

Towards a New Thinking on the Western Balkans

by Mihaela Luchian,
edited by Eleonora Poli

ABSTRACT

The report summarizes the proceedings of the closed-door discussion "Towards a New Thinking on the Western Balkans", hosted in Rome on 27 February 2018 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). The event saw the participation of representatives from the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), as well as of Italian experts. The aim of the event was to consult a wider platform of experts on a new vision on the future of the Western Balkans (WB6), their role in tomorrow's European Union as well as their regional economic and political dimension. Ideas and feedbacks will be reported in a Balkan Declaration to be drafted by the EFB, on the occasion of its 10th anniversary in April 2018.

European Union | EU enlargement | Western Balkans

keywords

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Introduction

Since the previous EU enlargement took place, the political climate across Europe has radically changed. To date, the European Union has to deal with multifaceted internal and external crises and it is struggling to find a new direction. Apparently, this should not be the time for setting strategic goals on enlargement towards the Western Balkans or even for discussing the topic. Yet, the recent EU Commission's strategy for "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", adopted on 6 February 2018,¹ seems to have provided a new momentum for discussing the Western Balkans access to the EU. The Strategy is indeed nothing but a tangible prove of a changed attitude from the European Commission's side; it confirms the European future of the region and sets a clear path for the Western Balkans to finally join the EU.

For this reason, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB), on 16 April in Belgrade the EFB will present a Balkan Declaration with the aim of providing inputs, ideas and perform a reality-check on the enlargement process. The Balkan Declaration will be built upon suggestions provided by several experts from EU member states, who will be involved in an interactive consultation process to "think of the Balkans from outside the Balkans".

The Declaration will be structured in four parts: (1) Policy recommendations to the EU; (2) Building human capital in the region; (3) Regional cooperation and bilateral relations; (4) The role of Balkans in the tomorrow EU. Each of these sections deals with a specific macro-area to be improved, and contains suggestions and strategies designed to enhance the process leading to the accession of the Western Balkans to the Union.

¹ See the European External Action Service (EEAS) website: *EU-Western Balkans Strategy: a credible enlargement perspective*, <http://europa.eu/!RT43FG>.

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First session

1. Policy recommendations to the EU

According to **Srdan Majstorović**,² coordinator of the initiative “Balkan Declaration” (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, BiEPAG), current debates on the enlargement process are very different from the past. Today’s European Union



is facing multiple downturns, ranging from internal security to security on its borders, migration and the Eurozone crisis. This is influencing the debate within the EU and within its member states, making enlargement a bold idea.

However, from Majstorović’s point of view, the first recommendation to the EU should be to open accession talks to all the six countries of the Western Balkans, especially on the rule of law chapter, which is the cornerstone of the good governance and functioning institutions. This would allow the Western Balkans countries to develop their local institutions and better perform from both a political and an economic point of view.

Secondly, representatives of Western Balkans must be included as observers in the EU institutions and in the discussions of the EU-28, in order to increase the legitimacy of the debate. Majstorović is aware that such procedure is not envisaged in the Union’s treaties, but such a new model could contribute to a step forward for many of the Western Balkans countries, which could envision their leaders becoming equal counterparts in the EU policy-making process and advocate their rights within the Union. Moreover, the Western Balkans countries should be included in the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and participate to the anti-corruption reports. Similarly, the accession process should be more multi-layered and more participated, especially on the side of civil society.

2. Enhancing human capital in the region

To date, economic and social development issues are causing increasing economic migration from the region. Since the Western Balkans needs to develop faster in order to catch up with the EU average, they should have access to European structural funds or to new financial mechanisms, designed specifically for the region. Moreover, the quality of the educational and professional perspectives should be increased, by developing a good and functioning framework of “brain circulation” at a regional level, and a new class of young “European balkanites”, to

² Srdan Majstorović is Chairman of the Governing Board of the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade.

enhance cooperation for the future.

