

EU policies and strategy towards the Western Balkans: where is it heading?

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Introduction

To analyze the current policies of the European Union towards the Western Balkans and consequently, the strategy that drives them, it is not an easy task. Nevertheless, through the insights of the supranationalism view on integration versus that of the intergovernmentalism rationale, I argue the implications and the effects of the current, “frozen” enlargement process and the reasons that led to such an outcome. Specifically, in juxtaposing the theoretical approaches of neo-functionalism with that of liberal intergovernmentalism, I seek to find out the reasons that are leading the process of enlargement toward a ‘dead end’ point, with no clear perspective for the Western Balkans` countries in the near future. Starting with a short comparison between supranationalism views on the EU, and an intergovernmentalist understanding, I will then follow with a theoretical discussion of the two most elaborated approaches on European Integration field, namely neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. Afterwards, I analyze the current situation of EU policies toward the Western Balkans while applying the theoretical frame that suits mostly the case study. Finally, I come at a conclusion of the vision or strategy that the European Union has toward the region (if any), and what can be some of the effects of the prolongation of the process.

Theoretical Framework

Supranationalism in the European integration discourse encompasses a broad generic view of a European Union that closely resembles the one of the national political systems. It looks upon the Commission as the driver of the integration process and links it to a strong executive role that brings in mind the governments of most member states. One of the things that is strongly emphasized by the supranationalism in the European studies is the shift of loyalties that takes place from the member states toward a new centre. This clearly contravenes the basic tenet of intergovernmentalism that maintains the continuous central role of the member states. Roughly speaking, if supranationalism believes that centers of decision-making are moving away from the states toward new, autonomous institutions, the intergovernmentalism points at the fact that the ultimate power remains with the state. Ernst Haas, describes political integration as “a process where actors shift their loyalties and expectations toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states. The end result of a process of political integration is a new political community, superimposed over the pre-existing ones” (Lindbergh, 1963, p.4).

On the other hand, the intergovernmentalists believe in a more ‘realist’ notion of the world and point at the states as the only significant actors. As Hoffman has correctly observed: “[a]ny international system, would be likely to produce diversity rather than synthesis among the units” (Rosamond, 2000, p.76; Hoffman, 1966). This means that the units (states) would be unwilling to relinquish power, but they may bargain to increase their share of profits. Thus they create these institutions for the simple purpose of preserving their interests and increasing their possibilities of gaining more, rather than

with the intention of delegating real, independent authority to them. But to have a better understanding of how supranationalism and intergovernmentalism can be applied to the study of European integration, it is better to interpret their basic tenets, through the lenses of neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, two of the most elaborated theoretical approaches on EU.

To start with neofunctionalism, it is interesting the fact that it has been identified as a 'pluralist theory', by one of the most prominent writers in the European studies field (Lindbergh, 1963, p.55). It is a self-explanatory term of this theory that points out at a variety of different actors, rather than viewing states as the only units of the world politics. The main assumption of this theory is that it "contemplated the replacement of power politics with a new supranational style, built around a core procedural consensus which resembled that of most domestic political systems" (Rosamond, 2000, p.73). Framing the understanding of the European integration in this way, it 'revolutionized' the traditional explanation of realist and intergovernmentalist views of the "perpetuity of power politics" and triggered a powerful "intergovernmentalist backlash" as a rival theoretical approach in explaining European integration (Rosamond 2000). But before turning to the insights and rationale of the most distinguished intergovernmentalist approach, Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism, it is of importance to mention the notion of 'spill-over' in the neofunctionalist approach. Spill-over refers to the economic integration in one sector that would lead to further integration in other sectors as well as "greater authoritative capacity at the European level" (Rosamond, 2000, p.60), as Haas has defined it. Hence, the process of integration is looked upon in incrementalist terms from the neofunctionalists, believing in a step by step approach to understanding the historical course of it and to find a rationale of the direction to where this Union without a "pre-defined end or *finalite politique*" (Verhaeven, 2004, p.274), is headed.

