Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans

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Dejan Jović

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia

dejan.jovic@fpzg.hr

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1383-0789

Abstract

This paper focuses on perceptions of the European Union (EU) and external actors (such as the United States, Russia, and Turkey) in six countries of the Western Balkans (WB) and Croatia in a comparative perspective. We present data generated by public opinion polls and surveys in all countries of that region in order to illustrate growing trends of EU indifferentism in all predominately Slavic countries of the region. In addition, there is an open rejection of pro-EU policies by significant segments of public opinion in Serbia and in the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina. On the contrary, there is much enthusiasm and support for the West in general and the EU in particular in predominately non-Slavic countries, Kosovo and Albania. We argue that the WB as a region defined by alleged desire of all countries to join the EU is more of an elite concept than that shared by the general population, which remains divided over the issue of EU membership. In explaining reasons for such a gap we emphasise a role of interpretation of the recent past, especially when it comes to a role the West played in the region during the 1990s.

Introduction

The idea of the *Western Balkans* as a separate region has its roots in the second half of the 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of a rather serious failure of a European policy towards countries of the former Yugoslavia. Its appearance signified ambition for a *grand return* of Europe to the Balkans. Although Europe (then 15 member states) was initially relatively successful in its diplomatic efforts to reach compromise between Slovenia and the Yugoslav Federation (in July 1991), its later failure to prevent and stop the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina opened doors of the Balkans wide to the United States (US), and — indirectly — to other external actors, including the Russian Federation. The US became present in the region, and redefined its role in wider Europe, largely due to its intervention in post-Yugoslav wars. These wars, which revealed that post-Communist transition to democracy has its serious risks and cannot *per* se and *by default* guarantee peace and stability, offered a strong argument in favour of preserving rather than dissolving NATO. They showed that the hour of Europe has not yet come[1] — especially not of Europe that is tempted to construct its new political identity in opposition and as an alternative to all external powers, including the US.

American involvement, in as much as being helpful for the purpose of securing peace and stability, challenged a new European narrative which was based on a vision of a united, peaceful and largely self-sufficient Europe (Europe *sui generis*), with its own identity and highly emancipated from influences of external actors.[2] The area of the former Yugoslavia, in addition to being a battlefield for local nationalisms, became a political battlefield for influence, primarily between Germany and the US, but also with a strong involvement of other actors, including some EU member states, which used it to achieve their own

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1   Here we refer to famous words by Jacques Poos, the Chair of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, who on 29 June 1991, said: „This is the hour of Europe—not the hour of the Americans.... If one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem. This is a European country and it is not up to the Americans. It is not up to anyone else." See: http://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/29/world/conflict-in-yugoslavia-europeans-send-high-level-team.html. [accessed 21 February 2018].

2   Although we here use the concept of „external actors" for the US, Russia and Turkey, we are aware that all three states are only relatively external to Europe. Due to historical, geographical and political reasons, they have been attached to Europe and are in many substantial ways only semi-external to it. This can be seen in concepts such as „Euroasian" and „Euro-Atlantic" space. There is, therefore, a good reason to doubt whether Europe can ever become fully emancipated from these three external powers — as well as whether it should be.

national interests (the United Kingdom and France).[3] When Europe decided to try again, with the first formal steps taken to *Europeanize the Western Balkans* immediately after the end of the post-Yugoslav wars, the resistance to this process by key leaders in the region (primarily Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, and to a lesser extent Franjo Tuđman in Croatia), led to further American involvement in two rather different ways. While the US treated Croatia as an ally and provided full support for its key national aims[4] — such as reintegration of a secessionist territory of Serb Krajina into Croatia in 1995 — towards Serbia the US showed hostility that culminated in the war in Kosovo in spring 1999. In both cases, the US involvement shaped the future of the countries concerned. In Croatia — as well as in Kosovo, Albania and among Bosniaks in Bosnia-Herzegovina - the US became an efficient alternative to the inefficient and/or hesitating EU. In Serbia and for Bosnian and Montenegrin Serbs (as well as for Serb refugees from Krajina), American interventions in 1995-1999, which were hesitantly supported by all EU member states, served as the basis for anti-Western political mobilisation. Thus, the war and the official memories of the war provided grounds for non-European (or at least: semi-European) alternatives to the role the EU wanted to play in the WB. Although the EU still claims that there is "no alternative to the EU" in the Balkans, this is not how local population sees reality. They see it in more complex terms. Those who benefitted from the US involvement when Europe was inefficient see Washington — not Brussels - as a saviour and thus a key ally. Those who feel that the US intervention was hostile to them are thinking of other alternatives, addressing their hopes and expectation primarily — but not exclusively - to Russia.

Creating the Western Balkans

When creating the notion of the Western Balkans, the EU had in mind alleged similarities among all countries concerned. However, it neglected differences, some of which led to the

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3   In one such episode of a competition for prestige and importance, France insisted that the Dayton Peace Accord should be signed in Paris. Major powers of that time demonstrated their status by being represented at the highest level at the ceremony of signing the Accord on 14 December 1995.

4   In the second half of the 1990s, Croatia opposed European plans for the Western Balkans and feared that the EU would introduce sanctions in response to increasingly authoritarian style of governing introduced by Franjo Tuđman. It moved closer to the US to prevent this. Successfully. When in 2008 Slovenia blocked Croatian EU accession over an open issue of maritime border in the Bay of Piran, the US mediated in order to reach what seemed at the time to be a reasonable and plausible compromise.

conflicts of the 1990s, whereas others emerged as a consequence of these conflicts. These differences prevent the region to be constructed as a unit. The EU would contribute to this by insisting on an individual (country-by-country) approach, which made the concept of the Western Balkans (or later, after Croatia joined the EU in 2013 — the Western Balkans Six, the *Restern Balkans*) defunct in real political terms. Instead of encouraging all countries of the region to first resolve their mutual disputes, the individual approach to EU membership directed them to further competition, and to "vertical" communication with Brussels, rather than "horizontal" with each other.

Still, it is indeed true that there are many similarities between countries concerned. All of them have been in transition from their own violent recent past towards (for now only promised, not materialised) membership of the EU. The membership in the EU is presented as an end-post of this process, the end of a complex transition, which involved not one or two, but five elements. Transition in countries of the former Yugoslavia (and to some degree in Albania too) involved radical changes of (1) political and (2) economic system, of (3) the politics of identity, of (4) statehood, in addition to being also (5) a transition from war to peace. Neither the EU nor local political leadership in the WB were prepared for such a multileveled process for which there are no ready-made recipes in any of previous waves of democratic transition (Jović 2010).

