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THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: Do They Share a Future?

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Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of SFR Yugoslavia in 1989, the European Union had an unprecedented opportunity to accept countries such as Poland and Lithuania that had belonged to the Warsaw Pact; ex-Yugoslav successor states such as Macedonia or Croatia; and Albania that had been part of the “other” Europe. Although most of these countries had been admitted to the Union by 2007, in 2014 newly installed EC President Jean-Claude Junckers stated categorically that the EU would not admit any more countries during his mandate; e.g. at least until 2019, if not indefinitely.

The rationale for denying EU accession differs for each country, but the underlying reservations are identical: a country is yet “not prepared” for EU membership; it is “too early” for the EU to accept a new country; or the “cost” of admitting a new member outweighs any benefits that might derive from its accession. These concerns regarding the Western Balkans have only been aggravated following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and the slow pace of political and economic change that has taken place since then. In the opinion of Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule, “member states and candidate countries have grown tired of the pace of the enlargement process, above all, the accession of

Romania and Bulgaria, which raised a lot of questions about the credibility of the process”. Furthermore, over the course of 2015 allegedly more “advanced” EU member countries from Eastern Europe, specifically Poland and Hungary, have been black-sliding politically and economically, making the possible accession of the remaining Western Balkan states even more unpredictably precarious.

European observers cite several kinds of reservations that have been preventing, or at least delaying, the EU’s readiness to admit the countries of the Western Balkans.

Perhaps foremost is the so-called “Enlargement Fatigue.” According to the *Eurobarometer*, in 2013 upwards of 60% of Europeans opposed any further expansion of the EU due to their concern about the Union’s ability to absorb new countries, whether politically or culturally. Second, the Dutch and French rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 was indicative of a broader “Institutional Fatigue” that many European citizens have felt regarding the fundamental political viability of the EU, even absent further expansion. And, most recently, there is increasing recrimination caused by Europe’s “Financial Fatigue,” or the ripple effect of the euro-

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zone crisis; namely, the resentment felt by many Europeans regarding the cost of bailing out failing economies of member states such as Greece. Of all these areas of concern, economic reservations appear to be most pressing. That is, the greatest challenge faced by representatives of the EU is to justify to their parliaments and constituencies why the union should admit another poor and unqualified Balkan state when this membership will unavoidably result in even greater financial burdens for average citizens of current EU countries.

The urgency aroused by all these concerns has only been further intensified since 2015 by the EU's inability to formulate a coherent and timely policy for sharing the responsibility and expenses stemming from the thousands of immigrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who have been coming through both member (Greece) and aspiring states (Macedonia, Serbia) as they make their way northwards towards Germany and Scandinavia. The concept of a unified "union" is being further challenged by the newest proposal coming from Brussels to seal Macedonia's southern border in order to prevent refugees from coming into "Europe" from Greece.

Viewed systemically, there is an inherent inconsistency in labeling these EU reservations as different forms of "fatigue." Fatigue implies a needed period of rest or recovery, which should be followed by a reinvigorated sense of energy and purpose. In other words, if enlargement is an integral instrument of Eu-

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ropean foreign policy, fatigue should only reflect a temporary respite from an ongoing and predictable process to which all member states are committed. Given the stated policy of delaying further EU expansion at least until 2020, the Union would appear to be experiencing more deeply rooted "rejectionism." That is, rather than a being temporary digression from its intention to expand, the EU's promise and then denial or postponement of accession has become a stick more than a carrot in its relationship with the Western Balkan countries. Viewed even more critically, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Europe is going through an incremental and not too subtle revival of historical prejudices and condescension of northern and western European states and peoples towards their southern and eastern neighbors. This trend is quite evident in the growing presence and strength of right-wing political parties in states such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden; all previously considered among the most progressive and welcoming countries, but which have been promulgating legislation restricting both the access and rights of immigrants.

And yet, as the EU struggles with these expressions of political, social and economic "fatigue," Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Kosovo are still expected to meet demanding standards and prerequisites in order to join a club that appears increasingly less convinced that it

wants them as members. In principle, EU accession criteria are supposed to apply universally to aspiring countries (for instance, reforming the judiciary, guaranteeing freedom of the media, eradicating corruption, strengthening the rule of law). In practice, however, the EU has applied different and inconsistent accession standards to each country under consideration. This "differentiated integration" policy has become a contentious matter in Balkans, where it is considered to be a double-edged sword: On the positive side, the policy is "flexible," supposedly allowing each country to meet accession standards at its own pace. On the negative side, however, this policy is perceived as unpredictable at best and as inconsistent and discriminatory at worst.

