



European Union Integration - Perspectives and Challenges of Western Balkans

Julejda Aliaj

Vanesa Sulmina

Universiteti "Aleksander Moisiu",
Albania

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Abstract

The European Union remains one of the most important unions on our continent and beyond. Its political-economic role is equally important in the international arena. Over the years, this union has been the target of most European countries. Integration enabled the free movement of goods and people, along with a number of other advantages that strengthened the political and economic position of each of the member states. Of course, just one article is not enough to talk about the development history of the European Union. What constitutes curiosity and reason to study is the current state of this union, its stability and the possibility of further enlargement, as has been discussed for years, including the countries of the Western Balkans, which since the fall of communist systems after the 90's they aspired to integration towards it. This article aims to give another critical perspective to these discussions, taking into account the current situation and economic and political developments within the European continent. We can not ignore the situation of the war between Ukraine and Russia in this discussion and the chain effects it has brought within the EU and beyond.

Keywords: Integration, European Union, Western Balkans, extension, policies, challenges

1. Introduction

The current situation and the challenges facing the European Union today directly affect the enlargement policies and the discussions for the opening of membership negotiations of the candidate countries. Doubts have been raised in the international arena about the stability of the union, and the exit of England in January 2020 opened the door for much speculation on EU values. It should not be forgotten, however, that the European Union is essentially an economic union, enabling the development of labor and product markets between member countries, and as such any relationship is reciprocal and facilitates free movement between them. The biggest fear about the union's sustainability is related to the high level of debt. The crisis of 2008-2009 was associated with a similar situation that led to the collapse of the economy of those years, so the repetition of the same scenario would have even more serious consequences in this period after the emergence of the global pandemic of Covid-19 that brought major health and financial damage.

Albania, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (excluding Croatia which is part of the EU), make up what is known as the Western Balkans. Over the last few years we have seen some interesting developments that open wide discussions from a political point of view. The countries of the Western Balkans are currently organizing their domestic policies in the framework of meeting the criteria for membership in the European Union. On the other hand, in addition to the efforts to have stability between them, it is inevitable to avoid the occasional tensions that characterize the foreign policy between these countries due to the past and the still present discussion on

the borders and the recognition of Kosovo. The countries of the Western Balkans are in different phases in terms of the integration process, two in the aspiration phase for the candidate country, two in the aspiration phase for the opening of negotiations and two in the negotiation phase. External factors have often influenced the postponement of this process, which is basically not simple and has been going on for over a decade. A number of criteria have been met by countries aspiring to integration, but in general the discussion goes on to some commonalities related to high levels of corruption, organized crime and freedom of speech. It must be acknowledged that a wave of dissatisfaction has been created at the level of government of the Balkan countries due to the postponement of the opening of negotiations and occurred in these circumstances at the end of 2019 gave birth to the idea of regional cooperation between Albania, Northern Macedonia and Serbia, a mini-Schengen area that materialized last year with what is known as the Open Balkans Initiative. This initiative has not been supported by all Balkan countries and there is a lot of rhetoric about it. The events of the 1990s, especially those that are sensitive to the Albanian nation, the Kosovo war, or the Bosnian genocide, would make it difficult and almost impossible for genuine cooperation between all the Balkan countries.

1.1 Current political and economic situation of the European Union

In the latest world economy rankings, the European Union is considered the second most powerful political organization in the international market after the United States. The Covid-19 pandemic has left a huge mark on the European economy as well as on any other economic space in the world, and as the recovery over the past year has progressed considerably, the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought great stalemates in political stability and severe consequences for the economy. Since the financial crisis of 2008, now all European countries are facing an immediate rise in inflation which is severely damaging all individual economies of European citizens due to the sharp rise in prices. The projections of economic organizations predict that inflation will increase to 7% within this year. Such a figure has an extraordinary impact mainly on the economies of smaller countries, being immediately reflected in the way of life of citizens, this is also due to the skewed ratios between the level of expenditures related to the basic products of daily consumption and of revenue. One of the biggest shocks that the European economy is currently experiencing is related to energy prices and given the geopolitical situation, the forecasts for GDP growth for next year are the lowest in recent years.

