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WESTERN BALKANS BETWEEN GEOGRAPHY AND GEOPOLITICS

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Milan Simurdić

The Region between Geography and Geopolitics – from Serbia's Perspective

This volume of the journal *Foreign Policy Papers*, presented to the public by the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia and the Fridrich Ebert Stiftung Belgrade Office, represents one possible view of the most current and most important issues that define both the contemporary and recent history of the Western Balkan region, and as a result the title: Western Balkans between geography and geopolitics - . The first word - geography – is historically persistent and known to everyone. However, it obviously has not lost its mystique and complexity, and above all, the capacity to surprise those who ignore it. The most important reason for this is that several European macro-regions intersect in this small territory: the Balkan, the sub-Danubian and the Mediterranean, each with their own backgrounds, i.e. gravitational zones.

This leads us to the second word in our title, which is equally intriguing and perhaps even more complex. It is more easily influenced by human activity, primarily by politics with both victories and defeats. There is no doubt that we are living in a globalized world, that the unipolar moment was only an episode, that we have entered a multipolar era, and that the disappearance of global ideological competition, or the *cold war*, did not bring eternal peace. Rather, we have entered a cold peace, a world of *realpolitik*, where the centres of power, influence and global decision-making will shift much faster than before. It will be particularly difficult to speak about contemporary challenges or seek a solution for global governance, not to mention sustainable development or climate change.

Geopolitics, perhaps not so visible during the cold war, has experienced a *renaissance*. Not only are the great powers, to whom it is somehow *natural* and who have always contemplated it and made plans from the perspective of the so called *bigger picture*, attempting to gain even instantaneous advantages at the expense of their rivals, but so too are the small, almost peripheral players (primarily in an economic sense). At the same time, there are no signs that the arms race is slowing down. On the contrary, military budgets are on the rise in many countries, not to mention the right-wing political wave both in Europe and many other countries. Sometimes all this seems like *déjà vu*. Even the migrant crisis, which hit Europe like a tsunami and brought back images once imagined to be in the distant past and a nightmare of the last century, has to a large extent been geopolitically induced.

Our region, referred to in this volume as the Western Balkans because the authors believe it to be the best geographical and most accurate name for the purpose of the following analysis as it is in fact a sort of testing ground for the geopolitical competition being carried out in the immediate neighbourhood or in single countries within the region. And there are more than enough actors. Euphemistically speaking, next to the old imperial players and their assistants, some of whom are wearing *new robes*, there are new global actors, who skilfully combine geopolitics with geoeconomics. All this should not be surprising, because only the interests are permanent, but the question remains whether the developments are thought through to the end, particularly when it comes to our region and, ultimately, to Serbia.

Therefore, in attempts to outline and shed light on our region from the perspective of the relationship between geography and geopolitics, the authors, each in their own specific way, creatively and on the basis of their own knowledge and experience, deal with different topics with a main message – although demanding and apparently unachievable, there is no alternative to regional cooperation. This is true for the EU as well, because regardless of the crisis, it still represents the most successful peaceful, economic and even political project in the history of our continent.

Thus Prof. Jovan Teokarević, in his introductory text entitled “Modest Progress towards a Less Desirable European Union: European Integration of the Western Balkans 2015-2016”, points out that the integra-

tion process of Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates into the European Union has been slowed down in recent years, particularly from the perspective of earlier expectations, and that the situation has not significantly changed even after the welcomed formal progress registered in many countries during the observed period, between the spring of 2015 and the spring of 2016.

The main problem with integration is still the absence of the rule of law as well as the closely connected democratic performances of all countries of the region, which continued to deteriorate to a level that existed a decade ago. Particularly worrisome is the violation of freedom of speech and the media across the region in recent years.

The economic crisis, the multiple crises of the European Union and the renewal of political rivalry of the great powers in the Western Balkans are serious challenges both for integration and for the Union's leading role in the region, which is confronted with the growing influence of competitors, among which Russia is the most important and in the long run the most dangerous, as it presents a more and more desirable alternative to the pro-European course which has long dominated the region, warns Prof. Teokarević.

The specific problems of this post-conflict region have better chances of being resolved if they become part of the broader framework of the European Union's accession strategy. The author concludes that unless it wants to entirely jeopardize its once strong and now faltering transformative power and dominant influence, the Union cannot avoid taking a stronger role in the region, particularly in the countries that are furthest from membership,

Dr. Jelica Minić chose a topic which only the most precise, systematic and committed experts on international relations can deal with. The title of her paper is "April 2016 – The Media Image of the Western Balkans". Most of the diplomatic work is the perception of the participant or the country which is being observed or being negotiated with. The author states that it is exactly because of this that the image of the Western Balkans significantly influences the perceptions created about it both by the international community and those who make decisions concerning the region, as well as the region itself.

The analysis reveals the parallel effects of processes which often run in opposite directions, intersect or act in harmony, or unfold at different levels of political, economic and social realities in the region. The recent past is the heaviest burden of its societies, which in the 1990s experienced all kinds of destruction and not all due to war. The spirits of the past emerge on every occasion and essential reconciliation and lustration have not occurred yet.

The region has also been additionally exposed to instability which is not self-generated – it imports problems from its surroundings, particularly from the EU. These include the export of the economic crisis and disputes within the EU, the slowing down (even freezing) of the further enlargement process, the refugee crisis, terrorist threats and the strengthening of the extreme right wing in the EU, warns the author.

The region defends itself by reforms, negotiations with the EU and NATO, regional cooperation, attempts for the improvement of bilateral relations between neighbours, although there are no real, visible resolutions to the outstanding issues in bilateral relations. Some of the countries are attempting to expand their partnership circle, and so Russian influence is increasingly visible in the region, with the growing presence of China, Turkey and the Arab Emirates, both at the level of trade and investments and at the level of *soft power*, where, through the media, cultural exchanges, the financing of civil society organisations and political parties of similar orientation, their impact on social and political developments within the region is increasing. Already for years, the EU and the USA have not had any new initiative or an innovative approach, so the interested actors occupy an empty space. The analysis of the media coverage of the Western Balkans shows this clearly. Dr. Minić emphasizes that the analysis of the media coverage of the Western Balkans shows this clearly and she concludes that the media image of the region realistically reflects the situation, but is at the same time selective, in accordance with the already established stereotypes about the Western Balkans.

Dr. Dragan Đukanović writes about (if we can say) the *large picture of a small region*, entitled “(Post) electoral Reflections on Western Balkan Relations”. The author, whose academic work strictly and successfully focuses on our region, considers that besides the undeniable progress in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration, it is obvious that the region is again facing a rise in ethno-nationalism as well as the escalation of new forms of certain problems in bilateral relations. Moreover, it is obvious that, even two and a half decades after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the countries of the Western Balkan region are unable to resolve numerous mutual issues (borders, refugees, succession, status of minorities, etc.)

The author stresses that attempts have been made within the “Berlin Process” (after 2014) for clear identification and the subsequent resolution of these issues.

However, after the initial domination of the Federal Republic of Germany in the process, the subsequent presidency of other European states led to its *mitigation*. This will certainly effect and slow down the resolution of bilateral problems in the Western Balkans.

Dr. Đukanović mentions that electoral cycles in all Western Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, etc.) have additionally reaffirmed stagnation in the resolution of bilateral problems with their neighbours and a weakening of genuine efforts to overcome them.

In the final text of this publication, entitled “Serbian-Croatian Relations: Lost in Elections”, I will deal with both the current state of relations between Belgrade and Zagreb and with a short historical overview.

The historical overview is necessary for two reasons: first, because this year marks two decades since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations and the signing of the so-called agreement on the normalization of relations, while the second reason is related to the necessity to observe our relations in perspective, starting from the lowest point, which certainly was the bloody, fratricidal civil war. In addition, by only looking backwards can we estimate where we have arrived, where the obstacles are, what the experiences are, what to develop and what to forget. This does not mean that the outstanding issues and challenges have been resolved. At times they seem to dominate relations and they are capable of, easily and quickly, even too quickly, of bringing them back to the past, with all the regional repercussions and regardless of the international position of one or the other country.

Essentially, bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia have become something entirely new, unknown and even unexplored following Croatia’s accession to the European Union in 2013, and have remained *lost in elections*. They have accelerated with the pace and severity of rhetoric, while Croatia, in addition to being a classical bilateral partner, has the dimension of being a European Union member, the club to which Serbia wants to join at an accelerated pace. Therefore, relations between Serbia and Croatia are not only bilateral, regional and multilateral anymore, there is a new element - Croatia sits at the table and decides equally with others on our accession to the EU, defines measures for the opening and closing of negotiating chapters and holds discussions about us at European Parliament meetings.

There is no doubt that a certain advantage in European affairs, observed through the criterion of the EU integration level, is at this moment on the side of Zagreb. But there is also no doubt that the elementary interest of Croatia requires that all the countries of the Western Balkan region become EU members in the manner set out in Thessaloniki in 2003 and repeated on numerous occasions from the highest positions in the Union. Another issue is what the Union, that old *lady*, will be like when Serbia is ready for admission. What will remain and what we should rely on is long-term peace and stability as a prerequisite for development, and not a zero-sum game and short-term gains, such as the current attempt of Croatia to condition the opening of one negotiating chapter. However, as long as the region’s countries share the same foreign political goal of EU membership, i.e. advocate for the same system of values, we will have a strong stabilizing and developmental tool, that is the centripetal force of European integration, while the countries of the region which have already entered the EU will either have the *task* or be faced with expect-

tations to help their former compatriots or neighbours on that path. The recent comments of prominent politicians as well as the media from the most influential member states concerning Croatia's conditioning of the opening of certain negotiation chapters with Serbia, clearly speak about this.

Modest Progress towards a Less Desirable European Union: European Integration of the Western Balkans 2015-2016

In a one-year period, between the spring of 2015 and the spring of 2016, which this analysis deals with, relations between the Western Balkan countries and the European Union were marked by a combination of current and new trends. Several formal steps forward in the European integration of some countries of the region speak about a welcomed continuation of this long on-going process, which from today's perspective there still seems to be no end in sight. Along with these modest but important successes in the region's integration, the European Union is clearly losing its popularity among the citizens of the Western Balkans, as well as its co-called transformative power, i.e. the ability to influence in an efficient way and in harmony with its principles and standards, legal, political and economic changes within the countries aspiring to become future EU members.

The unexpected and, judging by the consequences, very difficult migrant crisis which started in 2015, introduced new dynamics into relations between the EU and the region. Disorientation, chaos and a lack of solidarity and common policy towards hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants have shown that the European Union is in a worse state than previously assumed and that the frequent suggestion of the possibility of its dissolution is not unfounded at all. At the same time it became obvious that for the success of a joint resolution of major common European problems, such as this crisis, differences between members and potential members must be left aside.

A step forward

During last year, the majority of countries in the region registered progress in the European integration process. By opening three new negotiating chapters in 2015, Montenegro, which had started its accession negotiations in June 2012, solidified its leading position in relation to others, with twenty-two chapters opened so far, two of which have been temporarily closed. Serbia is way behind Montenegro in this process, whose membership negotiations with the EU officially began in January 2014, but the first two negotiating chapters were only opened in December 2015.

In the second group of a total of six Western Balkan countries, which consists of official candidacies for the membership of Macedonia and Albania, no formal progress was made in the observed period. Albania became a candidate only in July 2014 and it obviously has a lot of reform-related tasks to perform in order to start membership negotiations with the EU. The country's government rather optimistically expects that this might happen as early as late 2016 or 2017. Although Macedonia achieved candidate status in December 2005, due to many years of lagging behind with regard to reforms, and because of the ongoing political crisis at the moment, today it has less chance of starting accession negotiations than it had during most of the last decade.

The third and most backward group in the region in the European integration process consists of potential candidates for EU membership – Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo. Many years of stagnation on their respective European paths was finally terminated in the period under observation here. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) of BiH with the European Union, signed seven years ago, came into force in July 2015. In February 2016, BiH also submitted a long-awaited request for EU membership. The Kosovo SAA was signed in September 2015, and came into force in April 2016.

¹ Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade.

A general conclusion from the described formal steps forward in the European integration of the Western Balkan countries could be that EU enlargement to the Western Balkans was continued after all, contrary to earlier pessimistic forecasts that claimed it would end with Croatia's accession to the Union in 2013. This occurred, however, in an extremely complicated period, burdened with the economic and migrant crises in the region, as well as the multiple crises within the European Union itself. The greatest progress, although related to the initial steps in this very long process, was recorded in the countries which so far had the biggest problems with integration. This is, of course, important as it testifies that after several years the process has finally been unblocked and could contribute to stronger motivation for further reforms, as well as to a more balanced pace of European integration of the entire region. At the same time, it is not a guarantee that in the near future we shall see a convergence of more and less success, or that the huge problems shared by both will be overcome.

The most important challenges

When it comes to problems, there are still too many of them in relation to the length of time and the huge efforts invested in their solution. More importantly, many of them are very specific and are not directly connected with the legal legacy of the European Union (*acquis communautaire*), which aspiring members are obliged to adopt and implement in exchange for the Union's membership card, or with the so-called Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, and they are also different in relation to the Union's experiences during the previous waves of enlargement.

The Western Balkans' biggest problems in its European integration can be classified into three groups that will be briefly discussed here and can offer a rather clear picture of the region. First, there are *common problems*, shared by all countries in the region, second, there are problems that are *specific for particular countries*, and third, there are external problems which threaten further successful European integration of the region.

In order to assess the situation and the integration perspectives in particular countries regarding the possible resolution of all these problems, the most recent reports of the European Commission of November 2015 will be used here, in addition to other sources.² In comparison with earlier annual reports, their methodology has been improved in three ways. First of all, in order to emphasize the importance of and the continuity in resolving the most acute issues, a multiannual enlargement strategy has been introduced instead of the previous annual strategies, which covers the entire mandate of the actual European Commission, until the year 2019. Also, the assessment of progress in the reforms required of the aspirants for the first time places stronger emphasis on the *implementation* of the adopted legislation rather than on its adoption only, as was the case before. Finally, for the first time an assessment scale has been introduced, both for the *current state of play* in certain areas in relation to EU standards and for the progress the country has achieved within the previous twelve months.³

Both the state of play and the achieved annual progress are assessed on a five-tier scale, graded from one to five. The state of play grades are as follows: 1. Early stage, 2. Some level of preparation, 3. Moderately prepared, 4. Good level of preparation and 5. Well advanced. The grades for the assessment of progress are: 1. Backsliding, 2. No progress, 3. Some progress, 4. Good progress and 5. Very good progress. This new methodology enables a more precise identification of progress or the lack of it in reforms in certain areas, as well as a comparison across the countries and across certain areas in different countries.

Before moving on to the details, it should be said that the overall impression arising from the evaluation of the most recent European Commission reports is – speaking in school jargon – the following: the region as a whole mostly got *only passing grades in most areas*, but has unsatisfactory grades as well as just

² http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/package/index_en.htm

³ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-6040_en.htm

a few better than a pass. Or, if translated into the new Commission's assessment, the situation seems to be below average. When it comes to the current level of preparation for European Union standards, the average grade for the entire region is between *some level of preparation* and the *moderately prepared*. In a small number of cases it is *early stage*, whereas a good level of preparation and well advanced are very rarely mentioned. As for progress in the past year, the most frequent assessments are *some progress* or *no progress*. *Good progress* and *very good progress* are far less mentioned, as well as *backsliding*.

Overall, the European Commission concluded in November 2015 that the level of preparation of Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for European Union membership was *low* and that the progress realized in the previous year was *small*. An assessment was made thereupon, whereby there was no disagreement either within expert or political circles: none of the Western Balkan countries will be ready for membership of the European Union during the mandate of the incumbent European Commission, i.e. until the end of 2019. It should be kept in mind, of course, that there are big differences between the countries in the region, as well as between the situation and progress in specific areas. These gloomy but realistic findings should be, nevertheless, taken quite seriously into account when future action plans are being drafted and when contemplating future perspectives. Some other independently created *parallel* reports not only confirm the findings presented in the Commission's report, but are even more critical about their national governments' results in European integration.⁴

Common problems

If we now move on to the first group of problems and challenges faced by the countries of the region in European integration – those are the *common problems* shared in different degrees by all the countries – at the top of the list without doubt is *the lack of or insufficient level of the rule of law*. It is more about an entire group of interconnected problems which under this common name are not only mentioned in the Commission's reports, but in numerous similar sources, too. It might be better to encompass this entire group with the expression "*lack of good or democratic governance*". In both cases the point is that across the region, although to a different extent, even if appropriate and good laws have been adopted, there are no guarantees for the respect of human rights and freedom, judiciary is neither efficient nor independent, but is, on the contrary, subject to political influences, corruption is broadly widespread, while the fight against organized crime has had only little success. Institutions are politicized and non-transparent, as is the judiciary – under the influence of executive power over which there is no efficient control. In addition, the conditions for the implementation of laws are limited by the inefficiency of the public administrations of all the countries, where clientelism flourishes, and all these countries are too frequently *hijacked* by powerful private interests, and classified as weak, in the sense that they are incapable of providing important public well-being for their citizens. In recent years, there has been a particularly disturbing deterioration in freedom of expression and the independence of the media – the very foundations of good governance, rule of law and democracy. Therefore the Commission draws particular attention to: "Freedom of expression and the media remains a particular concern."⁵ Equally dangerous is the growth of intolerance, and the disrespect of all kinds of minority rights.

