a very long time. After the change of power in Skopje this year, it was clear that the process of European integration will gradually accelerate. In connection with this, there are increasingly frequent announcements that Macedonia will soon achieve a “historic” agreement with neighboring Greece regarding its name in international relations. As before, the most serious proposal is the “Republic of Upper Macedonia”, which should replace the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. (Smith, 2017)

a) The countries of the Western Balkans which started the negotiations process – Montenegro and Serbia

As already mentioned, Montenegro and Serbia are currently leading in the process of European integration, when we compare the dynamics of this process in the Western Balkans. Moreover, it is evident that these two countries are increasingly standing out from the rest of the region regarding the European integration. Although they started this process together within the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the last decade, the process of accession to the European Union of Montenegro and Serbia has “split out” in the middle of the past decade within the so-called twin track (2004). After the restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006, this process was formally completely separated.

It should also be noted that the two countries, after restoring their independence, gradually faced certain problems that determined their progress towards membership in the European Union. Montenegro gained the status of a candidate for the EU membership in 2010, and two years later the process of membership negotiations began. However, although the annual progress reports of the European integration process of Montenegro show significant progress, the question remains whether the successful dynamics of the opening of numerous negotiating chapters could be slowed down due to certain “fragile issues”. When it comes to Montenegro, these are certainly the fight against organized crime and corruption. (Montenegro 2016 Report: 53-66)

The European Union insisted on these very important issues from the very beginning of the negotiations with Montenegro, and especially within this process, it insisted on the verification of chapters 23 and 24 dealing with the judiciary and fundamental rights, i.e. justice, freedom and security. Although the “Pandora’s box” of crime and corruption on the Montenegrin coast (cases in Budva and Bar) has been opened over

the past few years, it is obvious that it is still not realistic to expect that the European Union will be fully satisfied with the achieved. Namely, despite the fact that the fight against corruption has begun, there is still no significant progress related to the judicial epilogue of these cases.

On the other hand, it should be noted that Montenegro has achieved an almost absolute level of compliance of its foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. (Montenegro 2016 Report: 80-81) Therefore, this otherwise very fragile issue in the Balkans, primarily because of the strengthening of the influence of certain states such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, still shows that Montenegro has positioned itself as part of the "western hemisphere", as shown by its accession to the restrictive measures of the European Union against Russia during 2014. It should be emphasized that on June 5, 2017, Montenegro became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance, which further strengthened its international position as a Western Balkan and Mediterranean country.

Therefore, Montenegro is facing potential problems of the necessity for an even more pronounced fight against corruption, as well as a greater efficiency of the judiciary. A major problem can also be the application of the European environmental legislation (Chapter 27). (Pobjeda, 2015) Also, there are areas of agriculture and rural development (Chapter 11), but also the regional policy (Chapter 22).

The Republic of Serbia gained the status of a candidate in 2012, but the negotiations on membership were conditioned by the already started dialogue between the authorities in Pristina and Belgrade. (Đukanović 2013: 365-385) Namely, unlike the rest of the Western Balkan countries, Serbia is a subject to the normalization of relations with Kosovo under Chapter 35 (Other issues). It is necessary to emphasize once again that the issues related to future relations between Belgrade and Pristina will remain prevalent in the process of European integration. Therefore, in the next period, a completely new dynamics of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo should be expected. First, it is necessary to fully implement everything achieved in the dialogue on the normalization of relations between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina since 2011, and in particular the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo, whose foundations were "set up" in 2013 within the framework of the First Agreement Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations.

In the forthcoming period, a significant encouragement of the United States and the European Union should be expected in order to speed up the process of the normalization of relations between Belgrade

and Pristina. (Đorđević 2017) That is why in Serbia was announced an “internal dialogue” about the most sensitive national and in a somewhat identity issue -- the status of Kosovo. At the end of this year, it should result in a new agreement between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina that would improve the process of normalization and more thoroughly determine their own relations in the context of European integration. (B92 2017) Of course, the dynamics of this process will depend not only the position of Serbia, but also Kosovo, in the process of accession.

However, Serbia has another very significant problem in the process of European integration. Namely, since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine and the introduction of the EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, Serbia has not had a satisfactory degree of harmonization of its foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy. (Đukanović 2015: 81-106) It seems that the problem will also have a long-term impact on the occasional slowdown in the process of European integration. For now, this issue seems to have been *ad acta* in some degree, until the intensifying and ending the process of normalization of relations between the authorities in Pristina and Belgrade.

