The Western Balkans and European Union: The Last Questions

[1]Shkelqim Xeka, [2]Arjana Mucaj

[1]*Lecturer, "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durres, Albania, xeka_al@yahoo.com*
[2]*Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology-Pedagogy, Tirana, ALBANIA*

Abstract

All the European countries that were integrated in the European Union, establishing a bilateral relationship with the Western Balkans countries has been one of the main objectives of the politics of Brussels, after the end of the Cold War. The European Union has played a clear role in the creation of the bilateral relationships between different countries in this part of the region. For instance, the relationship between Pristina and Belgrade is getting better through the interests that the European Union countries such as Germany, Austria or Sweden has for Kosovo and Serbia. The same question is regarding North Macedonia foreign relationships and Bosnia too. However the western part of the region used to be the source of a lot of conflicts that caused victims and unresolved questions. All these points will be discussed in more detail below in the paper.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Kosovo, economy.

INTRODUCTION

The Balkans have been a region with a lot of harmony and conflicts between different people, with huge cultures such as the Romanians, Albanians, Greeks and the South-Slavic people regarding the Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Bosniaks, Bulgarians and Macedonians. As all the European countries that were integrated in the European Union, establishing a bilateral relationship with the Western Balkans countries has been one of the main objectives of the politics of Brussels, after the end of the Cold War. As Vidučić says in her paper entitled "Progress in the Croatian transition and prospects for Croatia-EU relations", since its inception, the European Union has made a habit of expanding its membership to include industrialized western economies and boosting commerce with both neutral European countries and a number of Mediterranean countries (Viducic, 47). The European Union has played a clear role in the creation of the bilateral relationships between different countries in this part of the region. For instance, the relationship between Pristina and Belgrade is getting better through the interests that the European Union countries such as Germany, Austria or Sweden has for Kosovo and Serbia. The same question is regarding North Macedonia foreign relationships and Bosnia too. However the western part of the region used to be the source of a lot of conflicts that caused victims and unresolved questions.

Mehmet Elezi, the author of "The Western Balkans Between Statehood and Integration", says that the Western Balkans during various times, it has been a threat to the security of Europe, causing a huge worry in the famous European capitals (Elezi, 5). Even if the Balkans was considered by Winston Churchill as the main place where the world history is produced, the region continues to have problems in its perspective to fulfill the integration in the European Union, the peace and prosperity after the collapse of the Communist regimes in these countries and the economic problems, regarding the question of the Open Balkans agreement between North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia. All these points will be discussed in more detail below in the paper.

The role of the European Union in the Balkans

Firstly, the European Union had a huge interest in the integration of the region in the European Union, since the acceptance of Greece in the foundation in 1981. Beata Huszka, the author of "The Power of Perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans" says that after 20 years of the accession of Greece in the European Union, Brussels offered for the first time to Western Balkan states the chance to join at the 2001 Thessaloniki summit (Huszka, 3). The author says that the European Union has played a clear catalyzing role in resolving ethnic conflicts and bilateral challenges in the region. Some brief case studies that illuminate the situation were focused on the European Union's relationship with North Macedonia. The relationships were especially instructive about how the integration process can improve stability, and how strongly EU integration can strengthen security in the region.

Figure 1. *North Macedonia and the region of Macedonia. Shuttershock, 2010*

Ilija Milchevski, a noble Macedonian scholar, notes that since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the Republic of Macedonia has had a common dream with the vast majority of Central and Eastern European countries: to satisfy the European Union's criteria and join the unified European family in the not-too-distant future (Milchevski, 40). He mentions that however, the country had some problems.

The regional environment, where it was positioned the country, which was marked by the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, exacerbated the already difficult process throughout the remainder of Central and Eastern Europe. In terms of security, stability,

