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“New regional integration initiatives for the Western Balkans as substitutes for EU accession”

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Abstract. This paper examines new initiatives for “regional integration” of Western Balkans, as an alternative to full EU integration. Three decades since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, ideas on its reincarnation are re-actualized. Now; within “European” label. Although since 2014 “Berlin Process” for the Western Balkans was launched as EU-WB platform for speeding their accession through regional cooperation, scholars and diplomats are discussing other alternatives to full EU accession, in the form of “regional economic integration”. According to these initiatives, they will be integrated regionally under Serbian leadership, replacing their initial EU integration with Balkans sub-integration. In October 2019 Serbia launched in Novi Sad “Balkans Mini-Schengen”, which was further discussed in Ohrid and Tirana in the same year. Due the non participation of three other countries (Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina), that idea “slept” till mid of 2021 when Balkans troika of: Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia re-discussed it in Skopje meeting of 29 July 2021 and re-named it as “Open Balkans”. In parallel to that Serbian initiative, in the beginning of 2021 other alternatives to full membership circulated: from “free trade zone EU- WB to “differentiated integration/associated membership”. Due to status quo of EU enlargement and opposition of EU member states for accepting new members, likely for the Western Balkans will offer other alternatives to full membership, as a kind of trade integration with the block without political integration. European promises will replace European perspective which was proclaimed two decades ago. But, letting the Western Balkans out of EU will produce security risks and will challenge geostrategic interests of the whole Europe.

Keywords: EU, Western Balkans, Enlargement, Accession, EU integration, Accession’s substitutes

Introduction

EU enlargement is today rare used word in Brussels.¹ Other alternatives to full membership for the countries of Western Balkans are discussing. As the replacement for enlargement policy, in 2021 three substitutes are circulating: “Open Balkans”, “EU-WB free trade zone” and “differentiated integration”.

If accepted, these substitutes will replace existing enlargement and delay EU integration risking to failure of the region under eastern influence. The region which today is called The Western Balkans, for more than 5 centuries, was left out from west, (during the Ottoman Empire and communist ruling). After a decade of status quo of EU enlargement, region eastern challenges eclipsed the region with increased Russia and China presence. Letting the six countries of this region out of western umbrella would produce larger security consequences for southern borders of EU, creating a geopolitical vacuum which would be fulfilled by non Euro- Atlantic players.

Instead of experimenting with these alternatives of enlargement, Brussels should speed the process of accession for six countries of the Western Balkans. That geostrategic challenge was well understood by German Chancellor Merkel, when inaugurated in 2014 “Berlin Process”, as strategic wake up to prevent unpredictable geopolitical changes in the region and offering an inclusive approach for EU integration of all six countries from the Western Balkans. Why need for these “new initiative” which aiming substitute of their accession to EU, if “Berlin process” during last seven years supported integration path of all countries of the region to EU trough regional cooperation? In the following chapters will be elaborated status quo of EU enlargement and three substitutes to accession. The first is replacement of EU integration with Balkans sub-integration, as “open Balkans”, which replaced earlier “Balkan Mini Schengen”. Next is the “free trade zone EU-WB”, which will allow them only to be part of EU single market, but not their accession. Finally there is “differentiated integration” for the countries of the Western Balkans.

¹ Based on ECFR survey of June 2021, EU enlargement was even not mentioned as a priority issue; (“Слободен Печат“, 21.06.2021, p.11)

1. EU enlargement status-quo

The Western Balkans, in the last three decades was under two long transitional processes: post-conflict and post-communist transformation. In addition in the last two years the region faced with catastrophic pandemic consequences. After the wars in the last century, the European Union, in 1999 inaugurated a new process for integration of the Western Balkans. Through Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) and with full compliance of Copenhagen (1993) and Madrid criteria (1995), countries from this region are under EU enlargement policy, which should lead them toward full membership. Through post-conflict stabilization, EU offered to them “European perspective” with final goal: accession to EU. But after two decades the region continued to be out EU.

Tired from new members, Brussels justified it through: “enlargement fatigue”, lack of “absorption capacity” or by “privileged partnership” (Reka, 2010, 63). Only one country- Croatia becomes EU member in 2013, and six other countries are still far from their accession to the union. (Delcommune, A 2013, 3). In meantime in the last decade a status quo of enlargement, other alternatives to full membership were discussed, which would left the region outside of Euro-Atlantic umbrella.

