

Stages and integration challenges en bloc or mini EU?

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08.07.2016

**Despite Brussels commitment, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia have no Euro-Atlantic future in the short and medium term period.
Further division of the geo-political poles between the West and Russia has contributed to complicating further the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of above-mentioned countries.**

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Introduction

Various international organizations perceive the Western Balkan countries' are at some point in a similar socio-political terms as well as in terms of democratic consolidation of institutions and society with one another.

Evaluation and analysis of the challenges faced by these countries in terms of meeting the Copenhagen criteria would constitute a solid base for the institutions in Brussels to increase efforts (as proclaimed at the Summit of Berlin and Vienna) for financing inter-state projects¹, specifically in infrastructure and energy, so that the joint efforts to overcome the bilateral problems are eased. The recent initiative taken by the Austrian Foreign Minister, Sebastian Kurz about intensifying efforts while in his tour in the Western Balkans, symbolizes the importance that the region be energized in this regard.²

Nevertheless, the EU accession process is expected to be characterized by tensions and increasing complexity in the area of regional cooperation. Despite evident progress in this regard, the Western Balkan countries are handicapped by a lack of willingness to make compromises to simplify the process so that the region is ready to integrate en bloc.

En bloc membership would be a more efficient way to encourage countries to

undertake reforms, particularly in strengthening bilateral relations; meanwhile, it would avoid the possibility of eventual blockade of accession process of countries that are a few steps back or closer to membership.

Uncertainties that a particular country of the Western Balkans, in the case of entry ahead of other countries in the region, may obscure another country's efforts in the accession agenda, constitutes a serious worrisome scenario.

While officially, the European Commission, together with Member States should continue with its policy that "membership of countries depend solely on country's pursuing reforms in meeting the Copenhagen criteria" , in order to avoid any situation which may discourage other countries that are few steps ahead.

Meanwhile, if the issue of undefined Kosovo's international subjectivity is not relieved with the recognition of 5 EU countries; if the political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot reach consensus within the new initiative - *new strategic approach*, proclaimed by the United Kingdom and Germany³ - in order to move ahead with comprehensive reforms for EU membership; if the opposition parties and those in power fail to find consensus on how to get out of the current political turmoil including finding a long-standing solution for Macedonia's constitutional name; and given that the

¹*EU Connectivity Agenda Six Western Balkan Countries Initiative, which aim is to co-finance investment projects in the Western Balkans.*

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828_vienna_info_pack.pdf

²*Austrian Foreign Minister, Sebastian Kurz visits Western Balkans. (www.bmeia.gv.at)*

³*Germany's and Great Britain's Initiative was undertaken on 5th of November, 2014 and its aim was to intensify the commitment to advance with the taking of necessary reforms to overcome the blockade the country faces currently towards the EU integration. (see here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bosnia-herzegovina-a-new-strategic-approach>)*

pace of reforms pursued by the Western Balkan countries can be challenged seriously in the medium and long term, the EU should step up efforts to address these fundamental issues to enable them to overcome these challenges by pursuing the strategic objective for the region to integrate en bloc by January or July 2025 at the latest.

If this is impossible, enabling regional economic development through trade liberalization; freedom of movement through the abolition of visa regime between the countries; removing bureaucracy and barriers in order to facilitate the exchange of educational programs by the students; expanding the range of projects that enable improving the lives of citizens, etc. is another option deemed to consider by relevant factors.

Bosnia as a dysfunctional state

The complexity of the institutional system that was commenced as a result of the Dayton Agreement ; the low level of confidence among three ethnic groups; including the pressure exerted from outside – i.e. from Serbia on one side and Croatia on the other, constitute key factors in the creation of an atmosphere of impasse. As claimed by former EU Representative to the UN "the problem of Bosnia & Herzegovina is unsolvable"⁴, reflects the current situation on the ground.

Despite Germany's and the UK's initiative⁵ taken recently, the aim of which is to encourage the parties to begin the process of institutional reform of the

⁴Interview with former EU Representative to UN, Thomas Mayr-Harting.

judiciary as a precondition for unlocking the integration process; and frequent calls for secession from the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik⁶, is further complicating the already difficult process of the Western Balkan countries towards EU.

When we add to this complex situation the recent tectonic effects as a result of the British referenda in regards to future membership with EU; the continued Russian influence; the latest refugee crisis and the ever raising religious radicalism in the region,⁷ reinforces perceptions and fears that the region is still found on the edge of instability.

