

RECONCILIATION - A PREREQUISITE FOR THE INTEGRATION OF WESTERN BALKANS IN THE EU STREAM OF VALUES

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Abstract

This article discusses the necessity to take into account the strategic importance of the Balkan region for the EU. The relations between the states in the region are entangled, with political, ethnic, religious animosities and security risks. The most important if not the only tool for the social and economic progress of these states and for improving the stability and security of the region and Europe as a whole is the step by step integration of all states of the region into the EU.

Unfortunately, the road of Western Balkans (WB6) countries towards European integration and values has proven to be more burdensome and lengthy than many had hoped a few years ago. On the 6th of February 2018, the European Commission (finally) presented a new strategy towards the WB6 in which it resumed among other things also the responsibility to develop six initiatives aimed at supporting the reforms in the WB6 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia). The Annex to this instrument contains a timetable for the announced actions, including the supervision of their realization. Almost all actions are supposed to be realized until 2019 at the end of the mandate of the present Commission.

It is now of paramount importance that the new EU structure, which will be elected/appointed in 2019, develop new ideas and fresh operational policies towards WB6 in order to keep peace, stability and ensure the progress of the WB6 countries and the region as a whole. The author puts forward in the article some considerations that could be of use in further structuring and especially in implementing the new EU strategy towards WB6.

Key words: *Western Balkans, European Union enlargement policy, reconciliation, Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia.*

Introduction

The author is of opinion that the viewpoints included in the State of the Union 2017 "Western Balkans enlargement: common destination"¹ could be a good "starting point" for elaboration, by the "new EU structure" after October 2019, on an advanced EU policy towards the WB6, in accordance with thus far established deficiencies and new geopolitical challenges that this European region represents for the EU (Juncker, 2017.). That fresh EU approach could be an upgrading of the EU strategy towards the WB, which the European Commission presented on 6 February 2018. The Commission resumed the responsibility to develop the following initiatives aimed at supporting the reforms of the WB6:

1. To strengthen the rule of law. Existing tools, such as detailed action plans, will be expanded to all Western Balkans countries. Assessment of reform implementation will be enhanced, including through new advisory missions. Greater use will be made of leverage provided in the negotiating frameworks with Montenegro and Serbia.

2. To reinforce engagement on security and migration, including reinforcement of cooperation on fighting organised crime, countering terrorism and violent extremism and on border security and migration management. Europol liaison officers will be posted in the region, and Joint Investigation Teams will be further promoted, and status agreements with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency concluded.

3. To enhance support for socio-economic development. This will include expanding the Western Balkans Investment Framework, a significant boost in the provision of guarantees to encourage private investment, support to start-ups and SMEs (small and medium size enterprises) and greater trade facilitation. A new reinforced social dimension will see more focus on employment and social policies, with increased financial assistance to support the social sector, in particular, education and health. Funding under EU Erasmus+ program will be doubled.

4. To support the development of a digital agenda for the WB6. This will include a roadmap to facilitate lowering roaming costs, support for the deployment of broadband and development of e-Government, e-Procurement, e-Health and digital skills.

¹ The term Western Balkans (in continuation WB6) that is used to denominate the geopolitical area that is the topic of this consideration, includes the former republics of Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Hercegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo and Albania). It corresponds to neither to geographic nor geo-political realities; it was "invented" by the EU in order to divide Bulgaria and Romania that were supposed to become the EU members from other Balkan countries.

5. To increase transport and energy connectivity within the region and with the EU, including new investment support in this sector. More effective use will be made of the Connecting Europe Facility in the Western Balkan countries. The EU's Energy Union should be expanded to the Western Balkans.

6. To support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. This will include support to transitional justice, missing persons and increased cooperation in education, culture, youth and sport, and expanding the scope of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office. The Western Balkans will be fully associated with the European Year of Cultural Heritage; the EU - Western Balkans Heritage Route will be launched (Commission, 2018).

With the Annex to this instrument, a time table for the announced actions was adopted including the supervision of their realisation. Unfortunately, almost all actions are supposed to be realised until 2019 when the mandate of the present Commission ends.²

A step forward in stimulating the WB6 enlargement reforms has been the Berlin Process, a European initiative, launched by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, the goal of which is to facilitate regional cooperation between the WB6 countries to help them fulfil criteria to join the European Union.³ Its most important component is the so-called "Connectivity Agenda". Its first aimed was to link the WB6 together in the fields of transport and energy, later expanded into youth exchanges, economic connections and growth, higher competitiveness and trade exchanges, and new employment opportunities.⁴ It started with the 2014 Conference in Berlin, followed by the 2015 Vienna Summit, 2016 Paris Summit, 2017 Trieste Summit and the July 2018 London Summit.⁵ The next conference will be on 4-5 July 2019 in Poznan, Poland.

The Summit of the Western Balkans leaders on the 29th of April 2019 in Berlin was organized on the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It was concluded without tangible

² Annex to the communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the Council, the European economic and social Committee and the committee of the regions. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the western Balkans. Strasbourg, 6.2.2018, com (2018) 65 final

³ The initiative includes six Western Balkan countries that are candidates for EU membership (Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania) or potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) and some EU members, i.e.: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom.

⁴ The agenda seeks to enhance competitive advantages and provide tangible results for the local populations. 20 connectivity projects have been approved so far, out of which four have commenced work on the ground.

⁵ For more details see the webpage of Berlin process: <https://berlinprocess.info/>. Accessed on 17.5.2019.

solutions.⁶ The new meeting, during which one of the topics will be once again Belgrade – Pristina Dialogue has been scheduled for the first or the second of July in Paris, ahead of the Berlin Process Poznan Summit.

