

## The Theory of Change: Have Good Neighbourly Relations! Can Candidate Countries for EU Membership Deliver on This Commandment?

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Welcome to InCLUDE, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, supported by the Open Society Western Balkans Foundations. We want to drive forward the discussion about how to integrate the Western Balkans countries as full members of the European Union. Today, we want to look into the state of relations between the neighbouring countries of the region. I am your host, and my name is **Dušan Reljić**. Our guests today are **Milica Kovačević**, Programme Director, Centre for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, Montenegro. Her recent report inspired this talk. The topic was, and I'm going to read this out, "Good Neighbourly Relations in the Western Balkans: Bilateral Disputes and State-Level Politics that Perpetuate Them". And **Nikola Dimitrov**, who is a diplomat and a think tanker. As Macedonian Foreign Affairs Minister, 2017-2020, he was the chief negotiator of the Prespa agreement between his country and Greece. This deal ended the 30 years-long dispute between the two parties about the name and the identity of his country.

I will kick off with a joke, admittedly an old joke, about Yugoslavia being surrounded by BRIGAMA. This word means worries and troubles, and the acronym derives from B - Bulgaria, R - Romania, I - Italy, G - Greece, A - Albania, M - Madžarska, Hungary, and A - Austria. So BRIGAMA: this means that all neighbours were perceived as troublemakers, problems. One wonders today, have the problems disappeared or have they multiplied in line with the increased number of borders in the region?

My question to Milica: in your report, you emphasize that good neighbourly relations are a key condition requested by the European Union from the would-be members. But you also pointed out that fulfilling this requirement creates tensions, not only within the region, but also between some countries of the region and certain EU neighbouring states. How is this possible, after all the preparations for EU membership, all those years, Milica?

### **Milica:**

Well, this is hard to answer in a short answer, but I'll try. I'll just have to remind that while good neighbourly relations are embedded in fundamental documents of the European Union as clear condition for enlargement; they appear with the start of the enlargement of Western Balkans, more precisely in Croatia's negotiations. And this is for a reason in Croatia's negotiation framework: it was the region that was trying to access the Union

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after the recent war. War was still recent at that time. This also tells you that in this region bilateral disputes are not technical questions. These are questions that are very politically sensitive and dive deeply into identities, into war legacies, into burdens of different periods in the past. Second reason is that while EU and especially in last few years, very explicitly puts this as a requirement, as a condition that is necessary to be fulfilled. There are no clear rules, there is no unified predictable mechanism, or any mechanism, that stands for solving all these different kinds of issues. And third, and the most important I think, political elites in the Western Balkans, national political elites, are keeping disputes alive because these disputes keep them alive, keep them in power. In most of the countries of the Western Balkans, most of time of this period of negotiations, we had in power, or very strong, political parties that are basically war parties, parties with the legacies of '90s wars. And if you look at all the reports and documents about our region or individual countries, you will see well-founded criticism of corruption, of organized crime, of deficiencies in the rule of law. These are the questions that are most easily removed from the agenda and from the public discourse by talking about identities and by blaming neighbours for all our troubles, by coming back to this story of yours about surroundings of our countries. We also see, which is not encouraging and I'm glad that we have a chance to hear from Nikola as well, that those political parties or groups of elites that are trying to do different, that are willing to make very painful compromises, are being punished, are being demonized in an extremely toxic atmosphere. And for handy politicians in the Western Balkans doing the right thing, but paying the price of maybe losing elections, it's not the price that they are willing to pay.

**Dušan:**

Nikola, keeping in mind all of this that Milica said, you have achieved the seemingly impossible, and many observers in those days said it: working together with your colleagues in Athens, you found a way to normalize relations between the two countries. What were the most important factors that enabled this great success? And do you think that your success can be replicated today elsewhere in the region?