Year	The level of cooperation
2008	B&H signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

⁵Bosna & Herzegovina – a new strategic approach <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bosnia-herzegovina-a-new-strategic-approach>

⁶After stepping up pressure from the west and Serbia, Milorad Dodik, suspended plans to organize a referendum to change the justice institutional system in republic level. See here: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-serb-leader-puts-controversial-referendum-on-hold--02-09-2016>

⁷Interview with David Philips, Professor at Human Rights Studies Institute in Columbia University, delivering to Radio Free Europe in Albanian language. <http://www.evropaelire.org/a/27544978.html>

June 2008	B&H enacted a Reform Agenda which sole purpose is to avoid pitfalls in regards to socio-economic development as well as advancing reforms in public administration and judicial system. The implementation of the Reform Agenda is necessary to enable that EU reviews the application for membership status.
December 2010	European Commission decided to put B&H in the white paper of the Schengen zone whereby every citizen of Bosnia is entitled to move freely across the Schengen zone for a period of 3 months, without the right to work.
June 2012	EU dhe B&H launched <i>The High Level Dialogue</i> ⁸ aiming to help B&H to move forward in the accession process by explaining the methodology of EU accession negotiations and by discussing what is expected from a candidate country.
June 2015	The Stabilization and Association Agreement enters into force.
February 2016	Bosna & Hercegovina applied for membership status. ⁹

Bilateral relations. According to the report drafted by the European Commission¹⁰, are satisfactory, but much remains to be done in this regard. The non-recognition of Kosovo as well as the non-readiness of both countries to suspend the current visa regime remains a pitfall.¹¹

Continuing obstacles followed by non-readiness of the institutions of B&H on implementation of the requirements of the EU to amend the Constitution, as a result of the decision of the European Court of Human Rights or as claimed otherwise known as Sejdic – Finci case, comprise a challenge that violate this country's way towards integration.¹²

Montenegro - integration into Western security sphere

Despite initial resistance from the Government of Montenegro in regards to the provision of the European Union in the context of the legitimacy of the outcome of a referendum on independence, the former accepted the agreement of foreign ministers of the EU referendum result formula.¹³

⁸High-Level Dialogue between B&H and EU.
http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-489_en.htm?locale=en

⁹<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/bosnia-herzegovina-files-formal-application-to-join-eu-a6874511.html>

¹⁰Progress Report, 2015, pg 28. Regional Issues and international obligations.

¹¹Representatives from Civil Society Organizations from both countries gathered in Pristina in order to step up pressure onto the respective institutions to suspend the visa regime still in place.

¹²Sejdić-Finci case, European Court for Human Rights.

¹³EU authorities had put forward a condition to Montenegro in order for the EU to recognize the outcome of the referendum on independence: at least 50 % of citizens eligible to vote should vote and at least 55 % of the votes must vote pro.

On May 22, 2006, the Office of Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, came out with an official statement in which congratulates the citizens of Montenegro about the referendum process asserting that the result is acceptable in accordance with the requirement of the EU and urges the parties, in this case, Montenegro and Serbia to recognize the subjectivity of each other and establish diplomatic relations.¹⁴

After this process of establishing the state, Montenegro followed the path of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Year	The level of cooperation
2007	Montenegro signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). This agreement entered into force on 1st of May, 2010. ¹⁵
December 2009	Citizens of Montenegro were included in the white list of Schengen Zone, which guarantees free movement of people for 3 months period without entitlement to employment rights.
December 2010	European Commission granted Montenegro the membership status.

June 2012

Accession negotiations were launched on 29th of June. According to Montenegro Report 2015, up until now, 20 chapters from 35 in total have been opened and the negotiations are under way including chapters 23 and 24 on human rights and justice system. Two from the chapters which deal with Science and Research as well as the chapter for culture have already been closed temporarily.¹⁶

Bilateral relations. In the context of regional relations are considered good. The issue of Kosovo border demarcation has been completed in August 2015, on the sidelines of the Western Balkans Summit held in Vienna. Now it is the respective parliaments' hands to ratify it. However, this issue including that of the agreement on the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities sparked an outrage from the Opposition parties in Kosovo which led to the blockade of the Assembly. Even after the unlocking of Parliament proceeding by the Opposition, the current draft of the agreement is unexpected to be ratified because of dissatisfaction shown recently by certain MPs who support government.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the talks regarding demarcation between Montenegro and Croatia are still in the initial stage.

