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# THE NEW PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS WITHIN THE DANUBE REGION STRATEGY

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TATJANA SLIJEPCÉVIĆ

## INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation lies at the very foundation of the whole structure of the European Union and is a model that has proved itself exceptionally successful, particularly in such a diversified milieu as Europe is. In the course of the European Union's existence it has been continually changing its essential purpose, while in the light of the recent happenings in the heart of Europe, namely the Western Balkans, it has gained even a greater value as a tool of reconciliation, stability and ultimate prosperity. In the case of the Western Balkans regional cooperation stands as an indispensable prerequisite for the future of the region as a whole as well as for each individual state, foremostly when it comes to their European perspective. Countries once part of one state and now neighbouring countries tied historically and geographically to each other, the Western Balkan states have no other choice but to cooperate among themselves. Furthermore, all these countries are small in their respective territorial coverage, populations, economies and resources and thus it is in the best interest of them all to unite their potentials and act as regional rather than players.

However, regional cooperation primarily implies cooperation among the Western Balkans countries, which might not be enough as the countries face the same challenges, lack experience and resources for resolving problematic issues and not infrequently cannot be of much help to one other. Closer cooperation, partnership and contacts with more advanced, experienced EU member states would provide the Western Balkan countries with opportunities for direct learning, adopting best practices and translating them to the Western Balkan context which would ultimately enhance resolution of the present issues and challenges in the region. The Danube Region Strategy opens precisely these opportunities to the Western Balkans as it affects not just the member states, but the neighbouring countries as well. Along with being a unique way for direct and close cooperation among member and non-member

states, it creates space for active involvement and contribution of the Western Balkans to the common interest areas foreseen by the Danube Strategy. If fully embraced and used at its best by the Western Balkan countries this opportunity will, undoubtedly, result in many positive developments and pave the way to new ones.

### **ENLARGEMENT AND THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE WESTERN Balkans: Problems and Challenges**

Enlargement is very often defined as the EU's most powerful policy (Commission of the European Communities, 2008:4). Starting with the first enlargement in 1973, all successive enlargements have increased the EU's economic and trade capacities, enhanced stability and security and contributed to conflict prevention as well as strengthening democratic values and the rule of law. Enlargements, in terms of both deepening and widening the EU, have greatly raised the international presence and importance of the role the EU plays in the world's affairs today. In the overall trend of globalization, the EU has emerged as one of the most prominent actors to exercise its impact on a wide range of policy areas, change attitudes and shape expectancies of the other actors (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999: 17).

As *sui generis*, with achievements that speak for themselves the EU has a kind of magnet effect for many. There has been a great and long-lasting interest by the Western Balkan countries, Turkey, and some countries in the Caucasus such as Georgia and Armenia, as well as Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, in becoming part of the European family. This certainly poses great challenges and requires many changes and reforms, both in the EU and in the countries wishing to join. Enlargement is an exceptionally important and sensitive matter when it comes to the Western Balkans, as the whole course of its future, development, prosperity and stability greatly depends on the region's accession to the EU.

It is expected that the Western Balkan countries will be the next group of states to join the European Union in the course of the next decade. What is common to all these countries is that each shares a solid perspective for EU membership that has been confirmed on several occasions. This was first confirmed at the meeting of the European Council in Feira in June 2000, thereupon at the Thessalonica Summit in 2003 and at the following EU meetings of the highest level, including also an informal meeting of the Foreign Ministers that took place in Salzburg in March 2006. Furthermore, in January 2006 the European Commission adopted a strategy

with the title “The Western Balkans on the Road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity,” assessing that significant progress had been made since the Thessalonica Summit and defining measures and instruments in order to enhance EU policy towards the Western Balkans.

Up to now, the status of candidate country has been given to Croatia (accession date July 1<sup>st</sup> 2013), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Montenegro, while Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo<sup>1</sup> are potential candidate countries. As all of these countries have been through difficult periods and conflicts, and are still confronted with many problems and challenges, the European perspective would be a new era for them, bringing economic and social prosperity, and even more importantly peace and stability in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the experiences with previous enlargements, the EU has improved the process of negotiating and accessing new member states, giving priority to the rule of law and good governance as well as requiring economic reforms that must be taken before a country is allowed to join the EU. Although the Western Balkans has made progress on its way towards the EU in recent years, it is still faced with a number of issues that can undermine security and stability, slow down the economic progress and overshadow the European perspective of the region.

