

POLICY PAPER

The Western Balkans on their way to the EU – status quo regardless of refugees

Michal Vít

- **This text analyses the contemporary political and societal context of the Western Balkan region (WB) from the perspective of EU enlargement. It strives to present evidence of a correlation between the slowly declining interest in this region from the EU's perspective, with a corresponding discrepancy between declared integration commitments and their actual execution. The migrant crisis adds further complications and is at the heart of these deteriorating developments. The EU's enlargement policy towards the WB has weakened its transformational power towards new possible EU member states in the past decade. Looking at the enlargement policy in the context of migrant crisis from a broader perspective, it has failed to manifest unity and solidarity when managing fundamental problems such as migrant flows. The underestimated importance of the EU-WB relations in the larger scale of EU policies will also be discussed.**



The migrant crisis brought the WB to the attention of global media and a large crowd of experts and citizens. However, beyond the crisis, attention is first and foremost being focused on issues concerning the commitment of these countries to EU integration and on the potential inclusion of some WB countries into the EU enlargement process. The crisis has therefore brought forward the question of whether the integration efforts of WB countries into the EU are being affected. With slight exaggeration, it can be argued that the current level of cooperation is not helpful to either side involved – not to the EU and certainly not to the WB.

So far, the way the WB region is treated by the EU shows that there is little desire to speed up the enlargement process. From the perspective of WB countries, the perception is that the EU does not provide sufficient financial resources to act as a key transformative power, while in parallel opening up the possibility that these resources can be provided by other countries such as China, without the similar political and societal conditionality.¹ It is clear that the current shaping of the integration process is to some extent unwanted by either side: the EU does not see this question as a priority, while the WB countries do not want to lose their sovereignty over a wide scope of policies.

The political context of the Western Balkans-EU relations

The migrant crisis has exposed the nature of the competitive relationship between WB states and the EU,

¹ An overview of investments provided by China to individual WB countries is available here:

<http://www.ebrd.com/documents/comms-and-bis/see-china-investments.pdf> and with broader introduction here:

<http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2016/08/30/the-western-balkans-moving-towards-europe/>

The point that is often criticized by experts is the fact that China is supporting (and eventually, building) projects for which financial support was not approved by other financiers, such as the EBRD, in cases like the motorway between Podgorica and Bjelo Polje in Montenegro. In addition to this, the planning of some projects does not correspond to trans-European network plans, such as the motorway in Montenegro or between Banja Luka and Split. In this

mainly on the political level. It has become increasingly clear that when financial incentives are concerned, political considerations tend to become notably less significant, making the EU's transformational agenda less appealing than short term economic gains provided by Russia, China, or Gulf countries such as United Arab Emirates (UAE).

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The decreasing strategic role of the EU in the WB can be compared to the increasing influence of different countries using this opportunity to increase their political and economic influence in the region, such as China, Russia and certain Arab countries who have carried out strategic investments in Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and, to a lesser extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania.² One way to summarize the current situation would be to say that the WB countries' admission to the EU has to be addressed only in such a way that the topic of the EU integration remains open by maintaining ongoing negotiations. In this context, it seems that neither the European Commission (EC), nor the respective governments of the WB countries believe in the possibility of an actual accession in foreseeable future.³ The topic

context, it has to be mentioned that China is willing to support projects which will bring future political gains, as some projects supported by China, such as the motorways, were evaluated as economically not attractive.

² A detailed analysis of China's investments can be found here: <http://atimes.com/2016/07/china-in-the-balkans-montenegro-bosnia-herzegovina-open-new-frontiers>

³ Based on interviews undertaken in the WB and V4 region with experts and representatives of think-tanks (March/June 2016). See the overview of individual countries' status here:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/check-current-status/index_en.htm

of the migrant crisis entering the fray of the relations between WB countries and the EU showed strongly how building tangible forms of cooperation was not in the particular interest of either of the two sides involved.⁴ During 2015 and first half of the 2016, there was no EU-based initiative to invite WB countries to participate in creating solutions to manage the flow of migrants passing through Balkan countries. This leads to the question of what does this flawed cooperation mean for prospective relations between the EU and the WB?

It is clear that the historical opportunity to tie the region to the EU that emerged with the fall of communism was not used. At this point, the current situation does not provide many reasons for optimism: since the so-called Eastern enlargement in 2004, the WB states have not been exposed to any external threat of vital importance, and gradually obtained the status of candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia) with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.⁵ Since the introduction of the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for WB countries in 2009⁶, Russia has gradually increased its interest in the Adriatic Sea.⁷ This development is a part of the reasoning behind the NATO membership invitation extended to Montenegro in 2015. Thus, without a tangible security threat in the region, such as a disproportionate increase of Russian influence, no significant shift of the WB towards the EU, or vice-versa, should be expected.

