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Forever on the Periphery? The Return of Geopolitics to EU Enlargement to the Balkans

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At the beginning of 2016, almost 13 years after the Thessaloniki declaration to integrate the Western Balkans into the European Union, Brussels is left with Croatia as a Member State, Montenegro half way, at best, to becoming one, Serbia with first negotiation chapters just opened, and half of the region with no clear prospect of membership. But the wait-and-see approach that the EU had been employing for a number of years towards the enlargement policy in the Balkans has become even riskier in times of new international challenges. Among them, the ever-growing tensions between the West and Russia should, in particular, serve as motivation for the Union to look at enlargement in the Balkans from a geopolitical angle. Even if the Member States have in recent years shown less enthusiasm towards further rounds of enlargement, this should not discourage the EU institutions from undertaking an active role to revive the European integration process in the Balkans.

Neither Carrots...

The pace of integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union is far from dynamic and is, in fact, slowing down. The opening of the first two chapters in the accession talks with Serbia in December 2015 is only the latest evidence of this; while it took almost two years for the Serbian chapters to be opened (negotiations were launched in January 2014), neighbouring Montenegro managed to start talks in 10 chapters in the same timeframe, and Croatia, a country that launched its negotiations a decade ago, had 12 opened and 2 closed.

The case of Montenegro and, to a greater degree, that of Serbia, not only make the slowdown in the EU integration process clear, but these countries also represent the high point in terms of prospective enlargement in the Western Balkans, and therefore of EU enlargement as a whole. Elsewhere in the Balkans, only Albania (which was granted candidate status in 2014) has clear prospects of progress in the negotiations, even though they have not yet started. The European Commission has, for a number of years, recommended the start of accession talks with Macedonia, but this process has been blocked by

¹ H. Grabbe, G. Klaus, D. Korski, "Beyond Wait-and-See: the Way Forward for EU Balkan Policy," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2010.

neighbouring Greece because of a name dispute. Bosnia and Herzegovina delivered its application for membership to Brussels only in February 2016. Kosovo has not yet applied to become an EU Member State.

The slowdown is apparent despite the fact that the screening process, a comparison of the local and EU laws aimed at drawing a roadmap for reforms, now starts even before the accession negotiations kick off, which was not the case when Croatia was in talks on EU accession. Even though this technical obstacle to the enlargement process has been removed, the political reasons not to speed up the process are clearly visible. Enlargement fatigue was apparent in Brussels even before the Union's expansion to the east was completed in 2007.² The global economic crisis that came shortly afterwards absorbed the EU's attention, as virtually all Member States experienced a decline in GDP, and for some this was a double-digit disaster. Some analysts argued that the economic condition of Europe was an excuse for "a silent pact between enlargement fatigued EU member states and rent-seeking elites in the Western Balkans who do not mind slowing the pace of transformation," and that the crisis was "relegating the region to the outermost circle in a multi-speed Europe—the periphery of the periphery."³ Perhaps the later international developments, including the Arab Spring, the wars in Syria and Ukraine and the refugee and migrant crisis were viewed as similar excuses.

There is another phenomenon in the Balkan round of enlargement. It is becoming more and more visible that, although "the EU's internal procedures for handling enlargement have always been intergovernmental in nature, the frequency of incursions and opportunities for the member states to interfere and derail the process has increased over the past years."⁴ In other words, the blocking actions of Greece and Slovenia in the past, both due to bilateral disputes, could in future be repeated by any EU Member State to prevent Balkan accession by using the technical procedure for EU enlargement to impose a politically-motivated condition on an aspirant country. Especially since Croatia joined the Union in 2013, there have been more options at the disposal of other Member States. One example is a change in the French constitution, which obliges the government to hold a referendum to ratify the accession treaty of a future EU Member State should there be no qualified majority in both chambers of parliament. Similar attempts to upgrade simple majority to qualified majority when voting on enlargement have also been made in other national parliaments. In Germany, the new element is that the government now needs to seek the Bundestag's opinion on the opening of accession negotiations with a country aspiring to join the EU.⁵

...Nor Sticks

Some Member States have little interest in expanding the EU. For others, there are a growing number of factors that influence enlargement policy. This has led to a degree of nationalisation of the process (as the examples above show) and means that the slowdown of the process has also become apparent among the EU institutions. This was made clear by Jean-Claude Juncker's declaration on enlargement in 2014. Shortly before taking his position as head of the European Commission, he underlined there would be no accession to the Union during his term in office. This refers primarily to the Western Balkans countries since the others covered by enlargement policy either have frozen accession talks with the Union (Iceland) or face a lack of political consensus within the EU regarding membership (Turkey).

