

THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract: There have been some attempts to form a separate bloc of European Union (EU) states, sometimes with the assistance of a foreign country. This would lead to the disintegration of European construction, as some might take advantage of it. But the Ukraine crisis had a tremendous impact on the EU's unity. Except for Hungary, all the EU members are united in all the decisions related to Ukraine and Russia. There is no sign of any idea of trying to get back sovereignty or at least to enhance it by diminishing the power of EU institutions and NATO. The Western Balkans (WB) countries strive to enter the EU with the democratic values typical of the founding members. If the EU becomes a "two-block" EU, the WB countries would enter into the eastern part of the EU, creating a very different alliance with more autocratic values, less respect for human rights and less freedom of the media, and not respecting the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Is there still any sense in entering into such an alliance? Due to elections in some EU members, where the pro-European forces were the winners, and due to the Ukraine crisis, the EU became significantly more united and stronger. Unfortunately, the prospects of entry into the EU for the Western Balkans countries did not change.

Keywords: EU, Western Balkans, Ukraine crises, integration prospects.

INTRODUCTION

The movement toward the unification of Europe was undoubtedly a major event in the world history of the twentieth century, appealing to a free and united Europe through a link between states renouncing their absolute sovereignty. After the Treaty of Rome (1957), when the common

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market was achieved, a single market and monetary union were achieved by the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), some borders between the member states were abolished by the Schengen agreements (1985), and finally, the Lisbon treaty was signed (2007). In the last 20 years, except for some minor formal reforms, no adequate measures have opened the way to a reshaping of the Union. The necessity of reshaping was simply not strong enough. At the end of the previous century, political as well as economic implications made the enlargement of the Community a priority issue, with many finding it easier to increase the membership than to improve the political profile. It was furthermore evident that the United Kingdom would have opposed any steps towards a political union. The EU was always perceived as a group of nations with the same status. They were and still are equally represented in the Council; each member state has its own commissioner and has a relative number (according to its population) of members in the EU parliament. In this sense, the conditions of a stable and efficient EU are very clearly defined, and a balance of power between member states that can actually be maintained is formally guaranteed. In other words, the EU exists according to the "one-block" system (Kunić, 2021, 5 December).

INTEGRATION PROCESSES AND POWER BALANCING IN EUROPE

According to Henry Kissinger, the balance of power works best when one of the following conditions is met: first, when any nation feels free to join any other nation in accordance with circumstances; second, when there are fixed alliances, the balancer makes sure that none of the existing coalitions becomes dominant. And third, when there are rigid alliances and there is no balance but alliance cohesion is relatively low, there are compromises or changes in alignment on any issue. When none of these conditions prevails, diplomacy turns rigid. In such situations, a "zero-sum game" develops, in which every gain of one party is imagined as a loss for the other. Arms races and rising tensions are inevitable (Kissinger, 1994). Given Kissinger's conditions for a prosperous and internationally important EU, at least one of the three conditions for the functioning of the power relations among its members should be met. Such an EU would be "one-bloc", not "two-bloc". Within the EU, there are some alliances where the cohesion of those alliances is relatively low, so that, on any issue, there are either compromises or changes in alignment. For the sake of example, I will mention three such cases:

The first is the Nordic Council, which represents the official body for formal inter-parliamentary Nordic cooperation between the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council was founded in 1952 and has 87 members from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, as well as from the autonomous areas of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland. The representatives are members of parliament in their respective countries or areas and are elected by those parliaments.

Another case is the Baltic Assembly, which represents a regional international organization whose goal is to promote intergovernmental cooperation between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Baltic Assembly was formed after the decision on its establishment was made in Vilnius on December 1, 1990. It operates in accordance with the rules defined on November 8, 1991, in Tallinn, which were formally adopted three years later, on June 13, 1994. According to many economic, political, social, and cultural issues, this organization tries to find a common position by adopting decisions that have an advisory force.