EU member states are not the only ones having second thoughts about expansion. The most obvious repercussion in the Balkan countries stemming from their postponed or possibly permanent exclusion from the union has been a spreading sense of "Commitment Fatigue." Despite the rhetoric of many Balkan political elites that joining the European Union is their top priority and is ultimately inevitable, there is creeping popular skepticism regarding the EU's approach to enlargement and its sincerity. Specifically, the peoples of the Balkans are expressing increasingly serious doubts whether they would truly become equal partners in Europe, even should their countries be admitted.

This skepticism has already had significant ramifications in the Balkans: the emergence of "elected" but dubiously legitimate regimes whose domestic policies have been leading their countries into economic decline; the growing frequency of human and civil rights being violated or

eliminated; the continued presence if not growth of organized crime; and the increasing numbers of citizens of Western Balkan states who see no future in their home countries and who leave to settle in "Europe" – whether legally or otherwise. Not surprisingly, as "Euro-skepticism," with its attendant negative consequences, grows in the Balkans, the greater the resistance and reluctance among EU member countries to consider these countries for accession. What should have been a win/win paradigm for the EU and the Balkans has been transformed into a win/lose or possibly a lose/lose scenario.

Perhaps the primary unasked, and therefore unanswered question, is why current members of the European Union are (or should be) interested in the expansion of the club to which they belong. Namely, before admitting new countries, current members must concur on why enlargement should take place at all, and only then consider the process by which enlargement should take place. **Scholars of the EU** have isolated three primary drivers of expansion that date from the establishment of the European Common Market and which, declaratively, still pertain today. Not necessarily in any rank order, these drivers are: (1) protecting shared economies and security; (2) strengthening a shared sense of identity; and (3) promoting shared "values" or principles. EU enlargement has been complicated, however by two factors: One is the absence of agreement

among members as to which of these drivers should take precedence under any particular circumstances. And second is that the rules or guidelines that aspiring countries are expected to meet have become increasingly ambiguous.

Consequently, rather than being encouraged – let alone compelled – to establish an authentic domestic demand to adopt and achieve the *substance* of the EU's membership standards, Balkan politicians are motivated to go through the motions of adhering to the mechanical criteria of the accession process. Namely, simply by opening chapters of the accession *Acquis*, they can point to their good-faith compliance with the technical demands of accession without needing to demonstrate that they have implemented any substantive or sustainable reforms. In a process that Balkan thinkers describe as the EU "running hot and cold," countries of the Western Balkans at times are rewarded for meeting certain technical accession criteria, while at the same time they can be penalized for their failure to meet some substantive goal whose importance vis-à-vis technical criteria has not been made explicit.

Whereas the political classes of the Balkans have become adept at identifying and complying with this indeterminate accession process, for the average person in the aspiring countries of South Eastern Europe such back and forth makes the perspective of joining the EU dubious at best. While Brussels blames local political elites for their failure to comply sufficiently with accession criteria, local politicians are able to maintain (if not strengthen) their hold on power by pointing to Brussels for its refusal to recognize the progress that their countries have actually accomplished. This vicious circle serves the interests both within anti-expansion EU member states and among Balkan political classes: Anti-enlargement members of European parliaments can maintain the fiction that they favor a united continent and that they are still sincerely in favor of eventual European expansion, while their actions preclude actual enlargement from taking place. Simultaneously, oligarchs in the Balkans are able to justify their current domestic policies, arguing that only they have the needs and aspirations of their citizens at heart.

Given these circumstances and attitudes, two fundamental questions face decision makers both in the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans: One is whether there is a viable solution to this accession impasse: More specifically, is it necessary for the EU to redefine the purpose of accession, and then to retool how it is structured? The second question is what might be the consequences, both to South Eastern Europe and to the EU, should the countries of the Western Balkans remain in their current state of limbo for a prolonged if not indefinite period of time. In short, can the EU and the Western Balkans find a way to revise the process that the European Stability Initiative aptly calls "the staircase to nowhere"?