Democracy has also been backsliding during the last few years. After the encouraging growth of democratic indicators in the first half of the last decade, the democratic performances in the region are at this moment on average on a level of ten years ago.⁶ In tune with the growth of autocratic tendencies in Europe and in the entire world, the scourge of populism and illiberal democracy is spreading across the region, while personal and almost unrestricted power of leading politicians has become a feature of almost all political regimes in the Western Balkans.

⁴ <http://eu-monitoring.ba/en/alternative-progress-report-2015-political-criteria/>

⁵ *EU enlargement Strategy*, 10 Nov 2015, p. 5.

⁶ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit* 2016, p. 11.

The lack of the rule of law or good governance is admittedly the biggest problem which all other post-communist countries faced during their preparation for accession to the EU. Many of them even now, more than a decade after they joined the Union within the 2004 and 2007 enlargement waves, suffer from the same problems as the countries of the Western Balkan region, although to a smaller extent.⁷ As the problem with the rule of law is even more emphasized in the Western Balkans, the European Union in 2012 established new rules, according to which the countries in the accession process to the Union must at an early stage of negotiations start to seriously address these issues and continue to do so until the end of negotiations. Ongoing negotiations, based on the conditionality principle and with only a temporary closing of negotiation chapters were introduced in October 2005, when negotiations with Croatia and Turkey began. This new approach implies also a *balance* in progress, i.e. the obligation to take into account some topics and areas, or chapters, that are not to be neglected at the expense of others.

The new strategy of 2012 on the rule of law, called *fundamentals first*, envisages that the negotiating chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) should be among the first to be opened and the last to be closed at the very end of the negotiations. Montenegro opened negotiations on these chapters in December 2013, a year and a half after the start of negotiations, and Serbia expects this to happen before summer 2016, which is two and a half years after the decision to start negotiations.

In order to put additional emphasis on the issue of the rule of law and engage the countries in this respect as soon as possible, since 2011 the European Commission has carried out a special programme with Bosnia and Herzegovina dealing with the independence of the judiciary (the so-called *structured talks*).⁸ The same topics are the main backbone of similar programmes in Albania (within the so-called *high level talks* on key priorities)⁹, and the European Commission recently made it clear that the beginning of negotiations on Albania's membership of the EU would mostly depend on reforms in this field.¹⁰ The *high level talks*, which began between Macedonia and the EU in March 2012, also about key priorities, are not a replacement for real accession negotiations, but a *bridge towards them*, as they say.¹¹

The European Commission has been criticised lately for neglecting the issue of the rule of law in certain countries on account of other priorities. Serbia is usually given as the case in point, and although the EU has expressed a set of serious objections concerning the rule of law in this country, according to the critics it has been soft on Serbia because of the Serbian Government's conciliatory attitude in negotiations on the status of Kosovo.¹² Something similar happened with regard to the European Union's policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, when in late 2014, within the framework of the British-German initiative which during the following year became an initiative¹³ of the EU, with the aim of putting an end to the blockade of the BiH integration process, the legal and political implications of the verdict in the Sejdić-Finci case by the European Court of Human Rights practically ceased to be the leading condition for the further integration of BiH.¹⁴

⁷ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "The Widening Implementation Gap: The Impact of EU Accession on Governance in the Western Balkans", u: Eviola Prifti (ed), *The European Future of the Western Balkans. Thessaloniki @10* (2003-2013), EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013, s. 35-44.

⁸ http://europa.ba/?page_id=556.

⁹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-983_en.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/tirana-hopes-to-open-eu-accession-talks-this-year-03-04-2016>

¹¹ Mladen Karadjoski, "The High Level Accession Dialogue for Macedonia: Advantages and Disadvantages", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2015.

¹² Marko Stojić, "EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Out of Sight, Out of Mind?", *Europeum*, Prague, February 2016, p. 7.

¹³ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/dsee/dv/0507_11/0507_11en.pdf

¹⁴ <http://balkanfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief.pdf>

Another major common problem is the deep *economic crisis*, which is the result of the global and European crises that began in 2008, and is equally a consequence of the insufficiently reformed national economies in the region, which were unprepared for the simultaneous decrease of export opportunities and foreign investments. Despite the high economic growth experienced in the middle of the last decade, the Western Balkans met the global economic crisis unprepared, and following the two strong blows of the crisis – in 2009 and 2012 – the region fell into a long-lasting recession, and in the meantime has been unable to recover with enhanced economic performances, unlike a number of new EU member states. In the last few years there has been a revival of economic growth, but long-term sustainability can only be expected after 2017.¹⁵ Meanwhile, there has been a dangerous increase in external debt and budget deficits. The pre-crisis high unemployment rates have additionally risen (the average unemployment rate in the region is now about 22%), and several hundreds of thousands of people in the region have lost their jobs. Of particular concern is the extremely high youth unemployment, which in Macedonia and Serbia is at a level of 50%, in Bosnia and Herzegovina almost 60% and in Kosovo above 60%.

Wiser after the Greek crisis, in April 2014 the European Union introduced a package of new accession-related requirements for the Western Balkan countries which is based on its own new measures on economic governance and the constant control of the budget deficit and the indebtedness of eurozone members. A similar, yet less formal control of budgets and debts has been introduced, and the countries' governments have since then been obliged to submit to the Union their annual programmes of economic reforms, as well as two-year programmes for the increase of competitiveness and growth. The EU finance ministers are then supposed to offer recommendations for resolving the problems.¹⁶ Although the measures are relatively new and their range is for now limited,¹⁷ they are nevertheless important because they should prevent irresponsible behaviour of governments, as was the case in Greece, and can also assist the countries in the region to build efficient economies capable of coping with competition on the Union's market after accession. The present gap between the development of the Western Balkan and the EU economies does not offer hope for a fast convergence: on average, the development of the region is only at 30% of the EU average, with big differences between the countries.

Specific problems

Apart from the joint problems, the region is burdened by quite *specific problems* which the EU did not have to deal with in the previous waves of enlargement. These problems are part of the heavy burden of the past, and in from particular recent history, i.e. the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the accompanying armed conflicts during the 1990s. For European integration, two problems feature prominently due to their weight and significance: the first is the still *unresolved status of Kosovo*, while the other is the contentious official *name of Macedonia*. Both belong to the so-called identity issues, and are well beyond the framework of the Union's *acquis* and its traditional approach to enlargement. Neither of them can, however, be omitted from any attempt aimed at the stabilization of and progress in the Balkans, including European integration of the countries of the region.

The Kosovo issue is, by and large, far more difficult and complicated than the issue of the official name of Macedonia, although in principle there are no easy identity issues, as they involve emotional components as well. That is why it is not easy to say how easy or difficult it is to find a compromise between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo (or, even more precisely, between the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians) about controversial opinions as to whether Kosovo can (as Albanians claim) or cannot (as Serbs claim)

¹⁵ <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/pubdocs/publicdoc/2016/4/199171459965810138/SEERER9-for-web-eng.pdf>

¹⁶ Christian Danielsson, "A New Approach to Economic Governance and Growth in the Western Balkans" in: *Europe Policy Blog*, <http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/biepag/node/62>

¹⁷ Dušan Reljić, "EU Economic Instruments in the Enlargement Process: Evaluation of the New Approach", in: Valeska Esch and Juliane Kabus (eds), *EU Enlargement: Between Conditionality, Progress and Enlargement Fatigue*, The Aspen Institute Germany, 2014.

become an independent country after its unilateral secession from Serbia in February 2008, which in the late 1990s was preceded by a massive violation of Albanian people's human rights by Serbia's security forces. Putting all legal and similar considerations aside, an issue with the same type of uncertainty is the dilemma as to whether the Republic of Macedonia should maintain its name as is in their Constitution, as the Macedonians claim, or cannot, as the Greeks claim.

Without entering into the history of both conflicts and attempts for their resolution, our aim is to draw attention to the fact that in contrast to the name issue, the other issue has in fact more chances of success, judging by the results that have been achieved in the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations, which have been mediated by the EU since 2011. The chance of success rests upon another innovation the Union has introduced into its Western Balkan's accession strategy: this time around about the most difficult – identity issues. The new approach includes the problem within the negotiating framework and so makes its solution more probable, because as progress is made regarding the solution, membership draws closer. This is a supplement and improvement to the so-called *member state-building* approach, i.e. the establishment and strengthening of the institutions of the aspiring members, which the EU has been implementing in the region for years now, but with many problems.¹⁸ Serbia and Kosovo accepted that in exchange for progress in integration they would attempt to normalize mutual relations through negotiations. Before the entry of at least one of them (most probably – Serbia) into the EU, the normalization of relations will have to be formalized by a legally binding bilateral agreement.¹⁹

The dispute concerning the official name of Macedonia is more difficult precisely because of the lack of such an external framework and the structure closely connected with the integration process. Although the European Commission from 2009 to 2014 recommended in their reports that accession negotiations commence with Macedonia, this could not have occurred because Greece, as a party in the dispute and an EU member state, was in a position to block Macedonia's progress towards EU membership (as well as NATO membership) for years.

After the initial success of the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, when in addition to a large number of other practical arrangements, the first agreement on the normalisation of relations was signed in April 2013, the EU-led process came to a standstill. Upon the adoption of another landmark agreement in August 2015, on the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, mostly as a result of pressure from the opposition in Kosovo, negotiations at the level of prime ministers were practically discontinued, unlike the technical negotiations. The prospects of the successful continuation and completion of negotiations are not quite certain due to the unpopularity of the decisions of both governments at *home*. This process showed, however, how the *Europeanization* of a complicated and sensitive problem can contribute to its resolution. In the case of Serbia, its 35th negotiating chapter – opened at the very beginning of the accession negotiations – is devoted only to this issue and Serbia's entire progress in integration depends on it.

The next set of specific problems which can significantly influence the speed and efficiency of European Union integration, deal with *regional and bilateral cooperation*. State and non-state cooperation in the Western Balkans is closely related to European integration: it is at the same time both the prerequisite for and the instrument of integration. Post-communist Central European countries did not have a formal obligation in their European agreements to cooperate with their neighbours. Such obligations, as a condition for progress in EU integration, were, however, introduced into the stabilization and association agreements of the Western Balkan countries in order to overcome the consequences of armed and ethnic conflicts in the region during the 1990s.

¹⁸ Vidi: Florian Bieber, "Building Impossible States? State Building Strategies and EU Membership in the Western Balkans", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2011, 63:10, p. 1783-1802; Davide Denti, "The Europeanisation of Candidate Countries: The Case for a Shift to the Concept of EU Member State Building", *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 1(1), p. 9-32.

¹⁹ http://www.emins.org/uploads/useruploads/Pregovori/pregovaracki_okvir.pdf

After several years of ups and downs, certain progress was registered within the region during the observed period, but was challenged on a number of occasions by the deterioration of mutual relations and the outbreak of old and new conflicts.²⁰ Serbian-Albanian negotiations on the status of Kosovo is a good example of this pattern of behaviour, where for a time there is constructive cooperation, which is then quickly and easily followed by backsliding – to stagnation and repeated conflict. Similar hot-cold dynamics has been registered in the complex relationship between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (i.e. relations between Serbs and Bosniaks), and regarding this the repeated meetings of top politicians and the governments of these two countries, including the presence of Serbia's Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, at the commemoration on the site of genocide against Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 2015 should be mentioned. On several occasions between these meetings, mainly due to internal politics such as the Serbian-Russian blockade of the UN Resolution on the 20th anniversary of genocide at Srebrenica, as well as some verdicts of the Hague Tribunal (against R. Karadžić and V. Šešelj in 2016), harsh polemics were renewed and old insults exchanged.

Serbian-Albanian relations followed the same pattern, ranging from significant improvement at numerous meetings and joint initiatives of the Albanian and Serbian Prime Ministers to a radical deterioration of relations, such as after the football match between the national teams of Serbia and Albania in Belgrade in October 2014. In August 2015, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina finally achieved agreement on borders, which will have to be repeated in many more cases, as most border demarcation lines between former Yugoslav republics have still not been agreed upon. Many legal issues concerning the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and which affect the ordinary citizens much more than the countries, still remain outstanding. At the end of this very short review it should be mentioned that in 2015 relations between Croatia and Serbia also radically deteriorated, but for different reasons, ranging from electoral contexts to the refugee crisis, during which in early October the Serbian-Croatian border was temporarily closed and the two neighbours even introduced mutual trade sanctions.²¹

In order to enhance the faltering enlargement to the Balkans and to offer additional possibilities for regional cooperation, in 2014 the European Union launched the so-called Berlin Process. At the summits of the EU and the Western Balkans, first in Berlin in August of that year and then in Vienna a year later, the EU promised to help, but also requested meaningful mutual cooperation of Balkan partners in infrastructural regional projects within the areas of traffic and energy. Although without significant financial assistance, the Berlin Process has meanwhile become a framework and motivation for much more pronounced cooperation among the countries of the region in overcoming problems regarding the lack of infrastructural connections, and is a basis for common economic development. Even in this context, however, earlier problems plaguing regional cooperation in the Western Balkans have not been overcome.²² Although there are currently more than fifty regional initiatives and organizations for cooperation in many areas, this cooperation is still more dependent on external factors, namely the EU rather than the countries of the region, thus lacking so-called local ownership. Likewise, greater economic cooperation and integration within the region is also limited by the fact that the EU is by far the biggest foreign trading partner of all the countries. Regional cooperation could perhaps be more developed if it were institutionalised, or if the Regional Cooperation Council had a more independent coordination role vis-a-vis the region's governments. Reconciliation among the people and countries of the Western Balkans is also a necessary condition for cooperation, but it receives insufficient attention from the power holders in all the countries, particularly as they refrain from using a self-critical approach to the events of the recent past.

²⁰ More about this in Dragan Đukanović's contribution to this publication.

²¹ More about this in Milan Simurdić's contribution to this publication.

²² Jovan Teokarević, „Ograničenja regionalne saradnje“, in Jelica Minić (ed), *Izazovi spoljne politike Srbije*, Fondacija Fridrih Ebert, Evropski pokret u Srbiji, Beograd, 2015.

The Vienna summit of the Berlin Process adopted a very important declaration on the resolution of bilateral conflicts as a condition for better regional development, thus drawing attention to an issue which has been present, but long neglected.²³ The Berlin Process itself, however, also suffers from serious defects: it lacks local ownership over regional cooperation, the implementation of decisions is insufficiently transparent and so far, only six out of the twenty-eight EU member states have joined the Process. Particularly worrying is the counter-productive absence of all EU member states which are neighbours of the Western Balkan countries. The next Paris summit, in July 2016, will be successful if, among other things, there is much broader representation of European Union member states. The neighbours of the future Union members from the Balkans are key actors in the accession process and they should actively and responsibly participate by helping their neighbours rather than often disabling them through additional bilateral conditioning, in the way Croatia is currently preventing Serbia from opening certain negotiating chapters, even though it will have to satisfy the high requirements of the entire Union.

The external context of Western Balkan integration and the transformative power of the European Union

To the final group of problems and challenges – those not of an internal Western Balkan context, but external – we will pay less attention to because, although they are very important, they represent a smaller challenge than the internal ones, and also because the region itself cannot influence them much. We shall also link this analysis to the issue of whether the European Union still has sufficient transformative power to provide incentive and guidance for reforms in the countries of the region.