The process of Europeanisation that was shaped specifically for this region was thus significantly different and more complex than transitions in East and Central European post-Communist states. It resembled more original incentives for starting a process of the European integration in the 1950s and the 1960s. The idea of the European Union being also an anti-war project resonated well in the Western Balkans, although, in the meantime, contested by some key EU actors, such as the United Kingdom for which the EU was primarily — if not exclusively — about economics, not much about politics or peace and war.[5] The expectation was also that by joining the EU these

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5   In British official discourse, the European Union was about economic cooperation, much more than about anything else, including political integration. However, this discourse has neglected the anti-war dimension of the process in countries that have experienced war in recent past. The UK viewed NATO as an institution that should provide security in post-war regions, including in the Western Balkans. This view was close to the US discourse on the Western Balkans. The US argued that political and economic integration of the Western Balkans in the EU is compatible with its security-based integration in NATO, which provided grounds for a division of tasks between the EU and NATO. The UK has always opposed a "European Army" that would replace NATO in Europe.

states would reduce chances for a further conflict, both with each other and within. This was not only driven by the idea of a *democratic peace* theory, which sees democracy as a key for peace-building, but also because no member state of the EU has so far disintegrated either through a secession or through a civil war. Thus, the EU is still seen as the best framework for stabilisation of fragile and weak states.[6] It is, after all, the community that claims to be based on *shared values* such as democracy, rule of law and minority rights. Countries that are prepared to accept and enhance these values have been promised a European perspective. Europe is not only a territory, or an area, but also — and primarily — a community of shared values, among which peace-building has an important place.

The Western Balkans was created as a temporary region, not only because it was seen as a *waiting room* for EU membership, but also because its main *raison d'être* would disappear once the last of its candidate-countries joins the EU. Balkans would then, in political terms, become just *Southeast Europe* (Lampe, 2006). But before this happens (if ever), the key element of its political identity and (weak) cohesion was to be found in its Europeanisation, i.e. in transition towards the EU (and NATO). This transition was externally guided by the EU itself. The EU guiding role is seen through a conditionality policy that identified standards to be reached and criteria to be met for EU membership. The EU is thus involved not only in terms of conceptualising and defining the region, but also as an agent and a dynamo of its permanent reforming. It became the *external magnet* that influenced internal processes — primarily, but not exclusively, as a *soft power*. It carried a stick, not only a carrot. It became an interventionist power, a *friendly but strict tutor*. Evidence for this can be found not only in 1999 intervention in Kosovo, which EU countries joined and some of them even initiated (the UK under Tony Blair), but also in insisting that the full compliance with ICTY (The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) should be one of key conditions for EU membership.

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6   Referendum in Scotland in 2014 was a test for this: had secessionists won it would have been much more difficult to argue that joining the EU brings more stability to a country. However, since neither Scottish nor later Catalan referenda succeeded, the EU still remains a state-collapse-free territory.

Political elites and public opinion on the EU: enthusiasm, scepticism, indifferentism

Although reluctantly, since 2000 political elites of all Western Balkan countries have been verbally supportive of EU accession processes, whether out of the genuine or faked enthusiasm for the project of Europeanisation itself, or for pragmatic reasons — i.e. because a price for any alternative policy would be too high.[7] It would be too dangerous to resist: this would lead to isolation or worse. Those sceptical and unconvinced tried to reconcile their own particularistic vision of national interests with the idea of joining the EU. For example, even staunch sovereigntists began to argue that it is only through becoming a member of the EU that a state can turn its largely nominal and symbolic national sovereignty into something meaningful (Jović 2011b). Declaring independence is not enough in itself if a country is exposed to international sanctions, UN peace-keeping missions, the international tribunal's permanent intrusions into its judicial sovereignty or if its constitution is written by foreign powers which prevent key decisions regarding the future of a country (such as a *referendum on independence* or *on unification* with neighbouring countries). Not to mention when external powers were directly involved in making of states, such as was the case in Kosovo, whose secession from Serbia would be impossible without the active support of the US. These — for many in the countries concerned - undesirable and unpopular intrusions into national sovereignty could be stopped only with becoming a member of a respected international club, which treats you as one of their own, not as an object of their policies. Becoming an EU member, for most political elites in the region, is a matter of turning away from being an object of international politics and becoming instead a subject — from "being on the table" (e.g. on agenda) into "having a seat at the table". It was about replacing nominal sovereignty with "real sovereignty", whatever this concept means in a post-Westphalian global order that was

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7   In some cases, agreeing to regional cooperation was not unconditional. Croatia, for example, agreed only when convinced that the main objective of regional cooperation was not a re-establishment of Yugoslavia. Also, countries of the region argued against another *caravan* approach to enlargement. They insisted — and still do - on the individual approach and oppose grouping into one whole. The country that is considered a front-runner argues that it does not want to wait for the others, but prefers to join the EU on its own merit. However, so far only Croatia managed to reach its main objective, in 2013. Individual approach to countries is in contradiction with the notion of a region, and it thus undermines the concept of the Western Balkans as a region. Such an approach has been one of key motivators for further bilateral disputes, and has not helped the process of Europeanisation in the region.

announced, if not constructed in reality, by key visionaries of European integration.

While the elites agreed to pursue EU membership as their supreme objective, general population in some of its countries — not in all of them - remains sceptical and even dismissive. A gap between the elites and the population on European issues is, of course, not something that the Western Balkans is unique for. A whole European project is being largely built by elites, which to these days have significant difficulty to convince their own population to follow. Paradoxically, it is this gap between elites and population that makes countries of the Western Balkans much more similar to member states than not. Unlike political elites which are all pro-EU, the public opinion is divided and the support for membership has been declining almost continuously over the last ten years. If one of the main characteristics of identity of the Western Balkans is in alleged desire by its countries to join the EU, then such desire can be established for elites, not for population, at least not equally for public opinions of all countries. In this sense, there is perhaps the *elite's Western Balkans* but not the *people's Western Balkans.*

Croatian EU-indifferentism

This gap between the views of the elites and of the population was already evident in the case of Croatia. At its referendum on membership in the European Union (in January 2012), only 28.8 percent of total electorate voted in favour, 14.4 percent against, with the largest number of Croatians (56.5 percent) abstaining from voting (Jović, 2012). Faced with such EU-*indifferentism* — defined here as a predominant confusion about whether EU membership is good or bad for one's own country - Sabor (the Croatian Parliament), in expectation of such a low support, changed the Constitution by removing the threshold of 50 percent participation in order for a referendum to be valid.

