

# THE BALKANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## Abstract

The Balkan question is both a historical and a political one. With the coming together of some European countries to form the European Union (EU); it became necessary for these countries to forge head both on the economic and the political fronts. This in essence has accentuated the gains made by these European countries but it has had its attendant ramifications. This notwithstanding, the idea of European integration on the principle of peace, common history, cultural and economic development cannot be fully realised since some sectors of Europe is neutral or isolated. The literature on the nature of such integrations especially the need for the integration of the Balkan regions should continue to be discussed and implemented. This paper however, looks at the literature from a social and political history point of view and projects the necessary turns that Europe has made and the need to come to a useful end in the discourse that leads us to observing or witnessing a united Europe whose socio-economic, political and military complex holds its own against the odds but also for the common good of humanity.

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## Introduction

The roots of the European idea and the creation of the European community after the Second World War lie in the desire to prevent further war between European nations. According to Lucia (2012) one of the main goals of the original idea of European integration is defined as preserving peace in the Member States. Thus, the Europeans had seen the grave ramifications of war on the European territories.

More than two decades, the concept of a new Balkan community emerged as a counterweight to new aggressive and defensive nationalisms. The consequent idea to promote a common history of the region was also launched in political and intellectual environments,

which was the brainchild of European leaders. However, it is important that the reconstruction of the Balkan history would not be a new construction to supersede the significance of national histories and the roles they play. It stands better to be a new interpretation of the national pasts based on a common Balkan cultural and institutional heritage. And it implies the introduction in history teaching of supranational elements as a counterweight to ethnocentric or even nationalistic historical narratives (Rudolph, 1992).

The clash between the historical approach and the mythological approach in the Balkans raises clear problems because it puts in contact and even in conflict two opposing political cultures (*ibid.*). At the same time the situation is complicated by the fact that in the Balkans pre-industrial (tribal) societies coexist with industrial (national societies) and post-industrial (cosmopolitan) societies.

Clashes between these political cultures and the confrontational character of their relations breed terrorism, corruption, and organised crime, coupled with lack of economic development and incomplete democracy. This, according to Lowenthal (1996) is the third stage of the balkanization or rather the third balkanization, that is, balkanization after balkanization after balkanization, which makes any prospect of a stable, positive and rational order in the region even more problematic.

In the midst of all these challenges the region faces the big question of her status in the European Union (EU). The Balkan region has been in deep struggle trying to define their status in the EU. Over a decade now, various measures have been instituted to Europeanise the Balkans of which the enlargement has become a hook in the neck.

Greece in particular is becoming a burden on the EU. Greece might have failed the EU by its poor economic performance or probably the EU might have also failed Greece for refusing their own member a bailout. This is one of the pendulums hanging around the EU's neck. The recent signal that Britain is pulling out of the EU is another pendulum. The position of the Balkans in relation to the EU is an important issue for consideration and must therefore be discussed. This article discusses the possibility of Balkan integration into the EU and the impact of this integration on Balkan national politics, domestic economies, and the way forward with such a region with several national minorities. It attempts to establish the possibilities of peaceful cooperation and cohabitation among the Balkans in the EU.

## Theoretical Background

The Balkan region have been engulfed in serious controversies over the definition of nationalities and citizenship. Balkanisation and Debalkanisation have taken a swipe at the regions peace, stability and economic prosperity. The European Union is currently battling with its own challenges as Britain makes moves to dismember. In the midst of this, the Balkan region still beckons for solutions to its problem of integration. The current status of the Balkan region in the eyes of the European Union still hangs around the neck of the EU. We therefore seek to make a case for the mechanistic integration of the Balkan region into the EU. We want to analyse the controversies, challenges and possibilities of the successful entry of the Balkan integration into the European Union. Therefore, this study has been conducted by reviewing research articles and key policy documents of the EU to arrive at logical conclusions on the future of the Balkans with the EU. Considerations have been given to peculiar circumstances that apply to a particular group of Balkan countries and also unique circumstances.