democratic consolidation, and economic performance, the post-Yugoslav conflicts not only divided the countries of the region (later dubbed the "Western Balkans") from the rest of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (including their Southeastern European neighbors, Bulgaria and Romania), but they also fragmented the region, severing communication, economic, and societal ties that existed during the Yugoslav era (Milchevski, 41-42). In addition, Huszka says that North Macedonia has been a place where some rights were not respected by the Albanian community, living in the western part of the country, bordering with Albania. Huszka says that in spring 2001 a low-intensity war broke out between the Albanian National Liberation Army, which enjoyed broad support among the Albanian population. The conflict came to an end with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), facilitated by NATO and signed in August 2001 by the two largest Macedonian and Albanian parties. In the same year, the EU opened negotiations with the FYROM government on a Stabilization and Association Agreement. Even if the European Union presented many requirements for FYROM to fulfill, it was clear that implementing the Ohrid Agreement was the most important indicator of progress from the EU's perspective when evaluating (Huszka, 3-4). Furthermore, its name conflicts with its south neighborhood, Greece. Huszka says that for the reason of Greece, FYROM was denied participation in 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, which set off national protests in all the country. Nikola Gruevski, began negatively to perceive a nationalist government in Macedonia, by endangering its democratic government settled in Skopje. Huszka says that there was more focus on the Prespa Agreement of 2017 between North Macedonia and Greece. The author says that the Prespa agreement gave a huge impetus to the approval of the French government to access North Macedonia in the process of integration in the European Union. Even if the question of Macedonia has remained today unresolved for many periods in the modern politics of the world, The author says that the question of Macedonia would bring many other similar disputes in the Balkans, such as in Kosovo (Huszka, 2). The emphasis was raised when the question of independence of Kosovo and the recognition of a Macedonian state was put under the question, during the mission of the

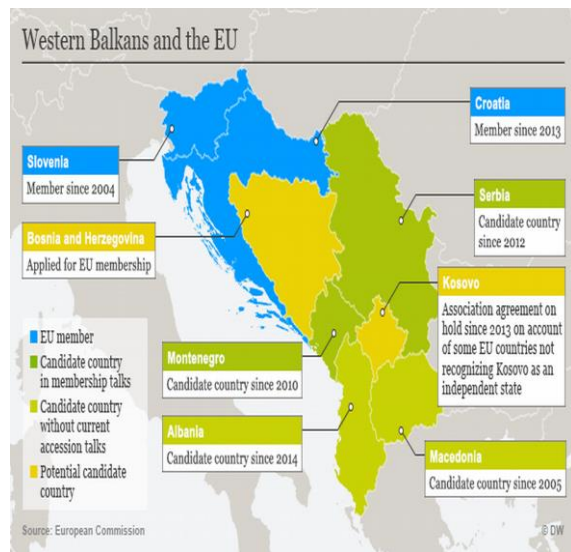expansion of the European Union in the Balkans.

Figure 2. *The expansion of EU in the Western Balkans. DW, March 26th, 2018.*

In the foreign politics, the role of the European Union has been important in the resolve of the border dispute between different nations of the peninsula. Huszka says that Croatia is one of the Western Balkan countries with the most disputed borders (one located near Piran, Slovenia and the other in Neum, Bosnia-Herzegovina). The author says that many of the borders are related with the past legacy that the Yugoslav Wars left in the country, where delineations between the countries were not always precisely defined. Similar issues are happening between Kosovo and Serbia; Albania and Greece, and the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Serbian-Montenegrin and Serbian-Kosovan relationships. Even if the enlargement of the European Union will bring a positive framework, Brussels should pay attention to the future extension (Huszka, 2-3). Returning back to the Macedonian question, the name of the country has been a problem since its independence in 1991. Milchevski says without any doubt that the name dispute has profound historical roots, stemming from both sides' ideas of their own history and identity. The name issue has become the greatest impediment to Macedonia's international recognition and European integration, despite the fact that it is fundamentally un-European and contrary to the EU's core values (Milchevski, 41-42). The old name of the country, known as "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" was not officially stated from Greece. Milchevski says that Given the political context, as evidenced by the already published Greek position on the name of the Republic of Macedonia, it is clear that the other member states took the Greek security-based arguments into account when establishing the European Communities' position on the recognition of the independence of the constituent republics of the former Yugoslav Federation (Milchevski, 44). The question of the name proved a huge and mysterious challenge for North Macedonia and for the Macedonian people in the road to be accessed in the European Union. As again, Milchevski mentions that the status of Macedonia's European Union (EU) admission process is unknown (Milchevski, 58). He adds that the delay has caused Macedonia's relations with the EU to suffer long-term effects as a result of the delay in international recognition caused by this problem. Macedonia missed the most powerful phase of impetus toward European reunification as a result of this delay, which culminated in the historic EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 and the admission of the majority of post-communist nations in Central and Eastern Europe (Milchevski, 58). He adds that due to the name issue, Greek demands that are contrary to the spirit of the Copenhagen criteria and some of the EU's basic values, the EU's position on the International Court of Justice's judgment, and the ambiguous positions adopted within some EU institutions toward the Commission's efforts to break the current deadlock, there is a lack of clear perspective for the process' future development. (Milchevski, 59).

