

## Balkans in the European Union

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### Abstract

In 2003, in Salonica, Balkan countries were told that “their future lies in the EU”. The Berlin process in 2014 provided a framework for a period of four years. In 2017, President Juncker, speaking of all non-EU Balkan countries except Turkey, estimated the first accessions would potentially take place in 2025! The Berlin process seeks to restore stability in the Balkans by leading to reconciliation. It includes new fact-finding commissions to establish the real facts in order to restore friendly relations, efforts to build economic links in transport and communication and new roads, establishment of a Western Balkan Common Market as a new partner for the EU, EFTA, and the EEA, and a new partnership among its member countries. The European Council will meet the Balkan heads of state in Sofia, Bulgaria, in April 2018. Without stability in the Balkans, there cannot be a stable Europe. In this paper we look at how to keep the Berlin process open and successful, possibly to accelerate it, and how to overcome current challenges. Notably, we look at the “deterioration of democratic standards” in some countries, which will have to be stopped and reversed. The conclusions support positive decision-making outcomes at all levels.

**Key words:** Western Balkans, the Berlin process, unresolved issues, EU future, progress.

## Introduction

To assess the costs and benefits of EU membership, Balkan candidate countries must pay careful attention to the twists and turns of the EU's history and weigh the competing strands of thought that will shape, in yet unclear ways, the future of the EU.

The EU has a long history prior to Salonic 2003 and its opening up to the Balkans. It is a history of some 43 years of intensive activity, occasional somnolence, and of bold leaps forward. At times, the French opposed and slowed down federalization, as they did British membership. At times, the British took the main opposition role while France and Germany increased their cooperation. The French prevented the adoption of the two proposed EU constitutions, while the British prevented the creation of a European Army and rejected the Social Charter, the Schengen Agreement, and the Euro, all of which they saw as contrary to their own interests. The Norwegians rejected EU membership in a referendum but accepted the common economic area. The Greeks shook the financial arrangements of the EU and now may be paying their debt for the next 40 years. Italy may decide to leave the EU and the Eurozone. Brexit could conceivably be followed by a Grexit and even further departures. Neither past history nor possible future developments suggest a straight predictable trajectory for the EU which Balkan nations seek to join.

It matters for the Balkans what the EU will be like tomorrow, just as it matters to the EU what the Balkans will be like once they meet membership criteria – whatever those criteria may be in the future. It is normal for the EU to look out for its interests in considering enlargement. It is equally normal, and indeed necessary, for the candidates from the Balkans to decide their destiny as have other nations – on the basis of their interests as perceived by their governments and their citizens.

## The Concept of 'Western Balkans'

The neologism "Western Balkans" as used by the EU does not correspond to traditional geography or history. The term Balkans is more accurate. Ljubisa Georgievski (2004) has suggested South Central Balkans as a more accurate term. Geographically, the Western Balkans include Slovenia, Croatia and all of former Yugoslavia. The Eastern Balkans include: Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and possibly Moldova (New Columbia Encyclopedia, 1963). Likewise, Eastern and Western Europe are political rather than geographic categories. For instance, Finland, Sweden and a part of Norway are in Eastern Europe, while they count as Western Europe. The name Europe, Europa is inherited from ancient times. The Greek states and Macedonia were the first and only Europe. Europa's arrival is a symbol of European civilization, which came from the Middle East. Later, Kings Philip and Alexander were the first to unify Greek city-states and the prosperous countries of Asia and Africa. Europe began its expansion East and South, while the West was still underdeveloped.

The division of the East and the West resulted from the weakness of Rome, which was then the largest empire in the world. In 476 AD, barbarian attacks divided the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern parts. The Eastern Empire survived some eight to ten centuries, as the Empire of the Romai (i.e. Romans of the East). The line of division is unclear: for some, it was the line Trieste to Danzig (Gdansk), for others it was along the rivers Drina, Bojana and on to Scutari. The Western Empire, founded by Charlemagne in 806 (AD), covered most of the territory of the EU (Judt, 2011).

Before the Second World War, the Balkan nations were a part of the West. They participated in creating the most advanced solutions of that period, e.g. the renunciation of war convention in 1929 and the European Federation of Nations in 1930.

The EU, with its current 28 member states, is the first attempt to unify all of Europe in modern times. The Treaty of Rome (Art 237) states that every nation of Europe has the right to apply and become a member of the EU. The Community can conclude agreements with a third state, a union of states, or an international organization, creating an association characterized by reciprocal rights and obligations, common actions and specific procedures. Such agreements are concluded by the unanimous Council, after consultation with the Assembly (Art. 238). It is assumed that those joining meet the conditions for membership.

