

# FOREIGN POLICY POSITIONING OF THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EU ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY BY 2025

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## *Abstract*

*Taking into account the European Union's strategic commitment to accelerate the accession of the Western Balkan countries for membership by 2025, as formulated by the Special Strategy (since February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018), this will necessitate a significant change in the foreign policy of this group of countries. While Albania and Montenegro have managed to fully harmonize their foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, this does not fully refer to the rest of the Western Balkans countries. Namely, Serbia and Macedonia as candidate countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina have failed to achieve a full harmonization of their foreign policy with the European Union in the preceding years and especially after 2014. This especially refers to Serbia, which, besides Montenegro, is perceived in the context of the mentioned strategy as a country that will gain full membership of the European Union by 2025. However, due to the strengthened influence of the Russia and China, it did not adequately harmonize its activities regarding Chapter 31 (the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union). This is all in the shadow of the end of the process of normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which is a crucial condition for accelerating this process. A similar situation is with Macedonia, which, thanks to the previous government (VMRO-DPMNE), distanced itself considerably from the EU and NATO membership. To a certain extent, the same conclusion can be drawn when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there is an evident disagreement among the most important political actors regarding the foreign*

*policy activity and the positioning of the country. On the other hand, according to the EU Enlargement Strategy by 2025, further progress in the context of Kosovo's membership may be achieved only with the consent of all Member States, including those that have not recognized Kosovo's independence.*

**KeyWords**

*European Union, Western Balkans, foreign policy, EU Enlargement Strategy by 2025, Common Foreign and Security Policy*

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of February 2018, the European Union Strategy of Enlargement by 2025 "instilled" new hope that the entire region of the Western Balkans, after setting off on its road at the beginning of 1999, will finally be integrated into the European Union in the framework of the Stabilization and Association Process within a certain period of time (Communication..., 2018). Of course, there are still numerous internal problems in the region, which do not make the perspective of membership of some of its states quite realistic (Đukanović, 2016: 173–206).

The problems of the Western Balkan countries with their immediate environment, but also among themselves, will greatly affect this momentum of acceleration of the EU accession process. At this moment, we can clearly distinguish three of the most significant problems, the resolution of which this year will affect the stabilization of the situation in this part of Europe. First, it is the ending of more than a quarter of a century agony of Greek opposition to use Macedonia's name, then the final determination of the relations between Belgrade and Prishtina and the potential settlement of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the upcoming October elections. The future of the Western Balkans will largely depend on the consolidation of the relations within this circle of Western Balkan countries.

The "Western Balkans" as the primary result of US (geo) politics during the break-up of the former socialist Yugoslavia is a project that is obviously not yet successfully completed. It has indeed found itself at the center of the Euro-Atlantic and EU region, but it is still far from full integration and involvement in the Western hemisphere of influence. Moreover, during the

past and this decade, the influence of the Russian Federation, as well as Turkey and China has increased in this part of Europe (*Ibidem*: 43–50).

Without a quarter of a century of substantial diplomatic offensive and the breakthrough of the United States, the Western Balkans would not have its current contours and internal configuration. It must also be recognized that the then European Union failed / could do nothing more significant in this war-torn and desolate region (Radio Free Europe, 2018).

Even today, the region of the Western Balkans is facing remnants of unfinished and undefined processes. After ten years since the proclamation of independence, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia are still undefined and numerous tensions accompany this situation. With respect to the above situation, it is certainly important to mention the very poor state of the non-Albanian ethnic communities in Kosovo after 1999. Tensions are not less even in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where political elites are competing to approach non-EU actors, the Boshnjak elite tending toward Turkey, and the Serbian evidently toward the Russian Federation (Radio Free Europe, 2018a).

Although it seems that after the last two NATO enlargements with Albania and Croatia (2009) and Montenegro (2017), the situation in these countries has been consolidated, this is not the case. These states, especially Albania and Montenegro, are facing the need for a clearer and more effective fight against corruption and organized crime. In this regard, we should expect both re-affirmed engagement of the United States, as well as pressure and conditionality by the European Union in the prospect of joining this organization (Blic, 2018).

