

## Diminishing Transformative and Normative Role: How the EU Seems to be Losing its Influence in Serbia

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**Abstract:**

The European Union is facing with a number of challenges – rise of populism, lack of leadership, the migrant crisis, Brexit – that shows that the European integration project need to be redesign. The European Union need to consolidate, return to its core values and try overcome the series of crises it's facing. Internal Instability of the Union is reflected on the European Union - Western Balkans processes, that is in a serious slowdown. One of the important attempts of the European Union to integrate countries of the Western Balkans is known as a Berlin Process. Initial enthusiasm that was a driving force for all countries in the Western Balkans region stooped when it became clear that due to the European Union internal unresolved issues, the enlargement of the European Union wouldn't be priority and would be indefinitely delayed. Governments of the Western Balkans countries formally promised to accelerate reforms, resolve bilateral disputes and many of them hoped that would have the opportunity to join the European Union in 2025. For a long time, the European Union – Serbia relation was based on the policy of conditionality, and Serbian authorities were pressured to fulfill their promises – normalize relations with neighbors, promote dealing with the past and, most importantly, deliver indicted for war crimes and genocide - in order to make a move forward. Serbia gained candidate status in 2012, opened negotiations and entered the EU accession process effectively. The enlargement fatigue and fear of the new wave of conditionality policy brings new alternatives on the table for Serbia, but joining the European Union still remain first priority of the Serbian Foreign Policy.

**Key words:** *European Union, Western Balkans, Serbia, enlargement, alternatives*



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The European Union (EU) is often praised as a “peace project”<sup>1</sup>, created in the aftermath of the Second World War. Ever since it was established, there has been no conflict between member states; peace was maintained among members on the basis of economic partnership. Seven decades on, the EU is still seen as one of the most innovative and creative ways to build a community - “the EU isn’t perfect, but it is a community that is worth belonging to”<sup>2</sup>. Over the years, the role played by the EU and the nature of its power changed, depending on the situation in each of the member states. Furthermore, it was influenced by the shifting balance of power in the world among the main actors in the international arena. The EU’s economic force rarely translated into political and real power.

### **The European Union: Growing Through Crises**

From 1952 to 2008, the European Union was evolving, growing and moving forward all the time. Treaties were negotiated with the goal to create a legal framework around the principle of supranationalism and a strong Union. That meant interdependence for population now exceeding 500 million people. All member states gained from free movement of people, goods, services and capital. More than half of member states share a common currency. EU citizens, can freely live, study and work anywhere in Europe. This is all set on the fundamental rights.

The EU was strongest in the first decade of the 21st century, when its “conditionality policy” was in full force. Following the Summit in Nice, the EU started to face new challenges. Before the summit, all member states had great expectations yet the convening produced ends with minimal results. In 2005, the draft of constitutional treaty that sought to enhance the ownership and identification of citizens with the EU was rejected. The EU showed its strength in economical area, integration of economies and building a common market for member states, but was less successful in fostering integration between European peoples. Having in mind the complexity of the EU, and that the treaties specify how and when the EU can react, one of consequences still remains is that EU has not been successful in proving that it is about more than its institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Garnett: The European Peace Project, Eurozine Editorial, Eurozine’s 24/2019 Newsletter, accessed March 1, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-european-peace-project/>

<sup>2</sup> Emily McDonnell: Four lessons in community building for the European Union, Apolitical, accessed March 1, [https://apolitical.co/en/solution\\_article/lessons-in-community-building-the-european-union](https://apolitical.co/en/solution_article/lessons-in-community-building-the-european-union)

Yet in the 2000s, the eastern enlargement of the EU was a successful project of economic and political expansion. A decade later, three more countries joined; EU enlargement policy was in its heyday, with 10 new members coming from the Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

We live in the times of uncertainty: changing concepts, rules and norms in the international politics; new actors on international scene, changing balance in the world, changing of perspectives and challenges, etc. Europe is going through a very difficult time and the EU is facing greater hostility from within than ever before. Henry Kissinger in 2018 stated “In the 1940s, the European leaders had a clear sense of direction. Right now, they mostly want to avoid trouble”<sup>1</sup>.