The biggest problems of the external context for the countries in the EU integration process are the multiple and deep *crises of the European Union*, which for several years has not been capable of finding solutions either for the economic or for the institutional crises, as well as those dealing with its own identity, democratic deficit and political leadership. In such circumstances – where the possible dissolution of the Union is openly debated – the countries awaiting membership are naturally losing confidence in the EU leadership and its readiness to continue to receive new members in the future. The former *magnetism* of membership is thus disappearing while the popularity of the EU option is on the wane across the Western Balkan region, in parallel with the reform obligations of local governments. Within the Union itself, instead of the previous glorification of the enlargement policy as the most successful part of the foreign and the overall policy, and the most efficient method of overcoming divisions in Europe, *enlargement fatigue* reigns and open resistance to enlargement has increased, so this policy has lost even the strategic significance it previously had within the overall EU policy. In the region, *enlargement fatigue* was followed by *reform fatigue*, and the interaction of these two closely connected factors led to the slowing down of EU integration.²⁴ There was also the *nationalization* of EU policies whereby member states themselves deliver further integration conditions to the aspirants in the region, which are often at odds with EU policy.

The *refugee crisis*, which accelerated in 2015, was an additional test which the Union failed to pass due to disunity, disagreements among members and a lack of solidarity and joint action. The countries of the region on the so-called Balkan refugee route (Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia) bore the heavy burden of about 600 thousand people this year, although they were only in transit to their desired destination targets in Northern Europe. In contrast to many EU member states, they showed even the readiness to help migrants, and with the contribution of civil society organisations, they became better organised over time. The coordination of assistance and transport within the region was a problem during a good part of the crisis, particularly in autumn 2015 up until the closure of the *Balkan route* in early

²³ <http://balkanfund.org/2015/08/joint-declaration-adopted-by-western-balkans-governments-representatives-in-vienna-countries-will-not-obstruct-neighbours-progress-in-eu-integrations/>

²⁴ Jovan Teokarevic, "Erweiterungsmüdigkeit in der EU und Reformmüdigkeit in den Ländern des Westlichen Balkan", *Der Donauraum*, Jahrgang 53, No. 1, 2013.

March 2016. Within the context of European integration, the refugee crisis clearly showed that when resolving common and major pan-European problems, there is not and should not be a difference between countries with an EU membership card and those without one. It is not certain that such a message from the migrant crisis will influence the improvement of opportunities in the speeding up of Balkan and potential EU candidate membership. Some of the countries of the region, Serbia in particular, have earned deserved praise and additional points within EU institutions for their good behaviour during the crisis, which they will rightly try to use in their future course of integration.

With regard to the crisis in Ukraine, which started at the end of 2013 and was followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and its participation in the civil war in eastern Ukraine, *relations between the West and Russia radically deteriorated*, great power politics in Europe was renewed and the wider area of the Balkans found itself in the *line of fire*, i.e. it once again became the site of dangerous competition between the great powers. In December 2015, NATO extended an invitation to Montenegro for membership, which at the same time could further accelerate its integration into the European Union (as was the case with all post-communist countries which became EU members in 2004 and 2007) and could also lead to dangerous internal divisions within Montenegro itself, where a part of the opposition and the majority of the Serbian national minority are strongly opposed to such a course.

Within this context of deteriorating conditions for further EU enlargement and the reduced popularity of the EU option, the *competitors of the Union in the Balkans* are trying to fill the newly created vacuum and impose their own interests, with direct adverse effects on further European integration in the region. While Turkey has in recent years lost considerable influence in the region, and not only among the Bosniak population, Russia is positioning itself very ambitiously through information and propaganda campaigns, non-transparent assistance to anti-European forces, and as the dominant supplier within the region of natural gas.²⁵ Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are the main points of growing Russian influence, because Russia is for the majority of their citizens a most desirable supporter and partner, more than the European Union. According to some, the growing influence of Russia is oriented primarily towards the termination of further NATO enlargement in the Balkans, as well the termination of further EU enlargement. An alternative interpretation emphasizes that Russia is neither able nor willing to stop the enlargement of the European Union to the Balkans; its ambition is, on the contrary, to solidify as much as possible its influence in the countries of the region during their accession to the Union, so that later, when they become EU member states, through them they can influence the Union itself in the long term.²⁶

We shall end the review of problems and challenges which the Western Balkan countries are confronted with on their path to the European Union by mentioning recently renewed requests from the European Union to *engage as actively as possible in the resolution of serious internal political crises* in some countries of the region. The best examples are Bosnia and Herzegovina from earlier, and Macedonia from the beginning of 2015. During 2014 and 2015, the EU was directly and actively engaged in BiH in order to prevent a further long-term blockade of reforms and EU integration of this country. The Union helped local political actors to jointly formulate a minimum programme of priorities in the reforms around which they could unite and implement.²⁷ EU assistance continued in the next step as well – the creation of a coordination mechanism for European integration in order to overcome political and administrative disunity at a BiH level, with the aim of harmonising the work of all authorities, and making them more efficient. However, many tasks remain to be done if BiH is to function as a united country, at least in the areas of importance for European integration.

²⁵ See: Francisco de Borja Lasheras, with Vessela Cherneva and Fredrik Wesslau, *Return to Instability: How Migration and Great Power Politics Threaten the Western Balkans*, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2016.

²⁶ http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?pub_id=6018&cat_id=3

²⁷ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/dsee/dv/0507_11/0507_11en.pdf

The intervention of the European Union in the political life of Macedonia was the result of a serious political crisis which has been ongoing in this country since the end of 2014, and is reflected in the total termination of any communication and cooperation between the government and the opposition. The opposition accuses the government of mass wiretapping and the introduction of non-democratic methods of rule, while the government accuses the opposition of attempts to come to power using non-institutionalized methods. During 2015, the EU became a mediator between the two political sides and helped to formulate conditions for the organisation of early parliamentary elections and the involvement of representatives from the opposition in the interim government, which was to prepare the elections. Due to the incomplete fulfilment of conditions for elections, the opposition, with the assistance of the EU and the USA, managed to postpone the elections initially planned for April 2016 to early June; however, it remains to be seen whether it will be possible to hold them even then.

Both in the case of BiH and Macedonia, there is a new, higher level of the Union's intervention in the very core of the internal political life of these two countries. The EU assessed that its mediating intervention is necessary due to the long-term and potentially dangerous lack of consensus among the leading political forces and ethnic groups of these countries on priorities concerning their future functioning, as well as further reforms, including their European integration. These interventions by the Union showed very clearly that the transformative power of the Union and its influence in BiH and Macedonia have been almost entirely exhausted in the last few years, and that the ruling political elites managed to abuse the European integration framework for their own purposes. It remains to be seen whether the current, more pronounced involvement of the Union in these two countries will increase EU influence and its faltering transformative power, both there and in the entire region.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we first concluded that the process of integration of Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates into the European Union has slowed down in recent years, particularly from the perspective of earlier expectations, and the situation has not significantly changed even after the welcomed formal progress registered in many countries during the observed period, between the spring of 2015 and the spring of 2016.

The main problem with integration is still the absence of the rule of law, while the closely connected democratic performances of all the countries of the region continued to deteriorate to a level which existed a decade ago. Particularly worrisome is the violation of freedom of speech and the media across the region in the last few years.

The economic crisis, the multiple crises of the European Union and the renewal of political rivalry of the great powers in the Western Balkans are serious challenges both for integration and for the Union's leading role in the region, which is confronted with the growing influence of competitors, among which Russia is the most important and in the long run the most dangerous, as it presents a more and more desirable alternative to the pro-European course which has long dominated the region.

Specific problems of this post-conflict region are more likely to be resolved if they become part of the broader framework of the European Union's accession strategy. Unless it wants to entirely jeopardize its once strong and now faltering transformative power and dominant influence, the Union cannot avoid an increased role in the region, particularly in the countries that are furthest from membership.

April 2016 – The Media Image of the Western Balkans

Introduction

The media image of the Western Balkans significantly influences the perceptions created about it in the international arena and among those who make decisions concerning the region, as well as within the region itself.

The following analysis includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, and the region as a whole. It investigates the manner in which the media covered events in the region in a short period, from 1st to 15th April 2016. The analysis encompasses only national, regional, European and Western printed media, which gives a sufficiently indicative, yet incomplete insight into the image created about the region, bearing in mind the dominant role of electronic media in informing the public, as well as the increasing role of social networks where information is shared.

The text involves important regional and national events that occurred in the Western Balkan countries, the reactions provoked in these countries and within the region, as well as their effects on bilateral and multilateral relations within the region and on the future process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The analysis reveals the parallel effects of processes which often run in opposite directions, intersect or act in harmony or unfold at different levels of political, economic and social realities in the region. The recent past is the heaviest burden of its societies, which during the 1990s experienced destruction in all aspects, and not all due to war. The spirits of the past emerge on every occasion and essential reconciliation and lustration have not yet occurred.

The region has also been additionally exposed to instability which is not self-generated – it imports problems from its surroundings, particularly from the EU. These include the export of the economic crisis and disputes within the EU, the slowing down (even freezing) of the further enlargement process, the refugee crisis, terrorist threats and the strengthening of the extreme right wing in the EU.

The region defends itself by reforms, negotiations with the EU and NATO, regional cooperation, attempts for the improvement of bilateral relations between neighbours, although there are no real, visible resolutions to the outstanding issues in bilateral relations. Some of the countries are attempting to expand their partnership circle, and so Russian influence is increasingly visible in the region, with the growing presence of China, Turkey and the Arab Emirates, both at the level of trade and investments and at the level of *soft power*, where, through the media, cultural exchanges, the financing of civil society organisations and political parties of similar orientation, their impact on social and political developments within the region is increasing. Already for years, the EU and the USA have not had any new initiative or an innovative approach, so the interested actors occupy an empty space. An analysis of the media coverage of the Western Balkans shows this clearly.

Ministers in Durres – good vibrations

In early April, there were still comments being made about the meeting of foreign affair ministers of the Western Balkan countries,²⁹ which was held in Durres, Albania, on 30th and 31st March. The ministers adopted a joint statement confirming their readiness for further cooperation on the Connectivity Agenda

²⁸ President of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia, a former diplomat.

²⁹ The Commissioner Johannes Hahn, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council Goran Svilanović, Head of the Visegrad Group, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomir Zaorálek and high representatives of the ministries of European or foreign affairs of France and Italy also participated in the meeting.

and issues of common interest. Commissioner Hahn emphasized that at the Brussels meeting between the Commission and the ministers of transport and energy of the six Western Balkans countries, it was agreed to develop a master plan in the area of hydropower, together with the strengthening of the existing energy networks in the region, which was the focus of the Berlin Process.

The Western Balkan Six Summit in Paris was in fact the main topic of the Durres meeting, where an agreed approach to 5 key issues was adapted:

- » The full implementation of measures agreed upon at the Vienna Summit so that all energy and infrastructure projects can get the appropriate funding in 2016;
- » A new focus on the youth, including student programmes and professional training;
- » The resolution of bilateral issues in the region;
- » Cooperation among Western Balkan countries and the EU to cope with the refugee crisis, as well as the successful fight against terrorism and violent extremism;
- » Active participation of civil society in facilitating the qualitative implementation of regional agreements.³⁰

It is interesting that all the countries of the region unanimously supported visa liberalization for all Western Balkan citizens, in other words the introduction of visa liberalization for Kosovo.

Other news at this meeting was the expression of strong collective support by the Visegrad Group for the countries in the region that are in the process of European integration, the sharing of experiences, the demonstration of the effectiveness of a regional approach and the endorsement of Western Balkan interests in the EU, where support for further enlargement lost momentum due to the numerous crises within the Union itself.³¹

On this occasion, the BiH and Macedonian heads of diplomatic corps signed an agreement on joint (shared) diplomatic-consular offices.

In Tirana, the Western Balkan Fund, modelled after the Visegrad Fund, was soon to start work as well as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, which earlier at the Berlin Summit was a common initiative of the Prime Ministers of Albania and Serbia.

The Hague Tribunal – a cruel April Fools’ Day joke

Then there was April 1st 2016. A week after the International Tribunal for war crimes in the territory of the former Yugoslavia sentenced the war leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić, to 40 years in jail, there was another verdict. This time, against the leader of the Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj, who during the 1990s directly participated in building a war ideology in Serbia and in the incitement of violence against other nations living there, as well as in BiH and Croatia. He was acquitted and many saw it as a cruel April fools’ joke.

The announcement of the two verdicts for the major indictees of the Hague Tribunal within only one week, provoked an eruption of emotions – anger on the one hand and joy among those who now had no doubts that at the parliamentary elections in Serbia on 24th April, representatives of the Radical Party would be elected to the National Assembly, including perhaps the recent indictee. Besides inflammatory rhetoric between Zagreb-Belgrade and Sarajevo-Belgrade, the verdicts, particularly the latter, caused

³⁰ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/03/30/meeting-of-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-western-balkans-held-in-durres/>

³¹ Authors: Ditmir Bushati, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Albania and Lubomír Zaorálek, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic, “The Visegrad Group & the Western Balkans: Enhanced cooperation towards a common future”, see on the website: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/04/12/the-visegrad-group-the-western-balkans-enhanced-cooperation-towards-a-common-future/>

serious re-examination of the role and credibility of the court, and even concerns about the further development of international humanitarian law.³²

Carl Bildt, the former Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs and peace mediator in the former Yugoslavia, gave the following comment: “Reading Karadzic and Seselj’s judgements in parallel is a strange experience. They give very different accounts of the nature of the war in Bosnia”.³³

Out of the three judges who made the final decision, Judge Flavia Lattanzi, was decisively against the acquittal verdict and her opinion was dissenting, while the Prosecutor, Serge Brammertz, announced the possibility of an appeal against the verdict. With the second verdict the Hague Tribunal gave reasons for a new avalanche of mutual allegations and tensions in the region and contributed to the strengthening of right-wing extremism, particularly in Serbia, which was already clearly obvious in the parliamentary election campaign to be held on 24th April.

Thus the aforementioned events at the very end of March and in early April, in two entirely different ways highlighted the continuously turbulent situation in the Western Balkans. The first event, which was important for the future of the region, received the deserved media coverage in the countries which participated in the meeting (very detailed in Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro, fair in BiH, very limited in Serbia). In the world media it was barely covered – good news from the Balkans is not interesting.

The other news about the Hague verdicts and their consequences on relations in the region, was not only covered in the Western Balkans, but also further afield (BBC, AFP, etc). Bad news from the region is expected and common. It matched the media coups from the previous year and the last few months, connected to Srebrenica and Operation Storm anniversaries, the rehabilitation of the Chetnick movement and The Ustasha Independent State of Croatia, the ceremony commemorating the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp and the separate commemoration ceremonies held by Croatian state officials and the victims of other ethnic and anti-fascists groups. This dark image of the region fits well with the usual stereotypes, adding its part of the burden to the already quite shaky scale of European politics while weighing up the European future of the region.

Media coverage of events by country

Which events and media news dominated the region in the following weeks?

Albania

The *Voice of America* reported that the European Union required Albania to carry out comprehensive changes in judiciary if it expected to start membership negotiations. Both the government and the opposition supported judiciary reforms, but the opposition demanded the implementation of a new law to exclude anyone with a criminal record from politics.³⁴ The *Huffington Post* wrote about the illegal trafficking of women in Albania.³⁵ The *European Western Balkans* reported that the European Parliament plenary session was to discuss resolutions on Albania and BiH on 13th April and that the main topics were to be the rule of law, corruption, discrimination, the pace of structural reform, polarization on the political scene, which burdened the relations of these countries with the EU.³⁶

³² <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2016/04/karadzic-and-seselj-decisions-risk-reputation-of-icty/>

³³ *ibidem*.

³⁴ <http://www.voanews.com/content/eu-demands-albania-thoroughly-reform-judiciary/3263298.html>

³⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/un-women/fighting-human-traffickin_b_9609984.html

³⁶ <http://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/04/12/ep-plenary-to-discuss-resolutions-on-albania-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

The *Balkan Insight* dated 15th April 2016,³⁷ wrote about the visit of Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, to America's President Obama on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of cooperation between the two countries after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. The discussion at the meeting with President Obama and Vice-President Biden was about the role of Albania and its relations in the Balkans, as well as security issues. Albania is considered to be a reliable ally of the USA and its policies in the Balkans.

