

**The Western Balkans towards EU: the integration of the region is also the  
“reinvention” of the EU?**

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## Abstract

The European Institutions failed to address the evolving crisis of the 1990's. The lesson was learned and perhaps we can say that the Balkans changed the EU as much as the EU is trying to change its poorest region.

After this, the role of the EU in the Western Balkans grew every day and today European Integration is almost universally recognized as the key strategy for achieving the goals of peace and prosperity in the region. The Western Balkan Integration is an important issue that allows the EU to obtain its role as a global actor in the international arena. On the other hand the Western Balkans countries consider the process of integration as a prerequisite for stable regional political and economic development. This view is shared by politician and citizens who consider the access to European political, economic and financial institutions as the long-term answer to fragmentation, conflicts and political backwardness.

This article argues that a process has taken place in the last decade facilitating the reinvention of the Europe as a normative power, aiming to promote its core values, like regional cooperation, human rights, democracy and rule of law.

As a whole my argument is that today EU is a normative power like Manners suggest, not only a civilian power, but the transformation of the EU into a normative power was made in the Western Balkan. Specially after the Kosovo Crisis, it took place such a re(invention) transforming the UE in an international actor in the international arena.

**Keywords:** Integration process, role of EU, Western Balkan, UE strategy.

*“When dealing with the Balkans, the devil is usually not in the details but in the failure to confront the obvious”*

*Edward P. Joseph*

*The hour of the Europe has come*, with this optimistic words during the 90', Jacque de Poos announced the intervention of the CEE in the Yugoslav crisis and the conviction of this organization on its ability to resolve the conflict emerged in the Balkan region (Lehne 2004,1). On the same line the declaration of Jacque Delors, the former President of the European Commission, *We don't interfere in American affairs and we hope that they would have enough respect not to interfere in ours* (Wolff, Peen Rodt 2007, 4). On the other side the Bush Senior administration concerned with different affairs in the international arena, like the gulf war, was released to let the Yugoslavian case to the Europeans. According to James Baker, *we don't have a dog in this fight* (Holbrooke, 1999, 27) .

In this way the crisis in the former Yugoslavia became the first and major challenge for the European foreign policy which was in its embryonic steps. The first response of the CEE towards the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia was trying to keep intact the Yugoslavian state. The reaction of the European leaders express their fear that the support of the dissolution of the Yugoslavia would encourage the minorities throughout the region to seek the independence.

In 1991 with the outbreak of the conflict, first in Slovenia and after in Croatia, the CEE in *primis* tried to avoid the escalation of the conflict in the region but at the end of the year the Bosnian war break out, with grave consequences for the peace in the region (Silber & Little, 1996).

First of all the European states were divided in their attitudes toward the recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. The CEE declare its promptness to recognize the independence of these two countries besides the fulfillment of certain conditions, but meanwhile, Germany completely ignored this position and recognized both these countries, which were far from meeting the conditions imposed. After this position of the German foreign policy, the CEE recognized these two countries ignoring the fulfillment of the conditions imposed and the priority of its own foreign policy. This approach undermined the competence and the credibility of the CEE as an international actor as well as its influence on the warring parties on the ground (Wolff, Peen Rodt 2007, 5). The Serbian side especially questioned the EC's credibility as a neutral mediator and when trade embargos against Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia were lifted, while the embargo against the Serbs was kept intact, the Serbian delegation finally withdrew from the negotiations and the EC peace efforts collapsed (Whitman, Wolf 2012, 139).

The intensification of the conflict in former Yugoslavia and the outbreak of the Bosnian war in this period shows the limits of the European foreign policy. Its role in the international arena passes in a second level with the intervention of other international actors. The massacres on the civil people in Bosnia and the absence of consistent and reliable efforts of the European foreign policy, brought the USA to take an increasing and important role in the region. The inability of the CEE to stop the violence after the definition of the Yugoslavian issue as a European problem, was awarded by President Clinton as the EU incompetence to resolve the question, and stopped the European clock for at least ten years (Wolff, Peen Rodt 2007, 7).

Nowadays is clear for all that CEE failed tackling the crisis that included the region in the 90'. The reason of the failure is that the new born foreign and security European policy wasn't able to face a complex problem and showed the lack of cohesion within the EU.