Indeed, rather than serving as a de facto suspension of the enlargement in the Balkans, Juncker's declaration was an estimation of the pace of the process and the results it can bring in the coming years. Namely, the six years that it took for Croatia's accession talks can set a precedent for other prospective EU members. Thus, Montenegro could finish negotiations with the EU by 2018, and Serbia by around 2020. But, since the process has been delayed for both countries from the start (compared to the example of Croatia), it is

² "A case of enlargement fatigue," *The Economist*, 11 May 2006, www.economist.com.

³ D. Bechev, "The Periphery of the Periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro Crisis," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, August 2012.

⁴ R. Balfour, C. Stratulat (eds.), "EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans," European Policy Centre, Issue Paper No. 79, July 2015.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

difficult to see these dates as realistic deadlines. Moreover, following the Croatian path to the EU, it is evident that another two years will be needed for any new accession treaty to be first prepared and then ratified in the Member States, to complete entry to the Union.

From this perspective, the announcement of no EU enlargement during the present EC term is no big news. Indeed, some surveys made similar predictions based on the progress at the time of countries from the Balkans.⁶ Nevertheless, it is discouraging that the Commission, which is usually the most ambitious in terms of EU enlargement agenda, would make such a declaration. What was, in fact, a calculation derived from data-based estimates and procedures has sometimes been seen in the Balkans as a political decision by the EU to pause, thereby creating a basis for a no-enlargement approach for next few years.⁷ Two months before the new Commission was established in November 2014, an EC-sourced document that circulated among the media showed that enlargement was not among the portfolios being considered at that time.⁸

Such an understanding was cemented by the EU's alteration of the portfolio previously called "Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy." The new commissioner, Johannes Hahn, was given the re-titled "ENP and Enlargement Negotiations" portfolio, a move perceived in the Balkans as a shift in EU priorities regarding the regions in its direct proximity. Second, the new term "negotiations" was stated as the actual goal for the near future, whereas Montenegro, for example, wishes to go beyond that stage and start the procedure of implementing the accession treaty before the current Commission's term is over.

Why Unfreeze the EU Enlargement?

Thirteen years since the Thessaloniki declaration to integrate the Western Balkans with the EU, Croatia has joined, Montenegro is half way to becoming a Member State (although at best this process will be finished at the very end of this decade), and Serbia's first chapters have just opened (this country has the ambitious plan to conclude negotiations by 2019). For the latter, there is also the question of the independence of Kosovo, which it must recognize as an obvious condition on the path to the Union though it is a bitter pill that Belgrade has little idea how to swallow. The other Balkan countries are more or less nowhere in terms of their integration with the EU, and most have no clear prospects of accession.

Still, after the European Council confirmed the future of the Western Balkans was in the EU, after NATO expressed its interest in enlargement to the region (accepting both Albania and Croatia as members and inviting Montenegro to join), and after Kosovo was recognised as an independent state by more than a hundred countries worldwide, the role of the West in the Balkans seemed indisputable. But, while the European integration process has been slowing down, the pace of developments in international politics has been increasing, and there has been an escalation of tensions between Russia and the West on a scale not seen for a long time.

Even setting aside the fundamental and well-known arguments regarding the Union's credibility, solidarity, widening the area of security and prosperity in Europe and, overall, a need for unification and integration of the continent, it seems a new incentive is looming for EU enlargement in the Balkans. The year 2015 saw the continuation of the Ukrainian crisis, internationalisation of the civil war in Syria, the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (a project in opposition to the European Union), and the first invitation this decade for an aspirant country to join NATO. The rivalry between Russia and the West turned global to the extent that it is more and more often being called a "new Cold War." On top of that, it has become increasingly evident in recent months that, with the decline of Union's interest in the Western Balkans, Russia has been increasing its attempts to re-establish its influence on this EU periphery.