On 30 April 2019, the Office of President of France Emmanuel Macron published the “French Strategy for the Western Balkans.”⁷ The strategy lists three measures: 1) French intensification of the relations with the region in general, 2) the strengthening of bilateral cooperation with the countries of the region in economy, security, justice and defence and 3) the intensification of exchanges with the countries of the region in terms of political-strategic dialogues concerning defence. The strategy put forward also challenges, as are disputes between WB6 countries, various economic and social issues, difficulties in permanently establishing the rule of law, security issues and external influences that divert the region from its European “ vocation”.⁸

Informal cooperation named Brdo-Brijuni process was initiated in March 2010 by Slovenia and Croatia. Its aim is to strengthen relations between the countries of the region of Western Balkans. The most important meetings of leaders of Western Balkans States were in July 2013, Brdo, Slovenia, in July 2014 Dubrovnik, Croatia, in June 2015 Budva; Montenegro, in May 2016, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in June 2017, Brdo, Slovenia, in 2018 Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, and in 2019 Tirana, Albania. The declarations adopted at these meetings are more or less expression of goodwill without tangible results.⁹

The WB6 countries have certainly, with the support of EU, other international organisations (for instance OSCE) and financial factors, made significant efforts for ensuring peace, transition reforms and partial regional cooperation.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the region is still rifted with unresolved war crimes problems, with the lack of cooperation, with suspicious political and media discourses, with opened borders and other problems, such as mistrust, animosities, hate speech, with cleavages and hatred between people, mostly on the ethnic and religious basis. Sadly, the younger generation is immigrating, mainly to EU member states, at alarming rates and this is likely to increase even

⁶See: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/30/berlin-summit-fails-to-restart-stalled-kosovo-serbia-talks/>. Accessed on 17.5.2019.

⁷ It is noted that the proposed Strategy complements the activities undertaken within the framework of the Berlin Process.

⁸See: <https://mk.ambafrance.org/Strategie-francaise-pour-les-Balkans-occidentaux>. Accessed on 5.5.2019.

⁹ See also: <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=141699>. Accessed on 5.5.2019.

¹⁰See: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en. Accessed on 5.5.2019.

further, thus seriously harming the potential for innovation progress of the region.¹¹

As has already emerged from past experience, WB6 governments show slow reactivity and preferences for surface-restyling rather than in-depth reforms. These countries still cope with limited national administrative capacities, but what is worse is that they coupled this with persistent illiberal tendencies (for instance regarding judiciary system, freedom of media). Yet one of the fundamental problems is that for now, their GDP is one-fourth of most advanced Western European countries (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development-EBRD 2018). Full convergence could take decades, and the best scenario estimates that it will take 40 years to catch up to EU living standards. Currently, industries are unable to withstand competition; foreign debt is growing; and unemployment remains high, with almost half of those under the age of 30 out of work. Instead, a bloated administration and service sector is emerging, with a low intensity of value creation. Investment is also inadequate, especially in education, research and development. The region's external debt and all its consequences ultimately stem from the trade deficit. This deep imbalance needs to be addressed by consistently investing in projects of common interest if we really want to ensure regional stability (Luisa & Madhi, 2019).

Taking into account the strategic importance of this region for the EU on one side and the entangled relations between the states in the area on the other, the step by step integration of all states of the region into the EU is the most important if not the only tool for the social and economic progress of these states and for improving stability and security of the area and Europe as a whole.

The EU needs new ideas and fresh operational policies

After years of taking the WB6 region for granted, there were great expectations that the European Commission's strategy paper published in February 2018 would herald a new and more determined EU engagement. Unfortunately this has not been the case, raising serious concerns as to whether some member states fully grasp what is at stake in the region. A representative survey recently carried out in the Western Balkans as part of the Balkan Barometer provides cause for concern. 28% of those surveyed no longer want to join the EU and only 42% believe seeking EU membership is a positive step (Lars & C. Feyeraben, 2018, p. 39). On the other side, driven mainly by domestic concerns, France, the Netherlands and Denmark are set to push the WB6 integration perspective further down the road. The Dutch Parliament has recently called for the suspension of visa-free travel for Albanians. These motions show that

¹¹ This trend has been accelerated after 1 January 2019 when Germany adopted facilities for import of labour from Western Balkans.

enlargement is ultimately governed by political decision-making in and between the member states and not by Copenhagen criteria.

The credibility of the EU will become point in question if the EU strategies and policies are not implemented in a fruitful way, especially if people of the region are not convinced that had the results of the EU policy changed, the current problems in their country might have changed for the better and hence improved the quality of their life. There is an urgent need to improve the EU WB6 enlargement process policies and the interconnected activities with new, fresh initiatives and programs. It should be elaborated based on the evaluation of achievements made this far and remaining shortcomings and on the analyses of the real situation in the region and each WB6 country. If Brexit is actually concluded in October 2019, could the new, improved and to the real situation adapted EU policy towards the WB6 one of the first "foreign relations" actions of EU 27, as a confirmation of the credibility and functionality of the "new" EU.

In continuation, I put forward some considerations that could be of use in elaborating and especially in implementing the new, improved EU strategy towards the WB6:

1. The formal framework of the new policy should be the European Commission instrument of 6 November 2018, which should be improved with fresh ideas and the accompanying action plan up-dated with new activities and with time-limits for their realization. The new policy should be supported by adequate financial resources provided in the new EU budget.

