

# The future of the Western Balkans integration within the EU

By Daniel Trenchov

## *Abstract*

*Following the key achievements of the European integration, the free movements of people, goods and capital, all the countries from the Western Balkan region strive for the same goal: being a part of the European family. Learning from the failures in the past, Western Balkans (WB) now learned the lesson that the European perspective can be built only through a cohesion, unification and comprehension. This elaborated study explores and identifies the common interest for both the European Union and the WB countries from the integration of this region. On one hand, although not all the countries from the WB live in equal political environments, all of them see a clear benefit in the long run from having a strong multinational entity as an economic partner. Moreover, the full membership gives them the opportunity to gather not only the fruits from the single market and harmonized legal system but also helps in democratization of the region which indirectly leads to greater stability and stopping of the permanent fragmentation. On the other hand, the EU is nowadays facing the reconfiguration of the world geo-politics which imposes stronger interconnections and interdependence of all the European people, states and regions at multiple levels. Also, having in mind the European demographic weakness which increases itself in an exponential manner, the EU already feels the lack of active labor force, without which it is impossible to have a sustainable development. On the security level, it is the interest of the EU to stabilize this region permanently in order to focus on the rapidly changing security challenges. Going even beyond that, the strengthened incorporated WB region in the EU will send an unambiguous signal that the EU plays the leading role in democratization of the societies by spreading common values based on diversity and not on glorification of one specific nation.*

**Keywords: European Union, Western Balkans, unification, integration, interest**

## Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the threat of conflict between the East and the West disappeared. At this moment, there was a growing awareness for the increased interconnections and interdependence of peoples, states, regions and continents. The initial consequences of these changes provoked a reconfiguration of the national strategies towards the creation of unions of multinational entities sharing common interests. The most explicit example of such unification is the process of EU enlargement to other European countries including the Western Balkan countries. However, the enlargement process and consequently the process of integration is not at all an easy process. It involves accepting the previously defined criteria such as stable institutions, a functioning market economy, incorporation of the *acquis communautaire*, which criteria should be met in order to accept the basic values and principles of the European Union (freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law, freedom of movement, solidarity). From the recent developments and the latest annual reports published by the European Commission, it is more than clear that the EU is not tired of expanding its borders to other countries. It evaluates and awards every progress made by the WB countries resulting in realization and approximation to the previously established criteria, values and principles. Hence, there is no doubt that the key advantages of the integration and membership in the EU are included in the national strategies of all WB countries, although each country is characterized by a different political climate and is facing different challenges on both short and long-term level.

However, it is very important to mention that the process of approaching the European Union by the Western Balkans would be very inert unless it is a two-way process, i.e. without the approximation of the EU towards the WB as well, the process would be delayed or almost impossible. The EU also does not remain blind to the contribution of the non-integrated countries. Actually, a strong and powerful Union depends on the will, motive and desire of both parties. Of course, such an approximation includes bilateral<sup>1</sup> cooperation on economic, security, geopolitical, cultural level. This paper will go step by step in elaborating the cooperation which, in

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<sup>1</sup> EU from one side and Western Balkan countries from the other side.

one way or another, represents the common future of the EU and the Western Balkans.

