

The Europeanization of Western Balkans. How far has the EU come, where did it fail and where should it go next?

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Abstract

According to Radaelli, Europeanization refers to 'processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies.' European Union has always exerted a powerful attraction for the candidate countries and by means of conditionality managed to shape the aspirations of these countries. In the case of the Central and Eastern European countries the enlargement perspective elicited a multifaceted and intense set of adjustment processes with the aim of socializing applicant countries into the values and standards of the EU thus enabling them to achieve 'democracy by convergence'. The Balkan region has always been part of Europe, nevertheless the situation in the region remains complex and in many respects problematic. Europeanization in the Balkans would mean structural transformation, modernization and adjustment to the advanced European models in areas such as good governance, economy and the rule of law. The thoroughness of these processes becomes all the more important especially if we take into consideration the increased politicization of the enlargement process. The present contribution attempts to assess the EU ability to shape the transformation of Western Balkan states.

Keywords

Europeanization, Western Balkans, accession, good governance, democratization

In the 1990s, the Western Balkan region suffered from severe conflicts, which ended after the intervention by United Nations and NATO forces and with the promise of accession to the European Union. In the early and mid-2000s, the prospect of EU accession and the global boom facilitated a rapid economic recovery in the Western Balkans and boosted economic and institutional reforms. The Balkan region has always been part of Europe, nevertheless the situation in the region remains complex and in many respects problematic. Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev (2015) regarded the Balkans as “the soft underbelly of Brussels’ diplomacy” due to the fragility of the region’s banking system, its massive dependence on Russian capital and its widespread exposure to Moscow’s political will.

In 2003, when the EU first promised membership, there seemed little doubt that the region’s future would be European. Since then, various unresolved legacies from past conflicts slowed the pace of reform and progress towards EU accession. On the side of the European Union, political willingness to offer a European future to its Balkan neighbors altered, too. The economic and financial turmoil of 2008-2009 and the subsequent European crisis of 2010-2013 slowed the rate of economic growth and amplified the levels of unemployment making it hard for the European politicians to sell a new round of enlargement to their own electorate. Moreover, for the EU to succeed now in its ambition to transform the region, it has to be aware of the momentous geopolitical changes that have taken place since a number of important global and regional powers like Russia, China and Turkey play now a more assertive role in the region than they used to play right after the fall of the Iron Curtain. To make matters worse, each of these three countries has built autocratic regimes that are regarded as a real danger for the democratic aspirations of the Western Balkan states. Speaking to the European Parliament in April 2018, President Macron placed political regimes in Turkey and Russia in the same category when saying he did not want the Balkans to “turn towards Turkey or Russia.” China has never excelled in its democratic credentials.

The European Commission presented in February 2018 its new Western Balkans strategy. Drawing on the relevant aspects of the Commission’s Communication, the EU launched at its summit in Sofia four months later a Priority Agenda for the EU and the Western Balkans. EU’s stated aim is to encourage reform in the six Western Balkans countries – Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania, by renewing the prospect of membership. The Commission set an indicative deadline (2025)

for admission to the EU of the two most advanced candidates. This was meant to renew EU's commitment to the region and inspire all Western Balkan countries, including those candidates that have not yet started membership negotiations (Macedonia and Albania) and those waiting for candidate status (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo), to remove domestic political obstacles to EU accession, solve conflicts with neighbours, speed up reforms and accelerate economic growth.

European Union has always exerted a powerful attraction for the candidate countries and by means of conditionality managed to shape the aspirations of these countries. In the case of the Central and Eastern European countries the enlargement perspective elicited a multifaceted and intense set of adjustment processes with the aim of socializing applicant countries into the values and standards of the EU thus enabling them to achieve 'democracy by convergence' by means of Europeanization. According to Radaelli (2000), Europeanization refers to "processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies." Like in the case of Central and Eastern European countries Europeanization in the Balkans was meant to induce structural transformation, modernization and adjustment to the advanced European models in areas such as good governance, economy and the rule of law. The underlying assumption has been that although not easy to achieve, a democratic regime would pave the way to a stable political system (Mounk 2018: 5). Equally important, the thoroughness of these processes has become all the more important especially if we take into consideration the increased politicization of the enlargement process.

Looking at European Commission's Communication (2018, pp. 3-4) and the Sofia Declaration (European Council 2018, pp. 1-3) we can witness that the main EU aim is to further socialize applicant countries into the dominant principles and values of the EU proceeding from the assumption that while none of the Western Balkans countries meet the criteria set in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, including the Copenhagen criteria, today, the region has come a long way since the end of the 1990s. Without overlooking the significant progress made both in terms of reforms and efforts towards overcoming the ruinous legacy of war and conflict, the

Western Balkans countries still have a long way to go before being able to meet all membership conditions and strengthen their democracies.