It should be emphasized that Serbia is the only state in the region that has given up the pretensions for the membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. This was done ten years ago due to the NATO engagement in Kosovo at the eve of its proclamation of independence in mid-February 2008. Increasingly, in Serbian public discourse is pointed that it will be more difficult to achieve the membership in the European Union before the country is integrated into NATO. So far, this is shown in the experiences of the Central and Eastern European countries in their accession to the European Union, i.e. the states that joined the Union in 2004, 2007 and 2013.⁷ On the scale of the existing foreign policy priorities, this question is conditionally stated only in the third place, i.e. after the normalization of relations between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina, and redefining relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation.

It should be noted that, like Montenegro, Serbia could be faced with the problems related to Chapter 27 – the environment. (Santovac 2017) Significant reforms in this area also imply fairly large investments, but it is not clear whether Serbia, without a significant Union’s assistance, could at all achieve that. There is, therefore, little progress in this field over the past years. In addition, there are problems related to the

7) These are Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

segment of the “rule of law”, i.e. Chapters 23 and 24, in which problems related to judicial reform and significant fighting against organized crime and corruption remain dominant. Namely, at the beginning of this decade, the so-called judicial reforms only further aggravated the situation in this area, and the successful resolution of this situation is not entirely certain in a short period of time. The negotiating Chapter 11 – agriculture and rural development could be a very significant problem for Serbia in the upcoming period, as well.

Although up to now (end of August 2017), Serbia opened 10 out of 35 chapters and temporarily closed 2 chapters, it is nevertheless a significant progress for less than two years. However, in the forthcoming period, everything will primarily depend on (re) defining Belgrade’s relations with the status of Kosovo. In this regard, a significant breakthrough in the European integration process could only come in the next calendar year, i.e. after the announced “historic” agreement between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina. In a wider context, after this the issue of future relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation will be imposed, where it will be necessary to coordinate it with official Brussels views and policies towards Moscow.

b) Albania in anticipation of the beginning of the negotiations and accelerated progress of Kosovo

After a long period of political crisis and disputes, *the Republic of Albania* has emerged from a rather turbulent period. Namely, due to the elections held at the end of this year, the dominance of the Socialist Party of Albania as the most influential political party was confirmed. In mid-2014, Albania gained the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union, but three years later it still did not begin the negotiation process.

Namely, Albania has been often faced with problems related to a set of issues concerning the rule of law. (Albania Progress Report 2016) The judiciary in this country is fairly inefficient, and there is a lack of resolution of very large scandals in the area of corruption and organized crime. It is still not clear when the negotiations on Albania’s membership in the European Union will begin, thus it is very difficult to predict the future dynamics of the country’s European integration. In the regional context, Albania is expected to influence the stabilization of the situation in its Balkan hinterland, and in particular not to hamper the normalization of relations between the authorities in Pristina and

Belgrade. Also, this country will be expected not to contribute to the radicalization of the Albanian population in neighboring Macedonia, which is also burdened with numerous problems with its neighbors. (Sotirović 2017)

In addition to the numerous initiated reforms, the new Albanian government must fight more decisively against organized crime (primarily drug trafficking), but also make significant efforts to consolidate the internal economic opportunities. Of course, a significant change was made due to the fair and democratic elections in whose organization also participated the representatives of the opposition Democratic Party. Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, has on several occasions expressed an optimistic view that the negotiations on EU membership will start at the end of the current 2017 year. (Xinhua 2017)

Looking ahead in the long-term and after the potential opening of EU membership negotiations, Albania will surely face issues related to Chapters 23 and 24 due to the still insufficiently strong capacity of the judiciary and the existing corruption in this system. Also, Albania, as well as Montenegro and Serbia, are likely to have significant problems related to the European criteria for environmental protection, and above all the possibility of implementing the European legislation in this area. As far as foreign policy is concerned, Albania fully coordinated its activities with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as illustrated by the annual reports on the progress of this country in the process of European integration, which highlights the one hundred percent compliance in the past few years. (Đukanović 2015: 81-106) However, on the other hand, it does not reflect the alignment of Albania's regional (Western Balkans) policy with its neighbors where, in recent years, problems have often been expressed in relations with Serbia and with the neighboring Macedonia primarily because of the status of Albanian communities in these countries. Therefore, Albania's renouncement of the "pan-Albanian" policy, which does not encourage the full integration of Albanians into the neighboring countries, would be very significant.