And the deep internal crisis in Macedonia, overcome in May 2017 with the arrival of new Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the return of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia to power, did not give such quick results when perceived from a time distance. Certain economic parameters indicate the above stated, but also the re-strengthening of the right political options (around VMRO-DPMNE), which, by opposing neighboring Greece, are trying to associate their identity very deeply to their "ancient" past (Reuters, 2018). However, it is clear that the sole Macedonia's membership of the EU will not be enough if the country does not become a NATO member very soon (in the next few years). This, however, is not possible without the considerable involvement of the United States and its influence on the Balkan Peninsula on suppressing the evident strengthening of Greek nationalism, which can project problems with its neighbors (Turkey, Macedonia and Albania) (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

This complex international environment and the circumstances in the Western Balkans in the coming period should nevertheless be overcome by allowing the membership of all its countries in the European Union (European Western Balkans, 2017). There are definitely a number of challenges and problems awaiting on this path, but one of the most important is actually the harmonization of their foreign policies with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

### **(Dis) harmonization of the foreign policy of the Western Balkan countries with CFSP**

It is very important to note that the harmonization of the foreign policy of certain Western Balkan countries with the Common Foreign and Security Policy is fairly successful and cannot and must not be considered a significant problem (Đukanović, 2015: 81–106). *Montenegro* and *Albania*, as two candidate countries, have largely successfully implemented the process of harmonizing their foreign policies with the European Union. This has been accompanied by some problems over the past five years, primarily related to the EU restrictive measures towards Russia with respect to the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine (*Ibidem*: 81–106). Moreover, these countries have made substantial efforts to adopt certain regulations on complementary alignment with CFSP. With the exception of the necessity to resolve the issue of Montenegro's borders with Croatia and Serbia, it is clear that these countries have no significant problems with their neighbors (Bokanews, 2018).

The situation with *Kosovo* is very similar, which since declaring its independence in 2008, has come closer to the United States, but also to the European Union, through its strategic foreign policy documents and action (Đukanović, 2016, pp. 124–126). Furthermore, the leading Albanian political parties in Kosovo are also in favor of accelerating the transformation of the Kosovo Security Force, which according to the 2008 Constitution does not have the character of classical military formation in the Kosovo Armed Forces (RTK 2, 2018). This is one of the prerequisites for entry into the Partnership for Peace and NATO in the upcoming period. In addition, Kosovo's most significant challenge in the context of joining the European Union will be related to the finalization of the process of normalizing its relations with Serbia, that is, initially the technical, and now the political dialogue with the authorities in Belgrade, which began in 2011. This will necessarily require some compromises with Serbia,

for which it seems that the major part of the Kosovo public is not ready, as indicated by the considerable prolongation of the ratification of the Kosovo-Montenegro border from 2015 to 2018 (Danas, 2018).

However, a legally-binding agreement on the comprehensive regulation of the relations between the authorities of Serbia and Kosovo was announced, which according to individual estimates and the planned internal dynamics of the European Union, will be completed by the end of the current year or in the first half of 2019 (RTK 2, 2018a). This should really relieve the evident tensions, which primarily exist at the verbal level between the authorities in Belgrade and Prishtina and thus improve the life of the citizens in Serbia and Kosovo and their internal connections.

*Serbia*, although listed alongside Montenegro in the Enlargement Strategy of the European Union by 2025, as one of the first countries to join the Union, is far from harmonizing its foreign policy with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (52% during 2017/8) (Serbia 2018 Report: 84). Namely, although there was a positive trend towards the said harmonization by 2014, this trend was considerably changed due to the introduction of European Union sanctions against the Russian Federation. Also, Serbia more often leads a completely dispersive foreign policy by forging "strategic partnerships" with a number of countries (France, Italy, China, Azerbaijan, announced partnership with Turkey...) (Politika, 2018). It is beyond any doubt that the influence of the Russian Federation is on a constant rise in Serbia, which is trying to secure its own monopoly in the sphere of energy, but also to prevent the country's accession into NATO. Russia can also try in the long run to seriously challenge and slow down Serbia's accession to the European Union, as it will have to align its foreign policy with the Union (Sputnik, 2018).

Serbia also allows a significant penetration of Chinese capital, mainly as loans for the construction of certain capital infrastructure projects (Blic, 2018). It seems that Serbia is getting closer to Turkey, which can also complicate its foreign policy position (Novi Standard, 2018). The reason for this is the apparent disagreement between the authorities in Ankara and the European Union after 2016.

It is evident that once the process of normalizing the relations between the authorities in Belgrade and Prishtina has been completed, the next topic that will be imposed in the context of European integration is related to the harmonization of Serbia's foreign policy with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. In this context, one part of the Serbian public can be expected to resist fiercely due to the rather strong influence of the

Russian Federation. This country has managed to strengthen its position in the political sphere as well, and there are also strong parameters of the influence of the Russian Federation on the situation in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (i. e. Republika Srpska).