"Instead the Treaties have included the ambition of an 'ever closer union', suggesting deeper political integration as an end in itself, without explicitly stating the final political or constitutional destination" (Verhaeven, 2004, p.274). It is important to note though that Haas, latter on, in his writings, relegated neo-functionalism to the status of pre-theory, "alongside federalism and communications approaches, because they do not provide an explanation of a recurring series of events made up of dimensions of activity casually linked to one another" (Rosamond, 2000, p.87). This rational analysis of the cause-effect linkage that Haas has observed in a latter phase of his career, tells a lot about the neofunctionalism and its limits in providing empirics for the explanation of the European integration. I turn now at the liberal intergovernmentalism to provide a rational explanation of the European integration and bring some of the insights of this theoretical approach in this field of study.

Schimmelfennig, while talking for the LI theoretical approach, mentions at one moment (jokingly) that: "Liberal intergovernmentalism is a theoretical 'school' with no 'disciples' and a single 'teacher', Andrew Moravcsik" (Schimmelfennig, 2005, pp.78-79). Of course, this is an oversimplified view of it, considering that Schimmelfennig himself has devoted an entire chapter in explaining the basic tenets of this theory and the works of many others. Rosamond describes this theory as a "two-level game" in explaining both the "national preference formation and an intergovernmentalist account of strategic bargaining between states" (Schimmelfennig, 2005, p.79). Turning to Moravcsik, he has described the European integration as resulting from national made

choices “by national leaders who consistently pursued economic interests..., - that evolved slowly in response to structural incentives in the global economy” (Moravcsik, 1998, p.3). Furthermore, he emphasizes that: “economic interest, relative power, and credible commitments- account for the form, substance, and timing of major steps toward European integration” (Moravcsik, 1998, p.4). Therefore, Moravcsik offers a more ‘realist’ *explanada* of the integration process and he strongly believes that national states are the primarily actors of international politics. They act rationally and have given preferences before entering the ‘bargaining table’ where they negotiate only and with the sole purpose of preserving their interests and increasing their benefits. In relation to the role and power of the institutions, Moravcsik states that governments created and delegated sovereignty to these institutions only “to secure the substantive bargains they had made” and “for the express purpose of committing one another to cooperate” (Moravcsik, 1998, p.4). *Ergo*, the states remain in full control of the decision-making process and are not constrained in their choices by these institutions.

Not only these institutions do not act independently of the states that created them, but they reflect the will and interests of those governments. One famous quote of Moravcsik gives us a ‘full’ meaning of what LI is all about: “There will never be a United States of Europe... I refuse to identify myself with those who promote the disappearance of the nation state...I seek instead a federation among strong nation-states” (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 472). In this sentence it is actually hard to discern if it is only a wishful thinking by the part of the author or a realistic view of the present situation. Notwithstanding this ‘slip’ of Moravcsik, I still rely on the insights of LI for the purposes of finding a rationalist explanation of the current policy framework of EU versus the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, for the purposes of a comparative analysis, I also look at supranationalist empirics, mostly in the form of Commission drives of the integration process.

The current policies of the EU toward Western Balkans

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 to twenty-five members, with several more countries to join in the course of the next decade, it radically changed the nature of the EU (Liebscher et al., 2004). This is reflected in the everyday business in Brussels, where an enlarged bureaucracy is keener to be criticized for a slow down of daily operations and where agreements are harder to negotiate and agreed upon. If so, the question then remains why the EU has expanded and has even recognized the possibility of further accession if conditions are met by prospective countries? Moravcsik provides an answer when he writes that: “Just as occurred in the past, leaders of the current EU members are promoting accession because they consider enlargement to be in their long-term economic and geopolitical interest” (Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003, p.43). He and Vachudova also stress that EU is gaining from enlargement in both “geopolitical stabilization” and “economic revitalization” of the European borderlands which in turn, is likely “to diminish nationalist conflict and make illegal immigration more manageable and reduce the costs of managing a border with potentially disorderly neighbors” (Papa, 2006). In this regard, LI offers a rationale of the EU is actually acting on pursue of their interests when they make the decision to further enlarge or not. And if the governments of the member states think that it is worthy to further enlarge at a given time and period, they go ahead with it after deliberating the issue in the Council.

