

# REGIONAL APPROACH OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN A POTENTIAL NEW CYCLE OF ENLARGEMENT – A CASE STUDY OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

**Prof. Marjan Gjurovski,**

*Faculty of Philosophy, „Ss. Cyril and Methodius“ University*

**and Mitko Arnaudov,**

*Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Centre for  
Neighboring and Mediterranean countries*

## *Abstract*

*The political catchphrase Western Balkans has become synonymous for the states and entities in this region which already are in the process of joining the European Union. After Croatia's membership to the European Union, two approaches have become almost certain: that the European Union will not expand „horizontally“ in the medium term and that it is difficult to expect the EU membership of any individual country from the Western Balkans separately from the others, respectively, the assumption of the potential integration of the entire region altogether have become almost universally accepted thesis within political and academic society. In this paper, the key research question is does, in the case of the Western Balkans, the European Union will use the regional approach of integration, i.e., does the entire region will become part of the Union altogether, in the classical sense of understanding full membership in the EU, according to the model of the admission of the countries of Central Europe, i.e., the so-called Visegrad group? From a theoretical point, this paper will provide a contribution to actualising the importance of regionalisation and regional integration in the achievement of foreign policy goals of small and microstates, such as the so-called „six“ in the Western Balkans.*

**Key words:** Western Balkans, European integration, regionalism, membership.

## **1. Introduction**

The process of European integration within the framework of the Western Balkans received its strong and realistic momentum at the summit of the European Union in Thessaloniki in 2003. At that summit, the leaders of the European Union said for the first time that the countries in the Western Balkans will one day become members of the EU, and that they have, as they said, a „European perspective“. (slobodnaevropa.mk

2021) However, in order to be more precise, it is important to point out exactly what was stated in the Declaration from the EU - Western Balkans summit held on June 21, 2003: „The European Union reiterates its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans.“ The future of the Balkans is within the European Union. The ongoing expansion and signing of the Athens Treaty in April 2003 inspires and encourages countries in the Western Balkans to follow the same successful path. Preparation for integration into European structures and eventual membership in the European Union, through the adoption of European standards, now represents a great challenge ahead“. (Declaration EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003) Then it is stated that „The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration - represents a new important step in the privileged relations between the European Union and the Western Balkans“. (Declaration EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003) As well as that „The Stabilisation and Association Process will remain the framework for the European course of the countries of the Western Balkans, until their future accession, and that the process itself and the prospects it offers serve as an anchor for reforms in the Western Balkans, in the same way that the accession process did in Central and Eastern Europe“. (Declaration EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003) In essence, and based on what was stated in the Declaration from the summit of the European Union-Western Balkans in Thessaloniki in 2003, it can be established that at that moment the Western Balkans, as a region, as a whole, enjoyed a clearer perspective and more precise frameworks for accession compared to today, twenty years later. The cause of a kind of stagnation, i.e., de facto regression of the process of European integration in the Western Balkans is twofold. On the one hand, the European Union has faced numerous challenges in the last 15 years. Starting with the financial crisis in the member states, through the economic and migrant crisis, all the way to the internal institutional crisis, which is both the cause and the consequence of the all-pervading crises that the Union is facing, and which the question of the enlargement policy automatically brings to a marginalised position. Numerous member states were faced with internal financial and then fiscal problems. At the same time, huge waves of the migrant and refugee crisis began, which created a new financial and security challenge for the entire European Union. On the third hand, the leaders of the member states increasingly doubt the efficiency and effectiveness of the institutional infrastructure of the Union, which is increasingly expressed not only in the political circles of the member states, but also in their societies through the increasingly expressed dissatisfaction of ordinary citizens in the member states of the European Union.