Within the region, Russia was until recently focused on strengthening its position in Serbia, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (limited there to Republika Srpska), and the fields of energy and military cooperation

⁶ See for example: T. Strážay, T. Żornaczuk, L. Jesień (eds.), *The Prospects of the EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans, AD 2011*, PISM Report, Warsaw, 2011.

⁷ See for example: "Serbia grudgingly accepts Juncker's enlargement pause," *EurActiv*, 16 September 2014, www.euractiv.com.

⁸ "Exclusive: The Juncker team revealed," *EurActiv*, 4 September 2014, www.euractiv.com.

seemed to be of special interest. Moscow, in exchange for supporting Belgrade's position on Kosovo, was allowed to buy a majority stake in the state company Naftna Industrija Srbije. Serbia was then naturally considered, along with Bulgaria and Hungary, to be included in South Stream, a project that at the end turned out not to be Moscow's priority. A similar fate applies to Turkish Stream, a project in which Macedonia was included. When protests in this country started in 2015, Russia changed its position from one of little interest and the Kremlin stated they were orchestrated from outside, suggesting that they were a Western response to Skopje's energy policy.

Moscow is also becoming increasingly interested in being active in security policy in the region. There have been joint exercises between the Serbian and Russian armies, unseen for years, and Belgrade plans to buy Russian weapons and establish a helicopter service centre in Serbia (expressed when Dmitry Rogozin, Russian deputy prime minister responsible for the defence industry, visited the Serbian capital in early 2016). Such moves have been complemented by political and economic cooperation. For example, Serbia did not join the Western sanctions against Russia, and trade between the two countries remained undisturbed.⁹ Both countries operate within a strategic partnership signed in mid-2013. From then on, cooperation accelerated as Russian high-level visits to Belgrade became regular, contributing to a renaissance of the Kremlin's activities in Serbia. Russia is also becoming more and more concerned about the Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, the continuation of EUFOR's mandate was confirmed at the UN Security Council in November 2015 only after a reference to there being no alternative to Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration with NATO and the EU was removed at Moscow's request.

Russia is also now active on security matters elsewhere in the Balkans. Relations with Montenegro, where the Kremlin was present in political and economic terms, started to deteriorate after Podgorica decided to join the West in sanctions against Moscow. Although this was a natural move for a country that is part of ongoing Euro-Atlantic integration processes, something that Russia was not openly disapproving of in the past, the Kremlin's reaction to NATO's invitation for Podgorica to join the Alliance in late 2015 was deprecatory and clearly intended to prevent Montenegro accepting the offer. Not only did Russia threaten that accession would damage its relations with NATO, but it also urged the government in Podgorica to hold a referendum on membership.

Overall, the only no-go zone for Moscow in the Western Balkans is by far the most pro-European and (to an even greater extent) pro-American Albania and Kosovo. Still, newly reinvigorated Russian actions in other countries of the region clearly show that the Kremlin's current policy towards the Western Balkans is to slow down even more the pace of the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. In principle, the more passively the EU and the West behave, the greater chance Moscow has of achieving this goal.

A More Ambitious Agenda in Response to Difficult Times

If the EU wishes its soft power in the Balkans to remain an attractive instrument, it should seriously consider changing the approach to the region's European integration to keep pace with the changes in the international political environment. In a time of international instability NATO is giving a signal that it is ready to engage more in the Balkans, for although its invitation to Montenegro will strengthen the Alliance's forces and general military capacity only symbolically, the geopolitical significance of this act is much greater.

In fact, the geopolitical dimension of the enlargement policy, a motivation that was clearly visible and worked well during the enlargement to the east, seems to be something that is lacking in the EU's strategic current approach to the Balkans. Difficult times prove that there is a need to return to this philosophy, since anything less than an ambitious enlargement agenda for the Balkans may not only be perceived as the Union questioning the process, but will also leave room for other players to step in and act in accordance with their own interests, which do not necessarily have to overlap with those of the EU.