Through the years the EU tried but didn’t find a proper way to respond to the challenges they faced all the time on daily bases. Firstly, weakness of institutions and policies, treaties aspiration wasn’t set on proper way to the politics of crisis management. Secondly, citizens of EU lost trust in their institutions, and they are worried for their own security. Thirdly, there is an apparent lack of leadership, confounded by populists and now, sovereigntists. Financial crisis starting in 2008 led to a redefinition of EU’s goals. Over the decade EU was prioritizing economic performance over social justice. Within the context of the crisis, the EU values of equality and solidarity have also been challenged by the rise of the nationalist right and the growth of xenophobia all over Europe. This has proven as a real threat because it undermines some of the main principles of the common European project.

Within the EU itself we have witnessed a “grand return” of history, geopolitics, identity issues.<sup>2</sup> On one side, we have in some member states an autocratic tendency (e.g. Hungary) emerging, than the separation of powers (Poland) is disturbed, and the solidarity for which the EU was known has been brought into question (with the unwillingness to accept the “quota system” as part of the EU’s migration policy). Another trend has been observed also, one of “nationalization” of enlargement policy, now used by members as a trump card in their foreign policy contests (an example is the French “no” to the aspirations of North Macedonia and Albania). Finally, there is Brexit.

The migrant crisis has been a profound test of the EU system and Union of member states, sown doubts and debates over sovereignty and the right of member states to define their own

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Luce: Henry Kissinger: ‘We are in a very, very grave period’, Financial Times, Article, accessed March 1, <https://www.ft.com/content/926a66b0-8b49-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543>

<sup>2</sup> Walter Russel Mead: The Return of Geopolitics – The Revenge of Revisionist Powers, Foreign Affairs, article, accessed March 1, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-04-17/return-geopolitics>

domestic policies that do not necessarily reflect ones set in Brussels. The EU can't speak with one voice on foreign policy and defense issues. Its institutions and decision-making procedures baffle the public and permanently seem in need of reform.

If we look the broader picture, we will see that the future of Europe is linked to the future of the European Union. We are living in a complex and multi-connected world, and the European model and norms are increasingly challenged by the competition of great powers in our wider neighborhood, as well as the erosion of solidarity within the EU. The EU is depending on relations between France and Germany, but also on relations with other international actors like USA, China and Russia. A passive response to these challenges would inhibit the EU's ability to maintain its basic values within its own space and act as model for a security community in the world.

It seemed that for the EU, after ten years of crisis, a period of consolidation had begun; results of the European Parliament elections in 2019 were one indicator that the growth of populism has reached its limits, having in mind the pro-European parties results. But on the other hand, divisions remain. EU is in dire need of the reform of institutions, to gain back trust among citizens; for this, there seems to be no partner among member states. Skepticism is growing yet expectations remain high. There is no political figure that is recognized and connected with the EU as actor of international relations. Also, there is problem with the leading structure in the Union. Weak leadership doesn't bring the promise of change.

From a long-term perspective, there is no doubt that the EU has been a success. Yet historical achievements do not necessarily ensure success in the near future. On the beginning of 2020, we can see that the EU is still a half-built building. The new institutions are needed, proactive leadership, and a change to its enlargement policy. The answer to all these challenges – of credibility, integrity – of the EU we propose is “more Europe”<sup>1</sup>.

### **The European Union and the Western Balkans**

The EU enlargement policy was a major success of the EU for years. The success story of the transformation of Central and Eastern European neighbors after 1989 was brought about by

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<sup>1</sup> Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_19\\_4230](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_4230)

transformative power during their transition period and it was well known as a process of Europeanisation<sup>1</sup>.

Following the economic and financial crisis, Brexit and other problems and issues that the EU is facing, enlargement is seen as a problem rather than a solution with future enlargement of the EU to the WB now questioned. On the other hand, the Western Balkans region is small area, very diverse, still in the process of transformation, dealing with bilateral issues, seeing no alternative to the “European path”.

In the scope of the enlargement policy, the EU created the Western Balkans as a “political construct” – bringing together a group of countries – Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. After Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, the six remaining countries – also referred as the “Western Balkans Six”<sup>2</sup> (WB6) – four are candidate countries to enter the EU (Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia) while two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) are potential candidates.