When it comes to the situation in the Western Balkans, the actors in this region have not made substantial progress on the way to the European Union. In fact, we are talking about numerous internal and regional problems and challenges that greatly affect, viewed from that angle to the European perspective of this region. However, the essence of the „frozen“ integration is not the internal and regional problems that have existed in the Western Balkans since the beginning of the nineties, that is, since the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Macdonald 1996), but also the simultaneous lack of interest of the European Union, including the key member states of the Union, in the enlargement policy, more specifically in the direction to the Western Balkans. During the last 20 years of the process of integration into the European Union, only two countries created by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia gained membership, Slovenia and

Croatia. (slobodnaevropa.org 2022) Meanwhile, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo, have acquired candidate status, potential candidate status or have begun accession negotiations. The annual reports on progress towards the European Union, the most important document for countries that aspire to one day join the bloc, showed that actors in the Western Balkans still need to work on the rule of law, the fight against organised crime and corruption, the relationship between the countries of the region and international politics, as well as the state of media freedom and human rights. (slobodnaevropa.org 2022)

## **2. Does EU have failed in the case of Western Balkans?**

The EU's policy in the Western Balkans region was largely related to issues of security, as well as political and economic stabilisation after the Yugoslav conflicts, then the encouragement of „institution building“ (institution building) and public institutions, issues of political conditioning (cooperation with the Hague Tribunal<sup>1</sup>), incentives for regional cooperation and reconciliation (establishment of the „Stability Pact for SEE“).<sup>2</sup>

From today's perspective, bearing in mind the current period of „enlargement fatigue“ in the EU countries, the „pause“ of several years in further expansion, which is, among other things, a consequence of the objective situation in the countries of the Western Balkans, in fact suits the Union itself. (Lopandić 2007, p. 63) However, the period of fatigue from enlargement was paralleled by new global actors who in the meantime framed their relationship with actors in the Western Balkans, thus in some cases reaching partner status, which did not favour the role of the European Union in this region. The political views of certain actors in the Western Balkans that the European Union is increasingly distant, that the European Union is less and less interested in the integration of the region according to the classic model, as well as the fact that the actors are progressing more and more slowly in the process of European integration, contributed greatly to the very influence of Brussels be significantly reduced in the regional framework.

Confidence in the „promised“ European perspective was increasingly clouded, while at the same time local politicians began to propagate alternative partnerships and collaborations that were not connected to the European integration process. At the last summit of the leaders of the Western Balkan actors with the leaders of the member states of the European Union held in June 2022, Andy Hoxhaj from the British University of Warwick said that „he does not expect the EU to show a real commitment and give a date when the European Union actually plans to expand to Western Balkans“. (BBC News on Serbian 2022)

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<sup>1</sup> The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is a United Nations court of law dealing with war crimes that took place during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990's. Since its establishment in 1993, it has irreversibly changed the landscape of international humanitarian law and provided victims an opportunity to voice the horrors they witnessed and experienced.

<sup>2</sup> See at security disputes: A European Balkans?, ESF working paper No. 18, January 2005, CEPS, Brussels. On the relations between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans M. Drouet, X. Richet, Vers l'Elargissement de l'Union européenne à l'Europe du Sud-Est, PUR, Rennes, 2006, 250 str.; About the perspectives of the region: International Commission on the Balkans, The Balkans in Europe's future, Sofia 2005, p. 64 About the Western Balkans, as the periphery of Europe v. S. Marković op. cit.

In fact, the relations between the European Union and actors in the Western Balkans is increasingly resembling a kind of partnership from which everyone extracts what suits them best, instead of a relations based on the principles and postulates of European integration. The European Union is still firmly committed to stability and peace in the region, and to providing a sustainable environment for economic, investment and trade flows, which in practice is an „outdated“ method that no longer contributes to strengthening the role of the Union in regional frameworks.