The political and social development of Western Balkan Region

A broader understanding of the integration perspectives of the WB countries can be reached using social and demographic indicators, such as population development. It is for example clear that a young generation, that would strongly support and demand from their governments a focused integration process, is missing in the region. Kosovo serves as a virtuous (counter-)example of this, with the largest share of the young generation of the WB countries buoying the highest regional support for EU membership.⁸ The young generation exerts pressure on the government to reinforce EU integration as a priority, a situation that is not comparable in other WB countries.

Despite the fact that the countries in question differ greatly, they all share two key indicators of social and economic development, which in effect act as main constraints to socio-economic progress. First of all, a continuous decrease or stagnation of its populations during the last decade. Numbers plummeted most significantly between the years 2006 and 2015 in Kosovo (from 2,2 million to 1,8 million), Serbia (from 7,4 million to 7,1 million) and Albania (from 3 million to 2,9 million). Serbia's birth to death ratio has been negative for 20 years now, while it has been constantly lowering for the past 10 years in Kosovo and Albania, causing a stagnation in population growth in these countries and in general in the region. To illustrate this fact, 82,125 babies were born in Albania in 1990 but only 33,221 in 2015. In Kosovo,

⁴ Despite the fact that ad hoc meetings of countries involving countries of the Balkan region with Austria and Germany were organized (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkans-brace-for-migrant-crisis-shifts-03-04-2016>), the EU-based approach involving EU representatives hand in hand with selected member states was missing (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/europe-s-dilemma-over-migrants-can-only-get-worse-08-21-2015-1>).

Even if for example Serbia showed good will in offering basic assistance to migrants, EU support to the WB countries was evaluated rather as an ambivalent (based on expert interviews undertaken in the WB).

⁵ Both countries aim to get candidate status. Bosnia officially applied for membership in 2016, Kosovo not yet. Both countries

have high public support for potential EU membership. However, there are key issues to be solved regarding how to create institutions in a new state (Kosovo) and their stability in a state facing possible disintegration (Bosnia).

⁶ See here for details about the granting of the MAP:

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37356.htm

⁷ See here for Details about the rising interest of Russia towards the Adriatic Sea: <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-quest-for-balkan-influence-and-bases/>

⁸ According results of Balkan Barometer published by the Regional Cooperation Council in the 2016. See:

<http://www.rcc.int/seeds/results/2/balkan-opinion-barometer>

České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko
Czech Visions for Europe, European Visions for the Czechs

55,175 babies were born in 1990, and in 2015 only 31,545. The unemployment rate is the second relevant indicator. In the last ten years, unemployment oscillated between 18 and 25% in Albania, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. In the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the figures oscillate between 35 and 45%. The number of asylum applicants from the WB region to the EFTA/EU countries in 2015 further illustrates the relation between demographic development and economic conditions: a staggering total of 177,925 applications, the majority of them by ethnic Albanians, were received⁹. Such numbers are even more alarming given that there is no armed conflict taking place in the region, contrary to the 1990s.

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The last ten years can be called a lost decade for the WB region. Economically, individual countries have been dealing with the consequences of civil war or even the effects of international embargos levied upon them by the neighbouring countries or the international community. As a result, Western foreign direct investments (FDI) have been decreasing since 2008, coupled with the effects of the economic crisis.¹⁰ From the perspective of economic development and political stability, FDIs from the West are seen as an indicator of social and political stability. The same cannot be said about those coming from Russia or China, which are animated by the desire to gain control over strategic decision-making in politics rather than financial profit. For China, investments in the WB are seen as a "gateway" to the EU and have already been widely

discussed.¹¹ In this context, it is only stating the obvious to say that the EU is steadily losing its potential to play a significant political and transformational role in the region, and to effectively influence the behaviour of those WB countries looking to join the EU. The relationship between the EU and the WB seems therefore to be reduced to its sole economic dimension, which holds up progress on other issues. This was not only caused by the lack of interest by the EU in the WB region, but also by the lack of guarantees advanced by the countries of the region, most notably in relation to the promotion of the rule of law in the long term, and by extension the acceptance of EU norms, both political and social. However, it is hard to promote and further enforce the rule of law when individual countries deal with such fundamental questions to their integrity, such as in the cases of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, never-ending disputes over the international recognition of a country itself (Kosovo) are also factors that hamper progress, since they force countries to focus on domestic issues rather than on the EU integration process.

