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**Enlargement of the European Union
in the Western Balkans and Russia's Geopolitics in the Region**

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Abstract: The European construction at the level of establishing an economic, political, social and cultural unity between its constituent states and those which are to complete it, represent the ultimate vision of a united and solid Europe, designed to generate welfare and security for all its members. Our approach attempts to reveal the functionality and substance of the Union's enlargement objectives in the area, generically called the Western Balkans. These goals, which have recently been translated into a strategy, will be achieved in 2025 for Serbia and Montenegro and for the other countries in a more distant future. Obviously, the European Union is not the only geopolitical player in the area and, certainly, the proposed objectives are directly or indirectly linked to Russia's regional geopolitical strategy. Thus, we show that in this enlargement process we are already in the collision phase of the two macrostates, the European Union and Russia, state entities which have so far prepared strategies of influence and have also undertaken approaches of strategic anchoring in the Balkan region. The present paper focuses on the geopolitics of the two powers, which is already in progress and produces effects in the Balkan bloc. Given that the Balkan bloc is more a strategic security area than an economic pulse, the centering of the two forces will materialize according to the interests of security and socio-political stability. It is to be mentioned that the European Union will usually bet on the strengths of the six Balkan bloc states and Russia on their weaknesses, even more, on the Union's cumbersome response mechanism. If Serbia and Montenegro have a horizon in 2025, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo will remain in this dispute for a longer period of time.

Keywords: European Union; Russia; the Balkan bloc; strategy; Serbia; Montenegro; Albania; North Macedonia; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kosovo

Introduction

At this point, the world scene is clearly configured in terms of the power exercised and constituted by the great powers, the struggle going only to consolidate these elements and possibly to seize new areas of influence that would only have a defensive role. Therefore, we know that the West maintains the same mechanism of external action and the East and Asian powers count on a strategic and operational flexibility that has often proved to be more effective in strategic geopolitics.

In this global and especially regional context, the European Union wants to be an inter-state macro-entity that dictates and develops a socio-political concept that has the role of coagulating nations and stimulating a form of cohabitation based on sustainable criteria from the perspective of the individual to the social and cultural macrogroup.

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The Union's constitution and enlargement process is well known in terms of its evolution over the years and obviously, the results of this process make this mechanism continue and produce effects that have a defining role in the achievement of the European goal, namely that of being the area of security and well-being for all its citizens. But exactly on the same basic criteria there is a collision with other regional and world players. More specifically, the European intercultural, social and economic conglomerate runs counter to the other social, cultural and economic patterns of the other superpowers, namely the United States of America, Russia and China.

Talking about the prospect of a new wave of EU accession, which looks at the countries in the Western Balkans, we appreciate that Russia's influence is and will continue to more and more manifest itself. Analyzing in general terms the six countries in the Balkan bloc, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, we observe a religiously heterogeneous population and substantial gaps in the gross domestic product of these countries. Besides, the geographic position of these states determines a particular prioritization of geopolitical interests in the area, both for the European Union and for Russia.

Considering these background elements, we can appreciate that the strategic approach of Russia and the European Union for attaining its own objectives will have different characteristics and tactics that are surely to generate extremely important long-term effects. In order to define and analyze the evolution of the goals of the two European powers, we must understand from the beginning that Russia has chosen, through its leader Vladimir Putin, to agree to the theory promoted by Aleksandr Gelievich Dughin, namely that Russia must exist as an empire and this empire must be defended primarily by natural borders formed by states or large areas of territory. This approach, coupled with the new generation war, set up by General Valeri Gherasimov, the chief of the Military Russian Staff, only reveals the challenge that the European Union must face in its enlargement process. It should also be noted that this new wave of enlargement will be built on the admission of these new states in block and the admission bloc will consist of at least two states.

In our analysis we will highlight the importance of the formation of these accession tandems and the vulnerability of the strategy adopted by the European Union in the process. To the same extent, we will transpose the reporting of these vulnerabilities to Russia's tactics to maintain influence in this area.

Content

In February 2018, the European Union, through the European Commission, published a strategy aimed at guaranteeing, in front of the Balkan countries, the continuation of the enlargement process and the admission of new states into the Union. This is very important for the simple reason that this document speaks of an acceleration of certain negotiation chapters and of the effective building of the accession bloc.

The accession bloc consists of Montenegro and Serbia, Albania and Northern Macedonia and with a more remote perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina with Kosovo. In this configuration which could be called a strategic one, Russia seems to be able to play its game and promote its interests much easier, but reality is breaking apart in something else.

The strategy confirms the European perspective of the region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe, based on common values, identifies the priorities and areas of cooperation and addresses the difficulties faced by the region, emphasizing the need for fundamental reforms and the building of some good neighbourly relations. The objective of the strategy is to provide a new impulse for reforms in the region to address the major challenges faced by the countries concerned. Novelty consists of a new strong message of encouragement for the necessary reforms to those countries

and guidance on the steps they need to take to move forward as soon as possible on the way to EU membership.

