



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG



BEYOND NON-PAPERS:

How a progressive, geopolitical role of the EU
could solve problems in the WB6
and bring enlargement back to success

Western Balkan Strategy Group
for an effective EU-enlargement policy



July 2021



Intro: Recognizing current trends and the need to change

For the past three decades, Western Balkan countries have been going through a dynamic period of consolidation of new states, economic transition and transformation of social values. This process of regional and internal consolidation is unfinished and the legacy of conflict is still powerful; yet the outlook of EU accession is the one positive project offering a perspective to societies and economies while settling the wounds of the past.

Serbia, in particular, has not closed the “Serbian question” and is not ready to accept the new reality in the region – to recognize the new states and treat them as equal partners¹. Belgrade with its policy of “protecting the Serbs and preventing their integration into their home countries” still believes that it can achieve wartime goals in new circumstances. The whole region, particularly Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, is hostage of such policy ascribing Serbia and its necessary democratic renewal a key role in moving forward towards a European perspective.

Kosovo and Serbia have been part of a dialogue facilitated by the EEAS for a little bit more than 10 years. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains severely divided among ethnical entities, with serious questions of institutional functionality. North Macedonia has a relatively recent history of ethnical clashes and disputes with neighbors (the most recent with Bulgaria). Montenegro – though not divided on a classical ethnic concept – is severely divided between two ethnic-political groups that may earnestly put into question its post-independence pro-western policy. Albania has issues with minorities who claim to be under-represented and disfranchised in institutional politics. Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama and Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic have a strong personal relationship, which many believe is based on the premise of their former attempts to change borders in the Balkans covered or not opposed to by former US envoy Grenell and HR Mogherini respectively².

Corrupt elites desire this situation, they feed on institutional instability, unconsolidated public policy that allows for corruptive practices and concentration of power, and one that provides partisan militants the power to occupy state institutions..

Not long ago, a Slovenian non-paper was released in public. Scenarios for the recomposition of the Balkans included the creation of a greater Serbia, Albania and Croatia, which would radicalize and take the entire region back to the past, wiping out everything accomplished over the past 30-odd years in Western Balkans. Such proposals fuel the hopes of ethno-nationalists and radicals with territorial ambition in the Western Balkans. The war past in the Western Balkans remind us that such scenarios are not possible without conflicts and displacement of people. The recent circulation of non-papers has however painfully demonstrated the current vacuum for positive ideas going forward in the European integration of the WB6. It has illustrated the need to re-visit the West’s engagement with the region with the aim of building a liberal-democratic order with the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue at its core problem moving forward.

¹ Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin stated that he „believes that the creation of the Serbian world solves the national question of Serbs” and “it is not a solution for all Serbs to live together in a foreign country, but for the majority of Serbs to live in their own country.” <https://rs.ninfo.com/english/news/serbian-interior-minister-supports-the-idea-of-greater-serbia/>.

² Land-swap attempts or partition of Kosovo was subject of the WB6 Strategy Group’s paper in 2018 accessible on link: https://rs.boell.org/sites/default/files/landswap_paper_final.pdf



A transatlantic approach should actively prevent the project and ideology of border change of 7 countries emerged from Yugoslavia and ethnic-nationalism built on the past from growing further. Maintaining liberal values over the security architecture in the Balkans requires first and foremost a concordance between the EU and US policy. There cannot be two western policies over this region. NATO, the EU accession, and conditionality policies over WB6 countries should reflect the unequivocal position of a unified transatlantic policy over what should be the 'democratic consolidation'. Leaders who oppose the liberal values of this security order, who work to promote values that bring in historical narratives to the exclusion of modern policy issues, and those who work to incite conflicting scenarios should all have an unambiguous disapproval from the West. The EU and US should make it clear that, whatever their disagreements are, the Balkans remain a region where they mutually share their past engagement, the 'now' of democratization, and the future of a successful transatlantic project.

In 2021, it is hence clear that if these briefly described dynamics continue to develop or remain unsolved, the prospect of EU enlargement will be rendered meaningless. That is why, this paper attempts to make proposals to change the current direction of trends with the aim of opening up space for problem-solving and eventually putting EU enlargement back on track for transformational success it has had in the past.