### **Collaboration on economic level between the EU and Western Balkans**

The world has been changing at breakneck speed since at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but economic growth seems to dictate that it is never enough, that we have to go further, higher and above all faster<sup>2</sup>. In second place on our list of mutual collaboration, for the sake of argument rather than conceptual reason, is the European Union's capacity to maintain its level of economic competitiveness in the world<sup>3</sup>. This is a sizeable challenge given the rates of economic growth already posted by China, India, Brazil and other regions of the world. If Europe does not keep its place in terms of productivity rates and export capacity, we will be witnesses of the collapse of the financial power of the whole Europe continent, including the WB countries as well, taking into account that a great portion of the trade exchange of the five states is made with the EU. In this regard, although the assistance from the EU for the WB is extended to many sectors it is primarily focused on the main regenerative priority of the region-economic and social development. Establishing strong commercial and administrative infrastructures, promotion of business and the promotion of independence through new skills help the countries from the WB to improve the life of their citizens<sup>4</sup>. Up to date, EU has granted wide trade concessions to all five countries and supports the creation of regional free trade area. EU funds economic changes in this area through promotion of transport and energy infrastructure, macroeconomic and microeconomic help lines for SMEs from which depends the majority of the growth and employment in the countries. It supports the emergence of a dynamic private sector and helps to create a legal framework that complies with EU rules on the single market and is favorable to business development.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, by helping people in the region to take responsibility for finding their own solutions, the EU also supports the launch of businesses that can create jobs. By implementing such measures, the countries of the region develop economies that can

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<sup>2</sup> Francois Heisbourg et al., Europe and power. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial\\_assistance/cards/publications/econ\\_mk.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial_assistance/cards/publications/econ_mk.pdf) (accessed on 28.10.2011)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,

respond to the requirements of the competitive global environment and build societies in which the citizens take part in the management of the countries<sup>6</sup>. Financial instruments such as CARDS and IPA help in the efforts to give greater role to market forces to liberalize prices and trade, to take down trade barriers for entry and exit of goods, to implement structural reforms such as privatization and restructuring of the large and public enterprises and to create a modern financial service sector. The EU is working together with these countries in providing enhanced macroeconomic stability through assistance linked to increased revenue collection, stronger public control of the costs and streamlined administrative structures. The EU also cooperates in building a business trust with strict application of the rule of law, tougher action against corruption and introduction of the informal sector in the mainstream<sup>7</sup>. Having in mind the deep and widespread recession which has affected both the EU, but even more the reform process of the enlargement countries, a new Joint Grant Facility has been created to pool and coordinate different sources of finance and leverage loans with grants for projects representing a priority for the Western Balkans, with the initial focus on infrastructure sectors, including social infrastructure, support to SMEs, energy efficiency and other investment sectors<sup>8</sup>. However, new instruments will produce the desired results only if the reform processes in the region proceed in a due time. Successful reforms usually need to be coupled with a political agenda and in this case that is the EU accession.

Despite the fact that all the countries from the WB see a clear benefit in the long run to have the EU as a strong multinational entity and as an economic partner in order to make a better living environment, the Union itself has also great interest in faster incorporation and integration of the Western Balkans into its family of 27. The EU interest towards the WB can be seen mainly through the prism of the intangible capital, the human resources capital and its intellectual background. Having in mind the European demographic weakness which increases itself in an exponential manner, the increasing need for labor from outside and the constant pressure to create new citizens<sup>9</sup>, the European Union already feels the lack of active labor force, without which it is impossible to have a sustainable development. In this context, the WB

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<sup>6</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial\\_assistance/cards/publications/econ\\_mk.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial_assistance/cards/publications/econ_mk.pdf) (accessed on 28.10.2011)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/d-mk/dv/0120\\_11/0120\\_11en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-mk/dv/0120_11/0120_11en.pdf) (accessed on 25.10.2011)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup> Rémy Brague et al., What borders for Europe. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

countries with the huge potential that lies in their human resources could be of considerable help for the disordered structure of the EU working age population. Considering that the Western Balkans have a core of highly qualified workforce that is ready to engage in the economic streams of the Union, the EU can maintain its competitiveness in the global scale at least in a short term.

However, this does not mean promotion of the so-called brain drain from the Balkans, but in contrary, a promotion of opportunities for young people to contribute to the achievement of their common Euro-Balkan goals and missions. With a well-defined and controlled demographic policy of migration, it is not impossible to generate a double benefit, on one hand the EU will fulfill a certain percentage of jobs with skilled labor and on the other hand, the WB countries will reduce unemployment rates. In fact, the young people who had returned to their countries after having gained an international and European experience are the key transformational force in taking on future steps to improve the quality of life in this region. The youth from the WB feels that its participation in decision-making and social processes is still limited<sup>10</sup>.

