

Europe and the Western Balkans: Dull Reality and Unrealistic Expectations

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French President Emmanuel Macron made headlines in October 2019 for vetoing EU accession talks with Albania and Macedonia. But the stalling accession process for the Western Balkans as a whole cannot be put down to one country's obstructionism. For leaders in the region, EU membership risks losing control over power and patronage. For EU leaders, it is a political headache that they would rather avoid. Writer and diplomat Zlatko Dizdarević analyses how and why the process seems to be going nowhere, as both parties turn in upon themselves. From the wider geopolitical game to the re-emergence of tensions in the region, he warns of the risks that continued ambiguity and pretence could bring.

To both outside observers and increasing numbers of its citizens, the European Union is turning into an arena of various political absurdities. This slide is happening slowly but surely regardless of how hard officials in Brussels try to explain it away. The facts unambiguously show the EU now is far from the relations, standards, political logic, and even the principles on which the EU rested when the so-called Thessaloniki promise was signed 16 years ago with unconditional commitment: the future of the Western Balkans is in the European Union.

This summer Angela Merkel and Viktor Orbán commemorated August 19, 1989, the historic day when Hungary – then behind the Iron Curtain – opened its border to 700 refugees from East Germany en route to Austria and freedom. Later that year the Berlin Wall would fall. Until this 30th birthday of freedom for refugees, Orbán was a passionate critic of Merkel's "unforgivable open-door policy" for asylum seekers. However, on this occasion, the fence-building Prime Minister of Hungary was happy to voice his appreciation for the German Chancellor. In response to Orbán's honeyed insisting on the two countries' attachment to "European values", Merkel said loudly that Europe will only be truly united when all the countries of the Western Balkans join the EU.

As shadows fall over much of what Europe promised 20 years ago, there was considerable scepticism, publicly expressed by many in the Balkans, about the declarations made that day. Back in Thessaloniki in 2003, the attitude towards the Western Balkans waiting room was optimistic. This opinion is not based only on the mood or political convictions, but on what were clear and solid criteria for both candidacy and membership in the European Union. In this context, the bitter statement of a German Left MP quoted in European media last year is worth recalling: the EU is now in such a condition that it would not meet the criteria for its membership of itself.

Analysis of the new reality of the EU-Western Balkans processes provide ample evidence of a serious slowdown, even compared to 2018. In some cases, the reality has become still more troublesome. The reasons are twofold. First, there are internal issues that have bred the counter-European mechanism. Second, there is external unwillingness, ignorance or very bad judgment on the part of the EU itself regarding the essence of the local obstruction to reforms and progress towards the EU. The logic behind the new governing profiteer-nationalist leaders and their parties is simple: any move towards the EU is a major step towards losing their power, based as

this is on disorganisation, profiteering, corruption, and a paralysed state.

The limits of the Berlin Process

In the past decade, the most serious attempt of the EU countries to integrate the countries of the Western Balkans is known as the Berlin Process. The first conference of this process, initiated by Angela Merkel, was held in Berlin on August 24 2014.

All these years, the EU structures and administration have formally and routinely engaged in the Berlin Process as an enlarged coalition of ten European Union countries in the name of the region's further development. First, there were Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Slovenia and then France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Poland, Greece, and Bulgaria joined. Annual meetings of the leaders of these countries have taken place in Vienna, Paris, Trieste, and London. The most recent in Poznan, Poland, was held in July 2019.

These meetings primarily aimed to support the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro – in their efforts towards EU membership, as well as to encourage closer regional cooperation among them. Initial enthusiasm, however, cooled shortly after the first Berlin conference when then newly elected European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made it clear that there would be no further enlargement during his term. Thus, the Berlin Process was, from the start, a plan B for the Western Balkans. It became clear that the enlargement of the EU would be indefinitely delayed. For political elites in the region, the process became an internal issue. In Europe, attention turned to its own unresolved issues, compared to which the Balkans was no longer a priority.