The region is also tired from long waiting in front of the Brussels doors. The Western Balkans still has un-resolved bilateral disputes and six countries have mutually either border’s disputes or inter-ethnic claims. (Reka, 2020, 79). It also has different strategic goals. Serbia is still in between the East and the West. Albania and North Macedonia, aiming the west, but waiting for while for start of accession negotiations. Although both NATO members, they remain out from EU, like Montenegro which almost failed into China credits slavery. Kosovo is still unrecognized by 5 EU member states and without visa-free regime. Bosnia and Herzegovina continued in permanent inter-ethnic battles, which risking state functionality, without NATO presence, as “guaranty its territorial unity”.²

² General Erich Folketshtad, Chief Commandant of NATO HQ in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (“Слободен Печат“, 24.08.2021, p.11)

After EU “big enlargement”, (2004/2007) integration process entered into a status-quo period, due to clashes between three key actors: political blockade of member states, non political power of Brussels bureaucracy and un-reformed states’ elites of the region. Further this delay of EU enlargement in the region according to Bildt, is dangerous. (Bildt, 2021, 10)

Earlier, EU enlargement was mostly geopolitical process, bringing inside EU ten former communist countries and two geostrategic important Mediterranean states-islands from the cold war era. Former allies of the Warsaw Pact, after integrating in NATO, were accepted in the EU, like Romania and Bulgaria. (Noutcheva, G- Bechev D, 2008, 114). Since the closure of that geostrategic chapter, an enlargement pause or a revised enlargement occurred (Reka, 2010, 64), due to a shift of this EU policy: from geopolitical approach, towards technical one, by which enlargement was almost substituted with European neighborhood policy. (Haoyy N- Leszek J, 2005, 2).

The geopolitics was left to NATO (integrating: Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), and the technique to the EU. This explains why, Albania although more than ten years a NATO member, still not started EU accession talks? This changed strategy was a result of a lesson learned by Brussels. By domination of geopolitical vs. technical reasons, (during the last “big enlargement”), some of new members where accepted, without fulfilling of later introduced Copenhagen and Madrid criteria. Three of them were less prepared in comparison to current candidates from the WB, and had lower GDP compared with former Yugoslavia.³

EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is the process based on the conditionality. (Gateva, 2015, 2). It was build trough Stabilization and Association Agreements; and till 2019 was implemented by accession negotiations by opening and closing of 35 chapters of *acquis communautaire*. Since 2020, based on “new methodology” of enlargement the whole process becomes more rigid, reversible and unpredictable. Till mid of 2021 that new methodology did not applied yet for two negotiating countries (Montenegro and Serbia), neither to “waiting” countries (Albania and North Macedonia), which in the last two years did not open accession negotiations.

³ Even Greece, in 80-ies of the last century, had lower GDP (57 billion USD) than former Yugoslavia (70,143 billion USD); not to speak compared with Romania (46 billion USD) or Bulgaria (18,84 billion USD); “Нова Македонија“, 21.06.2021, p.3

In the first decade of this century the process, was affected by “enlargement fatigue”, and some scholars opened the question of further expanded EU (Sjuarsen, H, 2003, 2). Some EU members states asked for the pause in enlargement, and two years ago, French President Macron’s requested deepening before widening, implying that there will be no external enlargement before an internal institutional reform of the EU. In autumn of 2019 France raises the need for change of that EU enlargement model, because was too long, not effective and not predictable. Based on “Macron’s doctrine” (Dumont G, 2021, 3), the whole process of enlargement should be gradual and reversible, due to slow progress of previous methodology.

French position on the need for “new methodology” came after a debate for new approach of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. (Swoboda, H 2018, 1). Some authors think that new methodology was launched to avoid repetition of Montenegro or Serbia case, with their delay of accession negotiations (Mirel, P, 2020, 3) and to give to the process more predictability and more credibility. “New Methodology” was presented by EC on 5th February 2020, and on March 2020 European Council enhanced and endorsed enlargement methodology.⁴ The 4 key principles of this new methodology are: gradual association; stringent conditions; tangible benefits and reversibility, which should be respected in each of 7 phases of the process.⁵ Not only EC, (as it was till now), but also each of member states could intervene and even ask for re-opening again already closed chapter. Compared with previous EU enlargement approach, (where accession negotiations were leaded by EC); now from the beginning will be directed by EC and member states. So, in contrast to earlier period when EC, gave positive recommendation for one negotiation country, (but Council decided against); now from the start of the process both EC and Council will be involved in the process.

Brussels justified its hesitation for new members due to not preparedness of them in the field of rule of law. In the Balkans, state capture is risking to shift towards failed state trough: politicized judiciary, corrupted state’s elite by oligarchy and nepotistic administration. All EC Progress

⁴ “Enhancing the Accession Process- A Credible U Perspective for the Western Balkans”; (Joint Statement of Member States f the European Council Endorsing and Enhancing Enlargement Methodology), COM(2020)57 Final, 20 March, 2020.