The third case is the Benelux, which represents the political-economic union and formal international intergovernmental cooperation of three neighboring countries in Western Europe: Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Benelux was created during the Second World War when the governments of the three countries in exile signed an agreement on a customs union (1944). After the end of the Second World War, the Union ceased to exist (1960). It was replaced by the Benelux Economic Union, which had an impact on the creation of the EEC (the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and the European Community in 1957).

There are some other less visible organizations among the EU members, but some states do not belong to any such alliance, for instance, Ireland, Malta, Spain, Portugal, France, and Germany. Until the cohesion of the alliances is relatively low so that, on any given issue, there are either compromises or changes in alignment, a “two-block” EU cannot emerge. There were some examples of trying to establish a separate block of the EU states, sometimes with the support of some foreign country. This would lead to the disintegration of European construction, as some might take advantage of it. China advocated for the formation of a 16+1 alliance. The 16 states of Central and Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia) plus China would strengthen the economic links between China and Central and Eastern Europe. The format was founded in 2012 in Budapest to push for cooperation

among the “16+1” (the 16 CEE countries and China). China was interested in infrastructure, renewable energy, and agriculture investments. The leaders of Central and Eastern Europe met with Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang in 2013. Later, this group evolved into 17+1 when Greece joined in 2019. Although the 17+1 initiative initially had some successful projects, such as the railway on the Greece-Hungary corridor and investment in Port Thessaloniki, the EU was able to moderate Chinese influence on EU unity. Nations belonging to the 17+1 group felt free to align with any other state, depending on the circumstances of the moment. Recently, some countries have been thinking of leaving this alliance. In March 2021, the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT) reported that in February 2021, the Lithuanian parliament agreed to leave what was previously known as the Chinese 17+1 format. Foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said the cooperation between Beijing and Lithuania has brought “almost no benefits”. (Radio, 2021) This initiative is definitely not challenging the unity of the EU.

The Three Seas Initiative

This initiative is a forum of twelve states of the EU, along with a north-south axis from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea in Central and Eastern Europe. The initiative aims to create an *Intermarium*-based (Late Middle Ages system of governing the region spanning the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black seas) regional dialogue on various questions affecting the member states. The member states are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. They held their first summit in 2016, in Dubrovnik. This initiative is supported by the US. Every year, the Three Seas Initiative brings together 12 member countries. The initiative is focusing on funding cross-border infrastructure projects, especially in the fields of energy, transport, and digitalization. We cannot exclude the possibility that behind the idea of creating this alliance there is the idea of creating a separate block of eastern members of the EU, thus creating the tampon zone between the western part of the EU and the Russian Federation. But the cohesion of this alliance is too low to be able to lead the EU towards a two-block EU.

The Visegrád Group

The Visegrád Group, or Visegrád Four, or V4, is a cultural and political alliance of four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and

Slovakia), all of which are members of the EU and NATO, to advance cooperation in military, cultural, economic, and energy matters with one another. The Group traces its origins to the summit meeting of leaders from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland held in the Hungarian castle town of Visegrád on February 15, 1991. The Visegrád group was clearly supported by the United States during Mr. Trump's presidency. The visit of Mr. Pompeo, the state secretary, just confirmed it. Some expected Mr. Biden, the newly elected President of the United States, to change this policy. Nevertheless, it would be too naive to expect fast and big changes in the US's foreign policy. After Mr. Janez Jansa became the president of the Slovenian government, Slovenia became a strong supporter of the Visegrad policy. At that moment, it seemed that Slovenia had de facto become a member of this group. Recently, Visegrád countries have had disagreements with the EU Commission and the EU Parliament over the EU's values. Due to strong pressure from specific countries, in which the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were very grave and which were threatened with very serious economic consequences, talks on the provision of assistance were organized. The main impediments to brokering an agreement were the disagreements between the Netherlands and Italy regarding conditioned assistance from the *European Stabilization Mechanism* (ESM) and the divergence between the stances of the South and the North on the issue of joint debt. Nevertheless, the EU managed to find a way to provide solidarity-based assistance, and the common problem (the pandemic) has at least led to some convergence of interests. However, an important element of this assistance is that some member countries strongly advocate the idea that the assistance should be conditional on compliance with European values. Naturally, the accurate definition of European values is rather debatable, but it is related, *inter alia*, to the freedom of the media, free and fair elections, the rule of law, respect for human dignity and rights, etc. Although such conditions have not yet been formalized, bearing in mind the stances of the richest member countries, they may be effective at the practical level. Speaking about European values, it was more than evident that it was an issue for the Visegrád countries, especially Poland and Hungary. The Visegrád alliance is somehow challenging the EU's unity. In the fields of freedom of the media, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and respect for human dignity and rights, this alliance seems to be rigid and, as there is no strong balancer, there are no compromises or changes in alignment on those issues. The third Kissinger condition is not totally fulfilled, and it could lead the EU towards a "two-block" EU. A zero-sum game may develop in which any gain for one side is conceived as a loss for the other. Mounting tensions become