Looking back on five years of the Berlin Process, it seems clear that its goal was not a more thorough involvement in the internal structures and organisation of the Balkan countries. The aim was to assess formal and technical adherence to the EU principles and to ensure the requirements for joining the EU family were met on paper. Too often the distance of Balkan reality was deliberately overlooked, rather than taking the speed and degree of approaching the EU reality as the true criteria for evaluating the European path of the Balkans.

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Throughout the Berlin process, the final declarations after meetings did not insist strongly enough on building an unchallenged rule of law as the key condition for future candidates and new members. Attitude towards the rule of law has traditionally been a cornerstone of the capacity for democratic processes in countries that have long inherited the basic principles of statehood and civil society. Unfortunately, this fact seems to apply to Europe, but not to the Balkans. Instead, room for manoeuvre was created for the governing castes, especially in the countries created by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Many governments formally pledged to accelerate reforms, resolve bilateral disputes, make progress in reconciliation, and deepen regional cooperation. But the lack of elementary understanding of the rule of law and institutionalism in the Balkans seems to have been overlooked for years by the Europeans.

There are many examples in each of the countries aspiring to join the European Union which corroborate this. Although different, they essentially all share a common denominator: a markedly unstructured, systematically disordered and deliberately neglected rule of law, a prerequisite for reform and accession to the European Union.

Unfortunately, concrete responses from the EU were not sufficient. The main focus of the EU in general, and regarding Western Balkans, is on the economy, profits, and the market, and this region is not a priority in that regard. Within many circles in Europe, and the EU administration in particular, the essence of the perpetual problems in the Balkans, primarily connected to historical, national, and religious issues, is misunderstood. But it is on these grounds that solutions must be sought, not in compliance with the rules of ‘old Europe’.

Stalling progress across the board

The core of the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina stems from the problems arising from a purposefully disintegrated society. Relations in this multinational and multi-religious country are dominated by deliberately awakened animosities, conflicts, and disagreements. It has been a year since the last elections in October 2018 and central government bodies have not been constituted – from parliaments to the Council of Ministers, which has completely or partially blocked all the reform processes linked to EU membership.

This is not a coincidence. The obstructions are caused and maintained by the leaders of all three national communities, or rather by their leading nationalist parties which Brussels considers their chief partner. The judiciary is the weakest link and is under the absolute control of politics that has assumed constitutional-institutional power while blocking all other mechanisms. The EU, on the other hand, deems the reforms achieved impressive. This cynicism is recognised by the public. The Bosnia and Herzegovina candidacy is yet more distant and the date of the start of the negotiations is absolutely uncertain. The country’s leaders, who issue false statements on a daily basis, are most interested in maintaining the status quo, as it is the only way to preserve their power. For them, every step closer to the EU is fatal because it means better functioning of state institutions, judiciary, press freedom, and reduced ethno-national tensions.

In Montenegro, seven years accession negotiations opened, but with only three of 35 negotiation chapters closed, there is already talk of the EU suspending negotiations. The unacceptably bad situation related to Chapters 23 and 24 (judiciary, rule of law, press freedom, security) contributes to this. Corruption at the highest level is widespread, a fact explicitly criticised by the European Commission in their May report. Even so, Montenegro has withdrawn more than half a billion euros from EU funds between 2007 and 2020.

Serbia entered the EU accession process quite effectively. It gained candidate status in 2012, opened negotiations, opened 13 of 34 chapters, and closed 2. Still, the recognition of Kosovo presents an insurmountable problem. Regarding the solution of this issue, Belgrade is further away today than a few years ago, though not just due to their own fault. European support through the optimistic Brussels process, a mediation initiative that began in 2011, has completely failed. Considering all this, much like Croatia, Serbia is struggling to cope with the extremely retrograde ideological visions of the past, which further narrows their path to a European future.

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Macedonia has not opened its accession talks, though it made large and painful concessions in early 2019 and changed its name at Greece’s request. Improving neighbourhood relations has been a priority of the Berlin Process, and the new government in Skopje has achieved this goal, including by signing the Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation with Bulgaria in 2017. However, the start of Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations, as recommended by the European Commission, was halted by France in June 2019. Bulgaria is now imposing a condition that requires the national identity of the 19th-century revolutionary Goce Delčev be changed

to Bulgarian in Macedonian history textbooks – an example of how the conditions set by the EU member states to non-member countries are far from irrelevant.