Two years after the proclamation of independence, at the end of October 2010, *Kosovo* managed to significantly accelerate its European path, i.e. to compensate for the previous backlog. Namely, the priorities of the authorities in Pristina until 2008 were primarily related to the declaration of independence, as well as its recognition by the most influential European and world countries. However, it was precisely at that time that the Feasibility Study was signed. Three years later, at the end of October 2015, *Kosovo* signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement. It was ratified by the European Parliament in late January

2016 in a very quick procedure. Namely, because of the lack of full recognition of all EU member states in the Stabilization and Association Process, Kosovo has gained a special place or status.

In February 2017, Kosovo's former foreign minister Enver Hoxhaj announced that Kosovo will soon submit a request for membership in the Union. (BalkanPlus 2117) However, there was a parliamentary and political crisis in Kosovo and the elections in June 2017, after which it is still not clear whether the government will be formed from two political groups. On one side is the PAN coalition formed from the representatives of the ruling coalition, while on another side the Self-Determination Movement and the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo lead a fairly Euro-skeptic policy and are not ready to allow the normalization of relations with Belgrade. The Self-Determination Movement has long obstructed the ratification of Kosovo's border with neighboring Montenegro, although the United States and the European Union insisted on it since its signing in August 2015. In particular, the Union considers this issue as a condition for the liberalization of the visa regime for the citizens of Kosovo, which makes them "outcasts" in relation to the rest of the region. New Government led by Ramush Haradinaj was formed in September 9, with support of the Serbian List.

On the other hand, the current President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, has repeatedly insisted on speeding up the process of normalizing relations with Serbia under the strong influence of the European Union and the United States. In this regard, he has often announced the signing of a legally binding bilateral "agreement on good neighborly relations" between Kosovo and Serbia, which would solve the long-standing problems in the long run, which has not yet been solved through the dialogue started in 2011. (Blic 2017) Raising the level of this dialogue to the level of two presidents will surely give more hope for its successful completion in the coming period. Such an epilogue would certainly contribute to a significant consolidation of the relations in Southeast Europe and would further open the possibility of accelerating the process of European integration in the Western Balkans.

It is very important that the authorities in Kosovo begin to form the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo in accordance with the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Namely, they have so far delayed this in order not to be blamed by the very radical Kosovo opposition, and above all the Self-Determination Movement. This created an additional insecurity among the Kosovo Serbs who are neither ensured what was agreed with the European Union, but also with the official Belgrade. Of course, this process will certainly depend

largely on the fact who and how will form the government in Kosovo in the coming period.

If in the long run, we look at the potential challenges of Kosovo in the outbreak of the negotiation process for the membership in the European Union, the inadequate fight against organized crime and corruption, as well as ensuring human rights for non-Albanian communities, primarily Serbian, would surely arise as the main problem. Also, the insufficiently strong institutions of the judiciary, which should be exempted from political influence, could be a significant problem. Of course, Kosovo, like other actors in the Western Balkans region, would certainly have problems with environmental protection. However, the acceleration of the European path of Kosovo should contribute to reducing the evident strengthening of the more radical political options there (primarily the Movement of Self-Determination), but at the same time to contribute to the improvement of interethnic relations, and above all between Albanians and Serbs. The European perspective of Kosovo should also contribute to the improvement of economic opportunities, which are not currently showing positive parameters.