Croatian population was in two minds over joining the EU. The predominant view was one of EU indifferentism. On the one hand, there were many reasons in favour of membership such as security concerns, identity issues ("returning to Europe", "away from the Balkans"), as well as the feeling that by ending the transition from Yugoslavia to the European Union the country would increase, not diminish a level of its real power

over decision-making (Jović 2011). Although recognised as an independent state, Croatia was between 1991 and 2013 "guided" and "supervised" by external powers over which it had no influence. Some instruments of this, for many Croatians undesirable, intrusion into the country's just achieved nominal sovereignty, included the presence of UN peace-keepers (UNPROFOR) on its territory, the intrusion into its judicial sovereignty by the ICTY, and a new — more demanding - set of criteria for EU membership that were applied for the first time to Croatia. Many felt that the Western powers are standing in the way of turning nominal into real sovereignty. In addition, the more sovereigntist segment of public opinion blamed the West for its policies at the beginning of the Yugoslav conflicts. They claimed that some Western states (primarily the United Kingdom) acted immorally when they failed to assist Croatia, which was the victim of Serbian expansionism.[8]

In the imaginary of the Croatian public opinion, the West was, thus, not a uniquely positive concept although it was much more positive than the — now rapidly disappearing - East, and especially the Balkans. In the new imaginary of European politics, the Balkans became the "new East", it became Orientalised, not only for Croatians but also for many other Westerners. On the one hand, the West was an alternative to "the Balkans", which was now increasingly identified as "Serbia" (Zambelli 2010). On the other hand, it was also perceived as an actor that pressurises Croatia into submission. This was considered unfair, and also possibly humiliating and insensitive, taken the nature of suffering that Croatia experienced during the 1990s. The other side of the coin — the authoritarian character of Franjo Tuđman's decade — was not something that Croatia was prepared to critically reflect upon. And neither was this the case with its own role in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the wars of the 1990s,[9] or with its hostilities and policies of ethnic engineering with regards to ethnic Serbs, whose numbers had shrunk in the 1990s from 12 to 4.5 percent of the total population of Croatia. The

8   For the role of the UK in the Yugoslav wars from a critical perspective, see Glaurdić (2017).

9   This was obvious in first official reactions to verdict by which six ethnic Croat political and military leaders of Herzeg-Bosna were convicted by the ICTY on 27 November 2017. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković said these verdicts were „deep moral injustice towards six Croatians from Bosnia-Herzegovina and towards Croatian people". See: https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/23672-plenkovic-praljak-s-actions-speak-of-deep-moral-injustice. [accessed 25 February 2018].

Homeland War myth and the official narrative of Croatia being the Victim and Victor in the war (Peskin and Boduszynski 2003) determined also its orientation towards external actors. When it felt that the EU's pressure was too heavy, Croatia turned to the United States and built friendly relations with Turkey, whose President Demirel was one of very few foreign dignitaries to attend Franjo Tuđman's funeral in December 1999. The "special relationship" with the United States was built as an alternative to EU's hesitations during the war of the 1990s. It resulted in the US backing the decisive military operation Storm by which the Croatian Armed Forces reintegrated the largest part of the secessionist territory of Serb Krajina in August 1995. In addition, American diplomatic efforts were a decisive element in the process of peaceful reintegration of the remaining eastern territories of Slavonia, Baranya and Western Sirmium, via Erdut Agreement (implemented in 1998). Close links with the US remained available as an alternative to full integration into the European Union. Friendship with Turkey, then still firmly allied with the US but nowhere near EU membership, as well as attempts to build a functional relationship with Israel, was seen as part of Croatia's pro-US orientation. In addition, these relationships with external actors were important for strategic reasons: friendship with Turkey helped to improve relationship with Bosniaks in Bosnia-Herzegovina following the 1993-4 conflicts between Croats and Bosniaks, whereas relationship with Israel helped to remove the long shadow of Croatia's Second World War record, which included also the Ustashe-led Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

It was not before 2000 that the political leadership of Croatia moved towards a one-directional foreign policy which treated membership in the EU and NATO as its most important strategic objective.[10] But public scepticism about the EU remained high. It was not easy to convince population which celebrated its independence from a multi-national federal/confederal state of Yugoslavia that it should join another multi-national entity that might — in not so distant future — even evolve into a quasi-federation/confederation. If Croats complained about not being treated fairly in Yugoslavia, of which they were about 20 percent of population, they have all reasons to be sceptical about their influence in the Union in which they would make less than one percent. For some, the EU was just another Yugoslavia (as

10 On Croatian foreign policy, see Šelo-Šabić (2014) and Jović (2011a).

expressed by political formula: EU = YU), and "Brussels" just another "Belgrade".[11] The nationalist narratives and myths, which are based on the notion that Croats had dreamt of its independence for many centuries, remain difficult to reconcile with an idea of losing its own local currency (Kuna) that was introduced only in 1994, for Euro in the future.

Even when Croatia joined the European Union, many remained unconvinced about benefits of the membership. In a poll conducted for Balkan Barometer 2016[12], only 33 percent of Croatians said that the membership in the EU was good for their country, while 18 percent thought the opposite. The largest number (49 percent) said they did not know whether it was good or bad and had no specific view on this issue.

Western Balkans Six: Albanian EU-enthusiasm and Slavic EU-indifferentism

This result for Croatia largely matches the views on the EU in other post-Yugoslav countries, with an exception of Kosovo, which is in this respect much more similar to Albania than to other former Yugoslav states. In fact, most polls on populations' views on the EU conducted in the Western Balkans show sharp division between two countries with ethnic Albanian majority (Albania and Kosovo), which have high hopes and expectations of the membership in the EU, and the rest of the Western Balkans — Croatia included — in which the main attitude is one of EU-indifferentism and confusion, if not open scepticism. By a relatively low level of positive views on Europe, Croatia still fits into the Slavic part of the Western Balkans, although it no longer takes part in a new Western Balkans Six.[13] In Albania and Kosovo, 81 and 83 percent respectively think that EU membership of their countries would be a good thing, while only six and two percent respectively think it would be bad.[14] On the other end of the scale, Serbia was in 2016 the only country of the region in which more people (31 percent) thought

11 For this see Krajina (2013).

12 See: https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2016.pdf. [accessed 23 February 2018].

13 Since 2013 Croatia acts as „Europe in the Balkans" — by using influence it now has as an EU member state in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the WB-6. It does not consider itself a part of the Western Balkans any more, but it wants to preserve influence in the region.