We propose a six-point program that would fight the naïve narrative of 'borders' and promote a European future based on democratic principles and common sense on modern statehood:

1. ASSURANCE FOR A COMMON FUTURE:

The Western Balkans cannot live in a limbo. Uncertainties on its future are so high that no one believes that a future within the EU is at all possible. Part of the blame for this is with the EU itself. The almost pure inter-governmental nature of the enlargement policy of the EU – partly due to the founding treaties construction – makes it so hard to strategize on future enlargement that basically nothing can nowadays be credibly promised. Domestic politics over enlargement is another dimension, which, in certain EU member states is strong enough to prevent leaders from tolerating an acceleration of the enlargement process. Balkan governments, peoples and discourse in general perceive this picture as utterly hurtful. Domestic initiatives to rely on European integration as a motor for domestic change have started to seem comic lately. Less and less people rely and trust that 'motor' primarily because the EU cannot assure anyone on the future of enlargement. The EU must STOP this in the first place by changing its discourse on the Balkans. The EU member states must project a strategy that is clear, certain, and sufficiently assuring to the WB6 on their future accession to the EU. That strategy should have clear indicators of performance to implement the regatta principle; one which would be a reliable, transparent and visible set of rules for governments and peoples to rely on in their domestic politics and accountability. It is only that strategy that would make conditionality policy work, thus pulling up democratic consolidation discourse in exchange of territorial-related plans for dealing with the future.



2. A STRONG CONDITIONALITY POLICY:

Labeling themselves 'pro-European', some leaders of the region are at the same time autocrats, capturers of state, abusers of law, and anti-Europeans in essence. A conditionality policy that allows partnership with governments who eat from both hands, the West and Russia, who stand for rule of law and favor criminal clienteles at the same time, who formally stand for free elections and in the same time buy media, is questionable. It does not work. Therefore, we propose a conditionality policy that starts from the 'top', the principles. One that bans cooperation with government leaders and presidents who are obviously autocrats, who oppose liberal values of peace and cohabitation, who run counter to the principles of their own laws, who promote anti-European values in their domestic governance in general. A conditionality policy that tolerates this serious abuse of law in the Western Balkans is at best ironic. Therefore, the EU's conditionality policy should be clear on the Western Balkans countries: no European future for countries run by corrupt governments, by those who promote nationalism and historical narratives that trigger conflicts, by those who work to divide societies and territories, by those who use power to deepen their partisan clienteles etc. A fundamental change in this policy is essential; hence, a clear NO to 'stabilitocracy' and a powerful YES to democratization is required. This would need to be reflected in allies within the WB6 countries – supporting those liberal, progressive forces that credibly stand for democratization and rejecting those who oppose it.

3. A TRANSATLANTIC 'NO' TO HOMOGENOUS STATES:

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4. A NEW FORMAT OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN PARTIES:

The Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue is the first chance of the West to champion a deal that echoes liberal values of international order. The prior format of shaping this dialogue with the High Representative of the EU as the formal mediator are deemed to fail. Among the main reasons for failure is the *laissez-faire* approach



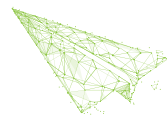
by which it is up to the parties – Kosovo and Serbia – to prepare the agenda, discuss and direct the negotiations. This approach should end. The High Representative should play a much more active role in negotiations, coordinating efforts with the US and EU member states well before and designating an agenda that is workable and has the pledge of the EU to implement it. Parties should be briefed and given much more orientation during the pre-negotiations, and the EU must actively push for stipulations that reflect the EU accession aspirations. The EU should also be ready to extend a **time-target offer** for accession in exchange for the final deal, with specific measurable indicators on conditionality benchmarks that should be met by the parties meanwhile.