The President and the Vice President expressed appreciation for the critical role which Albania plays in the advancing of regional security and reaffirmed the importance of keeping the door open to Euro-Atlantic integration for stability in the Balkans. "Albania is now a point of reference in the Balkans and one of the most important actors in the region. We appreciate this role and totally support you," Obama said, according to Albanian sources. Rama replied that he considered the Balkans a successful area of American foreign policy and emphasized that his country wanted to open a new page in the history of regional cooperation.

Another topic of the discussion was the contribution of Albania, as a rare majority-Muslim country in Europe, to the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS). Being a NATO member since 2009, Albania holds the status of strategic partner with the USA. Rama informed President Obama about the establishment of a regional centre for the fight against violent extremism, and about the regional and international partners who will support its work. Obama and Biden commended Albania for its religious tolerance and contribution to the international coalition in the fight against ISIS. Albania gives shelter to about 1,000 members of the Iranian opposition group *Mujahedeen-e-Khalq* and it has accepted to receive another 2,000 of its members.³⁸

Finally, the third topic was judiciary reform in Albania, which was the main topic during the February visit of the Secretary of State John Kerry to Tirana.³⁹ Albania will get technical assistance from the FBI to improve its judicial system. This implies the establishment of an anticorruption court and prosecution office, as well as a national investigative body modelled after the FBI. Albania receives 20 million dollars to assist in the implementation of these reforms, with an additional 5 million already allocated for this year.

BiH

The news in April about BiH started with the information that a delegation from the Republic of Srpska was visiting Russia in search of new investors and business partners. Russia is the fourth most important investor in the Republic of Srpska, primarily in the energy sector where it plans new investments. In 2015, foreign trade with Russia amounted to €360 million. In 2014 and 2015, the mutual trade turnover increased by 40%. The Republic of Srpska mostly imports oil and natural gas from Russia and exports agricultural products such as apples, pears and quinces. In 2015, exports from the Republic of Srpska increased by 128%.⁴⁰

The President of the BiH Council of Ministers, Denis Zvizdić, visited Turkey on 7th April and met with the highest officials – President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister Davutoğlu and the President of the Assembly, Ismail Karaman. Besides politics, the main topics were how to increase the volume of trade, which stands at approximately €500 million, and military cooperation. Meat and dairy products are the main exports. In recent years, closer ties have been established between the two countries. Turkey is helping to finance the return of Bosnian refugees who fled to Turkey during the 1990s (a loan of €100 million through the Ziraat bank in 2012). Last year Turkey gave a loan of €50 million for small and medium sized enterprises. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has conducted more than 700 projects in BiH since 1995, including the restoration of the 16th century Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka, which was destroyed by Serbian armed forces.⁴¹

³⁷ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-primer-meets-obama-to-talk-balkans-and-security-04-15-2016#sthash.FW6lYa8i.dpuf>

³⁸ <http://www.voanews.com/content/united-states-european-union-back-albania-center-fight-radicalism/3286217.html>

³⁹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-primer-meets-obama-to-talk-balkans-and-security-04-15-2016#sthash.FW6lYa8i.dpuf>

⁴⁰ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-republika-srpska-seek-stronger-economic-ties-03-31-2016>

⁴¹ <http://www.worldbulletin.net/world/171315/bosnia-pm-to-push-trade-ties-on-turkey-visit>

The Anadolu Agency (AA)⁴² reported that during the visit, which was also attended by the BiH Minister of Defence Marina Pendeš, an agreement on cooperation in the field of military training was signed between the Government of Turkey and the BiH Council of Ministers.

The third piece of economic news was that the EU and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) approved a programme for the financing of small and medium sized enterprises (€20 million) and the transfer of knowledge, which would be carried out through local partner banks, and in this way support the investment and adjustment business sector within regulatory reforms, and in accordance with the *acquis communautaire*.⁴³

The next block of news referred to the worrying quantities of firearms in BiH (at least 750,000 pieces are in illegal possession), showing that about 20% of citizens are armed. According to the Centre for Security Studies in Sarajevo, this presents a security risk because they are inadequately stored, they pose a risk for children and they are supplied to the black market and organized crime.⁴⁴

According to *Breitbart News Network*, when connecting the previous news with the following, the risk factors increased. Namely, radical Islamists have been finding a new home in Bosnia and the Balkan states. According to these allegations, when one compares the percentage with the population, the highest percentage of fighters from Europe who joined ISIS or Al Qaeda in Syria came from Belgium and BiH. It has been estimated that Salafists train in about a dozen locations in BiH and that the black ISIS flags are even flown in some remote villages. This refers to all the Western Balkan countries from which about 877 fighters went to fight in Syria and Iraq, and it is estimated that about 300 of them returned to their country of origin.

It is further alleged that during the war in Bosnia, hundreds of Arab volunteers came to join the muja-hedeen battalion in Bosnia and that now the flow has turned towards Syria and ISIS. The text quoted a Saudi Arabian volunteer who fought in Bosnia in 1994: "There is a war between the West and Islam. Bosnia gave the modern jihadist movement that narrative. It is the cradle."⁴⁵

After it was announced that about 300 fighters from Bosnia went to Syria and Iraq, the EU came under pressure to reject the BiH request to grant candidate status. It was also reported that ISIS was buying property in BiH as it was gradually being driven out of Syria after military setbacks. The UK Armed Forces Minister, Penny Mordaunt, said that EUROPOL had estimated that about 5,000 IS-trained fighters had returned to Europe through Serbia. She therefore claimed that there was no operational benefit from remaining in the EU or taking part in any of the defence or security structures that the EU planned to establish, such as the pan-European intelligence agency.⁴⁶

The next piece of news was about the President of the Republic of Srpska and the investigation of his involvement in the bankruptcy of the Pavlović Bank which was initiated by the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA). This is one of a number of ongoing investigations against President Dodik (previous affairs are connected to the construction of the new government building and the Banja Luka – Gradiška highway). Analysts point out that the most recent investigation will have an impact on local elections in October.⁴⁷

⁴² <http://aa.com.tr/ba/turska/ankara-potpisan-sporazum-o-saradnji-u-oblasti-vojne-obuke-izme%C4%91u-turske-i-bih/551015>

⁴³ <http://www.finchchannel.com/index.php/business/56563-ebd-and-eu-launch-sme-programme-in-bosnia-and-hercegovina>

⁴⁴ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/huge-quantity-of-firearms-poses-threats-to-bosnian-security-04-05-2016>

⁴⁵ <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/04/06/6-apr-16-world-view-radical-islamists-finding-new-home-bosnia-balkan-states/>

⁴⁶ <http://news.vice.com/article/black-flag-the-balkans-the-islamic-state-bosnia-herzegovina>
<http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/659929/EU-pressure-reject-Bosnia-application-link-ISIS-jihadi-Macedonia-tear-gas-migrant-crisis>
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/politics/7063208/Islamic-State-breeding-ground-Bosnia-should-not-be-let-in-to-EU.html>

⁴⁷ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/investigation-against-dodik-might-influence-local-elections-04-12-2016>

However, at its plenary session on 14th April 2016, the European Parliament welcomed the application of BiH to obtain candidate status (submitted on 15th February 2016), noting that reforms had to be intensified. The comments emphasized that the application had been submitted in the same week when the European Council was discussing the UK referendum issue, which showed that the European model was still attractive. The adopted EP Resolution on BiH supported its move closer to Europe and called on the Council to make a decision concerning its membership application at the earliest opportunity. The BiH authorities were called on to accelerate constitutional, legal and political reforms on their path to the EU⁴⁸. Bosnia and Herzegovina's aspirations for candidate status received support from many sides, from Commissioner Hahn to the Greek and Croatian governments, as well as other neighbouring countries.

Montenegro

There was the least news about Montenegro this April. It was concluded that the agreement on elections announced the possibility of the end of the political crisis. A high-level delegation of the United Russia, President's Putin party, was coming to Montenegro during the time of its preparation to join the NATO Alliance in order to improve relations. The visit was to include discussions with pro-Russian parties, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations, business circles, the media, and the Russian diaspora in Montenegro.⁴⁹ At the same time, thousands of Montenegrins were participating in an *online* referendum on the country's military status, which had been organized by a pro-Russian non-governmental organization. Thus, pressure was put on the government to hold a referendum on its accession to NATO.⁵⁰

The assessment of economic trends in Montenegro was worrisome - four prominent European banks (Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, Erste Group and Societe Generale) warned that the economy was facing significant structural, economic and financial risks. The banks pinpointed corruption, money laundering, organized crime and difficulties in payment of external debt as the main risks. The economy remained vulnerable to external impacts and any deterioration in the tourism industry, as the main economic branch, could cause serious imbalances.⁵¹

Other sources pointed out that the healthcare system in Montenegro was in its worst-ever financial crisis because the country had no assets to buy basic equipment and supplies to ensure the normal functioning of healthcare institutions.⁵²

Kosovo

The news of the day from Kosovo was that on 7th April Hashim Thaci was sworn in as new president of the country for the following five years at a special parliamentary session, which was boycotted by the opposition. During the swearing-in ceremony the opposition parties threw stones at the assembly building, refusing to accept the opinion of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, which had rejected their demands to cancel the presidential election on 26th February, due to irregularities. Before his election to president, Thaci was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in the cabinet of Prime Minister Mustafa. In the period 2008-2014 he was the Prime Minister of Kosovo.⁵³

The BBC recalled that Thaci had been one of the key historical figures in Kosovo and that during the 1990s he had been the leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the 1998-99 guerrilla war against the army of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It also recalled that Thaci had been the leader of the largest political party – the Democratic Party of Kosovo. Politically he has survived allegations for

⁴⁸ <http://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/04/14/further-reform-efforts-needed-in-albania-and-bosnia-herzegovina-say-meps/>

⁴⁹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-s-party-offers-closer-ties-to-montenegro-04-08-2016>

⁵⁰ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/montenegrins-vote-online-to-keep-military-neutrality-04-12-2016>

⁵¹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/corruption-poses-risk-for-montenegro-s-economy-report-04-07-2016>

⁵² <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/financial-crisis-threatens-health-care-in-montenegro-04-11-2016>

⁵³ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/hashim-thaci-swears-in-as-kosovo-president-04-07-2016>

racketeering, war crimes and organ trafficking during the Kosovo war. It recalled that he had been the key figure in negotiations and the main guarantor of the agreements reached normalising relations with Serbia regarding the political situation in Kosovo.⁵⁴

The opposition had been obstructing the work of the parliament since September 2015, protesting against the agreement reached with Serbia which granted greater powers to the minority Serb community in Kosovo, as well as the agreement reached with Montenegro on border demarcation, which was signed in August 2015 in Vienna.⁵⁵

The next topic was the big energy dilemma in Kosovo, from what to do with the huge reserves of lignite when the European energy policy was shutting down thermal power plants across Europe and in the candidate countries, to the obligations taken over by the Western Balkan countries in the Energy Community.⁵⁶

On 13th April, Bekim Çollaku, the minister for the European integration of Kosovo, visited Strasbourg where he met with Commissioner Hahn and members of the European Parliament. The main topics were the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement after it came into force and visa liberalization for Kosovo citizens.⁵⁷

Macedonia

In the first two week of April, Macedonia was under the media spotlight. The crisis connected to the boycott of parliament by the opposition party SDSM, because of suspicions of electoral theft in 2014 and the wiretapping scandal which corroborated these suspicions, had further deteriorated despite apparent successful international mediation. First there was the news of the withdrawal of the coalition Albanian party, DUI, from the Macedonian government several days before the dissolution of parliament. This was followed by the news concerning the revision of this move, which was interpreted as being the result of the replacement of the compromised ministers in the wiretapping scandal. Later on the DUI leaders denied that they were under pressure from abroad. This was followed by the dissolution of parliament, which was presumed to have been done in order to set a date for the June elections in agreement with the coalition partner VMRO-DPMNE. Other interpretations claimed, however, that it was an attempt to leave space for a new coalition. This was all part of the general context for the latest move of the Macedonian President Ivanov – to absolve all the suspects in the *wiretapping scandal*, which resulted in an eruption of dissatisfaction and street protests by the opposition party⁵⁸ and the announcement that they would boycott the elections.⁵⁹ President Ivanov explained his decision stating that it was his desire to achieve reconciliation between the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition SDSM parties and create a favourable climate for the June elections.⁶⁰

However, the effect in the domestic arena was exactly the opposite, while in the international arena this decision provoked sharp reaction qualifying it as a violation of the rule of law. Statements given on 13th

⁵⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35984823>

⁵⁵ <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/kosovos-constitutional-court-president-vote-38133894>
<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/experts-give-green-light-on-kosovo-border-deal-03-30-2016>

⁵⁶ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/05/tiny-kosovo-faces-a-big-energy-dilemma-kosovo-c-lignite-world-bank-coal/>

⁵⁷ <http://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/04/13/kosovo-minister-collaku-meets-comissioner-hahn-in-strasbourg-implementation-of-the-saa-crucial/>

⁵⁸ <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/macedonia-parliament-dissolved-ahead-early-election-38190274>
<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/dui-quits-macedonia-govt-silent-on-motifs-04-01-2016>
<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-party-shelves-from-leaving-government-04-04-2016>

⁵⁹ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/macedonia-opposition-says/2674154.html>

⁶⁰ <http://euobserver.com/enlargement/133032>

April 2016⁶¹ by the three-member mediation group of the European Parliament on the Macedonian political crisis, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, and the American Embassy in Skopje, were, in this regard, unambiguous.

At the same time, the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, and the President of Slovenia, Borut Pahor, visited Skopje⁶² where they discussed with government and opposition representatives, a solution for the ongoing crisis and the support of these two countries on Macedonia's European path. They also visited the refugee transit camp in Gevgelia on the Greek-Macedonian border and stated that the EU had to clearly define its migrant policies.

The newspaper articles noted that Macedonia was on the main line of defence against the irregular inflow of refugees into the EU. Tensions between Macedonia and Greece concerning refugees stuck in the area around the Greek border were intensifying. In preventing them from crossing the border, violent measures were more frequently applied with mutual accusations between the two countries.⁶³ In addition, there was a split within the Macedonian ministry of the interior and a decision made by the minister, who was from the opposition, was blocked.⁶⁴ Analysts considered the entire situation to be a *nightmare scenario*, whereby two of the weakest European countries were the supporting pillars in the management of the refugee crisis, which was irresponsible and unsustainable EU policy.⁶⁵

Serbia

Serbia attracted large media attention with the upcoming elections on 24th April, the Hague verdicts and their political consequences within the country and the region, the Croatian blockade of the opening of new negotiating chapters⁶⁶ in June 2016, and the growing influence of Russia in the public arena. These were all topics about which the commentators' assessments agreed on to a large extent. They envisaged the victory of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and the further strengthening of Prime Minister Vučić's position; the encouraging effect that Šešelj's acquittal verdict would have on his radical party's entry into parliament and the general strengthening of the right wing in Serbia; pressures within the EU on Croatia not to slow down Serbia in the negotiation process; the further strengthening of Russian influence, with the increasing use of *soft power* (through the media, the financing of their own non-governmental organizations, religious, cultural, educational and academic programmes and institutions) and the further intensification of economic ties and political meetings.

The central figure of most of the articles was Prime Minister Vučić, from comments dealing with his nationalist past,⁶⁷ although more were about his role as a politician who could modernize Serbia,⁶⁸ to comments that he was building for himself the position of an authoritarian leader modelled after Russian President Putin, which would jeopardize the democratization process in Serbia. The Government was

⁶¹ <http://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/04/13/recent-developments-in-skopje-undermine-the-rule-of-law-say-meps/>

⁶² <http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/11382-croatian-president-visits-refugees-in-macedonia>

⁶³ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/11/473808217/at-macedonian-border-migrant-police-tensions-erupt-into-violence>
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/greece-condemns-macedonian-use-of-force-to-stop-migrants-crossing-border-1460387320>

⁶⁴ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-police-rift-hampers-security--04-12-2016>

⁶⁵ <http://www.dw.com/en/macedonia-and-greece-play-the-blame-game/a-19180516>

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/war-games-in-greece-near-macedonia-turkey-amid-migration-row-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=97818&NewsCatID=351>

⁶⁶ <http://euobserver.com/enlargement/133004>

<http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/11353-austria-and-hungary-pressure-croatia-to-unblock-serbia-s-eu-negotiations>

<http://neurope.eu/article/alexander-vucic-croatia-will-not-humiliate-blackmail-serbia/>

<http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/11392-european-commission-rejects-croatia-s-arguments-in-its-dispute-with-serbia>

⁶⁷ <http://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/132894>

⁶⁸ <http://www.politico.eu/article/aleksandar-vucic-serbias-latest-savior-is-a-modernizer-or-strongman-or-both/>

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/azem-vllasi-vucic-understands-the-new-age--04-11-2016>

praised for its initiated reforms and incentives to get out of the crisis, which yielded low modest results, yet positive growth rates. The Stratfor analysis of 11th April estimated that the new government would neither change its pro-European policy nor jeopardize its good relations with Russia. It was expected that it would continue to implement reforms and attract foreign investors in the short term. However, it warned that in the long term reforms might slow down, due to the fact that EU membership was not in sight, and that this might increase the risks of ethnic conflicts both in Serbia and within the region.⁶⁹

Every commemoration in the region linked with the wars of the 1990s or previous wars, the rehabilitation of war ideologies, war crimes and collaborationists (Chetnick and Ustasha movements and their leaders, Nedić's government, etc.), provoked deep shock-waves and fears throughout the region – the April cycle started with the Hague verdicts and ended with the boycott of the commemoration ceremony organized by the Croatian authorities for Serbian, Jewish and Roma victims as well as Croatian antifascists at Jasenovac.⁷⁰

A parallel world – multilateral regional networks

And then followed the news which almost exclusively, although insufficiently, appeared in the regional media, and when compared with all the previous information it sounded as though it had come from another planet. This was the news about the quiet, patient and almost inaudible networking of interests within the region, which created a counter-balance, a sort of *safety network* – about processes of cooperation and the integration of the Western Balkans.