As it is noticed, the economic situation does not seem to be at all favorable within the union and to this are added a wide list of other elements which also bring problems related to the well-being of the union and its member countries. In addition to the economy and related problems, global issues such as those related to climate change are compounded by geopolitical problems. Almost 30 years after the Maastricht treaty there are many things that are in question when it comes to the European Union. There is constantly a kind of tense situation between member countries when it comes to making important decisions that can change the course of events. Also within the governments of member countries has grown a kind of populism that brings new trends towards full autonomy to operate within the country bypassing the general principles that each member state is obliged to apply due to joining this political-economic organization. A heated debate is taking place among member states on the topic of enlargement. It has been a long time since the last time the European Union decided to welcome a new country within it and during this time many other countries have been waiting for integration which for one reason or another has remained suspended without doing any step forward, bringing so a high degree of dissatisfaction within the citizens of these countries. It is still unclear the course of EU policy, which due to major political circumstances such as the war in Ukraine, is not adhering to its criteria when it comes to granting candidate status to a country. This creates a kind of precedent which is not easy to overcome and which creates tension between the waiting countries to become part of the union. But even before the war in Ukraine, there was a worrying resurgence of tensions in the region, particularly within Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Serbia and Kosovo. We have seen outside interference seeking to destabilise our neighbours and weaken the European Union, notably through Russia's insidious and well-documented disinformation campaigns. The hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout Europe have been exploited but these campaigns have increased further substantially since the start of the war on Ukraine. The fears of rising energy and food prices resulting from the war in Ukraine are also very strong in the Western Balkans, countries that are much poorer than those in the EU.⁹³

⁹³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/time-move-forward-eu-integration-western-balkans_en

1.2 *The situation and expectations of the Western Balkans*

The situations in the Western Balkans throughout history have been generally turbulent, mainly due to problems related to the territories inherited from previous wars that have influenced the shaping of today's political map. Added to this are the relevant political regimes that these countries have had, which have directly influenced their economic development. As a result, their development has been slower and the path towards other European countries is still being made with slow steps. Due to the territorial position, natural resources and economic potential that these countries have, they make them important strategic partners of the European Union, considering the import-export relations with Europe and their workforce. Although historically the diplomatic relations between the countries of the Balkans have been haunted by conflicts, some of them have also found in quite heavy armed attacks with consequences that have not yet been resolved, currently efforts are being made to find comprehension between them and negotiation to achieve their goals. Triggered by the delay in the integration process of these countries in the European Union, the initiative known as the Open Balkans was launched. There are many conflicting opinions regarding this initiative due to the delicate relations that exist between the Balkan countries. The non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by Serbia or the previous conflicts between Bosnia and Serbia, and the tendency of the latter to still lead the Balkan countries, make this initiative difficult to implement and not comprehensive. On the other hand, the discussion arises that if the countries of the Western Balkans are not able to increase the level of cooperation between them and overcome the obstacles in these relations, how will they manage to cooperate within the European Union if they were all integrated in it. In addition to all the internal challenges that these countries have, which are mainly related to economic developments, internal governance, levels of corruption or crimes, their biggest challenge remains that of cooperation between neighbors, for the creation of a diplomatic relationship suitable for European eyes. In one of the reports of the European Commission, there is a possible scenario for Serbia and Montenegro joining the union within the year 2025. As for Albania and North Macedonia, in the process of opening negotiations, there has always been one step forward and two steps behind by not making it clear when something like this would be possible, which according to the recommendations of European institutions should have happened in 2019. But the long process of integration within the European Union has increased dissatisfaction and raised doubts as to whether further efforts should be continued to make something like this possible. It is also known the high internal pressure within the countries of the union when it comes to expansion. Such a thing is seen with skepticism, for reasons related to emigration and the increase in the level of unemployment due to the influx of labor forces from countries with the weakest economy. Therefore, it seems that the process of integration of the countries of the Western Balkans will last longer than one might think. The countries of the Western Balkans have, quite rightly, demanded that their accession process is judged on their own merits. It has been almost 20 years ago that the EU declared in Thessaloniki that 'the future of the Western Balkans is within the EU', so a certain degree of impatience on their side, to say the least, is understandable.⁹⁴ The results of the last Summit held on the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans in the European Union did not bring the long-awaited results and were accompanied by tense statements after its conclusion by the leaders of the Balkans. However, the Council of Europe encourages further efforts in the implementation of reforms to achieve the desired results. The European Union expresses its full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and calls for the acceleration of the accession process. Building on the revised methodology, the European Council invites the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner. The European Council recalls the importance of reforms, notably in the area of rule of law and in particular those related to the independence and functioning of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. It also calls on the partners to guarantee the rights and equal treatment of persons belonging to minorities.⁹⁵

1.3 *Albania's perspective toward European Union*

The first time that Albania was mentioned as a potential country to be a candidate for the European Union, dates back to 2000. Six years later our country managed to take an important step with the signing of the Stabilization and Association

⁹⁴ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/geo-political-imperative-eu-both-widen-and-deepen_en

⁹⁵ *European Council conclusions on Ukraine, the membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and external relations, 23 June 2022*

