

The Future of Euro-Atlantic Integration in the Western Balkans

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Given the absence of enlargement progress in the May 2012 NATO summit and enlargement fatigue in the European Union, it is high time to reconsider the future of Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkans – an area that includes all the former Yugoslav republics plus Albania. The Euro-Atlantic integration of postcommunist Europe began hesitantly in the 1990s and reached its apogee during the 2000s. In the Balkans, the membership of Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria in NATO and the EU, and Albania’s membership in NATO, have been the most notable developments of the past decade.

The financial crisis and the recent rounds of enlargement, however, have raised doubts, if not hostility, toward existing, candidate, and potential candidate states among the elites and constituencies in many Western European member states. At the same time, popular support for the EU project is at a low point in many parts of the Western Balkans as well as many parts of “Old Europe.” Finally, NATO’s role in the Balkans – some of the countries considered for membership have been bombed by NATO – and the challenges that the alliance is facing in Afghanistan and beyond complicate the picture further.

Although NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans is primarily stalled by bilateral disputes, EU enlargement suffers from a more fundamental set of problems. Scholars Lenard Cohen and John Lampe suggest that “the EU pre-accession process has been one of the most ambitious democracy-promotion efforts ever attempted.”¹ But today the EU needs to rethink, first, the content of the European vision; second, the nature of the public goods it provides over time; and, third, whether the Union can expand and still keep the quality of those public goods the same as before.

¹ Lenard J. Cohen and John R. Lampe, *Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Postconflict Struggles toward European Integration* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press/The John Hopkins University Press), 2011, 450.

Implementing the Lisbon treaty more effectively is an important baseline but may not prove enough. Existing policies and recommendations, which focus primarily at building domestic support by promoting pro-Western elites, have reached their limits. In short, I argue that overcoming the troubles at the center of the EU is as important for sustaining popular support in the Western Balkans as the orientation of the local leadership, if not more. Euro-Atlantic integration may be the only viable alternative for the Western Balkans at the moment. But for it to remain the only alternative, the EU itself has to shape up. Without problematizing these questions, we may be talking past each other and more importantly over the heads of the citizens of the Western Balkans.

But let us take a step back and think about what exactly is Euro-Atlantic integration? At its simplest, Euro-Atlantic integration refers to the inclusion of countries from the Western Balkans to NATO and the EU. From the vantage point of Washington D.C., this is a process of stabilization, democratization, and alliance formation.² The process in Southeastern Europe is seen as the continuation of the earlier integration of Eastern and Central Europe in the 1990s.

NATO and the EU are different organizations, however, that make very different demands on their member-states. NATO is primarily a military alliance, albeit one that requires certain military and human rights standards to be met, while the EU is a political and economic project that does not shy away from transforming societies. As Nida Gelazis put it recently,

“The distinction between the transformative impact of EU and NATO is made clear by the difference between the two countries that became NATO members in 2009, Croatia and Albania. Both countries met the criteria for NATO accession, and today they have active troops participating in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. But where the Croatian government continues to adopt political and economic reforms that were necessary for EU accession, Albania’s progress has been stalled by a political impasse, allegations of government corruption and election irregularities. The transformation in the former meant that Croatia was invited to join the EU last year, while the council postponed offering Albania candidate status.”³

Thus, although popular support toward the two organizations has traditionally been highly correlated, the EU makes more demands by far on governments and people of the Balkans than does NATO. This is not to suggest that NATO is unimportant. Clearly, security is a precondition for any other type of activity. But it is exactly for this reason that NATO has not faced the same level of fatigue that the EU has.

NATO Enlargement

Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Montenegro are the only countries in the Balkans that have not entered the NATO

² Hearing on “The Western Balkans and the 2012 NATO Summit,” Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission), Washington, D.C. (January 18, 2012).

³ Ibid.

alliance. Former U.S. diplomat Daniel Serwer reminded us recently that NATO entered the Balkans with a no-fly zone over Bosnia.⁴ The legacy of this “introduction” is very much behind the problem with NATO enlargement today. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are unlikely to become members in the near future – each for different but not unrelated reasons. Problems remain, and the West is often directly linked in these debates. Out of these countries, Montenegro is most likely to join the alliance once it completes its Membership Action Plan. Meanwhile, despite strong endorsement by the United States, Skopje will not achieve NATO membership until it reaches some type of settlement on its name dispute with Athens.