⁵ Ibid, Annex 1, pp.1,2,4,5

Reports notified wide spread corruption, as well as Transparency International, which corruption index remains high.⁶

Technical standards are important for their accession to EU but as well as geopolitical considerations. Compared with the past, if the EU allowed: post-dictatorial enlargement (Greece, 1981; Portugal and Spain, 1986); and post-communist enlargement (countries from Central and Eastern Europe, 2004/2007); why not to accept even after two decades, new post-conflict countries from the Western Balkans?

Having in mind that remaining out of EU this region poses geopolitical risk Germany since 2014 initiated a “wake up” approach to enlargement process. In order to return the region into real integrative path in 2014 “The Berlin Process” was launched, offering EU funds for economic recovering and regional cooperation and connectivity, trough financing infrastructure and energy projects of the Western Balkans countries. (Rudan A, 2018, 1) Seven years since launching that regional cooperation initiative German Chancellor Merkel in her last meeting of Berlin Process on 5th July 2021 concluded that “The Balkans needs reconciliation”.⁷

Geopolitical consequence of letting the region out EU is unpredictable due to other “interested” players like Russia or China. This never ended EU integration marathon in the Western Balkans will have un-predictable security consequences not only for the region. It was demonstrated in the beginning of 2021 trough “non-paper games”, which affected region’s geopolitical atmosphere. Media discovered a “non paper”⁸, which recommends the formation of a “greater Serbia” and “greater Croatia”, proposing significant remapping of the region.⁹ Those countries would absorb parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and potentially parts of Montenegro. The Republika Srpska portion of Bosnia and Herzegovina would be joined with Serbia, and the remainder with Croatia. Albania and Kosovo would also be merged into a single country. (Reka, 2021, 2). For EU and US redrawing borders is an “unrealistic and very dangerous” idea that

⁶ Based on Balkans Barometer: 13% of citizens of Albania, 8% of Kosovo, 5% of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by 4% of citizens of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, confirmed that they were subject of corruption by state officials; Koha 13.07.2019, p.5

⁷ “Panorama”, 05.07.2021, p.5

⁸ Media alleged Slovenian PM Janez Jansa as the “author”, although Jansa denied his “authorship. Later EC confirmed that such document exists; “Delo”, “24 UR”, “Necenzurirano”, Politicki.ba; etc; “Euroactiv”, 12.04.2021; “Нова Македонија“, 14.04.2021, p. 3.

⁹ “Vijesti”, 22.04.2021; “СП Неделник“, 24-25.04.2021, p.2-3

“belongs in the past”¹⁰, but earlier, remapping the Balkans’ borders is an idea was discussed by high European and American officials.¹¹

In parallel to the first, media discovered the second non-paper¹², supposedly by French and German diplomats, although denied by these two countries. Instead of calling for border changes, it proposed the creation of an autonomous district for majority-Serb areas in northern Kosovo, as well as for special status for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which would be allowed to operate unobstructed as a self-governing part of Kosovo’s political and constitutional system. So, letting the region out of Euro- Atlantic umbrella would create other dangerous scenarios, in particular in actual pandemic circumstances and upcoming new emigration waves from Afghanistan. But, also two decades of unfulfilled promises from Brussels, would not be pushed within 1-2 years; in particular not with less political weight of EU chairs like Slovenia (second half of 2021) or Czech Republic (second half of 2022) EU, comparing with powerful France (first half of 2022). The last one is not such enthusiastic of new members of the union. Most likely French presidency with EU will be focused on “The Future of Europe” debate, which started this year. Macron will not risk ahead of presidential elections of next year with any promising accession message or the region risking its re-election. In particular when negative public opinion on enlargement in EU member states rise. Only less than half of EU population is in favor for new members, even 30% in some of them like in: France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium.¹³ Although Joseph Borell, EU HR for CFSP repeated that the Western Balkans is a “geopolitical issue”¹⁴, no yet any sign that due to the geopolitical importance, the region would in the near future be part of EU. If the region would not be part of EU, it will lose as geopolitical vacuum area in front of Russia and China.¹⁵ Brussels choice is: to accept six countries from Western Balkans or to let them to fail under non Euro-Atlantic orbit, and not experimenting with other substitutes to enlargement.

¹⁰ The declarations of: German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Salenber, Croatia’s Foreign Minister Gordan Grlic Radman. EC and US State Department also rejected the idea too; “Слободен Печат“, 21.04.2021, p.11

¹¹ Between 2018 and 2020, EU Special Representative Federica Mogherini and U.S. Special Envoy Richard Grenell held discussions on a Kosovo-Serbia territory swap. German Chancellor Angela Merkel came out strongly against the idea, however, effectively killing it.

