

WILL THE WESTERN BALKANS KNOCK IN THE EU'S DOOR FOR A LONG TIME TO COME, OR WILL IT JUMP INTO THE ARMS OF RUSSIA AND CHINA?

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Abstract

The European Union fears that it will lose support in the Western Balkans due to blocked negotiations on its enlargement. Despite pressure from large number of states, including the Czech Republic, no agreement has yet been reached that would give the states of the former Yugoslavia or Albania a clearer idea of possible membership in the European bloc. Therefore, there are fears that Russia and China will strengthen their influence in the region at the expense of the EU through various steps. The paper does not have the character of research but is motivated by the acute need to address the future of the Western Balkans in the shortest possible time. In particular, it aims to highlight the need to step up regional cooperation with neighboring countries that are already members of the European Union. The article concludes that in order to fulfill this mission, it is necessary to use all possible platforms that have already been created and are in line with European values. The Three Seas Initiative is undoubtedly one of them. For geopolitical reasons, neither China nor Russia should have this option precisely because of their authoritarian forms of government.

Keywords

Presidency of the EU Council, Western Balkan, Enlargement, European Union

I. Introduction

The most dramatic and extensive conflict that took place in Europe after World War II was associated with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In this part of Europe, too, power structures disintegrated, similarly to the countries of the so-called Eastern bloc. According to Veselý (2020) the main difference, however, was the fact that the new political structures in the post - Yugoslav area moved from communist to nationalist positions, which was legitimized by the results of the 1990 elections. The nationalism of the new political leaders led to the disintegration of the country, which took the form of a civil war. Although at the time the 12-member European Communities and the United States sought to stabilize, the ongoing reunification of Germany, the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, and destabilization and growing tensions in Czechoslovakia weakened the international community's interest in preserving Yugoslavia.

The integration of the Balkan countries into the European Union has been talked about for more than two decades. The first steps in bringing the Union and the seven Balkan countries closer together - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo - began in 1999. However, since 2013, when Croatia joined the European Union, further enlargement has stalled. It is blocked by years of regional disputes and the fears of members of the Union who perceive the risks of corruption and political instability. The strategic importance of the whole region cannot be overlooked, as it is directly adjacent to EU member states. Any problem and instability in the region directly affect the EU. In November 2015, the European Commission set out a medium-term strategy for the EU enlargement policy covering the mandate of the previous Commission.

Much has changed since the last EU debate on the Western Balkans in August 2019, nine foreign ministers wrote, citing "dynamic domestic political developments" in the region. According to them, the covid-19 pandemic "amplified existing trends, including geopolitical implications." According to them, foreign actors intervene in the regional affairs of the Western Balkans "at our expense". The European Union identifies Albania and all countries of the former Yugoslavia except Slovenia as the Western Balkans. So far, only Croatia has achieved bloc membership from these countries. While the

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EU has provided "massive support" to the region, other actors have been more successful in presenting their assistance. "This undermined our reliability, credibility and perception of our solidarity," said the signatories of the call, which, in addition to the Czech representative, was also signed by the foreign ministers of Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia, Greece and Ireland (Euractiv, 2021).

Last year, the European Union did not agree on the promised start of accession talks with Albania and Northern Macedonia, which met all the required conditions. The start of the negotiations was first blocked by several Western countries, led by France, which, fearing insufficient anti-corruption reforms in the candidate countries, demanded that the negotiating rules be amended. Earlier, in an effort to join the EU, the country changed its name from the original Macedonia at Greece's request. Bulgaria then opposed it, coming up with linguistic and cultural demands on Northern Macedonia. After the parliamentary elections in July this year, Bulgaria has the opportunity to change its approach and not oppose the enlargement of the EU to its western neighbors.

It has also slowed down accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, which are the furthest of the six countries aspiring to join the EU. Bosnia and Kosovo have not yet acquired the status of candidates for membership they are seeking. The people of the Balkans are feeling deeply disappointed with the enlargement process, despite their ongoing efforts to join the Union. Therefore, some leading politicians in the Balkans have recently become more critical of the EU, as evidenced by polls. "Unfortunately, the prospects for EU membership in the Western Balkans are becoming more obscure, more distant and therefore less motivating. We have created a free space in the region that is filled by others with different ideas", said Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, referring to the growing influence of Eastern powers in the Balkans (Euractiv, 2021).

II. Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The European Union is probably undergoing the most important transformation since the beginning of the integration process. Over the last few years, several factors of a different nature have come together to call into question the aims, structures and balances of integration and therefore call for a political and institutional response from the Union¹.

This was reflected in the program of the presidency trio, of which Slovenia is the last presiding country. The programme *Taking forward the Strategic Agenda 18-month Programme of the Council (1 July 2020 - 31 December 2021)* of current trio was published on 9th June 2020 (European Council, 2020). In July 2021, the Slovenian Presidency took over from Portugal several still unresolved issues. Among other things, it will try to move forward the blocked negotiations on the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of the Western Balkans, on which the EU states do not have a completely unified view. At the same time, moving towards the enlargement of the European Union to include these countries is one of the priorities of the current Slovenian Presidency. The forthcoming Slovenian EU Presidency, which is considering holding a summit of EU and Western Balkan leaders in the second half of the year, could hope for a shift in talks.

It is very positive that the Prime Minister of the country currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU emphasizes the need for the European future of the Western Balkans, and thus for a further shift in the integration of these countries into the European Union. It should be borne in mind that the Twenty-Seven is the main business partner of the region and at the same time the largest investor here.

¹ Tortola and Vai (2017).



Slovenia's six-month presidency program in the Council of the European Union is based on four priorities. Under the slogan *Together – Resilient - Europe* Slovenia will seek:

- to facilitate the EU's recovery and resilience,
- reflect on the future of Europe,
- strengthen the rule of law and European values,
- and increase security and stability in the European neighborhood.

The current large-scale health emergency following the COVID-19 pandemic affects all Member States that are unable to respond adequately on their own and therefore requires a collective response at EU level. That is why Slovenia emphasized strengthening the resilience of the European Union as one of its main priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic, during which life and work moved into online space, increased our vulnerability to cyberattacks. Therefore, Slovenia will focus its efforts on strengthening European cyber resilience. More needs to be done to be better prepared and able to respond in a coordinated way to potential large-scale cyberattacks.

At the same time, it will be necessary to ensure a lasting recovery in all sectors of the economy and public life. To mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the Slovenian Presidency's priorities will be the effective implementation of the EU Next Generation instrument and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, in order to facilitate the adoption of national recovery plans as soon as possible. The desire is to make the most of the implementation of these two tools to accelerate the transition to green and digital, which will create jobs, strengthen the resilience of our societies and ensure the health of our environment.

The digital transformation was one of the EU's goals before the pandemic, an event that only accelerated the process. Digital technologies have become essential for work, business, learning, socialization and access to everything from health services to culture. As current legislation no longer satisfactorily addresses current challenges, progress needs to be made on digital services and markets for the EU to set new standards in the use of digital platforms. Slovenia will strive for Europe's digital sovereignty and the ethical use and development of artificial intelligence, which is identified as one of the key technologies of the future due to the availability of big data.

The Slovenian Presidency, with the support of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, will take all necessary steps to strengthen transatlantic relations. Close cooperation with the United States and NATO, based on common principles, values and interests, is the best guarantee of strengthening the EU's position in the international community and facilitating the promotion of common interests by Member States. Special attention will be paid to the countries of the Western Balkans, their future in Europe and the credible continuation of the EU enlargement process. Slovenia will pursue the economic recovery of the countries in the region. To ensure sustainable development, we need to work with them to make green and digital transformation a reality and to improve connectivity within the region and the European Union. Efforts will focus on improving the region's resilience, including cyber resilience. The main principle of our efforts will be to build a positive future for young people. To this end, Slovenia will host an EU-Western Balkans Summit in the autumn.

From the point of view of continuity, it is very important that Slovenia is based on the document of the Trio of Presidencies. Follows up on priorities of Germany and Portugal, making its priorities compatible with the previous period. The three Presidencies are doing their utmost to relaunch and deepen the single market, further transition to green and digital transformation, strive for digital sovereignty, ensure the EU's strategic autonomy through a dynamic industrial policy, support for SMEs and start-ups. enterprises, controlling foreign direct investment, building more resilient

infrastructure, especially in the health sector, and producing critical goods in Europe in order to reduce over-dependence on third countries.