On the other hand, the regional political elite, aware of the reluctance of the European Union for a new and accelerated horizontal integration, abuses regional and bilateral disputes and open issues as an effective mechanism to maintain the commitment of Brussels in the region, but only at a certain level that does not deal with the process of essential integration of the region by depth. Dimitar Bećev, associate of the Carnegie Europe Foundation and lecturer at the School of Global and Regional Studies at the University of Oxford, assesses that the insufficient commitment of the European Union to the Western Balkans, bilateral disputes between member states and candidates, the idea of a European political community, but also the behaviour of political leaders in the region, trapped states and a dissatisfied public are the main reasons why the process of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has been blocked. (Danas 2022)

The Western Balkans is essentially part of the European political agenda, at least in the period of the last 15 years, but at the same time a marginalised point as a result of the financial crisis, the migrant and refugee crisis, the exit of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the EU, as well as the corona virus pandemic and the current conflict on the territory of Ukraine. In such a current context, Bećev also notes that the Western Balkans does not generate a sufficient level of instability to threaten Europe, and it seems that the status quo, although imperfect, is tolerable for the 27 member states of the European Union. (Danas 2022) In the meantime, the process of integration of the Western Balkans has been further complicated by numerous initiatives that have been interpreted in the regional context as a substitute for the European perspective of the entire region. Initially, in 2014, the Berlin Process initiative was established, led by Germany and other EU member states, at the moment when the former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, after his appointment, declared that there would be no new enlargements during his mandate. (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov 2023) The ultimate goal of the Berlin process is the formation of a regional market in the Western Balkans, as a kind of step that should simplify the process of European integration of the region, but the political moment was such that the initiative was accepted with a reservation, i.e., the question - whether it will be a substitute for joining the Union/EU membership.

Later, French President Emmanuel Macron came up with the idea of forming a European political community, which would include other countries of Eastern Europe, such as Moldova and Ukraine, but also actors from the Western Balkans. This Macron's idea additionally had a negative effect when it comes to regional perception, both at the political, academic and social level, towards the European integration of the Western Balkans. Although the French president specified his idea, at least in the case of the Western Balkans, saying that the European political community complements the EU accession process and is not its alternative, while at the same time German

Chancellor Olaf Scholz pointed out that there is no security for the European Union without a stable European Western Balkans, the very idea it was not met with much enthusiasm in the regional framework. (Danas 2022) Bećev believes that, according to Macron's idea of the European political community, the Western Balkans six would be in the outer circle of the EU, in which the countries would have the right to some of the advantages of integration into the single market and access to the Union budget, but they would not have all the privileges as member states, among which is the decision-making. In this context, he expresses doubt that the actors in the Western Balkans would be stuck in the waiting room forever. (Danas 2022)

The situation on the ground, respectively, the process of European integration in the Western Balkans, was further complicated and brought to a position of uncertainty with the beginning of the conflict on the territory of Ukraine. Although at the beginning there were claims that this is actually a geopolitical momentum in which the EU should show its power, and round off its whole with the accelerated integration of the Western Balkans, security, energy and economic challenges have once again reached the top of the agenda of both the European Union and its states member, and the integration of the Western Balkans is further marginalised in the classical sense, although at the same time the role of Brussels in the region is significantly more dynamic compared to the previous period. But today, the essence of the EU's role in the region is completely different. Focused on competition with other global actors, whose influence, according to Brussels' view, is negative and counterproductive when it comes to creating a stable, sustainable and economically prosperous Western Balkans. Today, the European Union is increasingly present in the Western Balkans, but unlike before, in the capacity of one of the numerous partners that is trying to re-assure and convince the local political elites and citizens that the European perspective is actually the future of the region, but also a reality that can be achieved in the medium term.

### **3. What Western Balkans has done on EU integration path?**

Actors in the Western Balkans in a strategic sense opted for European integration, and in that context, they defined membership in the European Union as a key foreign policy goal. In almost every foreign policy strategy of actors in the Western Balkans, membership in the European Union is stated as a foreign policy goal. But the essence of the problem in that context is that this foreign policy goal of the Western Balkan actors usually does not correspond with the political circumstances in the region.

Although the intensity of cooperation with European institutions is increasing from year to year, primarily in the process of using European funds that contributes to the improvement of institutional infrastructure, the rule of law, the democratisation of society, the development and sustainability of the market economy in the Western Balkans, in the political context very little has been done in the direction of solving the problem of political corruption, corruption at all levels in Western Balkan societies, the fight against crime, as well as solving regional and bilateral problems and disputes, as one of the important determinants in European integration.