EU Enlargement

Turning to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, we have Croatia, scheduled to become the 28th member of the EU in July 2013, as the only acceding country following six years of negotiations. The Western Balkans also include three candidate countries, Serbia (since March 2012), Montenegro (since December 2010), and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (since December 2005), and three potential candidate countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo.

The 2005 Constitutional Treaty debacle and the rather negative post-accession developments in Bulgaria and Romania significantly damaged the pro-enlargement camp’s internal cohesion as well as its appeal. Moreover, the financial crisis and the problems in the Eurozone exacerbated the situation by undermining, at least temporarily, the whole European integration project. Still, despite the financial crisis and the problems at the heart of the EU integration project, the enlargement policy of the EU seems to be moving ahead in the Western Balkans. However, this may just be the product of diminishing ambitions and the limited vision that “Old Europe” has with regard to EU integration. In other words, this “success” may come together with an EU that moves closer to an inter-governmental organization model rather than some kind of United States of Europe.

For some analysts, a longer period of EU accession for the Western Balkans is the best way to get the necessary reforms in place, but the momentum is waning. Old practices – financial assistance, supporting Western-oriented elites, backing pro-Western civil society organizations – might no longer work or be available in the new conditions. Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1980s, often proposed as examples, were countries transitioning from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy under EU accession at a time when Western Europe still enjoyed the awe of most of the world. Today, things are different. The financial/political crisis in Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Ireland, coupled with the perception of double standards in the EU accession process in the eyes of the people in the Western Balkans, complicate matters. Moreover, the sluggish show of solidarity in the recent financial crisis and uncertainty about the future of Europe in the future global distribution of wealth and power further undermine the “carrot” of EU membership. EU funding, visa liberalization, and trade preferences and agreements may

⁴ Ibid.

not prove enough to change this current, especially as they are taken for granted in many Western Balkan capitals.

Moreover, what stalls the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans is not just a hesitant European Commission or even a failure to achieve the Copenhagen criteria – the criteria a country must meet to be eligible to join the European Union. In many cases, the problems are native to the region itself. Two of the countries that remain potential candidates have internal security and governance problems, have international institutions helping them govern their countries, and have bilateral disputes. There are many actors involved in the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans, and we need to understand their perspectives and aspirations. To complicate things further, these aspirations and orientations change over time and at different speeds, creating varying constellations at each step of the way. At times, a given Western Balkan public becomes pro-EU while the publics in EU capitals are indifferent or hostile – for example, Serbian elites became pro-European around 2008 at a time when the rest of Europe was becoming more skeptical and the crisis had just begun. Other times the local elites are in doubt when the EU wants to move forward with enlargement and so forth.

There is no shortage of irony in this process. For instance, in some cases where the public developed negative opinions on the matter, the very democratization for which the EU accession process was pushing undermined the commitment – and ability – of Balkan elites to an EU future (like in Serbia). Similarly, in other cases the very success of the EU accession process and the positive effect of conditionality may turn the public opinion of a country against EU integration – especially when things do not look that bright for the EU (as in Croatia).

Where Do We Go From Here?

The discussion in the Western media is from a vantage point that is particularly EU- and NATO-centric. This would not be problematic if indeed there were no alternative models for the Western Balkans. But is this true? Some disagree, proposing that Russia or maybe Turkey – inspired by a neo-Ottoman ideology – may have alternative plans for the region. Supporters of this view cite names of ministers and other elites in the Western Balkans that have studied in Turkey or Russia, or figures on foreign direct investments by various non-Western countries in the region, as well as evidence of other transnational forms of political community building. To a great extent, however, experts suggest this is nothing but hot air.

Beyond this debate, however, an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration may actually end up emerging from within the Western Balkans. Such alternatives appeared in the past and include ideas of a Balkan federation or various types of ententes.⁵ Unfortunately, one dreadful alternative is the so-called “black hole,” by which Western Balkan countries, which remain outside the EU, simply continue to “export” instability and uncertainty to the rest of Europe. It is this latter possibility, which for many

⁵ For more recent regional cooperation attempts, see Ivan Vejvoda’s testimony at the Hearing on “The Western Balkans and the 2012 NATO Summit.”

describes the current state of affairs, that most legitimizes the Euro-Atlantic orientation. In the end, the only way for Euro-Atlantic integration to take root is if the people of the Western Balkans perceive it as the best alternative. This means focusing on preserving the appeal of EU institutions and keeping alive the values that have been at the core of the Euro-Atlantic integration project.