Climate change

On 4th April, Podgorica hosted the first high level ministerial panel on how to respond to climate and environmental challenges in South-eastern Europe.⁷¹ It was an opportunity to highlight the necessity for better regional connecting, not only in the field of transport and energy, but also in the field of environmental protection. The region is exposed to climate change which threatens its water resources, energy, and agriculture as well as the safety of key infrastructure, as proved by the catastrophic floods of 2014. It was emphasized at this meeting that the region would observe the conclusions of the Paris Climate Change Conference held in 2015, and promote the concept of a *green economy*. In the joint declaration, “The Podgorica Initiative”, which was adopted at the meeting, ministers supported a regional approach to environmental and climate change issues and the work of the recently founded Regional Working Group on Environment.⁷² This meeting sent a message to the upcoming Paris summit of the Western Balkans Six (WB6).

The Roma Integration Process 2020

On the occasion of International Roma Day on 8th April, the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Goran Svilanović, announced the beginning of a large, regional project worth €1.8 million financed by the EU and the Open Society Foundation. The project, which will be led by the Roma themselves, will have its headquarters in Belgrade and will include six beneficiaries from the Western Balkans and Turkey. This news was reported in the media and on social networks in the entire region.⁷³

⁶⁹ <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/serbian-politics-current-problems-hail-past>

⁷⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-croatia-jasenovac-idUSKCN0X82II>

⁷¹ Partners in organization of the meeting: Global Water Partnership Mediterranean, Umweltbundesamt - the Environment Agency of Austria, South Eastern Europe Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

⁷² <http://www.rcc.int/press/286/climate-change-and-environment-crucial-issues-for-see>

⁷³ <http://www.facebook.com/RegionalCooperationCouncil/?ref=bookmarks>

The Conference of the European Integration Parliamentary Committees

On April 8th Sarajevo hosted the 12th Conference of the European Integration Parliamentary Committees of countries participating in the Stabilization and Association Process of South-East Europe (COSAP).⁷⁴ Delegations of the European Integration parliamentary committees of BiH, the Republic of Albania, Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia, together with members of the EU Harmonization Committee of the Grand National Assembly of the Republic of Turkey, who participated as observers, and members of the European Affairs Committee of the Croatian Parliament, in the capacity of guests, adopted a joint statement in which they expressed assurance that a clear perspective of EU membership would contribute to the prosperity of the Western Balkan region.

It was announced at the meeting that the upcoming EU-Western Balkan summit was to be held in early July in Paris. Further discussions covered the topics of concrete regional initiatives for the creation of a single investment area, agreement on the recognition of qualifications and occupations in the region's countries, as well as infrastructural and logistic connections. It also dealt with further steps in relation to the earlier adopted parliamentary initiative of the Republic of Albania for the establishment of a parliamentary forum within the framework of the Berlin Process. In a joint statement it expressed confidence that the EU enlargement policy would contribute to peace, security and prosperity in Europe, particularly in this region, emphasising its support of the participants in the Stabilization and Association Process, and for more effective implementation of the necessary reforms in full compliance with the new EU approach, tackling the most important questions first (*fundamentals first* – the rule of law, good economic governance and public administration reform).

The Network of Judicial Training Institutions in South-East Europe

This network was established on 14th April during a two-day conference in Bucharest,⁷⁵ with the aim of strengthening cooperation in the judiciary domain in the Western Balkans and the entire South-East Europe. The “fundamentals first” approach, which means the quality of governmental and judicial institutions, is considered crucial for the economies and citizens of these countries. This network provides a platform for the exchange of good practice and experiences in the region in the areas where everyone can gain from regional cooperation and in doing so there is no overlap with national strategies and plans in the judiciary domain. Judicial training and mediation have been identified as important support in the reduction of the backlog of court cases and the improvement of the efficiency of courts in areas where regional cooperation enhances reforms at a national level. It is believed that the establishment of a network which will deal with training, the networking of mediators, the coordination of projects in the judiciary and in internal affairs and the strengthening of judicial institutions and their capacities, will contribute to greater independence, integrity and competency of the judiciary in the region.

The harmonization of the South-East Europe 2020 Strategy with EU macro-regional Strategies

At the meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EU-SDR), held in Sarajevo on 14th and 15th April, it was pointed out that this macro-regional strategy, as well as the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Regions (EUSAIR), are not only development frameworks for the respective regions, but also additional tools for EU enlargement that may be of assistance to the Western Balkan countries⁷⁶. It was emphasised that there is a convergence of goals among the EUSDR, EUSAIR and RCC Strategy SEE 2020, which justifies their better connection and the coordination of forthcoming activities in all priority areas. The European Commission, UNEP and RCC discussed with

⁷⁴ <http://novi.ba/clanak/63897/jasna-perspektiva-clanstva-u-eu-doprinosi-prosperitetu-zapadnog-balkana%20-%20mtkeywords=Goran%20Svilanovi%C4%87>

⁷⁵ <http://www.fena.co.ba/article/845029/see-judicial-training-institutions-network-established>

⁷⁶ <http://www.rcc.int/news/191/synergising-rcc-and-eu-macro-regional-strategies>

participants from the Western Balkan countries how to connect them as best as possible and in a strategic manner with the EUSDR and the EUSAIR, particularly with regard to environmental protection.

The trade fair in Mostar – the meeting of BiH, Serbian and Croatian leaders

The 19th International Trade Fair was opened in Mostar on 12th April and served as an opportunity for BiH, Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Turkish leaders to meet. For the first three countries it was an opportunity to relax the tense atmosphere in the region after the announcement of the Hague verdicts and the Croatian blockade of Serbia's EU negotiations at bilateral meetings (Bakir Izetbegović, Aleksandar Vučić and Kolinda Grabar Kitarović), and to send a message that the future of European economic cooperation and better connectedness within the region are common priorities. Messages also included a common concern for stability in the region and the taking responsibility to overcome disputes and create a positive climate for the strengthening of economic cooperation. These meetings received good media coverage in the region and modest coverage⁷⁷ in the Western media of rare good news from the Western Balkans.

Common problems

Less and less democracy in the Western Balkans

Strong leaders have placed public institutions under their control, which is particularly true for Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, and so democracy in these countries has been declining over the last six years. Such an assessment was given in the recently published Freedom House annual report, "Nations in Transition 2016",⁷⁸ which deals with the analysis of the state of democracy in Central and Eastern European countries and Eurasia. Serbia and Montenegro are characterized as *semi-consolidated democracies* (in the same category as Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania), BiH, Macedonia and Albania as *transitional governments* or *hybrid regimes* (in the same category as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia), and Kosovo as a *semi-consolidated authoritarian regime* (with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, and a step ahead of the *consolidated authoritarian regimes* throughout Eurasia, which includes Russia and other central Asian countries).⁷⁹ It is estimated that only Albania has shown progress over the last six years.

For Kosovo and BiH it was stated that the construction of nation states in these two countries was in deadlock; in Serbia, Prime Minister Vučić was increasingly limiting freedom of the press and using early elections to strengthen his personal position, but he was making progress in EU negotiations and was successfully capitalizing on Serbia's role in the refugee crisis; in Macedonia there was electoral manipulation and mass corruption; in Montenegro, there was no progress in the fight against corruption and the assurance of transparency in public procurements; and in Kosovo, the opposition's dissatisfaction with the implications of the Brussels agreement with Serbia was brought to the fore, while necessary reforms, particularly the fight against corruption, was pushed into the shadows.

The assessment is that the Western Balkan leaders took advantage of the EU's difficulties to strengthen their own positions, counting on the EU's primary interest of maintaining stability within the EU and in the region. The report states that lasting peace in the Balkans is a significant achievement, but that peace without progress leads to stagnation, which could be dangerous for the region. It is therefore recommended that the EU prioritize freedom of the press, the rule of law and good governance when addressing the countries of the region, rather than short-term geopolitical goals.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/balkan-leaders-meet-improve-relations-38330105>
http://www.heraldcourier.com/news/world/balkan-leaders-meet-to-try-to-improve-relations/article_3776acec-d95a-567e-8385-ee040930169a.html

⁷⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2016>

⁷⁹ Str. 12 i 13. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_NIT2016_Final_FWeb.pdf

⁸⁰ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/democracy-declining-in-balkans-freedom-house-report-04-11-2016>

The Balkan route in the trafficking of arms

The slowdown in movement of refugees from war-torn Middle East countries shifted the media attention to arms trafficking via the Balkan route. It turned out that the arms, among other things, used in the terrorist attacks in Europe originated from the Balkans (mostly from Serbia, Croatia and Bulgaria); it was estimated that there are about 6 million pieces of firearms in the Western Balkans, mostly unregistered⁸¹ and that arm sales to the main war zones, although partly legal, are mostly illegal.

The biggest buyers are foreign governments, often Western ones. In 2014, American, Australian, British and Canadian military cargo airplanes transported 22 million packages of ammunition, Kalashnikovs and other weapons, from Albania to Kurdish forces fighting against ISIS in northern Iraq. Although these arms were a gift, in most cases they were lucrative contracts. The arms were mostly delivered to Western-supported militia in the Middle East. In this way, the Balkans assist the Balkanization of other regions, concludes the Economist.

The Dutch referendum against closer ties with Ukraine

Although it refers to Ukraine, one piece of news with potential serious consequences for the Western Balkans is the outcome of the Dutch referendum in which citizens voted against the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.⁸² Such voting indicates the attitude towards enlargement in general, and casts doubt on the EU's ability to implement the commitments of the enlargement process. The UK referendum on their exit from the EU, could have similar consequences. The future of Europe, an amalgam connecting Western Balkan countries and providing security and stability in the region, would thus become uncertain. The case of Macedonia, where the EU accession process has been blocked for already more than a decade, shows the potential future of the entire region.

One of the commentators of the Dutch referendum expressed concern that it may have initiated a frightening sequence of events, empowering the opponents of further enlargement and Euroscepticism, which might expand across Europe. It was stated that the only consolation was that the perspective of accepting any new members into the EU is in the distant future (at the earliest Montenegro in 2020, and later possibly Serbia), which would give enough time for the mood against enlargement to change.

Conclusion

The media image of the region realistically reflects the situation, but at the same time is selective, in accordance with the already established stereotypes of the Western Balkans. There is a parallel reality - cooperation, communication, exchange of goods, services, ideas, intraregional capital flow, the establishment of structures and mechanisms for cooperation and intensive political talks on bilateral and multilateral levels. Regional and national media cover this to some extent. Despite all the problems at this level, the region leads a pretty "normal" life, with good mutual understanding. Nevertheless, this reality is not interesting for the media, especially that outside of the region.

⁸¹ <http://www.economist.com/node/21697019/print>

⁸² <http://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-referendum-raises-concerns-over-eu-enlargement/>

(Post)electoral Reflections on Western Balkan Relations

Introduction

The Western Balkans is today facing a large number of internal problems, from unfinished and unsuccessful transition to the harbouring of *old* bilateral issues. It is obvious that despite the undeniable progress made in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration, the region is once again faced with the strengthening of ethno-nationalism and new intense forms of certain problems in bilateral relations. Moreover, it is obvious that even two and a half decades after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the countries of the Western Balkan region are unable to resolve numerous mutual issues (borders, refugees, succession, status of minorities, etc.).

In this regard, attempts have been made within the framework of the “Berlin Process” (after 2014) for the clear identification and subsequent resolution of these issues.⁸⁴

However, after the initial domination of the Federal Republic of Germany in the process, the subsequent presidency of other European states led to its *mitigation*. This will certainly effect and slow down the resolution of bilateral problems in the Western Balkans.⁸⁵

Electoral cycles in all Western Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, etc.) have additionally reaffirmed stagnation in the resolution of bilateral problems with their neighbours and a weakening of genuine attempts to overcome them.

Croatia – the *deterioration* of relations with eastern neighbours

The return to power of the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union in Croatia during last year (2015), which unsuccessfully tried to reshape itself into a modern European Christian democratic party around the middle of the last decade,⁸⁶ has further aggravated the relations of this country with its eastern *neighbours*.⁸⁷ Croatia, besides its foreign policy agenda focused on Western Balkan countries (since recently this expression has been replaced with *neighbours*), to which it was a part of, in the context of European integration, until 2013, decided to further push the Croatian national issue, i.e. the status of Croats in neighbouring Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸⁸ In the context of European integration, Montenegro can also expect a similar attempt by Zagreb concerning the status of Montenegrin Croats, who predominantly inhabit the Boka Kotor region, to come up as an additional problem. Another unresolved issue is the status of the Prevlaka peninsula.

⁸³ Assistant Director of the Institute of International Politics and Economics and Deputy President of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia.

⁸⁴ Dragan Đukanović, *Balkan na posthladnoratovskom raskršću*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, JP „Službeni glasnik“, Beograd, 2016, pp. 156–159.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 156–159.

⁸⁶ „Milorad Pupovac – HDZ ne napustio demokrsćanstvo, zato raste govor mržnje i nasilje”, *Tportal*, 8. 3. 2016. Internet: <http://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/419461/HDZ-je-napustio-demokrsanstvo-zato-raste-govor-mrznje-i-nasilje.html>, 22/03/2016.

⁸⁷ Enis Zebić, „Pogled na svijet hrvatskog ministra: Susjedi da, regija ne“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Balkansi servis, Prag, 29. mart 2016. Internet: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/pogled-na-svijet-hrvatskog-ministra/27642290.html>, 30/03/2016.

⁸⁸ Dragan Đukanović, „Obrisi nastanka trećeg (hrvatskog) entiteta u Bosni i Hercegovini: stavovi lokalnih aktera, SAD i EU“, *Nacionalni interes*, broj 1, god. XI, vol. 22, Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2015, pp. 127–150.

When it comes to blocking the European integration process, it is a repetition of experiences in relations between Ljubljana and Zagreb, and is now evident in the case of Serbia's pre-accession negotiations (Chapter 23 – Reform of the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights).⁸⁹ Something similar happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, when early this year Croatia insisted on *traditional trade* when Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for EU membership.⁹⁰ This included a number of goods which dominated in the economic exchange between the two countries before Croatia entered into the Union in mid-2013.

The use of *Balkan spite*, so immanent in Balkan politics, did not bypass Croatia either, regardless of the numerous previous announcements and promises that the mutual blocking of countries in this part of Europe on their path to the European Union would not happen. Moreover, Croatia would continue to (mis)use conditioning tactics against the Western Balkan countries on their path towards European Union membership, in issues like the demarcation of borders, the continuation of the succession of property of the former SFR Yugoslavia, refugees, displaced persons, etc. This was also confirmed by the most recent official requests by Zagreb to Serbia regarding attempts to redefine the status of Croats in the Republic of Serbia (their guaranteed representation in the National Assembly of Serbia, etc.), as well as their insistence on changes being made to the jurisdiction of Serbia's Special Prosecutor's Office for War Crimes, and Serbia's *insufficient* cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia.

