

GEOPOLITICS AND EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract:

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) has reached a stalemate as a result of both the democratic regression witnessed in the region and the changing EU approaches. In this context, there is an urgent need for the EU to clarify between its transformative ambitions in the region and a more geopolitical approach to the region. Failing to do so may create a vacuum in which other external powers may take advantage to strengthen their influence in the WB.

Keywords: EU Enlargement; Transformative Power; Geopolitics; Western Balkans

Introduction

This paper argues that the EU ought to clarify the relationship between its approach based on the objective of transforming the Western Balkans (WB) through EU membership and another one emphasising more geopolitical considerations as a justification for EU membership. Failing to do so may further undermine the influence of the EU in the region while strengthening the influence of the other external powers.

To discuss these points, this article is divided into three parts. The first deals with the concepts of backsliding and competitive authoritarianism that characterised the recent changes in terms of domestic politics in the WB and the changes made to EU enlargement policy. The second part gives an overview of the geopolitical rivalries in the WB. The third part discusses the tensions between the EU transformative approach in the WB and a more geopolitical approach.

1. Backsliding and Elusive EU Membership

Since 2015, most of the WB have all experienced a regression in terms of democratic and human rights, not to mention corruption. In this respect, one

should notice that the Covid-19 crisis did not cause such negative evolution but made it even more visible.

The use of the concept of democratic is contested (Cianetti & Dawson, & Hanley, 2018). Some authors refer instead to resort to the concept of competitive authoritarianism to define the nature of the political systems that emerged in the WB since 2015. Such systems are characterised by the weakness of the democratic institutions and the utilisation of that weakness by authoritarian political actors to attain and retain power (Bieber, 2018, p. 338). Those changes became all too visible already in 2019 when mass protests took place in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia denouncing the increased suppression of democratic rights, of corruption and the muzzling of the media amid unfavourable economic conditions (Balkan Insight, 2019).

In all the WB, the Covid-19 crisis led the local governments, such as in other countries as well, to take to restrain individual freedoms. In Serbia, the Serbian President Alexander Vučić, in power since 2014, went much beyond these measures by imposing, in 2020, a state of emergency that led to the silencing the opposition by closing the Parliament and further restricting the freedom of the press. In Montenegro, while allowing pro-government protests, the police banned the ones organised by the opposition parties on sanitary grounds (Wunsch, 2020).

Regression or at least lack of progress is also being reflected in the resolution of conflicts in the region. The conflict between Serbia and Kosovo has shown little signs of a possible resolution despite some positive steps undertaken such as the decision taken in June 2020 by Kosovo to remove all barriers on goods produced in Serbia. In Bosnia, the country has experienced major political turmoil in the aftermath of the 2018 elections that left the country without properly functioning governing institutions, not to mention the repeated attempts taken by Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Republika Srpska, to undermine the Bosnian complex system of government (Edwards, 2020).

Such developments seem to be pushing the WB countries further away from EU membership and puts in question the EU enlargement methodology based on the fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993, emphasising the importance of the rule of law and good governance for joining the EU. In addition, the successive internal crises that the EU have faced since 2008 (Euro crisis, migration crisis, Brexit...) contributed to decrease further any remaining appetite within the EU for the inclusion of new member states, leading to some extent to an „enlargement resistance“ (Economides, 2020).

In this context, attempts were made to put the issue of EU enlargement back on the EU front burner. In 2018, the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU convened an EU-WB summit without producing any concrete results. Again in 2018, the European Commission issued its new Enlargement Strategy for EU accession aimed at the Western Balkans that included for the first time an indicative date of 2025 as a possible horizon for EU accession of

the most advanced candidate countries such as Montenegro and Serbia (European Commission, 2018, p.3). But in 2019, the EU enlargement issue suffered from a new setback. In October, the French, Dutch and Danish EU member states opposed starting the accession negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania. The French opposition was based on two arguments. The first and main argument, was that the EU needed to reform itself internally before engaging itself in a new wave of membership. The second was that these two countries had not accomplished enough progress in terms of domestic reforms despite some notable attempts at reforming the country by his new Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, in office since 2017.¹

This last argument led the French to issue, one month later, a Non-Paper proposing a new methodology for the accession process. The new methodology is based on four key principles, which were gradual accession; stringent conditions; tangible benefits and reversibility (Non Paper, 2019).