For Serbia and Montenegro, for which accession negotiations are already in progress, the strategy sets out the indicative milestones that need to be completed to finish the accession process in the perspective of 2025 adherence. In addition, through the six emblematic initiatives in key areas, the strategy significantly reinforces the EU's commitment to Western Balkan partners.

These six emblematic initiatives are specific actions that the EU will adopt in the coming years to support Western Balkan transformation efforts in areas of mutual interest. The following directions are concerned: strengthening the rule of law, enhancing security and migration commitment, supporting socio-economic development, increasing connectivity in transport and energy, launching a Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, supporting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. The main actions and their timetable are set out in the "Action Plan to Support the Western Balkans Transformation", annexed to the enlargement strategy.¹

But these steps are very complex and uncertain in reality, as well as some statements made by European leaders expressing their reserved views. Thus, in a joint press conference with the European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker and the European Council President, Donald Tusk, the Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, could not hide his dissatisfaction with the outcome of the meeting. Addressing the Western journalists, he spoke about the importance of joining the Western Balkan states to the EU and drew attention to the involvement of other forces, such as Russia, in this region. Borisov said he did not understand the Europeans' fear of these countries, which together have a population of 17.7 million citizens.

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, told the reporters that over the past 15 years, each time the enlargement has been talked about, a "weakening of Europe" has been achieved. "I do not think we are doing any favour either to the candidate countries or to us by maintaining a mechanism that somehow has no rules", Macron said. The French leader emphasized that the EU needs a "real reform" before a new enlargement.²

*A news periodical states that, during the stage of Albania's tour through the countries aspiring to join the European Union, Jean-Clude Juncker told the press: "Contrary to what we read everywhere, the Commission and I did not say that Serbia and Montenegro would necessarily be members of the EU in 2025. The 2025 term is open to all candidate countries and if a candidate country meets all the accession criteria up to date or sooner, we will act so that its efforts are recognized by the EU."*³

Against the background of what the European official said, the perspective of the Montenegrin official, described in a publication stating that "Montenegro's newly elected president, Milo Djukanovic, made publicly known that he intended to improve the relation with the Russian Federation, a relation that has become increasingly cold as Montenegro's NATO integration process has advanced and become a reality, despite Moscow's opposition. The Montenegrin Foreign Minister, Srdjan Darmanovic, praised the initiative of the Montenegrin president and, despite his notoriety for harsh comments on Russia's influence in the Western Balkans and Montenegrin politics, Darmanovic emphasized the need to improve the relations between Montenegro and the Russian Federation."⁴

¹http://www.cdep.ro/afaceri_europene/afeur/2018

²<https://www.euractiv.ro>

³<https://www.digi24.ro>

⁴<https://monitorulapararii.ro/balcanii-de-vest>

Taking into account the profoundness of things, we observe Russia's functional strategy, which has positioned its influence in the former Yugoslavian countries, especially Serbia. Under these conditions, Albania-Northern Macedonia tandem will become an easily manipulated target by Russia, as neither at this time the old dispute between Albania and Macedonia has been fully resolved, even if officially this is over. The Slav origin of the population in the region plays a crucial role in the exertion of certain influences by Russia, especially since, through its good relations with Bulgaria, a country that considers Macedonia as a Bulgarian territory, Russia will seek to strengthen its strategic position in the area.

What Russia already created in the Western Balkans is very difficult to dismantle by the European Union and Russia has strategically positioned itself playing the book called Kosovo. The smarter Russia's strategy in the Balkans is, for the simple reason that the economic investments in Serbia are very low compared to the amounts allocated by the European Union to this country.

The relations between Serbia and Kosovo are extremely tense, especially since last year a Serbian train was sent to Kosovo, which said in many languages, "Kosovo is Serbian". Putin's involvement by Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vucic, on this issue shows that Russia is an important player in the geopolitical maneuvers of the region. Serbia is Moscow's most important pawn, which has gained this low-cost influence. Serbia refused to impose sanctions on Russia, as Montenegro, for example, did. The Serbian mercenaries fought in Donetsk to destabilize Ukraine.