Anastasakis (2005), argues that “despite many negative predispositions towards the Balkans and the pejorative notion of Balkanization, there is no doubt that the region is part of Europe and that the current EU-led reform genuinely aims to bring the region back into Europe’s fold.” Anastasakis believes that, Europeanisation took a new turn after the fall of communism where the EU began to expand to the Balkan region. However, the EU is nearly getting tired instituting stringent measures for Europeanisation of the Balkans.

Brennan (2013) posits that The EU is now not only a direct neighbour of the Western Balkans, but also the most important economic, political and geopolitical actor in South Eastern Europe. Like Anastasakis (2005), Brennan believes that the EU in a period of “expansion fatigue” with its successive enlargements coupled with protracted economic crisis, which has enveloped the Eurozone since 2008 and has thrown the very survival of the EU into doubt. From a widely acclaimed perspective, Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) argues that the major problem effecting relations between the countries remains the public discourse on wars, which is still segregated according to partisan sides.

Grabbe et al. (2010), at the European Council on Foreign Affairs, think that the EU has been pursuing a wait-and-see policy. They argue that in the midst of a huge economic crisis, the EU leaders may be

tempted to put off any further decisions on enlargement. However, now that some of the Western Balkan countries have tested the EU's commitment by formally applying for membership, they believe the wait-and-see approach is unsustainable.

As a matter of fact, the EU has kept six of the countries of the Western Balkans—Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – waiting for a decade. And these countries have are good examples of the EU's wait-and-see tactics. The EU has asked them to take on difficult and ambitious reforms to prepare them for membership. However, Balkan leaders are no longer even sure that the EU members really want them in the club. As a result, Grabbe et al. (2010) opines that the EU's credibility is fading in the Balkan region.

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (Policy Paper May 2014) has indicated that the Western Balkans had experienced more than a decade without armed conflict and were eligible to accession but for the expansion fatigue (Brennan, 2013; Grabbe et al, 2010). At this point, the Western Balkans has experienced more than a decade without armed conflict. That the violence of the previous decade has taken its toll on the region, not only in terms of death and displacement, but also by delaying the region's ability to catch up with the democratization process, which began a decade earlier, has been corroborated by Brennan (2013). The Groups' assertion that controversies over the war past of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, whilst controversies over the past continue to haunt political debates could therefore be logical.

According to Lasheras (2016) competition continues to take shape as Europe and the Balkans struggle to deal with a refugee crisis of unprecedented scale. He adds that EU has been slow to assist the countries along the Balkan migrant route and has largely failed to craft joint solutions (Brennan, 2013; Grabbe et al. 2010; Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2014).

Lasheras continues that the crisis has in a sense reversed the traditional roles of the EU and the Balkans as the EU has become a net exporter of instability to the region. Thus, the legions of refugees who entered the Balkan region in 2015 came from a member state – Greece – and ended up being stuck in the region as EU member states further north blocked their passage. Lasheras believes that the crisis has strained bilateral relations, fuelled long-standing animosities, and strengthened illegal networks and organised crime.

Consequently, the EU's reluctance towards Europeanisation of the Balkans has become more conspicuous. Thus, out of all the Western Balkans, only succeeded in joining the Union in 2013; some 13 years after the launch of a formal process to expedite actions on integrating the Balkans. The rest of the region remains still distant from accession for the foreseeable future and some countries, for instance Turkey, has less hope due to "enemies from within". In addition to the challenges of political and economic transformation, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia remain weak states with dysfunctional institutions, notwithstanding the considerable diversity among them.

Grigor'ev and Severin (2007) also argue that in favour of the Balkan stability as a the paramount reason for not seeing their dream come true. According to Lehne, there are several explanations for the marked differences in the progress of the West Balkan countries in the Stabilization and Association Process. *One factor* is the historical accident. Serbia and Montenegro, for instance, could only begin the process after the fall of Milosevic in October 2000, at a time when negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were well under way (Morari, 2012).