The second point was that the European institution lacked military capacity to intervene in the conflict zone. Besides the lack of military capacity, the institution lack the unity to affront the crises. CEE found itself unable to unify the different perspectives of the European countries in a common position. European states had different position not only regarding the measures that should be taken and how they should be implemented but also the nature of the problem that they

afford. At the time of Yugoslav Crisis, European Institutions did not have any experience in dealing with armed conflict (Belloni 2009, 5). The lack of experience and expertise of the European institutions affording the new crisis in a new world that change every day would increasingly blurry the role of this organization in the region during this period. The role of the CEE as a civil and diplomatic power was shadowed by the lack of a long-term strategy about the Balkan region (nor did they consider enlargement to be a useful stabilizing tool), and the activity of the organization was focused on helping after the conflict and not during the conflict, leaving the CEE in the shade as an international actor.

In 1999 during the crisis in Kosovo even though the resolution of the conflict and the armed intervention was made under the impulse of the U.S., the EU became aware of its role in the region as well as of the necessity of a general strategy towards the region. The period immediately after the war in Kosovo and specifically the 2000 would be the turning point for the EU's foreign policy and its importance in the region (Overhouse 2007, 40). The EU policy towards the Balkans became more coherent and active and the USA-EU relationship began to increase. Four were the main factors of this development (Lehne 2004, 112):

1. The challenging nature of the problem.

After 2000 elections the Balkan countries had democratic governments. The region continued to be problematic but the risk of armed conflict was significantly reduced. This factor led to the development of a global policy towards the region.

2. The consensus on the policy towards the Balkans.

Before the 90's the experience on the Balkans was very scarce so after the crisis the European member states began to create a strategy and a common analysis of the region. The common interest was the stabilization of the region, arriving at a mutual and sufficient agreement on the objective to develop a more ambitious foreign policy.

3. Increased ability to cope with international problems.

The position of the High Representative increased the EU ability to respond positively and in a rapid way towards the new developments and cooperation with the international actors.

EU also began to develop not only civilian intervention skills but also military skills on crisis management. The development of these new instruments was made in the Balkans. During the spring of 2003 the EU took command of the police operation in Bosnia that was previously under

UN command. Since then, the EU has broadened and refined its international security and defense engagements, both functionally and geographically (Overhaus 2007, 40). The Balkans has remained a crucial point for the expanding security role. We can mention not only the EUPM mission but also the Concordia in Macedonia (first military operation conducted by EU) and Operation Proxima and EUFOR Althea in Bosnia. Definitely we can affirm that EU after the Balkans war develop its Security and Defence policy, and opened a substantial security engagement of the EU, as a clear example we can mention the Operations in Congo.

4. The states of the region had aspects in common with Eastern European countries.

During the 90's the EU had accumulated a large know-how on promoting the integration of these countries in the CEE. This experience contributed even more to the development of attitude towards the Balkan countries.

The UE in the 2000 understood that without a clear long-term strategy for political elites in the countries of Western Balkans and for the ethnic groups that they represents would be less powerful and the ability of the EU to act in the region will be reduced. As a result the Feira Council in 2000 states that the Balkan countries were potential candidates to become members of EU (Kramer 2000, 28).

The impact of the crisis of 90's bring a revolution in the way of how the EU appeared in the international arena and its role in international relations. After the Kosovo crisis in 2000 on its role as international actor overcome the dichotomist discussion between the definition of Duchenne (Manners 2002, 236) who looks at UE as e civilian power that based its influence only on the economic power and the definition of Bull that look the empowering of the EU in the international arena only with the growth of her military capacity, introducing the concept of UE as a normative power (Manners 2002, 239).

The definition underlines not only the combination of intents with the scopes but the EU as normative power is characterized by the use of civil instruments (economic, financial and diplomatic resources); the use of violence is inevitable and necessary but first of all from the promotion of democratic value, multilateralism and regional cooperation (Manners 2002, 241). In fact the normative dimension will be from the 2000 and beyond an integral part of the discussion and of the EU actions. This is evident in tractates and discussions of the most

prominent political figures who represents EU. An evident example are the words of Javier Solana<sup>1</sup>, that defines the foreign policy of the EU in the following way:

*Our foreign policy can't be based only on the interests of the parties. Protecting and promoting the values, that are parts of our history and are very important to our citizens, should continue to be a priority. Solidarity, tolerance, inclusion, compassion are integral part of the EU. We can't surrender promoting them.*

Precisely the Balkans were the challenge and opportunity to turn on and to test the foreign policy of the EU. Balkan showed that EU can't have an active role by giving just a peace example, but must be clear in defense of democracy, human rights and rule of law, values on which depend its existence, the core norms of TEC founds in the preambles of TEC and TEU.

