

The European Union: From Brexit to "Balk-in"

The European Union (EU) has initiated a process which can be called as "Balk-in" to include the Western Balkans in the union in order to show that the confidence and solidarity among the members are still strong after the breakdown of the Brexit. Especially since Bulgaria's attainment of the Presidency of the EU Council on January 1, 2018, the EU has been pursuing a more effective policy regarding the Western Balkans. The main reasons behind the EU's long-lasting quiescence in the Balkans were:

- The European debt crisis triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis – which has not yet been completely overcome.
- The refugee crisis - a new refugee movement is being expected next year.
- The lack of integration of the new EU members such as Croatia and Bulgaria.
- The Brexit process in which the United Kingdom decides to leave the EU.

These reasons which hindered the EU's concentration on the Western Balkans also led to a belief that the EU could not survive.

The EU going through an existential crisis did not make any promising statements about the Western Balkans for a long time and accordingly lost its influence in the region day by day.

In accordance with the EU's loss of influence, the impact of other international actors such as Russia, Turkey, China, and etc. began to increase. In fact, since Turkey was an "ally" of the EU, it was not considered as a threat in the region. But the gradual deterioration of relations between the EU and Turkey made the latter a possible opponent of the former in the region.

The EU realizing its diminishing power in the region organized a Balkan summit hosted by Bulgaria on May 17 in order to give a green light to the Balkan countries that they will become the members of the EU.

The aim of this summit was not only to signal the Balkan countries' inclusion to the EU, but also to block the expansion of the influence of international actors as much as possible, and to help the EU get out of recession and overcome the Brexit syndrome.

As a matter of fact, for the successful implementation of the Summit, the EU worked hard to address the problems of the Western Balkan countries. For example, Bulgaria and Macedonia have concluded good-neighborly agreements in order to preclude the long-standing disputes between them.

In the same way, a great effort has been made to overcome the name problem between Greece and Macedonia that has been continuing since the 90's. Overcoming these problems would mean EU and NATO membership for Macedonia, while for Greece and Bulgaria, this would make them far more effective and efficient in solving the problems rather than being problem-creator in the region.

Besides, the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is another problem that the EU has endeavored to overcome. In this context, the EU was insistent on launching and sustaining the process of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue in order to solve the problems between the two countries. However, the ongoing dialogue process between Belgrade and Pristina halted due to such crises as the killing of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanović on January, and the brief detention of Marko Djuric, the director of the Serbian government's Kosovo office in Northern Kosovo. In this context, it cannot be argued that the EU putting pressure on both Kosovo and Serbia was successful in solving these problems.

The disagreement between Serbia and Kosovo also caused another dispute among the EU countries. This is because of the fact that Greece, Spain, Romania, Cyprus, and Slovakia do not recognize Kosovo's independence. These five countries, particularly Spain, stated that they would boycott the summit if Kosovo participated in it. This attitude has forced the EU to use the expression of "our partners from the Western Balkans" instead of "the Western Balkan states".

Well, why does the EU insist on including the Western Balkans in the EU?

Is it important on account of ensuring the integrity of the land? Although the territorial integrity is one of the reasons for the EU enlargement process, it is not that important concerning this question.

Is it important because the Western Balkan countries will economically contribute to the EU? No...
Because the share of Western Balkan countries in the EU economy is almost nothing. But the economic meaning of the EU for the Western Balkans is irreplaceable. The EU accounted for almost 70% of the exports and 65% of the imports in the Western Balkan countries.

Is it important in order to block the intervention of international actors? The Western Balkans is a region with great historical and geo-strategic significance. It is the boundary between the East and the West, and the Catholic and the Orthodox world, while it is a land where Islam has also been experienced. It is true that the region, which has been under the influence of different civilizations throughout history, is still under the influence of many international actors. Some of these influential actors can also use armed conflicts in the region in order to increase their influence.

Is it important because of security? Yes. In accordance with the possibility of an armed conflict to be provoked by international actors, it is not certain that conflict will not occur again between these countries that fought against each other very recently. Such an atmosphere of conflict would deeply affect the EU in a negative way which is currently wrestling with a number of crises. So, the security of the region means the security of the EU.

Is it important because the EU aims to bring prosperity and democracy to the Western Balkans? Not at all. The Balk-in process isn't an effort to make the Western Balkan countries members of the EU or to bring prosperity or democracy. But it is an effort to stimulate the belief that the EU is still a successful project and to save the future of the EU. Because the Western Balkan countries which had great hopes before the summit did not find their expectations at the end of the summit.