For the sake of a more comprehensive and realistic insight into Croatia's relations with its eastern neighbours, it should be emphasized that the former government, led by the Social Democratic Party, managed to gradually worsen relations with these countries, primarily with Serbia during 2015 with regard to the migrant crisis. Such *right turns* by the Social Democratic Party of Croatia did not ensure new voters, but it did in some way bring into question the traditional support base/electorate of this party.

On the other hand, the Croatian Democratic Community, as an extremely right-winged party, continues to *float* on the wave of Croatian ethno-nationalism, seeing it as an opportunity to primarily influence the status of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Croats whose inequality in the neighbouring country is often spoken about.⁹¹ Despite declarative claims that it is against the establishment of something that would resemble a so-called third (Croatian) territorial entity in BiH, the authorities in Zagreb continue to influence the most prominent political Croat leaders in BiH regarding either the transformation of the existing entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina or the establishment of a new Croatian self-government. It seems that in this regard, HDZ is also relying on the significant support of some very influential Christian democratic parties within the European Union.

Another point, which is very indicative, is that Croatia's foreign policy is definitely attempting to distance itself from the Western Balkans as much as possible, wishing to get closer to Central and Eastern European countries in order to establish new and enhanced methods of regional cooperation.⁹² Within this circle of prevailingly Roman Catholic countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, etc.), Croatia is trying to further strengthen its role.

⁸⁹ Branka Trivić, „Srbija i EU: Bez saglasnosti Hrvatske pregovori se nastavljaju“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Balkanski servis, Prag, 8. april 2016. Internet: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/hoce-li-hrvatska-odustati-od-blokade-srbije/27662585.html>, 09/04/2016.

⁹⁰ „BiH: Sporna 'tradicionalna trgovina' sa Hrvatskom“, *Aljazeera Balkans*, Sarajevo, 17. mart 2015. Internet: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/bih-sporna-tradicionalna-trgovina-s-hrvatskom>, 22.3.2016.

⁹¹ Dragan Đukanović, „Obrisi nastanka trećeg (hrvatskog) entiteta u Bosni i Hercegovini: stavovi lokalnih aktera, SAD i EU“, *Nacionalni interes*, op. cit., str. 127–150.

⁹² Janko Bekić and Marina Funduk, „The Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Initiative as the revival of Intermarium“, *IRMO Brief*, No. 2, 2016, IRMO, Hanns Seidel Stiftung, Zagreb, 2016.

Parliamentary elections in Serbia 2016 – the obvious strengthening of anti-European forces

Parliamentary elections in Serbia, scheduled for 24th April 2016, will not drastically change the *political image* of the country. It is more than obvious that the Serbian Progressive Party will remain dominant in the political arena, but that civic political parties, above all, the Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party, etc., will weaken significantly. However, the anti-European and extremely nationalist parties and movements (the Serbian Radical Party, Dveri – the Democratic Party of Serbia coalition, etc.) will change the structure of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, where such options, according to the results of the 2014 elections, were not represented.⁹³ In the long run, this could certainly influence the strengthening of, firstly, Euro-sceptic and then anti-European tendencies of the majority of Serbian people. Specifically, it could strengthen the pro-Russian mood concerning the constant *equilibrium* of Serbian foreign political tendencies (evident during the last two centuries), and also the public's strong indifference to European integration and getting closer to the European Union in general.

Since 2014, the government of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić has tried to improve relations with its neighbours as much as possible. Significant progress has been made in relations with Hungary, with further visible efforts in the consolidation of relations with Albania, in spite of countless incidents in the previous period.⁹⁴

To a certain extent Serbia managed to *relax* relations with neighbouring Montenegro, but failed to resolve several outstanding issues (dual citizenship, border demarcation and the status of minorities).⁹⁵ In this regard, the future government of Serbia can be expected to redefine these issues and commence solving them in the coming period.

Relations between Serbia and Croatia deteriorated in particular in mid-2015 due to the migrant crisis, and after this issue calmed down, mostly due to non-regional actors, there was new nationalist rhetoric from the Zagreb authorities, with an attempt to revive certain bilateral issues within Serbia's European integration *package*.

As for Belgrade's relations with the authorities in Sarajevo, the variations and oscillations are different. In this regard, in addition to last year's positive developments (the visit of the Serbian prime minister and government to Sarajevo, Serbia's donation to Srebrenica, etc.), there were also negative developments (the attack on the prime minister of Serbia in Srebrenica at the commemoration of victims of crimes in this town), following the verdict against the Republic of Srpska's war-time president, Radovan Karadžić, in March 2016, there was the possibility of the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action re-filing BiH's complaint against the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for aggression and genocide, although with little chance of its review leading to a different judicial epilogue.⁹⁶

It is very important to initiate, as soon as possible, the Serbian-Bosniak talks already announced on several occasions, which would include the largest possible number of actors from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and would create an opportunity for the strengthening of Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehood, as

⁹³ „Istraživanje CeSID: Da su izbori bili juče SNS bi imao 53 odsto”, Nedeljnik, 4. april 2016. Internet: <http://www.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalnews/istrazivanje-cesid-da-su-izbori-bili-juce-sns-bi-imao-53-odsto/>, 7.4.2016.

⁹⁴ Dragan Đukanović, Dragan R. Simić, Dragan Živojinović, “Serbia and its neighbors: continuity of old and/or new policy”, *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LXIII, No. 1151, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, 2013, pp. 104–118.

⁹⁵ Dragan Đukanović, „Republika Srbija i Crna Gora – analiza bilateralnih odnosa i problema nakon 2006. godine“, *Srpska politička misao*, Institut za političke studije, god. XXII, vol. 48, br. 3, Beograd, 2015, str. 51–70.

⁹⁶ Dženana Halimović i Zoran Glavonjić, „Ima li osnova da BiH ponovo tuži Srbiju za genocid”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Balkanski servis, Prag, 29. mart 2016. Internet: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/ima-li-osnova-da-bih-ponovo-tuzi-srbiju-za-genocid/27642062.html>, 4.4.2016.

well as the consolidation of internal relations between its two largest ethnic groups (Bosniaks and Serbs). These talks would also influence the still unresolved issues of the position of Bosniaks in the south-western part of Serbia (Sanjak).

During the last two years, Serbia has managed to improve its relations with Bulgaria and Romania (particularly after the announcement of the formation of a new initiative – the Craiova group), where issues concerning the status of the Bulgarian, Romanian and Vlach communities have dominated. However, this issue could also potentially slow down Serbia's European path. As for Serbia-Macedonia relations, it is clear that the only remaining important issue, relations between the Serbian and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, cannot significantly influence their dynamics.

It is beyond any doubt that Serbia will in the coming period maintain its existing constructive attitude concerning talks between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina. Moreover, the gradual marginalization of Kosova's extreme opposition (the Movement for Self-Determination and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo), which doesn't accept even the minimum collective rights of non-Albanian communities, creates the possibility that talks between the two sides will intensify and new issues will be opened.

Belgrade and Tirana have to work additionally on the consolidation of bilateral relations. In this regard, they are trying to overcome the dominant differences between Serbia and Albania concerning the status of Kosovo, to strengthen economic cooperation and further improve the status of minority communities. It is obvious that the European Union (primarily Germany) and indeed the United States, perceive the improvement of relations between Belgrade and Pristina as a potential solution to the numerous latent tensions and instability in the Western Balkans.

The Challenges of Kosovo's relations with its neighbours

The recent election of Hashim Tachi as Kosovo's president and the additional consolidation of the ruling coalition will reduce the influence of radical opposition options (the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo and the Movement for Self-Determination).

It can be expected that in addition to the significant obstruction of the opposition in the Assembly of Kosovo, talks between Pristina and Belgrade will continue, which the EU and the US insist upon. To this end, after certain delays in negotiations with Belgrade, one can expect a more significant attempt by the government in Pristina to implement the previous agreements and to place some new topics on their agenda.

Kosovo's relations with Montenegro have not yet reached the desired level. Namely, diplomatic relations have not yet been established at ambassadorial level because the Montenegrin government insists that the Montenegrin national minority should be explicitly mentioned in the constitution in order for their collective rights to be guaranteed. It should also be mentioned that Kosovo's opposition tried to block the ratification of the border agreement with Montenegro (signed in Vienna in late August 2015), which also greatly influenced the strengthening of nationalist forces among the Albanian population in neighbouring Macedonia.

In any case, it is clear that the current government of Kosovo will attempt to improve relations with Montenegro and Macedonia, and thanks to international pressure will intensify political talks with Belgrade.

Bosnia and Herzegovina – *circulus vitiosus* in relations with its neighbours

The general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, held in October 2014, did not bring anything new either internally or externally. On the contrary, the country has been trapped in continuous internal ethnic and interethnic divisions. The Serbian and Croatian political elite in BiH rely heavily on Belgrade and

Zagreb, while the Bosniak elite attempt to gradually draw near to one of these sides or remain equidistant. In such a context, the Bosniak political elite often overemphasize their own exclusive protective role for the preservation of the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is in fact the reason why there is no significant improvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina's relations with their neighbours, and in particular with regard to border disputes (with the exception of Montenegro). Bearing in mind the attempts of the Zagreb government to somehow postpone BiH's application for European Union membership (by insisting on the issue of *traditional trade*), it is clear that such a policy by neighbouring Croatia will continue.

On the other hand, the rapprochement of the central authorities of BiH with neighbouring Serbia is not close at hand despite the many announcements of Bosniak-Serbian talks and the attempted realisation of several important ideas during last year's joint session of the BiH Council of Ministers and the Government of Serbia.⁹⁷

Bosnia and Herzegovina will, in all probability, despite some progress towards European integration, still remain a prisoner of internal division lines and be confronted with a lack of sincerity from its own neighbours, which is at the same time also their position towards them. It should nevertheless be emphasized that Bosnia and Herzegovina has to a large extent improved its relations with neighbouring Montenegro, which was confirmed by the signing of the border agreement in Vienna at the end of last August.

Montenegro – a small Balkan state and its positive role in neighbourhood relations

An overview of Montenegrin relations with its neighbours, ten years after the renewal of its statehood, shows that it is a confirmed constructive actor in the Western Balkan region. It has managed to reduce the number of problems with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to zero, as well as starting to resolve certain issues with other neighbours, such as Kosovo (*border demarcation*) and Croatia (*dealing with the past*).

Certainly the most complex relations are those between Montenegro and neighbouring Serbia. However, since 2012 it is evident that the authorities in Belgrade have not interfered with internal Montenegrin developments and that it wants to solve the several remaining issues in bilateral relations. Moreover, co-operation has been established and intensified in the context of European integration,⁹⁸ together with the announcements of more significant Serbian investments in Montenegro (Bar Port, *Elektromontaža*, etc.).

The announced parliamentary elections in Montenegro, which should be held in the second half of this year, will probably not change the actual foreign political position of the country. It can be expected that the Democratic Party of Socialists will remain in power, assisted by several smaller political parties. This could bring a new quality into relations with its neighbours, bearing in mind that the Democratic Party of Socialists terminated the coalition (established in 1998) with the nationalist Social Democratic Party of Montenegro. In fact, such a development creates the possibility of establishing relations, particularly with neighbouring Serbia, on new foundations of full mutual recognition and without the continuous harbouring of certain historical controversies from the 20th century, which have for so long determined Serbian-Montenegrin relations.

The unlikely victory of the pro-Serbian opposition in Montenegro would threaten to deteriorate relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo. On the other hand, the equally unlikely predominance of opposition civic parties (DEMOS, United Reform Action – URA, Montenegrin Demo-

⁹⁷ „Zajednička sjednica Vijeća ministara BiH i Vlade Republike Srbije, dnevni red, 4. novembar 2015”, Internet: http://www.vijeceministara.gov.ba/saopstenja/sjednice/najave_sa_sjednica/default.aspx?id=20695&langTag=hr-HR, 2.4.2016.

⁹⁸ Dragan Đukanović, „Saradnja između Republike Srbije i Crne Gore u evrointegracionom procesu“, *Evropsko zakonodavstvo*, god. XIII, br. 52–53, IMPP, Beograd, 2015, str. 306–320.

crats, etc) in the next parliamentary elections in Montenegro would not significantly disturb the country's existing foreign political course towards its Western Balkan neighbours.

Montenegro also played a very important role in 2013, when its Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed a new method of regional cooperation within the package of the Western Balkans six (WB 6). Unfortunately, due to consistent disagreements among the current Balkan actors, this very important idea for the remodelling of regional cooperation was not immediately accepted; however, in practice it remains an important guideline for the achieved scope and dynamics of subsequent regional cooperation.

Macedonia at the periphery of the Western Balkan periphery

The interethnic and political crisis in Macedonia has shown that the European Union has almost no clearly defined position or policy towards this country. Moreover, the dominant rule of the rightist and populist VMRO-DPMNE to a certain extent managed to (self)isolate the country and *de facto* terminate its European and Euro-Atlantic integration process. However, evident pressure from the international community, that is the US and the EU, has resulted in certain modifications of attitude towards Macedonia and the creation of the possibilities of fair and democratic elections in this country in early June 2016

In the period of the so-called interim government there were numerous irregularities related to earlier electoral cycles, especially with regard to voting registers. In the opinion of the leading opposition, the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia, these conditions were not sufficient to hold fair and democratic elections, which led to 14 political parties announcing the boycott of the elections. At the same time, the Democratic Union for Integration, the party which was dominant among Albanians in Macedonia after the Ohrid Agreement (2001), recently left power.

Therefore, according to numerous expectations, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE will remain in power after the June elections, in which much of the opposition will not participate. An objective assessment of the situation in Macedonia indicates that the VMRO-DPMNE will remain the dominant political party after the coming elections.

This means that Macedonia's complex and very poor relations with almost all of its neighbours will persist. The dispute over its name with Greece will certainly continue in the coming years, while equally complex relations with Bulgaria will potentially influence new blockades of Macedonia on its European path. The extremely frequent revival of the so-called Albanian issue in Macedonia by Tirana could also influence the dynamics of their accession to the North Atlantic Alliance, which was on several occasions hinted at by Albanian Prime Minister Rama.⁹⁹

The (pan)Albanianism of the actual government in Tirana – the continuity of policy towards its neighbours

In the coming year, 2017, Albania also expects regular parliamentary elections. However, it can be expected that the ruling Socialist Party of Albania will remain in power, as will the incumbent Prime Minister, Edi Rama. When it comes to relations with neighbours, Tirana's authorities often (over)emphasizes the position of Albanians in the neighbouring countries, especially in Macedonia, southern Serbia and Montenegro.¹⁰⁰

Certainly the most complex relations are between Albania and Serbia, with drastic disagreement on the position of Kosovo. In addition, the Tirana authorities repeatedly required the *copying* of legal guarantees

⁹⁹ „Rama: Veto za Makedoniju ako ne garantuje ohridski sporazum”, *NI*, Beograd, 20. maj 2015.

Internet: <http://rs.n1info.com/a61974/Svet/Region/Rama-Albanija-ce-staviti-veto-na-prijem-Makedonije-u-NATO.html>, 22. mart 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Dragan Đukanović, *Balkan na posthladnoratovskom raskršću*, op. cit, pp. 107–111.

for the status of Serbs in Kosovo for the Albanian municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa (the *Preševo Valley*).¹⁰¹ On the other hand, relations with Montenegro have significantly improved and there have been no major problems in recent years.

The domination of the *protection* policy for Albanians will continue to prevail in the concept of Albania's foreign policy towards its Western Balkan neighbours in the coming period as well. It may, however, pose the potential for new instabilities in this part of Europe.

Conclusion

The electoral cycles in the Western Balkan countries almost always additionally burden bilateral relations. This is not exclusively a Western Balkan specialty, such spillovers exist across Europe and the world; however, it shows that by mentioning neighbours in electoral campaigns, and usually in a negative context, it contributes to an increase in one's own popularity. This has been confirmed by last year's elections in Croatia and this year's elections in Serbia. In this regard, the mutual negative rhetoric of individual actors increases sporadically, but with the dominant aim of internal homogenization in the region's countries.

Nevertheless, once elections are over, the dominant actors pragmatically turn towards the improvement of bilateral relations, albeit most often in a declarative way. In accordance with external influences, primarily from Brussels, there follows a period of certain relaxation, which once again changes with the upcoming new electoral cycle. This, however, does not mean that the resolution of bilateral problems in the Western Balkan region will be accelerated after the recent or upcoming elections in these countries. On the contrary, it is evident that international pressure for their resolution must be additionally strengthened, as EU membership of the Western Balkan countries per se will not contribute to such developments. The political elites in this part of Europe are not ready to show more good will and begin to actually eliminate obstacles in bilateral relations.