Agreement and three years later it formally sought to be a candidate country to become part of the union. Albania applied for EU membership on 28 April 2009. In 2012, the Commission recommended that the country be granted candidate status, subject to the adoption of pending reforms. In October 2013, the Commission unequivocally recommended granting Albania the status of candidate for EU membership, which it obtained in June 2014. In the light of the country's progress, the Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Albania in 2016, 2018 and 2019. In June 2018, the Council agreed to the possible opening of accession negotiations with Albania in June 2019, provided the necessary conditions had been fulfilled. However, both in June 2019 and October 2019, the Council failed to greenlight the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, it finally decided to open accession negotiations, pending the fulfilment of a set of conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented the draft negotiating framework – the first to take into account the 'revised methodology for enlargement to the Western Balkans' that was published in February 2020 – to the Member States.⁹⁶For more than a decade now nothing has changed: Albania has not yet opened negotiations to become an EU member state. There have been some essential requests from the EU regarding some important reforms such as the reform of the judiciary and the reform of the electoral system before the opening of negotiations was discussed. Reducing the level of corruption and protecting fundamental freedoms are also always a highly sensitive issue. If we were to open the discussion about how the reforms were carried out and what their effects were, we would have to do a more in-depth study because the first consequences, which apparently were not positive and do not seem to have brought the result of long awaited. But at what point is Albania when even today, after 13 years, it has not even been able to open the negotiation process to become an EU member state? On the surface, there is still no clear reason why negotiations have not yet been opened for Albania. Until the last summit held for the integration of the Western Balkan countries, by the main European institutions were required to open negotiations for our country in the framework of meeting the main conditions set for this process. But the EU remains committed to the principle of unanimity and therefore cannot advance the decision to open negotiations. The long wait certainly causes dissatisfaction and tension in diplomatic relations between the parties but as long as each candidate country aspires to integrate into the union must again reflect and improve itself to become a part of it. Being part of the union, obviously the political and economic benefits are great, but also that anyone who aspires to join the union must be an added value in it, therefore it is of fundamental importance to meet any criteria related to the state of law, so that it does not carry with it major internal problems that would be reflected at one time or another in the common European arena. To reach the desired point requires an iron political will and high conscience to build a state which is guided by the basic principles of the rule of law and which protects and implements fundamental human rights and freedoms. Without achieving this, regardless of any conditions applied, the problem will sooner or later come to certain surfaces to cause damage. Despite the skepticism of European countries to accept Albania among them, the main problem remains the internal organization and behavior. Internal problems are undoubtedly reflected in the international arena as well. In most of the reports of the main world organizations that deal with annual evaluations of issues related to the level of corruption, the freedom of the media and the individual's one, or citizen perception in certain aspects, they have not been positive in the majority of cases, despite the fact that they have evaluated the country's efforts to develop. It is being noticed that recently, among the biggest reforms undertaken in our country in the framework of the conditions to be met for the opening of negotiations, such as the reform of the judicial and electoral systems, they are bringing serious consequences for the citizens. It is worth mentioning here the increase in the difficulty of accessing the courts due to the change in the territorial judicial map and the lack of political representation in a fair proportion due to the new electoral system. Albania has the best chances to win this battle, and this depends not only on the will of the internal government but also on the individual behavior of everyone, because through our elections we decide who and how will represent us, and we also choose to be implementing in the main European norms.

2. Conclusions

Today's political developments have recognized other new dimensions and factors that influence the behavior of these entities when it comes to foreign policy. The biggest discussions are related to the notion of state sovereignty over that of international unions, and yet the latter have often managed to have a more priority approach over the domestic policies of a state. The memory of a nation is closely linked to the political regimes it has gone through and the events it has faced in the Western Balkans have left deep traces, which consequently condition the way they develop today and affect the way of creating and developing external relations.

⁹⁶ *The Western Balkans, European Parliament*

At first glance, it can be argued that the European Union is certainly not in its best days, especially when the region's stability or economic crisis is called into question. On the other hand, enlargement policies are not so easy to implement, especially when every EU country faces internal public pressure on the fear of a large wave of emigration due to unemployment in countries with poor of our continent.

The challenges of the Western Balkans in the long ordeal of efforts to become part of the European Union are still great, despite the fact that the partial will to accept a series of important criteria in this regard must be acknowledged. What is noticeable and constitutes a general plague of the region is the high level of corruption and organized crime. The influence of these factors damages both the internal developments of the countries and also reduces the level of credibility in the international arena. It is more important the existence of a great political will, mainly internal, to reduce these phenomena, in order to reach other levels of negotiations when it comes to integration into international unions.

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