**Nikola:**

Thank you, Dušan. I went to Athens in my second week as Foreign Minister, and my message was very straightforward. If you want to have a predictable friendly neighbour to your north, let's see if we can solve this problem. It was obviously an extremely difficult process; the dispute was deeply entrenched. There were many politicians who made their careers using or misusing the so-called "name dispute". It was about building trust, it was about learning to think in the shoes of the others: I've become an expert on the Greek sensitivities with regard to the name issue, and same with my counterpart, Minister Kotzias. Then, it was useful that we had several elements of the problem: the name of the country itself, and the need for distinction between the Greek region of Macedonia and the Macedonian Republic, my country. Another element that was very important for us was to leave the dispute behind as Macedonians who speak the Macedonian language identity and a right of self-determination. By finding a way to address the key concerns on both sides, this is how we managed to create the compromise. The best test to check if the compromise is just, or it works, is to see

whether both parties are equally miserable and equally happy: if one party is euphoric and the other feels defeated, the dispute is not solved. It will linger on.

Now, whether this can be replicated: look, I believe in miracles, and I believe that miracles are possible even in our region. I think disputes are solvable. It will take leadership. It will take political will and a conviction that you do it for the next generation and not for your career.

**Dušan:**

Milica, Nikola pointed out that miracles are necessary. Your report contains a whole catalogue of border and identity disputes, and these issues still affect or even prevent good neighbourly relations in the region. For instance, Croatia's with Montenegro, bearing in mind that Montenegro is speeding up the negotiations for accessing the European Union, or even today North Macedonia's with Bulgaria. What are your thoughts about miracles? Which of the disputed items could be positively transformed?

**Milica:**

We, on purpose, tried to make a catalogue and record all the disputes. Some of them are already well-described and written because at certain point of time they were a problem and they were in the focus of politicians, of researchers, of analysts, and the one of North Macedonia is of course very well-described. But there are disputes that are now being latent, do not produce any political problems. But in the case of some movement towards EU accession or some other political event, it can appear as the unsolvable big thing.

I do think that we need miracles, but technically speaking there is no dispute that is unsolvable on a technical level. We all love to think that our problems are sui generis and that it happens only to us. But actually, if you look at that, it all happened somewhere to someone, and there are solutions and there are technically accessible and possible solutions. But for the political willingness to do that, we, I think, need miracles, and not just for that in the Western Balkans.

Going out of this political dramatic identity talks, I would say that border disputes are probably the easiest to solve because there are rules, there is plenty of rules: there is a framework very well-defined internationally for solving border issues. On the other side, identity disputes and these legacies of the war of the past are more difficult to solve because they rely basically only on who runs the country and which political elite is ready to take on what Nikola describes. If we want to solve this, no one can be happy about that, but we are going to solve that for a better future.

I would say that the European Union was having different approaches in mediating or having any role in these disputes. The success ones were those where European Union was heavily involved, like in the case of Macedonia-Greece dispute, it was in the framework of the UN, but EU was the guarantee of that. EU is involved in Kosovo-Serbia dispute, which is probably the one that is most difficult to solve. But we would love to see European Union putting this condition for the enlargement to have more

involvement and more guidance, because these are elites actually still only ready to hear what comes from Brussels: what civil society in the countries is saying to them doesn't affect their behaviour.

**Dušan:**

This is, I would say, an optimistic view that people want to listen to what the European Union, especially in its present condition, has to say.

Turning back to Nikola and keeping this in mind, I wonder if the real challenge is less about final settlements and more about preventing the abuse of issues for political purposes, including by EU member states, as we have seen, Greece, Bulgaria, and about building trust. In other words, should good neighbourly relations and the resolution of border issues be viewed as an ongoing process rather than as a precondition for EU membership?

**Nikola:**

An excellent point, Dušan. There is a major distinction between disputes among candidate countries on one hand, and disputes between a candidate country and a member state on the other hand. For the second category there is, by definition, great asymmetry between the parties. Because of the accession process and the incentive of the candidate country to be part of it, to join the European Union, there is great leverage in the hands of the member states, and the temptation to use this to maximum is difficult to resist. It is probably not the best format for solving bilateral disputes with a compromise that addresses key concerns on both sides, if one party has such enormous leverage.