The new, improved policy should include the support to the continuation of all achievements of the Berlin Process also those that had not been yet realized by particular WB countries or by them as a whole (for instance custom union, removal of Kosovo's 100 percent customs on import from Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina violating the free trade agreement - CEFTA), the relevant proposals of the French strategy of 20 April 2019 and other stakeholders. The new policy should be the outcome of the European Commission consultations not only with the WB6 governments but also with other stakeholders in the region such as regions and local communities, chambers of commerce, professional and civil society organizations.

The new strategy and the operational programs for it realization should not be confined to the "classical model" - to the mere fulfilment of the requirements of the EU *acquis communautaire*, but should stimulate developments that are also contributing to the progress of WB6 countries and of the region as a whole. It should also stimulate the creation of necessary pre-condition for the realization of the aims EU policy as are reconciliation, regional cooperation of people and the relevant political, cultural, economic and similar developments, interconnected with and supporting the realization of the *acquis communautaire* platform.

In addition, it will be commendable to address the recognition and implementation of social and economic rights particularly for the most vulnerable social strata which is increasingly relevant in the context of general dissatisfaction towards politics and social disillusion, especially within the younger generations¹² and groups of people who live “on the other side” of the poverty gap.¹³ The results of such activities will contribute, the long term, to the situation which would make possible the EU enlargement and the integration of the WB6 countries in the main EU streams.

The European Commission and other stakeholders should more precisely explain to the WB6 and EU wider public the aims of the new EU policies and disseminate them as far as possible, in a way that will be understandable for ordinary people. In the simple language would be commendable to explain to people the membership prospects of all WB6 countries thus mobilizing them in favor of building up criteria which are necessary for becoming a member of the EU.

In assessing the results of the EU improved policy, it will be commendable to be flexible: in addition to common criteria mandatory for all it would be necessary to take into account the traditions of each country, their so far achievements and specific interests as well.

2. The realization of the improved EU policy would need also the revision of the EU negotiation process. At present, the EU negotiates the accession process largely with the elites of the WB6 countries. In the future, it will be necessary to elaborate ways and means for the inclusion in this process also the local communities, chambers of commerce and professional associations, education and research institutions, civil society associations and institutions and similar entities. This will be the proper way to promote shared “values” or principles and to enlarge the pro-European attitude of the population. As to the civil society organizations it is necessary to support their independence and to avoid the situation, which could be discerned now, of transforming them into the “proxies” of EU delegations, particular states or political parties. Moreover, it would be commendable to avoid the “privatization” and “bureaucratization” of the current and eventual new structures.

¹² According to the World Bank Development Indicator has been in 2016 the percentage of youth unemployment in labour force aged 15-24 as follows: B&H - 62,3, Kosovo - 57,7, Macedonia - 47,3, Serbia - 43,3, Albania - 39,8 and Montenegro - 37, 7. In comparison - EU - 22,7 and Germany 7,2.

¹³ According to the World Bank Development Indicator, in 2013 the following percentage of people lived at 5,50 USD per day: Macedonia - 13 %, Albania - 10,3 %, Kosovo - 5,8 %, Montenegro - 2,4 % and Serbia - 2 %.

3. In realizing its improved policy should the EU develop more elaborated cooperation with other international organizations (UN, OSCE, WB, IMF and others)? Cooperation with OSCE should be developed especially on fields where the later has achieved remarkable results in developing activities, which contribute to reconciliation, stability and the democratic development of WB6 countries. (Silvo, 2016) As to NATO it will be commendable that the EU in a constructive way evaluate carefully what is the common interest of both organizations concerning WB6 and what is the particular strategic interest of U.S. as a leading NATO power that does not coincide with the interest of EU and its (present and future) members in the Balkans area. It is an urgent need to abolish the agreement of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania with the US on the exempting all Americans (and even some non-nationals) from accountability for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. These agreements, in the form requested by the US government, are illegal under the Rome Statute, are not required by US law and are in controversy with EU law.

Elaborated and targeted reconciliation is a precondition for the efficient EU enlargement process

Reconciliation is *conditio sine qua non* for developing understanding, cooperation and progress of WB6 region. Having in mind the current political, security and socio-economic circumstances in the WB6 region and in each of the member countries in particular the EU should find ways and means for supporting, with adequate measures, the elaborated and well-aimed reconciliation process, which achievements would create a favorable environment for the solution of particular existing problems in the region and thus for ensuring the step by step integration of WB6 countries into the EU system of values.

Reconciliation means to find a way in which two situations or beliefs that are opposed to each other can agree and exist together. It is a very complex task (Kjell-Åke, 2006). It ways and means should be elaborated after analyzing the factual situations and finding the adequate methodology for building up activities, which could create an adequate environment, stimulating solutions for the existing problems (David, Barnes, & Huyse, 2003). In post-conflict societies where past injustices remain unresolved; there exists a latent risk of a renewed outbreak of violence, years or decades later. Reconciliation has, therefore, become increasingly important in the context of conflict prevention and development co-operation.¹⁴ The well-known scholar on peacebuilding, Johan Galtung distinguished between negative peace as the outcome of efforts

¹⁴ Mainstream Conflict Prevention (2005), Issues Brief, OECD. The drafting of this Issues Brief was led by Germany's International co-operation enterprise for sustainable development (GTZ).

to stop physical or personal violence (direct violence), and positive peace as the goal of efforts to end indirect structural and cultural violence (indirect violence) that threaten the economic, social and cultural well-being and identity of individual human beings and groups (Johan, 1969).