Cooperation between the Western Balkans countries in practice exists only in the form of regional forums and initiatives. While some of them are active and producing results, purpose or achievements of many remains unclear. The Berlin Process, launched in 2014 and imagined by the Germans as a way to offer some kind of integration to WB6 while aiding the integration of these countries into the EU, has the highest profile of them all. The Process is supported by the European Commission, international financial institutions and the Member States involved – Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. The Process’s connectivity agenda refers to linking the people (social dimension), economies (economic dimension) and states (political dimension) of the region. Within this agenda, the Process has thus far yielded initiatives and projects in the fields of transport and infrastructure, economic connectivity, youth cooperation and cooperation among businesses and among the civil societies of the Western Balkans. Aiming for institutionalization, it also inspired setting up entities-regional organizations: the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Western Balkans Chambers Investment Forum (WBCIF), the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), South East Europe Transport Community. The Berlin Process encompasses the meetings of the representatives of regional civil society organizations (Civil

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Walk: EU Enlargement: from successful policy to dead end?, Eurac Research Blog, accessed March 1, <https://blogs.eurac.edu/eureka/eu-enlargement-from-successful-policy-to-dead-end/>

<sup>2</sup> More on <https://berlinprocess.info/>

Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series), youth organizations (Youth Forum) and business associations (Business Forum).

During the Sofia Summit of the European Council in May 2018 and following the Sofia Declaration, European leaders reaffirmed their support towards the admission of the Western Balkans countries as EU members. But enlargement remains conditioned on successful resolution of numerous open issues. Observing the socio-economic and political development, the convergence of the Western Balkans with the EU is at the heart of the accession process. And in almost all countries in the WB region, during the accession process the EU was directly involved in reforms in what was without precedence in modern history. In the aftermath of 1990s, all countries in the region were looking in the same direction, to “strive for Europe” and saw the EU as their final destination.

The Western Balkans countries and politics are rightly dominated by the perspective of the EU enlargement, but given the delays in this process the countries of this region should be focused on enhancing their institutional capacities, regional cooperation, and democratic state-building.

The Western Balkans (WB) remains the last part of Europe that is not yet integrated, while on the other side enlargement has become the driving force of political change and hope for all citizens in the WB region. EU has lost its power of attraction; at the same moment its enlargement ambitions have deflated.

All WB states had went through or are going through one iteration of policy of conditionality: Albania... justice reform... North Macedonia and Montenegro... rule of law issues... more researchers are calling upon the EU to exert more pressure on Serbia’s government.<sup>1</sup> Six years on, it is clear that opening of negotiations and roughly half of the chapters opened did not bring the country closer to the EU. Stabilocracy, term popularized by Srdja Pavlovic and Florian Bieber, has emerged causing a change of perspective and new approaches to each country. While political representatives repeat how the “European perspective“ is not closed, but fatigue in the WB countries is there and mistrust to the process is stronger than ever. During all this time, and after frequent crises (economic, migrant, war in Ukraine), the prestige of the EU diminished – citizens were no longer sure that it was this “bright future“ that awaited us all from WB region.

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<sup>1</sup> Beáta Huszka: The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed March 1, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the\\_power\\_of\\_perspective\\_why\\_eu\\_membership\\_still\\_matters\\_in\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans)

More Europe cannot be realized without the inclusion of the Balkans in its ranks through a responsible and predictable enlargement policy. But both sides need to change approach, because it seems this one doesn't work.

If WB countries want to survive ongoing crises in the EU, as well as in their own neighborhood, to become stronger and dedicated to the process, political elites in the region together with civil society need to find a common approach and then become part of the European solutions. All WB countries with their governments need to work on and solve bilateral disputes in a constructive way instead of undermining each other's efforts. The Berlin process is more than welcome contribution to the long-term development of the region. It needs to be materialized through short-term and concrete efforts by the EU and the WB countries that will provide visible results that enhance lives of citizens. Also, WB countries need to prepare to extend the solidarity demonstrated toward refugees and migrants to a long-term commitment to respect human rights of everyone regardless of where they are coming from, including their most vulnerable citizens. And more responsible engagement by WB countries within the region will help to the WB countries to get closer and faster become part of European comprehensive response.

On the other side, the EU has to behave as though the future of the Western Balkans actually matters for them and that they really want to "open the doors" to the WB countries. The example of North Macedonia is telling... The fact is that the countries of the Western Balkans are surrounded by EU member states on all sides and they are in their suburb. Therefore, everything that happen and taking place in any country of the region impact all countries of the region, and happenings in the non-member countries which undermine the very standards that the EU claims to represent cannot be ignored by EU. One of the most important roles of the EU must be to encourage aspirations for membership by assisting countries to understand why and how the union's values will improve the standard of living both for each country and for the union as a whole.