¹² “Koha Ditore”, 26.04.2021, p.1; “Koha”, 24.04.202, p.8

¹³ “Слободен Печат“, 17.05.2021, p.12

¹⁴ “Koha”, 19.05.2021, p.9

¹⁵ In 2021, The Republic of North Macedonia and Albania had “diplomatic war” with Russia. Montenegro had difficulties to expand its military contingent at KFRO/NATO mission in Kosovo due to obstacles of new “pro- Russian government”, as Montenegrin President Milo Gjukanovic informed NATO SG Stoltenberg in May 2021; (“Вечерње Новости“, 18.05.2021, p.3); Montenegro and Serbia would fail under China’s debt slavery due to unpaid China’s credits for infrastructural projects. With the

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2. Serbia's "Balkans unification"

In parallel to "Berlin process" in the last years some other "regional integration" initiatives for the Western Balkans occurred, as "new" alternatives to full EU membership, which coincidence with three decades of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Speculation rise for possible replacement of European Union with a "Balkans union" as a kind of enlarged Yugoslavia and coincidence with Soros idea of 1999 for a region "of former Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania". (Soros, G 1999, 2).

During the cold war division, former Yugoslavia was a tampon zone between the west and the east. After the fail of Berlin wall, when its geopolitical importance expired, the last state of southern slaves ends. It was an historical experiment which tried to create a Yugoslavia without "Yugoslavs". That artificial creation tried to keep different ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities- under centralized Belgrade ruling.

Communist empire (1945-1991) followed Serbian empire (1918-1941) as a hegemonic project founded after the First World War and continued after the Second World War. Around 20 million people of different national background and with historical enemies leaved in an imagined "harmony", although where suppressed really in a collective prison: under Serbian monarchic dictatorship (between two world wars); under Tito's authoritarian ruling (after the Second World War); and under Milosevic regime (in its last decade).

Tito sold that "successful" story to the west (that will not fail under Soviet hemisphere); and to Moscow (that is neutral to the west), trough his foreign policy of "non aligning movement", as a "third block" in the cold war. Today, Serbian president Vucic is pushing the same agenda, announcing Belgrade summit of that "non aligning movement" on its 60th anniversary, announced for 11-12 October 2021.

After Tito's dead in 1980, former Yugoslavia entered into a deep economic and political crisis. Financially, the country had unpaid international debt of around 20 billion USD. It explains that façade of "economic stability" of the last Yugoslav state, with the highest GDP in the region,

which survived by foreign credits.¹⁶ Only Slovenia as most developed federal constituent of former Yugoslavia in 1990 had GDP of 17 billion USD.¹⁷ It explained why that northwest republic was the first which asked independence from Yugoslavia, considering that is colonially misused by Central government in Belgrade. Similarly the southern federal constituent- Kosovo; although less developed in the former Yugoslavia, was the richest with minerals¹⁸ and energy¹⁹, two key elements for Yugoslav industry.

That economically centralized absorption of all incomes from all other seven federal units in Serbia created political un-satisfaction which was followed by self- determination movements in its federal units. Seven federal units felt that they work for the eight-Serbia, and his capitol Belgrade. After Tito's dead and the fail of Berlin wall, circumstances changed and federal units requested independence from that state.

Eight decade of Serbian project of "Yugoslav idea" created three Yugoslav states under Serbian dominance: the first (1918-1941); the second (1945-1991) and the third, (1992-2006). The first two followed geopolitical changes after the "Versailles Peace" (1919) and the "Paris Peace" (1945). The third was the last attempt for reincarnation of the state who failed twice. But, in 2006 geopolitical circumstances changed radically and after separation of Montenegro from "Federal Yugoslavia", that idea was reduced into Serbia.

The dissolution of the last Yugoslavia comes after geopolitical change in the Europe which ends the cold war. The former state which was defended by two opposite poles had no more geostrategic importance. Internal political turmoil as a reaction against Milosevic plan to transform Yugoslavia into "Serbo-slavia" speeded that dissolutive process. Serbian communist leader Milosevic trough Yugoslav army, started new wars: on 20 June 1991 in Slovenia, later in Croatia, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, hoping for former soviet support, but forgotten that cold war era ended.

¹⁶ According to World Bank, in the beginning of 80-ties of the last century: Yugoslav GDP was 70,143 billion USD; higher than Greece of 57 billion USD. Romania had 46 billion USD and Bulgaria 18, 84 billion USD. Later EU membership of these countries improved their economies: In 1987, Greece has higher GDP in the region, and Romania in 2016 had highest GDP from former Balkans communist countries. ("Нова Македонија", 21.07.2021, p.3)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Trough two industrial giants: "Trepça" and "Feronikel"

¹⁹ Termo-electrane "Obiliq"

After these liberation wars, seven new states were created. Two of them are today EU and NATO members, two others NATO members, two others in a way of EU integration, and two others waiting for EU candidate status. Except Serbia, which is in a military alliance with Russia and economically depended from China; all others are clearly oriented towards the west. On 9th July 2021, accession treaty of Serbia into Euro-Asia Economic Union, (a Russia's dominated economic area) was enforced. ²⁰

Since the dissolution of that Yugoslav federation in 1991, two federal states were created too: Federal Yugoslavia (1992-2006) and The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995). The first ended in 2006, and the second- created by: the Dayton Peace", is surviving formally, but really remains a non-functional federation.