I would like to draw the attention to the following proposals which should be considered to be elaborated in the new EU – WB6 policy:

1. The EU should support and make mandatory proper forms of reconciliation processes, which should be established both on bilateral (for instance: reconciliation between Serbs and Croats; between Bosnians - Serbs - Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina; between Serbs and Albanians; between Macedonians and Albanians; between Slovenes and Croats and so on and so forth) and on multilateral, regional level as well. As to the later, it will be commendable to organize common activities dedicated to the specific areas of reconciliation, aimed at finding ways and means for developing positive future activities and programs on these issues.

2. North Macedonia is the only country of ex-Yugoslavia that has not open border problems with its neighbors. Despite the repeated pledges by both the EU and the countries of the region, there has been scarce progress in solving these disputes.¹⁵ The latest stand-off between Croatia and Slovenia, with Croatia refusing to accept the Court of Arbitration's ruling on the maritime border demarcation in the Bay of Piran does not set a good example to the region. Unresolved border disputes, especially those between the EU member Croatia and its other Western Balkan neighbors (Serbia, B&H, and Montenegro) undermine the credibility of the EU enlargement process itself and of the member state directly concerned in particular. The president of the European Commission Juncker repeated on several occasions that the EU is "not willing to import" open border problems through the membership of the given state. Nevertheless, the European Commission should be adequately "involved" in searching solutions for the border problems between the WB countries (and between Slovenia and Croatia as well) as it is obvious that these countries are not able to find solutions by themselves. The cooperation with OSCE in this regard will be useful.

3. It is necessary to continue and conclude efficiently the persecution and punishment of the perpetrators of war crimes in the wars 1990-1999. The lack of sufficient coordination and close cooperation between international stakeholders and a general reticence on the part of the national authorities to engage meaningfully with past wrongs have resulted in a situation where many perpetrators of war crimes remain unpunished and individual victims have barely received any reparations. For the ongoing transitional justice processes

¹⁵ Positive examples: the ratification of agreements on the Kosovo-Montenegro and Montenegro-Bosnia and Hercegovina borders.

to meaningfully further inter-ethnic reconciliation in the republics emerging from the former Yugoslavia, continued legal reforms and a pluralistic public discourse, which embrace a strong focus on the rights of victims of war crimes, are necessary.

The procedures at the international tribunal for former Yugoslavia in Hague have been closed. The persecution and punishment of persons who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity and the reparations of the victims will, therefore, remain in the hands of national jurisdiction and thus in many cases under the influence of the political elites in power. For instance, the prosecution of the leaders and members of the Liberation Army of Kosovo (among the suspects are the president of the republic, and the government and national assembly) who allegedly committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during and after the war in Kosovo was impossible to organize in Kosovo. The international community thus established the Kosovo Special Chamber with the seat in Hague. EU nominated 19 judges of this court, but no one indictment was at this writing presented.¹⁶

4. Existing narratives in the region are obstructing regional reconciliation and are cementing existing prejudices that can incite repetition, divisions, mistrust and denial. It is necessary to overcome in a history rooted hatred that has been in the recent wars for dissolution of former Yugoslavia resumed and "flavored" with new ethnic, religious and political "incentives". This negative attitude is supported, as illustration, by the existence of parallel, segregated (ethnic) schools, by teaching of history that create ignorance of pupils or negative attitude towards the "others" and by a part of mass media in general.¹⁷

The reconciliation is not only the matter of politicians but first of all of the other social factors who could developed the public opinion in a positive,

¹⁶ On 3 August 2015, the Kosovo Assembly adopted Article 162 of the Kosovo Constitution and the Law on Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office, following the Exchange of Letters between the President of Kosovo and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in 2014. This structure has jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes and other crimes under Kosovo law in relation to allegations reported in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Report of 7 January 2011.

¹⁷ Clio in the Balkans, The politic of history education (ed. Christina Koulouri), Centre for democracy and reconciliation in Southeast Europe, Thessaloniki, 2002 and Christina Koulouri, History teaching and peace education in Southeast Europe, Hitotsubashi Journal of Art and Sciences 50 (2009), pp. 53-63, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo. See also: Kosmas Kaprinis, The politics of history education in the Balkans: The youth generation as transmitter of reconciliation, International Centre for ethics, justice and public life, 37, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

constructive way regarding relations between neighbors – educators, historians, researchers, philosophers, writers, poets, musicians, journalist, sportsmen and the similar social factors. It is, therefore, necessary in the new EU policy documents more precisely elaborate the support of the projects in the field of education, culture, science, media and the similar.¹⁸

The exchange and cooperation of youth could be one of the “tools” of reconciliation. At the Paris meeting of Berlin Initiative held on 4 July 2016 was as part of efforts to promote reconciliation in the region, an important emphasis given to the role of youth, with the establishment of a Regional Youth Cooperation Council. According to the Final Declaration by the French Chair of the Summit, this Youth Council will be modeled on the 50-year experience of the Franco-German Youth Office and will “support activities that promote reconciliation of the peoples as well as programs on remembrance, diversity, intercultural exchange, regional mobility, citizen participation and the promotion of democratic values”.¹⁹ But for the time being there is no yet evidence of the impact of these offices’ activities on the social relations in particular countries and in the region as a whole.

5. The WB6 region is a patchwork of national minorities of nations living in new sovereign states in the neighboring country before but Albania being a part of a common state. The control of one’s ethnic territory has been the main goal of the recent Balkans nationalistic wars. Besides due to the former migration a great number of members of “other” ethnic origin are living not in “their” nation-state but “another” state and some of them not enjoying the rights deriving from the constitutional status of a national minority.