After that, the existing German - Portuguese - Slovenian trio will be replaced on the threshold of 2022 by the French - Czech - Swedish trio. It is the same composition of the trio as in 2008 - 2009. The connection of these two trios (one with the participation of Germany and the other under the baton of France) is very real. Germany and France have always been able to reach mutually acceptable compromises in the past, including unprecedented measures to support economies in overcoming crises. Although Germany and France sometimes disagree for the first time, the effort to find a balanced compromise has been the absolute basis of their policy within the EU for many decades. Their cooperation is so institutionalized and takes place on so many levels that partial disagreements never mean the end of it. It can therefore be assumed that this will be no different in their approach to the Western Balkan countries. The Czech presidency, which will start next year in July, also wants to move the topic forward.

III. The Western Balkans on the Road to the European Union, or in a Dead End?

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), the framework for EU-country relations in the region, and the Stability Pact, a wider initiative involving all key international players. The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. The Thessaloniki European Council in 2003 reaffirmed that all SAP countries are potential candidates for EU membership. This "European perspective" was reaffirmed in the Commission's Western Balkans Strategy of February 2018 and in the declarations following subsequent EU-Western Balkans summit. According to Biscop (2019), to believe in the values on which our democratic states are founded inherently implies a belief in their universality, because an opposite amounts to violation of these values. To pretend, for example, that human rights do not equally apply to all humans is to deny the very idea of human rights. Not all governments recognize the universality of these values, but that does not affect their universal validity.

The EU has therefore developed a policy to promote the gradual integration of the countries of the Western Balkans with the Union, with an emphasis on respect for European values and the rule of law. On July 1, 2013, Croatia became the first of the seven countries to join, and Montenegro, Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Albania are official candidates. Accession negotiations have been opened and chapters with Montenegro and Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

Launched in 1999, SAP is a strategic framework to support the gradual rapprochement of the Western Balkan countries with the EU. It is based on bilateral contractual relations, financial assistance, political dialogue, trade relations and regional cooperation. Contractual relations take the form of Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs). They ensure political and economic cooperation and the establishment of free trade areas with the countries concerned. Based on common democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, each SAA establishes permanent cooperation structures. The Stabilization and Association Council, which meets annually at ministerial level, shall oversee the application and implementation of the relevant agreement. He is assisted by the Stabilization and Association Committee. Finally, the Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) ensures cooperation between the parliaments of the Western Balkans and the European Parliament. Since the entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo in April 2016, the Stabilization and Association Agreements are now in force with all candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans. In the case of Kosovo, the Stabilization and Association Agreement is an EU-only agreement that does not need to be ratified by the Member States (five Member States do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state). Trade and trade-related aspects of the SAA are covered by the Interim Agreements. They usually enter into force quickly after they have been signed, as trade is an exclusive competence of the EU.

Applicants for EU membership must meet the Copenhagen political criteria. Once a country has been recognized as a candidate, it moves through the various stages of the process at a rate largely

dependent on its own merits and progress. A candidate country must adopt and implement all EU legislation (the *acquis communautaire*). The Commission reports on progress in its annual country reports. Every important decision is taken by the Council, acting by unanimity, from the opening of negotiations to their closure. The accession treaty has to be endorsed by Parliament and the Council before being ratified by all contracting states. Candidate and potential candidate countries receive financial assistance to carry out the necessary reforms. Since 2007, EU pre-accession assistance has been channeled through a single, unified instrument - the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). Most candidate and potential candidate countries may also participate in the EU programs.

European integration and regional cooperation are closely linked. One of SAP's key objectives is to encourage countries in the region to work together in a wide range of areas, including the prosecution of war crimes, border issues, refugees and the fight against organized crime. A specific component of the IPA is intended for regional cooperation and cross-border programs. The Sarajevo Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) operates under the auspices of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). The RCC aims to support the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of non-EU members and to develop cooperation in areas such as economic and social development, energy and infrastructure, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, human capital building and parliamentary relations. The EU and many individual Member States support and participate in the RCC. Another important regional initiative is the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). In addition, the countries of the Western Balkans participate in a number of regional frameworks. It would be highly desirable for the countries of the Western Balkans to be able to participate effectively in the Three Seas Initiative as well.

Visa-free travel to the Schengen area has been granted to citizens of the Republic of Northern Macedonia), Montenegro and Serbia since December 2009 and to citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina since November 2010. In January 2012, a visa liberalization dialogue was launched with Kosovo. In July 2018, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo met the last criterion. Parliament followed and decided to open interinstitutional negotiations, which were ongoing.