Three decades later, Serbia is pushing its idea of "Balkan unification", intending to reincarnate former Yugoslavia, as a kind of "European Yugoslavia": with former federal constituents plus Albania, as Serbian President Vucic announced in 2017: "old Yugoslavia plus Albania". (Reka, 2017, 2). On 10 October 2019, a "Balkans Mini Schengen" was launched in a Novi Sad meeting between: Serbian President Vucic, Albanian PM Rama and Macedonian PM Zaev. Although till the end of that year, two meeting followed in Albania and North Macedonia, no progress was marked till this year. It was re-launched on 28 June 2021 by "troika": Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, and continued in Skopje meeting on 29 July 2021, where that initiative was re-named to "Open Balkans"²¹, between same three states. Three others: Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, did not participate and from the start of that initiative rejected their participation, because of fear of reincarnation of new Yugoslavia. According to some scholars "open Balkans is only a political fantasy of three Prime Ministers, because it consists only one quarter of the Balkans". (Plasari A, 2021, p.1)

Kosovo refused participation in that new Yugoslav experiment, because it is not recognized by Serbia and because is against of replacement of that "regional" integration with EU integration. As Kosovo PM Albin Kurti declared "open Balkans is open for the influence from the East, mainly from Russia and China".²² Kosovo's strategic aim is European Union and not a Balkans

²⁰ "Вечерње Новости", 08.07.2021, p.7

²¹ TV Alsat M, 29.07.2021, news 16,00; Top Chanel, 29.07.2021, news 15,00 Euro news Albania, 29.07.2021

²² His declaration to media in Prishtina on 1st August 2021, (RTK, main news 19,30, 01.08.2021)

Union. Kosovo is part of Berlin Process initiative of regional cooperation of all 6 Balkans countries, and why now should be part of an initiative in which is not treated as sovereign state? Even, not just three states which refused that initiative²³, but also opposition parties in three states which signed “Open Balkans” are against arguing that EU and Germany are for regional cooperation, but as “the implementation of common regional market of all six countries within the Berlin process”.²⁴

After the Second World War, Benelux and European Community of Coal and Still, were created. But they were regional integration of three respectively six states which mutually recognized each others. This is not a case with Serbian project of “Balkans Mini Schengen”, neither of its renamed substitutes “Open Balkans”, which aim to remove border control between three states till 2023. The crucial question remains: how would function that “regional integration” only with half of the countries of the Western Balkans and if Serbia doesn’t recognize Kosovo?

Skopje meeting marked the end of “Mini- Schengen”, and the inauguration of “Open Balkans” as trilateral gathering, instead of all 6 Balkans states.²⁵ After 8 meetings in the period: 2019-2021 between three leaders and refusal of other 3 countries that idea did not work. How that regional integration would function if the countries of that region have different strategic orientations? With an anti- NATO Serbia and Russian ally and with 3 NATO members and one with NATO presence inside? With five states which have only Euro- Atlantic integration strategic goal without alternatives and Serbia which has alternative to EU: Euro- Asian Union of Putin? Before launch of that Serbia’ s “Mini- Schengen”(2019) similar regional integration projects where

²³ Apart from Kosovo where position and opposition have the same- refusal position, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, member of Federal Presidency Shefik Xhaferoviq, was against too, questioning “why need for that if we have Berlin Process?”, (Anadolu Agency 0.8.2021); In Montenegro, Andrej Nikollaidis from civil society qualified it as a “return of Yugoslavia, and not integration to EU” (<https://www.cdm.me/kolumne/otvoreni-balkan-hvala-dobra-je-nama-i-eu/>), and Zorka Kordic, chief negotiator with EU rejected that idea, asking “only implementation of action plan for CRM within Berlin Process”. (<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com> 16.08.2021)

²⁴ In Albania, against is main opposition party PD (“Gazeta Shqiptare”, 06.08.2021, p.4; “Panorama”, 12.08.2021, p.3); In the Republic of North Macedonia main opposition party VMRO-DPMN, and in Serbia Helsinki Committee President Sonja Biserko, because as she declared: “Germany is against that idea” ([www.avangarda](http://www.avangarda.com); [www.botasot](http://www.botasot.com) 12.08.2021); see also official statement of the Cabinet of German Chancellor of 11.08.2021 (“Panorama”, 12.08.2021, p.3; “Gazeta Shqiptare”, 12.08.2021, pp.2-3), where it recall obligations of six countries to implement common regional market as agreed on the last meeting in Berlin on 5th July 2021. Same said EC spokeswoman Ana Pisonero (“Panorama”, 14.08.2021, p.3; “Gazeta Shqiptare”, 14.08.2021, p.3)