The Kosovo problem was a fuse that began the process of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The dominant Serbian opinion is still not in a position to accept the existing reality, i.e. that there is another political, economic and security system in the greater region of Kosovo, and that all the contours of the authorities of Serbia in the north and in some enclaves of Kosovo actually disappeared after the signing of the Brussels Agreement in April 2013.

c) The prevalence of bilateral disputes and internal issues in relation to the European integration: Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

The course of European integration in the Western Balkans has shown that they can be used in the context of the blackmailing of neighbors regarding certain bilateral issues. So far, this proved to be the case between Slovenia and Croatia about unresolved border issues (border at sea and on land not definitely confirmed after international arbitration in July 2017), as well as between Serbia and Romania when acquiring the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union due to the status of the Vlach minority in 2012. Croatia has also unsuccessfully tried to block Serbia in the opening of some negotiation chapters (23, 24 and 26) by imposing conditions which are actually

related to their bilateral relations.⁸ But certainly, the most drastic case of this kind is the Greek-Macedonian name dispute, which has been ongoing since 1991. (Shea 2008: 211-277) It stopped Macedonia to join the European Union, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Greece first blocked Macedonia to start the membership negotiations after acquiring the candidate status in November 2005, and at the same time, it prevented the receiving invitations to join NATO at the summit of this organization in Bucharest three years later.

In the previous period of VMRO-DPMNE's rule in Macedonia, it turned out that the authorities in Skopje were not ready to accept numerous proposals of inter-ethnic factors for the new name of the country. This resulted in an internal crisis that threatened to lead to significant escalation, especially in the first half of 2017. VMRO-DPMNE was not ready to leave power in the usual way in Macedonia, which resulted in conflicts in the Macedonian Parliament in late April 2017. However, after the arrival of the US official Hoyt Brian Yee in Skopje in early May 2017, the situation returned to the constitutional frame and a new pro-European government was formed, which has the essential goal of accelerating the Euro-Atlantic and the European integration. (MIA, 2017) The new government of Zoran Zaev, the president of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia, accentuated the successful completion of the process of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Regarding this, there are certain predictions according to which Macedonia will receive an invitation to join NATO during 2018, possibly under the temporary name "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". (Đukanović, 2017) In this way, the attempt to enter NATO, which began in the early 1990s, would be successfully completed. This would also strengthen the regional security and mitigate the potential for intra-party conflicts in Macedonia between the more radical members of the Albanian community and representatives of the central authorities, modeled on those that took place in 2000 and 2001.

On the other hand, Macedonia has been blocked regarding the accession to the European Union for a long time. In fact, due to Greece, but also the strengthening of nationalist tendencies in the Macedonia itself over the past decade, its suspension has *de facto* occurred. A recent shift in power in Skopje will, however, make it possible to improve relations with neighboring Greece and the possibility of finding a compromise on the country's name. In this context, two concrete

8) These conditions hampers the comprehensive jurisdictions of the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor's Office, co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and the status of Croats in Vojvodina / Serbia.

proposals are currently being made public – the Republic of Upper Macedonia or the Upper Republic of Macedonia.

If and when it comes to opening the negotiations with Brussels regarding the EU membership, Macedonia will certainly predominantly face the problems with the set of “rule of law” issues like other countries in the Western Balkans region. This primarily relates to the fight against corruption and organized crime, judicial reform, and may also raise issues of the status of certain minorities, primarily Bulgarian in Macedonia. Although on August 1, 2017, Macedonia with Bulgaria signed an agreement on good neighborly and friendly relations, it is not a guarantee that the issue will be easily removed from the list of Sofia’s official priorities. (Reuters 2017) The issue of the status of its minority has already been emphasized several times by the official Tirana, but when it comes to joining of Macedonia to NATO, Tirana will condition the completion of this process by the utter implementation of the Ohrid Agreement (2001). (Vesti 2015)

Unlike Macedonia, whose main problem in the process of European integrations was tied to relations with Greece for a long time, *Bosnia and Herzegovina* is lagging behind on this path due to a very divided political system. Namely, three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) and their representatives, as well as two entities (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska) cannot reach a minimum consensus on how to improve and accelerate the path towards full membership in the European Union. It seems that occasionally Bosniak, but also the Serbian elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have largely ignored the European integration under various external influences. On the one hand, the Republic of Turkey also faced with a marathon long and uncertain process of European integration, affects the Bosniak political elite (primarily the Party of Democratic Action of BiH) to speak about this process more declaratively than to substantially and successfully end it. Also, for the past 22 years since the signing of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, Bosniak political parties expected that the structure of the state would fundamentally change and completely return to unitary compliance before the outbreak of armed conflict in 1992. The Serbian side in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, expected an additional “loosening” of the Bosnia and Herzegovina framework and strengthening of its own integration. The current president of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, often mentions the possibility of holding a referendum on the “state-legal” status of this entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (ATV 2017) At this moment, the leadership of the Republic of Srpska is more reliant on preserving the constant support it

receives from the Russian Federation, while the last year's referendum on the Republic of Srpska Day (January 9th) held in September 2016 was highly disputed by the Republic Serbia.⁹

The leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Croats, although already demographically rather weakened, as shown by a comparative overview of the results of the 2013 census and the pre-war census from 1991, in the acceleration of European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina see the possibility to link additionally with the Republic of Croatia. This preoccupation of the three ethnic national elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina with its own "national" interests only blocks the possibility of accelerating the European integration of the entire state in the long run. Even with a strong diplomatic initiative (German-British plan from November 2014) to accelerate European integration, with the undoubted internal blockade of this process a substantial progress has failed. (Balkan Insight 2014)

Despite the defrosting of the Stabilization and Association Agreement of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the European Union on June 1, 2015, which was signed in February 2008, a substantial progress was not achieved. However, the submission of a candidacy for membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the EU followed in mid-February 2016. But due to the internal blockade of the European integration process, BiH did not submit a completed questionnaire preceding the approval of the candidate status. Namely, the Republic of Srpska and the state authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not agree on certain activities related to the above questionnaire. Similarly was repeated at the Trieste Western Balkan Summit, which was held in mid-July 2017, when the Republic of Srpska challenged the entry of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Transport Community of South-East Europe. (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2017)

At the beginning of February 2016, a mechanism for coordinating the European integration was established in a very complex state structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the Republic of Srpska entity has been challenging it for a very long time, thus it was modified at the beginning of August 2016. Nevertheless, this also did not create realistic assumptions for the acceleration of Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union. Two earlier very intense attempts to amend the 1995 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the April package

9) This referendum was organized on the basis of a decision of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina challenging this date as discriminatory. However, this referendum did not have the support of the United States and the European Union, and Serbia also showed significant reserves.

of constitutional reforms of 2006 and the Butmir Package of 2009) failed to harmonize the views of the leading political and ethno national factors in Bosnia and Herzegovina to change the set of issues related to the coordination of activities concerning the country's accession to the European Union. Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is still far from the possibility of similar constitutional audits.

Otherwise, the highly complex and multi-stranded bureaucratic apparatus in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which also monitors the dysfunction of state power structures, only further complicates the process of European integrations. This is confirmed by the inability to reach consensus within such a state structure on very important issues. This implies, in the first place, the additional consultations of the cantons within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then two BiH entities (Federation of BiH and the Republic of Srpska), and then additionally with the state level of government. Only after completing such a complex procedure Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state can communicate with the official institutions of the European Union "in one voice".

The progress in the European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the coming period will depend primarily on the further strengthening of the influence of the Russian Federation and Turkey in this country. If it does not weaken, any progress will be hard to imagine. Both Russia and Turkey, due to their influence on the leadership of the Republic of Srpska and the Bosniak political elite, are trying to re-position themselves much wider, i.e. in the Western Balkans. A potential case of Croatia's blockade of the European integration of neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina should not be diminished. Croatia showed that it was capable of this when it launched the issue of "traditional trade" on the eve of the submission of the candidacy for membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰ At the same time, one should bear in mind that similar can happen by transposing certain bilateral issues between the two countries – Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – such as the undefined borders, but also the so-called Croatian issue within the Dayton political system. The official Zagreb has often pointed to the necessity of "ethno-federalization" of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which implies to a certain extent the revival of plans for the establishment of the so-called Croatian „Third entity“ or the restoration of the war formed creation of the so-called Croatian Republic Herceg-Bosnia (1992–1994).

10) Croatia, after joining the European Union, demanded that certain quotas of duty-free imports of products of animal and plant products be imported. This has jeopardized a large number of manufacturers from Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Al Jazeera, 2015)

In the long-term context, when Bosnia and Herzegovina secures the status of candidate for membership in the European Union, as well as most Western Balkan countries, it will face problems related to the set of issues of the “rule of law”, i.e. the more efficient judiciary. Of course, within these issues, the systematic fight against corruption and organized crime will also be actualized. Like the rest of the countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not able to accelerate the implementation of environmental standards.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, having in mind the internal non-conformity of legal regulations, a number of negotiating chapters that can be labeled as “technical” (e.g. taxes, statistics, financial regulations, etc.) could be a problem. That is why the prediction of the duration of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s potential negotiations with the European Union regarding the membership is very ungrateful.