These developments led the EU Commission, in February 2020, to submit its own new EU enlargement methodology, largely inspired by the French Non-Paper. The new methodology that builds on the 2018 New Enlargement Strategy emphasises four key aspects such as credibility, predictability, dynamism and more political steer on the part of the Council and the member states (European Commission, 2020). It provides for a more flexible process along six policy clusters that would allow speeding up the conclusion of the accession discussions and for greater political scrutiny on the part of the Council and member states that will play a more central role in steering the enlargement process (Stanicek, 2020, p. 2-3).

Following their agreement of the Commission's new methodology, the EU member states agreed to start formal accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. That being said, such negotiations got stalled, in June 2021, following the Bulgarian demand for North Macedonia to address its bilateral linguistic and cultural dispute first (Rettman, 2021). As for the other candidate countries, progress in their accession negotiations has been slow.

Montenegro was seen as the most promising candidate for EU accession. Montenegro applied for EU membership in 2008 and was granted candidate status in 2012. To date, 33 negotiation chapters have been opened and three were closed. That being said, the 2020 Commission Country Report on the country's progress to EU membership highlighted a number of problematic issues, especially with regard to human rights, freedom of the press, not to mention that there is still no elucidation of the shooting attack of a local journalist, and corruption (The Guardian, 2018). In May 2021, Montenegro opted into the new EU enlargement methodology in the hope of speeding up its accession process (Crowcroft, 2021).

¹ Even though being labelled as a 'hybrid' regime by the Freedom House, the new government elected in 2017 started a process of reforms with mixed results (Freedom House, 2020).

As far as Serbia is concerned, the path to EU membership has not been any easier since the country was granted, in 2012, candidate status. In the last 2,5 years, the discussions reached a stalemate with little if no progress being made. In its last 2020 Country Report, the Commission highlighted its growing concerns regarding the deterioration of Serbia's human rights situation and rule of law, not mentioning the deadlock in the country's peace talks with Kosovo. To complicate matters more, Serbia concluded, in 25 October 2019, a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), likely to be incompatible with any future EU accession. This move appeared to have been more about foreign policy than about trade and showed the extent to which Serbia is playing off the EU against the other powers in the region (Vuksanovic, 2019). In May 2021, Serbia also decided to opt into the new enlargement method (Euractiv.com, 2021).

The two other countries in the WB, namely Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo are yet to be granted the status of candidate countries. Bosnia Herzegovina applied for EU membership in 2016. In 2019, the Commission delivered its opinion indicating 14 key priorities to be addressed by the country in order to expect granting it EU candidacy. As far as Kosovo is concerned, the lack of consensus on the recognition of the country's independence by some EU member states prevent any formal discussions on EU membership even if the EU has managed to develop bilateral links with this non-fully recognized entity (Rettman, 2021).

The lack of progress in the EU accession process for the WB countries has recently led to some strong reactions from both key EU political figures and think-tankers. In June 2021, the German, Portuguese and Slovenian Foreign Affairs ministers reassured the strategic importance for the EU to extend its membership to the WB countries while lamenting the stalemate in the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (Federal Foreign Office, 2021). In July 2021, on the eve of the start of the Slovenian EU Presidency, a network of think tanks from both the EU and the candidate countries called for revisiting the EU enlargement methodology by emphasizing the need for greater differentiation between the candidate countries and stronger monitoring of their progress towards accession (Emerson & Lazareviv, 2021). The last EU-WB summit held under the Slovenian EU Presidency on 6th October 2021 did not lead to any significant breakthroughs by falling short of mentioning the word of „accession“ as far as the candidate countries are concerned and just „reconfirming its [EU] commitment to the enlargement process“ (Brzozowski and Makszimov, 2021).

The combination of democratic backsliding in most of the WB countries and of the changing EU approaches has led EU enlargement to reach a new stalemate. Such a development may lead to a decreasing influence of the EU in the WB while increasing the one of the other powers such as Russia, China and Turkey.