The cause of such a trend in the Western Balkans is threefold: first, local political elites, understanding the reluctance of the European Union to accept new member

states, abuse the process of European integration in a peculiar way, declaratively claiming that their policies are aimed at joining the European Union, while on the other hand, essentially, there is very limited work on meeting the membership criteria, primarily the so-called Copenhagen criteria; secondly, the lack of interest of the European Union and its member states in the accelerated integration of the Western Balkans contributed to a kind of stagnation of regional activities on the way to the EU. Actors are no longer sufficiently interested in overcoming regional and bilateral disputes and open questions because they have de facto become aware that certain, above all politically difficult compromises, do not directly affect the acceleration of the European perspective, but their commitment to these challenges is ultimately reduced to declarative promises from sides of the Union. Statistics show that the number of citizens of the Western Balkans who believe in the European future is decreasing, and that is why serious changes in approach and much more capable EU diplomacy are necessary. (Politika 2022) Paul Taylor from the Brussels institute „Friends of Europe“ believes that the EU must take advantage of the current geopolitical moment and integrate the Western Balkans. (Gajić 2022) On the other hand, many analysts and diplomats believe that phased, gradual integration is the only realistic path. (Gajić 2022)

The essence of the problem is that the role of the European Union in the Western Balkans is no longer „the main game in town“. This was greatly contributed by the local political elites who, in the circumstances of slow progress towards the EU, were forced to offer their citizens investment and partnership relations with other large countries, such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. The ever-increasing presence of the People's Republic of China, in the economic sense, but also the Russian Federation, in the political sense, has contributed to the fact that the trust of the European Union among the citizens of the region has significantly decreased, while the European Union itself has been put in a position to be one of the competitors in the region that strives to realise its political, security and economic influence on a long term. Aleksandra Tomanić from the European Fund for the Balkans believes that the very fact that 20 years after the promise of membership, given at the summit in Thessaloniki, the debate is returning to methodology is bad news for accession. (Gajić 2022) At the same time, Paul Taylor says that within Europe there is an awareness that the geopolitical moment should be used for a new policy towards the Balkans, but he warns: „There is also a great risk that the momentum will be lost, because huge resources and energy are focused on supporting Ukraine, and tomorrow maybe be some other priorities.“ (Gajić 2022)

It is a fact that actors in the Western Balkans do not meet all the set criteria for membership, especially related to the democratic capacities, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, including issues of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and crime, but it is also a fact that there is regional fatigue in the process of European integration, which in the current European circumstances can lead to an additional move away from the so-called European path, which is not in favour either for the European Union itself, or for regional actors. In addition to this fact, we must not ignore the lack of interest of certain member states of the Union in the revitalisation of the enlargement policy. Already in September 2021, it was known that the northern countries of the European Union, such as Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands, fear

the scenario that happened with the too-fast admission of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, and the migration of workers from Eastern Europe to Great Britain, which affected the negative attitude of the British towards the Union. (Aljazeera Balkans 2021)