14 See: https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2016.pdf. [accessed 23 February 2018].

it would be bad for Serbia to join the EU than that it would be good (21 percent).[15] Close analysis of results for Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina show that ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbs in these two countries are more positive / more negative about the EU than others, and thus the result for Macedonia was 47 percent for "good" and 15 percent for "bad", whereas in Bosnia 33 percent for "good" and 21 for "bad".[16] But in core post-Yugoslav states — Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia — the number of those indifferent (or "in-betweens") was higher than the number of those who were positive about the membership.[17]

These findings reinforce doubts over the idea that the Western Balkans is a region in any political sense which was supposed to be characterised by desire to join the EU. It is, in fact, divided to its largely indifferent post-Yugoslav area (minus Kosovo) and largely pro-EU ethnic Albanian states. Among Slavic populations of the former Yugoslavia, the EU membership is currently not generating much enthusiasm, although there is no open rejection either. Most people show no interest in this topic, and certainly do not feel that the outcome of the process depend on them. It seems the EU membership is the key project for this generation of political leaders, but not for current generation of citizens. There is a widespread feeling that if the "EU" (in reality: all of its current member states, since the decision on accession must be unanimous) wished to admit their countries to the Union, it would happen regardless of the will of the population in the countries concerned. If, on the other hand, others do not want further enlargement — or if they object to a particular country of the Western Balkans joining the EU - then the enlargement will not happen, again irrespective of the position taken by population in the Western Balkans. There

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 In this article we use available public opinion surveys by respectable surveyors who have conducted longitudinal sociological research in countries of the Western Balkans. We have chosen surveys which have been used to inform policy-makers both in the countries concerned and in the European Union and thus have influenced the process of decision-making. Although we have not produced our own survey but relied on those available in public space, we consider this to be a legitimate methodological decision for the purpose of this article, since the main objective here is to present and explain trends not only when it comes to political elites and their views on the EU accession, but also trends in general population in the Western Balkans. The alternative to this would be to rely on discourse analysis of political speeches and statements by decision-makers, but in doing that we would miss the view from below, and would not be able to explain trends in society.

is a belief that the future of the process depends on others, not on local actors. Thus, why bother?

Albanians, both in Kosovo and in Albania, as well as in Macedonia (where they are about 25 percent of the total population) represent an exception and have very different views on the EU than the rest of the Western Balkans. One can argue that this is a consequence of a very different recent history. In the 1990s, the West stood by Kosovo, and thus Albanians see the West as saviour, their protector and the key strategic ally. On the other hand, Serbs have had a completely different experience with the West. Memories of devastating sanctions during the 1990s (for which most Serbs do not blame themselves or their political leaders but the West) are still very much alive. Even more problematic for many Serbs was a decision of most Western states to recognise independence of Kosovo in 2008, almost a decade after the end of the war. It is from 2009 that popularity of the EU embarked on a downhill curve. The war of the 1990s and its aftermath in 2008 recognition of Kosovo have created both positive and negative perceptions of the West: positive among Albanians, negative among Serbs. Memories and interpretations of the recent past cannot simply vanish by a magical stick, even if this stick comes with a thick carrot — which it does not.

This is especially the case in societies which are basically unwilling to critically assess the role their states and leaders played in the 1990s. Blaming "the West" (or anybody else rather than themselves) is an essential part of the narrative that resists critical reflection on its own nationalist past. This is also an easy but dangerous method of creating frustrations and grievances that can be easily manipulated for further confrontations with former (and possibly also future, e.g. "eternal") enemies in the neighbourhood: Croats, Bosniaks and Albanians, especially those from Kosovo. Since many people either directly participated in or tacitly supported the expansionist policies of Milošević during the 1990s, by allocating responsibility for Serbia's failures exclusively to the West, they create a story in which they are just victims of other peoples' actions, and not perpetrators, supporters and stand-byers of crimes committed in their name (Dimitrijević 2008). These views also generate the sense of being just a passive object in a relationship with the West, which is treated as the only Subject of serious decision-making. This is then transformed into passivity and fatalism

when it comes to issue of the EU accession. Just like the war and peace were "produced" by others, so is the EU accession process. In this perspective, little depends on 'Us', and much on powerful 'Others.'

But it is not only those who supported Milošević and his regime that have some difficulty in understanding Western policy towards the issue of Kosovo. Even Milošević's opponents think it is not only unwise, but unfair that the West has changed its approach to Kosovo, from originally treating it as *de facto independent* but *de jure* part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in the provisions of the 1244 UN Security Council Resolution, 1999) to recognising independence of Kosovo, risking the unity of the EU and NATO in which there was no unanimity with respect to this issue. Ten years since Kosovo declared independence, the problem has not been solved. On the contrary, it seems that the issue of the status of Kosovo is still very much on agenda, now affecting directly the process of the EU accession of Serbia and Kosovo — and with possible consequences for Albania and perhaps also Macedonia. The status of Kosovo, which divides the region but also the EU and the UN is, in our view, the main obstacle to both EU membership of the Western Balkan six into the EU, and to constituting the Western Balkans as a region. This is an important problem if we define the Western Balkans as an "incubator" for membership in the European Union, and as an area in which the process of Europeanisation makes the essence of politics.

The recognition of Kosovo was the main reason for Serbia's explicit rejection of its membership in NATO, and for declaring the politics of military neutrality in 2008. Joining NATO was in all other cases of post-1989 enlargements an obligatory step on the road to joining the EU. Thus, the question emerged: can a country join the EU without previously joining this politico-security alliance first? Is Serbia serious about belonging to the European Union if it resists deeper cooperation in security policy? This question becomes even more important in the age of increased fears for European security, not least because of the migration/refugee crisis of the 2010s.