As already mentioned, candidate and potential candidate countries of the Western Balkans are at different stages in their progress towards the EU. However, most of the problems and obstacles they encounter on their way to membership are of the same nature and they can be dealt with and solved if the countries closely cooperate at the regional level, something which will be closely looked at in the next section.

## REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is a topic very often heard about and an issue of great importance when speaking about the European perspective of the region. There have been much success and progress in intensifying regional cooperation, especially in the recent couple of years, thanks both to regional actors and international partners. The major support and incentive for regional cooperation has been coming from the European Union, but it has also been one of the major conditions

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<sup>1</sup> Under Resolution 1244/99 of the United Nations Security Council.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/> (August 10<sup>th</sup> 2011.)

incorporated in all the documents and agreements regarding EU membership of the Western Balkan countries.

As already mentioned, one of the reasons that regional cooperation is being very much insisted on is that the EU itself is founded on cooperation among regions and because political stability, economic prosperity and social development has been mostly achieved due to close relations and cooperation in a vast range of fields between the European states and regions. For this reason it has been seen as a successful model to be followed and applied in the Western Balkans region too. On the other hand, the geographical proximity of the Western Balkan countries, as illustrated in Map 1.1, their historical ties and shared, very often turbulent and gloomy past, have made regional cooperation inevitable and even more relevant.

*Map 1: The Western Balkans*



*Source: <http://kos.rec.org>*

With shorter or longer intervals of peace, the region has been frequently stricken by war, starting with the First and Second Balkan Wars, the First and Second World Wars and the most recent wars in the 1990s that followed declarations of independence by the former Yugoslav republics. After each of these conflicts and wars, the region reappeared integrated in a somewhat different form and it always functioned as a part of larger political structures that could keep the region together and that could

guarantee stability. Today there exists a larger entity that could assume this role and responsibility: the EU, since “the EU, by the virtue of its power of attraction and hence power to promote certain norms of appropriate state behaviour became perceived as the actor best able to bring stability to this traditionally unstable region.” (Delević, 2007:14).

That regional cooperation is a model that pays off was also proven by the example of the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC). Although the EU conducted most of its relations and negotiations with the CEE countries in a bilateral form, interstate cooperation strongly featured in the requirements package for EU accession. In the case of the CEE countries, cooperation was necessary for resolving border problems and minority issues. Since then “good neighbourliness” started being added to the list of the membership criteria, and besides the benefits for the region in question, it became a means to “prevent the enlargement from importing foreign policy problem into the EU” (Delević, 2007:23). Although the benefits of regional cooperation were many and although it was very much fostered, it was never included in the obligatory requirements for EU membership and it never gained more importance than the bilateral approach that the EU had towards each candidate country from CEE.

However, the attitude towards the Western Balkan countries was different. The official report that the European Commission submitted to the European Council and Parliament in 1996 contained goals and objectives as well as conditions and instruments that should be applied as a response to the issue of the Western Balkans, introducing the “regional approach” for the first time. As this was the time when the Balkan conflict had just ended, with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina coming to a conclusion, the regional approach was primarily a means to consolidate peace and security in the region. For that reason, the agreements that were later concluded with each country were focused on maintaining political stability and economic prosperity through cooperation among the countries themselves, with the neighbouring countries and with the EU (Delević, 2007:23). While they were treating all these countries together as one whole, they were at the same time paying great attention to the specific position of each one of the countries. Entering into such an agreement was conditioned by the readiness of each country to work on peace building, adopting democratic values with the emphasis on the respect on human and minority rights and willingness to re-establish cooperation with the neighbours.

Thus, the EU attached much greater importance to regional cooperation in the case of the Western Balkans, than it had with CEE, for now regional cooperation was

promoted to one of the compulsory preconditions for EU integration and it was to be closely monitored and assessed in the course of the countries' progress towards EU membership (Delević, 2007:24). In May 1999, the European Commission came up with a more comprehensive and ambitious plan for the development of the Western Balkan region and its eventual integration into the EU. In order to foster the accession process for candidates and potential candidates in the Western Balkans, the EU has developed a policy known as the Stabilization and Association Process. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) was initiated in May 1999, showing long-term orientation of the EU to assist the countries of the Western Balkan region in their political efforts by the means of financial and human resources aid that would finally lead to full EU membership. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo are all involved in SAP, which is a constituent part of the overall enlargement policy and which prepares the whole region for EU integration. The process is at once bilateral and regional, since on the one hand it contributes to the establishment of relations among the countries involved in this process and the EU, and on the other fosters their mutual regional cooperation.