Post-Yugoslav solution: a last solution or last conflict

Secondly, the problem of the security in the Balkans was shown in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia (especially in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosova, Serbia and North Macedonia). Nemanja Rujevic, a Serbo-German author and editor with the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle, says that either the western and eastern part of the Balkans have a lack of an independent court, media freedom, and political abuse of public funds that continue to plague the Balkan region (Rujevic). Furthermore, political conflicts appear insurmountable, such as the Kosovo dispute between Pristina and Belgrade, the

Macedonia-Greece name dispute, and the lack of popular support for constitutional reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina among the country's three ethnic groups.In "Yugoslavia's Wars: The Problem from Hell", it is said that because Yugoslavia played such a significant role in Balkan and Central European security prior to 1989, the developments Burg observed should have prompted the West to reassess Balkan and Central European security. Policymakers should have recognized that the previous regional security framework was crumbling, and that unless nonviolent alternatives could be found, war or wars could readily erupt. Burg's observations, on the other hand, were used to justify the insulating strategy and a refusal to reconsider the issue. As a result, the Balkans are currently in limbo. As all other options have failed, Balkan governments are increasingly supporting the renationalization of security agendas across Europe (Strategic Studies Institute, 120).

 Before, Yugoslavia was considered as a united and harmonical country in the Balkans, between different people that lived there, such as the Slavic people regarding the Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Slovaks, Bulgarians and non Slavic people regarding the Albanians, Turkish, Romanians, Vlachs, Italians, Hungarians, Ruthenians and Germans. But the reality of living in harmony between different people changed. Although the Burg's point explained by Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, with the death of Josif Broz Tito, considered before as the father of Yugoslavia and of the Yugoslav people, and along with the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of specific countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany and the Soviet Union. The disappearance of such countries was made peaceful, or often accompanied with conflicts that brought. The same fate happened in Yugoslavia. The first demostrations regarding the nationalistic movements began in all the 8 countries that were included in Yugoslavia. The first ones were the Albanian student movement in the Autonomous Region of Kosovo. Jones cites that in 1989, the new-comer president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, revoked Kosovo's autonomous status and imposed direct control from Belgrade. He replaced Kosovar Albanians with Serbs in most official positions and began to dispossess the Kosovar Albanians

of their equity in most communally owned enterprises (Jones et al, 149). As a result, despite the existence of a peace deal, or the outline of one, the wars are far from done, and most, if not all, political concerns remain unresolved. Croatia, like other Western Balkan countries in transition, stepped into a long process, from the end of the war in Croatia until 2012 to join the European Union. Viduvic says that Croatia has shown good price stabilization achievements, but it has struggled in the economic policy part of the transition, which could be dubbed "from import substitution to export extension." The foreign account balance is deteriorating as a result of the speed and method with which privatization and stabilization measures have been implemented, as well as the complexity of and commitment to structural adjustment programs, as well as the success of market infrastructure development and the demand for radical financial and corporate sector reforms (Viducic, 50). Furthermore, the author mentions that the presence of foreign banks in the region has boosted the region's banking markets' competitiveness. However, due to local restrictions on foreign ownership and cautious foreign participation (low capital inflows and a preference for low-risk activities), their impact is still limited. As a result, the financial markets in the region are still under-banke (Viducic, 54).

Figure 3. *The breakup of Yugosalvia. BBC, May 22nd, 2006.*

The Yugoslav Wars had its most recent turn of events underlines the reality that the United States and its allies had already reached a perilous fork in the road in tackling the hostilities in the former Yugoslavia by June 1995. According to the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, they say that apart from the ramifications for the UN such

