

THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract:

In this article, we address the issues of the countries of the Western Balkans related to the accession to the European Union. We focus on areas to which we have so far had the opportunity to obtain information on the countries belonging to the Western Balkans region.

In our paper, we aim to introduce the region of the Western Balkans in more detail and look at the arguments that support the integration of countries into the EU. For the European Union, but also for the countries of the Western Balkans, to point out what enlargement policy is like and what the benefits are.

From a methodological point of view, we classify the paper among qualitative research, using a descriptive, comparative and analytical method. As part of enlargement policy, it can be seen that this policy is constantly changing. It can be said that nothing is more permanent than change, which brings with it benefits as well as certain challenges and benefits, which we want to point out in this paper.

1 Introduction

In this article, we aim to elaborate on what we have been able to know so far about the countries belonging to the Western Balkans region, what the arguments for joining the European Union (hereinafter also as the EU) prevailed and what arguments against joining the EU. In our paper, we also aim to introduce the individual countries of the Western Balkans in more detail and look at the arguments that support the integration of countries into the EU, but also at the threats and challenges that such integration brings. For the European Union, but also for the countries of the Western Balkans. What is the enlargement policy and what are the benefits of this policy?

In our paper, we aim to bring closer the enlargement policy, which is one of the youngest policies of the European Union. From a methodological point of view, we classify the paper among qualitative research, using a descriptive, comparative and analytical method. The

sources used in this paper are data and knowledge based on statistical data from the Balkan Barometer from 2020, from professional foreign and domestic publications and we also used data available on the Internet, such as data from the European Commission or the European Union's website.

2 Experimental details

The issue of the Western Balkans needs to start with the definition of which countries belong to this region. The definition of the Western Balkans is difficult due to the lack of a uniform definition. It is not only difficult in theory, but also in practice. It is not possible to uniformly define which countries belong to the Balkan region, resp. they do not belong, as some views call into question the very existence of a region called the Western Balkans. This was due to the absence of works and professional publications that would define the Balkans from a geographical point of

view, despite the fact that the geographical concept of the Balkans is older than the cultural one.

Geographically, the region of the Western Balkans is most often defined as the south-eastern part of the European continent, whose border is terminated by the line of the Trst and Odessa, known as the Balkan Peninsula. The countries of the Balkans that include the Encyclopedia Britannica in their definition are Greece, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, as well as Slovenia, and thus the countries of the former Yugoslavia.¹ The geographical encyclopedia of the world, in turn, defines the Danube-Balkan Region, which includes Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania. The Western Balkans are defined as the Danube-Balkan region with the countries of Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary by the World Geographical Encyclopedia.² It is possible to strictly and precisely define the region of the Western Balkans on the basis of geographical parameters, but as we mentioned above - the definitions differ. According to Janusz Bugajski³, of the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, the term Western Balkans is geographical but also political and originated to describe part of the Balkan Peninsula. The part that remained outside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Specifically, they described seven countries, namely Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Slovenia, along with Albania, which emerged from international isolation.⁴

This region is a region with a dynamic and turbulent past, which has only relatively recently ended the deep Balkan crisis on its territory. The region of the Western Balkans, as a post-conflict region, is a region that is a potential focus of further conflict. It is also a place where there may be a risk to global stability and security unless otherwise provided. The reason may be non-integration into the European Union, which would mean greater isolation from global influences and trends.⁵

The European Union (as well as the EU) considers the integration of the countries of the region to be its priority. The aim is to promote peace, stability and prosperity not only for the EU but also for the region of the Western Balkans. Last but not least, the promotion of freedom or prosperity from an economic point of view. After the Balkan crisis, the European Union is the largest trading partner in south-eastern

Europe. The intensity of business transactions and its slowdown was observed during the economic crisis. On the other hand, intra-regional foreign trade has intensified, which can also be attributed to the conditions within the integration process.

For the purposes of our paper, we are working with the definition of the Western Balkans and the countries belonging to it: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo⁶, Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia⁷

Enlargement policy is the youngest of the European Union's policies. As Tanja Mišćević⁸ says in her study, for this policy to succeed, three conditions must be met from all three parties, the European Union, its members and the candidate countries. The first condition is a clear political consensus on the need and desire to become a member, then there is an integration and absorption capacity and, last but not least, the credibility of all participants in important activities. The policy of enlargement did not occur immediately with the creation of the EU itself, but only with the integration processes of Central and Eastern Europe. The EU, which at that time registered member states such as Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg as founding countries, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark in 1973. Greece (1981), Spain and Portugal in 1986 and 1995 Austria, Finland and Sweden. Mention should also be made of 1991, when Germany was reunited and thus the territory of the European Union was substantially expanded.