As defined by the European Commission, SAP is "the framework for the EU negotiations with the Western Balkans countries, all the way to their eventual accession with three main aims:

- Stabilizing the countries and encouraging their swift transition to a market economy
- Promoting regional cooperation
- Eventual membership of the EU" (The European Commission, 2006:5)

The core component of SAP overall is the emphasis on regional cooperation. SAP should not be understood as a process that occurs only between the EU and a SAP signatory, but it is very much concerned with cooperation and mutual assistance among the countries of the region themselves. This is specifically underlined in the SAA chapter on the regional cooperation, where it is stated that the signatory country will be actively promoting cooperation throughout the region. Upon signing the Agreement, a country becomes obliged to start negotiations and conclude bilateral agreements on the regional cooperation with the other countries that have already signed the SAA.

With regard to regional cooperation, the countries participating in AP have obligated themselves to achieving concrete objectives and implementing specified initiatives in accordance with the Thessalonica agenda from 2003<sup>3</sup> in the area of regional trade liberalization, facilitation of the visa regimes within the region, the rounding up of small weapons and arms, creating a regional market for gas and energy, developing an energy infrastructure, transportation network and telecommunications, water management, environment protection, cross-border and parliamentary cooperation, as well as science and research (The European Commission, 2006:6). Constructive regional cooperation is of crucial value and indicates that a country is ready to integrate into the EU. The Western Balkans' approach to the EU has to be accompanied by an enhancement of regional cooperation modelled upon cooperation within the EU itself. The Western Balkan countries have also become fully aware of the shared problems that they have, most of which have strong cross-border characteristics, from which the responsibilities towards each other arise. They now realize benefits and results that regional cooperation has brought to each one of them, which gives further incentive to continue strengthening cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, regional cooperation purely within the Western Balkans will not be a sufficient response to the challenges these countries are faced with and which need to be solved prior to joining the Union. Lack of experience and poor resources common to all the Western Balkan countries are a serious obstacle to tackling existing challenges at the regional level. While the European perspective is certain for the Western Balkans countries, it is still remote for many of them and inability to fulfil the requirement of the regional cooperation in a satisfactory manner might prolong the accession process even more. In such a context the Danube Region Strategy might be a needed solution and answer for the Western Balkans.

## **DANUBE REGION STRATEGY –**

### **A NEW PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS**

The Danube Strategy is the first EU initiative in a long time which, besides the priority fields, affects the neighbourhood and enlargement policy. It is not just a catalyst of

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<sup>3</sup> The Thessalonica agenda extended and enriched SAP with some elements that were introduced due to then imminent enlargement towards the Central and Eastern European countries; it also introduced a range of new tools and instruments to underpin the reform processes in the Western Balkans and bring it closer to the EU.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.euroresources.org/guide\\_to\\_population\\_assistance/european\\_community/ipa.html](http://www.euroresources.org/guide_to_population_assistance/european_community/ipa.html)

good-neighbourly relations in the region, but it brings closer the EU member states and third countries and strengthens their relations. The Strategy may be perceived as a bridge between the current state of the Western Balkan countries and their full membership which can greatly facilitate the integration of the Balkans in the European structures. It is an outstanding opportunity for these countries to be a part of a macro-region strategy and to be closely linked with some of the member states through the matters of mutual interest and benefits (Council of the European Union, 2011).

The Danube Region Strategy includes eight EU countries (Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania) and 8 non-EU countries (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova).