A **summary of arguments** for and against EU enlargement illustrates that the two lines of reasoning differ in their very essence. Arguments in favor of expansion are values oriented, stressing the goal of promoting shared ideals and furthering the vision of Europe as a unified continent living in peace and

prosperity. Arguments against expansion are technocratic, emphasizing the current difficulties in managing the EU with its 28 member states and warning how much more difficult, complex and expensive it would be to administer the EU if additional countries were admitted. Put otherwise, arguments favoring enlargement focus on the purpose of the EU - *what* it is meant to be and *why* it should expand. In contrast, arguments against expansion concentrate on *if* and *how* this process should take place. This uneasy intersection of purpose versus process has been bedeviling the countries of the Western Balkans as they try to comply with Brussels' accession demands.

When average citizens of Balkan countries imagine belonging to the EU, their vision is of increased prosperity, hopefully aligned to some extent with the economies of countries they know best: often Germany or Sweden. The majority of Balkan people who are immigrating to the EU are motivated by their poor domestic economy and less so by their dissatisfaction with domestic politics. Put more generally, rarely do people from Macedonia, Albania or Bosnia declare that their desire to join the EU is driven by a desire to strengthen the rule of law in their home country, to guarantee the freedom of their domestic media, or to create mechanisms that assure food safety standards or environmental protection.

At the same time, however, people of the Balkans are resentful that the EU seemingly considers their societies to

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be somehow inferior, and which need to transform themselves not only economically but also structurally before they merit membership in the EU. For instance, Brussels tends to view Balkan societies as endemically corrupt, despite the fact that as many Germans (and Americans, for that matter) consider their own politicians to be corrupt as do people in Serbia or Albania. Doubtlessly, Macedonians, for instance, recognize that corruption is a serious problem in their state. What they do not see, however, is how the EU's demands are helping to reduce corruption; nor how following the dictates of the EU would improve daily life in Skopje. The majority of people throughout the Balkans are convinced that their countries' membership in the EU would more effectively lead to the reduction of corruption because the union would have the leverage to convince (or compel) their politicians and institutions to conform to EU standards. This is leverage that the EU apparently does not now have, other than the continual delaying of accession. For its part, the EU maintains that as long as corruption has not been curbed, countries do not qualify for admittance, either technically or substantively. As a result, "creative tension" between the EU and the Western Balkans has been erased: That is, there is little motivation for aspiring states to engage in meaningful and enduring reform, where progress towards mutually agreed-upon accession benchmarks would be recognized and rewarded by Brussels. Rather, the tension is based on punishment, where failure to meet the EU's expectations results in further postponement of acces-

sion. This in turn allows Balkan political classes to justify their inaction and to continue with self-serving policies that *a priori* prevent their countries from meeting accession criteria.

To overcome this impasse, the EU and aspiring countries of the Western Balkans must come to a mutually acceptable agreement that aligns purpose with process. Countries in the union are justifiably concerned about the implications of admitting new members whose economies and politics are not sufficiently underdeveloped to warrant decades-long attention and support. This is particularly true in the current context of unprecedented levels of immigration and doubts about the future of the common European currency. Nonetheless, more far-sighted politicians, whether in Berlin or Stockholm, recognize the benefits that European unity has brought to the continent since World War 2, and are not dissuaded by present obstacles from seeing the potential demographic, economic and political advantages of further expansion. However, this view also recognizes that inaction comes at a price: That is, keeping the Western Balkans out of the EU has as many consequences as does admitting these countries to the union, whether or not they are fully “prepared.”

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Numerous scenarios have been considered for what may happen should the countries of the Western Balkans remain outside the union indefinitely; and none of these is advantageous for the EU. At a minimum, inaction would lead to a growing *black hole* in South Eastern Europe: That is, continuing the status quo in the excluded Balkan states would further their downward economic and political spiral, which – among other things – would facilitate the concomitant influence of organized crime and encourage further unregulated out-migration. Although armed conflict is not a significant possibility, it also cannot be ruled out should a country such as Macedonia reach a tipping point of frustration and impoverishment. Serbia, as the largest of these Balkan states, has a long history of pan-Slavism, and has been an ally of Russia since the waning of the Ottoman Empire. And though Putin’s Russia is not the Russian Empire of the late 19th century, it is still an option for Serbia to align itself with other relatively powerful Orthodox Slavs rather than remaining unaligned. Similarly, Turkey has been developing economic and cultural interests in the Balkans (and elsewhere through Central Asia). Without delving into the complications of Turkey’s attempts to gain admittance to the EU, an alliance of Turkey with Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia is not out of the question. Of these, Macedonia and Albania have a particularly positive view of the US, and may opt to cultivate a primary trans-Atlantic partnership. In each of these scenarios, the European Union has its political and economic significance diminished.