Youth participation is an essential strategy for ensuring optimal development and for achieving wider development goals for society. Generally speaking, the driving force for the continuation of the political, social and economic reform and transition process are qualified young professionals with European experience coming from the WB countries. Nevertheless, much remains to be done: the European Community has a common policy for goods, but not yet for people<sup>11</sup>.

### **Collaboration on a security level**

As threats are becoming more sophisticated, the adversary is less often an army of an enemy state, but a vague threat: guerrilla or terrorist groups. The role of the security is no longer limited solely to the defense of the national territory, but to defend interests of a whole region even a continent. In the future, the EU will have to deal with international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, civil wars and disasters of human origin. In order to neutralize the new threats, the EU must be able to consolidate itself by integrating the security sectors of all the countries including the security structures of the countries belonging to the WB region.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.youthalliance.org.mk/download\\_items/Final\\_Declaration\\_Con2010.pdf](http://www.youthalliance.org.mk/download_items/Final_Declaration_Con2010.pdf) (accessed on 25.10.2011)

<sup>11</sup> Rémy Brague et al., What borders for Europe. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

In other words, it is the interest of the EU to stabilize this region permanently in order to focus on the rapidly changing security challenges. With the membership in the Union, it is more than clear that the WB countries will benefit on several levels. The close cooperation between the security structures will allow them to modernize their military, police and all the other security capacities. By using the humanitarian, diplomatic and other instruments of the EU, the five countries<sup>12</sup> will have the chance to learn an enthusiastic and fresh perspective on how to prepare, develop and manage international projects and how to take responsibility in activities related to the success of those common future projects. Also, by entering in the security framework of the EU, the WB countries will become more closely acquainted with a wider range of approaches and solutions in a security context which will help them build the necessary background as serious contributors to the European security.

In addition, being part of the European security defense policy will provide an invaluable opportunity to take a proactive role in the domain of the European external security policy and to get closely involved in its improvement. Thus, this narrow collaboration would propose ways of linking the practice with the European security homologues and would bring a step further to developing cross-sectorial cooperation and mutual learning situations where different approaches and strategies can be compared. It will give a boost to sustainable partnerships in terms of exchanging experiences and identification of the main priorities. From the EU's standpoint, the integration of the five countries will inevitably push the boundaries of the Union to the southeast which also means strengthening of its strategic positions. Maybe, some critics in the field of the security will say that it is nothing more than spending more and more resources at every level to control the extended borders, but it also means making a security umbrella of the entire European continent. Given the huge contribution of WB countries in different NATO missions, it should not be neglected the contribution that they could give in missions led by the European Union as well. Although some countries are already involved in missions such as the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is under direct command of the Headquarters of the Council of the European Union, they could still take proactive roles in missions in Africa also led by the security structures of the EU, transforming in this way and becoming contributor countries with full participation in the missions led by the EU.

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<sup>12</sup> In this paper Kosovo/UNSCR 1244 is not taken in consideration.

## **Including the Western Balkans in the European Union as a tool for becoming a global player**

With the emergence of China and ultimately of India, which increasingly constrain European and American diplomatic and strategic spaces for manoeuvring the European Union is now faced with the reconfiguration and re-composition of the world geo-politics. In these new circumstances, Europe will have to decide whether it should try first to built policies on the scale of the Union or focus instead, from the start, on coordinating common external security policy<sup>13</sup> with the United States, the main guarantor of strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region, which has become, under the American umbrella, the main world economic growth driver<sup>14</sup>.