The need for enlargement policy has arisen mainly due to the need for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which also wanted to become members sui generis. This policy was to help in the process of transition, in other words, in preparation for EU membership, in meeting the conditions for EU accession, and only then could the country become a full member of the EU.⁹

Assistance in the integration process came in the form of determining the criteria that a country must meet so that the EU can also assess that a candidate country is ready for EU membership. Among the first criteria was the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, which define the basic criteria for meeting economic, political and legal criteria. These include a functioning market, competitiveness, democratic institutions, respect for human rights and the harmonization of legislation with

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans>

² Tomljanovic, 2018

³ Janusz Bugajski,

⁴ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>, 2021

⁵ Barčáková, 2018

⁶ The designation does not affect the positions on the status and this designation is in accordance with UNSCR. 1244/1999 and the Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Declaration of Independence of Kosovo.

⁷ www.europarl.europa.eu, 2020

⁸ Mišćević, 2016

⁹ Ibid.

the *acquis*. In 1995, the so-called Madrid criteria defining administrative capacity. All these enlargement policy measures have been and are being developed primarily for aid. Not only financial aid, but also aid that shows the direction and timetable of how a country can become a member of the EU. The countries mentioned above, around 1995, became members of the EU without any major complications. Only for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did more serious problems arise, which could also be solved thanks to the enlargement policy.

In 1999, the European Union decided to support the countries of the Western Balkans through the Stabilization and Association Process (SGP). This process defines and frameworks relations between countries (eg the Western Balkans) and the EU itself. In addition to this process, the Stability Pact, in which international actors in particular participate, also supports integration processes.

Further enlargement policy assistance also came in the form of the Accession Partnerships, which included priorities for countries to meet in order to become full members. They should also help in the harmonization of the so-called *acquis*, which included the then 29 negotiating chapters. Following this example, European Partnerships, also known as Partnerships for European Integration, have been established for the countries of the Western Balkans. This form of assistance included priorities for countries in the short and medium term. The short horizon was set for a period of one to two years, while the medium-term priority horizon was set for three to five years. Thanks to these priorities, the reform process should have been more intensive and faster. The political platform of regular meetings of representatives of the countries or representatives of the European Union-Western Balkans political dialogue should also contribute to the pace. Last but not least, the mentioned financial and non-financial assistance is a part of this policy.¹⁰

Within the enlargement policy, the year 2005 was important when the EU introduced the so-called benchmarks. Benchmarks are a measure not only for the EU, but also for the candidate country itself, which talks about whether a given chapter can be opened or not. closed. It is a double check, double evaluation of the fulfillment of conditions in a given chapter, in a given integration process.

Analyses of the enlargement policy, which said Musladin (2012) in his professional articles in particular countries have shown that the most serious factors that determine the process, the process itself and the results of the EU integration process can be divided into three main groups: The first is the specific interests and thus the interests that flow from each sector. The question

arises in the competitiveness of products from other countries, respectively. from countries aspiring to join the EU. The second group are the so-called "National interests" and thus a factor that speaks to the possibility of a negative impact on the decision-making process in a Member State. The third group is the union system and thus the structure, methods and processes of the decision-making process.

One of the priorities in the integration processes is close regional cooperation, which leads and has led to an increase in this type of trade. As Gabrielová¹¹ writes does not confirm in its study that, despite the higher intensity of intra-regional trade, the position of the European Union vis-à-vis the countries of the Western Balkans as their main trading partner would be weakened. In his study, he also points out that the orientation of the countries of the Western Balkans towards the European Union would be more economically advantageous than intra-regional cooperation, but does not deny the positive effects of such cooperation. It recommends for the countries of the Western Balkans, and we agree with the given recommendation, the so-called simultaneous north-south and south-south integration, and thus integration into the European Union and at the same time internal economic integration. The resulting benefits are less vulnerability to external influences in economic crises. Higher attractiveness for foreign investors and deepening of internal relations. It is not excluded that the given high intensity of intra-regional trade is not only temporary, as it is assumed that in the case of individual integrations into the European Union and withdrawal from CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement), with membership ceasing to be a member of the EU membership will strengthen the country's relations with the EU itself.¹²

Economic prosperity and stability in the countries of the Western Balkans is a priority for the European Union in relation to the countries of south-eastern Europe. This is evidenced by the large amount of EU assistance in the integration process. These are, for example, financial instruments such as the CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization) funds. This fund was established in December 2000 and is primarily funded by this "financial package" to meet objectives such as democratic stability, institutional development, law enforcement and harmonization with EU law, human rights, social and economic development. etc.¹³ Other financial funds for assistance are SAPARD, IPA (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization), IPA II, or PHARE. Since 2004, administrative and technical assistance programs

¹⁰ Mišćević, 2016

¹¹ Gabrielová, 2013

¹² Gabrielová, 2011

¹³ www.europskaunia.sk, 2018

known as the twinning program and the Technical Assistance Information Exchange Office (TAIEX) have been available to the countries of the Western Balkans. These forms of assistance were created to help countries with the capacity to implement reforms within the *acquis*¹⁴ Preferential trade agreements, autonomous preferences have been introduced, and the countries of the Western Balkans have joined international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Stabilization and Association Agreements. Within the framework of assistance to the countries of the Western Balkans from the European Union, we can talk about multilevel assistance within the integration process and thus a great advantage for the countries of the Western Balkans.