²⁵ “Koha”, 30.07.2021, p.2; “Слободен Печат“, 30.07.2021, p.5

like: annual Presidential summits of four presidents (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro- since 2008); “WB 6” initiative (2011); or Tirana’s “Balkan Benelux” initiative (2012). All these initiatives were refused by Serbia, and why now 5 other states should accept one initiative from one refusal state? In Skopje meeting of 29 July, Vučić changed only the name of “Mini Schengen” to “Open Balkans”, but did not change the essence of his initiative: the whole Balkans with “Serbian World”, (“Serbski Svet”)²⁶ a new Serbia strategy, inaugurated last year, which according to some scholars is just a copy of Kremlin doctrine of “Russian World”, (Bugajski, 2021,7), or “russian scheme for Moscow strategy in the Balkans”. (Murati, 2021, 1)

European idea from reconciliation to integration created today EU. But Serbia did not apologize for the genocide in the last Balkans wars. (Reka, 2021, 3) How, that European idea will be implemented in the Balkans, if Serbia did not forgive for all what did during the Balkans wars?

How to push forward regional integration of the Western Balkans, when Serbia is not recognizing Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (through Republika Srpska) is blocking that recognition? How would function any kind of regional integration if two from fifth states not recognize the sixth? EU, US, and Germany, clearly said that any regional cooperation initiative should include all six countries according to Berlin Process and Sofia EU-WB Summit for creation of common regional market.²⁷

Instead of common regional market, agreed by all six countries at Berlin Process meeting of 5th July 2021, Belgrade is trying to sell its own regional project. Belgrade is pushing that fourth “Balkans integration” model as new try of Serbian hegemony- substituting the EU integration. But, likely it will be the fourth failure of that “Yugoslav” idea for one century; after first failure of Yugoslav Monarchy (1941); the second communist Yugoslavia (1991); and the third Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2006). Less likely that reincarnation of Yugoslavia could happen even not within that new renamed regional initiative “Open Balkans”. It will not survive as did not its predecessor “Balkan Mini Schengen”. An open Balkans could function only with equality of all

²⁶ This new doctrine was announced by Serbian Minister Vulin (“СП Неделник“, 24-25.07.2021, p.22); “Serbian World” was criticized in Montenegro as attack against its state sovereignty. (<https://www.cdm.me/kolumne/otvoreni-balkan-hvala-dobra-je-nama-i-eu/>), as well as by Bosnia and Herzegovina elites, (Gojko Verić, “Где било, Срби свуда”, “Ослободјење”, СП неделник, 25.07.2021, p.22)

²⁷ The statements of: German Government of 11 August 2021; of US State Department of 12 August 2021; and of European Commission of 13 August 2021; See more: “Gazeta Shqiptare”, 12.08.2021, p.2; “Panorama”, 12.08.2021, p.3; “Gazeta Shqiptare”, 13.08.2021, p.3

six countries, based on principles, respecting state sovereignty of each other and not only individual interest of one state. It should not be the substitute to EU membership. Only half (three out six) of the countries of the region could not create real regional integration. Since 2014, regional cooperation within the “Berlin Process” inaugurated all six countries and not only half of them, and Germany clearly repeated that its “priority for the Western Balkans is Berlin Process and the implementation of Action Plan for Common Regional Market agreed in the last summit of 5th July 2021, which should be signed on EU- WB Summit on 6th October 2021”.²⁸ Trilateral gathering like “Open Balkans” will not survive because it not represent Balkans regional integration, but just trilateral agreement of only half of the Balkans countries.

Why need for “Novi Sad Process”, if there is “Berlin Process” since 2014? Why need enlarged Serbia instead of Enlarged EU? Why need for Euro-Asian Union if two decades the region is aiming European Union? Most likely the Balkans will continue to be divided strategically in two geopolitical blocks: Pro- Russia alliance (Serbia and Republika Serbska) and Euro- Atlantic ally: Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (minus Republika Serbska). Less likely that strategic ally of NATO’s members will allow entrance of its Balkans members in opponent strategic “integration”.

²⁸ Deutsche Welle, 22.08.2021; see also “Koha”, 23.08.2021, p.3

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3. EU-WB Free Trade Zone

Next substitution's proposal to EU full membership is that of "free trade zone" between the Western Balkans and the EU²⁹, as an alternative to full accession. It was proposed by ESI in the beginning of 2021, suggesting for the region an alternative proposal to enlargement, based on EEA model (European Economic Area) of the EU with: Norway, Switzerland, Lichtenstein and Island. (Bache I- Stephen G, 2006, 544).