inevitable. The strongest tool in the hands of the EU to achieve the rule of law and democracy in the EU is imposing the conditions for the distribution of EU funds. But the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was following her promise, given before she got the position, to diminish the confrontation with Poland and Hungary. Sometimes, economic interests overrule the defense of the basic EU values. The European Commission warned Poland and Hungary to respect freedom of speech, organize fair elections, strive for a free and independent media, and to have a politically independent judiciary. But the market for the products from Germany, France, and other most developed European countries is so important that those countries would not be willing to lose it on account of European values. At this moment, there is no effective balancer in the EU. Knowing this, the four leaders of important political groups in the EU Parliament (Manfred Weber, EPP; Iratxe García Pérez, S&D; Dacian Cioloș, Renew Europe; Ska Keller and Philippe Lamberts, Green/liberals) wrote the letter (October 2020) to the EU Commission and the European Council emphasizing that the EU values are not on sale. Recently, the EU Commission decided to limit access to some funds to Hungary due to non-compliance with some basic values of the EU. Traditionally, the UK played the role of the European balancer, but they opted to leave the EU. Germany and France are the only countries capable of acting as balancers. At this moment, they seem to be trying to play this role, but they have not been very successful. After the elections in Germany and France, we can expect that the roles of France and Germany will be much stronger within the EU. If the EU Parliament, together with some important and economically strong members, is not successful in balancing the Visegrád group, the way towards a double-speed EU will be opened. After the elections in the US where Mr. Trump was replaced by Mr. Joe Biden, we could expect that the policy of diminishing the power of the EU will probably be changed. Under the presidency of Mr. Donald Trump, the US supported the activities of the Visegrád group. It seems that the reason for this is the creation of the tampon zone between the EU and the Russian Federation and, at the same time, to split the EU into two parts, thus diminishing its power. Together with the support of Brexit, it is evident that the policy of diminishing EU power de facto follows the idea of "Make America first". Immediately after the election of Joe Biden as the new US president, there were a lot of expectations that this policy was going to be changed. But soon it became clear that we could see the weakening of the transatlantic link, a clear orientation of the US towards Asia. It became more evident after the signing of the defense treaty between the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Zerjavic, 2021, 21

September). But the Ukraine crisis had a tremendous impact on the EU's unity. Except for Hungary, all the EU members are united in all the decisions related to Ukraine and Russia. There is no sign of any idea of trying to get back sovereignty or at least to enhance it by diminishing the power of EU institutions and NATO.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS INTO THE EU

A European perspective for the Western Balkans was among the priorities during Slovenia's Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2021. Slovenia is among the main initiators of constructive discussion regarding the future of EU enlargement policy. The yearly multilateral meeting of the leaders of the WB countries is called the Brdo-Brioni process, which was established by the president of Slovenia, Borut Pahor, and the president of Croatia, Ivo Josipović. It is important that shortly before the Slovenian EU-Council presidency, the Brdo-Brioni meeting was realized. Let me mention that the Brdo-Brioni process inspired the creation of the Berlin process.