Russian companies have invested in Serbia five times less than the European ones, says Serbia Monitor. European business investments for the past decade amount to 15 billion euros, equivalent to 73% of total investments made in Serbia. In the first half of last year the weight was 85%. Traditionally, the EU was Serbia's largest and most important trading partner, with more than 60% of its imports and exports. In addition, between 2000 and 2015, the EU countries granted Serbia 2.7 billion euros of non-reimbursable funds, hoping that in the future this country would make enough progress to enter the Union.¹

Russia has increased its commitment to the region, trying to delay the Western Balkans' access to the European Union and block the course of those countries that want integration into the North Atlantic Alliance. In addition, Moscow uses every opportunity, including intelligence structures, and sometimes the Russian Orthodox Church, to promote its interests and to support anti-Western sentiment, especially among Serbs and to undermine the Western influence throughout the region.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing the perceptions developed by the Orthodox Slavs in the Western Balkans regarding Russia and the European Union. Belgrade's Security Policy Centre poll shows that Serbs perceive Russia as a major political (70%) and military (79%) political power and, on the other hand, according to another poll, the 2017 Balkan Barometer, only 26% of Serbs believe that joining the European Union is a good thing. At the same time, the data collected by the Ministry of European Integration in Serbia between June and December 2017 show that support for the Serbian membership of the European Union often varies between 48% and 52%.

The new attitude and vision of the Russian leaders shows us very clearly that Russia exploits all the opportunities offered by one of its strong points, namely its quality as an important supplier of energy resources on the world markets, thus strengthening its position in the field of regional and global security. Thus, an important tool for strengthening influence in the Western Balkans is Russia's energy strategy, which includes increasing its share of energy resources, often at the expense of Western suppliers of such resources, building pipeline networks across all geographical directions, influencing

¹<https://www.zf.ro/business-international>

the market by increasing the prices of energy resources and, implicitly, generating and enhancing the dependence of as many countries in the region as possible, including by coordinating its activities with other energy producers.¹

Analytically looking at these de facto situations, we can assume that the Union's enlargement policy is rather a policy tactic at the Union's border than a clear enlargement process and the purpose of this policy is to correctly and substantially assess possible internal security slips within the Union on the basis of disputes of cultural or religious origin. This strategy adopted by the European Union is a socio-political exercise to which the aspiring countries will have to participate and their participation will definitely define the future community building. Thus, at this moment, the European Union proves its geostrategic maturity in the area and becomes cautious in its expanding endeavors.

The consolidation factor becomes paramount in all community sectors, and intercultural diffusion represent the key to success in all macro-community processes that converge towards a safe area and capable of responding to any planetary power in the field of military and economic security. Ensuring the flexible and secure mechanisms that it is now experiencing in the Western Balkans, the European Union becomes a skilled and flexible player at its southern border and this experiment will be decisive in its strategy towards Turkey, a country that has been negotiating with the Union for a very long time. The fact that a strategy offers a perspective for the Balkan countries, the European Union does not promise anything, and it also introduces a new concept, namely adherence in block. This type of accession, at least in the case of Macedonia and Albania, says exactly what the European security community wants to be.

While Russia is diplomatically repositioned vis-à-vis most western states, the size of the Kremlin's influence in the Western Balkans and the mechanisms used by Russian leaders show that Moscow is failing to take concrete action to maintain considerable influence in this region.

However, even though from a geopolitical point of view the Western Balkans occupy an important place in Moscow's area of interest, from a geo-economic point of view, Russia does not have the means to replace the West. The European Union is still the most important trading partner of the Western Balkans, accounting for over 76% of the trade in the region, with Brussels being the main supplier and key source of foreign direct investment in most of the countries in the region, even though there are many reforms and conditions to meet the aspirations of the six states and the integration of the region into the structures of the European Union. But this does not prevent the Russian authorities from disrupting the process of stabilizing the region and contributing to maintaining the status of Western Balkan security-conscious entity.

In the Western Balkans, Moscow is trying the same strategies and tactics tested and operationally used in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Baltic states, exploiting in a professional manner the main vulnerabilities of the Western Balkans. The growing religious agitation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbian-Kosovo dispute over the status of the former Serbian province point to the main objective of the Russian authorities, which is and will remain the blocking of any process of solving these problems and inducing and developing distrust in motivations, capabilities and goals of the European and Euro-Atlantic structures to further enhance the major division of civil society across the Western Balkans.²

¹<https://monitorulapararii.ro/>

²https://monitorulapararii.ro

Conclusions

The enlargement process of the European Union is one of another strategic concept, which from our perspective has acquired the strength and maturity of countering Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic security strategy. Even though the Western Balkan states are not soon an integral part of the European Union, they play a key role in the regional security and the regional economic development. The democratic exercise imposed by the European community on the Balkan states strengthens a deep reform path that the Union is considering in this region. Moreover, the new energy independence solutions the Union has in view, clearly outlines the capacity of the European community to become a stable and independent macro-state.

Russia is aware of the fact that it cannot brutally intervene in this area and, to a large extent, it does not want it, as Russia's goal is to reject the Euro-Atlantic force structures.

From this dual perspective, Russia's interest in the area and the European Union's strategy in this region, we conclude that the Union's enlargement process is only a strategic and long-lasting approach and the security of the area will exclusively depend on the foreign policy of the two great powers, the European Union and Russia.

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