Having all of this in mind, the concept of Western Balkans is unacceptable. It contributes to the impression that the six Balkan countries already in the EU have left the Balkans and are not to be held to the same standards. On the contrary, it should be clear that they are expected to cooperate as good neighbors and in solidarity with other Balkan countries. If Bulgaria is to preside over the so-called Western Balkan group, this is a positive step in the right direction. An all-Balkan group in the EU is preferable to an artificial Western group in the East! This all-Balkan group should be a natural link with European countries farther East – as well as with Mediterranean countries. Turkey is logically a part of the Balkans, as are its neighbors, mainly in the Middle East.

### **The Berlin Process**

Back in 2003, in Salonika, the future looked brighter. Greece expressed its hope that all Balkan countries would be in the EU by 2014. As this didn't happen, Angela Merkel launched a new diplomatic initiative. Representatives of Germany, France, Austria and Italy met with representatives of the non-member Balkan countries, in Berlin. This was followed by a Vienna summit in 2015, the Paris summit in 2016, and the Trieste summit in 2017 intended to improve regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries and their multilateral contacts with EU countries. All participants were very interested in this initiative for the Balkan countries and the EU to work together on the future accession of the Balkans to the EU, especially as it had earlier appeared that the EU was not paying attention to this region and the realization of its EU aspirations.

The meetings dealt with economic development and infrastructural improvements. The Balkan countries cooperated with the EU on the issues of refugees which contributed to the renewed EU action. The EU Commission's reports on Balkan countries, such as those on Macedonia in 2013-2017, were predominantly positive despite the slowing down of real progress. Externally, the tensions among Western Balkan countries increased and "the EU had woken up to the dramatic deterioration of democratic standards" (Fouere, 2018). In its Communication on Enlargement, the European Commission reported on some countries showing clear symptoms and varying degrees of "state capture" (Fouere, 2018). What was shown in the case of the Western Balkans was "the state control of civil society", and the media, "some engaging in hate speech", intimidation tactics against the government's critics, and nationalist rhetoric. In education there were attempts to rewrite history, increase ethnic divisions, and push neutral minorities toward conflict. The OSCE, the Council of Europe and other organizations noticed these tendencies.

President of France, Emmanuel Macron said in his speech at the Sorbonne on September 26, 2017: "When they, (the Balkan non-members), fully respect the acquis and democratic requirements, the EU will have to open itself to the Balkan countries, because our EU is still attractive and its aura is a key factor of peace and stability on the continent. They will have to respect the conditions stipulated... They should not turn their backs on Europe and move towards either Russia or Turkey, or towards authoritarian powers that do not currently uphold our values" (Macron, 2017). In other words, he had some doubts, unlike the case of Great Britain, which, if it desires at some future time, will find its place once again in the EU. As for Angela Merkel, she has made no new statements since September, concentrating instead on negotiating to form a new government coalition in Germany.

In other words, the Balkan countries will have to adopt the acquis and the democratic requirements internally and will have to cooperate among themselves to achieve reconciliation, leading to greater stability in the area. Bilateral and multilateral negotiations among Balkan countries offer a clear chance to achieve the latter goal. For instance, Macedonian-Bulgarian relations and mutual understanding were improved in the summer of 2017. The Macedonian and Greek Prime ministers met in Davos (in January 2018) and again subsequently in their own countries, to talk about the name issue and future relations between the two countries. Bosnia is in different position, as its entities have important differences among themselves. Going beyond what is already being implemented pursuant to EU/Western Balkan initiatives, a Truth and Conciliation Commission, like in South Africa, would be a good idea.

The most ambitious part of the plan is to establish a Common Market among the countries involved in the Berlin process. A market of almost 20 million people is expected to be created, along the model of the Visegrad countries before they joined the EU. This Common Market will be able to organize cooperation among the Balkan non-member states. This new Common Market will be able to cooperate with the EU countries and with other regional organizations, such as EEA, EFTA, and with other nations, such as the U.S., Britain, and Canada. Aside from

economic and commercial benefits to the participants, implementation of this initiative could create new, positive habits of collaboration and cooperation in the Western Balkan region and a sense that the region has something to gain in trade relations from thinking and acting as a group

An inaugural Western Balkans digitalization conference is scheduled for March 2018. There has already been some success with planning roads, transportation, energy connectivity, and communications. A Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO) has been established following an agreement in Paris in 2016 and further discussion in 2017 in Trieste. The RYCO is modelled on the Franco-German Youth Office.