On the other hand, it is true that not all members show similar stances and attitudes toward enlargement; the ones that are to gain more are the border states, because of the vicinity with the prospective countries. This is why, as Schimmelfennig emphasizes: “EU border states have a strong interest in enlargement” (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p.178). And this in turn, explains why most of the Southern states, led by France, gave their support to Bulgaria, Romania and the Southeastern candidates, while the Northern countries were more supportive of Vishegrad and Baltic states (Schimmelfennig, 2003). Furthermore, if we look only from a rationalist LI perspective, the previous 2004 accession of the ten new EU members, we fail to grasp the whole picture. Economically speaking, the accession of these ten new countries was not a very successful story for the older member states. Breuss has analyzed,- even before the accession took place,- that “[o]n average, the EU will become even poorer: measured in PPP, GDP per capita will be lower by 9 per cent” (Breuss, 2004, p.296).

but e continues by also stressing that the EU Enlargement was a sound political project rather than an economic project. He mentions that “enlargement will end the political separation in Europe” (Breuss, 2004, p.296).

To shortly turn now at the applicant countries and the way they look at the dual partnership with member states, they often have found themselves in “weak negotiation position and accordingly have conceded much in exchange for membership” (Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003, p.44). Although both parties will both benefit from the enlargement, the applicants are going to benefit even more and for this reason they are willing to concede a lot in the pre-accession negotiation period. According to this rationale, the applicant countries are having short term costs, but will have long term benefits, whereas the contrary can be said for the member countries. In this light, we may summarize that it is in the EU interest to prolong the pre-accession period of the ‘aspirant’ countries and in a way, force them to adhere to the strict conditionalities, before any further step is to be taken. Considering also the fact that candidate members, - not to mention those that have acceded already-, have much more comparative advantage in terms of financial aid, compared to the associated countries, it becomes clear that the gap is deepening along the way and that the Western Balkan countries cannot be expected to perform miracles in order to catch up with the rest.

Nevertheless, realistic or not, the EU has already well understood that “the membership carrot has become one of the main instruments of the EU to support its normative power” (Juncos, 2005, p.93). Considering the past failures of the EU in the area, notably the failure to take the lead in the Yugoslavian wars, or to intervene in providing stability in Macedonia, not to mention Kosovo and the ‘inferiority’ in which has found itself as compared to the strong interventionist policy of the U.S., the EU has to (re)establish itself as a major player in its borders. As Juncos reminds us: “one of the lessons of the Bosnian conflict was that “real wars” had not disappeared from the continent and that they could erupt only a two-hour flight away from Brussels” (Juncos, 2005, p.95). In order to maintain the momentum and not to let these countries fall in ‘despair’ and become flourishing areas of organized crime and trafficking, the EU is playing a difficult role and handing out promises as the only efficient mean at hands. As Moore reminds us:

For Brussels, integrating the western Balkans means that there will be no “black hole” in the middle of the EU -- especially after Bulgaria and Romania join -- in

which organized crime could flourish. By offering the prospect of membership, the EU has a powerful lever to influence precisely the kind of changes -- called "reforms" -- that it wants to see implemented (Moore, 2005).

Nevertheless, without institutional and financial back-up, the rhetoric of the EU, starting with the Thessaloniki summit and onward, can turn into a kind of "double-bluff, in which the EU pretends to offer membership, while the countries of the region pretend to implement reforms" (Lehne, 2004, pp. 121-122). This 'empty' rhetoric will serve for nothing, since at its best can only preserve the 'hopeless' status quo, whereas at its worst, it can provoke despair and unrest. On the other hand, "in the case of the EU's policy of "stick and carrots," the EU certainly uses more than persuasion and temptation; it aims to alter the political attitudes of other countries through the use of traditional forms of coercion and seduction" (Peshkopia, 2005, p.46). But, nevertheless the disputable policies of European Union, they remain the best hope to see things moving ahead and maintain the pace on reforms and democratization of the region. The European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, insisted that notwithstanding the failure of the draft constitution and the present political crisis, "the momentum for enlargement should continue based on the principles of consolidation, conditionality and communication" (European Policy Center Briefing, S34/05, 2005). Enlargement, according to Rehn is a great success story and one of the most important EU instrument for stabilizing the region and showing itself as a "civilian power" (European Policy Center Briefing, 2005). The policies of the Union toward the Western Balkans can thus be seen as a way to maintain the momentum, preserve the stability and increase the pace of reforms on one hand and (re)establish the EU as a strong, powerful player in the region. These features are in line with the moral values embedded on the institutional framework of the EU and a way of promotion as an influential world player.