It was also one of the key reasons for the beginning of the end of enthusiasm for EU membership in Serbia, if there

ever was such an enthusiasm. The other reasons included the internal crisis of the EU, as well as the lack of clear and explicit promise that the enlargement would continue. In October 2009, as result of the lifting of strict visa regime for tourist visits to most of EU member states, according to an IPSOS Strategic Market and International Republican Institute poll, 76 percent of Serbs supported EU membership for Serbia. But in November 2015, this number dropped to 49 percent. The opposition to EU membership in the same period of six years increased by more than twice: from 19 percent in October 2009 to 44 percent in 2015. In April 2011, the "yes" vote would have clearly won at the referendum on EU membership, with 64 percent in favour, and only 17 percent against. But four and a half years later, in November 2015, the result would be much more uncertain, although still positive: 44 percent in favour and 32 percent against.

External actors in the Western Balkans: alternatives and/or spoilers?

Such a change in public opinion is not only a result of the pro-Kosovan policy by the West. It is also an outcome of frustrations over ever more directly expressed hesitation of the EU to continue with enlargement. In 2009 there was still some hope that the enlargement would proceed fast (following liberalisation of visa regime in November 2009), but this was no longer the case by 2015. Two contributing reasons might have only facilitated this trend: one is a decision of the new President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, not to have a commissioner for enlargement in the EU Commission[18]; the other — change of the course of Serbian politics, which was in 2009 led by credible Europeanists, whereas in 2015 this was no longer the case. The new leadership in Serbia was still committed to EU membership, but it began to use what Dimitar Bechev calls "the default pro-Russian position in Southeast Europe... that there is no choice to be made between Russia and the West", e.g. that "countries can have it both ways" (Bechev 2017: 241).

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18 In his statement of 15 July 2014, Juncker said: „The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28... The Union and our citizens now need to digest the addition of 13 member-states in the past ten years". See: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-567_en.htm. [accessed 20 February 2018].

The new, much more pro-active and assertive Russian foreign policy has significantly contributed to Putin's increased popularity in Serbia, as well as in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. After the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, Vladimir Putin and his Russia established themselves as those who would draw the Eastern border of European enlargement. By his intervention in Ukraine (over Crimea), Putin emerged as a competitor to the West in European peripheries. He challenged the unipolar character of European order. Europe is still dominated by the European Union, but after 2014 in its peripheries we see the emergence of bipolarity or even (with the rising power of Turkey, and with new involvement of China through the Silk Road project) multipolarity (Jović 2015). Although Russia has no capacity to project power equal to the West, it can be a rival and a spoiler, especially in the Western Balkans where its popularity and influence is larger than elsewhere, with exception of some post-Soviet states.

This trend is further encouraged by victory of Donald Trump in the American presidential elections in 2016. His criticism of Europe and in particular of the European Union, place Trump and his USA as a competitor to the EU's interests in territories and regions outside of the EU. This is one of the reasons why anti-EU parties in Serbia (for example, Vojislav Šešelj's Radical Party) and large segments of its alt-Right non-governmental organisation scene welcomed such outcome of the presidential elections in the US.[19] They also welcomed Brexit, which they saw as a beginning of the end of the European Union. Although they scored badly at national elections in Serbia, the anti-EU forces in Serbia have managed to promote the narrative that there "is a viable alternative" to the West in the Balkans. This narrative is based on praising the Russia's role in safeguarding Serbia's interests in Kosovo and over Kosovo. If and when Russia prevails over the West — as they think might happen sooner or later — Kosovo's recognition will be revoked. In a recent statement on Kosovo, the Serb Orthodox Church argued in favour of turning the Kosovan case into a frozen conflict, in expectation of major changes in global politics in the decades to come.[20] Strong Russia is the key to strong Serbia. Serbia should play the game as required by the powerful West for as long as the West is

19 See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-balkans-biden-trump/vote-for-trump-serbian-ultra-nationalists-chant-as-biden-visits-idUSKCN10R1U0. [accessed 1 March 2018].

20 See: https://beta.rs/dijalog/dijalog-politika/86821-kosovski-problem-kao-zamrznuti-konflikt--ideja-srpske-desnice-bez-sire-podrske. [accessed 17 May 2018].

powerful. It should talk a talk, not walk a walk. It should aim at protecting its interests by cooperating with the West when and if necessary, but never to put all the eggs into one basket. The West has taken Kosovo away from Serbia, whereas Russia and China have not — and this should be acknowledged in Serbian foreign policy. Thus, the policy of one-directionality is against Serbia's best interests.[21]

This line of thinking, which is rather popular in the media, in intellectual circles and with general population, managed to influence politics even before Aleksandar Vučić became the main decision-maker in Serbia. Under President Boris Tadić Serbian foreign policy was constructed on the notion of „four pillars", these four being the EU, the US, Russia and China.[22] There is also in recent years some evocation of the former Yugoslavia's President Josip Broz Tito's policy of non-alignment, both in the sense of looking both towards the East and West, and in the sense of relying on friendship with influential non-European states, largely members of the non-aligned movement.[23] Many of them rejected US pressure over recognition of Kosovo, and are — jointly with Russia and China - keeping Kosovo outside of the United Nations, which Serbia sees as its strategic objective. In recent years, Serbia improved its relationships with Arab states, China, Russia and Turkey. It also moved closer to most EU-sceptic governments within the EU, such as, for example, with Viktor Orbán's Hungary.

This does not mean that Serbian political elite is no longer committed to EU membership, but only that it is now prepared to consider alternatives in the case that the membership — for this or that reason — does not happen, or at least not in this political generation. One should not forget that the WB-6 countries are waiting for the membership for almost three decades, and that some of them are not yet anywhere near it. This is a frustrating and humiliating experience, and emotions do have its place in

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21 In this context, sovereigntists in Serbia advocate policy of a „frozen conflict" in Kosovo. See: https://www.vesti.rs/Kosovo/Zamrznuti-konflikt-najbolje-resenje-za-Kosovo-i-Metohiju.html., https://ba.voanews.com/a/a-29-2007-09-17-voa2-85868017/667424.html, etc. [accessed 3 March 2018].

22 See: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454. [accessed 22 February 2018].

23 See statements by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić: https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vucic-u-talijanskim-novinama-ishvalio-tita-20160928 and https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/region/dacic-predlozio-ministru-vanjskih-poslova-gambije-da-ta-zemlja-preispita-odluku-o-priznanju-kosova. [accessed 1 March 2018].

foreign-policy making. In the meantime, the EU itself is in the crisis and less attractive than it was in the 1990s or the 2000s. The new competition between the West and Russia is "a rivalry between an opportunist which has a clear set of goals though lacks the means to achieve them, and a terminally disoriented West that possesses the power assets but is not of one mind about how to respond to the challenge" (Bechev, 2017: 249). Is it thus completely unreasonable that enthusiasm for this objective — which had been in 1990 presented as the "only game in town", and under the slogan "there is no alternative but EU membership" — is no longer strong?