Due to the fact that in the region are all political entities based on ethnicity could be the interest of the “mother nation” for “its” minority in neighboring state, a source of conflict and political tensions. The most dangerous thing in this regard will be the spreading of ideas that it is necessary to unite all Albanians (currently living in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and all Serbs (at least those currently living in Serbia,

¹⁸ One of the commendable examples is the Program of academic network for support of academia in 6 Western Balkans countries the EU policy towards the Western Balkans with emphasis on regional cooperation based on reconciliation ANETREC. The project proposal was prepared within the Erasmus+ call-2018- by nine universities from the WB6. Proposed actions: 6 virtual teaching programs (EU policy towards WB6; reconciliation; multiculturalism; human rights and discrimination; religion; migration), summer school, training seminars, international conference on EU enlargement policy towards the WB6 countries with emphasis on regional cooperation based on reconciliation).

¹⁹ Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 4 July 2016; http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Novinarsko_sredisce/Sporocila_za_javnost/2016/Declaration_Western_Balkans.pdf. Accessed on 27 July 2017.

B&H and Northern Kosovo) in one state or “ideas” that is necessary to “adjust” the borders in order to satisfy the national interests and ensure peace in the region.²⁰

This is the main reason why it is necessary to affirm another role of national minorities in inter-state relations. The “declaration on democracy, human rights and protection of persons belonging to ethnic and religious minorities in south-eastern Europe” adopted on 25 February 2001 by the participants of the conference organized by ISCOMET from all parts of former Yugoslavia was the first action dedicated to this goal.²¹

In this context, it will be commendable to consider the support of advanced ways and means of protecting minorities than are the classical one embodied in inter-state agreements. One of the already functional forms is the creation of the so-called “common cultural spaces”, which enable free linguistic and cultural flows across the (open) state borders while respecting the states’ sovereignty and territorial integrity and the principle of not interfering in internal affairs. Such an approach to the role of minorities in inter-states relations in the WB6 region would probably weaken the aspirations to “unite” the national minorities with the “mother nation”.

6. Having in mind the hesitation of political structures to assume this responsibility the reconciliation processes should be elaborated and launched in parallel by civil society organizations, education and research institutions, by religious communities or other non-governmental organizations and entities. The EU should support and co-finance their well-elaborated reconciliation projects coordinated by those who have experiences and enjoy credibility in this field.²² The state authorities should assume the responsibility at least of not blocking if they are unprepared or unable to support these reconciliation endeavors.

²⁰ As to the EU attitude role regarding Serbia-Kosovo proposal to barter “ethnic territories” there have been fair criticisms voiced of the High Representative Federica Mogherini, including – ‘a sotto voce’ – by Chancellor Merkel. That the idea of ‘border corrections’ or a ‘land swap’ between both Serbia and Kosovo has even been entertained by key EU officials as a possible solution for the normalisation of their bilateral relations, begs the question whether those of whom leadership is expected fully grasp the historical context of the region. One could only imagine the impact that such a solution would have for Bosnia and Herzegovina (see: Fouéré Erwan and Blockmans Steven, EU dithering leaves Western Balkans prey to other suitors CEPS Commentary, 29 April 2019).

²¹ See:

<http://www.iscomet.org/images/documents/deklaracije/ISCOMET%20Documents%201991-2005.pdf>. Accessed on 17.5.2019.

²² As one of already elaborated project we would like to mention the ANETREC project proposal, see note 29 above.

The religion communities of the region and especially the monotheistic religions - Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam - could have a very important role in contributing to the conciliation, respect of otherness, peaceful inter-human relations and thus stability in the region of WB6.²³ This was shown by the results of the project "Contribution of Religious Communities to Reconciliation, Respect of Diversity, Democracy, Human Rights, Protection of Minorities, Co-operation and Stability in South Eastern Europe (the so-called "Maribor Initiative"), which was realized in the frame of the WT1 of the Pact on Stability in SEE, in the period 2001-2003 by ISCOMET - Institute for Ethnic and Regional Studies from Maribor, Slovenia as coordinator; it was co-financed by the EU upon the decision of the Council.²⁴ In the frame of the project the first appeals of all major religious communities from the former Yugoslavia for "removal of the consequences of the war" and "reconciliation and cooperation" were adopted at the gatherings in Slovenia on 2 December 1994 and on 21 September 1997 respectively, followed by pertinent meetings in Serbia, Romania and Moldova.²⁵

7. Genuine regional cooperation, based on reconciliation tenets, is a workable tool for consolidating peace, stability and progress of the region. In

²³ General on this topic see: Devetak, S., 2007. Religious Freedoms in South Eastern European Countries in the Context of the Process of European Integration. In: Polzer M., Devetak S., Toplak L., Unger F., Eder M. (eds.): Religion and European Integration - Religion as a Factor of Stability and Development in South Eastern Europe. Edition Weimar, European Academy of Sciences and Arts, pp. 123-151.

²⁴ The aim of the "Maribor Initiative" Project was not the organization of ecumenical dialogue that is supposed to be the responsibility of the Churches and religious communities themselves but to organize well prepared and targeted discussions in SEE countries on the topics where the Churches and religious community could, due to their great influence on people's mind and behavior, contribute substantially, in common or each for itself, to the implementation of the objectives of the Project, i.e. reconciliation, respect of diversity, democracy, human rights, protection of religious and ethnic minorities, co-operation and stability" in SEE. The project based on the conviction that these values are *conditio sine qua non* for the development of those countries and for their inclusion in the European structures. These aims were pursued through different forms of interaction (debates, round-tables, conferences etc.) of people of "good will", believers and non-believers: religious dignitaries, members of religious communities, of civil society organizations and institutions, academics, researchers, civil servants and governmental functionaries, representatives of international governmental and non-governmental organizations etc.