For their part, Balkan politicians could decide to relinquish their absolute hold on power, and to make sincere efforts at meeting the accession demands that the EU has defined. Most observers of the Balkans would dismiss this possibility as unfeasible. What is feasible, however, is for the EU to redirect its attention and resources towards other voices and constituencies in South Eastern Europe; members of society who share an aspiration for EU membership rather than a desire for personal gain. The list that follows is but a short synthesis of some of the steps that both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans could take to reach a common goal by aligning process and purpose.

1. First and foremost, the EU should rescind its declaration that no further enlargement will take place during Juncker’s term. This position only demotivates aspiring countries from any effort to comply with accession standards. More fundamentally, such a reversal must be based on a common decision by the EU that enlargement is an integral aspect of its foreign policy and that a united, common Europe remains a political construct to which all member states are dedicated. Equivocation, or the lack of consensus makes moot any further recommendations regarding enlargement.

2. If enlargement does become an instrument of European foreign policy, the EU needs to rely more on positive rather than negative reinforcement practices to motivate aspiring countries to meet accession standards. Not only have punitive actions, such as reducing IPA funding, failed to accelerate reforms, they have

motivated local elites to continue engaging in policies that serve their own agendas to the detriment of their country’s economic and political future.

3. The relationship between the EU and Balkan elites needs to be revisited. At present, the EU negotiates the accession process largely with the elites of the Western Balkans, to the exclusion of civil society and other local leaders who have their own voices and constituencies. By engaging more with leaders who are not beholden to the current political classes, Brussels would

- increase local ownership both of the way towards and the specific outcomes of the accession process; and

- improve the chances of these states meeting accession standards by stimulating greater society-wide demands for positive change.

4. One highly contentious area is the ambiguity of the discourse between Brussels and the countries of the Western Balkans. To avoid misunderstandings and the controversies that stem from them, the EU should use specific and clear language to define which issues the Western Balkan states need to address. Absent specific terminology, people in the aspiring countries cannot determine whether or not real progress has been made. Furthermore, the prevalence of ambiguous terminology only

reinforces the scope for local politicians to blame Brussels for not accepting achievements that they claim to have achieved.

5. Accurate terminology to capture progress in the accession process must be accompanied by accurate, reliable and accessible data. Therefore, the EU should put into place a consistent system of statistical data collection and analysis that applies equally to all aspiring countries. Rewarding countries for providing consistent and accurate data will

- allow everyone engaged in the accession process to see how any given country is doing at a particular time;
- motivate officials in the aspiring countries who are tasked with accession to collect, analyze and make public honest statistical information; and
- make possible meaningful comparisons of progress among aspiring countries.
- By combining specific and clear terminology with accurate, consistent and accessible data in its annual progress reports, the EU could:
 - set clear and achievable accession benchmarks;
 - elevate the credibility of its arguments regarding the rate of progress towards benchmarks that have been identified by all parties;
 - define realistic minimal standards that must be reached for any country to have its progress acknowledged;
 - set specific minimal accession standards for each specific issue an aspiring country needs to address;
 - respond to criticism or objections by Balkan countries regarding inaccuracies or mistakes they identify in reviews of their progress.

To summarize, the EU has to behave as though both the present and the future of the Western Balkans actually matter. The refugee/immigrant debacle has been testing the very notion of a union of member states. It has reignited the debate over sovereignty and the right of member states to define domestic policies that do not necessarily adhere to policies set by Brussels. As it happens, the countries of the Western Balkans are surrounded by member states on all sides. Consequently, events taking place in any country of the region impact all countries of the region – members and non-members alike. The EU therefore cannot ignore or downplay events occurring in non-member Balkan countries, which undermine the very standards that the EU claims to represent. For example, Brussels must inform any Balkan government immediately that shutting down independent media or jailing journalists has direct and immediate negative ramifications for accession. Likewise, Brussels cannot declare any Balkan election to be “adequate” when both domestic and international observ-

ers are aware that the process was manipulated with impunity to maintain the ruling oligarchs’ rein on power. The role of the EU must be to encourage Balkan aspirations for membership by assisting countries to understand why and how the union’s values will improve the standard of living both for each country and for the union as a whole. However, Brussels cannot expect threats of exclusion to force the countries of the Western Balkans to transform themselves into Northern or Western European societies as the price for admission to the club. There must be room for a more inclusive definition of “Europe,” with membership criteria that are achievable for countries whose histories, cultures and aspirations complement but do not imitate their neighbors to the north.

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