If one analyses further the results of recent public opinion polls in Serbia, one can conclude that Kosovo represents the key *red line* in public perception of Serbia's relationship with the European Union. Furthermore, it is used by conservative, pro-Russian forces to pressurise government into a more cautious policy on Europeanisation. Kosovo represents the key element of Serbian national myths, but also the point of humiliation and defeat by joined forces of Kosovan Albanians and their Western allies. In a survey conducted by IRI & IPSOS (2015)[24], 71 percent of respondents for the Serbian sample said that they expected Serbia to be forced into recognition of Kosovo in order to join the EU (19 percent said that this would not be the case). When asked "what should be Serbia's response to this", 57 percent said that Serbia should refuse it, "even if it means staying out of the EU".

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy's survey conducted in December 2016 and January 2017, confirms the importance of the Kosovo issue. Although 43 percent of respondents said they would vote in favour of EU membership (against 35 percent), when asked how would they vote if recognition of Kosovo were the condition for membership, their responses have changed radically: 69 percent against and 13 percent in favour. To place such a request as a condition for EU membership most Serbs would see as further humiliation and another historical defeat. As Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said on one occasion: this would be equal to request the state to commit suicide (he used the word Harakiri)[25] in order to join the EU. Even the most pro-EU politicians would have hard time to convince

24 See: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_
    public_release.pdf. [accessed 2 March 2018].

25 See: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=26&nav_
    category=11&nav_id=1362989. [accessed 3 March 2018].

that EU membership is worth committing national suicide, as suggested by such discourse, which is now promoted by parts of political elite itself.

Mentally, most Serbs have in fact erased Kosovo from their visualisation of contemporary (and possibly also future) Serbia. However, to formally recognise Kosovo would for many be an act of self-defeat and of compliance with those who had helped secessionists to win in what many see as being an illegal war of 1999. It would also signify an *a posteriori* justification of NATO bombing. "What is stolen can be claimed back and eventually returned. However, what is given by your own will — is given forever", says in their petition against President Vučić's allegedly reconciliatory policy towards Kosovo a group of 174 public intellectuals, among whom were prominent bishops of Serb Orthodox Church, members of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and others.[26] This Appeal for the Defence of Kosovo and Metohija was drafted by Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), which has been always rather sceptical towards Serbia's joining the EU. While in government, DSS drafted the Constitution of Serbia, which identifies Kosovo and Metohija (Serb name for Kosovo) as an integral part of Serbia, e.g. as its autonomous province. Now they argue that the "frozen conflict" is the best solution in contemporary context and oppose any move that would enable Kosovo's membership in the United Nations. For as long as there is hope that things may change in future, Serbia should wait for that moment. Kosovo is thus the key issue in which nationalist and other anti-EU opposition can unite in their attempt to merge the issue of national pride and discontent with alleged intentions of Vučić's government to reach compromise that would trade Kosovo's status for EU membership in the future. The fear that the opposition is worse and openly anti-EU is also one of the main reasons for current Western support for Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, despite his increasingly authoritarian style of governing domestically.

Perceptions of Russia

The policy of non-recognition is linked with the expectation and hope that Europe and the world are moving from unipolarism and American hegemony to multipolarism,

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26 Full text of the Appeal, as well as the list of signatories, see at: https://www.in4s.net/apel-odbranu-kosova-metohije/?lang=lat. [accessed 1 March 2018].

in which Russian role in the Western Balkans will be more influential. Pro-Eastern orientation is not limited to some marginal groups. Even the Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, who is the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and occasionally plays a role of „an opposition within government", seems to share this view. On the occasion of a February 2018 visit to Serbia by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, Dačić claimed that Serbia could not see its national interests ever being fulfilled without support of Russia.[27]

This is also the view of the majority of the electorate, and thus it cannot be simply ignored or dismissed, for as long as Serbia remains a democracy. The IRI & IPSOS study of the public opinion in Serbia (2015)[28] asked citizens: "If you have to choose one country Serbia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relationship with, which one would that be?". Not surprisingly, Russia came by far the first with 63 percent, whereas the EU was second with 12 percent, Germany third with 9 percent, followed by China (7 percent), the US (3 percent), and Turkey (1 percent). Russia came first also when respondents were asked whether strong relationship with a particular country was in Serbia's interest. As many as 94 percent said yes to Russia on this question, 89 percent to China, 88 percent to Germany, 71 percent to the EU. On the other end is the United States: only 30 percent of Serbs think that strong relationship with the US were in Serbia's interests, while 65 percent said this was not the case.

When asked to explain reasons for their positive view on Russia, citizens gave the following reasons: "Russians are our Orthodox brothers" (23 percent), "Russia is the only power that can confront the West" (20 percent), "it is our biggest export market" (18 percent), "it is our protector throughout history" (18 percent), "Russia is our true ally in the effort to keep Kosovo part of Serbia" (10 percent), "it is our main gas/oil provider" (8 percent) and "it is the biggest investor in Serbia" (3 percent). It matters rather little that some of these statements are clearly wrong, as explained by Dimitar Bechev (2017): Russia is certainly neither the main trading partner nor the main investor in Serbia — this is the European Union. However, voting behaviour is based on perceptions, not on facts. Thus they remain relevant, even when false.

27 See *Politika*, 23 February 2018.

28 See: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf. [accessed 15 February 2018].

In line with policy of remaining in between, which has been promoted by the "four pillars" approach, as well as by policy of current government that Serbia wants to remain simultaneously a friend of Russia and a candidate for EU membership, is the finding of IRI & IPSOS survey in which 61 percent of Serbs said that "Serbia does not belong to either the West or the East". Interestingly, 19 percent said that it belonged to the East, and 12 percent to the West.

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy's survey of 2017 found that most Serbian citizens think that influence that Germany, China and Russia have on Serbian foreign policy was positive, while the influence of the US and the EU was mostly negative.[29] In a more detailed picture, most are prepared to acknowledge that EU membership would have positive effects on Serbia's foreign direct investment and for the international standing of the country. However, that siding with Russia would enhance security and internal stability say 48 and 39 percent of Serbs respectively. Membership in NATO remains perceived almost entirely negatively: even in terms of enhancing security only 22 percent of Serbs positively value eventual NATO membership, while 43 percent negatively. That current level of cooperation with Russia is satisfactory believes 48 percent of respondents in that survey. In favour of a stronger and more formalized ties "in the shape of a political alliance with Russia" are 23 percent, whereas 10 percent think that Serbia's links with Russia are already too tight, and that Serbia has become "a Russian puppet".

