

# Helsinki bulletin



HELSINKI COMMITTEE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA  
address: Kneza Miloša 4,  
Belgrade, Serbia  
tel/fax. +381-11-3349-170; 3349-167;  
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs  
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

NO.139 // FEBRUARY 2018



FONET-AP-RSE

## ACCESS TO THE EU: A MATTER OF CHOICE

The European Commission's strategy for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is an important and all-inclusive document that taken into consideration all the circumstances both the EU and the region are faced with. The strategy testifies that the EU has finally considered all the elements decisive for its own and the Balkans' future. In this context, the strategy can be seen as the most important development ever since the Salonika Summit (2003) when European prospects had been opened to the Balkan region. However, uncertainties marking the EU itself

following Brexit and the announced reforms, as well as different understanding of democracy between some member-states such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania on the one hand, and the absence of political resolve for radical changes among Western Balkan elites on the other crucially decided the strategy's context and frame.

The strategy at the same time mirrors the EU's political, security and economic interest in the Western Balkan in the light of ongoing

turbulence in the Middle East: from its unstable relations with Turkey to terrorism, organized crime and probably new migrant crises. Presence of new actors in the Balkans such as Russia, China, Turkey and some Arab countries was a major impetus to passing the strategy. The action of the latter could easily undermine Balkan countries' orientation towards the EU and disturb their bilateral relations given that each of them – Yugoslavia's successors – has its "mentor" with interests of his own.

The strategy also manifests the understanding that "the Union has to be stronger and more solid before it become larger" and that it has to engage itself much more in the Western Balkans so as to unable and speed up the reform that have been undertaken.

The strategy emphasizes that the Western Balkans is a part of Europe and that its membership of the EU is a historical chance but also "a matter of choice" of each individual country; and that for making that choice these countries need to reach "political and social consensus and obtain citizens' support." The strategy provides a clear-cut frame and roadmap applicable to all the countries, its most important benchmarks being the rule of law, good governance, democratic institutions, the struggle against organized crime and corruption, economic growth, reconciliation, neighborly relations and regional cooperation. By this document the EU took upon itself to financially and otherwise assist the countries to overcome all the obstacles they are faced with. Apart of the rule of law, the strategy specifically focuses on renewal of the region's devastated economy, economic reform programs, infrastructural ties, digital agendas, reconciliation and regional cooperation.

## REACTIONS IN THE REGION

As a document all the member-states have voted for, the strategy, in its final version, provides compromise solutions in the light of demands and pressure from some countries, and the EU's internal political currents as well. That is one of the reasons why everyone in the region is somewhat disappointed with it as everyone had higher expectations especially for exact (and closer) dates for accession to the EU. "The document has been composed by the principle 'two by two,' Montenegro and Serbia, Macedonia and Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo," says Tonino Picula, the Croatian representative in the European Parliament, adding that Montenegro and Serbia were in the process of accession negotiations, while some countries have not obtained yet a status of candidate, and the two "in between" were still waiting to have the date for accession negotiations set.<sup>1</sup>

As an official in Brussels put it metaphorically, Montenegro and Serbia that have made most progress on their course to Europe were given bicycles although they might have "expected more, limousines or at least automobiles."<sup>2</sup> As, he added, considering that "Serbia has been more standing than walking so far and that Montenegro was moving on foot, both have been given now at least the opportunity of turn pedals and decide their speed on their own... That's why you were given bicycles rather than cars so that you can make as much progress as fast your are turning your pedals."<sup>3</sup>

Despite their higher expectations from the strategy, all the countries in the region are encouraged to pursue their reforms, especially in key areas but also told that their progress towards accession would be measured

1 <http://m.portalanalitika.me/clanak/293797/picula-crna-gora-ima-razloga-da-bude-nezadovoljna>  
2 Nedeljnik, February 8, 2018.  
3 Ibid.

by each individual country's achievements. In this context Montenegro has made the biggest breakthrough. Montenegro's Premier Duško Marković says, "This document is most important to Montenegro, as a country that has made the biggest progress so far and opened more chapters /than the rest/, since Montenegro is mentioned in the context of a next member-state in the period till 2025 as a credible deadline within which we could be ready for a full-fledged membership. And if our results are adequate we can accede even earlier."<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Serbia, its attitude towards Kosovo is a priority; it is expected to reach a comprehensive and binding agreement on bilateral relations. The strategy emphasizes that two years prior to its accession to the EU Serbia should fully normalize its relations with Kosovo; the strategy insists on demarcation of borders but mentions not recognition.