Bilateral relations with other countries in the region are developing at a normal level.

¹⁷The Head of PDK Parliamentary Group Mr. Adem Grabovci stressed that the current boundary does not coincide with the draft proposed to demarcate the border with Montenegro, noting that according to the draft, the border lines would be 5km inside the territory of Kosovo. The same were declared by MPs coming from other governing partner - LDK. The deputy Shpejtim Bulliqi an MP who teaches Geography at the University of Prishtina, has stated several times that the current draft agreement is wrong and should be reconsidered.

¹⁴http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/press_data/en/declarations/89678.pdf

¹⁵<http://www.delimne.ec.europa.eu/code/navigate.php?id=56>

¹⁶Montenegro Report 2015. Anex I – Relations between Montenegro and European Union. Pg 77. http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20

At the NATO Summit, held at the end of last year, Montenegro was invited to start accession negotiation process. This process has entered the final stages: the beginning of the ratification process from the member states¹⁸ which is expected to last not more than two years so that the acceding country becomes officially a NATO member.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the move sparked reactions from pro-Russian opposition which began a series of protests to oppose membership in the military bloc or at least that this membership is subject to popular plebiscite. At the same time, the opposition stated that the government must resign due to bad governance, corruption, undemocratic practices and election characterized by fraud.²⁰

This tensed political situation could affect the situation that would lead to the stagnation of the integration process after the ruling party faces resignation request and that the opposition is not necessarily showing signs of readiness in terms of continuing efforts to join the EU.

Serbia - a crucial factor

Territorially, economically, demographically and militarily, Serbia is the most powerful country in the Western Balkans. This position constitutes a substantial factor on being able to use the card of (de)stabilization whenever it feels its interests are at stake in the region. The destabilizing potential is translated as a positive element in international relations. This creates potential advantage against other countries to increase the leverage in exerting geo-political influence.

Therefore, Serbia's foreign policy strategic objective, as many times already proclaimed, is getting an EU membership. Meanwhile, Serbia's strategic partnership with the Republika Srpska; political influence in Kosovo; special relations of Serbia's political institutions with the Church – a religious institution which does not recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church; considerable impact Serbia's government has on Gruevski government in Macedonia - comprise uncontested elements in dimension of Serbia's foreign policy projection which undeniably serves to accelerate its path towards the EU.

Therefore, by using these diplomatic cards, the goal of Serbia is, at the same time, to retain its influence on the aforementioned countries. However, this may inevitably further aggravate its/their path, although complex, to the EU.

Year	The level of cooperation
2008	Serbia signed the SAA and the Temporary Trade Agreement.
Dhjetor 2009	Serbia joined the white list of the Schengen Zone. Three days later, it applied for membership status.
Mars 2012	In march 2012, Serbia gains the candidate status for EU membership.

¹⁸ *The Republic of Albania is the first NATO member which has ratified "the Protocol of North Atlantic Treaty for Montenegro membership, on 23rd of June, 2016.*

¹⁹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_128096.htm

²⁰ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/anti-government-protest-spread-across-montenegro-10-05-2015-1>
<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/anti-government-protest-spread-across-montenegro-10-05-2015-1>

Dec. 2015

Accession negotiations began with the opening of Chapter 35 (Comprehensive normalization of relations with Kosovo) as well as the Chapter 32 which relates to financial control.

Note: EU expects that by the beginning of January 2016 to open two additional chapters (Chapter 23* – Judicial System and Fundamental Rights and Chapter 24* – Judiciary, Freedom and Security), which constitute the most significant chapters in the negotiation process alongside chapter 35.

Nevertheless, Croatia, as a member of EU has introduced several additional requirements which must be met by Serbia in order to unfreeze the accession negotiations.²¹ These requirements were taken into account by the European Commission and became part of EU position during the opening of Chapter 23.

*It is important to mention also that with the beginning of accession negotiations, Montenegro and Serbia (other candidate and potential-candidate countries will follow the same principle) will be subject to the principle of opening chapter 23 and 24²² in the very beginning of the negotiation process and then to be closed in the very end of the process. The opening of these chapters in the beginning of the process is perceived necessary since these are the most challenging chapters to implement on the ground.

The bilateral relationship. Regarding the relationship with the other countries of the region, Serbia has shown that it is an actor who considers EU integration as a top priority of its foreign policy.