If something doesn't change in the next period, the "European project"<sup>1</sup> can be easily turn in something very different for WB countries. If credibility of EU is not restored, if there is no good news for all those waiting for a sign of optimism, in the sense that at least some progress has

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<sup>1</sup>Thierry Chopin and Jean-François Jamet: The Future of the European Project, Fondation Robert Schuman, European Issue no 393, accessed March 1, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0393-the-future-of-the-european-project>

been made, WB countries will look for new alternatives. Seeking new investments and new chances for growth and development, they will be tempted to find new actors that will serve as their backup plan. It can easily happen that WB countries “slip” out of the EU’s sphere of influence.

This process which kept societies and politicians in the region motivated to pursue democratic and economic reforms, rule of law and the fight against corruption for decades, however seems to be slowing down for the last year. But the good thing is that again WB is in the spotlight and hence the new methodology that could offer some new approaches to the countries waiting for their turn. Also, finally somebody in the Brussels heard WB grieved that they are unhappy with the EU approach and individual members turning a blind eye to stability and state capture. If nothing else, it can be ignored anymore.

### **European Union and the Republic of Serbia**

When it comes to Serbia-EU relations we see how in 20 years they have gone almost whole circle. From believing that EU is the only direction for Serbian society to giving up and trying to find new alternatives. This recent history of relations can be divided in three different phases: first, expectation based on the policy of trust that we are on the European path, roughly from late 2000 to 2006, second, policy of conditionality and mistrust or enlargement fatigue: from 2006 to 2014 and third, seeking new alternatives: from 2014 – ongoing.

#### *Policy of Trust: 2000 – 2006*

Following the deposing of Milosevic regime in October 2000, political and economic transition started and the highest priority was given to the European integration process. The new era in relations between EU and Serbia, at that time still Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, started immediately after the political changes. Financial support was significant: FR Yugoslavia was assisted with 200 million euros for consolidation after democratic changes and this was a good sign for the new Government to begin the process of Serbia’s joining the European Union. Even though Serbia had pro-European foreign policy orientation in that moment it was not enough to begin the walk on the European path. EU decided that Western Balkans will become part of the EU as a whole region. It was necessary that all countries carry out fundamental reforms, set



democratic rules, with the main focus on the rule of law and respect of the human rights, develop modern market economy and improve regional cooperation.

From the beginning, Serbian political elites were dedicated and committed to integration of Serbia to EU, set that as a high priority and adopted in Parliament “Resolution on the EU Accession” in 2004. The Government was ready to meet all political conditions for joining the EU. Serbia got the green light to start negotiations with the European Union in 2005, after adoption of the Feasibility Report and started the negotiations on the Stabilization and Association agreement. It was a positive impulse and good sign which was a driving force and promotion of the EU in Serbia was on a highest level. Image of EU in Serbia was good and expectations were very high. Public opinion polls show that people were in favor of the EU and expected to be part of the Union very soon.

In this period, almost all reports issues by European Commission detected a number of serious problems in the process of political and economic transition as well as in implementing of the European standards, but the main focus was on a negative assessment of Serbia’s cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Failure of Serbia’s authorities to arrest remaining fugitives led to call of negotiations on SAA in 2006. Also, in the same year the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro fell apart and Serbia continued European integration process as an independent state.

*Policy of conditionality and mistrust: 2006 – 2014*

Serbia expected more from the EU and its relations, trust in the European integration process was high, as well as expectations. The new Serbian Government in 2007 made the commitment that it will fully cooperate with ICTY and the SAA negotiations were completed. But new challenges as well as other hidden factors had arisen. The policy of conditioning and expecting from Serbia only to deliver, as well as disagreement on the status of Kosovo and recognition of Kosovo’s independence by majority of the EU member states in 2008 resulted in the growing Euroscepticism in Serbia but also contributed to strong polarization among the political elites in Belgrade.