as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as this timeline of events from the summer of 1995 indicates, the consequences for the West have been significant. Many people distrust NATO and the European Union's competence and importance in dealing with future European crises because they have been unable to find any practical remedies to the issue (Strategic Studies Institute, 6). The only response to the May 29-30, 1995 discussions in the Hague was to send more troops and concentrate UNPROFOR in fewer locations. The truce reached in December 1994 was never truly successful, and by April it had completely collapsed. Croatia started a new operation in May to reclaim Serbian-populated territory lost during Serbia's 1991 invasion. By doing so, Zagreb further exposed the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), the UN operation in Yugoslavia, as an ineffective peacekeeping force (Blank, 1). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the European Union had an important role during the war of 1992. Igor Stiks, a noble Bosnian-Croatian professor, says that Bosnia-Herzegovina has been a theater of major EU external involvement for more than 15 years. Stiks says that since the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement and an ensuing peacekeeping operation in which both the US and the EU played a major role, Bosnia has been under direct supervision, making it effectively a semi-protectorate (Stiks, 127). Furthermore, Tija Memisevic, the author of " EU conditionality in Bosnia and Herzegovina: police reform and the legacy of war crimes", says that the accession of the country in the European Union was difficult, due that it was proved to be a great obstacle to, among other things, the return of the local population to their pre-war homes. (Memisevic, 49). The author says that due to the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) institutionalized ethnic division, police forces remained divided and organized along new administrative lines (Police of Republika Srpska, Police of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Police forces of ten cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Police of the Brcko District) (Memisevic, 50). After the beginning of 2000's era, the European Union Police Mission (EUPM) took over from the IPTF in January 2003 and has been intimately involved in police reform in BiH ever since. The restructuring of Bosnia and Herzegovina's police forces has become a formal component of the EU integration process, and a set of criteria governing BiH's integration

progress has been steadily developed. However, the topic of police involvement in war crimes and its negative influence on repatriation, reconciliation, and transitional justice has never been expressly addressed in these criteria. (Memisevic, 50-51). Furthermore, Stiks says that the European Union is interested in the result of the Dayton Agreement, which has been helpful to establish dual, or two-level, citizenship, as well as multiethnic citizenship from a political standpoint. The author says that Brussels is also interested in the strange situation of inhabitants from Brko's self-governing area acting as Bosnia's third entity de facto. Although under direct Bosnian sovereignty, Brko is shared by the entities, and its people have the option of choosing which entity citizenship they want. Citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be classified as multi-ethnic in the sense that practically all political participation is based on ethnicity (Stiks, 128).

As it happened during the war in Croatia and Bosnia, the same fate happened in Kosovo in the end of 1990's. Elezi says that the intervention of NATO against Milosevic's atrocities in Kosovo in 1999, the Stability Pact, and the attention of Washington and Brussels to the progress of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region were three historical steps in focusing European Union about the question of Kosovo (Elezi, 5). Huszka says that Brussels is trying to compromise in a positive way the relations between Pristina and Belgrade. She says that the relationships between Kosovo and Serbia illustrate how the promise of integration in the European Union can drive conflict settlement (Huszka, 4). For the same reason with Huszka, it is accepted also from Elezi. He says that between Serbia and Kosovo there is only a unique and a difficult issue that is not resolved yet, Mitrovica. According to Elezi, Mitrovica is a town, divided by Kosovan part in the south, while in the north is governed de-fact from a government that has relations with the government of Belgrade and does not recognize the independence and the authority of Pristina. Elezi says that the division of the city is sponsored by Belgrade, which requires this state of affairs in order to play the populist nationalist card within Serbia to distract public attention from internal problems. Elezi says that regarding the case of the independence of Kosovo, Mitrovica can be used in two ways: first option, is to keep Kosovo within its current borders, as

stipulated by UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which means that Kosovo's territory cannot be expropriated. Kosovo would therefore serve as a regional paradigm for the democratic inclusion of minorities into national life. Macedonia's vulnerable neighbor, Skopje, said that this solution would not destabilize the country. The violent acts of the previous year, while a setback, have generated some concerns, but the general consensus is that they do not rule out the possibility of a multiethnic community. While the second resolution is the exchange of the territories between Kosovo and Serbia, which would mean the division of Kosovo and could have had negative casualties in the economy of Kosovo. The division could have caused a boomerang effect in the region and in European Union politics, because there would be more claims between people about specific territories, such as the union of the Bosnian Serbia with Serbia, and the union of Ilirida (Western Macedonia) with Albania. Furthermore, Elezi says that according to an American analyst, he says that the only problem that some states in the Western Balkans can not join the European Union, is the nationalism that they carry. For instance, the partition of Kosovo would mean setting up a Greater Albania, a Greater Serbia, a Greater Montenegro, a Greater Croatia and perhaps Muslim states in the western part of the region. (Elezi, 6-7).