According to the report compiled by the European Commission and published in 2015, Serbia continues to play a constructive role in the region to participate actively in regional initiatives, such as the Cooperation Process of South East Europe, the process of Brdo, the Council for Regional Cooperation and the Free Trade Agreement in Central Europe.

Meanwhile, the demarcation of the border with Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina it is still in progress. The same process has not yet started with Kosovo.²³

Kosova vs. Bosna

After the declaration of independence, Kosovo was confronted with the non-readiness from the UN Security Council to agreeing to accept Ahtisaari's blueprint on the basis of which the act of independence was declared. Consequently, Serbia, with the help of friends like Russia and China, began a fierce campaign for the non-recognition of the declaration of independence. This campaign culminated with the establishment of the case in the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

In August 22, 2010, the Court issued its opinion that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law. As a result, Serbia did not cease to operate by sending the case before the UN General Assembly, by which, its members majority voted, that Kosovo and Serbia engage in a technical dialogue, with the mediation of the EU, to resolve issues that do not affect the status of Kosovo topics.

²¹Croatia lifts veto towards Serbia

<https://euobserver.com/enlargement/133668>

²²Meanwhile, the demarcation of the border with Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina it is still in progress.

²³Regional issues and international obligations, pg. 19. European Commission Report for Serbia, 2015.

In the beginning of the process, actors involved insisted that dialogue would be subject only to technical issues. Despite this commitment, after a certain period, this technical dialogue process advanced to political one. Hot topics of the integration of northern Kosovo under its jurisdiction has made the European Commission to connect issues of comprehensive normalization of relations with Kosovo in the negotiations process for membership of Serbia in the EU, namely through a special chapter.²⁴

Besides, in this context, the Stabilization and Association Agreement signed recently between Kosovo and the European Commission, apart from the technical aspects about the necessity of reforming the institutions which deal mainly with trade, rule of law and increase the efficiency of public administration, states the necessity of continuing the dialogue mediated by the EU, between Kosovo and Serbia. SAA and Chapter 35, respectively, oblige both countries to continue the dialogue as the only way to continue the EU accession process.²⁵

However, so far, the dialogue with Serbia has yielded more in favor in Serbia rather than of Kosovo's interest.²⁶ This is because of the simple reason that Kosovo suffers from the lack of recognition of its international subjectivity, including the refusal to recognize its independence from 5 countries of the EU and the negative image it possesses by the endemic corruption and organized crime.

Regarding international obligations and regional issues report highlights the adoption by the Assembly of Constitution amendment to establish the special courtrooms and Special Prosecutor's Office which was demanded by US Attorney Williamson - engaged for 3 years to investigate allegations raised by Dick Marty, rapporteur of the Council of Europe, about the crimes that were committed during the years 98'-00'. The report further noted that Kosovo has joined some regional organizations, although still not managed to gain membership in all other regional organizations, as is with the case of South East European Centre for the Rule of Law.

Regarding the level of bilateral relations, Kosovo and Bosnia have not agreed upon any cooperation with diplomatic character. Because the latter refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence, visa liberalization was not taken into account, neither.

Right now, relations with Montenegro are in a good level. After reaching agreement on the demarcation of the border with Montenegro in August 2015, the agreements have not yet proceeded to the respective parliaments for ratification. Fierce opposition by Opposition political parties in Kosovo has prompted other MP's from the ruling parties to acknowledge the potential ramifications that this process might entail by increasing the pressure to the government to reflect on the matter.²⁷

²⁴Chapter 35 of accession negotiations, Serbia-EU.

²⁵Article 5 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Kosovo and European Union. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=11239>

²⁶Serbia lobbied to prevent Kosovo to adhere to UNESCO and International Court of Arbitrage.

²⁷The street action of several days before of VETËVENDOSJE! Movement whereby they arose a border sign that separates two countries, tried to, again, protest against the government in order to reflect on the matter at stake. This action was caused the Government of Montenegro to react immediately adding that the action of "unknown persons" has "put the very good relations between the Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Kosovo in serious doubt."