²⁵ The appeals of these meetings see in:
<http://www.iscomet.org/images/documents/deklaracije/ISCOMET%20Documents%201991-2005.pdf>. Accessed on 5.1.2019.

spite of some positive achievements as is the agreement of friendly relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria and a lot of particular cooperation between the WB6 countries and od time to time expressions of "good bilateral relations" between particular states and common "declarations of good will", for instance, at the periodic conferences of these countries in the frame of the so-called Brdo / Brijuni process ²⁶or at Berlin Initiative summits²⁷ are relations between the countries which succeeded the former Yugoslavia still riddled with the revival of old animosities and especially with consequences of the wars in the nineties.

The EU will contribute to the reconciliation process in the WB6 region if will support and finance more targeted and relevant multilateral, regional cooperation projects enhancing the cooperation and good neighborhood relations between the WB6 countries in the fields of culture, science, education etc. The already established Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO) with the seat in Tirana and the functioning civil society forum could with well-elaborated programs and their efficient management substantially contributes to the improved cooperative attitude in general and to new forms of constructive cooperation in the region. The Regional Cooperation Council with the seat in Sarajevo could have, with proper programs and adequately management has an important role in the region.²⁸

As to economy, Bela Balassa, a professor of political economy at the John Hopkins University, defines economic integration as a "process and as a state of affairs. Economic integration comprises the set of political and economic measures to eliminate discrimination between economic units that belong to different national states. It represents the absence of discrimination between national economies". The Regional Cooperation Council with the seat in Sarajevo could have, with proper programs and adequately management has an important role in the region. The "free trade" in the region shows the political diversities in the region that are somehow "covered" by the Central Europe Free Trade Agreements (CEFTA) on trade. But the poor trade between the WB countries could not be an enhancing factor for developing common interests in this field.

²⁶ Brdo - Brijuni Process in informal cooperation initiated in March 2010 (at that time named as Brdo process) by Slovenia and Croatia to strengthen relations between the countries of the region of Western Balkans so that the strengthened cooperation in the region would help its faster progress towards the European integration. The most important meetings of leaders of Western Balkans States were July 2013, Brdo, Slovenia, July 2014 Dubrovnik, Croatia, June 2015 Budva; Montenegro, May 2016, Sarajevo, BiH and June 2017, Brdo, Slovenia, 2018 in Skopje, North Macedonia, 2019 Tirana, Albania.

²⁷ See: <https://berlinprocess.info/>. Accessed on 12.5.2019.

²⁸ See: <https://www.rcc.int/>. Accessed on 23.5.2019.

The Berlin Initiative has reached so far scarce results as for instance the signing of the Transport Community between EU and five WB6 countries, the proposal of Action plan to develop a Regional Economic Area (REA), aimed at consolidating a market of some 20 million people, and so attract investment and generate growth and jobs. The Action plan is, in fact, a ‘declaration of intentions’; it is divided in four sections-trade, investments, mobility and digital integration. The Central European Free Trade Agreements (CEFTA) which members are all WB6 countries will remain the legal basis for the REA. Unfortunately, the EU was not able to influence the Kosovo government to revoke the 100 customs for the import from Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina that represent a serious break of CEFTA agreements.

But the real political situation in the region is shown by the fact that it was not possible to come to the common understanding for any of this action. The treaty on Transport community was not signed by Bosnia and Herzegovina because of rejection of Republika Srpska, the establishment of REA was opposed by Albania and Kosovo who also rejected the ambitious project of the establishment of the free customs union proposed by Serbia. Croatia and Slovenia rejected the participation in the Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO), which is supposed to be seated in Tirana.²⁹ Indicative is the fact that there still exists a visa regime between Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina.

However irrespective of that all these forms of regional economic cooperation - and the new one that will be in due time elaborated - should be included and if necessary further elaborated in the improved EU policy towards the WB6. It will be commendable to explore and elaborate properly new much more advanced forms of regional cooperation, based on reconciliation tenets, as are in illustration: 1) Cross-border cooperation and establishment of cross-border regions on the legal basis of the EU Regulation of 2013 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation - EGTC (for neighbors which are EU members)³⁰ and 2) The stimulation of establishing the so-called Euro-regional Cooperation Groupings - ECGS on the basis of 3rd Protocol to the Madrid Convention of the Council of Europe (for all countries).³¹ It will be commendable also to stimulate the establishment of common regional entities in the fields of technology and sciences.

²⁹ The reorganisation of RYCO is included as a task in the new EU strategy of February 2018.

³⁰See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R1302&from=EN>. Accessed on 11.5.2019.

³¹See: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/206>. Accessed on 11.5.2019.

These forms of cross-border regional cooperation, if realized, would be the clearest evidence of the stability of the region and cooperative attitude of WB6 countries (and Slovenia and Croatia) in the spirit of Westphalia regional order of international relations.