Despite the fact that more than a year ago there was a change of government in *Macedonia*, the fundamental change in foreign policy did not follow. Macedonia has not yet joined the restrictive measures of the European Union directed towards the Russian Federation and its level of compliance with CFSP is low (83 % in 2017 and 2018) (FRYM 2018 Report: 84). Bearing in mind the intention of the European Union to start the accession negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia in the near future, it is very important to note that its foreign policy must return to the initial goals that were proclaimed at the beginning of the last decade (Đukanović, 2016: 122–124). Of course, everything is still in the shadow of the unsettled dispute with neighboring Greece over the official name of Macedonia, where substantial bilateral efforts are being made on both sides to resolve this problem and remove the obstacles to NATO and EU membership (EurAktiv, 2018).

The last couple of years of the outgoing government of Nikola Gruevski showed that the influence of the Russian Federation gained strength (Glas Amerike, 2018). However, it is obvious that this influence was not prevalent in the intention of keeping the ruling coalition around VMRO-DPMNE in power. The Russian influence was particularly evident in the academic community of Macedonia. What is more, Macedonia should play an important role in the Chinese Belt and Road concept, as a transit country. It is intended for the role of a transit country between the port of Piraeus in Greece, through the countries of the Western Balkans and further towards Central Europe, or the European Union (Deutsche Welle, 2017). Significant economic impact in the field of investment is made by Turkey.

In a very short period of time, Macedonia will have to start with more substantial harmonization of its foreign policy with CFSP. The further dynamics of the negotiations for a full-fledged EU membership will depend on the level of harmonization which represents a significant challenge.

The deep internal crisis in *Bosnia and Herzegovina* has considerable consequences on the foreign policy orientation of the country. Despite the previously unambiguous Euro-Atlantic orientation, national political elites are clearly skeptical in relation to these foreign policy priorities. The ruling Boshnjak political circles are predominantly relying on Turkey's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but are somewhat interested in NATO membership

(Oslobodenje, 2018). On the other hand, the leaders of Republika Srpska are evidently trying to strengthen the influence of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, in this respect, strongly reject the possibility of BiH membership of NATO (Večernji list, 2018). The Croatian political factor in accelerating European integration sees the possibility of additional approximation to the Republic of Croatia (N1, 2018). In spite of evident differences, in mid March 2018, the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted the foreign policy strategy for the period 2018-2023 (Predsjedništvo BiH, 2018). This document reaffirms the country's commitment to NATO and EU membership, but it seems that there is no broader consensus on this issue.

Since Bosnia Herzegovina is yet expected to obtain the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union, it certainly means that there will be a necessity for internal harmonization of the foreign policy efforts between the national elites, and then their alignment with the European Union CFSP. Bearing in mind the political relations within Bosnia and Herzegovina, this will be an extremely difficult task.

## Conclusion

Despite the previously announced objectives of the newly formed states on the territory of the former Yugoslavia related to NATO and EU membership, it is obvious that in the past two decades there have been some problems and fluctuations in their realization. This is certainly contributed by all the more significant engagements of the traditional actors in the Balkans – the Russian Federation and Turkey, as well as China. In this context, it will be very difficult to successfully complete the process of harmonization of the foreign policy of the Western Balkan countries with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union (Bislimi, 2010: 29–48). Moreover, dominant sections of the public in some Western Balkan states are increasingly skeptical, especially towards a membership in the European Union (Balkans Barometer, 2017: 21). Additionally, by a decision of the authorities at the end of 2007, proclaiming military neutrality, Serbia put at stake the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the entire Western Balkans. Namely, it is obvious that without the complete one-way integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic community, the state will not be able to reduce a number of existing tensions.

Of course, much will depend on the persistence of non-EU actors in the Western Balkans region. In this regard, we should especially bear in mind the strengthened aspiration of Turkey to increase its influence in this region,

primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some parts of Serbia and Albania. On the other hand, the Russian Federation will try to further enhance not only its economic presence, but also its political influence (Helsinški biltén, 2018: 1–7). This is particularly significant in the context of global rivalry between the United States and the Russian Federation, which can put the Western Balkan region in an extremely disadvantaged position.

The harmonization of foreign policies and positions of the Western Balkan countries with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union will be a particularly demanding task for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. The level of compliance of Montenegro and Albania with the European Union's CFSP is at a satisfactory level. However, when it comes to the three afore-stated countries, the foreign policy objectives, strategies and operational activities must be redefined. In the context of strengthening the influence of non-EU actors and the existence of certain skepticism on the part of the public in these countries, the ending of the above-mentioned process will not be an easy task.

If, however, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina join NATO through an accelerated process, this should indirectly affect the process of harmonization of the Western Balkan countries foreign policies with CFSP.

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