The interdependence in industry between the Balkan countries

There is another way that the conflict in the Balkans should be resolved from the European Union, in order that these countries in the future should be integrated. One of them is the interdependence in their economies and its exchange programs between the Western Balkan countries. In one paper entitled "Sustainable Growth in the Western Balkans", written by Sabina Silajdžić, in collaboration with Jasmina Selimović, and Eldin Mehić, the authors say that like other any region, the Western Balkans have suffered greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As policymakers begin to shift their focus on the day after, so to speak, they would be well-served to bear in mind the assessment that the region has a great potential to embark on the course of sustainable economic growth by transitioning to renewable energy production and improving energy efficiency of its industries. According to them,

by transitioning to renewable energy production and improving the energy efficiency of its sectors, the region has a wonderful opportunity to embark on a path of long-term economic prosperity (Silajdzic et al, 177). Even if there is an innovation of Brussels in the interdependence of the economy in the Western Balkan countries, employment rates in the Western Balkans have increased slightly in recent years (at least during the pre-pandemic times), structural and youth unemployment remain consistently high. Emigration aspirations, such as youth and labor emigration, clearly illustrate that economic difficulties are long-term and systemic (Silajdzic et al.179). Furthermore, the Open Balkans pact, signed between Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia in December 2021 would help in the industrial development between these three states. According to Silajdzic et alThe Western Balkan countries have made tremendous progress in terms of transition reforms, especially macroeconomic reforms and trade liberalization, over the last two decades. The convergence of these economies, on the other hand, has been sluggish. Trade openness and a spike in FDI following the liberalization of the banking sector and huge privatization projects were primarily responsible for the steady growth rates in the early years of transition. The growth process has been marked by gradual convergence in terms of total factor productivity growth and relatively limited private sector development (Silajdzic et al., 181).

In the assessment of the value of economic integration, Christophe Solioz, a French scholar focusing on Foreign Policy, Human Rights and International Relations focusing on the Balkans, says in his journal article entitled "The European integration of the western Balkans (Part II)", that the Bertelsmann Foundation used an indicator previously created by König and Ohr to assess the benefit of economic integration over the period 1992-2002 across the EU-15 (excluding Central and Eastern European nations). According to the author, The Bertelsmann 'integration index' shows that, first, every country – except Greece – has been able to achieve higher per capita income as a result of European integration; and, second, while some countries (such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the United Kingdom) have benefited significantly from growing integration, others have not (Denmark, Germany, Austria and Finland)

(Solioz, 154). Furthermore, the author tells that there are four basic causes that could explain this convergence (or deconvergence) deficit: First, the eurozone was established in 1999 for countries that met the 'euro convergence criteria' (also known as the Maastricht criteria); second, the Union did not provide sufficient resources for the 'big bang' enlargement after 2004; third, the 2007-2008 crisis, which began as a financial crisis in the private banking sector and evolved in Europe simultaneously as a financial market (Solioz, 154). Furthermore, Solioz says that The Cohesion Fund appears to be an effective vehicle for disseminating the EU's numerous regional cooperation programs, but it fails to address the condition of 'deficit countries in the Western Balkans (Solioz, 155-156).

Furthermore, Silajdzic says that the economical and industrial development of the Balkans is processed through a simple and easy way, the sustainable development. The authors say that the region's transition to a green economy should be built on strategic policy frameworks that combine the transition goals of the manufacturing, environmental, and energy sectors. A regional sustainable industrial policy initiative for Western Balkan countries could provide a valuable conceptual framework for developing and implementing successful policy initiatives in the region. It may thus provide resources for the successful implementation of various policy initiatives, such as financial and technical capacity for technology adoption and industrial upgrading in line with the European Green Deal—a strategy aimed at transforming the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy with no net green-gas emissions by 2050; decoupling economic growth from resource use; and "leaving no person and no place behind." (Silajdzic et al, 177). In the sustainability policy options in the industrial section, the authors suggest eight industrial policy levels that could be pulled as a catching up process in the Western Balkans: first, mapping the potentials, secondly, building inter-firm linkages and collaborative networks, fostering international collaboration, technology adoption, the adequate provision of the capital, support for innovation, rebuilding the region's science and technology base and the last, but not least, integrating environmental concerns. The authors say that these eight levels can be pulled to encourage a more active catching-up process for Western Balkan countries. s (Silajdzic et al,

188-190). In addition, the author believes that the process of industrial technological upgrading necessitates systematic government support for both technology transfer and cleaner technology adoption. Over the course of the transition, industrial capacity has dwindled, and horizontal industrial policies have proven insufficient to promote dynamic industrial restructuring and technical upgrading. The consequences of the Western Balkans' existing one-dimensional approach to sustainability concerns appear to be concerning, especially in light of European Union member states' high-tech growth agendas and the Western Balkans' inadequate contribution to the industrial areas. (Silajdzic, 191).