An entangled international environment

In elaborating new policies towards WB6 and in its implementation, the EU has to be aware of the presence and interest of other international powers in the region. The WB6 is, due to their regional characteristics, a typical mid-region, exposed to the contradictory influences of the most influential agents of international relations which are usurping the political and socio-economic instability of the states and of the disunity of a region as a whole, also through adopting the historical confirmed approach *divide et impera*. The EU policy toward the WB has thus to cope with the interests of other states which are involved in this part of Europe.³²

WB6 is now just one arena in the standoff of geo-political interests of Russia and USA with both sides attempting to buy influence with investments, energy projects and assurances to take care the security of states in the region. Russia regards the WB6 as an arena in which it can achieve significant effects with relatively few resources, predominantly through “soft” methods and intelligence, with the aim of distracting, weakening and dividing the Western community of states.³³Turkey has been after 1990 “rediscovering” the Balkans.³⁴The Gulf States have been struggling to keep pace with others in

³² The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. A map of geopolitical players (ed. Dr Lars Hänsel and Florian C. Feyeraben). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Berlin:2018; Western Balkans in the context of competition between China, Russia, Turkey and EU. Warsaw Institute.Special report, 28.11.2018 (www.warsawinstitute.org. Accessed on 10.1.2019.

³³ Russia does not play a significant economic role in the Western Balkans: only 6.6% of foreign direct investment in the region comes from Russia and Russia’s share of regional foreign trade is 3.9% for exports and 5.3% for imports. However, the region is dependent on Russia for its energy supply, though this dependence is waning. Viewed as a whole, Southeast Europe is only a sideshow in Moscow’s strategic thinking, albeit one that should not be underestimated. See also: Bechev Dimitar, Understanding Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans. Strategic Analysis September 2018 (<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategic-Analysis-2018-9-Beshev-.pdf>. Accessed on 5.1.2019.

³⁴ Turkey officially supports the Euro-Atlantic and European integration of the Western Balkan states, it is also pursuing an independent “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy with the aim of creating its own sphere of interest. In addition to economic activities, Ankara’s resources are mainly poured into trade, banking,

enlarging its presence and influence on that part of Europe also by spreading of Wahhabism).³⁵ The endeavors of China to keep and enlarge its presence, especially on the economic field in WB6 countries also contribute to "raising a value" of Balkans in the current process of the new geo-political division of the world.³⁶ Germany, France and Italy called the attention that the EU should be given powers to rule on whether or not Chinese takeovers of major European companies are motivated by political rather than economic goals what refers, of course, also to the WB6.

During his visit to Serbia Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 16 March, 2018 said that Serbia is crucial for the stability of the region and that he expects further development of relations in the economic and all other spheres. At this occasion, he announced that his country would actively assist the European integration of Serbia and the region. Besides Serbia, Abe paid a visit also to the three Baltic States, Bulgaria and Romania. This tour was made in the context of the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement of 8 December 2017, which is in the process of the final approval by the EU.

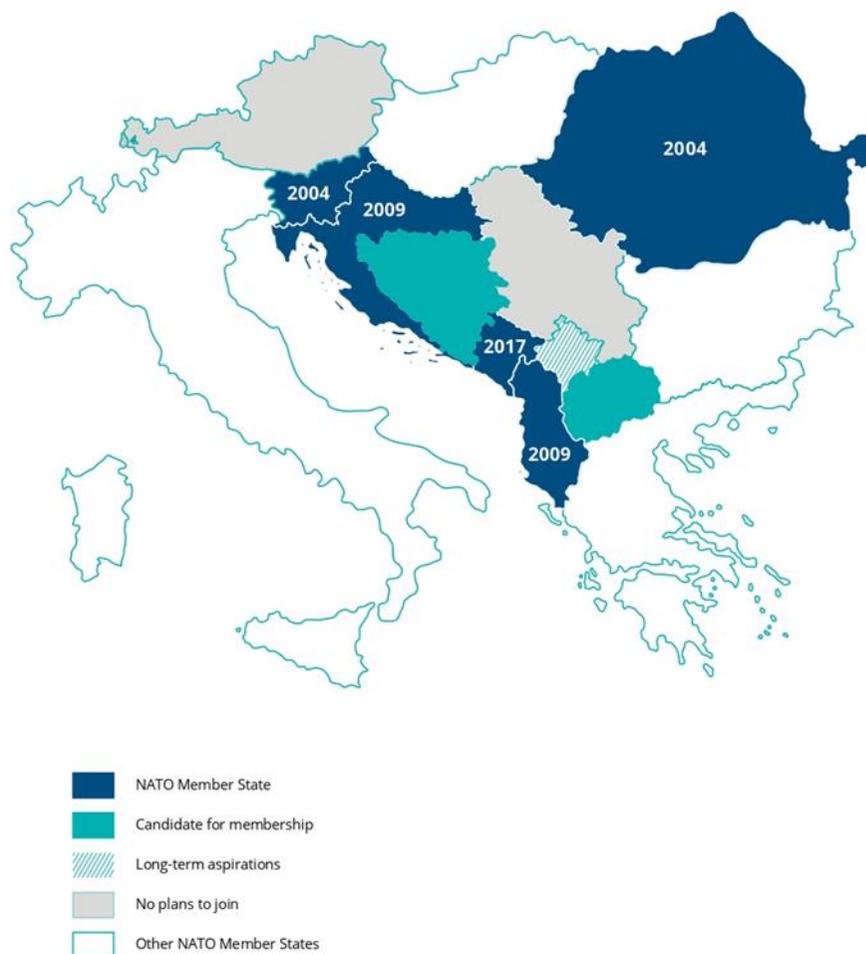
Within the EU, generally speaking, different levels of interest for the WB6 exist. Nowadays became Germany and France the main "engine" concerning the EU policy towards the WB6 (Berlin initiative, new French strategy, common actions).

construction, telecommunications and critical infrastructure (e.g. Prishtina, Skopje, Ohrid and Zagreb airports), with a primary focus on soft power and the cultural and religious ties that have grown over the centuries and that are now being systematically expanded. See also: Aydıntaşbaş Asli, From myth to reality: how to understand Turkey's role in the western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations. Policy brief, March 2019.