Grigor'ev and Severin, furthermore, holds the position that the current power disequilibrium in the Balkans has a strategic character and it still has, at least in the medium term, the capacity to destabilize the entire continent of Europe. They claim that the solution for the frozen, active or latent Balkan crises is to be found at the intersection of the conflicting interests of the regional and global actors with the conflicting interests of the local actors. Grigor'ev and Severin are skeptical where the conflicting interests are placed in this circumstance?

To this extent, the Balkan dilemma is a still a problem under discussion. The issue of Balkans and the European Union have gain some level of recognition by several researchers. Some of the researchers discussed here focused on individual Balkan experiences. It is the aim of this work to present a composite picture of the fate of the entire region in their attempt to join the European Union.

## The Balkans

The term "*Balkan*" comes from a Turkish word meaning "a chain of wooded mountains". The Balkan Peninsula may be defined as an area of southeastern Europe surrounded by water on three sides: the Adriatic

Sea to the west, the Mediterranean Sea (including the Ionian and Aegean seas) to the south and the Black Sea to the east. Its northern boundary is often given as the Danube, Sava and Kupa/Kolpa rivers.

The term “The Balkans” covers not only those countries which lie within the boundaries of the “Balkan Peninsula”, but also include Slovenia, and Romania. Slovenia, which was part of Yugoslavia from 1919 to 1991, lies partially north of the Danube-Sava line and therefore outside the Peninsula, but prior to 1991 the whole of Yugoslavia was considered to be part of the Balkans (Ibid.,). In most of the English-speaking world, the countries commonly included in the Balkan region are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Other countries sometimes included are Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey. (ibid.,).

Zemon (2010), has said some Balkans trace their heritage to Egypt. According to him Egyptian cults and their monuments were highly present in the Balkan Peninsula during the Roman Empire. He continues that some of the Egyptian monuments were brought by Roman legionnaires, officials, servants etc.

On the other hand, the Croatian Egyptologist Selem (1987) states that around that time assimilated Egyptians could be found among the Balkans citizens in provincial colonies and municipalities, as slaves or equal people, and Egyptians that are not assimilated do not accept Hellenistic-Roman forms of their gods, intending to keep their monuments in the native Egyptian language but were in a socially excluded position. Zemon stresses that this situation was characterized for “Egyptians in Salona (near Split) and near islands, belonging to the lower classes”, who were probably small traders or craftsmen.

In fact, Europeanization as an identity formation project can be defined by its relationship or juxtaposition with the civilizational “other” (Anastasakis, 2005). Therefore, Zemon’s position on the identity of the Balkans suggests that the Balkans might be a different ‘breed’ whose historical background flaws their European identity.

The issue of the Balkan Egyptians’ identity, ethno-culture and history is one of the hardest scientific problems. Bearing in mind that a history is not an issue of the past, but an answer to the needs of modern life, it is also very important to find a way, how a particular historical context or tradition is used in the current process of construction of identity (ibid.,).

Often times in history, the people of the Balkans are portrayed as war-like and blood thirsty. This is because the region has recorded high

levels of instability than any other in Europe in modern times. Before World War I, the area was known as ‘the powder keg of Europe’ and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand is often seen as the trigger that led to the first World War which still hangs around as a matter of controversy. As to whether or not the people of the Balkans region are incapable of peace, time will surely tell.

### **The Balkans and the European Union**

On November 1, 1993, the Treaty on European Union (also known as the Maastricht Treaty), established the modern-day European Union (EU) which encompassed the European Community. The Maastricht Treaty established the EU with three main pillars as the guiding principle: an expanded and strengthened European Community; a common foreign and security policy; and common internal security measures.