But on the other side, Valbona Zeneli, a noble professor and scholar at George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, says that the Western Balkans' fundamental challenge is economic security. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality are all threats to the region's regular people' daily safety. This region became very vulnerable, going into a double dip recession, after being indirectly affected by the global economic slump through trade and financial spillover channels and strong reliance links with European Union markets (Zeneli, 53). The author says that the economic downturn has exacerbated socioeconomic conditions, reducing consumer confidence in markets, socially dividing societies based on income and wealth levels, lowering living standards and shattering social foundations, and jeopardizing hopes for eventual convergence with advanced countries. (Zeneli, 53). Furthermore, Zeneli says that unemployment in the Western Balkans is the highest in Europe, at 24% on average, more than double that of the rest of Europe. The economic crisis exacerbated this situation, resulting in even lower incomes, greater poverty, and increased unemployment. Despite the fact that GDP per capita nearly doubled in the recent decade, it was a jobless boom that did not result in additional employment. The Western Balkans have low participation rates and a scarcity of options for young employees.

The question of the Open Balkans between 6 countries

Since December 2021, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia are members of the Open Balkan, an economic and political zone in the Balkans. The zone covers a total area of 131,935

km2 and is home to about 12 million people. Albanian, Macedonian, and Serbian are the official languages. The cities of Belgrade, Skopje, and Tirana serve as administrative centers. All three member governments hope to promote commerce and cooperation as well as improve bilateral relations by establishing the zone. According to the ETIAS (European Travel and Information and Authorisation), this new agreement will allow Serbian and Albanian individuals to freely travel between the two countries without the requirement to display a passport at border control checkpoints; instead, they will be able to present a national ID card. Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Herzegovina have all endorsed the Mini-Schengen action plan for freedom of movement and a shared regional market, with Montenegro remaining the lone holdout (ETIAS).

Figure 4. *The green countries (members in Open Balkans). Euronews, August 31st, 2021.*

On the other hand, some politicians think that the Mini-Schengen between North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia is dangerous. According to an article on Radio Television 21 of Kosovo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, Donika Gervalla said in an international meeting in Slovenia between the Foreign Affair Ministers and European Affairs of the European Union and Balkan countries, about the role of Kosovo in "The Open Balkans" agreement. (RTV 21). The article says that there are individuals in the Balkans who are attempting to undermine this notion by attempting to return to the region's earlier days, when political and economic conflicts were intertwined."They call it mini-Schengen,' and they keep telling us that it's not a roadblock to EU membership." However, this is not the case, it is said to benefit

regional cooperation. Furthermore, the minister urged the EU to take immediate action to halt the process before it is too late. "This approach has the potential to be quite harmful for Balkan stability and peace," she continued. In addition, debates centered on the expansion process, the rule of law, and measures for building a sustainable Europe following the Covid-19 pandemic. "A request was issued for mass immunization on this occasion in order for all states to return to normal as quickly as possible," the MFA said. (RTV 21).

Except from Kosovo, Montenegro, another state in the Western Balkans that used to be in a federation with Serbia (before known as Serbia and Montenegro, existed between 2001-2006). refused to join the pact of the Open Balkans. Samir Kajosevic says in her article on Balkan Insight, entitled "Montenegro Rejects Balkan 'Mini Schengen' Proposal", that A Montenegrin minister has opposed the concept of forming a Balkan version of the European Schengen Area, which would remove economic and travel barriers between Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and maybe additional nations (Balkan Insight). She claimed that it would be a waste of time because her country has already "opened its borders" to its neighbors and removed trade obstacles. Montenegro is a member of CEFTA, the Central European Free Trade Agreement, a regional effort for Western Balkan countries that ensures free movement of people and commodities, according to her. She also said that Montenegrin citizens are already traveling using their identity cards as a document to all countries in the region except Croatia, because it has been a member in the European Union since 2012. Between three countries, with frustration, the presidents agreed to open their national borders to each other's citizens and products without limitations on January 1, 2023. Furthermore, the United States (US) special envoy, Gabriel Escobar, said that the Open Balkans plan would fail if it did not involve "all six countries" of the Western Balkans. He said that the three nations that are beginning this project must be open and honest with the other three skeptic partners, and their concerns must be taken into account." This effort will not succeed unless all six countries participate. Furthermore, the US ambassador in Belgrade said that the goals of the Open Balkans program are critical for Serbia's and the region's European futures (Euractiv).

