European Integration and the Western Balkans – What Now?

Ivica Bocevski
Associate Senior Research Fellow and Diplomatic Advisor,
Centre for Research and Policy Making, Skopje

Abstract: Is there a real perspective for the full integration of the Western Balkans Six in the European Union, or is the accession process already dead? "Something is rotten in the state of the European integration of the Western Balkans" is not just a poetic way to describe the state of affairs regarding full accession, but a reality. The European Union, and previously the European Economic Community, was quite efficient in previous cycles of European enlargement. Virtually all the accession processes were completed within the mandate of a single European Commission once the negotiation processes had been started with the respective countries. Furthermore, in the pre-accession period the European Union invested heavily in the removal of the "non-acquis political criteria," which were usually linked to the democratic insufficiencies of the candidate countries. The only notable exceptions to the 'rule of a single European Commission' are the Turkish enlargement and the Western Balkans Six (WB6) accession process. Given the fact that most of the WB6 countries already have the necessary legal framework in place for cooperation with the EU and that the single market is by far the largest trading partner of the region, the only logical conclusion is that there is no political will for further enlargement of the European Union, and so the accession process has ground to a halt.

The European Union and Democratization

The democratic nature of the European Union and its member states is enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union. Article 2 of the Treaty stipulates that "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail". That being said, is there a link between European integration and the democratization processes in its member states, candidates, and potential candidates? Can the EU project its democracy in its neighbourhood and around the globe? The answer seems obvious because "no regional organization or influence has had a more powerful impact on democratization in its own neighbourhood than the EU" (Larry Diamond, 2008). The EU was created from six Western European countries, which underwent thorough and substantial redemocratization in the aftermath of World War II, and all successful emerging Mediterranean democracies after the collapse of the southern dictatorships were admitted to the EU as full member states. Leo Tolstoy wrote in Anna Karenina that 'happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way', and at first sight it may seem that all the success stories of the post-communist democratic transitions are also alike, as they are now members of the European Union, while the undecided cases are at various stages in their journey towards European integration, and the failed post-communist democratizations are all unsuccessful in their own way, without any prospect of becoming members of the European Union.

Actual evidence is, however, less than obvious, and as Sedelmeir concludes, "the link between democratization and European integration is not straightforward" because "it is not clear to which extent the EU actually had a causal influence and how its influence varied across countries and issues" and "even if the EU did have a causal impact, it is not obvious that its influence was always entirely positive for democracy in East Central Europe" (Sedelmeier, 2010).

In their essence, the democratization processes in the Mediterranean and the post-communist countries confirm that "one of the firmest conclusions" was that "transitions from authoritarian rule and immediate prospects for political democracy [are] largely to be explained in terms of national forces and calculations" and that "external factors [tend] to play an indirect and usually marginal role, with the obvious exception of those instances when foreign occupying power was present", as O'Donnell and Schmitter (2013) indicate in the most authoritative study on the democratization process, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule in 1986.

However, after the fifth enlargement of the European Union, there has been a steady inflation of scholarly articles in which the role of the "external factors of democratization" has been reassessed due to the successful European integration story of the post-communist ten that joined the European Union (Tolstoy's happy families or Donald Rumsfeld's "New Europe") in 2004. Despite all the triumphalism of this tectonic historic event in contemporary European history, Philippe C. Schmitter's argument is still rock solid when he claims that democratic transition and consolidation are primarily issues of domestic politics and can best be explained by following the micro and macro political vectors in every polity.

However, the role of the European Union has to be re-evaluated, since throughout its history, this entity has played a decisive role in the democratic stabilization of the emerging European democracies, following their democratic transitions from authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The primary democratic role of the European Union in the domestic affairs of its constituent countries is "preventive", meaning that there has never been a case of complete democratic breakdown in any of the European member states. This specific role of the European Union was a by-product of its institutional development and the events of the wider geostrategic environment of the European continent. It confirms the postulates of the intergovernmentalist approach to the European Union, since the institutional development of the EU has led towards the broadest possible acceptance by the domestic national elites of the necessity to preserve the democratic regimes as a minimal condition for access to the common market and the other benefits provided by full membership.

The attractiveness of the EU continues to motivate countries to apply for membership. However, none of these countries are seduced by the special Cytherean "soft power" of a European Venus, as Robert Kagan defines the European way of foreign policy (Kagan, 2004). The applicants' positions result from a cold-blooded cost-benefit analysis, and even though their elites and societies are aware of the massive reform process necessary for full accession to take place, the final prize (full membership) far "outweighs the costs, particularly those of exclusion, that applicants make concessions even when no coercion is threatened" (Vachudova and Moravcsik, 2003). Furthermore, a seat at the Council table gives small and medium-sized countries more say in world affairs through the EU's collective weight. And it is also beneficial in disputes with their neighbours; while those members left outside have much less influence" (Heather Grabbe and Ulrich Sedelmeier, 2010).