¹⁰¹ „Rama: Albanci na jugu Srbije imaju manje prava nego Srbi na Kosovu”, *Jutarnji list*, Zagreb, 11. novembar 2014.
Internet: <http://www.jutarnji.hr/rama--albanci-na-jugu-srbije-imaju-manja-prava-nego-srbi-na-kosovu/1235580/>, 22. mart 2016.

Serbian-Croatian Relations: Lost in Elections

This year will mark two decades since the mutual recognition of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and Croatia. In fact, in April 1996, diplomatic relations between the then FRY (later Serbia and Montenegro, now Serbia) and Croatia were established for the first time in history.¹⁰³ This was the first interstate agreement between the two countries, successors of the former SFRY¹⁰⁴, which together with the Agreement on Succession and the Dayton set of documents, form part of the system of *peace agreements after the undeclared war*. It is worth mentioning that the content of the abovementioned agreement was composed ambitiously, however, the text itself was soon forgotten and marginalized in bilateral relations, while the problems caused by the dissolution of the common state were swept under the carpet. The best proof of this is indeed the current situation, where on many occasions when the highest representatives speak about relations, this agreement and its anniversary are never mentioned at all. By all accounts, its signing was rather the result of external pressures than of a genuine desire or need for the Belgrade and Zagreb political elites to really do something, that is, to start the normalization of relations at a political level or in economic, humanitarian and other areas. Its signing followed the acceptance of the Dayton Agreement which was preceded by the Croat Army's operations *Flash* and *Storm*,¹⁰⁵ i.e. the ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population in Croatia, as well as the agreement on the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia. This is not surprising when we remember that the elite and leaderships remained the same on both sides until 2000, and there are few (if any) historical examples, particularly in the history of the Balkans and our region, where the initiators of the conflicts had the knowledge, will, and, equally important, the support and legitimacy to repair, *normalize* what had been demolished, destroyed and dismantled.

If we are to try to summarize in a couple of paragraphs the periods in the development of relations from the abovementioned Agreement of 1996 until now, with an emphasis on the current state of relations between Belgrade and Zagreb, it would be most useful to divide them into two main phases, with several obvious interim phases in each of them.¹⁰⁶

In the first *phase*, up until the change of government in Zagreb and then, in some opinions, the surprisingly fast change of government in Belgrade as well,¹⁰⁷ relations were reduced to contact out of the public eye. This period ended with democratic changes in Belgrade marking the opening of the second interim phase, which *unstuck* relations, with the eruption of outstanding issues as well as the visible readiness of the two sides to initiate normalization and even reconciliation.¹⁰⁸

The exchange of visits at the highest level and contacts at international and regional meetings became almost a matter of routine. The freedom of movement of people and goods was realized in a fairly short

¹⁰² The former Ambassador of FRY (SCG) in the Republic of Croatia in the period 2001-2005, Ambassador of Serbia in the Kingdom of Norway 2010-2015 and the Republic of Iceland 2012-2015. Member of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia.

¹⁰³ http://demo.paragraf.rs/combined/Old/t/t2003_02/t02_0110.htm

¹⁰⁴ NIN correspondent from Zagreb Z. Stanivuković published on that occasion an interesting text available at <http://www.nin.co.rs/arhiva/2383/2383e.html>

¹⁰⁵ According to numerous assessments, for Serbs in Croatia and for Serbia this was a "mass, unpunished crime, the biggest forced exodus since World War Two" and for Croats "a brilliant military-police coup". This shows the depth of differences and emotional charge in the assessment as well as the long-lasting source of debates and disputes about this topic. Note: also Pomaks in Bulgaria, Serbs in Kosovo.

¹⁰⁶ The text is limited to the last 20 years of relations between Belgrade and Zagreb. It is neither the aim of the author nor the intention of this paper to enter deeper into history; we are aware of the disadvantages of such an approach, or as recently put, a "kaleidoscope" effect in our relations in the sense that the image changes almost on a daily basis.

¹⁰⁷ Croatian president Tudman died at the end of 1999 while the FRY President Milošević shortly after that left the political arena in the dramatic changes of October 2000.

¹⁰⁸ The FRY Minister of Foreign Affairs G. Svilanović officially visited Zagreb in late 2001. See <http://ba.voanews.com/a/a-37-a-2001-12-13-6-1-86245122/1176558.html>

time, and the two countries even began to cope with the war crimes issue, outside of the proceedings and trials before the International Criminal Tribunal for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). This will be a topic which will for generations accompany bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia, always returning relations to the past, which has become clearly visible in the last few days, months and years.¹⁰⁹

The international community and its main actors were strongly spurring on and encouraging normalization and reconciliation. The prominent role in the first period was played by the UN and the OSCE, then the EU, and to a certain extent also Serbia's and Croatia's neighbouring countries, together with the USA.

Here it is necessary to emphasize the *pioneering*, although deeply logical move of the Serbian community in Croatia within the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS), which in 2003 entered into a coalition with the Croatian Democratic Community, extended its hand to this party which was under the new president, Sanader, who was reform- and European-orientated. This brought multiple gains for the Zagreb authorities, but also the unfortunate continued obstruction of the resolution of outstanding issues concerning the position of the Serbian community in Croatia, most often at a local level, which was difficult to overcome without the blessing of central government and other influential actors. This also affected Belgrade-Zagreb relations and to a certain extent brought them into a new, pragmatic phase.

From today's perspective, however, it turns out that attempts to normalize relations and direct them towards reconciliation through a *bottom-up* approach were short-lived and exposed to the numerous influences of non-state players who, for various reasons, obstructed such intentions or strived to build a long-term *wall* between the two countries. It was repeatedly confirmed that animosity towards neighbouring countries could still result in political profit, with relatively small investment and no or very little responsibility. In other words, one can still live well from conflicts and not only cooperation. This, of course, does not mean that overall relations in the region and the atmosphere in bilateral relations with Croatia have not improved.

The independence of Montenegro, cordially supported by the Zagreb authorities, brought Serbian-Croatian relations into the second, "purely" bilateral phase, removing the veil of Yugoslavism and uncovering the interests of the two sides to such an extent that it can be said that relations in fact, contrary to expectations, were returning to the past rather than turning towards a common European future. It is difficult to say whether the reason lies in their ambiguously formulated national and geopolitical interests, which even small countries like Serbia and Croatia are not exempt from, or whether it lies in their deep-rooted opposition.¹¹⁰

At this point, and before we continue to elaborate on relations between Serbia and Croatia, it is necessary to note that their bilateral relations also have a broader, delicate dimension that is reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the inevitable growing importance and influence of the Bosniaks and Islam. The current *rapprochement* of Serbian and Croatian leaders in BiH and the seemingly growing convergence of their interests is a topic for separate analysis, but it certainly indicates that the consequences of Belgrade and Zagreb policies are more than purely bilateral.

In the next phase of relations, after its separation with Montenegro, Serbia was independently building its diplomatic relations with Croatia for the first time. Apart from outstanding issues from the war period and the notoriously complex issue of the unfinished process of the succession of the former common state, Croatia's recognition of the independence of Kosovo put an added burden on relations. Moreover, Zagreb sent an ambassador to Pristina soon after that. This move, which was taken together with Bulgaria and Hungary, led to the withdrawal of the Serbian ambassador from Zagreb *for consultation* and to the

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, the reactions/publicity after the ICTY's acquittal verdict for the generals, Gotovina and Markač and the recent acquittal verdict for Šešelj.

¹¹⁰ The witty remark about relations between Serbia and Croatia, made by a prominent expert in foreign affairs: "everybody knows everything, just like in football", is probably true.

freezing of political talks. An additional burden on relations was the decision of the International Court of Justice to accept jurisdiction for Croatia's lawsuit against Serbia for genocide. The rapid and severe reaction of Belgrade, with the announcement of a counter-claim, put an extra strain on relations. Croatia also participated in the December hearing before the International Court of Justice in the Hague about Kosovo's declaration of independence, which made Serbia more than unhappy. Within this episode of disputes and outstanding issues, it looked as if Belgrade and Zagreb would, for a long time, meet in the courtroom rather than around the negotiating table. In principle, an agreement is always better among neighbours than a courtroom, which also applies to relations with neighbouring countries, however, not at the expense of justice; punishing the culprits on an individual basis rather than on a collective basis, without any crime being swept under the carpet and without any new injustice.¹¹¹

The talks partially returned to normal in early 2009, when the then Prime Minister, Ivo Sanader, visited Belgrade, accompanied by Croatian businessmen as an alibi, but at the same time it confirmed that Zagreb was giving priority to economic relations and investments in Serbia. As with other countries that had recognized the independence of Kosovo, there was *an agreement that there was no agreement*, and a *reset* of relations. It was generally agreed that the top-level meeting should continue at a slower pace, however, Prime Minister Sanader, under *mysterious* circumstances and overnight, left his key position in the Croatian administration, and Zagreb's attention was shifted to a dispute with Slovenia, the resolution of which was a precondition for Croatia's accession to the EU, which was achieved in 2013.

The good news was that the exchange of goods in economic cooperation during the previous years was worth almost one billion dollars. Croatian investments in Serbia did not decline, while investments by Serbian companies in Croatia were still marginal, perhaps because of the reserved attitude of local communities. However, several contracts were signed during the year and several important meetings and visits were realized. The countries concluded the agreement on cooperation concerning EU integration, signed an agreement on economic cooperation, negotiated on health insurance as well as cooperation concerning minorities. Significant dynamics of contact and cooperation were realized between the departments of the interior, including the conclusion of an agreement on police cooperation and readmission.

Talks between Belgrade and Zagreb developed through tacit agreement and moved from easier to more difficult issues *step by step*. The Zagreb authorities were particularly cautious not to jeopardize in any way the European perspective and their relatively fast and successful membership negotiations, especially through relations with their neighbours (Serbia, BiH, Montenegro, and in a specific way Slovenia). A phase had now been reached whereby it would be necessary to start dealing with even the most delicate topics, with potentially complex consequences on relations, the public and the political actors in the two countries. Paradoxically, here lay space for the biggest breakthrough in relations.

And so, before Croatia entered the European Union¹¹² relations between the two countries ranged from cooperation to conflict, or better to say dispute, about the resolution of numerous outstanding issues. The disputes, almost exclusively on topics of the recent past came to the fore much more rarely, mostly in connection with elections, and more at local and regional levels than at a national level. The magnet of EU membership functioned, with the significant advantage of Croatia in this process.¹¹³ A common foreign-political goal *ironed out* the differences and encouraged talks. This was going on in spite of the

¹¹¹ M. Simurdić, Paradoks srpsko-hrvatskih odnosa, Tanjug, 3.1.2010.

¹¹² The specifics of the dimension of each measure is expressed in the annexes of the basic agreements, which cover, among all else, human and minority rights, which directly tackle the position of the Serb community in Croatia, of which little is known and is the most important for our topic. See <http://www.mvep.hr/custompages/static/hrv/files/pregovori/Ugovor-sazetakMVEP.pdf>

¹¹³ The support of Serbia, regardless of its marginal importance, in comparison with member states' attitudes, was permanently present, among all else as a sign of the sincerity of its own membership ambitions on the basis of the EU Thessaloniki agenda. There are also examples of direct support, e.g. when Belgrade relatively quickly and successfully pulled ahead in negotiations on the withdrawal of the "blue helmets" from Prevlaka, with characteristic passivity, but also without public objection and exposure of the Podgorica authorities.

fact that already then it was clear that Croatia had powerful EU sponsors who preferred the regatta to the convoy principle when admitting new members. The obstacles on their path to accession were the result of other disputes among EU members and not whether to accept another member which, according to most criteria, was ahead of Romania and Bulgaria, the countries admitted before Croatia.

For NATO, of course, the geographical position of Croatia was the issue of all issues. The Adriatic coast in the hands of others, i.e. a potential enemy, is a nightmare for strategists and soldiers, and as a part of allied territory it is a clean and not too expensive gain. Large countries see wide and far and it is not surprising that US President Bush personally visited Croatia immediately after their invitation to join NATO in 2008, which was adopted at the Alliance Summit in Bucharest, in order to directly encourage them on this path. The fact that members of the Croatian Army were at the same time facing trial in the Hague did not to any extent slow down the process of Croatia's entry into NATO.

The broad span of actors in international relations, from state to non-state, and perhaps most importantly, the citizens of the two countries - which during the 1990s seemed impossible – were complementing and encouraging each other. Delays and disputes at state levels were compensated by non-state actors, particularly by business people, those in the arts as well as sportsmen, while the citizens, more and more of them young, who, in their numbers and with their growing ties brought the stability and encouragement which were necessary.¹¹⁴

This significantly stabilized relations and opened a space for the resolution of the remaining outstanding issues. Observed from today's perspective, this was an idealistic assessment because the opposite turned out to be true. It, in fact, did not stand the test of time. Croatia did not resist the call of EU membership to patronize and behave like a regional force while hiding behind other members. This was bad for Serbia, but not without potential negative consequences for Croatia as well. Still, Sanader was saying that we would be the best allies once in Brussels. In addition, one should remember the numerous statements, even those made by the Croatian parliament and particularly at the time when Slovenia was conditioning Croatia's admission into the EU, that Zagreb would not do the same to its neighbours. Then the HDZ and the ruling coalition completely forgot this and introduced a higher level of distrust with regard to their intentions and goals of cooperation with Serbia. The incumbent government in Croatia was entirely different, more ideologically oriented and less pragmatic than the leadership which, in the not so distant past, had led the government (or party). In fact, it seems that the majority of the ruling coalition in Croatia was increasingly under the influence of the political philosophy of the Croatian Party of Rights, which was behind a series of disputes and conflicts between Serbs and Croats, both in Croatia and in BiH.

And so, talks between Belgrade and Zagreb were moving between the past and future, between the current failure or the non-existent closure of the tragic chapters of the violent civil war which followed the dissolution of the common state, and moving, regardless of how it seems now, towards joint membership of the EU, which is the most successful peaceful and developmental project in the history of Europe. Problems in relations lie, above all else, on the side of the past, whereas a European future, although not entirely free from potential problems, is probably the easiest topic on the agenda of the two countries. In fact, there is rivalry on issues of the past and partnership topics of the future. Hypothetically, let us imagine what positions the two countries would take within EU institutions once they have the same level of integration, for example in the area of common foreign and security policy.

Of course, Belgrade-Zagreb talks cannot operate in a vacuum. Each party has its own plans, ambitions and problems. Belgrade puts political topics on the top of the agenda, while Zagreb economic cooperation. Foreign policy starts at home, and so, firstly, both parties act depending on their internal political needs, and then on their own international position and foreign policy interests and priorities. Their obligations also stem from the fact that they are both members of the international community: with regard to Serbia,

¹¹⁴ See the text M.Simurdić, "Između prošlosti i budućnosti", Helsinška povelja, No. 133-134, Beograd, 2009.

it is a country negotiating for EU membership and has NATO partner status, while Croatia is in the EU and a NATO member state.

There is particularly no vacuum in contemporary international affairs. Severe global and regional crises, which only the biggest optimists could call challenges, have surrounded our region and there is louder talk of a *new Cold War*. The crises in Syria to the south and Ukraine to the east, together with the influences of these hot spots, has placed the region in a dangerous grip, which even countries which are economically, politically and militarily more powerful would find hard to withstand.

For Serbia and the region this is additionally complicated due to the fragile situation within the EU, where, among all else, a political pendulum is dangerously oscillating from the Greek crisis and the possible exit of Great Britain, to the most delicate problem for us at the moment – the refugee wave, practically a human tsunami, which reached a peak on the so-called *Balkan route*, which includes Serbia.

At one point, this wave of refugees seriously threatened relations between Serbia and Croatia and showed how sensitive they are not only to their own, but also to *imported problems*. In the midst of the parliamentary electoral campaign, Zagreb resorted to a highly unusual and hardly understandable measure – it closed its borders. It is obvious that the fight for votes overcame the need to maintain undisturbed communication between the two countries, regardless of how dramatic this refugee wave was at times. For the first time since the end of the conflict in the 1990s, the then opposition was heard advocating for army deployment on its border with Serbia, which fortunately did not occur, at least not publicly.