Based on that comparative model, ESI suggested that Slovenian Government as EU chair will prepare a proposal which will be presented at an EU-WB summit till the end of 2021. Slovenian Presidency will push forward that project through Serbia, which this proposal sees as the leader of that regional alternative to EU integration. "The Serbian government communicates to the Slovenian government, to other EU member states concerned about enlargement policy – France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands – and to the European Commission that it would be interested in a process that would allow Serbia to join the EU single market once all required reforms are implemented." (ESI, 2021, 1).

By this initiative, "embracing a "Finnish road to accession" it would transform EU-Serbian and EU-Western Balkan relations³⁰, in a phases based process of four steps.

In the first step, "the Serbian government communicates to the Slovenian government, to other EU member states and to the EC that would allow Serbia to join the EU single market once all required reforms are implemented".³¹

Why by this initiative Serbia is chosen to lead EU integration process in the Western Balkans, if Belgrade is the country which has lowest level of aligning with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy? Although a state which is negotiating EU accession it not applied EU sanctions against Russia after annexation of Crimea in 2014. Finally Serbia is the only country in the

²⁹ ESI Report: "Slovenia, Serbia and an EU-Balkan breakthrough in 2021", 09.03.2021

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

Western Balkans which is part of Russia Euro- Asia Union. (Reka, 2021, 4). Finally, how and why Serbia is chosen to be leader of this new process, compared with at least more advanced Montenegro in actual accession negotiations which are fare ahead from Serbia?

Next step of ESI model is that “the Slovenian government prepares a concrete proposal with European Union institutions to be presented at an EU-Western Balkan summit later in 2021”.³²

The third step will be that “the offer to join the Single Market is extended to all Western Balkan countries, including Kosovo”.³³

Why this initiative specifically mentioned: “including Kosovo”, if the country is part of enlargement policy of EU as all other states from the region? Since 2015, Kosovo is under SAA process with EU, implemented trough ERA, and financially supported by IPA funds. Finally Kosovo is part of “Berlin Process” together with other five countries from the Western Balkans. The authors of this initiative did not give further explanation why Kosovo is treated like this in their model?

ESI model further suggests that once “all countries have adopted the same regulatory framework and joined the Single Market it becomes possible to have these four freedoms also between the countries of the Western Balkans”.³⁴

But, similar conditions are set for the countries from the region within existing enlargement process trough Copenhagen and Madrid criteria, so why need for another similar conditionality approach which not will end with final goal: EU membership?

Finally, within the forth steep, “the EU and those Western Balkan countries interested in joining Single Market develop an institutional framework for this, so that once countries have joined the Single Market they will, like Norway does today as member of the European Economic Area (EEA), continue to adopt future EU rules and regulations in the areas covered by the Single Market”.³⁵

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

Here the main concern to this steep is that developing of that institutional framework is not easy neither short process but would need many years. At least for the six countries from the Balkans which is fare compared with most advanced Norway standards on democracy, rule of law, human rights and market economy.

In parallel to that ESI proposal which is putting Serbia as Balkans leader, Hungarian PM Victor Orban in his seven points “manifesto” on Europe, mentioned only Serbia which “should be accepted to the EU”³⁶, without mentioned other 5 countries. Having in mind close friendship of Slovenian PM Jansa and Hungarian PM Orban, both close allies with Serbian president Vucic, it is not surprising why these two EU member states is pushing leading role of Serbia in the Western Balkans.

The proposal for EU-WB trade zone, likely will be pushed forward by Slovenian Presidency with EU, and will be followed with requirements for 22 areas, (similar to EEA agreement with Norway); mainly “four freedoms” within EU single market, the same which enjoyed in EU Nordic states. “Once all countries have adopted the same regulatory framework and joined the single market it becomes possible to have these four freedoms also between the countries of the Western Balkans. EU and WB countries will develop an institutional framework and adopting future EU regulations in the areas covered by the Single Market”³⁷, similar to the Soros idea of 1999. (Soros, G 1999, 2). By this alternative, instead of full membership, Balkans countries would be part of the EU common market, but not EU full members. They would use free trade with the union but without decision vote.

