

Happy Birthday to the EUGS? The EU and the Western Balkans two years on

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Abstract

The EU Global Strategy, presented by the High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini in June 2016, renewed the EU's commitment to take responsibility for the stability of the Western Balkans and reiterated their relevance for Europe's own security. Despite the numerous valuable initiatives the EU has put forth in the framework of the Strategy's implementation, the absence of a credible enlargement policy, coupled with socio-economic hardship, weak domestic institutions and Russia's destabilizing role in the region, have undermined the effectiveness of the EU approach. In principle, the recent re-launch of the enlargement process provides fertile ground for turning the EU vision into action. Yet, divisions among Member States over the accession perspective of these countries overshadow the Strategy's future implementation.

The EU Global Strategy (EUGS), presented by the High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini in June 2016, renewed the EU's commitment to take responsibility for the stability of the Western Balkans and reiterated their relevance for Europe's own security.¹ However, at the time the Strategy was unleashed all the right conditions seemed to be in place for this region to regain its long-held label as Europe's powder keg. Against the background of Russia's increasing assertiveness, the multiple crises the EU was undergoing had cast a shadow over its attractiveness to these countries and led to a pause in the enlargement process. In these conditions, the birth of the EUGS was indeed a difficult one. But what have its first two years of life been like?

The EUGS called for an improvement of the resilience of the Western Balkans states and societies within the scope of the enlargement process. While the building of resilience was embedded in one of the five lines of action identified in the Roadmap on the Follow-Up to the Strategy in October 2016,² in June 2017 a Joint Communication by the HR/VP and the European Commission restated the importance of EU enlargement for promoting reforms in the region.³

In this framework, the EUGS implementation also sought to enhance cooperation in areas of challenge shared by the EU and these countries. To counter terrorism the 2016 Communication on Enlargement Policy extended the Radicalization Awareness Network to the Western Balkans and invited them to continue to use the EU Law Enforcement Agency (EUROPOL) as a facilitator for cooperation.⁴ In addition to this, the EU supported the Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative, conducted targeted political dialogues under the Stabilization and Association Agreement Framework, and funded several initiatives aimed at increasing the resilience of civil society against radicalization and extremism.⁵ To help enlargement countries deal with migratory pressures, in turn, the 2016 Commu-

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, 24 June 2016, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/regions/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

² EEAS, *Roadmap on the follow-up to the EU Global Strategy*, Bratislava, 16 September 2016, <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/feuilleteroute-strategieglobale@ue160922.pdf>.

³ High Representative and European Commission, *A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action*, Brussels, 7 June 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/2017-joint-communication-strategic-approach-resilience-eus-external-action_en.

⁴ European Commission, *2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, Brussels, 9 November 2016, http://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/20161109_strategy_paper_en.pdf.

⁵ European Political Strategy Centre, *Engaging with the Western Balkans. An Investment in Europe's Security*, Brussels, 17 May 2018 (EPSC Brief), https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc_-_brief_-_engaging_with_western_balkans.pdf.

nication foresaw special support measures and humanitarian aid. Added to this, Brussels contributed to these countries' border integrity through the Western Balkan Border Security Initiative.⁶

Nevertheless, the absence of a credible enlargement policy, coupled with socio-economic hardship, undermined the effectiveness of EU initiatives. As increasing numbers of people left the region because of high unemployment rates, several political leaders channelled popular discontent into nationalism and the terrorist threat remained high due to the return of foreign terrorist fighters.⁷ Furthermore, favoured by systemic inefficiencies in these countries' governmental and rule-of-law institutions, migrants and refugees started using new routes within the Western Balkans to reach to the EU.⁸

In the meantime, since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis Moscow had begun to more actively foster pro-Russian sentiments in the region, with the aim of preventing it from becoming part of the West. To increase the ability of these countries to resist external disinformation activities, as envisaged by the 2017 Communication on resilience, the European External Action Service (EEAS) established a Stratcom Western-Balkans Task Force. Investments in new initiatives to enhance media independence in the Western Balkans were also announced by the European Commission.⁹ As for the energy sector, while the EU continued to support resilience in the Western Balkans by exporting the EU *acquis* and through existing financing instruments, the EUGS triggered initiatives aimed at creating a single energy market including these countries.¹⁰

Yet, Brussels' efforts to limit the effects of external pressure in the region have had mixed results so far. After two Russian intelligence agents allegedly sought to murder Montenegro's pro-West leader, Milo Djukanovic, in October 2016, the country reacted by accusing Russia and arresting the sus-

⁶ Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *Integrative Internal Security Governance*, June 2018, <https://www.dcaf.ch/integrative-internal-security-governance>.

⁷ Jeffrey Mankoff, "How to Fix the Western Balkans. European Integration Is Still the Best Path Toward Reform", in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2017-07-07/how-fix-western-balkans>. See also EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018>.

⁸ The original Balkan Route, which was closed in March 2016, consisted of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Croatia. The new route includes Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia. See Mladen Lakic, Dusica Tomovic and Gjergj Erbara, "New Balkan Route' for Migrants, Refugees Causes Alarm", in *Balkan Insight*, 4 June 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/region-on-alert-as-migrants-open-new-balkan-route-06-03-2018>.