The mentioned autonomous preferences were created with the aim of liberalizing exports for the countries of the Western Balkans to the countries of the European Union. This liberalization of exports, resp. duty-free access to the European single market covered all goods except wine, veal, sugar and certain types of fishery (restrictions on tariff foods were introduced for those foods and products). This assistance was initially agreed for a limited period of five years, but was extended several times. Stabilization and Association Agreements are bilateral cooperation agreements at political and economic level. Although these agreements bring fewer advantages than the autonomous agreements themselves, they are for a longer period of time and therefore their importance is considerable. The agreements aim to harmonize trade law. Regional cooperation is also mentioned, as well as ECAA 2006, which is the European Common Aviation Area, the SEETO - Center for Transport in South-Eastern Europe, the Energy Community, the judiciary, the police and border protection. The MARRI Regional Forum is a further cooperation in the framework of migration, asylum and refugees, with the aim of detecting their smuggling and illegal migration.¹⁵

It is important for the European Union to integrate the countries of the Western Balkans as effectively as possible, because its subsequent political, social or economic stagnation can destabilize the region, but also the forces of the European Union. An example is Brexit, resp. withdrawal from Great Britain from the European Union, direction of policies of Poland and Hungary and their blocking of the EU budget, or higher involvement of third parties in the countries of the Western Balkans (eg China during the covid-19 pandemic in Serbia)

Table n. 1.: Current state of the Western Balkan countries in the process of integration into the EU¹⁶

	The application for EU membership	Current state
Albania	April 2009	Candidate country (june 2014)
Republic of Northern Macedonia	March 2004	Candidate country (december 2005)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	February 2016	Potential candidate country
Montenegro	December 2008	Candidate country (december 2010)
Serbia	December 2009	Candidate country (december 2012)
Kosovo		Potential candidate country

3. Conclusion

In our paper, we analyzed the benefits of the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the European Union from the perspective of the countries themselves, but also from the perspective of the European Union. We believe that the integration of countries is not a problem, but on the contrary, it is an example of a solution and therefore certainly belongs to the European Union, once the necessary criteria and conditions have been met. The integration of countries is a solution, for example, how to achieve a high degree of democracy, peace, stability, whether economic or political, in the countries of the Western Balkans, how to increase regional cooperation and so on.

In this paper, we analyzed the integration processes of Southeast Europe, with which forms of financial and non-financial assistance they can work. This is a clear benefit for countries in the process of joining the EU. The EU is a major trading partner for the countries of the Western Balkans, but also thanks to the conditions of accession to the EU and various cooperation, the countries of the Western Balkans also benefit from intensive intra-regional trade and political cooperation. Following the recent enlargements of the EU, the Western Balkans is a priority for the EU, as the countries of south-eastern Europe have become immediate neighbors and thus neighbors of the European Union's external borders. We believe that, although the current situation on the Balkan Peninsula is stable, it is a source of possible disputes and conflicts. This may also be the reason why the countries of the Western Balkans are not indifferent to the European Union and are cooperating in their integration into the EU. However, it should be recalled that the countries of south-eastern Europe have much to offer not only economically and politically, but also within a skilled and unskilled workforce. The people of these countries often have knowledge of several foreign languages at a communicative level. If even their work (skilled and unskilled labor) is legalized and the gray economy is eliminated to the lowest possible percentage, it will bring economic benefits not only to the country itself, but also to EU countries.

During the integration processes, from the fulfillment of the basic criteria to the specific criteria, a relatively deep and complex relationship will be established between the candidate country and the European Union. It

¹⁴ Mišćević, 2016

¹⁵ Zubaľová, 2017

can be said that the more conditions a given country has to meet, the deeper the relationship between them and the EU is established.

As part of enlargement policy, it can be seen that this policy is constantly changing. It can be said that nothing is more permanent than change, which brings with it benefits as well as certain challenges. The advantage is a certain degree of flexibility, additional assistance for candidate countries. On the other hand, there is a challenge for the candidate countries, who say that they must be prepared to add the necessary new criteria if necessary. This may lead to some pessimism about the countries' expected accession to the EU. This topic is relatively dynamic and therefore requires further research, which we plan to work on.

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