3. Regional cooperation

The regional cooperation, though crucial, is very problematic. Majstorović stressed out that more cooperation in key political issues must be accompanied by political maturity. The region needs to take the initiative in confidence building, enhance its resilience to challenges



at a regional level and support the creation of a regional identity. The governments of Western Balkans countries should cooperate, eventually in a Balkan Council to be established.

As far as bilateral relations are concerned, such as the Kosovo-Serbia ones, talks on technical issues are underway. Should the latter be successful, the Presidents of the two countries could meet, taking an important step towards normalization of relations. The credibility of the European path of the Western Balkans depends on their ability to recognize their interconnectedness and on their commitment to develop positive outcomes.

Regional cooperation is also important for credible development strategies: each country should have a development strategy at national level and develop a portfolio for attracting investments, to be coordinated at regional level.

4. Western Balkans in the tomorrow EU

After the accession of the Western Balkans countries the EU will be different. Therefore, enlargement talks are attempting also to define its future structure.

The main issues to be addressed are:

1. Building a stronger security cooperation. The Balkan region is the "soft belly" of Europe, quite integrated, but still not regarded as a full partner of the EU, which makes it particularly sensible to third parties, such as Turkey, Russia and China. These influences may not have positive effects on the rule of law and on the path towards European standards and values.
2. Role of Western Balkans in facing development challenges in order to address illegal migration. Some initiatives were taken, but with limited political, financial and legal resources. This should be given more attention, stressing the interrelation between illegal migration and security.
3. The overall invite to the EU is to include Western Balkans in policy discussions on their role and to recognize them as full partners.
4. State joint communications to highlight the impact and the positive effects of European integration, which is taken for granted in most part of EU member states, but are still difficult to achieve in Western Balkans countries.

Second session

Building on Majstorović's presentation, Italian experts were invited to express their opinions on the future of enlargement.



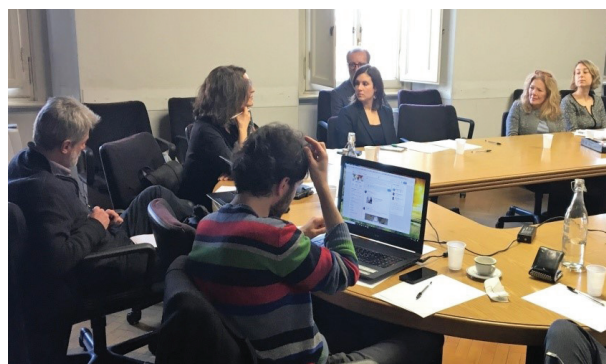
According to **Cristian Barbieri** (IAI) cooperation among Balkan universities should be strengthened in order to avoid the risk of a regional "brain drain". Moreover, he also raised the issue of cooperation between security and police forces in the region. This is a very delicate issue, given the background of the officers and the war experience. Western Balkans countries are members of Interpol and have third parties agreements with Europol, but the exchange of data is still modest for different reasons, in contrast to a strong "criminal cooperation" in the region. Majstorović observed that there is cooperation between Serbia and the EU mission in Kosovo on exchange of information.

Andrea De Gaspari (Intesa Sanpaolo) underlined how cooperation and the resolution of bilateral issues are crucial for regional economic development and political stability. Indeed, even countries that are members of the EU, such as Slovenia and Croatia, are still fighting for border issues. Before entering in the EU, conflicts need to be solved. Yet Balkan leaders seem to lack the will or the power to do that.

Ferruccio Pastore (FIERI) stressed that the Balkans have become an EU priority only when the migration crisis emerged. The Union however has attempted to adopt a regional cooperative approach to manage migration, while at the same time it has been tempted to address the "soft belly" problem by cutting it out through walls. The creation of what Pastore calls a "migratory krajina" could have a strong disruptive power on the future of the region.