In 2008, policy of conditionality reached its symbolic peak, reinforcing anti-European sentiments among citizens of Serbia that also effected the stability of the coalition government. Political crisis in Serbia led to snap elections and EU support among pro-European forces even

though a lot of questions were opened. But on the other hand, in 2009 visa-free regime entered into force for travelling to Schengen countries and Serbia applied for EU membership, which made the EU's popularity among citizens rising. Political elites made the promise that Serbia will join the EU eventually. They also used fact that EU will bring money and new financial impetus to Serbia.

A decade later, citizens don't believe that we will be part of the EU and public opinion polls show that support to the EU is rapidly decreasing and has been hovering since 2012 a little above 50% of those who want Serbia to be part of the EU. This was also a reflection of the crises that started in 2008, and which show that EU is not as strong as it once was. And with migrant crises some of the core values are on the test.

On the other hand, European integration path and Serbia's EU membership is proclaimed as the first strategic foreign policy priority of the Republic of Serbia. In 2012 Serbia obtained candidate country status and in 2014 started the negotiation process after the first intergovernmental conference was held.

Image of the EU was typically connected with the all conditions that Republic of Serbia was obliged to fulfill and never with a support of the EU and foreign direct investments coming from EU members. In the period from 2007 to 2016 EU Member States donations have reached €523.86 million.<sup>1</sup> The Delegation of the EU to Serbia failed in communication that didn't show what actually had been done in different areas, especially investment in the infrastructural project and help to smaller cities and local communities. Success stories were rarely told.

*Seeking alternatives: 2014 – on*

Serbia's accession to the EU is a complex and comprehensive process. But in the last six years it seems that there is no European integration process and no enthusiasm among those who are in charge with Serbia's negotiating process. In the last year only 2 chapters were open and Government hasn't appointed the chief of the negotiation team. It seems that the EU still uses the politics of the "stick and carrot", but new methodology is a chance to consolidate and check where we stand in this moment and how to continue reforms. The last EU progress report shows that democracy in Serbia is on the test, with no media freedoms and that there is no progress at all.

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<sup>1</sup> EU Assistance to Serbia, accessed April 10 <http://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en>

Very important is that EU moderated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, after Mogherini left the position of High Representative of the Union is almost invisible.

On the other hand, political elites in Serbia try to play neutral game and to promise cooperation to everyone, and the last two years served to show that Serbia actually has an alternative to European path, that our traditional friends are Russia and China and that they will help Serbia.

The EU is still one of the biggest donors to Serbia with more than €3.6 billion<sup>1</sup> in grants provided over the past 18 years in all fields and server to prepare and effectively implement obligations.

This and next year can easily become a turning point for the European project in Serbia, and the Western Balkans. If the EU does not restore its credibility, if there are no good news of progress on the European path for the countries in the region, if there is no feel of making some progress and if there are no new financial arrangements alternatives will win.

China is ready to offer new possibilities in terms of investing in infrastructure and taking over strategic sectors of the economy. Serbia is at a risk of slipping out from Brussels' zone of influence.

## **Conclusion**

It's a fact that we all live in the age of uncertainty in the international arena and there is no good prediction what will happen in the next period, because the situation is changed on the daily level. Crises are all over us. In the next period, Serbia need to choose the side and to dedicate to process if the membership in the EU is still the one of the priorities of the foreign policy. Commitment to fulfillment of the obligations accepted is a priority. Western Balkans region faces number of difficulties when it comes to the EU integration process and internal political dynamics seem to make situation even more difficult. Continuity of working on solving of its own bilateral disputes is on the top of the agenda.

EU is on the crossroads and with a lot of open questions – how EU might transform after Brexit, what will be the EU's position on the global stage and the power of European system of values and it's all connected with EU's enlargement policy and its relations with the Western Balkans. In this regard, the future of Europe lies in the new leadership, responsible, dedicated and brave, ready to deliver on the issues that really matter to people. And, “unless it acts soon, Europe

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<sup>1</sup> EU Assistance to Serbia, accessed April 10 <http://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en>

may become not a player in the new world order but the chessboard on which great powers compete for power and glory.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro: Empowering EU member states with strategic sovereignty, in: Leonard, Mark; Shapiro, Jeremy (eds.): Strategic Sovereignty: how Europe can regain the capacity to act, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2019, pp. 5-18, p. 6 [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ecfr\\_strategic\\_sovereignty.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ecfr_strategic_sovereignty.pdf)

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