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 ongoing reforms. In October 2013, the Commission clearly recommended that Albania be granted EU candidate status in June 2014. In view of the country's progress, the Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Albania in 2016, 2018 and 2019. In June 2018, the Council agreed on possible accession negotiations with Albania in June 2019, provided that the necessary conditions are met. However, in June 2019 and October 2019, the Council did not recognize the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, it finally decided to open accession negotiations, provided that a set of conditions is met. In July 2020, the Commission presented to the Member States a proposal for a negotiating framework - the first to take into account the "revised Western Balkans enlargement methodology" published in February 2020. However, accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia have not yet started.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate country. The Stabilization and Association Agreement was negotiated and signed in June 2008, but its entry into force was frozen, mainly due to the country's failure to implement a key ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. The EU's "renewed approach" to the country, which focused more on economic governance, enabled the long-awaited entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement on 1 June 2015. The country applied for membership on 15 February 2016. In May 2019, the Commission published its opinion, including a list of 14 key priorities for Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on Bosnia and Herzegovina's replies to a comprehensive questionnaire. Ensuring the proper functioning of the Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the parliamentary dimension of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, is one of the 14 key priorities. In July 2020, almost five years after the first and so far only SAPC meeting in November 2015, the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina voted on the SAPC Rules of Procedure, paving the way for their formal adoption by the SAPC in June 2021.

The Republic of North Macedonia applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was granted EU candidate status in December 2005. However, the country has not been able to open accession negotiations for many years, mainly due to a dispute with Greece over the use of Macedonia. This dispute has been successfully resolved through the "Prespa Agreement" on the new name of the country - the Republic of Northern Macedonia - which entered into force in February 2019. Since 2009, the Commission has always recommended that accession negotiations be opened. In June 2018, the Council agreed on the possible opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia in June 2019, provided that the necessary conditions are met. However, neither in June 2019 nor in October 2019 did the Council announce the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, the Council decided to open accession negotiations without further conditionality. In July 2020, the Commission presented a proposal for a negotiating framework - the first that takes into account the "revised Western Balkans enlargement methodology" - to Member States. However, accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia - and Albania - have not yet begun. This is mainly due to problems between North Macedonia and Bulgaria regarding identity, language and history.

Kosovo is a potential candidate for EU accession. It unilaterally declared independence in February 2008. Kosovo's independence was not recognized by five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) and two countries in the region (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). In July 2018, six years after the issuance of the visa liberalization plan, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo met all the criteria. The European Parliament immediately followed suit and launched the ongoing interinstitutional negotiations. In the region, only Kosovo remains excluded from visa liberalization, as some EU Member States continue to have reservations. Following a major agreement on the normalization of relations in Belgrade and Pristina in April 2013, the European Council in June 2013 decided to open negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo, which entered into force on 1 April 2016. remains closely linked to the high-level dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which will facilitate the EU, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement to normalize their relations. The last high-level meeting for dialogue took place on 15 June 2021.

Montenegro, which gained independence in 2006, applied for EU membership in December 2008. It acquired candidate status in December 2010 and accession negotiations were opened in June 2012. In line with the EU's "new approach" to the accession process, the basic rule of the legal chapter - Chapter 23 on judicial reform and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 on freedom, security and justice - was opened at an early stage of negotiations, in December 2013. all 33 chapters examined were opened, of which only three were provisionally closed. The last remaining key chapter (on competition policy) was opened in June 2020. In its strategy for the Western Balkans, published in February 2018, the Commission stated that Montenegro (and Serbia) could join the EU by 2025, while acknowledging that this perspective was 'extremely ambitious'.

Serbia applied for EU membership in December 2009 and gained candidate status in March 2012 after Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on Kosovo's regional representation. Accession negotiations were formally opened on 21 January 2014. The first two chapters, including the chapter on normalization of relations with Kosovo, were opened in December 2015. Chapters 23 and 24 on the rule of law were opened on 18 July 2016. To date, 18 of 35 negotiating chapters, two of which have been provisionally closed. Since December 2019 no new chapters have been opened. In its strategy for the Western Balkans, published in February 2018, the Commission stated that Serbia (and Montenegro) could join the EU by 2025, although it acknowledged that the perspective was "extremely ambitious". Serbia's future integration into the EU - as well as Kosovo - remains closely linked to the high-level dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo facilitated by the EU, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement to normalize their relations. The last high-level meeting for dialogue took place on 15 June 2021.