How is the situation with the liberalization of visas on the Western Balkans?

The liberalization of visas between the European Union countries and Western Balkans countries is different from what it was in the past. Stiks says that in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania, the EU successfully used visa liberalization as an instrument of legal and administrative engineering. (Stiks, 129). Visa liberalization was utilized not only to consolidate civic records and establish new security measures via biometric passports, but it was also used to change existing legal provisions relating to criminal law and the functioning of the police, customs, and border control. However, many unforeseen political and practical implications resulted from the process itself. Furthermore, he admits that the visa liberalization between these countries, even if it has offered a distant membership potential in exchange for a pledge to execute often difficult reforms, the process is the most visible and immediate illustration of the EU's impact for inhabitants of the Western Balkans. The EU utilized the visa liberalization process as a tool to exert pressure. (Stiks, 129)

Stiks says that Kosovo has not yet liberalized the visas with the other countries of the European Union. Everything depends on the bilateral relations between Pristina and Belgrade and from the beginning of the question of the independence of Kosovo. The author say that the process itself, particularly the evaluation of the benchmarks and the decision to grant visa-free travel to holders of Macedonian, Serbian, and Montenegrin passports at the end of 2009 but not to citizens and residents of Kosovo (even those with Serbian citizenship and passports), or Albanian and Bosnian citizens (included at the end of 2010), became mired in controversy and exacerbated the bitter sense of isolation felt by those who were left behind. Furthermore, aside from the exclusion of Kosovo's liberalization in visas, Stiks says that the government of Belgrade agreed that Serbian citizens, regardless of ethnicity, who reside within Kosovo's territory will be excluded from the benefits of visa liberalization. As a result, the EU obliged Serbia to discriminate against one segment of its people (many Albanians still retain Serbian identity documents and passports). One of the cited reasons is that Serbia has had no control over the territory and people of Kosovo since 1999. (Stiks, 130). Furthermore, the people and the government of Kosovo were left with no other option, further depreciating Kosovo citizenship (particularly for the Serbs living in Kosovo) and rendering Kosovo's new independence emblems (such as the Kosovan passport) largely meaningless. Stiks makes a summary that the real proposal of the European Union was attempting on the one hand to strengthen Kosovo statehood and win the allegiance of Kosovo minorities (particularly Serbs) to the new state, while on the other hand, it could arrive to undertake initiatives that undermined these efforts and effectively forced people to seek out less legitimate ways to obtain useful travel documents (Stiks, 130-131).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the expansion of the European Union in the Western Balkans will be a good future solution in Europe, but it will create new conflicts between people. Apart from the Western Balkans, Elezi says that there will be current threats to European security, such as the Basque problem, the Irish problem, Kaliningrad, Transdniestria, etc. Furthermore, the Cyprus crisis, silent for about thirty years, has represented a potential danger that extends over the entire island, but it seems like this issue is moving towards a solution as well (Elezi, 5). Aside from the lack of democratic ideals, there is one other stumbling block to the region's unification. In addition, the European Union's accession might be difficult due to some minor problems that can cause an imaginary Third Balkan War, regarding the question of Macedonia in its name and the question of the independence of Kosovo and the continuation of "The Open Balkans" plan between three countries of Western Balkans: Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, with its results after 5 years from the decision of the formation on December 2021.

This particular stumbling block has to do with the process of state building. The bulk of the region's countries have not completed the statehood circle. To put it another way, they are not yet fully formed states with clearly defined borders. As Elezi says in the end of his paper, even if the future integration of the Balkans in NATO and mainly in the European Union is foggy, a government itself formed as a

consequence of election fraud cannot be considered a member of the regional solution. As Rujevic says in the end of her article in Deutsche Welle, waiting in Europe's wings is a tough fight for survival for Balkan residents, considering the region's high unemployment and poor income. Thousands of people, mostly highly educated youth, migrate from the Balkans to Western Europe each year, leading some to believe that they will only be able to join the EU if they trek there on their own two feet. More research should be done for the resolution of the problems in the Western Balkans, until they will be accepted as full member countries in the European Union.