The challenge of the strategy towards the Balkan is related with the different approach of the EU in the international arena. Increasing its role in the Balkans the EU became an international actor in the international arena, despite the conviction of Bull (Europe is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one, Bull, 1982, p. 151). The EU begin to re-think a larger strategy in the Balkan and was seen as an actor not only in the region but also in the international relations.

The result of a larger strategy was the creation of the process of Association-Stabilization shows that all the countries of Balkan are potential candidates for membership. The stabilization-association is the main strategy in the Balkans.

This process which follows the signing of a specific pact with each particular country intends to strengthen the rule of law, economic reconstruction, regional collaboration and to prepare countries for the future membership. With the stability pact and with the initiatives that followed, EU enterprise non only a clear strategy but also the leadership role in the region. The membership is considered the strongest initiative that would push the process from stabilization to association and finally to integration (Juncos 2005, 98).

During the Thessaloniki Council in 2003, the EU declare that the future of the EU is the integration of this countries and their membership. The process of Association –Stabilization has six goals which are:

1. The development of the economy and of the commercial relations with and within the region;

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<sup>1</sup> Secretary General of the Council of the EU / High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy introducing the European security strategy of the Council of the European Union

2. The development and the redirection of the economy including the financial aids;
3. Increased assistance for democratization, civil society, and rebuilding institutions;
4. The cooperation in the field of justice;
5. The development of the political dialogue at regional level;
6. Implementation of the Stabilization and Association agreements.

To implement this process, the UE relies on two instruments: on the new instrument of pre-association (IPA) and the Stabilization-Association agreements (Reljic 2007, 19). The agreement of Stabilization-Association is an instrument for the integration of the Balkan countries into the UE structures (Reljic 2007, 21). The signing of this agreement by each state is conditional on its progress in building the state of law, a functional economy market and cooperation with the countries of the region. In this moment non all Balkan countries have the same status and are at the same stage of the process of integration. Though Albania has signed this agreement since 2006 hasn't yet received the status of candidate country, which is already reached Montenegro (Hoffman 2005, 57). The different speed with which the western Balkan countries move towards integration may constitute a danger in the creation of an intensive process of regional cooperation, which above all should be the base for peace and stability in the Balkans.

By changing focus, not from the perspective of Brussels but from the countries of the region we cannot ignore that these countries have confidence in this organization. The political class, academics, civil society and public opinion are largely convinced that European integration is the response to economic backwardness, conflict and disruption. So far the only political model for the future of these countries has been the European membership. This has been an important incentive for the implementation of reforms in these countries, in the name of Europe and has been the motto that accompanied the reforms regarding the armed crime or in the creation of relationship between countries with historical conflicts and non always friendly in relation with each other. Vice versa since the Balkan countries are potential candidates, the EU has undertaken important projects to fight threats to security in the region, organized crime, illegal immigration and border threats. Today the change in this area is most noticeable than in all other areas.

The strategy of the EU on the integration of the region, taking into account the differences between candidate countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, is still being undertaken with the internal problems of stabilization, Kosovo continues to have a special status given that the status as an independent state is subject of discord into the EU, while Albania hasn't yet received the candidate status) many time has been criticized for failing to include different actors form the political class (Juncos 2005, 97). In the same line has been criticized the distance from the Brussels institutions and ordinary citizens. On this point we must notice that with a foresight and a smart political move, the UE extended the application of the free-visa regime and the free movement of citizens of non member countries. In this way all the citizens of non-member countries find themselves closer to Europe and its values, bringing them ever closer to the European dream.

The main problem of the European integration is the mobility of the target, expressing more clearly, the achievement of this goal depends not only on the implementation of reforms by the countries of the Western Balkans. This is perhaps the weakest point of the strategy on the Balkans, since integration is hampered by structural reasons of the EU itself. Not all the EU countries welcome the expansion of the UE, giving an example, until recently the French constitution content the so-called "Turkish-clause" under which a further extension of the UE should be subject to referendum by French people (Reljic 2007, 16). Even though this clause does not operate, is a clear example of how the integration of the Balkans also depend on external factors. Although Brussels constantly repeat that the integrations is the essence of the "soft-power" of EU, for expanding peace, democracy, prosperity on the continent, there is a reluctance on the part of Europe for a further expansion.

The EU diplomacy faced a big success in the region with the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. EU used all its diplomatic power to reach this agreement showing again here role as a principal actor in the region. But what led the two prime ministers in Brussels was the strong interest of both parties to move forward on the path of European integration. The truth is that can't be no European space within the European continent, but on the other side the agreements show that the region holds the key of its future.



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