In order to properly assess these processes, in a manner similar to that employed in the case of the Central and Eastern European countries, the EU sets benchmarks against which each of the six Western Balkan states are to be evaluated independently on their own merit in accordance with the progress achieved in meeting the established conditions. This policy has been known as democratic conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). The underlying idea would be to induce candidate countries to comply with specific standards that originate in the Copenhagen criteria. They were also tied with EU programs of financial assistance, the accession partnerships, twinning for the secondment of pre-accession advisers from the Member States' civil services to the applicant countries in return for the compliance with the imposed standards. As gaining international approval is an important way of legitimizing political choices, the conditionality tool proved to be a very powerful one in determining the Central and Eastern European states to embrace the European values and is still regarded as the best option in dealing with Western Balkan states, although one big difference remains between the two groups of countries. If in the case of Central and Eastern European states EU had offered a clear membership perspective, in the case of Western Balkans states it speaks only of "a possible 2025 perspective" for the completion of the accession negotiations with the most advanced members of this group of countries (European Commission, 2018, p. 9) without any firm commitment to admitting any of these countries to the EU.

EU had used this policy of democratic conditionality in different ways: timing the accession process (starting of negotiations, determining the date of full accession), ranking the applicant's overall progress, benchmarking in specific policy areas, providing examples of best practice, assessing the applicant's administrative capacity and institutional ability to implement and enforce the *acquis communautaire* (Grabbe, 2001, pp. 1028-9). It is obvious by now that these methods have not lost their timeliness and influence among Commission's preferred means for approaching EU's relations with any candidate state. As such, accession to the EU by new members has generally been part of a wider process of Europeanization that went hand in hand with the process of domestic transformation in a democratic pluralistic regime with a market economy. As the idea of enlargement gained momentum, the two processes – the regime transformation and advancing towards full-

EU membership – became increasingly not just simply parallel, but deeply interrelated. They came to be so intricately linked that they depended on each other and even more they fed each other (Matli and Plümper, 2004, pp. 307-8). The reform process of the Central and Eastern European countries has taken thus a particular form due to the foreign policy decision they made in favor of accession to the EU and the necessity to meet the Copenhagen criteria. They had nothing else to do but to align themselves to the standards imposed on them by the European Union. Although undoubtedly weaker than their Central and Eastern European counterparts, Western Balkan states have benefited from a similar EU treatment that combined significant and credible rewards, coupled with substantial amounts of financial and technical assistance, in order to promote Europeanization. Yet, a combination of “inexpertness, illegitimacy and inconsistency” rendered the EU less likely to apply conditionality consistently (Vachudova, 2014).

What remained very debatable from this perspective was the extent to which the EU was able to impact on the reform of the CEE states. It is already commonly agreed that its effectiveness depended on the domestic political costs of compliance and on governmental cost-benefit calculations (Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel, 2003, pp. 495-6). This raised fears that the imperfect shape of the institutions created in the CEE states would add to the already significant democratic deficit of the EU. In contrast, the up-to-now EU efforts aimed at the democratic transformation of the Western Balkans states have uncovered that neither conditionality, nor capacity-building have been able to get at informal institutions, such as clientelism, that have been challenging the political willingness of decision-makers in complying altogether with EU rules (Börzel, 2013, p. 182). As a result, Europeanization in the Western Balkans has remained largely shallow, giving rise to formalistic, short-term and technocratic reforms, rather than sustainable and transformative domestic change (Mendelski, 2013, p. 104).

At the same time, Europeanization itself has exposed in recent years its own limits. According to Mendelski (2016, p. 347), after the euphoria of the start-up period, when Europeanization was mainly described in positive terms, the EU being regarded as bearing a constructive impact on candidate countries and their governance (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005, 2009; Grabbe 2006), there has been a period when the effects of Europeanization on candidate countries have begun to be assessed in rather critical terms. The main idea being that EU’s transformative power can be restrained due to unfavorable domestic

conditions (e.g. Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgi, 2012; Elbasani, 2013; Mendelski, 2013; Dallara, 2014). Arguing that the EU conditionality has undermined the rule of law, democracy, and the fight against corruption by applying deficient and inconsistent methods of good governance and democracy promotion (Mendelski 2016, p. 347).

Conclusions

Ever since the beginning of the 1990s, the Western Balkan region has raised challenges of a distinctive character to the European Union. A closer look to the strategy documents of the European Union for the region has uncovered that the aims remain very similar to those that animated the relations towards the Central and Eastern European countries, minus the clear membership perspective. Nevertheless, neither the substantial weaknesses exposed by the Western Balkans states, nor the limits of the Europeanization toolkit previously employed for dealing with the Central and Eastern European countries, have made the European Union to alter its strategy or methods for steering a course toward liberal democracy and market economy towards these states. The Balkan region has always been part of Europe, nevertheless the situation in the region remains complex and in many respects problematic. Europeanization in the Balkans would mean structural transformation, modernization and adjustment to the advanced European models in areas such as good governance, economy and the rule of law. The thoroughness of these processes becomes all the more important especially if we take into consideration the increased politicization of the enlargement process.

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