Regardless of the direction or the strategy that could be opted in order to deal with the globalization and a rapidly changing security environment, new security concept and military doctrine, defence planning, strengthened relations between the countries from the EU are essential to be incorporated. Now, with the new security challenges, it is indispensable for the EU to organize a strong cooperation not only among the member states but also among all European people, states and regions including the Western Balkans in order to create stability and a high level of protection from the global threats. Only with a full membership of the WB countries the EU can reinforce its strategic position which already has been written in the Lisbon Strategy as an objective and that is: the EU to become the most important global player. Perhaps, a military support from NATO will be an equally decisive factor when deciding its future strategic project, but the EU however, needs to take into account that NATO structures mean, by definition, a power that lies mainly on its military capabilities.

At the grand strategic level, what makes the EU a global player is its sheer economic size. To preserve its status as an economic power, therefore, the EU has to become a power across the board, which requires a grand strategy and a will to proactively pursue one<sup>15</sup>. Enlargement is, by large, the most powerful policy tool of the EU<sup>16</sup> in order to maintain the economic power but also it will serve EU's strategic interests in

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<sup>13</sup> Кузев Стојан, Збирка документи од областа на безбедноста и на одбраната (стратегиски определби). Скопје:Југореклам, 2002

<sup>14</sup> Heisbourg Francois et al., Europe and power. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

<sup>15</sup> Biscop Sven "European strategy"(Paper presented at the High Level Conference, Diplomacy, Defence and Development, Ohrid, September 12-15, 2011)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/d-mk/dv/0120\\_11/0120\\_11en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-mk/dv/0120_11/0120_11en.pdf) (accessed on 25.10.2011)

securing stability and conflict prevention vis-à-vis the great aforementioned emergent countries, China and India.

In addition, enlargement helps to increase prosperity and growth opportunities and secures vital transport and energy routes.<sup>17</sup> The present enlargement agenda, despite countries like Iceland or Turkey, covers Western Balkans countries too, which have been promised EU membership once they fulfil the necessary conditions<sup>18</sup>. The possible accession of five new Balkan members would raise issues, in principle manageable<sup>19</sup> (independently of the very large difficulties posed by the economic catching up they have to do). All of these issues lie at the heart of Europe and they will not disappear unless sincere efforts are made to work them out. The EU cannot postpone them any longer, nor resolve them without the accelerated process of enlargement which is useful for all the 27 EU countries. The so-called enlargement fatigue cannot be used as an excuse any longer and the integration of the Western Balkans must happen as soon as possible<sup>20</sup>. EU's enlargement policy needs a desperate push, and the Croatian success story is clearly not enough, having in mind that the entry into the EU of the WB countries was promised in the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration<sup>21</sup>.

On the other side of the “enlargement fatigue” story is the “accession fatigue”. Some political scientists argue that the WB countries are as tired as the Union is with all the promises made, but never delivered by the Member States. The Macedonian case can set the scene for this “push” to happen sooner rather than later. In fact, the countries of the regions have moved closer to EU membership as the region made progress in meeting the established criteria and conditions.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the full membership gives them the opportunity to gather not only the fruits from the single market and harmonized legal system, but also helps in democratization of the region which indirectly leads to greater stability and stopping of the permanent fragmentation. In

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>19</sup> For the sake of argument, let's throw light on the state of affairs in the Western Balkans: Macedonia has the name dispute with Greece as well as the recognition of the church issue with Serbia, Serbia has the Kosovo issue, Montenegro and Croatia have the border issue in Prevlaka, Albania has the problem with the use of continental zone with Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have the statehood problem, and even the Croatian-Slovene bilateral problem is not entirely resolved.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>21</sup> Francois Heisbourg et al., Europe and power. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

<sup>22</sup> Substantial progress was made towards visa liberalisation, leading to the Commission's proposal from July 2009 for visa liberalization for three countries (Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia).

this sense, the society desperately needs results in the area of financial investments, economic growth and creation of new jobs in order to eliminate any form of extremism and endangering so far achieved progress<sup>23</sup>.