2. Geopolitical Rivalries

The EU is, without contest, the primary external political and economic actor in the WB. For all the countries in the region, EU membership remains their main policy objective. Economically, the EU is by far the largest trading partner of all the WB countries accounting for more than 67% of their import and more than 73% of their export, well ahead of Russia, China, Turkey and the other countries that barely reach double-digit figures (Panagiotou, 2020, pp 4-6). Financially, the EU is the largest donor and the largest investor in the region as well, dwarfing the other external powers to a very large degree by providing from 60% to 80% of the FDIs to the different countries in the region. Despite such data, the EU is still suffering from a perception deficit in the region. For example, in a poll conducted in 2017, 24% of respondents were convinced that Russia is at least at par with the EU when it comes to its development aid. In reality, Russia accounts for less than 0,5% of development aid to Serbia and the EU for more than 60% (Panagiotou, 2020, pp 6-9).

That does not mean however that local responses to EU policies and decisions have not reflected deep concerns, and at times sharp criticisms in the WB, especially in relation to the Covid-19 crisis. In spring 2020, the EU decided on an export ban on medical supplies that excluded the WB from accessing vital tools such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks and a year later, the EU refused to share their vaccine rollout with the region. It does not mean, however, that the EU remained inactive. In May 2021, the EU announced a financial support to address the health and economic impact of the Covid 19 epidemics of up to 3,3bn Euros, consisting of a mix of loans, guarantees and other financial instruments. In terms of vaccines, the roll out of vaccines used in the EU and in the USA is taking place thanks to the COVAX mechanism set up by the World Health Organization and heavily supported by the EU. More recently, in April 2021, the EU committed to supply more than 651,000 doses to the region. However, there is no doubt that the EU lost a large chunk of credibility among the local populations in the region because of its vaccine diplomacy (Schmidt & Dzihic 2021). A recent survey completed in July 2021 in Serbia showed that the majority of people now sees Russia and China as the key allies and supporters of their country, well ahead of the EU (Hosa & Tcherneva, 2021).

The other countries that have increasingly invested both political and economic capital in the WB are three main external powers, by order of importance: Russia, China, Turkey.

For Russia, the Balkans have been part of their strategic backyard since the 19th century. Russia is the main energy supplier to all the countries in the region and plays the card of their religious and cultural proximity skilfully. It has also been supporting a number of local political forces with the aim of preventing the resolution of conflicts in the WB whether between Serbia and Kosovo or in Bosnia, not mentioning their heavy involvement in disinformation

campaigns in the region. During the first months of the Covid-19 crisis in the WB, the Russians displayed their support by supplying countries such as Serbia with protective masks and by setting up a production facility scheduled to operate in autumn 2021 in Serbia (Schmidt. & Dzihic, 2021).

That being said, if Russian policy in the WB can be considered as a source of nuisance from the EU's point of view, its impact should perhaps not be exaggerated. Firstly, Russia has mostly approached the WB as part of its relations with the other great powers. Secondly, and with the exception of the field of energy, the economic importance of Russia for the WB is rather limited (Panagiotou, 2020, p. 9-12).

In some respects, China is a newcomer in the WB. Its involvement in the region derives from a larger policy also called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at setting up bilateral links with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These bilateral links were formalised in 2012 with the launch of the 17+ 1 format.² The last two summits of this format took place in 2018 in Sofia (Bulgaria) and in 2019 in Dubrovnik (Croatia). In the WB, China has become a new source for funding for a series of infrastructure projects, some being controversial at the local level (Markovic Khaze & Wang, 2020, p. 12-13). As elsewhere in the world, the Chinese involvement in the WB is much less politically motivated than financial and economical. It nevertheless contributed to fuel corruption and bad governance amid frustrations expressed in some Central and Eastern European countries with respect to their access to Chinese markets and lack of trade opportunities (Lilkov, 2021). During the Covid-19 crisis, China was also keen on showing its support for the Western Balkans by providing a high number of masks and protective clothing as well as vaccines including the establishment of the first production unit in Serbia (Schmidt & Dzihic, 2021).

Turkey's involvement in the WB has long been centred on its religious and cultural diplomacy that consisted of funding preachers, mosques and Islamic schools while cultivating close relations with local leaders. Such support proved useful in the repression against the so-called Gulenists by obtaining the extradition of some of their members taking refuge in the region such as in Albania and in Kosovo, often in disregard to their national and international commitments in terms of human rights (Koppa, 2020, p. 5).

The geopolitical configuration of great powers influence in the WB places the EU as a central actor in the region. That being said, with influence comes the issue of strategy. In this field, there is a risk for the EU to overplay the importance of geopolitics over its transformative objectives in the region.