European officials have specifically emphasized that 2025 stood for just "an indicative date and encouragement" and that not "a blank check but an impetus to many reforms." Explaining the EU's expectations from Serbia Commission for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Johannes Hahn said that the strategy was the strategy was not an invitation or a possibility to get some discount but a roadmap for EU integrations.<sup>5</sup> Fixation on date, he added, could end in "frustration and disappointment, since EU member-states will not accept a new member that has not solved its bilateral problems."<sup>6</sup> According to Head of EU Delegation to Serbia Sam Fabrici, the strategy is "a new deal" since it offers the opportunity for the sextet in the Western Balkans to come closer to the EU.<sup>7</sup>

4 <http://www.kurir.rs/region/crna-gora/2990209/premijer-crne-gore-optimista-crna-gora-moze-da-postaneclanica-eu-i-pre-2025-godine>.

5 Politika, February 11, 2018.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

Although disappointed, Serbia's state authorities interpreted the strategy as a testimony of domestic reforms made so far on the country's way to Europe. According to Serbia's President Vučić, the strategy stands for a major impetus to citizens and an important recognition for Serbia. The fact is, he said, that the time has come to "pay some bills from the past and make decisions that no one has had courage to make for decades."<sup>8</sup> "In comparison with four countries and one territory /Kosovo/ the most difficult tasks are awaiting Serbia," he said, adding that it was about "issues so important that citizens will have to have their say about them."<sup>9</sup> Premier Ana Brnabić said that the strategy "provides an opportunity though not a guarantee, it implies not that we shall automatically join the EU in 2025 but it recognizes all our efforts."<sup>10</sup>

However, in the article he penned for the *Pečat* daily Defense Minister Vulin argues, "European integrations cannot be the reason why we should give up resolution of the Serbs' national question. European integrations should not be connected with our wish to decide what is best for us."<sup>11</sup> The problem of Kosovo, he says in this context, cannot be solved without a solution to the Serbian question in the Balkans since the Serbian people have not solved its national question for two centuries. Pointing out to the threat of a Great Albania, he underlines, "After all, we are not trying to solve the problem with Prishtina. We have been searching for a solution, so far at least, with Tirana."<sup>12</sup> Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić claims that the phrase "a legally binding agreement" means nothing: its author is ex-commissioner for enlargement Stepan Fule.<sup>13</sup>

8 Ibid.

9 Danas, February 8, 2018.

10 Politika, February 11, 2018.

11 Pečat, February 9, 2018.

12 Ibid.

13 Politika, February 11, 2018.

Representatives of the pro-European opposition – Democratic Party (Dragan Šutanovac), Liberal Democratic Party (Čedomir Jovanović), New Party (Zoran Živković) and Social Democratic Party (Boris Tadić) met with Commissioner Hahn in Belgrade. Apart for Kosovo as a priority issue, they said the EU should pay more attention to processes going on in Serbia: destruction of institution, the media and human rights.

According to Vuk Jeremić, leader of the People's Party, the strategy for the Western Balkans is "a heavy blow for countries in the region and Serbia since it relativizes Serbia's accession to the EU but relativizes not the pressure on it to solve urgently the problem of Kosovo and Metohija."<sup>14</sup> And, leader of Dveri Boško Obradović who had not been invited to the meeting with EU officials said his party was not anti-European but Commissioner Hahn and "bureaucracy in Brussels stand for anti-European regime." "Serbia is in Europe, the Serbs are Europeans, we belong to the European Christian civilization and should not allow to have Europe turned into something else."<sup>15</sup>