Nevertheless, the review of agreement could produce other effects which may affect the relations between the two countries. It has sparked attention from of the Montenegro's authorities, implying that it is willing to renegotiate its terms if necessary.²⁸ Meanwhile, the exchange of ambassadors between the countries, despite signing an agreement to establish diplomatic relations, has been halted as a result of the request of the President of Montenegro to incorporate in the Constitution of Kosovo the right to recognize the Montenegrin minority.²⁹

The European Commission has also taken into account the demarcation issue in the latest report on the implementation of the criteria for visa liberalization with Kosovo which calls on the authorities in Kosovo to resolve the issue and ratify it. This issue was set as a condition in the latest decision of European Commission regarding the recommendation to lift visa ban to the citizens of Kosovo to the Schengen area countries.³⁰

Relations with Macedonia remain good, too. Despite the incident last year in Kumanovo, the Kosovo government called for calm and increased attention to implementation in full the Ohrid Agreement as a basis to defuse tensions between the two major groups: Macedonian and Albanians.

²⁸Public Relations Office, Government of Montenegro. <http://www.gov.me/en/search/155301/STATEMENT-Disagreements-in-Pristina-on-the-state-border-with-Montenegro-are-Kosovo-s-internal-matter.html>

²⁹Office of the President of Kosovo has taken a decision to appoint one representative from Montenegrin community in Community Consultative Council.

³⁰The third European Commission Report on the visa liberalization implementation process. Recommendation II. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/policies/international-affairs/general/docs/third_report_progress_kosovo_fulfilling_requirements_visa_liberalisation_roadmap_en.pdf

Macedonia – without identity?

The current political crisis and obstruction of neighboring EU and NATO³¹ member countries has further complicated the impasse where Macedonia is already for 10 years now.

Eleven years ago Macedonia received the candidate status. Recalling the accession of Albania and Croatia in NATO, Greece blocked an invitation for Macedonia's membership because of failure of consecutive negotiations on the name issue. Neighboring states, namely Greece, considers that Macedonia has territorial ambitions against her due to the fact that this name matches the name of a northern Greek region. Greece claims that Macedonia is trying to steal its identity and its way towards Euro-Atlantic integration processes will be blocked as long as the latter does not change the attitude towards this issue.

Macedonian current Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski stated that his country is ready to find a solution for the name issue in order to unblock the integration path. Once the solution is found, it will be subject to a popular vote to gain further legitimacy.³²

Meanwhile, the political crisis in Macedonia is a problem that is blocking Macedonia's path towards integration. Failure to implement the Ohrid Agreement fully, which ended inter-ethnic conflict, continues to raise tensions between the main ethnic groups: Macedonians and Albanians.³³ One might recall the fact that Albania has also embarked on Greece and Bulgaria in blocking its path to NATO as a result of the reluctance of Macedonia to implement the Ohrid Agreement.

³¹Greece and Bulgaria.

³²<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/16/macedonia-open-to-changing-its-name-to-end-24-year-dispute-with-greece>

³³<http://news.yahoo.com/albania-threatens-veto-macedonias-nato-bid-185836194.html>

Non-recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church is another element which may adversely dictate the level of relations between these countries. Although the current government of Prime Minister Gruevski enjoys excellent relations with the government in Belgrade,³⁴ relations could be affected if eventually there is a power swap in political spectrum of political parties on both sides.

Viti	Niveli i bashkëpunimit
December 2005	Macedonia is the first country, alongside Croatia, to receive the candidate status from the European Council on 16th of December, 2005.
December 2009	Macedonia citizens entered in the white list of the Schengen Zone, which guarantees them free movement without working permits.
October 2009	European Commission proposes European Council to open the accession negotiations.
March 2012	Considering the political blockade from Greece (unofficially from Bulgaria also), European Commission launched the High Level Dialogue ³⁵ for accession with Skopje.

Albania

In June 2014, Albania officially received the candidate status for membership in the European Union. To make possible the opening of accession negotiations, the European Commission has called on Albania to focus on meeting the five criteria: the creation of a professional and depoliticized public administration; strengthening the independence of judicial institutions; the fight against corruption; the fight against organized crime, and; protection and promotion of human rights.³⁶

In addition to these criteria, the neighboring state - Greece, has warned that Albania's path towards Brussels depends on its success in overcoming obstacles such as demarcation of the maritime boundary - a process that has stalled as a result of the decision of the Constitutional Court; the issue of topography, and the repeal of the law of war, which is still in force, despite Albania's being a NATO member.³⁷

In a recent visit he made to Albania, Greek Foreign Minister made it clear that Albania's path towards EU will not be easy if it is not committed to overcome the remaining problems with its southern neighbor.³⁸

³⁴Governments from both sides have organized inter-government sessions.