Conclusion

The prediction of any development of events in the Balkan is often a very difficult and ungrateful endeavour. This was particularly obvious at the end of the 20th century in these areas. That is why it is not an easy task to give any reliable prediction of what will happen in the Western Balkans over the next ten years. Any long-term absence of the Western Balkans’ attachment to the European mainstream, i.e. the European Union will result in a significant instability. Namely, a region that is so divided and in which there is still a considerable distance between the dominant spheres of societies, as well as political elites, can only progress if it is “embedded” in the most important economic and political flows in Europe.

Needless to say, the European Union itself faces a number of problems. Only its further strengthening and transformation into an enhanced institutional structure can respond to the numerous challenges of time. Of course, it cannot rest on the (crypto) hegemony of only one state, but it still needs to rely on the broader circle of states. At this moment, it is obvious that this will be done by the “three” – the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Italy. Naturally, for such a development, the question arises as to what will happen to the countries of the so-called New Europe, that is, primarily the countries of Central Europe, which are increasingly prepared to expand the existing cooperation frameworks within the Visegrad Group and strengthen their additional integration with the Danube regional component.

In this sense, it is also possible that certain “border” countries of the Western Balkans, and above all Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the perspective find their surroundings in the midst of the geostrategic estimates of the leading countries of this Central European region (as well as Austria and Hungary).

On the other hand, leaving the Western Balkans to the strengthened influence of Russia or Turkey could lead to the new instability if one bears in mind the traditionally unbalanced relations between Moscow and Ankara towards the countries of the region and the peoples of the Western Balkans. The efforts of certain European countries, primarily the Federal Republic of Germany, to strengthen the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries within the Berlin Process since 2014, show a certain deficit of potential progress, i.e. insufficient prospects of improving the rather intricate bilateral relations. (Đukanović, Krstić 2016, 169-185) Moreover, the results of this initiative are becoming less visible from year to year, but they are reduced to certain issues which to some extent do not reflect the complexity of the Western Balkan political agenda.¹¹

At the same time, re-shifting the focus of the topics in the Western Balkans from political to almost dominant economic themes (e.g. infrastructure and development projects) is not enough to calm the situation in the region. Namely, over the past half century, it has not been possible to focus on economic problems in this part of Europe, bearing in mind the enchantment of local societies and political elites with ethnonationalism and the so-called “unresolved” national issues. In other words, only the urgent focusing of the empowered European Union on the Western Balkans and strengthening of the prospect of their membership, after the ending of Brexit, can contribute to the stabilization and modernization of the countries in the region.

According to some ideas, this scenario should not be based on favoring only one Western Balkan state and the demonstration of good examples of Europeanization in this part of Europe, but essentially on a broad impartial observation of the Western Balkans as a region that shares a common human history and has many similar features. At the same time, this should not involve a substantial change of the existing individual approach within the Stabilization and Association Process,

11) Like the constant emphasis on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans – RYCO, which in 2016 has its headquarters in Tirana. Namely, this office is essential for better understanding among young people in the Western Balkan region, but its establishment was actually marked as the most important meeting point in Paris, which was organized in 2016 under the Berlin Process.

but in a certain way a greater respect for the particular “weak points” of these countries in the process of European integration. Namely, each of the Western Balkan countries has just a certain degree of issues that slow them down along the way towards the membership in the European Union. There was a lot to say about it in the second part of our work. For Serbia, for example, the matter of relations with the authorities in Pristina and the relations with the Russian Federation are one of the most significant obstacles. On the other hand, when it comes to Montenegro, it is the fight against organized crime and corruption, i.e. a set of problems concerning the rule of law. Bosnia and Herzegovina is burdened in the process of European integration by insufficient development of the institutional capacity to take up obligations in the context of accession to the Union, etc. In a certain way, strengthening the institutions of the European Union and their competencies in the coming period could compensate for particular problems of individual countries in the region due to the introduction of potentially new and, moreover, sharper sanctions for the member states and the candidates for membership deterring from the commitments. In this way, in fact, there would be significant opportunities for Brussels to have a more intensive influence on the Western Balkans through much stronger conditionality.

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