The media with anti-European editorial policies have been critical of Serbia's state authorities for their pro-European orientation for long; according to them, the EU and its Commission are turning into an obstacle to Serbia's economic development, while European integrations are more and more damaging that beneficial as propagated.<sup>16</sup> Further on, they argue that Serbia's membership of EU would renounce all the results achieved in the struggle for pan-Serbian liberation and unification, while Serbia as a part of Eastern Orthodox civilization would be deprived of its geopolitical significance.<sup>17</sup>

14 <http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/2990637/vuk-jeremic-strategija-eu-za-zapadni-balkan-tezak-udarac-drzavama-regiona-i-srbiji>

15 Politika, February 11, 2018.

16 Pečat, December 15, 2017.

17 Ibid.

The strategy was a huge disappointment in Bosnia-Herzegovina. "The fact that no date of a possible membership of the EU has been set for us is a bad news for the country, and I think that people in the EU do not understand how important Bosnia-Herzegovina is for regional stability," remarked Deputy Chair of B&H Parliament Mladen Bosić. On the other hand, Milica Marković, the member of Bosnian delegation to the Council of Europe, points out, "Out of all countries of the Western Balkans Bosnia is the least ready for accession to the EU." Up to now, Bosnia-Herzegovina has not fulfilled many preconditions and, therefore, a concrete date for its accession has not been set.<sup>18</sup>

Not only the authorities but Brussels itself were target of many criticisms for the EU's allegedly double standards, which actually allow Russia to take over Bosnia.

"No doubt that the standards used are different," remarks reporter of BHRT Benjamin Butković. As it seems, no one has taken into account Bosnia-Herzegovina's specific structure and the role the EU had played – during the war and in the post-war period – in its make. He further comments that the EU is not strong enough to say loud and clear that the majority of its member-states sees the Islamic factor in Bosnia-Herzegovina as something most disturbing and are particularly suspicious about the country's joining the family of European nations despite the fact that they all recognize in words only that Bosnian Muslims have given proof enough of their orientation towards Europe.<sup>19</sup>

Since Madrid opposes Kosovo's categorization among "Western Balkan countries" the strategy does not touches on it formally, which Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci commented on as the EU's "inability to reach a common stance about

18 Ibid.

19 <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/DW-Strategija-EU-losa-poruka-za-BiH/463829>.

Kosovo.”<sup>20</sup> Johannes Hahn, however, remarked that Kosovo was not excluded from the strategy given the entire region of the Western Balkans was taken in the “package.”<sup>21</sup>

Kosovo’s Minister for European Integration Durata Hoji wrote, “The EU opened its doors to us but passing their threshold depends on us.” However, she was also among those looking forward to more concrete positioning of her country. And yet, President Thaci welcomed the strategy for treating Kosovo as an integral part of enlargement plans; he comments, nevertheless, that the document failed in opening equal prospects for membership to all the countries in the region. And it notably failed, he added, in the case of Kosovo whose vistas for the membership of which in the EU were blurred.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike them, Albania’s Premier Edi Rama was quite satisfied. “I agree with everything the strategy quotes about Albania. Accession negotiations are closer than ever before. As of now, everything will depend on our persistence.”<sup>23</sup>

The strategy was received in Macedonia with optimism. “Good news for Macedonia and all its citizens came from Brussels,” said Premier Zoran Zaev, adding the EU has recognized big progress the country had made in its movement towards Europe. The EU’s stance about each country’s responsibility for its own tempo inspires specific hope...”This encourages us to strengthen our efforts and catch up with the countries that are already negotiating accession.”<sup>24</sup>

According Macedonia’s Deputy Premier Bujar Osmani, Macedonia will begin accession

<sup>20</sup> Politika, 11. February 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dw.com/sr/zapadni-balkan-od-radosti-do-skepse/a-42496504>.

negotiations with the EU in 2018. To him publication of the strategy stands for a historical moment because the EU has focused on the Western Balkans but also because integration into the EU is an issue of the society’s Europeanization rather than just a technical matter.<sup>25</sup> Beginning of Macedonia’s negotiations with the EU depends mostly on resolution of unsettled problems especially with Greece it has been at odds with for long about its name.