The Maastricht Treaty also contained provisions that resulted in the creation of an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), including a common European currency which is the Euro (£). The roots of the European idea and the creation of the European community after the Second World War lie in the desire to prevent further war between European nations. One of the main goals of the original idea of European integration is defined as preserving peace in the Member States (Schuman Declaration of 1950; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

And this was to be the ground preparation for a broader agenda of a buoyant and prosperous European Community. However, this prosperity was not designed for the entire European region from the onset as the Balkans for the equation. The EU was not always as big as it is today. When the European countries decided to cooperate economically in 1951, only 6 countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands) participated. Over time, more and more countries decided to join. The EU reached its current size of member countries with the accession of Croatia in July 2013. Indeed, the journey of the Balkans to the EU has much to talk about.

At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the European Council declared that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”. There was no ambiguity that this political commitment taken by EU heads of state and government—together with those of the Western Balkans—was a clear promise. It provided for a strong incentive for the societies of the Balkans by the EU and seemed to entail the promise that the future

of the region will be stable, prosperous, and within the EU. However, more than a decade later, the promise is still yet to come to fruition. Of the seven countries of the Western Balkans, only Croatia has succeeded in joining the EU (European Communities, 2005; Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group Policy Paper, May 2014; Grabbe et al., 2010).

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of the U.S. Congress have long backed EU enlargement, believing that it serves U.S. interests by advancing democracy and economic prosperity throughout the European continent. Over the years, the only significant U.S. criticism of the EU's enlargement process has been that the Union was moving too slowly, especially with respect to Turkey. Some U.S. officials are concerned that "enlargement fatigue" as well as the EU's economic and financial troubles, which have hit the countries that use the EU's common currency (the euro) particularly hard, could potentially slow future rounds of EU enlargement (Archick and Morelli, 2014; Brennan, 2013).

After five successful waves of enlargement, the European Union, despite all debates, is still poised for action to receive new members. At present, clear prospects for European Union membership have the countries of the Western Balkans – Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Montenegro followed by potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo.

Western Balkans countries first had to extricate themselves from the shackles of colonialism. After obtaining their independence, they had to face a lot of problems that became more distinguishable along with the decision to join the European Union. The western Balkan countries have opted for Europe. The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) is the EU's political strategy for the European integration of the western Balkan countries, all the way through to their eventual accession. Regional cooperation amongst the western Balkan countries constitutes a key element of the SAP: constructive regional cooperation is recognised as a qualifying indicator of the countries' readiness to integrate into the EU (European Communities, 2005).

From the EU perspective, it is important to underline that Croatia is the first candidate country that actually acceded to the EU according to the 'regatta principle'. It is also worth mentioning that the Croatian accession has taken place at the moment when the EU itself is facing considerable internal problems and rising enlargement fatigue, coupled with the reformation fatigue among the countries in the region. Therefore, its accession represents an important signal that the



enlargement process has not ended (*Croatian Membership in the EU – Implications for the Western Balkans*, 2013).

However, the fact that the accession process has been successfully concluded opens the possibility for political elites and citizens alike to scrutinise the reforms and accession process critically and exercise additional pressure onto respective governments to intensify efforts for the reforms which is a process far from over.

The improvement of the social and economic situation of these states were noticed mainly after the Stabilization and Association Process was started by signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreements, that were adopted by European Union in the 1999 and represents the European Union's renewed long-term commitment to the region. The agreements have the mission to bring closer the Western Balkan countries to the European Union by introducing European values, principles and standards in the region and create such a favourable context for accession (Morari, 2012 cited from Serbos, 2008, p. 97).

Association Agreements are signed with Central and Eastern Europe countries and then Action Plans are prepared in the scope of these agreements. Neighbourhood Policy foresees the benefiting of neighbour countries from EU enlargement with regards to stability, security and welfare. This aim is to emphasized in the European Security Strategy approved in 2003.