EU (lack of) strategy towards the region

Consensus has been established among European leaders over how the EU should proceed with enlargement. Speaking at the European Council on 14-15 December, Commission President Barroso,- repeating what Rehn had pointed out before,- explained that the pace of enlargement depends on the EU's capacity to integrate new members. "Consensus is clearly emerging around what I call the three Cs, consolidation, conditionality and communication," (Enlargement yes..., p.1), he said.¹ While the door to enlargement remains open, candidate countries must respect all the criteria. In reality, it is hard for these countries to adapt the criteria on their own, without a 'push' from the EU. And if they ever succeed in this impossible task, they might grow in eurosceptics, like in the case of Croatia or Turkey.² The reasons might be different, but the economic revival,-

¹ Here we may discern some kind of coherence in the public declarations of the EU officials that may qualify as a build-up strategy toward the Western Balkans.

² In the case of Croatia, Croats began to pay more attention to the high unemployment rates in some EU member states, the inflationary problems that followed the introduction of the euro currency and the heated debate over the proposed EU constitution. They also grew bitter because of the Gotovina affair. Whereas in Turkey's case I can quote its ex-foreign minister, Mr. Yasir Yasin when mentioning that "if the EU will

reached after adhering to the rigid criteria set by the EU,- in association with political costs that accompanies the process, might transform themselves in powerful anti-European levers that may set the integration process back in years.

Now, this is just a speculation, but even if it is a least likely outcome, it should be considered in the EU's strategy toward the Balkans before the matters could precipitate. Also, considering the little economic cost that EU faces in the case of incorporation of the whole region (roughly the size of Romania) and the incentives that it can get, especially in terms of increasing its level of influence, should be enough for the EU to re-consider its current strategy (if any) toward the Western Balkans. One author has described the current enlargement process of the EU as stalled, because of "the reluctance of the older members to give up larger parts of their financial positions to the newcomers, while the latter should be satisfied with much less benefits than hoped for and have hard conditions to apply the *acquis communautaire*" (Balla, 2005). And since the hope for a fast integration has been waned, some of these candidate or associated countries have sided with the United States, "against some of the EU founding members who took a decided anti-US course" (Balla 2005).

Of course, it cannot be in the interest of the EU to let these countries shift their interests and its strategy has already taken some precautionary measures on preventing this. To be more explicit, the case of Kosovo, which is going soon to 'change hands' from the U.S. backed up UNMIK to an entirely European made up force, is a significant policy change in that regard that is part of coordinated moves from the EU to become more visible and engaged in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the EU has been leading the multinational efforts in BiH, through the incentive of prospective integration. More concretely, the Commission has submitted a Feasibility Study which has linked "the beginning of negotiations on an SAA with progress on 16 reform priorities" (Lehne, 2003, p.119). Also, the EU has helped build multiethnic peace and stability in Macedonia, granting this country the candidate status, notwithstanding some failures to comply with all the imposed criteria. This is in line with what Pippin has argued while talking about the possible course of action toward the region and has emphasized that "the accession of Albania, BiH, Croatia, FYROM and Serbia and Montenegro to the EU is a matter of when and how, rather than whether" (Pippin, 2004, p.228).

If all these policy approaches of the EU toward the region rise up to a clear cut strategy for the Western Balkans, or qualify only as snapshots that do not essentially try to change the status quo, this is a matter for debate and cannot be answered by taking an inductive analysis in such a short paper. Furthermore, the empirical evidence on occasions seems contradictory, because the EU has not stucked to a single, coherent and declared strategy. On the contrary, it has changed its position regarding the region, according to various economical, geo-political, cultural or other factorial considerations. Nevertheless, to conclude the argumentation about the strategy of the EU toward the region, I would like to mention the rationale offered by Judy Batt when she says that the EU does not have an 'exit strategy' for the Western Balkans; it has an 'accession strategy', as EU leaders have repeatedly affirmed. This strategy draws in part from the

not integrate us now, in the future we might not be interested." (Present author's notes in a conference about the future of Europe, organized in October 2006 in Budapest).

experience accumulated with the ten newest members of the EU, but “it cannot take for granted that its success will repeat itself in the Western Balkans” (Batt, 2004, p.125).