³⁵ Arab countries are increasingly making economic investments, particularly in tourism, construction (e.g. Belgrade Waterfront), agriculture, aviation (Air Serbia) and military technology, and are also providing loans and generous development aid. This investment is not restricted to the Muslim countries of the Western Balkans.

³⁶ Beijing appears to be a "stabiliser" and hence an apparent ally of the EU, since China supports the states' integration into European structures, and its long-term investment in the region means that, unlike other external actors, it is not in its economic and strategic interests to destabilise the Balkans, a region that is often described as a "powder keg".

NATO enlargement process in the Balkans



Picture 1: NATO enlargement process in the Balkans. Source: The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2018, Sankt Augustin/Berlin, p 40. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038. Accessed on 10.6.2019.

As major powers use their financial and political clout to gain influence in the Balkans, weak local governments will continue to balance among competing nations. U.S. is especially through their membership (under its supervision) in NATO enlarging its pre-eminence in the Balkans. Its

“strongholds” in the region are Croatia, Kosovo and Albania. Slovenia could be treated as a pragmatic member. In spite of being a member is Montenegro regarding this question internally divided. Serbia is openly opposing the membership in NATO and developing a policy of “equidistance” - as “candidate country” continuing negotiations for the association agreement (and subsequent membership in EU) and developing cooperation with Russia on economic and other fields, including on security matters as consultative member of Russian sponsored Collective Security Treaty organization Parliamentary Assembly while having also some cooperation agreements with NATO.

The U.S. is taking the WB6 and its neighboring states first of all - in accordance with its newly confirmed policy of permanent confrontation with Russia - as the new cold war “front line”, among others, by supporting the line that spans from the Black to the Baltic Sea (Romania, Poland, three Baltic States) and including also the states on the coast of Adriatic Sea, first of all Croatia, Albania and Montenegro.³⁷ During his visit to Russian neighbors Georgia and Baltic states, aimed at assuring the USA support against the “Russian aggression” the US Vice-President Pence visited on 2 August 2017 Montenegro where he delivered a speech at the Adriatic Charter Summit attended by leaders of Montenegro, Croatia, Albania and Slovenia (all NATO members) as well as Serbia, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Kosovo. He confirmed Washington’s commitment to the region and said Balkan states must be “resolute and uncompromising” toward Russia, which he called a “an unpredictable country that casts a shadow from the East”. He underlined that “Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force and, here in the Western Balkans, Russia has worked to destabilize the region, undermine democracies and divide you from each other and the rest of Europe”.

A permanent US military presence in south-east Europe is necessary to stabilize the region, argues a report by Washington-based think-tank the Atlantic Council, which also warns of increased Russian attempts to exert influence. It said that a U.S. military presence could be modelled on the current Camp Bondsteel facility in Kosovo.³⁸ The primary goal of the strategy of the U.S. is the confrontation with Russia and China in the context of the general policy of the new division of power on the world scale. Therefore are there many reasons why it is not possible to take for granted that the strategic interests of the EU and U.S. in Western Balkans are identical.

The EU policy should not follow the cold war philosophy, aimed at building new frontlines in confrontation with Russia, but should stimulate the progress of Balkans as an area of peace, security and progress - in the context

³⁷See: <http://three-seas.eu/>. Accessed on 10.6.2019.

³⁸See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-us-military-presence-atlantic-council/28886879.html>. Accessed on 24.9.2018.

of the future peace and stability in Europe in which construction and management should have the EU a decisive, autonomous role. Therefore it is necessary to avoid the situation as it had been in the case of Ukraine when the EU platform for the Vilnius summit on the eastern neighborhood in 2013 put Ukraine in "or-or" position and thus contributes to the subsequent dramatic events in this country with so huge, obviously long-term negative consequences for the stability, peace and development of Europe as a whole.³⁹

Instead of conclusions

If the new structure of the EU would keep its credibility then it should first of all declare strongly its "one voice" commitment to the close cooperation with the WB6 countries, aimed at realizing their overwhelming inclusion in the EU political and economic structure and the emerging common foreign, security and defense policy as well. If the EU wants to avoid history returning to haunt those who forget the lessons of the past, it will need to demonstrate by its actions the irreversibility of the accession process for the Western Balkans and treat the countries in the region as future members. The beginning of negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia in autumn 2019 will confirm the credibility of the EU policy towards WB6.⁴⁰

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³⁹ At the very beginning of that crisis the former American Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Henry Kissinger said: "The European Union must recognize that its bureaucratic dilatoriness and subordination of the strategic element to domestic politics in negotiating Ukraine's relationship to Europe contributed to turning a negotiation into a crisis. Foreign policy is the art of establishing priorities. To treat Ukraine as part of an East-West confrontation would scuttle for decades any prospect to bring Russia and the West - especially Russia and Europe - into a cooperative international system". Henry Kissinger: To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end. Washington

Post, 5 March 2014.

⁴⁰The situation in Albania is, on the opposite, not favourable for negotiations as even a civil war could emerge in the country if the Edi Rama regime will not find adequate solution with the opposition.

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