Thus, full membership in the European Union brings enormous economic, societal, and other benefits to the societies, states, and markets involved. The emulation of the Western European economic order and welfare state cuts across the political and societal spectrum, assuring guarantees for different segments of the society with divergent and conflicting political interests, while access to the potential of the common market provides for substantial gains and a slow convergence towards the living standards of the Western societies. Full membership also exponentially multiplies the "costs" of undemocratic regime change carried by a potential authoritarian elite, thus leading to the preservation of democratic political regimes in the member states. This does not mean that the member states will inevitably reach the highest levels of democratization and liberalization, nor does it mean that European integration creates some kind of "deus ex machina" leading towards "ever more democratic and liberal countries". As Charles Tilly argues, "sunny optimism about the durability and inevitable advance of democratization seems utterly displaced" (Tilly, 2007), and in the case of the full member states of European Union, there has not been a clear "path dependency" leading towards full democratic consolidation. Recent evidence from the Central and Eastern European countries shows that some form of deconsolidation can take place over time, and media freedom and the independence of

the regulatory bodies can be a challenge even for some of the founding member states. However, the conclusion that there has not been any case of full democratic breakdown in the European Union holds even after seventy years after the inception of the European Union and five major waves of enlargement (1973, 1981-1987, 1995, 2004, 2013-?), two of which comprised the incorporation of countries emerging from decades of authoritarian and totalitarian systems. The fifth wave began with the Croatian accession in 2013, but so far none of the other stabilization and association agreement countries (i.e. the WB6) have joined the European Union, so the wave is more of a ripple at the moment than a full enlargement wave.

Western Balkans – when conditionality meets sovereignty and great power politics

The former Yugoslav countries are a perfect example for the idea that nothing is predetermined in history and politics. Former Yugoslavia had a form of association with the European Economic Community since the early 1970s, and unlike other communist countries, the citizens of Yugoslavia had the freedom to travel both in Western and in Eastern Europe without any visa restrictions. In economic terms, former Yugoslavia had a thorough and deep cooperation with the Western European countries. The irony of history for the Western Balkan nations is that their Eastern border was the "Iron Curtain" until 1989, so for the citizens of the Warsaw Pact countries the "free world" began at the Yugoslav border. In a few months, this very same border may become a Schengen frontier for the citizens of the former Yugoslav countries (except for Slovenia and Croatia) and the entry point to the European Union. In a way, the fate of the post-Yugoslav countries (except for Slovenia) contradicts the findings of Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky, who argue that "Western leverage (governments' vulnerability to external pressure) and linkage to the West (the density of a country's ties to the United States, the European Union, and Western-led multilateral institutions)" explain the divergent paths of the post-communist countries (Way and Levitsky, 2005). The level of Western leverage and linkage to the

former Yugoslavia was by far the greatest compared with any other post-communist country, using any statistic possible. Still, the country collapsed.

In the early 1990s, it was popular to explain the collapse of former Yugoslavia, which was followed by bloody wars, as a resurgence of "ancient hatreds", "primordial conflicts", "tribal instincts", "balkanization," and other deprecating and pejorative expressions. However, the essence of the Yugoslav crisis was the inability of the federation to manage the "segmental institutions" of its constituent parts (Roeder, 2007).

In the aftermath of the Kosovo crisis in 1999, the European Union began the Stabilization and Association Process (a modified version of the Association process, with an emphasis on stabilization in order to accentuate the post-conflict situation in the Western Balkans), with the objective of preparing the participant countries for full membership in the European Union. At the Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003, all of the EU's member states declared their "unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries" and that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union". The Thessaloniki Declaration gave a concrete prospect of membership to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Yugoslavia (now succeeded by Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo).

Two decades after the end of the violent conflicts, Croatia has been a member of the EU since 2013 and entered the eurozone and the Schengen area in 2023, Montenegro and Serbia have been negotiating for almost a decade, Albania will probably start the negotiation process in the coming period, the Macedonian European integration was stuck in the antiquity (through the Greek veto) and is now lost somewhere in the Middle Ages (through the Bulgarian veto), Bosnia and Herzegovina has finally become a candidate country (after Ukraine and Moldova), and Kosovo is expected to complete its visa liberalization process.

Nonetheless, these recent developments in the region signal the limits of the democratic conditionality. Namely, one role of the European Union in the Western Balkans, as a foreign power seeking to exert its influence in order to pacify the region, meets another of its role, as a "Staatenverbund" (association of sovereign states) that the Western Balkan countries

aspire to join as full members. Gergana Noutcheva observes that "in the Western Balkans, the question of whether the EU is genuinely concerned about spreading its norms, or is acting out of a rational interest to secure stability on the Continent, has been more prominent in the political thinking on the receiving end of EU conditionality, as a result of which compliance with conditions tied to sovereignty has been either fake or partial or imposed by external actors. When the EU's policy lacks strong normative foundations, political leaders in non-EU countries tend to reject EU-sponsored ideas about what is right and appropriate for the governance and external relations of their states and tend to revert to domestic sources of legitimacy, no matter whether these are based on rationality or identity" (Noutcheva, 2007).