In the first reactions by EU, it seemed that Brussels is supporting that model, as an economic regional zone which should be functional till 2035, promising 30 billion EURO, for regional economic cooperation according to EU Commissioner Varheli, who declared: “we are discussing

³⁶ “СП Неделник“, 10-11.07.2021, p.5

the way how to integrate the Western Balkans in some of areas of single market, before they become full members of EU”.³⁸

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³⁸ His statement in “Tirana WB summit”, 10th June 2021; TV “Top Chanel”, “Koha”, 11.06.2021, p.3

4. Differentiated integration

Another “substitute” for full EU accession which is discussing recently is that of associated membership through “differentiated integration”³⁹. Similarly to two previous alternative proposals, it not suggests full EU membership of the countries from the Western Balkans as a final goal, but “gradual and conditional accession of the Western Balkans towards the rights and the benefits from EU membership”. (TEN-CEPS, 2021, 1)

Differently from the first model (“Open Balkans”), which not include Kosovo; and the second initiative (“EU-WB free trade zone”) which “include Kosovo”; this third alternative model to full EU accession, includes all six countries from the region.

Although is justified as a model of “reforming EU enlargement”, and according to one of its co-authors, it should push “prompted acceptance of the Western Balkans to EU-away from enlargement bogeyman” (Lazaraveic, 2018, 1), this model is another alternative to full EU membership.

The authors of this model are based on the actual state of play of EU enlargement, which they qualified as “enlargement impasse”, and based on that they propose “the necessity-for-its-

³⁹ <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Enlargement-Impasse-and-the-Necessity-for-its-Transformation.pdf>CEPS &Think for Europe (TEN); See also:“Koha”, 23.07.2021, p.11

transformation”⁴⁰. As some authors mentioned, EU enlargement to Western Balkans is like “to be running on autopilot”. (Balfour R-Straulet C, 2015, xiii).

The delay of the EU enlargement in the region they argued with the fact that between 2013 and 2018 there was no summit of the EU with the Western Balkans, and suggests alternative way how to reform the enlargement policy.

This model use combination of comparative analysis from EU internal institutional building and its external expanding experience from previous EU enlargement in central and Eastern Europe, which is qualified as “rigid model based on in- out approach (Emerson, M-Blokman, S, 2021, 1).

From the first experience, it used EU precedents for differentiated level of integration in some fields like: EURO zone and Schengen area where, not all EU member states are fully integrated or at least are not implementing some EU policies- as other member states.

In the cases of “Euro zone” only 19 out 27 members are part of the area which uses European common currency-EURO⁴¹. Not all EU member states are part of EU monetary union; 7 are non euro zone members⁴² and one is with opt-out status⁴³.

As far as Schengen zone, only 22 out 27 EU members fully implement “Schengen aquis”, and five of them⁴⁴ not joined it.⁴⁵

Regarding the second aspect: earlier experience of EU enlargement, this proposal considered to” move away from precise model of accession for Central and South East Europe”. (TEN-CEPS, 2021, 2)

These precedents from EU integration experience were used for the proposal for “differentiated integration” of the countries from the Western Balkans. The final goal of this integration model

⁴⁰ <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Enlargement-Impasse-and-the-Necessity-for-its-Transformation.pdf>CEPS

⁴¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/euro-area/what-euro-area_en

⁴² Like: Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Sweden

⁴³ Denmark

⁴⁴ Like: Ireland, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Cyprus.

⁴⁵ <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-visa-countries-list/>

will not be full membership of the countries from the Western Balkans, but observer EU status”⁴⁶.

So, observer status at EU is another alternative to full membership, by which according to this initiative, it will be allowed only “partial and progressive accession with strong Brussels monitoring”⁴⁷.

This substitute proposal further elaborates how Western Balkans could progressively and conditionally access to EU, suggesting that “accession process should be divided into functional, structural and institutional elements”, allowing partial and gradual phases based membership. (TEN-CEPS, 2021, 2).

Based on this model, it will be a long process with more phases, which starts from “structured political dialogue till the observer status”⁴⁸, but will offer “a credible perspective instead of no perspective”. (Lazarevic, 2018, 1)

Compared with two previous substitutes which did not mentioned accession, this differentiated integrated model, at least let as the possibility EU accession, eventually after long process.

⁴⁶ “Koha”, 2.07.2021, p.11

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

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CONCLUSIONS

1. European perspective remains main EU soft power instrument for keeping the countries of the Western Balkans under West European hemisphere. But it should be credible and should deliver concrete results for EU accession of all six Balkans states. After two decades, only the promises could not lead towards real progress of EU enlargement. EU could be tired from new accessions, but as well the Western Balkans from to long waiting for accession. Letting this region out of EU would create a geopolitical vacuum and open door for non Euro- Atlantic actors.
2. Instead of experimenting with alternative proposals to full accession of these countries to EU, Brussels should return to original aim: their membership to the European Union. Another decade of experimenting with EU integration of the region will have geopolitical high price for the Europe.
3. Three substitutes to EU full membership will not solve the long delayed integration journey of six countries from the region; neither will bring them closer to the European Union. A contrary these alternatives proposals will replace EU enlargement policy, keeping the region as a periphery of the Europe, risking its failure into non Euro- Atlantic area with broader security consequences.

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