⁹ European Commission, *The European Union steps up support to independent media in the Western Balkans*, Brussels, 10 November 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4541_en.htm.

¹⁰ Zoran Nechev and Aleksandrs Svilans, "Western Balkans: more resilience for the energy sector", European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2017 (Issue Brief 19), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2019%20Energy%20resilience%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans.pdf>.

pects.¹¹ Later on in 2017, when the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, accused the EU of being “obsessed with the Balkans”, the Montenegro government replied arguing that peace in this region is in Russia’s “best interest”.¹² Indeed, such a position is unlikely to change in the near future given the victory of the pro-EU candidate Djukanovic in the recent presidential elections.

Nonetheless, Moscow still maintains a strong influence in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While Russia has traditionally supported Belgrade’s non-recognition of Kosovo, its influence on the Serbian energy sector remains strong. In addition to this, in 2017 Moscow increased its military cooperation with Belgrade.¹³ As reflected by the Serbian President’s recent declaration that Serbia would not change policies towards Russia because of its EU accession process, the Russian strategy is increasingly paying off.¹⁴ Concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina, against the backdrop of ethnic fragmentation and the slow implementation of the EU Reform Agenda,¹⁵ the constant Russian support of Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik further hinders the country’s European integration.¹⁶

Even though the region’s structural problems, and Russia, have given the EU a hard time in the past two years, one may argue that the re-launch of the enlargement process – triggered by the February 2018 Commission’s Strategy on the region – set the basis for a happy second anniversary for the EUGS. It would seem to be an appropriate moment for finally celebrating the prospect of turning the Strategy’s vision into action in the coming years. Indeed, EU leaders declared their “unequivocal support for the European Perspective of the Western Balkans” on the occasion of the May 2018 Sofia Summit.¹⁷ In the past months, EU governments and the Commission also agreed on a series of concrete initiatives on boosting infrastructures and economies; on supporting media and civil society independence; on fostering closer cooperation in countering terrorism and organized crime; and on enhancing the effectiveness of migration policies and border management.

¹¹ Milena Veselinovic and Darran Simon, “Montenegro: Russia involved in attempted coup”, in *CNN*, 22 February 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/21/europe/montenegro-attempted-coup-accusation/index.html>. See also Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017. The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

¹² Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, “Montenegro Reacts to Russian Criticism for Joining the Alliance”, in *RFE/RL’s Balkan Service*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-reacts-russian-criticism/28531867.html>.

¹³ Dusan Stojanovic, “Russia starts delivery of MiG-29 fighter jets to Serbia” in *AP News*, 2 October 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/c5dc67500bc44b509f8524afbc944704>.

¹⁴ Aleksandar Vucic. See Gordana Filipovic and Misha Savic, “EU Membership Won’t Change Serbian-Russian Ties, Vucic Says”, in *Bloomberg*, 21 February 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-21/eu-membership-won-t-change-serbia-s-ties-with-russia-vucic-says>.

¹⁵ Vuk Velebit, “What is the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s European integration?”, in *European Western Balkans*, 26 January 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/01/26/state-bosnia-herzegovinas-european-integrations/>.

¹⁶ Reuters Staff, “Bosnian Serbs roll out red carpet for Russian delegation”, in *Reuters*, 24 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-russia/bosnian-serbs-roll-out-red-carpet-for-russian-delegation-idUSKBN1HV27Z>.

¹⁷ European Council, *Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit*, 17 May 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/05/17/sofia-declaration-of-the-eu-western-balkans-summit/>.



However, the reluctance of some Member States to commit to the enlargement process is likely to make the Western Balkans' path to European integration bumpy and hence to affect EU conditionality in the region. Kosovo is a good case in point. The Commission Strategy set 2025 as the indicative year for the admission of Serbia into the EU. Nevertheless, the recent increase in Spain's opposition to Kosovo's independence, with the not-so-hidden aim of containing its domestic separatist movements, might eventually overshadow the past – and affect the future – results of the EU-brokered talks between Belgrade and Pristina. Such talks, which are tied to the accession of Kosovo and Serbia to the EU, are crucial for the stability of the entire area.

Moreover, although on 26 June 2018 European affairs ministers gave the green light to the opening of accession talks with Albania and Macedonia in June 2019, France and The Netherlands expressed reservations in this regard. In particular, three separate swords of Damocles are hanging over the accession perspective of these countries. While the recent agreement with Greece on the long-lasting name dispute played a major role in the EU decision on Macedonia, it remains open to question whether the name change will be approved by Macedonian citizens in a referendum, which might take place later in the year. As for Albania, while the rule of law has improved, several Member States might still continue to oppose its accession because of the country's economic migrants and organized crime.¹⁸

Finally, even though the victory of the pro-EU candidate Djukanovic in the recent presidential elections in Montenegro is likely to positively contribute to the accession of this country in 2025, upcoming elections in Bosnia might serve as a playground for Russian strategies, particularly given the recent re-launch of the enlargement process. Happy birthday, EUGS, but watch out!

¹⁸ Benet Koleka, "EU urges Albania to deepen reforms for entry talks", in *Reuters*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-albania/eu-urges-albania-to-deepen-reforms-for-entry-talks-idUSKBN1HP2CL>.

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