When asked whether Russian influence on Serbian foreign policy is positive or negative, 61 percent said it was either "very positive" or "positive", and 12 percent that it was "negative" or "very negative". In comparison, the influence of the EU over Serbian foreign policy is seen as very positive / positive by 28 percent, and very negative / negative by 36 percent of respondents. It is not surprising therefore to see that 59 percent of Serbs would feel indifferent if the EU ceased to exist, and 15 percent would be happy if this happens (21 percent unhappy).

The paradox of such a strong pro-Russian, and to a degree also anti-EU perceptions in Serbia is that in fact 91 percent of Serbs have never been to Russia. Thus, their image of Russia is based on imagining, not on personal experience or facts (IEP

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29 See: http://bezbednost.org/upload/document/public_perception_of_serbias_foreign_policy.pdf. [accessed 1 February 2018].

survey of March 2017). Institute for European Policy's another survey (from July 2016) reveals that despite this, 41.3 percent of the Serbs identify Russia as Serbia's main friend, followed by Greece (12.1 percent), which many Serbs have visited. On the other side of this scale, Croatia is perceived as the main "enemy" (19.7 percent), followed by the US (18.1 percent) and Albania (12.1 percent). One can thus safely conclude that the more the EU becomes anti-Russian (in the form of further sanctions against Russia), and the bigger role Croatia plays in the process of EU accession of Serbia, the more anti-EU is Serbia likely to become. The EU should perhaps use the positive image of Greece and Germany if it wants to appear more positive towards Serbia, not the voice of Brussels or Zagreb.

Largely negative image of the West, and in particular of NATO and the US, is shared by ethnic Serbs from Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose voice cannot be ignored if not for other reasons than due to the fact that all foreign policy decisions in the Bosnian State Presidency need to be approved unanimously by representatives of the country's three constituent nations, including a Serb representative. For that reason, Bosnia-Herzegovina has not recognised independence of Kosovo. IRI Institute's April 2017 survey reveals a gap between views related to Bosnian foreign policy orientation between ethnic Serbs and two other nations in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosniaks and Croats. In fact, it is not just a gap, but more than that: three nations have completely opposite views on issue of the EU and NATO membership for their country. While EU membership of Bosnia-Herzegovina supports 65 percent of Bosniaks and 59 percent of Croats (most of whom already have an EU passport, as dual citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia), only 18 percent of Serbs share this view.30 Another research, by the USAID office in Bosnia-Herzegovina, (2016) finds that 72 percent of citizens in that country would support EU membership: 89 percent in the Federation, but only 41 percent in the Republic of Srpska. Although these figures are somewhat more positive for EU prospects of Bosnia-Herzegovina, even they reveal that in the Serb entity 55 percent opposes and 41 percent supports EU membership for Bosnia-Herzegovina. This can be explained by hopes among many ethnic Serbs that Bosnia-Herzegovina could at some point disintegrate, thus paving the way for either an independent state of Srpska, or (preferentially) its unification

30 See: http://www.iri.org/resource/poll-bosnians-united-opposing-divided-us-eu-and-russia. [accessed 31 July 2018].

with Serbia. For this to happen, Western power over the region would have to be replaced by Russian hegemony — and thus the "frozen conflict" scenario is also in this case seen as a preferable option. If Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, joins the EU, chances for such a scenario would be almost non-existent. No country of the EU has so far disintegrated — not even the United Kingdom and Spain, in which there were referenda on independence by Scotland and Catalonia respectively. Thus, membership of a united Bosnia-Herzegovina in the EU is seen as a factor of further stabilization of *status quo*, which is not something that ethnic separatists would like to support.

Even deeper is a divide on potential membership of Bosnia-Herzegovina in NATO. It is supported by 59 percent of the total population of Bosnia-Herzegovina, while 38 percent is opposing it. However, support for NATO membership in the Federation is high (85 percent), as high as it is the opposition to it in the Republic of Srpska, in which only 15 percent support it (with 81 percent against).[31]

Such a deep division between the two entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina, caused by staunch rejection of both the EU and NATO by Bosnian Serbs, indicates that there is a danger that even placing these two issues on the agenda would have a potential of risking a fragile balance that has been achieved in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina is thus not divided only on internal political issues, but also on issues of foreign-policy. This issue is as divisive as it was the issue of independence in 1992. It corresponds positively to respondents' view on Russia and the United States as two non-EU rival powers. Bosniaks and Croats view the US positively (by 64 and 56 percent respectively), while Serbs view it negatively (only 26 percent say that the role of the US in Bosnia-Herzegovina is positive). On the other hand, 89 percent of Serbs, but only 29 percent of Bosniaks (and 43 percent of Croats) see Russian role as positive.

Conclusion

When it comes to both perceptions of benefits of joining the European Union and to perceptions of main external actors,

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31 See USAID Bosnia-Herzegovina report at: http://www.measurebih.com/uimages/final_
MEASURE-BiH_NSCP2016_FindingsReport-BSC_200511201720formatted.pdf. [accessed
31 July 2018].

the Western Balkans remains internally heterogeneous and deeply divided. On the one side is Serbia and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who are, as Maja Stojanović said in October 2017, increasingly Eurosceptic.[32] On the other side are Albanians in Kosovo and Albania, who support EU integration of their countries by 83 and 81 percent respectively. Political elites are still pro-EU in all countries of the region, but they must take into consideration public perceptions and trends — or at least successfully and convincingly pretend that they do. In addition to this difference (between Albanians and Serbs) there are also deep divisions between Bosniaks and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where foreign-policy, especially on key issues such as that of the EU and NATO membership, needs to be consensual. In Croatia, the prevailing view on the EU is one of "EU-indifference". While not Eurosceptic, Croatia is less enthusiastic about the EU, to which it belongs since 2013, than Albania and even Macedonia. But EU-indifferentism is also growing in other parts of the Western Balkans for two reasons: one is to be found in hesitation of the European Union to offer a viable and convincing perspective of accession in the meaningful future. The second is to be found in the gap between elite enthusiasm and popular scepticism which produces permanent confusion and then results in a growing number of those who „don't know" and/or „don't care" about EU membership.