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It has been expected that the migrant crisis would bring the integration process back to life because of how deeply it concerns both the EU and WB countries.¹²

⁹ For the overview of applications, see: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Countries_of_origin_of_\(non-EU\)_asylum_seekers_in_the_EU-28_Member_States,_2014_and_2015_\(thousands_of_first_time_applicants\)_YB16.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Countries_of_origin_of_(non-EU)_asylum_seekers_in_the_EU-28_Member_States,_2014_and_2015_(thousands_of_first_time_applicants)_YB16.png)

¹⁰ For more details regarding the impact and development of FDIs, see:

https://editorialexpress.com/cgi-bin/conference/download.cgi?db_name=WCCCE2015&paper_id=184

¹¹ See for example <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/chinas-growing-ties-with-serbia/> or http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian for reference.

¹² See for example the policy papers published by the EUISS: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief-9_Western_Balkans.pdf and

However, this was not the case, and current issues regarding the migrant crisis are being addressed only via bilateral and interstate agreements among the WB and V4 countries, and WB and EU countries respectively. The increased intensity of communication was nevertheless not matched by the adequate shift in admission talks on giving the EU–WB relations a new common substance, as it was expected for example by Serbia.¹³

The states of the so-called “Balkan route” on their way to the EU

In comparison with the situation in Macedonia which has spent more than 10 years without significant progress since gaining the candidacy status in the 2005, things have moved much faster in case of Serbia. It was officially listed as a candidate country in 2013, and by end of 2016, one chapter was already closed for negotiations with three new chapters expected to be opened in the first months of 2017. Nevertheless, any further acceleration of the integration process for the WB region is hindered by the European Commission’s neighbourhood and enlargement policies, which are not keen to speed up the integration process towards WB. European Commission President Juncker’s statement from 2014, where he stated that another enlargement could not be expected until 2019 certainly did not brighten the prospects of the WB countries.¹⁴ Regardless, the greatest obstacle on Serbia’s way to the EU remains the issue of Kosovo, or more precisely Serbia’s refusal to recognise Kosovo as a sovereign independent state. The country’s long-term hesitation regarding its foreign policy orientation towards either the EU or Russia only further complicates the negotiations¹⁵.

Agreements with Russia on hosting military bases in the future are a case in point of how choices may influence Serbia’s EU accession process¹⁶.

Besides the nature of the relationship between the EU and the WB, the position of Greece also needs to be understood, given its position as the first EU country on the Balkans route. In many respects, the situation of Greece, both politically and economically, is very complicated as well. Since 2009, Greece has been facing strong macroeconomic pressure and budget cuts, leaving the contemporary Greek economy contracted by 25% compared to its 2009 level.¹⁷ However, the enforcement of European standards (both the Schengen agreement and of the Eurozone) is still expected from individual member states. Greece has not been able to respect this, as symbolized by its inability to respect the Dublin regulations concerning the registration of migrants, in what was albeit an overwhelming situation for which the country was underequipped, especially on the islands in the Aegean Sea. The Greek side argues that additional resources are needed to effectively deal with the flow of people, to protect the external Schengen border, and to ensure proper living conditions for the refugees. The resources are even more needed in that they could avoid further damage, caused by these migratory pressures, to an economy that is barely in recovery from the various austerity measures.¹⁸ The Greek situation is much direr than anywhere in the EU with creditors maintaining a strong pressure, a public administration in shambles and little to no economic prosperity in sight¹⁹. Therefore, the role of financial demands, as they related to the management of migration, cannot be considered purely in financial terms, but also must take into account the relevant social and political

http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_28_Borders.pdf, or by EMiS <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12942.pdf>

¹³ According to an interview with representatives of the Czech MFA.
¹⁴ See:

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/juncker-to-halt-enlargement-as-eu-commission-head/articleshow/38427661.cms>

¹⁵ <http://suffragio.org/2014/10/15/beware-putins-southern-european-soft-power-front/>

¹⁶ http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=09&dd=04&nav_id=91512

¹⁷ For details, see:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/tough-austerity-measures-in-greece-leave-nearly-a-million-people-with-no-access-to-healthcare-9142274.html>

¹⁸ For details, see: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece-oecd-idUSKCN0WC1BC>

¹⁹ According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, Greek expenses related to the migrant crisis reached 0.17% of the country’s GDP in 2015 (0.2% for Germany, 0.1% for Hungary and 0.07% for Serbia). The IMF analysis is available here: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1602.pdf>

contexts and risks, such as the stability of public administration or the level of corruption. It is impossible to expect that ad hoc financial support will solve long-term issues that affect a variety of problems in carrying out public administration.

The situation at the Greek-Macedonian border (April 2016)

The situation at the Idomeni refugee camp at the Macedonian-Greek border (eventually shut down at the end of May 2016), and other camps in Macedonia and Serbia as well, represents an interesting perspective on how assistance is provided to people in need in individual states on the Balkan route. In July 2016, basic assistance to refugees was provided thanks to volunteers from all over Europe and NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières. Security was ensured by the police of the respective countries, who were also responsible for guarding the borders, mainly between Macedonia and Greece. Guards at the so-called Green border between Macedonia and Serbia, and Bulgaria and Serbia were also introduced. The most striking remains however the absence of communication between the various groups that provide aid to the migrants and the state institutions of Greece and Macedonia. Thus, the aforementioned organisations provided only targeted assistance, such as basic logistical and medical support rather than crucial legal support regarding the refugees' immigration status in Greece or further countries on their road.