Conclusion

This essay has sought to find an explanation of the current policies and strategy of the European Union toward the Western Balkans. In doing so, it has analyzed the actions and rhetoric of the EU, through the theoretical lenses of Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Neo-functionalism approaches. The author recognizes the shortcomings that both these European integration semi-theories have in fully explaining different aspects of the integration process and is well aware of the limited scope and space of this essay. Trying to maintain a logical flow in linking the theoretical insights with the empirical evidence, I tried to guard myself against falling into a fallacious trap while discussing the long-term policy and strategy of the EU. This is mainly because of the thin (divisional) line that exists between ‘speculation’ and ‘argumentation’. I am mentioning this because of the actuality of the topic that I have chosen and the risk of falling into a nebulous endeavour in trying to find a rationale of the current policies and ‘discover’ the strategy of the EU toward the region. Moreover, it is not easy to set up a coherent analytical frame, while trying to maintain an utmost objectivity, in such a limited space. Nevertheless, these two sub-theories of European Studies can provide some very powerful tools in explaining different parts of the integration process and they both offer a pro-integrationist rationale of the Union’s attitude toward the region.

They depart on the debate about the role and the strength of the supranational institutions that serve as drivers of the enlargement process, namely the Commission. Whereas the neo-functionalist view maintains that the Commission is behind the policy actions and serves as a powerful engine in promoting any strategy toward further enlargement, the intergovernmentalist position firmly upholds the central bargaining role of the member states in the negotiating table. This paper provided some empirics on this issue while stressing the ‘supranationalist’ statements of some Commissioners, (notably Rehn and Barroso), that have delineated a prospectus of the future stance that the EU would maintain with the Western Balkans. The European position will be conditionalized by the ‘three Cs’ principles and that fulfillment of the accession criteria on individual basis would be the first step that would pave the way for these countries to integrate themselves. Furthermore, I argued that the economic reasons are not the determinants of the process and provided evidence while comparing and contrasting the Western Balkan countries with both CEECs and the newest members of the EU, notably Romania.

On the other hand, the evidence provided in this paper, can also be explained through the negotiation power that remains on the hands of the governments of the member states and how they make rationalist driven decisions that serve their own ends. In the end, the European Council comes out with general guidelines, like the ones established by the Copenhagen summit in 1993, that are to be followed and ‘translated’ into concrete policy actions from the Commission. And is the Council who has the last word on Enlargement and can vote on further incorporation of new member states only through unanimity. Therefore, we can conclude that both these theoretical approaches can serve to understand the current policies and politics of the EU toward the Western

Balkans and both of them can be used to find a common set of preferences that may qualify as a strategy of the Union toward this region.

All in all, the European Union has temporally 'frozen' its further enlargement toward the Western Balkans for internal problems that relate to the structural absorption capacity of it for the moment and the provisions of the Treaty of Nice that call for a restructuring, after the number reaches twenty-seven. But on the other hand, the EU has shifted the main part of the responsibility toward these aspirant countries and has repeatedly made clear that only the fulfillment of the conditions would qualify them for accession. Individual evaluation on the merits has left the ball on the Western Balkan's side and concrete reforms are awaited from them. The compliance with these reforms is a *sine qua non* for these countries if they ever want to see the 'green light' for accession into the EU, although this is only half of the story. The other half is the willingness of the European Union to integrate these countries and to basically give signs of this willingness, notwithstanding its internal divisions or absorption capabilities, in order not to leave this region to its fate and further succumb or deteriorate. This will provide a much needed impetus for the Western Balkan countries to push ahead with the rest of the reforms and democratize at a faster pace, while simultaneously complying with other conditions.

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