The main factor that can explain differences between Serbs and Albanians in the Western Balkans is to be found in memories (private and official) of the recent past, e.g. of the 1990s. Most Serbs view the West in general (especially the US and NATO) through the prism of their interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and especially through the war in Kosovo. Albanians do the same, obviously with a very different — in fact entirely opposite — perceptions. This is also why there is no major rejection of the EU in Macedonia, in which 72 percent of the respondents in an IRI Survey (2017) were in favour, and 21 percent against EU membership of their country.[33] In as much as Macedonia's EU and NATO accession has been blocked by an EU country (Greece) for more than a decade (since 2008),

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32   See: „Srbija više nije oduševljena Europskom unijom", *Deutsche Welle*, 29 October 2017 (Ivica Petrović).

33   IRI Survey, Macedonia (4 — 12 March 2017, N = 1.108), Macedonia: National Public Opinion Poll. Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-5-5_macedonia_slides.pdf. [accessed 20 February 2018].

this country did not share the fate of Serbia during the 1990s, and thus there is no major hostility towards any Western power. IRI Survey of 2016 shows that the EU comes first (with 73 percent) when asked for the country or group of countries that Macedonia's interest would be best served by maintaining strong relationship with. Germany is second with 70 percent, Turkey third with 63 percent, followed by the US (58 percent) and Russia (53 percent).[34] Macedonian citizens, unlike those in Serbia or Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, still support EU membership for their country, although not as enthusiastically as in 2008. Still, 18 percent think Macedonia will never become a member of EU, 25 percent think it will happen more than 10 years from now, and 17 percent do not have a view regarding the time schedule.[35] Recent events in Macedonia, including the initial — not yet confirmed — agreement on the name issue between the Macedonian and Greek governments has an ambiguous potential with regards to general population's attitude towards the EU. Those who oppose the name change (from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia, as suggested by draft agreement) are likely to blame the West for what they see as an attack on most fundamental element of Macedonian identity. Those who value EU membership that much that they would be prepared to compromise over the name issue are likely to lead both the referendum campaign in favour of changing of the name, as well as further steps towards EU membership. However, if the European Union does not respond in kind — by offering more than just a promise of joining at a certain point in the future — anti-EU sentiments are likely to be further enhanced, primarily among Macedonians.

The lack of clear perspective, despite many declaratory promises about the "European perspective" being opened to all countries of the region, is another reason for growing scepticism. EU accession for the former communist countries is now almost a 30-year old political project. It began with the end of the Cold War in 1989, with first concrete steps being taken in East Central Europe immediately after. In the Western Balkans, a journey towards the EU was delayed due to the Yugoslav wars. However, even in these countries the first steps on this journey

34 IRI Survey 2016 (conducted 19 — 25 April 2016, N = 1.104). See: Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion, available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_macedonia_survey_april_2016_0.pdf. [accessed 20 February 2018].

35 According to the same survey, 96 percent of Macedonian citizens supported membership in EU, while in 2016 — 71 percent. Macedonians also support NATO membership, by 73 percent.

were taken almost 20 years ago, in 2000. While this project successfully mobilised energy and social enthusiasm in Central and Eastern Europe before 2004, it is becoming less obvious if it is still sufficiently attractive to a new generation of people in South East Europe. Many new voters in these countries — for example, those born in 1989 - have been waiting for EU membership for much of their lives. To them this might look like waiting for a Godot. There is a growing sense of unfairness, as well as of not having the ownership of the process of EU accession among people in this region.

The EU remains to be engaged economically (76 percent of trading is with the EU 28, with Italy and Germany being top partners for the Western Balkans), and politically — through the Berlin Process, Belgrade-Priština dialogue and through further initiatives and statements that support Europeanisation of the region. Some of them — such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Initiative (RYCO) — are getting popular and are seen as useful by younger people. However, the EU is no longer "the only game in town". In fact, it has never been. Even in the 1990s, at the peak of self-proclaimed hegemony over whole Europe, the EU had to accept involvement of the United States, and the then helping hand of Russia and Turkey in the process which brought to an end Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian war. With Putin becoming the leader of Russia in 2000 (which was, among others, one of consequences of the NATO intervention in Kosovo), Russia became more assertive in its attempts to spoil the game for the West. As Bechev argues, "Russia is not in position to roll back Western influence. What it is capable of, however, is to project influence, cultivate allies, and profit from opportunities as they arise. Or indeed, stir trouble" (Bechev, 2017: 6). Although it is by far less involved in Balkan economy (even in Serbia, 62.5 percent of imported goods and services come from the EU and only 9.6 percent from Russia), Russia has successfully created an image of the main protector and ally, and — most importantly — as an alternative to somewhat too intrusive Western policies towards the region.

Russia "plays a weak hand the best possible way, taking advantage of other's weaknesses", says Bechev (2017: 17). This refers both to internal weaknesses (for example: corruption, inter-ethnic conflicts and tension, deficiency in energy resources etc.), as well as a lack of will on the side of the West to include the whole region into the European union as soon as

possible. By hesitating to do so quickly, the EU opens the door for external influences, including those of the US, Russia and Turkey. Furthermore, it keeps acting as if nothing has changed since 2004. Not only that it is not alarmed by increasingly cold reception it is met with among general population, but it keeps introducing higher and higher criteria and standards for new candidates. By doing this, the EU is encouraging candidate countries to simulate reforms that they cannot implement due to either ever stronger opposition of domestic public opinion, or to the character of new demands that are increasingly unrealistic. Or — as in most cases — both.

Thus, if it wants to remain an attractive alternative to increasingly illiberal and anti-EU alternatives, the European Union should move into the region quickly and with no further delay. It should open its doors to all candidate countries now. EU membership is unlikely to eliminate EU indifferentism, as we saw in the case of Croatia. It will not completely eradicate trends towards anti-liberal democracy (or illiberal democracy), as we witnessed in Hungary and Poland. However, it can do much to address a source of anti-EU attitudes in the countries of the Western Balkans by eliminating or reducing the sense of unfairness and uncertainty, which is still the main reason why many people remain confused and hostile to European Union. It will also send a clear signal to all external powers that the Western Balkans belongs to Europe, and thus it is not open for geostrategic games by increasingly anti-EU oriented players. Otherwise, further delays will strengthen the role of other actors and might make EU enlargement in the future more difficult, if not impossible.

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