² Originally established the 16+ 1 initiative included: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2019, Greece joined the initiative. Recently, in March 2021, Lithuania decided to leave the 17+1 initiative.

3. Transformative EU vs. Geopolitical EU in the WB

When taking office in 2019, the new President of the EU Commission Ursula Von der Leyen announced her willingness to have a geopolitical Commission. This announcement did confirm a new emphasis on geopolitics in EU external policies. That new emphasis became already visible in the aftermath of the EU-Russia crisis of 2014 that reminded the EU of the resurgence of power politics in Europe. If anything, the Covid 19 crisis in the WB highlighted the extent to which the region has once again become a space for renewed competition between the great powers.

In its involvement in the WB, the EU has portrayed itself as a major transformative force or as some scholars referred to, as a transformative power (Grabbe, 2006). This was clearly reflected in the 2015 EU Commission enlargement strategy when emphasising that: „EU membership has a powerful transformative effect on the countries concerned, embedding positive democratic, political, economic and societal change“ (European Commission, 2015, p.2). In this light, EU policies are aimed at guiding the reform process in the candidate countries through setting accession conditions referred to as accession conditionality and Europeanization, a process by which adaptation to the EU becomes deeply intertwined with domestic policy making and providing them substantial financial support. These principles make much of the transformative approach that reject both a geopolitical approach and concept of interests (Grabbe, 2006, p.3).

Since 2016-2017, the EU seems to have gradually shifted to a new geopolitical approach in its involvement with the WB. This shift is being translated in some key documents related to EU foreign policy such as the new 2016 EU Global Strategy with a stronger emphasis on EU interests, stability, resilience and the need to develop defence capabilities (Lehne, 2020). Related more specifically to EU enlargement, the 2018 Commission’s Enlargement Strategy, while not giving up on its transformative dimensions, uses new words and concepts alluding to the WB as being part of the EU’s sphere of interests: „EU membership for the WB is in the Union’s very own political, security and economic interest“ (European Commission, 2018, p.1).

If the 2018 new EU Enlargement strategy emphasised the need for reforms in the fields of human rights and good governance, the 2020 Enlargement methodology gives more say within the member states in assessing the situation in the countries concerned. This greater political steer may well go both ways: either in the direction of a tougher approach or a more lenient approach according to the foreign policy preferences of the member states concerned. In any case, the use of unanimity in these decisions may well lead to other deadlocks as member states can always use enlargement decisions as a way to settle political scores with the candidate countries (Cvijic 2019) as reflected in the recent Bulgarian veto that stopped the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.

There is, therefore, a risk for the EU to gradually shift to a new approach, from the one of transformation to the one emphasising more geopolitical considerations. Such an approach may well lead to two kinds of developments. The first one would be to devalue the transformative ambitions of the EU involvement in the WB to other sets of objectives aimed at stabilizing the different countries in the region. The second one would be to show greater tolerance of democratic backsliding in order to counter the influence of external powers but with the risk of the EU reneging on the very values on which it is founded. The net result of such an approach would lead to granting EU membership to the WB while disregarding the state of their democratic institutions.

To some extent, EU member states are still divided between a number of them keeping insisting on the need for the EU to continue being a transformative power in the WB. Among those countries, one could certainly include France, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian EU member states. Other member states favour a geopolitical approach. Among these countries, one could include Austria, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia as the main ones (Petrovic & Tzifakis 2021.p.161-162).

Conclusion

A more EU geopolitical approach to the WB, if confirmed, may be based on an exaggerated reading of great power competition in the region. As the figures mentioned in this paper show, none of the great powers active in the Balkans can pretend to replace the EU as the main political and economic partner for each of these countries. In addition, some of these external powers such as China and Turkey or even Russia do not have any interest in seeing a complete collapse of the EU enlargement to the WB as these countries could be used as spearheads to take advantage of the EU single market. A weakening of the EU influence in the WB may also produce a vacuum that could fuel further instability in the region by exacerbating great powers rivalries.

Lastly, a too strong emphasis on geopolitics in the EU approach towards the WB also presents the risk of overlooking the new challenges the region is facing at the beginning of the 21th century. For example, one can mention the poor record in the region in terms of protection of the environment. From the highest levels of air pollution recorded in Europe to the destruction of natural habitats and decreasing biodiversity as well as increasing temperatures, each of the WB countries is facing major challenges in these fields (Lesoska, 2020).

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