Greece and the WB countries display two common characteristics: broken trust with the EU as a whole. Secondly, missing sense of need to approach the migrant crisis as European issue involving the EU as well as WB. This can be demonstrated in the case of fence-building on the Greek-Macedonian border without prior consultation with the EU. The situation is further complicated by the fact that citizens of WB countries are or have been tempted by

migration themselves, especially the ethnic Albanians from Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, who constitute the poorest ethnic group of all the Balkans. In the last decade, a significant number of people left WB countries to work in the EU under the guise of now-defunct conditions and regulations that de facto allowed for legal emigration. It is these three countries (Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia), most hit by migration to the EU, that now lack a part of their population that strives for the benefits of EU membership and implementation of norms at the national level.

Central Europe and the migrant crisis

From the Central European perspective, the situation is approached from a narrow national political perspective and is used to achieve mainly domestic goals. This was clearly shown during the political campaign prior to the parliamentary elections in Poland (fall 2015) and Slovakia (spring 2016), in which parties and movements with rather extreme political stances succeeded due to their campaigns taking a hard stance on migration issues. According to opinion polls carried out in Poland, the opposition against accepting refugees gained an additional 32% support between May and December 2015, reaching an all-time high of 53 %²⁰. After a brief analysis of the political manifestos of the two parties with the harshest attitude towards the acceptance of refugee, Kukiz 15 in Poland and L'S-NS in Slovakia, it is quite surprising to notice that they do not prioritize the strong distance to migration policy of EU, and asylum seeks legislation proposals in particular. Taking advantage of the migrant crisis in order to achieve political goals and personal ambitions is common in other Central and Western European countries as well. Such misuse of the issue is more an effect of the long-term development of a particular country's society rather than a genuine attempt at dealing with the migrant crisis itself. A closer look at the political programs of parties such as Fidesz or PiS from the last ten years reveals that the present approach to refugees stems

²⁰ http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2015/12_2015.pdf

more from a utilitarian point of view rather than a real concern with the migrant crisis in itself or its possible impacts on societies. There are, particularly in Hungary and Poland, tendencies which are translated into emphasized national identity building and refusing external influences such as EU migration policy.²¹

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Conclusions

The exaggerated reaction of the sovereign movements of Central Europe points out how the migrant crisis is used to pursue goals different from solving the crisis itself and establishing a functional framework for integrating newcomers. Irrespective of self-avowed efforts by individual WB countries to pursue EU integration, only political cooperation, mainly at the interstate level, seems to be able to fulfil the agenda of mutual relations. As far as Central Europe is concerned, it is clear that the issue of the migration crisis has failed to boost its interest in the WB region despite ad hoc meetings. In parallel, the migrant crisis has shown the WB countries' lack of interest in utilising newly established channels to strengthen their relationship with the EU and vice versa due to fact that these are ad hoc rather than representing a new structural substance. It is possible that in hindsight, maybe ten years from now, the migrant crisis will be seen as a wasted opportunity for the region of the WB, both from the perspective of the EU and of Central Europe.

²¹ In the understanding of parties like PiS or Fidesz, this is an example of the decreased role of nation states in the EU decision-making process.

Recommendations

To the European Union and member states involved

- Search for new means of communication (e.g. via specific policies) between the EU and the WB region, and maintain the EU enlargement question within the actual agenda of mutual relations.
- Focus on economic development leading to reducing unemployment mainly among the young generation, thus eliminating motives for economic migration to the EU countries.
- Establish a framework of mutual relations on the basis of concrete issues – e.g. infrastructure development cooperation, supporting small businesses and linking a stable rule-of-law environment to foreign investments.
- Strive for coordinated development cooperation of the EU member countries in order to prevent individual sectors from overlapping.
- In case of repeated escalation of the migration crisis on the so-called Balkan route, engage in communication and assistance based on the tools of the EU, not intergovernmental agreements.

To the countries of the Western Balkans

- Work towards a rule-of-law environment with help from the EU.
- Insist on the thorough application of legal norms in order to increase FDIs from the EU.
- Maintain the issue of EU admission as a key political priority.

Michal Vít

Ph.D. graduate of the joint program of Masaryk University and University of Leipzig entitled East and Central Europe in Transnational Perspective. Vít holds MA in European studies from Masaryk University in Brno and his research focuses on the process of national identities' forming of political parties in Central Europe.



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