³⁵This dialogue's aim is to follow the preparation process for integration but the parties do now claim any obligation for the membership.

³⁶<http://www.integrimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/deklarata-per-shityp/pese-prioritetet-per-statusin-ja-masat-konkrete-te-geverise&page=1>

³⁷<http://www.shekulli.com.al/p.php?id=286345>

³⁸ibid.

Year	Level of cooperation
2009	The SAA enters into force. In the same month, despite calls from various European officials to postpone the application for candidate status, Albania applied.
December 2010	Altogether with Bosna & Hercegovina, Albania acceded in the white list of the Schengen Zone, by which the citizens of Albania are eligible to travel freely across the Shcengen area for 90 days with no employment rights.
June 2014	Albania was granted with the candidate status.

Efforts of the Albanian institutions on fulfillment of obligations were accompanied recently by US Embassy, which according to US Ambassador Donald Lu – he has received instructions from the US Department and the White House to provide help for the parties to dialogue in order to proceed quickly with the constitutional changes necessary to begin the most important justice system reform since the fall of the dictatorship. US diplomatic commitment is also evidenced by the visit of US Secretary of State, John Kerry, the purpose of which was to encourage the parties to intensify their efforts to complete the justice system reform.³⁹

³⁹ Secretary Kerry travels to Munich, Albania and Rancho Mirage.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252139.htm>

For this purpose, Tirana was also visited by the German Foreign Minister, Steinmeier who urged the parties to find consensus and enact much needed reforms to Albania's european future.⁴⁰

In addition, local institutions are being assisted by the Venice Commission, which has presented to the parties a draft document to enable reforms in this important sector. However, numerous debates between both political sides and inability to reach a consensus have contributed to the EU 's wane patience. Chairman of the Committee for European Affairs in the Bundestag, Gunther Krichbaum stated in harsh tones about stalling the approval of the justice reform, adding "... but if, at the end of the day, we get the impression that this reform is not desired, that the fight against corruption is not working just as it should, then the end of the day we can make a decision to repeal the candidate status... July 21st is a crucial date on this regard because there needs to be taken a decision" when the European Council is set to meet again for the fall session to set the date for the start of accession talks.

Regarding regional relations, based on the report on Albania drawn up by the European Commission for 2015, Albania is considered useful actor in this area.

Albanian diplomacy serious commitment to strengthening relations with countries of the region is acknowledged as well.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Steinmeier in Tirana for the reform on justice system.
<http://www.dw.com/sq/steinmeier-n%C3%AB-tirana%C3%AB-pa-reform%C3%ABn-n%C3%AB-drejt%C3%ABsi-nuk-p%C3%ABrshpejtohet-integrimi-n%C3%AB-be/a-19329773>
⁴¹ EC Albania Report, 2015.
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_albania.pdf

Conclusion

Complexity and historical tensions among the countries of the Western Balkans is not only difficult to solve, but is foreseen quite unpredictable in the medium and long-term period. When this historical and political reality we add the tectonic effect produced as a result of the popular verdict in the UK about the future of country, in which case the majority stated that their country should leave the bloc, the perspective of the Balkans region in accession process has been complicated further and is expected to be even more unpopular to EU citizens at large for a relatively long time ahead.

Carrot and Stick was offered as a policy for this purpose by the European Union in 2003 in Thessaloniki and since then, despite numerous obstacles – be that external and internal, the region has enjoyed a rapid breakthrough in regards of improving bilateral and multilateral relations, in one hand, and has energized effort to diversify economic development, rule of law for all and the social and institutional democratization, on the other.

Since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, where the region officially was given the prospect of integration into the EU, countries in the region have intensified efforts, more than ever, to implement the criteria which help in healing the wounds of the past by opening a new page of mutual cooperation and strengthening trust.

Despite these developments, the sad history of inter-ethnic hatred has left traces that are difficult to overcome.

The efforts of the Croatian Armed Forces to buy weapons - surface-to-air-land with a range of 300 kilometers, on one side, and Serbia's aspirations to be equipped with such weapons from the Russian Federation on the other hand; Federation on the other hand; statements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia that Kosovo is a hotbed of ISIS including its diplomatic initiatives to obstruct Kosovo's membership in international organizations;⁴² the constant threat of secession by leaders of Republika Serspka; efforts of the opposition parties in Montenegro to curb its membership in NATO , the non-readiness of Bulgaria and Greece to pave the way for Macedonia to advance towards Brussels, represent some of movements that are needed to receive greater attention from Washington and Brussels.