The Berlin process will continue as long as it can help Balkan countries reach their goals. In its Enlargement Strategy Paper, the European Commission should: set out a vision of transformation of the Western Balkan countries into functioning democracies with accountable governments and viable economies; and address the principles of the rule of law and fundamental rights (Fouere, 2018). Pre-accession funds should also be increased in order to accelerate the process (Fouere, 2018).

Given Balkan countries' growth in 2017 of 2.6 per cent, expected growth of 3.3 per cent in 2018, and of 3.6 per cent in 2019, it would take some 15-20 years for the region to catch up with the EU's current average performance. While Balkan nations are making important if small attempts to overcome the ghosts of the past, in at least a number of countries in Europe and beyond, steps are being taken to resurrect the past to bring back nationalism, populism and conservatism (The Economist, 2017).

Unless, they continue to apply and be considered one by one, which would take much more time than now envisioned, the Berlin process may be the only path to the EU for the Balkan nations which are still outside the Union. This process, as we have seen, has been sponsored, promoted and developed mainly by France, Germany, Austria, and Italy – not by the Balkan countries already in the EU. This creates the impression that the Balkan countries are not full participants in this process, ceding leadership to the major powers. (Former President Josipovic of Croatia, called his own country “a smaller power in the EU,” at the UACS conference, in 2017).

The EU of Six was originally established by the nations *tales quales*, with the help of the U.S. The successive constitutions of the EU were elaborated and adopted among delegations of all member states equal to each other. By contrast, the negotiations on joining the EU are not conducted among equal delegations. The candidate countries have to accept the EU requirements, often without being able effectively to express their own – broader – interests.

## A Few Unresolved Issues

The EU, while proceeding in order with European integration, lacks a clear idea about its future. Is the EU to become a new, supranational state, or an international organization? How big is it supposed to be? A decade or so ago, French political scientist Pierre Manent wrote about the EU as a mode of rule as a state (“kratos”), detached from its nations and citizens (i.e. the “demoi”). This EU consists of nations but does not rely on them or on their civil societies, their support or opposition. It is an unparalleled type of organization (Manent, 2017).

In a recent essay *The Economist* opines, however, that “the belief that nationalism could fade away, was always naïve. The real question is what form it will take” (*The Economist*, December 23, 2017). The gist of this article is that universalist–liberal–cosmopolitan ideas are always defeated by revived nationalism.

British historian, the late Tony Judt, writing in 2011, has called the EU “a grand illusion”. According to him, the EU was not created by idealists but by realists and France, which needed support for its reconstruction and its restoration to great power status. Schuman, Monnet and a few others were idealists. According to Judt, Jacques Delors was a realist. In his 1988 book “*La France par l’Europe*” (France through Europe), Delors opined that France needed the EU in order to grow. Judt saw the Europe of Six as a great success. With 15 member states, he wrote that the EU had become unworkable, especially with its consensus voting. Judt could not have imagined an EU with 28 or 33 member states.

“The Union is founded on the value of respect of human dignity, freedom, democracy, human rights... including the rights of persons belonging to minorities (The Treaty of the EU, 1992). The status of minorities is not clear, as they do not have equal rights with majorities in all states (Hudson, 2015). In the EU, there are states which recognize one nation only and no minorities. Linguistically, there is no equality either, as each country joining the EU selects only one of its main languages to be used officially in the EU. There are 24 languages for 28 countries.

While the EU and its current member states have, as we have seen, a number of issues with which to contend, some unresolved issues are specific to former Yugoslavia. The international borders of the former parts of the united Yugoslav nation have never been established. The first Yugoslavia, before the Second World War, established on the theory of “one nation – three tribes”, had no reason to look into internal borders. The second Yugoslavia had state lines between its republics, but these were open to all. Even the border with Albania was opened in the period of 1945-1948, although there had been an earlier international border in that case. (Albania was included in the Yugoslav first 5-year economic plan). On the other hand, Yugoslavia was recognized internationally as a nation and a founder of the League of Nations and the United Nations. This overview explains some of the present day conflicts, such as those between Slovenia and Croatia on their maritime border, or between Bosnian entities,

Montenegro and Kosovo. The Peace Treaty with Italy (1948) transferred a part of Italian territory to Yugoslavia as a whole, not to any specific part of it.

Various plans for a Balkan federation have been considered over time, including between Yugoslavia and Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria (The Treaty of Bled), Yugoslavia and Greece – as well as federations of Balkan nations (since 18<sup>th</sup> century). The last such proposal came from Ljubisa Georgievski, a Macedonian politician, diplomat, writer, theater director. In 2004 he envisioned a federation with some 140 million people, taking into account the common culture, history and destiny of the “Balkanians”. He called for tolerance, cooperation, dialogue (Georgievski, 2004).