IV. The Western Balkans and Three Seas Initiative or The Belt and Road Initiative

Three Seas is an initiative that connects twelve EU Member States between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. History has dealt with these peoples of Central and Eastern Europe with very different hands, and their cultural and religious backgrounds are similarly diverse. Nevertheless, the stories of all these countries have one chapter in common: the Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into two parts and hampered natural development, economic growth and international unity in the region for half a century. While the nations of Western Europe are connected by roads and railways, power lines and oil and gas pipelines, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe remain relatively disconnected from each other in terms of modern infrastructure. The deficit is particularly acute along the north-south axis of the region.

If we take a closer look at the map of Europe, we should not miss the fact that between the Black and Adriatic Seas there is a large area of six countries of the Western Balkans, which does not participate in the activities of the Three Seas Initiative. Although the European Union's Common Economic and Customs Area has paved the way for the stable development of the continent as a whole, the countries of the Western Balkans continue to stand out from their European counterparts due to their economic disparities and outdated infrastructure. Despite the collective policy of the European Union, the gap that developed in the second half of the 20th century must be bridged as soon as possible. It is estimated that the lack of investment in infrastructure, energy and digital fields has increased enormously over the years. Removing this deficit would significantly boost development in the region and strengthen and unite Europe as a whole. The Three Seas Initiative have been designed from the outset to complement rather than compete with the European Union.

The objectives of the Three Seas initiative are the following (Three Seas, 2021):

- *Economic growth.* The main goal of the overall initiative is to support economic growth and prosperity in the region. Greater activity in trade and service provision in the region and with neighboring countries creates such opportunities and makes Europe as a whole more competitive on a global scale.
- *Greater interest among investors.* In the context of the European Union, the Three Seas countries have been excelling at above-average economic growth rates for many years. As such, they offer investors a potentially higher rate of return. Working together and implementing similar policies will make these countries more attractive in the global financial market.
- *Energy security.* Energy is not only an economic problem but has also become a strategic and security problem. A coherent, well-functioning energy market and freedom of choice between suppliers will increase open competition, ensure better supply to the region and strengthen energy security.
- *Geopolitics.* Strong economic development throughout Europe, including the Three Seas region, will help to defend current geopolitical interests more effectively, while at the same time opposing unfavorable interests.
- *Smart connection.* In terms of new investments, the aim is to make the most of the region's experience and potential in implementing digital solutions. This goes beyond the development of digital infrastructure and includes the creation of intelligent, modern solutions for data exchange and more efficient use of information.
- *Achieving climate goals.* A coherent approach by Central European nations to the development of new and modern infrastructure will help the region to move towards lower carbon emissions and carbon neutrality. Cooperation between the three seas and their partners will lead to a stronger, more unified and internationally competitive Europe.

At first sight, it is clear, that the countries of the Western Balkans can successfully participate in all these goals and thus contribute to the development of European prosperity. The Sixth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative on 9th of July 2021 began with a Presidential Panel on the topic “Three Seas Initiative: A path to a stronger, united and competitive Europe”.

On the other hand, Russian and China's activities in this corner of Europe can be an undesirable alternative to the development of the Balkans. The fundamental difference is that their activities are not based on values common to the EU states but are based on the authoritarian government of the Russian Federation, or the exclusive position of the Communist Party in the case of China. It would therefore be unreasonable if (thanks to European passivity) Russian or Chinese geopolitical interests, which are incompatible with European values, began to dominate the Western Balkans. The Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. The stated objectives are "to construct a unified large market and make full use of both international and domestic markets, through cultural exchange and integration, to enhance mutual understanding and trust of member nations, resulting in an innovative pattern of capital inflows, talent pools, and technology databases." The Belt and Road Initiative addresses an "infrastructure gap" and thus has the potential to accelerate economic growth across the Asia Pacific, Africa and Central and Eastern Europe.

IV. Conclusion

The Western Balkan region is a priority for the European Union. The EU is already the main political, economic and trade partner of the region. People from the European Union and from the Western Balkans do not only share a common history and culture but they share also a common future. As High Representative/ and EC Vice President Josep Borrell stated: "the future of the region lies in the EU" (EEAS, 2021). Here we can only imagine the potential of a democratic region of the Western Balkans that respects the rule of law and functions as a single market in a market economy. To unlock this potential, the Member and Candidate or Potential candidates States must work together to address the lack of investment. To fulfill this mission, it is necessary to use all possible platforms that have already been created and the Three Seas Initiative is undoubtedly one of them. For geopolitical reasons, neither China nor Russia should use this option.

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