Strategic aims which are indicated in the European Security Strategy Document forms the basis of which "European Neighbourhood Policy Broader Europe: A New Framework for Relations with Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood" was prepared by the Commission in March 2003 and European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Document was published in May 2004. According to Ledge (1993), through this document, EU has put forth how close links may be provided with the countries qualified as neighbours (Karluk, 2015, pp. 57-70).

The First Stabilization and Association Agreements were signed with Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on 9 April 2001 and Croatia on 29 October 2001. Both of states started the implementation of the agreements before they came into force. This is an indication of desperate Balkan countries yearning to enter the EU. The situation of the other Western Balkan countries is different, the progress being more modest. Albania signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement only in 2006, Montenegro in 2007, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008, as well as Kosovo and Serbia. Serbia was conferred the candidate status on

1 March 2012 (European Commission, 2012; Karluk, 2015). In 2011, a novel and more rigorous approach was proposed by the European Commission, and endorsed by the Council, building mostly on lessons from the EU's eastward expansions.

The EU's increased focus on 'good governance' criteria (such as maintenance of rule of law, independent judiciary, efficient public administration, the fight against organised crime and corruption, civil society development, and media freedom) was visible already during Croatia's accession. However, this is the most critical condition that appears most Balkans may find difficult to meet, bearing in mind that these countries are fragments of former nations and hence, young in self-governance.

Yet this new strategy was for the first time reflected in a formal manner in the framework adopted in June 2012 for negotiations with Montenegro, which foresees that Chapter 23 (on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (on Justice, Freedom and Security) are opened in the early stages of the talks and closed only at the very end of the process.

The same approach was then fully integrated in the EU's negotiations with Serbia, which kicked-off in January 2014, and will continue to be observed in all future accession talks with the remaining countries in the Balkans. Moreover, the heavy weight of rule of law issues can be felt now also before the actual negotiations, as was amply demonstrated, for example, by the key priorities set out in past years with a view to allowing Montenegro and Albania to advance on their respective EU paths (Stratulat, 2014).

## **The Way Forward**

The European Union's enlargement process has entered a new phase. The completion of accession negotiations with Croatia, opening the way to membership in mid-2013, perhaps, have vindicated the policy adopted in the aftermath of the devastating Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, which aims to bring peace, stability, democracy and ultimately EU membership to the whole region. This may be good evidence for the transformational power of the EU's enlargement policy, since it provides new momentum for reform in all enlargement countries (European Commission Report, 2011).

The turbulent history of the region is the reason why the EU defines as its main priority the preservation of peace, democracy, good governance

and stability, on which basis each country builds its political and economic life. Monitoring the political climate which main characteristics are good governance, political stability and effective dialogue between the institutions within each country is extremely important for the future of the region as a whole (Aleksieva and Panayotova, 2011).

This combination of anxieties related to institutional, political and economic pressures inside the EU, as well as to daunting regional and country specific issues in the Balkans, led to a more complex mosaic of EU demands on the Balkan countries, and to a more exacting method of applying the enhanced membership conditionality. The criteria formulated by the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen remain the blueprint for accession and require any aspiring country to have stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy and the capacity to adopt and implement the ever-larger body of EU law (the *acquiscommunautaire*).<sup>1</sup> However, these conditions have acquired a very precise meaning for the Balkans (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group Policy Paper, 2014).

Presently, they are all declaratively representative democracies showing higher or lower levels of applied democratisation. However, there are many bilateral issues between neighbouring countries within the region. The relations between these states are still burdened by the past wars. One of the major issues that these countries need to deal with in order to advance bilateral relations, and also in order to gain access to the European Union, are border issues between the respective countries. This has been the very cause of most of their wars.

The problem with borders appeared in the context of the question of whether the post-Second World War borders should be kept or whether the situation was to be returned to the period before the Second or even the First World War, that is, before the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918. Countries are raising these issues because of potential profit to be gained from it in terms of, for instance, access to the open sea, roads, maritime roads, and so on (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

Also, is the problem of refugees and internally displaced people. The refugee crisis has been both internal and external problem of the European Community. Greece for once produced refugees in the

1) The *acquiscommunautaire* is the accumulated body of EU law and obligations from 1958 to the present day. It comprises all the EU's treaties and laws (directives, regulations, decisions, declarations and resolutions, international agreements and the judgments of the Court of Justice.