In a series of statements and moves which further contributed to the worsening of the atmosphere in relations, in 2015 there was a debate between the heads of the two countries about the purchase of military weapons, which was fortunately short-lived, using also a vocabulary that was long forgotten, and could only be interpreted as an attempt to obtain, as a general rule, short-term internal political gains. This could even have been understood if such statements had not revived or awoken revanchism among ordinary people, who are the basis of relations on both sides.

Regardless of the obvious fact that there are more important similarities and bearing in mind that although the EU (and NATO) perceive the entire region as part of a *free, peaceful and prosperous Europe*, it is obvious that periods of the realpolitik approach to bilateral relations interchange with those more ideologically coloured. In fact, Serbia and Croatia have somewhat different international positions (more in terms of achievements than in goals), but certainly share the same geographical fate, have similar if not the same systems, have similar languages and share long periods of common history. As repeated on many occasions, until the civil war and the dissolution of the former SFRY, Serbs and Croats waged wars against each other mostly wearing other countries' uniforms.

Hence, with the European integration process¹¹⁵ Serbia is trying on the one hand to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty violated by the independence of Kosovo and on the other, to develop the concept of a multi-vector foreign policy and multiple *strategic partnerships*. This leads to a more tactical than strategic, predominantly political and very modest economical inclination towards the countries of the Non-aligned movement. Serbia, of course, has concluded the so-called Brussels Agreement with Pristina which is of crucial importance and has mostly been implemented. Serbia is also developing relations with NATO and has reached the membership application phase. It insists on the position of military neutrality, which was adopted by the National Assembly in the form of a resolution, and is essentially a unilateral declaration, without adequate guarantees, recognition of other states or their guarantees.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Membership negotiations opened in late 2013, first chapters in 2014, now delayed because the Zagreb authorities, the only EU member "with no stand".

¹¹⁶ See I. Vejvoda, „Mogu li slediti druge balkanske zemlje“, Novi magazin, Beograd, 10.12.2015.

In the case of its Western neighbour, Croatia, in addition to EU membership became a full member of the NATO Alliance (in 2009, together with Albania), which has strengthened its influence and importance in the region, in Europe and globally, particularly in terms of its possible influence and obligations in relation to the policies of these two organizations towards the Western Balkans. Early experiences show that Slovenia is more skilful and relaxed, while Zagreb fails to resist the temptation to use its new position to impose its agenda on its neighbours and even in the region,¹¹⁷ i.e. it tries to project its own geopolitical ideas onto others (especially BiH and Serbia).¹¹⁸

So far there is no indication that by doing this Croatia enjoys broader support from the members of the clubs it has recently been admitted to, and it even seems that it is not a policy that has been synchronized, accepted or endorsed by the EU or by the Alliance members, or at least their key actors. Hence, Croatia has significantly solidified its international position and in that sense, together with Slovenia, although with a little delay, at least in an institutional as well as in a contractual sense (if not in terms of implementation, then especially in political culture) distanced itself from the traditional set of Western Balkan issues. Therefore it is not surprising that Belgrade and Zagreb have different views about how to resolve outstanding issues, and so elements of cooperation interchange with signs of competition in their relations.

Significant progress was being made in certain areas in mutual relations, above all those related to the legacy of war, up until the case of Croatian conditionality, i.e. reservations against opening Chapter 23 in Serbia's EU membership negotiations.¹¹⁹

In spite of this, we would like to believe that this unfortunate episode will not jeopardize progress in judicial and police cooperation. For whether it is about the war crime proceedings, lists of persons convicted and indicted for war crimes, the search for missing persons on the one hand, or the fight against organized crime on the other, the impression is that it is insufficient, yet the breakthroughs are important. It has been confirmed that for war crimes and organized crime, which essentially have common roots in the legacy of the war, there are no exclusively national omens, or solutions, but also that criminals in the region sometimes cooperate better than those for whom the development of relations and the removal of obstacles are the main tasks.

Relations between Serbia and Croatia require both firm and trust-based bilateral cooperation, a regional approach and joint action. Changes in the structure, the programmes, the political actors and overall bilateral relations in the region, Europe and even globally, require additional and permanent efforts in order to build relations on solid and mutually beneficial foundations. Most actors from the time of the Serbian and Croatian conflict have either left the historical arena or experienced political transformation and even catharsis. For example, the split within the Serbian Radical Party, the largest opposition party in Serbia, has actually reduced resistance to the development of relations with Zagreb because support for the party's revisionist policy towards Croatia has significantly decreased. For a certain time, the same was true with regard to the activities of Croatian political parties.

However, the call of politics and the fight for votes is constant, that is parliamentary elections (in the case of Croatia also elections for the European Parliament), local, presidential and even party elections. To this,

¹¹⁷ The Zagreb professor of international relations D. Jović uses an interesting expression "small power" in describing the position of Croatia in his text which is worthy of attention „Hrvatska vanjska politika pre izazovima članstva u EU“, journal *Politička misao*, Zagreb, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Croatian politicians gladly mention Vojvodina, particularly when speaking about the position of Croats in Serbia, emphasizing its specificity but neglecting, certainly consciously, the fact that a large number of Croat minority members live in other parts of Serbia, including Belgrade.

¹¹⁹ One of the few topics that both the former and the incumbent Croatian government agree on, and for several years have been criticizing, is Belgrade's ambition to be a so-called "mini Hague", even though it is about the implementation of principles of universal jurisdiction in the prosecution of war criminals. It is striking that Croatia did not require other EU member states with similar or the same regulations to modify this law.

of course, one should add the intention of certain actors to strengthen their internally weakened position by attacking the other side according to their needs. The targets and actors change, but some facts are undisputable. These is, above all, the spillover of political influences, the closeness of political reasoning and the attempts of a number of actors, both on the right and recently also on the left pole of the political spectrum, to gain political points and collect votes at the expense of the other side, or to be more precise, of the other nation.¹²⁰ On several occasions this has also been interpreted by Freud's formulation of *narcissism of small differences*, which although very picturesque offers only a diagnosis, without the prescription for overcoming the difficulties in relations. In fact, it could be said that relations between Serbia and Croatia, ever since becoming direct, without third parties, have been *lost in elections*.

In fact, since 2012 and the presidential and parliamentary elections in Serbia, there has practically not been a year without elections being held in one or the other country. If we go back a couple of years to 2010, a new president was elected in Croatia. This was followed by local elections in Croatia in 2013 and early parliamentary elections in Serbia in 2014. In addition, for the first time elections for the European Parliament were held in Croatia, together with the first round of presidential elections in 2014, which, in the second round was won by a woman for the first time. In the same year there were regular parliamentary elections in Croatia, while this year, 2016, early parliamentary elections have just ended in Serbia (simultaneously with regular elections in the Province of Vojvodina and local municipalities). Next year, regular presidential elections and regular local elections will be held in Serbia and Croatia respectively, and later, in 2018, again elections for the European Parliament in Croatia. We do not single out party elections, but believe that in the case of big players and minority parties they affect bilateral relations. We have observed all of the above but we are aware that early elections are not excluded from this tight schedule, more so in Croatia than in Serbia, where, as we mentioned, they have just ended. Relations between Serbia and Croatia stagnated and entered an essentially new period after the Serbian elections in 2012 and the change of both the president and the government of the Republic of Serbia. The fact that the position of the President of Serbia and the most influential positions in the government of Serbia were taken by the leaders from the Serbian Progressive Party, was met with scepticism and *schadenfreude* by Zagreb. This is because most members of this party were members of the Serbian Radical Party before the split, which in Croatia is without any exception perceived as one of the main culprits for the *aggression* and the standard-bearer of Great Serbian pretensions. There is no need to elaborate that such a development was approved by certain rightist circles in Croatia, in the sense that it was an alibi for their own political moves and promotion.

On the other hand, the new hybrid incumbent government in Croatia is entirely different, more ideologically and less pragmatically oriented than the HDZ leadership was in the not too distant past. In fact, one has the impression that the majority of the ruling coalition in Croatia is increasingly under the influence of the political philosophy close to the Croatian Party of Rights. Attempts to Europeanize the extremist forces have terminated, at least in the way in which the former minister of foreign affairs, M. Granić, did with the Croatian Party of Rights.

One of the key elements of the complex, multidimensional relations between Serbia and Croatia is the issue of the position of the Serb community in Croatia.¹²¹ This is well illustrated in the document of the Serbian National Council from Zagreb,¹²² which in a documented and very illustrative manner, among other things, says that "last year marked an increase in the number of physical attacks and threats directed against Serbs in Croatia and the destruction of their property. In 2015, we witnessed the banning of the

¹²⁰ See the statement of the then Prime Minister of Croatia Z. Milanović <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/milanovic-srbija-nece-uvoditi-ni-kakve-mere-protiv-hrvatske/yzdpgr>. In a similar spirit, but much more actual about Serbia, see the statement of the current Vice President of the Croatian Government B. Petrov <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/petrov-o-srbiji-i-seselj-gospodo-vrijeme-je-za-katarzu-petrov-nakon-izbora>.

¹²¹ The text of the declaration is available at http://ombudsman.hr/images/Deklaracija_o_nesnosljivosti_i_etnocentrizmu.pdf

¹²² <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/353528/Hasanbegovic-od-velike-Srbije-ne-vidi-veliki-zlocin>

Cyrillic script in Vukovar, numerous attempts to rehabilitate the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and the ever-frequent use of hate speech by public figures and part of the media. Therefore, the year 2015 will remain remembered as a year in which the nationalist, anti-minority atmosphere, which has been intensifying since 2013, i.e. since Croatia's accession to the European Union, has reached great proportions.”

Furthermore, it has been seen that “the representatives of national minorities in the Croatian parliament and the president of the National Minority Council of the RH Government, who on 14th May in Pula published the Declaration on intolerance and ethnocentrism in Croatia, warned against this trend”.¹²³ The Declaration also states that members of national minorities have again witnessed chauvinist statements, discrimination from certain parties who have created their political ideology upon nationalism and exclusion, and that such a situation is a security problem for minorities and an obstacle to their guaranteed rights. This document, among other items in this Bulletin, remained almost unnoticed in the public arena. It should be stated here that this year, the Serb community in Croatia, for the first time since the declaration of independence of the Republic of Croatia, boycotted the official ceremony for the commemoration of the victims of the Ustasha concentration camp at Jasenovac, which is an additional indicator of the presented assessment.¹²⁴

In any case, the Serb community in Croatia, despite the huge problems it has been facing since the violent dissolution of the SFRY, has the political knowledge, experience and will to continuously fight for the improvement of its position, regardless of how impossible it may seem.

At the same time, this community is a constant and consistent advocate of normal good neighbourly relations between Croatia and Serbia and a resolute fighter for human and minority rights.¹²⁵ Last, but not least, it should not be forgotten that it is the largest authentic Serb community living in an EU member-state.

At the beginning of this text the intentions of some actors from the Croatian political arena to build a wall between Serbia and Croatia, and even between Croatia and the rest of the Western Balkans was mentioned, and it was also stressed that the common foreign political goal of all the countries of the region is a prerequisite for peace, stability and development, as defined in Thessaloniki in 2003. In this regard, it is worth pointing out new accents or indicators of a new direction of Croatian foreign policy, which was led up to now by the new President of the Republic of Croatia¹²⁶ iwho first openly rejected the term region and introduced the term neighbours, and then returned to the term South East Europe, which is the old (German, mostly Bavarian) name for the Western Balkans. Already these signs show that new winds are blowing, at least from Pantovčak, which, according to the Croatian constitution plays the role of co-creator in the formulation and realization of foreign policy, and that Croatia through a large part of its political elite is attempting to distance itself from the region and to cement its role as the *external wall of Christianity*, which was a topic traditionally favoured by clerics as well as politicians after the declaration of Croatia's independence. For this concept, Pantovčak launched a new term *uspravnica* (a vertical line,

¹²³ The text of the declaration is available at http://ombudsman.hr/images/Deklaracija_o_nesnosljivosti_i_etnocentrizmu.pdf

¹²⁴ <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/353528/Hasanbegovic-od-velike-Srbije-ne-vidi-veliki-zlocin>

¹²⁵ If Serbs finally agree and reconcile that the Croatian and Serbian languages are two different and separate languages, then Croatians' old dream will be fulfilled. But when they realize that in practice it means that Serbs are taught on their own, now the allegedly different language and script cause trouble and they wonder why the children are separated into classes and schools, and this is followed by the destruction of Cyrillic signs and other Serbian insignias with hammers. Novosti March 18th, 2016. „Srbi po mjeri HDZ“, Zoran Daskalović).

¹²⁶ In the period 2005-2008, she was the Croatian head of diplomacy although according to the author, who was the FRY ambassador in Zagreb, that role was in fact performed by the then prime minister Sanader himself, with strong support from the MFA State Secretary H. Bišćević. Then she was ambassador in the USA, and after that the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy at NATO and was nominated in 2014 by the HDZ as presidential candidate, which was successfully realized.

trans. note), probably marking a geopolitical vertical, i.e. the Baltic-Adriatic line.¹²⁷ The presence of the Croatian President at the Visegrad Group summit showed that this was really the case; however, without any specific conclusions or Croatia's admission.

Essentially, bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia are something entirely new, unknown and even unexplored following Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013 and, as we have already stated, have remained *lost in elections*. They have accelerated with the pace and severity of rhetoric, while Croatia, in addition to being a classical bilateral partner, has the dimension of being a European Union member, the club to which Serbia wants to join at an accelerated pace. Therefore, relations between Serbia and Croatia are not only bilateral, regional and multilateral anymore, there is a new element - Croatia sits at the table and decides equally with others on our accession to the EU, defines measures for the opening and closing of negotiating chapters and holds discussions about us at the European Parliament¹²⁸ or the Council of Europe. Unlike Serbia which is on the table, Croatia is at the table.

When looking at the list of outstanding topics in bilateral relations, it is obvious that in fact hardly any items were resolved during Croatia's accession to the EU. This could mean at least two things: either that disputed issues were left to be resolved by the interested parties, with eventual good service from Brussels, or that the power of the EU's geopolitical enlargement in Croatia completely overshadowed its outstanding issues with its neighbours, with the exception of Slovenia, which was already in the EU. In any event, this does not seem encouraging.

However, there are no one-way streets in relations between countries. Interdependence is, among other things, a constant that hardly ever changes. In a globalized world it increasingly gains in importance, and in a small space it can hardly be neglected, and if so - at a very high price. This means that bilateral relations are globalised and cannot be isolated from global affairs. There is no doubt that a certain advantage in European affairs, observed through the criterion of the EU integration level, is at this moment on the side of Zagreb. But there is also no doubt that the elementary interest of Croatia requires that all countries in the Western Balkan region become EU members in the manner set out in Thessaloniki in 2003 and repeated on numerous occasions from the highest positions in the Union.¹²⁹ Another issue is what the Union, that *old lady*, will be like when Serbia is ready for admission. What will remain and what we should rely on is long-term peace and stability as a prerequisite for development, and not a *zero-sum game* and short-term gains. However, as long as the region's countries share the same foreign political goal of EU membership, i.e. advocate for the same system of values, we will have a strong stabilizing and developmental tool, that is the centripetal force of European integration, while the countries of the region which have already entered the EU will either have the task, or be faced with expectations to help their former compatriots or neighbours on that path. The recent comments of prominent politicians as well as the media from the most influential member states concerning Croatia's conditioning of the opening of certain negotiation chapters with Serbia, clearly speak about this.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ It is possible that the Zagreb authorities use the "right-wing wave" in V-4 in an attempt to capitalize on the fact that, from an energy and military aspect, its geographic position is very favourable. The idea is reminiscent of what Polish Marshall Pilsudski advocated between the two world wars in the concept called "Intermarium", which saw the USSR as the main danger, i.e. his pretensions to strengthen Polish influence in Ukraine.

¹²⁸ Croatian MEPs did not resist to use this forum for fierce criticism of Serbia. See e.g. <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/ko-je-evropska-parlamentarka-ruza-tomasic-bivsa-kanadska-polica-jka-koja-je-pretukla/dm77h34>

¹²⁹ Croatia has three "conditions" for Serbia: the first is to abandon the criminal prosecution of persons indicted for war crimes in conflicts in the entire territory of the former SFRY, the second is a guaranteed seat in parliament for the Croat minority representative, and the third is full cooperation with the ICTY.

¹³⁰ See e.g. <http://www.dw.com/sr/hrvatska-blokada-tema-u-berlinu/a-19195956> ili <http://rs.n1info.com/a152402/Svet/Svet/Nemacka-nema-razumevanja-za-blokadu-Hrvatske.html>