Reference

[1] Blank, Stephen J., editor. YUGOSLAVIA'S WARS: THE PROBLEM FROM HELL. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1995, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11917. Accessed on 26 March 2022.

[2] Elezi, Mehmet. "The Western Balkans Between Statehood and Integration." Connections, vol. 4, no. 2, Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 2005, pp. 5–8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26323165. Accessed on 2 April 2022.

[3] ETIAS t. "Mini-Schengen: What Does This Accord Mean for the EU?" ETIAS Visa Waiver for Europe, ETIAS, 5 Apr. 2022, www.etiasvisa.com/etias-news/mini-schengen-balkans. Accessed on 5 April 2022.

[4] EURACTIV.rs. "Escobar: Open Balkans Initiative Cannot Succeed without All Western Balkans Countries." Www.euractiv.com, EURACTIV, 25 Nov. 2021, www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/escobar-open-balkans-initiative-cannot-succeed-without-all-western-balkans-countries/.

[5] Huszka, Beáta. THE POWER OF PERSPECTIVE: WHY EU MEMBERSHIP STILL MATTERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21645. Accessed on 26 March 2022.

[6] Jones, Seth G., et al. "Kosovo." Securing Health: Lessons from Nation-Building Missions, 1st ed., RAND Corporation, 2006, pp. 149–86, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg321rc.14. Accessed on 3 April 2022.

[7] Kajosevic, Samir. "Montenegro Rejects Balkan 'Mini Schengen' Proposal." Balkan Insight, 12 Nov. 2019, balkaninsight.com/2019/11/12/montenegro-rejects-balkan-mini-schengen-proposal/. Accessed on 5 April 2022.

[8] Media, RTV 21. "Gërvalla in Slovenia: Eu Must Stop 'Mini-Schengen', Dangerous for Peace in Balkans." Gërvalla in Slovenia: EU Must Stop 'Mini-Schengen', Dangerous for Peace in Balkans -, RTV 21, 23 Jan. 2021, en.rtv21.tv/gervalla-ne-slloveni-be-ja-duhet-ta-ndale-mini-shengenin-i-rrezikshem-per-paqen-ne-ballkan/. Accessed on 5 April 2021.

[9] Memisevic, Tija, et al. "EU Conditionality in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Police Reform and the Legacy of War Crimes." War Crimes, Conditionality and EU Integration in the Western Balkans, edited by Judy Batt and Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2009, pp. 49–66, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07052.7. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

[10] Milchevski, Ilija. "A Requiem for a Dream: The Name Issue and the Accession of Macedonia to the EU." International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, vol. 22, no. 4, 2013, pp. 40–59, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26583454. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

[11] Rujevic, Nemanja. "Balkan States Sit in Endless EU Waiting Room as Trieste Summit Begins: DW: 11.07.2017." DW.COM, DW.COM, 11 July 2017, www.dw.com/en/balkan-states-sit-in-endless-eu-waiting-room-as-trieste-summit-begins/a-39632991. Accessed on 3 April 2022.

[12] Silajdžić, Sabina, et al. "Sustainable Growth in the Western Balkans?: The Need for A New Industrial Policy." Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development, no. 19, Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development, 2021, pp. 176–91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48617363. Accessed on 1 April 2022.

[13] Solioz, Christophe. "The European Integration of the Western Balkans (Part II)." SEER: Journal for Labor and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe, vol. 21, no. 2, 2018, pp. 153–200, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26803063. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

[14] Štiks, Igor, et al. "The European Union and Citizenship Regimes in the Western Balkans." THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EU: 'THE HOUR OF EUROPE,' edited by Jacques Rupnik, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2011, pp. 123–34, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07053.11 . Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

[15] Vidučić, Ljiljana. "Progress in the Croatian Transition and Prospects for Croatia-EU Relations." SEER: Journal for Labor and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe, vol. 3, no. 1, 2000, pp. 47–64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43291708. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

[16] Zeneli, Valbona. "Economic Development in the Western Balkans: On the Road to Competitive Market Economies?" Connections, vol. 13, no. 4, 2014, pp. 53–64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326377. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.