⁹ For more on Russia-Serbia relations, see: T. Żornaczuk, "Have Your Cake and Eat It: The Dilemma of Serbia's Relations with the EU and Russia," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 39 (771), 17 April 2015.

In order to eliminate the potential ambiguity arising from discouraging EU messages about how long and tough the enlargement process is, it is essential to mobilise and encourage the countries of the region to reform. In other words, enlargement fatigue should be avoided in order to avoid reform fatigue in the Balkans. This is why unified political declarations, based on an agreed vision, are significant for both political elites and societies in the region. Apart from the two front runners, whose progress in negotiations will be the main indicator of the success of EU policy in the Balkans this decade, the current Commission should take more positive steps concerning other countries in the region too. This particularly regards Albania as a promising candidate. The country will need careful assistance when transforming most of its state institutions, but the enthusiasm and energy of the government in Tirana, as well as the general reform momentum noted by the Commission in this year's progress report, should be used without delay as the foundations for the next steps of integration with the EU.

If the EU does not outline a more ambitious agenda, the Balkans will continue to bring bad news. There is an immediate need to re-think the approach towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and to find solutions on how to involve it in the EU integration process, rather than expecting the country to become more centralised and to have less parity in key roles—which has failed since Sarajevo became part of the EU enlargement policy. It is also crucial to undertake mediation between Greece and Macedonia in order to resolve the name dispute, for without such action it is almost certain that Skopje will in the coming decade make no more progress from its status as a candidate than it has in the past ten years. Another lost decade would not only be highly conspicuous compared to progress elsewhere in the region, but recent years have also made it clear that stagnation in this country actually means a regression in security and democratic standards. The emergence of a new government in Skopje after the snap election planned for spring 2016 should serve as a stimulus for the EU to tackle this problem comprehensively if the Union wishes to minimize the risk of further internal unrest (including ethnic-based) and the effectiveness of external players' destabilising efforts.

While enthusiasm for enlargement is low in the European capitals, more engagements and new initiatives are needed from all the EU institutions in order to revive the Balkans' road to the Union. The EC has so far been pushing the enlargement agenda, often even more ambitiously than the average position of the Member States. However, since there is still a general consensus regarding the accession of the Balkan countries to the Union remains, there is also room for European Council President Donald Tusk to become more visibly involved in the enlargement process. Yet it emerged during an ad hoc regional meeting on the Balkan migration route in October 2015 that, despite having been in office for nearly a year, President Tusk had not visited the Balkans. His first trip to the region did not take place until late November 2015, and even this was primarily connected to a joint action with Serbia and Macedonia to manage the migration crisis, with the EU integration portfolio clearly only peripheral (for example, no mention was made of a date for the opening of the first chapters in negotiations).¹⁰ This only shows that constant new international challenges can easily distract the EU from the focus on its well-established priorities.

The option for Tusk to become more proactive in the question of the enlargement to the Balkans derives not only from his prerogative as president to instruct the EU on its political direction, but also from the vision of strengthening the EU internationally and supporting neighbours who share the Union's values, which he presented at the beginning of his term. This would also balance the voices suggesting that Tusk tends to focus more on issues of interest to his home country, Poland, such as the energy union and the war in Ukraine, and, therefore, other major European affairs occupy him to a lesser extent.¹¹ In fact, Tusk's country of origin could be useful for him regarding policy towards the Balkans. As he comes from a country that benefited from the round of enlargement a decade ago, and because Polish citizens are very supportive of further expansion, any encouragement Tusk gives to the Member States to engage more in the Balkans would be perceived as natural for him.

¹⁰ "President Tusk visits Belgrade," Newsroom of the European Council and Council of the European Union, 21 November 2015, <http://tvnewsroom.consilium.europa.eu>.

¹¹ E. Maurice, "Balkan summit highlights Juncker-Tusk leadership gap," *EUObserver*, 22 October 2015, www.euobserver.com.