The European way would have probably to go back to the founding fathers to start working together to develop joint common economic interests so that the passions, the emotions, the political potential of the disputes gradually fades away, and then at some point to actually solve it. There is a great contradiction between the heart of the accession process conditionality. We all say there is no speech on enlargement that doesn't say enlargement is a merit-based process. But it is not reconcilable to have a merit-based process and a bilateral dispute that is a direct obstacle to the candidate country. So, for instance, today, if my country is really doing great – I think we can do better, admittedly – and we excel at delivering on, let's say, the fundamentals cluster: chapters 23, 24, we excel. We won't move an inch in the accession process because of the bilateral dispute. You cannot reconcile the merit-based process and a bilateral dispute that is directly an obstacle.

EU has not managed to develop the right balance and approach to these issues, especially when a member state, and usually, paradoxically, those member states using or misusing outstanding issues in the accession process, essentially to settle them on their terms, are exactly those member states that have the most to benefit from a European success of their neighbouring candidate country.

**Dušan:**

Let's think of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova for a moment. These candidate countries have huge parts of their territories occupied by Russia: if EU member states insist on restoring the territorial integrity of all candidate states before admitting them to the European Union, isn't this the perfect recipe for ensuring that EU enlargement, in Eastern Europe at least, never happens? First Nikola and then Milica, please.

**Nikola:**

EU likes to talk in categorical terms, but when the political context is such, I think decisions are possible that are not exactly in line with the previous declarations made.

The case of Cyprus, the current presidency: when Cyprus joined, there was a political context, Greece was very much behind it. This is a country that has a territorial dispute, right? The Greek part, the Turkish part, unification, the Kofi Annan plan did not work, was not accepted. They still made it. Now, especially after that particular accession, EU is known to say: "We don't want to import problems in the Union, solve your problems before you join". But, I mean, the current Russian war in Ukraine is of such importance for the continent, for the European Union, that I think other factors will also play when it comes to the decision-making on Ukraine, on Moldova as well. And ideally, we do both things. We help those countries and their territorial integrity, and we work on their accession. Easy to say, very difficult to do, but I don't think it's going to be a very black and white firm principle "you have to solve it before we move with you", the stakes are too high.

**Dušan:**

The squaring of the circle.

**Milica:**

I would say that insisting on not importing any dispute in the European Union effectively means for many countries: no EU for them. You mentioned the merit base, then it's frequently mentioned, and I actually hate the use of that word that serves to justify things that can't be otherwise justified. Because there is a system, and you are repeating the merit base, but the reality is that there are geopolitical and political decisions.

I'm speaking this coming from Montenegro, which is moving so fast in the EU direction, not because of tremendous successes in reforms, but due to geopolitical moment and decision that made these merits, this benchmarks and criteria, being interpreted way lower than those were interpreted only a few years ago. It's always political: disputes are different and then merit base is not fair. Especially for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the challenge they are facing is different from some minor border demarcation problems.

Nikola mentioned the big issue of Cyprus, but also like this first bilateral dispute that was made a condition for joining by Slovenia to Croatia. Their dispute about demarcation in Piran Bay - it was actually never solved. Just to remind you: Slovenia blocked a few chapters of Croatia from closing. EU got in, there was negotiation and

they agreed to go to binding international arbitration. Croatia joined the EU, arbitration happened, there were some scandals around undue influence. Croatia still doesn't recognize the outcome of that arbitration. But the thing is that before that escalated politically, Croatia and Slovenia had great political, economic, and human relations, and they continued to have that and have that close cooperation within the European Union. Formally, that dispute still stays, but its relevance is way lower than it ever was before. I would say that we need an approach that would consider these things, analyse positions of each country and finally openly state that, yes, there are merits, but we are a political union and it's also a political decision, and if we decide to have someone in, we are going to support that someone in solving these disputes, not making that threshold that they can't pass.

**Dušan:**

Milica, and if I remember correctly, there was also a role of the United States in the issues between Slovenia and Croatia, but this would lead us to a different ground and maybe in our next episode we will debate about how the big players from outside influence the situation.

Today, we spoke about the importance of having good neighbourly relations in the region for entering in the European Union. And I want to thank our guests, Milica Kovačević, Programme Director, Center for Democratic Transition in Podgorica, Montenegro, and Nikola Dimitrov, think tanker, former Foreign Minister, Skopje, North Macedonia. And to you, thank you for watching this episode of Include, the podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, with the support of the Open Society Foundations, Western Balkans. Please do join us soon again.