### **Additional forms of collaboration between the EU and the Western Balkans**

Considering that the WB countries belong to Europe geographically and that they share a common history, the exchange of cultural values between these naturally connected regions is an inevitable fact. On one hand, by attributing a full membership to the Western Balkans, the EU will inherit the historical “cradle of civilizations”, a whole demographic landscape of many nations, cultures, languages and religions. On the other hand, by accessing to the EU, the WB will have the opportunity to overcome the retrograde values such as the disrespect, intolerance and irresponsibility and to accept the new democratic values of the EU, liberty, respect for human rights, rule of law, freedom of movement, etc. Even the Europeans themselves believe that the values they stand for hold good not only for Europe, but for the whole world as well. It would be a dangerous, even lethal temptation to consider Europe as watertight compartment that has nothing to give or to receive from the rest of the world. That would be denying the whole past of Europe and endanger its future<sup>24</sup>. Speaking about the cultural exchange, a joint Euro-Balkan projects such as organizing art colonies, literary workshops, poetry competitions and similar events are a great opportunity for the people from the Western Balkans to choose the European identity<sup>25</sup> instead of some kind of rudimental forms of Balkan entity.

As far as the sustainable development is concerned, EU takes the major role in the fight against poverty and it is crucial for the development in the long term of the WB region. Through promotion of a sustainable life and supporting emission reduction projects such as establishment of environmentally friendly transport or other carbon free means of transport, the EU works towards creating an ecological awareness in the whole WB region. The need for a common ecological and environmental security

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<sup>23</sup> Петар Атанасов. Перспективите на Република Македонија на патот кон НАТО и ЕУ. Скопје: Министерство за одбрана на РМ, 2006

<sup>24</sup> Francois Heisbourg et al., Europe and power. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008

<sup>25</sup> According to Rémy Brague the European identity is perhaps precisely that acceptance of others, of difference, of plurality, whether national, cultural or religious (Rémy Brague et al., What borders for Europe. Paris: Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, 2008)

policy will keep raising its importance and will be in the future among the main priorities of the EU structures.

Education is among the most important factors determining the development of a society. The international mobility within education is an essential condition for an open society and therefore should be supported, developed and stimulated in the WB countries. In this respect, the life-long learning programs, the already established scholarship programs, the non-formal education, discussions, scientific debates, exchange of students and pupils, language conferences, bilateral and multilateral meetings, but also defense and security related education for civilians and parliamentarians<sup>26</sup>, are only a part of the instruments of the EU to bridge the gap between the European students and the students coming from the Western Balkans. This also represents a form through which the people from this region have the opportunity to share the past, present and future experiences. Collaboration on academic and intellectual level also means collecting and sharing good practices, tools and methods, which in the long term implies development of the entire European society. It is very important to emphasize that education is not only a form of preparation for future employment, but it shapes humanistic principles of a civic society<sup>27</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The financial crash of some of the EU countries, the lack of orientation, the asymmetrical distribution of the power, the shift of economic gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the demographic decline, clearly indicate that the European Union has to reformulate the current pattern of governance and decision making process and to introduce a new integration vision which will include the countries from the Western Balkans as well. Of course, the process of enlargement is the most powerful tool when it comes to the future of the WB region, but it is also a prerequisite for peace and stability, and ultimately for regional integration and economic prosperity. The WB values will need to change the perception of the region in the eye of the average European citizen in a manner that this region will be no

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<sup>26</sup> Fluri Philipp and Hadzić Miroslav. Sourcebook on security sector reform. Geneva/Belgrade: Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2004

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.youthalliance.org.mk/download/items/Final\\_Declaration\\_Con2010.pdf](http://www.youthalliance.org.mk/download/items/Final_Declaration_Con2010.pdf) (accessed on 25.10.2011)

longer the largest producer of history in the world, and that it will become a credible “exporter” of security, stability and democracy. The process of integration is not an easy process and therefore requires consultation and collaboration between the EU and the WB policy makers on economic, security, cultural, educational and geo-political level. Thus, we come to the theory that the evolution of the Balkans depends not only on the development of one nation or on some specific values, but on the will, enthusiasm and readiness of the entire Euro-Balkan collective.

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