*Map 2: Territorial coverage of the Danube Region for the Danube Region Strategy*



Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/cooperation/danube/maps\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperation/danube/maps_en.htm)

Based on the previous results of the macro-regional strategies in the European Union, the European Council proposed development of an EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The Danube Region Strategy, just like the Baltic Region Strategy, is a way to establish a macro-regional model for efficient territorial cooperation. It is expected to



bring better coordination among the official authorities and organizations working in the Danube area and result in prosperity, sustainable development, the opening of new employment opportunities and strengthened security in the region (European Commission, 2011). Motives and goals of the Strategy are best summarized in the Final Declaration of the Conference of the Regional Leaders of the Working Community of the Danube Regions held in Linz 2008: *“For the Danube Region and its successful integration of the states, regions, municipalities and citizens, there is the chance and obligation to come out of the new international surroundings stronger than before, by pooling strengths, joint actions, and formulating a policy for the Danube region for the future. Only in this way, the Danube region can again become one of the leading intellectual, economic and cultural centers of Europe and the world, as it has been before. Together, the regions along the Danube are strong and with them also Europe.”*<sup>5</sup>

It was recognized at an early stage that none of the stated goals would be achievable if the scope of the Strategy did not step beyond the EU borders. A great value of the Strategy lies precisely in the fact that it has been created not solely for the EU member states, but that it involves all the countries that have been a part of the Danube Cooperation Process (European Commission, 2011). This new partnership is of special interest and importance to the Western Balkan countries, as the Danube basin has been a historical link and main gateway to European integration of the Western Balkans. Such an envisioned strategy opens the possibility for candidate and potential candidate states to directly cooperate with the member states, some of them the most developed and oldest ones, to receive guidelines and adopt best practices for responding to the challenges the Danube Region countries share.

The Danube Region Strategy has been launched with the aim of enhancing and cohering socio-economic development, strengthening security and recognizing multiculturalism in the Danube Region. Since all the states involved in the Strategy have been severely affected by the global economic crisis, the Danube Strategy primarily tries to contribute to sustainable economic growth in the region. The Strategy emphasizes economic interdependence of the countries in the Danube region and their potentials for economic development. It proposes establishment of the business networks and non-governmental trade promotion bodies which will generate

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<sup>5</sup> Working Community of the Danube Regions. (2009.) Final Declaration: Sustainability Shaping the Future of the Danube Region. Working Community of the Danube Regions, Linz.

future development opportunities, especially for SMEs, increase employment and stimulate efficient and sustainable growth (Council of the European Union, 2011).

Strengthening safety and security is another very important aspect of the Strategy, as the Danube Region comprises both Schengen and non-Schengen countries, as well as member states, candidate countries and potential candidate countries whose laws and security policies are not harmonized, which requires continuous and comprehensive cooperation in security matters. Interlinked through the Strategy, the participating countries will be able to cooperate much more closely, to exchange information more frequently and organize joint actions aimed at strengthening security and safety in the region. For the candidate and potential candidate states this will also be an opportunity to become much better acquainted with the laws and security policies of the member states and to adapt domestic laws and policies to European standards.

Furthermore, the Strategy stresses the need for recognizing multiculturalism, as the Danube basin has always been comprised of different peoples and nationalities. Bearing in mind multicultural, religious and national structure of the Western Balkans, this aspect gains additional value and significance.

The priority areas of the Danube Strategy are among the major obstacles to the advancement of the Western Balkan countries and those strongly favoured by the EU. Therefore, being integrated into the Danube Strategy opens great opportunities for the Western Balkan countries to improve fields that are lagging behind through cooperation and joint efforts with much more developed countries and certainly at a faster pace than they would do on their own. On the other hand, the Strategy will enable a change in the position of the Western Balkan countries, from passive observers and aid recipients to states taking an active part in the implementation of the Strategy. For the first time, these countries will be in a position to provide input and give advice on how to approach the issues the Strategy focuses on. The Western Balkan countries will have the opportunity to provide initiatives, propose solutions and act as equal partners with the member states in matters of mutual interest and concern. Assuming an active role in this process will help in changing the perception of these countries and positively reflect their affirmation at the European level.

## CONCLUSION

The Western Balkan countries, both from their individual and common perspectives, believe that the Strategy will open great possibilities to fully employ their economic,

cultural, ecological and other potential in the Danube area. Facilitating social-economic development, improving connectivity and communication services, protecting the environment and mitigating risks of natural disasters are among the top priorities of each country, which within the framework of the Danube Strategy have much better chances to be achieved.

The Danube Strategy's benefits to the Western Balkan countries could be many and they could be a foundation for future cooperation, joint work and common goals shared with the European Union. Whereas for the time being contributions from the Western Balkans might be few, it is highly likely that in time this micro-region could grow into an equally contributing and valuable partner. Gradually, a whole new chapter both for the Western Balkans and the European Union might be begun and prove why the Danube Strategy has been considered a success even before its creation.

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