But now the countries of the WB do not expect to become members of the EU in the near future, although officially they do not say it, and the need for regional cooperation has resulted in the creation of some alliances in this region. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (SNS), Prime Minister of North Macedonia **Zoran Zaev** (SDSM) and Prime Minister of Albania **Edi Rama** (PS) signed on October 9, 2019, in Novi Sad, a Joint Declaration of intent to establish a "*Mini Schengen*" among the three states. The joint declaration envisages the elimination of border controls and other barriers, which should facilitate movement in the region by 2021. It would also enable citizens of the three countries to travel in the region using only an identification card and find employment anywhere in the region based on their professional qualifications. The signed declaration should help the Western Balkans region to start functioning on the basis of four key freedoms on which the EU is founded: *freedom of movement of people, capital, goods, and services*. The initiative is also open to other Western Balkans countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo. It was stressed that the respective initiative is not compensation or an alternative to the membership of the countries in the region in the EU. However, it replaces some of the benefits of freedom enjoyed by EU members. In reality, this initiative is a form of compensation for EU membership. Also, North

Macedonia is following a similar policy. They intend to foster better relations among neighboring countries, although they have not been very successful. Of course, they would like to enter the EU as soon as possible. Nevertheless, they signed some important agreements, the Ohrid Agreement and the Prespan Agreement, and they changed the name of the country and became North Macedonia. Is the EU going towards a "one-block" EU or a "two-block" EU? It seems that there are some world superpowers interested in creating a double-speed EU, an EU with two blocs of countries with the possibility of mounting tensions between them. Yet, the EU has always been able to surpass such ideas as dangerous to unity. Especially after the UK's decision to leave the EU, the idea of a "one-block" EU being strong and stable is very active. Nevertheless, the UK took this decision, and the EU was simply not able to preserve unity with the UK. Although the position against a "two-block" EU is supported by important European forces as well as many European citizens, the fact that the EU will become a "two-block" EU cannot be ignored. Some analysts are even more pessimistic and estimate that the split between the western part of the EU and the eastern part is deepening, and it seems that this process is irreversible (Apih, 2021, 9 September). The participation of the important political persons at the 16th Bled Strategic Forum and the content of the discussions seemed to pave the way for the eastern part of Europe to work together (Forum, 2021). The Forum focused on the future of Europe and the call to increase its resilience. The topics of the conversation touched on the priorities of the second Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU, which is taking place within the project "Together Resilient". The slogan "*Reconciliation*" is *conditio sine qua non* for developing understanding, cooperation, and progress of the WB6 region. Given the current political, security, and socioeconomic conditions in the WB6 region, and in each of the member countries in particular, should the EU find ways and means to support, with adequate measures, the elaborated and well-intended reconciliation process, the accomplishments of which would create a favorable environment for the resolution of specific existing problems in the region, and thus for ensuring the step-by-step integration of WB6 countries into the EEU? Reconciliation means finding a way in which two situations or beliefs that are opposed to each other can agree and exist together. It is a very complex task. Its ways and means should be elaborated after analyzing the factual situations and finding an adequate methodology for building activities that could create an adequate environment for stimulating solutions to the existing problems. In post-conflict societies where past injustices remain unresolved, there exists a latent risk of a renewed outbreak of violence, years or decades later.

Therefore, reconciliation has become increasingly important in the context of conflict prevention and the development of cooperation (Devetak, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis in question shows that the countries of the Western Balkans are striving to join the EU (Kunić, 2021). For them, joining the EU would mean accepting the democratic values that are typical of the EU member states. Considering the perspectives of integration processes in Europe, we concluded that if the EU became an international organization composed of two blocs, then the Western Balkans would enter the eastern part of the EU, which would be a completely different alliance, with more autocratic values, with less respect for human rights, and less freedom of the media. This “eastern bloc” could completely relativize the meaning of the principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. It would then be fair to ask the question: does it still make sense to enter into such an alliance? According to the author, the EU of two blocs is not a good option, neither for the EU nor for the whole world. We should preserve the united EU and do our best to make it politically stronger and more economically successful. Due to the elections in some EU member states, where pro-European forces were the winners, and due to the Ukrainian crisis, the EU, according to the author, has become much more united and stronger. Unfortunately, the prospects for the Western Balkans to enter the EU have not improved significantly; moreover, they may have stagnated.

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