The process of accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union is also affected by the war in Ukraine, and now a matter that has been discussed a lot is being called into question, namely the power of attraction of the European Union. (Danas 2022) However, as Bećev explains, we should not rule out greater involvement of the European Union in the Western Balkans and taking steps by Brussels in order to consolidate its position in the region and prevent any disruption. In this context, the rule of law, democracy and prosperity will not automatically result from membership, but the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union is a necessary condition for the advancement of what the European Union considers its basic mission, which is to spread its principles and values to the countries that are on its edge in the interest of political stability and economic growth. (Danas 2022) In this context, it is important to point out the fact that the citizens of the Western Balkan region are increasingly distrustful of the European Union. The process of integration is already taking too long if we use the Thessaloniki Declaration of 2003 as the starting point. Since then, only Croatia has managed to become a full member of European Union (if we exclude Slovenia that joined the EU in 2004 and that is part of another group of countries – those from Central and Eastern Europe), while the other actors within the region are in the process of accession, respectively, in the negotiation process, or just have received candidate status, which most precisely shows of how slow and unpredictable the entire EU accession process is at the moment. Bilateral problems, as well as regional disputes, no longer have the capacity to destabilise the security of the European Union, which was the case during the 1990s, and this fact also greatly influenced the process of European integration, and today Brussels is present in the region in a kind of role as a mediator of occasional tensions, before everything on the political level, but the European Union is less and less playing the role of an honest and reliable political partner that offers a clear perspective of integration and membership. When it comes to the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union, it is important to recall the statement of the President of the European Council, who said that the region has a strategic importance for the European Union, but at the same time emphasised that it is crucial for the region that there is a connection between reform and investment process. He also emphasised that fundamental values, the rule of law and the fight against corruption are in the DNA of the EU project, and that this is exactly what the authorities in the Western Balkans should want for their societies. At the same time, the current Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni stated that the European Union should prioritise the integration of the Western Balkans, and that this region cannot be allowed to remain outside the European Union for a long time.

However, the problem in the context of integration still exists within the region itself, that is, within the institutional framework of actors in the Western Balkans. In all the reports of the European Commission concerning actors in the Western Balkans, the term „limited progress“ dominates when it comes to the realisation of the Copenhagen criteria, i.e. the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, as well as respect for minority communities, and the

functioning of the market economy, including competitive abilities and respect for market rules within the European Union, as well as the ability and preparedness to assume the obligations of a member, including effectiveness in implementing the rules, standards and policies that make up the legislation of the European Union, and respect for the goals of the political, economic and monetary union. (Copenhagen criteria 1993) In fact, certain researchers believe that accession to the European Union remains a unique tool for transforming the political system of the Balkan states, which would otherwise remain unreformed. (Milovanović 2017, p. 51) In this context, the integration process itself has the character of transformation and is fundamentally important for the countries of the region. (Milovanović 2017, p. 51)

#### **4. Conclusion**

European partnership is the key word of the region. Because membership in the European Union is a common goal and strategic commitment of these countries, and partnership signifies the nature of mutual relations and equal cooperation that are being pursued. (Milovanović 2017, p. 51) In this context, the current process of integration between the European Union and actors in the Western Balkans should be observed. In the past decade, the momentum for actors in the Western Balkans, after Croatia's accession, to be integrated into the European Union individually, and for the European Commission to deal with each regional actor separately, was missed. The new circumstances and challenges faced by the region and the European Union at the same time enable the opening of a new stage in the enlargement process, which should consist of two chapters: first, the reaffirmation of the European Union's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans as a chance for the final and permanent stabilisation of conditions in the region, which is already geographically within the borders of the Union; secondly, the acceptance of the regional integration approach by political actors in the Western Balkans, as this will initially contribute to the final initiation of the trust-building process between regional political entities, and then contribute to the promotion of the European integration process through a common regional approach.

The European Union has not lost its chance to be the „main game in town“ in the Western Balkans, but there is already a certain marginalisation of citizens' interest in joining the European Union, precisely because of the slowness of the whole process, as well as the cumbersome procedure along the way. In the economic sense, it is an efficient and effective model of integration that already exists in regional frameworks, but also between the European Union and the Western Balkans. Now, in the current European and regional circumstances, what is needed above all is the political will and vision of European and regional political leaders with the aim of real integration of the region in the form of full membership.

Otherwise, missing the momentum for accelerated regional integration, primarily based on the needs of new geopolitical developments, will contribute to the deepening of animosity within the borders of the Western Balkans, but also on the line between the Western Balkans and the European Union, which will have long-term negative implications for both sides, maybe not in the sense of security threats and sustainability of one or the other side, but it would certainly give rise to security challenges that will directly affect the stability and sustainability of the region, and on the other hand, indirectly threaten

the European Union itself, its political guidelines, economic trends, but also security strategies.

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