Balkan region recently, coupled with the refugees from the Arab spring. Another issue which is related to the past wars is the problem of the residual emotional trauma still being confronted by the citizens of these states (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

For one, the EU's overall approach to the region is based on a strong security dimension, with its own repertoire of action, including various peace agreements, international agreements<sup>2</sup> and political agreements starting from the Stabilization and Association Process; and the multilateral Stability Pact for Southern Europe – replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. These set additional and politically-sensitive conditions – the “Copenhagen Plus” criteria – to be fulfilled by the countries of the region before accession, when the EU has learned that its leverage was most (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group Policy Paper, 2014).

A successful journey into the EU would also entail a study economic environment among the Balkans. At least for most Balkans, regional trade liberalisation is progressing. A network of bilateral free-trade agreements among the countries of the region, including Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, has been established, thus creating a free-trade area of 55 million consumers. This sends an important signal to the investor community, which will find a market of high absorption potential for industrial and consumer goods. To reap the full benefits of trade liberalisation in the region, the free-trade agreements need to be fully and efficiently implemented. The countries of the region committed themselves to complete the network of free trade agreements (European Communities, 2005).

Trade among south-eastern part of Europe is fully in keeping with the EU perspectives of the different countries in the region, independently of where they stand on their way to membership. Trade liberalisation and facilitation is one of the pillars of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP): a main instrument of the SAP is the autonomous trade measures that the western Balkan countries enjoy which includes free access, without quantitative limit, to the EU market for practically all products (European Communities, 2005). This usefulness of this opportunity will be highly dependent on the Balkan's ability to produce. They should brace up for hard work; they should be prepared for high levels of industrialization to match up the European economic area; while been aware of the political terrain of the European communities.

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2) Such as UN Resolution 1244 and the Dayton, Kumanovo, Ohrid, and Belgrade agreements, and the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations

Most countries who have undergone or qualifies for enlargement process have maintained overall prudent macroeconomic policies. Fiscal consolidation and the reform of labour markets remain the most urgent short-term priorities, reflecting largely similar challenges to those presently faced in the EU. More structural reforms would be needed to boost competitiveness and improve the investment climate, which will attract foreign direct investment, fostering job creation and ensuring the sustainability of growth.

Significant progress is being made on forming a regional energy market and rebuilding infrastructure. The projected south-eastern Europe regional energy market, which should provide modern and liberalised gas and electricity systems, will be key to a regional energy market based on European standards, transparent rules and mutual trust, and it will set the right environment for the optimal development of the energy sector. The agreement governing energy trade will substantially contribute to attracting investment into this strategic sector.

This new economic environment would require a comprehensive transport policy with effective cost-sharing definitions, bearing in a region that still recovering war trauma. An integrated regional transport strategy, consistent with the trans-European networks and taking into account the pan-European corridors, should be a high priority. The EU has been noted supporting projects of regional significance and regional initiatives in the areas of environmental protection, science and technology, information and communication technology, and statistics. This will be a cause worth supporting, to expedite actions towards the integration of the region.

## **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, aspiring countries must now get a head start on rule of law reforms, develop a solid track record of results and adopt inclusive democratic processes (accommodating parliaments, civil society and other relevant stakeholders) to support their national European integration effort.

Stabilisation of the Balkan region and ensuring prudent security measures, development of sound economic policies, are paramount to successful EU integration. The Western Balkans, in particular have the responsibility to, improve the capacity of public administration, and strengthening the rule of law, including by reforming the judiciary

and combating widespread corruption present particular challenges. Progress in these areas would also be conducive to the business environment and the Balkan region would not be far from seeing their dream come true.

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