Meanwhile, the progress towards integration stages is not significantly different to other countries. Montenegro finds itself in a more favorable situation than other countries. Accession negotiations opened in mid-2012 and, if it does not face any extraordinary challenge in the meantime, is expected to become a new member of the EU in the beginning of 2020.

Most endangered by the lack of prospects for membership are Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. As long as we have in place the same Treaty which gives the rights of every members state to veto any possible accession of a new member and if things move in the same direction - as so far, then it is not certain that these three countries will be ready to accede in the EU in the

⁴²*International Court of Arbitrage and UNESCO.*

Meanwhile, Albania and Serbia, although facing many challenges, are in a more favorable situation and if not obstructed by any external uncontrollable game changer, are expected to join the European bloc within the period of 2025. However, based on the level of relations between the Western Balkan countries, Serbia will likely be faced with delays in its path and then if it stagnates, taking into account Serbia's impact in the following states, inevitably will affect the countries path to get complicated. Therefore, the most affordable solution for countries in the region and for the EU as a whole is the *en bloc* integration.

Recommendations

The recent initiative of the German Chancellor - Summit of Berlin and Vienna, which was followed by the Paris Summit in July this year, should not only encourage the countries to continue their path but also must take into account the specifics of which, if not taken seriously into consideration, the process can be accompanied by various challenges where states can block the entry of countries that are behind in terms of integration. Montenegro, Serbia and Albania do not have challenges in terms of international subjectivity as Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, have.

- ▶ Given the development potential, security, diplomatic and political clout of Serbia, it is vital that it is pressured to help efforts to continue with undertaking necessary reforms led by Germany and the UK⁴³ in order to enable the proposed constitutional changes in Bosnia & Herzegovina so that the country can carry on with the next stage of integration.
- ▶ Because of a historical past and because of their geographical position, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria have a vital role to play in this process, too. They have the ability and potential to influence the way of all countries to avoid obstruction. Therefore, by increasing their pressure, especially towards Serbia to avoid sabotaging Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo, the member states of the EU should focus attention towards unlocking the path of the region and insist that the best way move forward is by enabling countries to integrate *en bloc*.
- ▶ Considering the geo-strategic interest of Serbia in the Balkans – which is to control territory as much as possible regardless of the socio-economic situation of its citizens and those of Bosnia, should reflect that a model such as Bosnia not only does not serve the citizens of Bosnia, but neither Serbia's. So, a reflection in this regard is needed; that agreement for the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo in conformity with the Court's constitutional verdict must be taken with seriousness.

⁴³ *New Strategic Approach.*

- ▶ Given the very alarming and sensitive position of Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, EU member states should consider the option of introducing a strict monitoring mechanism⁴⁴ under of which these countries accelerate their path in line with that of Montenegro, Serbia and Albania.
- ▶ EU Member States, in coordination with Washington, must strengthen joint efforts to exert pressure on ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina to enable the necessary constitutional changes happen; pressure Macedonia to overcome the current political crisis that has been result, among others, by losing the prospect of this country in the integration process; and Kosovo – pushing EU states which refuse to recognize its international subjectivity - to take the step of recognition.
- ▶ The Paris summit should expand the range of areas that should be given importance to; in particular the rule of law and consolidation of democratic institutions, infrastructure and energy projects in addition to which the parties have already agreed upon on regional initiatives being undertaken.
- ▶ The best solution to overcome the specific challenges of this region is the *en bloc* integration within 2025. Waves of integration of the countries of the former eastern bloc were characterized by differences in the aspirant countries as well. Therefore, the states of the Western Balkans should not be denied of this right for the sake of security and prosperity in these countries as well as the general interest of the EU.
- ▶ If this solution is not possible for various reasons, the leaders of the region should consider the possibility to integrate among them, or elaborate options for trade liberalization; removing bureaucratic obstacles to the free movement of citizens and enabling students to have the opportunity to study at universities free from bureaucratic and administrative obstacles.

⁴⁴Referring to Romania and Bulgaria examples after their EU accession, specifically the establishment of Verification and Cooperation Mechanism from EU.
http://ec.europa.eu/cvm/index_en.htm