5. CITIZENS-ORIENTED AGENDA FOR A SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE:

The EU-mediated Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue should start with a few initiatives that are citizens-oriented, something that does not trigger the nationalist sentiment and manifests the good-will of both parties to remain equal on the table. Such projects should echo things that really work in practice, making the citizens of both countries feel connected with its purpose. Initiatives may include joint working groups to promote mutual recognition of qualifications for certain professions (e.g. doctors, engineers etc.), promotion of youth exchange in education institutions, joint funding schemes for environment protection, exchange of civil society and media representatives in support of state institutions transparency, joint business development initiatives in sectors such as IT, etc. The EU and the parties in the Dialogue must prove that initiatives that are more practical do work, and that such background could massively help the later efforts in construing a final deal between the two countries.

6. PILOTING ECONOMIC PROJECTS AS A MATTER OF PRIORITY:

Last but not least, an important incentive for democratic state-building in the Balkans is economic growth. Countries lack growth strategies; many of them rely on consumption economies with no specific developmental driving force behind it. The EU and US should not continue the prior practice of investment through aid projects that basically sends the money back to the donor state. Bigger economic projects should be supported with emphasis on those that incentivize regional cooperation and economic integration. Electricity connectivity infrastructure, gas pipelines, regional highways, railways, shared airports, joint funds for multi-state free enterprise start-ups, are all possibilities that can be explored. Joint economic efforts have never been tried in the region. Except CEFTA – which is a purely trade agreement – not much has been even proposed in terms of economic projects. An EU and US support, in the form of a renewed Berlin process, can emphasize this component more strategically and envisage practical outputs for the lives of the people.



To meet these expectations, we recommend the following:

To the US State Department:

- a) Coordinate with the EU and its member states to harmonize a long-term, bipartisan approach on the Western Balkans. That approach must embrace the principles, which form the liberal order in which countries, politics and regional cooperation should be grounded;
- b) Offer a bipartisan approval to that policy in the US Senate;
- c) Consider economic projects, which the Western Balkans can afford in the long-term in exchange for weakening the role of China in labor-intensive industries in Europe.

To the EU and its member states:

- a) Harmonize with the US a long-term policy on the Western Balkans, and define the authority to mediate between the WB countries and its terms;
- b) Consolidate the terms of the trans-Atlantic approach on the Balkans, and embrace the long-term role of NATO and other security elements in it;
- c) Develop a common position between all member states on the principles on Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, and stamp a harsh NO on homogenous states, territorial/border changes, and nationalist approaches as a red line;
- d) Provide a **clear time-targeted accession agenda**, based on measurable indicators on the enlargement/conditionality policy; – beyond the benchmark system and more visible
- e) Block property and suspending entry into the EU countries of persons contributing to the destabilization of the Western Balkans (which Biden Administration already announced two weeks ago in the form of an executive order).

To the EEAS:

- a) Omit from repeating the practice of formal dialogue, ‘constructive ambiguity’ texts, and never-ending negotiations with no content; prepare, coordinate, make a clear plan, and then mediate with concrete substance;
- b) Ensure that parties are conditioned with criteria that are inherently connected to the enlargement strategy; go hand-in-hand with the DG NEAR and provide accession leverage for negotiating a deal;
- c) Envisage a negative principles policy: ‘what cannot and should not be part of a negotiating table’;

To the WB governments:

- a) Coordinate with the EU to reposition the enlargement agenda in domestic politics;
- b) Provide a clearer role to civil society organizations in the enlargement progress monitoring;
- c) Omit from nationalistic narrative, instead endorse modern-state discourse on development, rule of law, human rights values, democratization etc.;



To the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs:

- a) Form inter-parliamentary groups with national parliaments of WB countries; promote a clear agenda of European integration with specific missions in each country;
- b) Frame an annual program of European integration from a parliamentary perspective, in which WB parliaments engage in meeting certain benchmarks which they agree with the CFA;
- c) Promote values of human rights and provide a harsh NO to leaders running counter to those principles.

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The “Strategy Group for a political, societal and economic European integration of the Western Balkans Six” is a group of legal, historical and political researches from all WB6 countries organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung’s Belgrade, Sarajevo and Berlin offices. Its aim is to credibly advocate for a more effective European integration of the Balkans in European as well as Balkan capitals.