Nationalism at a higher level is still nationalism. EU citizens may be building a new nation which cannot avoid nationalism of its own. It took Italy some ten centuries to become a nation in its own right. There is no “end of history”. The EU has its proponents and its opponents. For some, it is a reality, for some an illusion. If nation X wants to join the EU, it should be able to figure out what kind of organization it would be joining. An EU that consists of 30 member states will become very different if that number increases to 120!

What is essential is peace among nations and within nations. The peace movement, not wars, should be endorsed. We have too many wars and other armed conflicts worldwide. The EU knows this and understands it well. The EU, however, needs its own defense and security right now.

### **The EU of the Future**

The EU future is difficult to predict as is that of any international or even national body politic. Last year, the future was either in a system of five speeds, where every member state should choose the level of its participation, -or- a unity of all in advancing toward a federation or a confederation of all members. The first was proposed by President Juncker, the second by Guy Verhofstadt, the leader of the European Parliament Liberal group and former Prime Minister of Belgium. In fact, the dilemma here is between an International organization and a new state. It provides citizenship as a nation, which is now the case, but lacks institutions in the areas of democracy, defense, and finances.

In 2017 in his Sorbonne speech, President Macron of France insisted that “the EU members must forge a common path.” Europe is today more fragile due to globalization and the ideas of nationalism and identitarianism.

The European Council, at its meeting of December 14, 2017, adopted conclusions on a number of earlier proposals of member states, including those of President Macron.

The European Council is not alone in foreseeing a major role for the EU in the years to come. Speaking for The Guardian in early 2017, Antonio Guterres, the new UN Secretary General, described the world as “largely chaotic”. He said that a united Europe is essential: “to prevent

the world in succumbing to deepening conflict. Only a renewed commitment to multilateral cooperation could head off the gathering danger” (Guterres, 2017). This can be understood as a return to internationalism again.

The nature of changes taking place in the EU is significant. Looking at the European Council’s Conclusions and President Macron’s proposals, the EU is likely to become not only a state (kratos) in the form of a federation or a confederation, but also a great power in its own right. After BREXIT, the EU will take additional tasks and steps to increase the level of integration beyond any earlier experience. The EU countries will be more closely connected and more efficient on both European and world global levels. This policy will require more resources as well, which will require a higher level of investment.

The Balkan countries may find the new activism of the EU harder to follow. The Western Balkan countries will have to think ahead and decide on their own strategic goals, which have so far remained unchanged despite the EU goals changing. For instance, they may decide to favor a larger group of nations included, if those nations so desire. Some countries can be partners of the Balkan countries, within or outside of the EU.

The most useful approach would be for the remaining Balkan countries, candidates or not, to assess their own values, goals and alternative actions, evaluating the situation, the trends and the means to advance. Whether in its original or abbreviated form, the policy science approach of Harold Lasswell would help (Lasswell, 1971). Although not referring to other approaches, The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) have already done some research in this area. Balkan Universities could develop their own action in this area, Chambers of Commerce and other new participants are needed in the process of “Europeanization” of this and related geographic areas. A culture of regional cooperation should develop on both intergovernmental and non-governmental levels (BiEPAG, 2016).

To re-establish democracy, Balkan countries have to follow their own constitutions, and in some cases revise them. Parties in power have to accept change through the ballot box, the equality of men and women, human rights and fundamental freedoms have to be fully respected. Civil society should be given a place in political life. (The Economist, July 15, 2017). Even in Athenian democracy the Delian League (simmachia) was not responsive to the citizens of individual states but to their envoys. The Delian League under Athenian leadership increased the number of state members from about 100 to 300. The EU has its place in the Mediterranean Union, in Africa, in the Caribbean, in the Pacific. The EU can become a Brussels League!

To re-establish democracy at the Balkan level, the states know exactly what their obligations within the EU will be. They do not, however, follow the regional patterns of direct democracy which is present in Switzerland but rarely in the EU. Those are people’s assemblies and referenda which were formerly followed in Balkan tribal institutions. By including women everywhere, those forms of democracy could be useful and make a contribution to the EU.



The challenge for the new member-states is to accept a new EU, as it is being built, despite the new increasing obligations, domestic and European reforms, larger budgets, civil society organizations, and neighbors' policies. The challenge for the EU is to keep its course and to develop its internal democracy while being responsible to its member-states, to European citizens, and to their needs.

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