Kosovo is blocked in the process together with Serbia. Like Bosnia and Herzegovina, they do not yet have membership status. Both countries, each in their own way, seem to be doing their best to delay as long as possible. Europe has failed in this regard and Kosovo is on the verge of a complete blockade due to unresolved internal relations between Albanians and Serbs, dominant corruption across all parts of the system, and crime and radicalism of every kind.

Albania has been an official candidate for membership since June 2014, but internal relations, corruption, and the strong negative influence of the mafia – both locally and in the diaspora – are clear obstacles in the road ahead. A snap election will hardly fix the situation. The favourable opinion of the European Commission did not help either, as other conditions became more complex.

Many in the Western Balkans hoped that the most advanced candidates in the negotiations would have the opportunity to join in 2025. It was naturally assumed that meeting the membership criteria was unquestionable, and that the EU would continue to show interest in enlargement. In this context, Chancellor Merkel's aforementioned statement is encouraging. However, in the context of many recent developments, such an explicit statement is somewhat surprising simply because, over the past few years, the whole global reality has changed, from new relations between America and Europe, the Russian factor, Turkey's position, and developments in the Middle East, to the already devastating situation with refugees and the 'reorganisation' of relations within the EU and at its borders.

A new geopolitics

Global geo-strategic relations involving the Western Balkans are becoming more pronounced. The USA is exerting increased influence to round out its strategic power in this zone. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are officially the last two countries in the Balkans where NATO integration, of great US interest, is not going to plan (Macedonia is in the process of joining). In Belgrade, there is a direct, unhidden Russian influence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska entity fully identifies with Belgrade's political goals and obstructs moves in this direction. Turkey is openly seeking to regain its imperial influence in the Balkans in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia (especially the Sandžak province), and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. While the influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina is predominantly religious and cultural, on Belgrade it is economic.

It is hard to believe that the proposed election of László Trócsányi, Hungary's former Minister of Justice who is very close to President Viktor Orbán, as the Commission's Enlargement Commissioner, would have helped balance external interests in EU enlargement [for more on the candidacy of László Trócsányi, see [here](#)]. The candidate has since been rejected by European parliamentarians for his role in undermining the rule of law in Hungary and at the time of writing it remains unclear who will fill the post. Similarly slim are the prospects of the USA overcoming resistance in Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina to joining NATO. The economic vacuum left by the EU in the Western Balkans is rapidly being filled by China with no resistance whatsoever on the part of the citizens of this region.

Moderate optimism feeds on new concepts such as the Regional Organization for Youth Cooperation exchange initiative, and the London and Poznań meetings of the Berlin process strengthened cooperation on security matters and the economy. Such projects undoubtedly contribute to creating a positive atmosphere through meetings of the citizens of the region, especially young and educated people, bringing them closer and contributing to understanding. However, the negative energy that comes from politics interested solely in the survival of corrupt governments sustained by tensions and hollowed-out institutions is much stronger than the optimism of young

people who, therefore, move abroad in droves.

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There are many examples in everyday political life in the Balkans of a lack of political will to solve problems that, if resolved, could have a positive effect on strengthening regional stability. At one point, it was announced that civil society organisations in the Western Balkans intend to set up a Regional Commission to determine the facts of all victims of war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed in the former Yugoslavia. Despite more than half a million signatures in support of the commission in a region of about 18 million people, not all Balkan governments were willing to support the initiative.

The motivation for deeper involvement of governments in the region for activities within the Berlin Process is declining. The lack of prospects for membership makes it difficult to implement the provisions of previous summits. It is increasingly felt, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that despite various, mostly unrealised, initiatives and projects, the European Union has not yet found enough political will to deal with this country and the depressing consequences of its absurd constitutional system seriously. There is a growing belief that the fundamental interest of the international community is to maintain the status quo which suits current oligarchies interested in divisions based on an exclusively ethno-religious concept in the organisation of the state and society.