## EU STRATEGY’S GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The global financial crisis in 2008 laid bare fragility of democracies in the Western Balkans. Fragile as they were, they turned to illiberal practices, growing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. Having been less interested in the Balkans at the time the West opened the floodgates to new actors, Russia above all. Over the past years Russia has positioned itself significantly in the Balkans. The EU strategy is an attempt at a strategic counterblow to new actors’ activism. Its realization, however, will mostly depend on the EU’s and Western Balkan countries’ commitment to EU objectives. Resolution of the problem of borders between the newly emerged states will stand as the biggest problem; in this document the EU defined it as its top responsibility (the case of Macedonia testifies that problems as such cannot be settled just bilaterally).

The status of Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, will be the biggest stumbling block since both countries have problems with Serbia and its full recognition of their sovereignties. Besides, Bosnia is also under Croatia’s considerable influence, as well as those of Turkey and Russia (through Serbia).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.dw.com/sr/zapadni-balkan-od-radosti-do-skepse/a-42496504>.

China with its transcontinental platform “16 plus 1” including all East European and West Balkan countries is also an influential factor. The EU “old” member-states see China as a partner but also as a threat, mostly due to its attempt to infiltrate European economic avenues (which always cautions against corruption).

Officially, Russia welcomed the strategy. Maria Zaharova, the spokeswoman of the Foreign Ministry saw no obstacles whatsoever to development of its relations with the countries aspiring to the membership of EU and posed them not the question of “with us or against us.”<sup>26</sup>

However, judging by what some Russian commentators are saying, Russia is skeptical about “a geostrategic initiative taken by a stable,

powerful and united Europe.” In an interview with RTD Russian historian and head of the Research Institute for Modern Crises in the Balkans Elena Guskova said, “Russia is fully aware of anti-Russian tendencies permeating the EU’s policy for Serbia and Montenegro the more so since it is a common knowledge that peoples of Serbia and Montenegro have always been oriented towards Russia. Therefore, the EU tries its best to cement Serbia and Montenegro’s distancing themselves from Russia.”

Everything indicates the significance of the timing for Western Balkan countries’ membership of the EU; the longer these countries are at the margins, the riskier they will be to the future of European project as such.

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26 <http://meta.mk/en/russian-mfa-on-strategy-for-the-western-balkans-our-principle-is-not-with-us-or-against-us/>.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Considering the EU member-states resistance to enlargement over past years (because of financial and migrant crises most of all) the enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans is of strategic and visionary significance.

Its main motif is to offer prospects to already negotiating countries; therefore it sets the frame within which negotiations will have to proceed so as to be rounded off possibly by 2025.

All the initiative the strategy has launched indicate that the EU is aware how important the Western Balkans is to its own security as well as to its economic interests.

However, new players (Russia, China and Turkey) are also objective threats to the region's movement towards the EU; the former realize their interests in the region without any preconditioning, which plays into the hands of regional elites without sense of morals and general interest. The biggest problem, however, is the growing authoritarianism in most Balkan countries.

Western Balkans is now given an offer that guarantees assistance in overcoming obstacles and difficulties not only economic and political but also in its movement towards shared values and participation in intellectual debates about the future of the EU. The strategy for the first time clearly defines the problems facing the Balkans, especially the phenomenon of "captured state;" this means that the EU will be insisting on fundamental democratization and especially on free and independent media.

Resolution of bilateral problems, a new benchmark in the adopted document, will precondition membership of the EU. Besides Serbia-Kosovo normalization, the document refers to other borders between the newly emerged states.

The strategy clearly indicates the need for stronger social involvement. Reconciliation and facing the past are surely imperative as they precondition endorsement of European values – pluralism, tolerance, respect for human rights and the rule of law. Therefore, the European Commission should strengthen its cooperation with the civil sector to spur the European option.

Apart for everything the strategy quotes, the Western Balkans also needs badly a new "Marshall plan" that would speed up its economic and institutional development of the countries truly committed to regional cooperation. The latter also necessitates a new generation of politicians that would free their "captured states" and so release social energy the region needs to make a breakthrough.

Should the EU strategy for enlargement fail to offer a realistic plan for economic growth and social progress in the Western Balkans it would turn up as yet another "simulation exercise" the more so since democracy, the rule of law and other trademarks of "Europeanism" could not possibly take lasting roots in poor societies.