Luisa Chiodi (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso) stressed out that access to the structural funds is a very delicate issue in a time when the EU budget is already shrinking because of Brexit. The technological gap is not typical only of the Balkan region, but also within the EU, and it must be tackled through a bidirectional exchange of best practices. She also pointed out that there are many non-convincing narratives coming from political leaders in the Balkan region on the reasons why Western Balkans should be considered a priority. The focus on geopolitical reasons is unproductive; it must be shifted from the security dilemmas to the positive contributions. She also believes that the approach should be more middle ground and grassroots, since top-down strategies and investments in infrastructures will not contribute to fight the strong populist rhetoric in the region, which has to do with inequalities and profound individual insecurities.

Stefano Silvestri (IAI) noted that border and separatist issues are not only “Balkan issues”, but concern also several European members, like Spain with Catalonia. Moreover, the Declaration should contain a message on the future of the EU and on what the Balkans perceive as their future as a whole.



Milica Uvalić (University of Perugia) welcomed the emphasis placed on human capital as a key factor of economic development, by stressing that, unfortunately, education reforms have not been properly dealt with in the Western Balkans: there is a discrepancy between the labour market needs and the qualifications and skills of graduates, causing huge unemployment rates of young people. According to Uvalić, the Declaration should include a separate section on economic development, since structural economic problems have still not been dealt with, by increasing the gap with respect to the more developed EU, while poverty, inequalities and poor living conditions fuel populisms and nationalisms. The huge unemployment rates in some Balkan countries (Kosovo, Bosnia or Macedonia), foster the illegal economy. She also pointed out that the Western Balkans have gone through a continuous process of de-industrialization, conserving competitiveness mostly in labour intensive goods. In order to tackle these structural problems, governments must learn to think strategically and on long term. In some areas, the South East Europe (SEE) 2020 Strategy is not in line with what is being done at a national level. Regional economic integration could have a lot of beneficial effects, economic and political, but Majstorović noted that an integration of the labour markets and economies would be very difficult, due to the strong nationalistic climate.

Riccardo Pennisi (Aspenia) brought up the topic of minorities rights and bilateral disputes, many of whom are still unsolved. He wondered if a common regional policy and regional cooperation would overcome minorities issues within states.

Raffaella Coletti (CeSPI) mentioned that a Western Balkans’ access to EU structural funds is unrealistic. Secondly, she believes the part of the document dealing with the role of the Western Balkans in the tomorrow EU should be more structured and creative. If the Balkans continue to be regarded as a periphery, they will stay so, while a new European development structure, based on macro-regions and different from the concentric current one, could be more suitable. The macro-region strategy is still a minority stream in the European debate, but it could provide the Western Balkans an opportunity to imagine differently their development, not only as a periphery. Balkans could contribute to the creation of this new development conception in the European Union.

Chiara Milan (University of Siena) endorses the idea of sharing and spreading knowledge about EU institutions, policies and structure, and its benefits, also by increasing mobility between the Western Balkans and union. She also highlights the problems of education within the Western Balkans individual states, like divergent curricula in schools. Secondly, EU must support a strong civil society, solidarity movements and local communities, which are often more prepared to face problems, such as migration, than local politics. Thirdly, Western Balkans must take important steps towards green energy and de-carbonization.

The meeting was concluded with a final discussion on what if the Western Balkan were to be immediately integrated within the EU. While this could be motivated by geopolitical reasons, to prevent other external actors such as Russia, Turkey or China from influencing the region, the reform process would risk to be led prevalently by EU officials and institutions, with the alienation of the local authorities. Moreover, as Luisa Chiodi reiterated, a post enlargement EU with 33 member states will have to face a more challenging decision-making process. In this respect, although enlargement is not going to happen tomorrow, there is certainly the need to discuss how an EU with 33 members will be structured and to provide a more structured path of accession to the Western Balkans countries. The latter might allow these countries to more easily reach objectives and not to be discouraged by the so-called pre-accession limbo.

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