Croatia takes the EU Presidency

Traces of all this can be seen in the process of European integration of the Western Balkans, in the different attitudes of the EU countries towards enlargement, and also in relations between the countries which are on their way to the EU. These relations have never been worse since the last war in the former Yugoslavia. This is especially true of the extremely bad relations between Croatia and Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (there is an idea for a 'Croatian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina'), and Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (separatist ideas within Bosnia and Herzegovina). The relations between Serbia and Montenegro are similarly poor and neither Serbia nor Bosnia and Herzegovina recognise Kosovo.

In this context, there are dilemmas about how Croatia will preside over the European Union from January 2020 with its obvious internal radicalisation of the right, nationalist extremism, and support for the defeated fascist tendencies. Croatia has ongoing problems with virtually every country in the region. This is particularly true in the case of its neighbours – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Slovenia. Unresolved borders, alienated property from the Yugoslav era, and issues of the dead and missing persons from the war remain. In addition to this, there is a strong feeling in Bosnia and Herzegovina about the direct and unacceptable interference of Zagreb in its internal affairs.

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Zagreb persistently backs the resolve of the Croatian Democratic Union party (HDZ) of Bosnia and Herzegovina to change the electoral law in a way that would increase their chances of gaining Croat-designated seats. In essence,

the main course of action of HDZ in Bosnia and Herzegovina has become the total denial, open and aggressive, of any civic concept in organising the state. In this context, they demonstrate support for all manner of condemned, retrograde and extreme nationalist forces in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The denial of the verdicts of the Hague International Criminal Tribunal is publicly encouraged and separatist leaders and their criminal associates have now become heroes of the struggle for national interests. These stances are no longer individual cases, but Croatian government policy. It is also noteworthy that the warnings repeatedly sent to Croatia from the EU have been completely ignored, including recommendations and opinions of the Human Rights Tribunal in Strasbourg on specific cases. It is hard to believe that such politics has the necessary credibility during the EU presidency and, in particular, in the process of bringing other Western Balkan countries closer to the European Union.

Ambiguity is untenable

Considering the situation after the recent EU elections, it is difficult to predict whether or to what extent the policy of Brussels towards the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU will change. There have been no tangible indications so far that the logic, strategy, or policy of the EU administration will be different. The functioning of the EU itself is becoming increasingly complex to navigate and major structural changes are unlikely. Overall, political relations in the Balkans resemble the situation across Europe and beyond. Trust is lacking, constructive solutions are few, and there is no turning to the future. Unfortunately, the Balkans are increasingly dealing with the past and persisting with 'old debts' in a destructive, bordering on aggressive manner.

It is hard to say whether, in this context, it would be more desirable to speed up the processes of the accession of the Balkan states to the EU with all the problems arising from this potential 'leap' or to move away from those who do not show sufficient will for integration in order to remain in power. Not because the answer is not clear, but because the EU needs to clarify what outcome is better for Europe as a whole.

The room for manoeuvre of the European Commission is limited and constrained by at least three aggravating factors. First of all, the European Union has again become an open project due to many internal and external issues. However, it cannot be seen as a thorough project of peace, prosperity, and security while the volatile Western Balkans is not a part of it. Second, outside influences in the region, especially those of the USA, Russia, and Turkey, are growing stronger and often in opposition to the interests of the EU. Moreover, these influences are increasingly recognised as acceptable to certain EU countries and candidates for accession. Third, regional cooperation is weakening. Instead, tensions and animosities of various kinds are being encouraged.

The only thing the new Commission should not allow in all this is to prolong the situation without offering clear and unambiguous answers and, more importantly, without taking much more vigorous and concrete action against such tendencies both inside and outside the EU. All in all, the situation in the countries of the Western Balkans, in general and with regard to European integration, is worse than a few years ago. There are fewer reasons for optimism than many in Brussels would like to see or admit.



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