On the other hand, the countries of the region have recently shown that they can cope with very demanding, comprehensive, and wide-ranging reform, even in the most sensitive areas. The visa-liberalization process has ended with success in all six countries, even though it incurred considerable institutional and financial costs. The opening of the accession negotiations, with a clear timeframe for concluding the process, can lead to the same effects already witnessed in the ten post-communist countries that have already joined the EU.

In reality, the processes observed by (Noutcheva, 2007) and (Sasse, 2008) are part of the same phenomenon, with the major difference in their status vis-à-vis the European Union. The incorporation of the Balkan countries in the EU will prevent any backsliding into a full democratic breakdown, as witnessed in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe.

Conclusion

This article analysed the role of the European Union in the democratization processes of former European authoritarian and totalitarian states, as well as the institutionalization of the EU's role as a "democratizing agent". The other external influences (the US security umbrella, NATO integration, and the role of political actors in shaping the diverse outcomes of transitions) were not taken into consideration, although they must be an integral part of any thorough analysis of the influence

of external factors on emerging democracies. This article only focused on the European Union and has argued that the most important role of the EU in democratization is the role of democratic stabilization, which is only possible after a country's full accession to the Union. This finding can be reinforced by the fact that the only emerging third-wave democracy left out of the third enlargement (Turkey) has experienced a military coup and a full democratic breakdown. The same political dynamic can also be observed in post-communist countries. It seems that democratic conditionality can exert the influence of the European Union and lead towards a change of the political elite in candidates and potential candidates (Slovakia 1998, Croatia 1999, Serbia 2000), but the structural deficiencies of the domestic political systems still remain. Furthermore, the countries left without any clear EU perspective easily descend into some kind of "hybrid regimes", "democracies with adjectives", or full authoritarianism, as has been the case with the Russian Federation and Belarus. Of course, the logic of democratic stabilization does not come from beliefs in European supranationalism, it comes from a cold-blooded analysis of the costs and benefits of European integration. The key ingredient of democratic stabilization is the threat of exclusion from the common market and the joint European institutions, which keep the elites and societies "locked in" the preservation of a democratic regime. This notion also sets the limits of the democratization potential of the European Union, as demonstrated by evidence from the recent enlargement and the early exercising of democratic conditionality in the Western Balkans. Whenever the process goes beyond the intergovernmentalist approach and into redefining the basic tenets of the democratic constitutional order, the results are ambiguous at best. This is where the limits of the democratic stabilization potential of the European Union are clearly drawn. Explicitly, enlargement cannot be a nation-building exercise.

The key dilemma for the future of the democratizing role of the European Union is whether the Union will continue its enlargement or has come close to defining the final and definite frontiers of European integration. Without the possibility of full accession to the common market and participation in EU-wide decisions, it is highly unlikely that the democratic stabilization role of the EU will function

in its neighbourhood and throughout the globe. The other challenge is the possibility of exporting the model. The world is experiencing a growing number of "alphabet soup" emulations of the EU, although none of them has come even close to the depth and width of European integration. William Wallace has argued that "the experience of deep integration within Western Europe does not ... provide a model for others to follow. Its historical development was rooted in stages of economic development and security framework that have now both disappeared. The institutional structure that West European governments agreed to under those past circumstances has managed to respond to the very difficult challenges posed by the economic and industrial transformation in the 1970s and 1980s. Political, economic and security motivations have been entangled in the evolution of West European regional integration from the 1940s to the 1990s" (Wallace, 1994). The last possibility of "expanding the model" still has not been tested, like expanding the OECD into a common-market, globalized EU-like model, with the possibility of open global membership in the future. Given the real structure of the contemporary world, this can be an interesting idea for contemplation but appears too idealistic for any serious analysis.

The best conclusion for any text examining the democratization of the post-communist countries would be the warning given by Sir Ralph Dahrendorf in his essay Reflections on the revolution in Europe, with the appropriate subtitle "Letter intended to have been sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw" (echoing Edmund Burk's "letter to a gentleman in Paris" from another tumultuous and revolutionary period of modern European history). Dahrendorf cautions that it may take a mere six months for a constitutional reform, and six years for an economic reform, but "sixty years are barely enough to lay" the social foundations required for an open society to emerge, or as he puts it, "transform the constitution and the economy from fair-weather to all weather institutions capable of withstanding the storms generated within and without" (Dahrendorf, 1990).

Unfortunately, in the case of the Western Balkans, the European Union will forego its most successful policy (the democratic stabilization of the member states) if the process of enlargement does not continue.

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