

Europe as an Economic Giant but a Political Dwarf in the Balkans

After EU's failure to properly respond to the Gulf Crisis, which took place at the beginning of the 1990's, Belgium's then-Foreign Affairs Minister, Mark Eyskens, harshly criticized the EU's incapability of going beyond a trade area calling it an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm. This criticism, directed at the EU at the beginning of the 90s, has preserved its validity in the Balkan politics of the Union to this day.

Western Balkans is a European-based term that defines 6 countries that are surrounded by EU member states, but whose chances of becoming members of the EU in the short term are small. Five of these countries (Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro) continued to exist as a country under the Yugoslavia roof until the early 90s. After the death of Tito in 1980, which is identical to the name Yugoslavia, the decisions taken by Serbs against other peoples and the removal of other countries from the government have led to the road to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The sixth country, Albania, lived through one of the world's heaviest communist regimes from the Second World War until 1990.

The beginning of 90's were years when there have been major breaks in the Balkans as well as in the world. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of bipolar world system after the collapse the Soviet Union were great changes around the world. At the same time, there were wars in the Balkans where great massacres happened. The occurrence of such battles in the county within Europe threatened the security of the EU. Although it posed such a risk for the EU, the EU had not been effective in ending these wars. As the EU did not take steps to end the Bosnian war, the arms embargo that it put into practice tied the arm of the Muslims living in Bosnia in the war against the Serbs. The worst of all was that the Dutch peacekeepers in Bosnia-Herzegovina sent thousands of unarmed Muslims to death in Srebrenica. "Thanks to god" the West (USA) intervened earlier in the Kosovo war and did not repeat the same mistake. These days EU was a political dwarf and a military worm, just as Mark Eyskens said.

The Balkan countries, after the wars, have been in constant need of EU membership and support. From one side because of collapsed economies after wars, from another side in order to protect the territorial integrity. For these reasons, the Western Balkan countries have made efforts to make reforms that the EU was demanding. They carried out these reforms as long as they had the belief that they could become members of the EU. And the political activity of the EU was high as long as these countries continued to have this belief.

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But problems such as the debt crisis, the refugee crisis and the BREXIT incident in the EU have slowed down the enlargement process. Another reason for the slowdown of the enlargement process stems from the fact that the most recently adopted countries to the EU can't fully adapt to the union.

Parallel to the decline in the belief in the Western Balkan countries that they will become members of the union, the EU's influence has begun to diminish. There are a lot of examples where the EU's diminished influence can be seen. For example, last year, the EU has not succeeded in overcoming the long-standing political crisis in Macedonia. In fact, and even the president of Macedonia has not met with the EU representative who came to Macedonia, to found a solution for the political crisis. At the same time, the EU has not been effective in changing the opposition's decision not to participate in the elections in Albania. The EU also didn't prevent the Republic Srpska's unconstitutional referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Other actors have become more influential in these periods when the influence of the EU is declining. Among them is Russia which is a cognate of the Slavs that make up the majority of the region's population, Turkey which has strong historical ties with the region, the USA which is one of the game makers in Western Balkans and China which has recently made major investments in the Western Balkans.

Although the impact of the EU on the Western political arena has diminished, for the economic landscape

is still the most important actor. That is, more than 65% [1] of foreign direct investments in the Western Balkans come from European countries. Also, 75% [2] of the foreign trade of the Western Balkan countries is carried out by the European countries. The remittances of workers with Balkan origins which are working in Europe, sent to families, is also one of the important income sources of the Balkan countries. These statistics show that Europe is an economic giant for the Western Balkans. But it is not sufficiently influential in the economic arena. Aware of this, the EU has been quoted as saying that these six countries will become members of the EU, in order to increase their belief that they will become members of the EU and to prevent and possibly narrow the scope of influence of the international powers.

In this framework, on one side the EU suggests the establishment of a customs union that will allow the Western Balkan countries to liberalize trade among themselves. On the other side, the EU has begun to say that the enlargement process, which has been frozen, will be restarted and that the new members will be from the Western Balkans. At the same time, it says “more quietly” that no one country is ready to become a member of EU.

As can be seen in the examples given above, the EU is a political dwarf, although it is an economic giant in the Western Balkans. It should not be forgotten that the EU is a political dwarf when it comes to solving the problems, but it is always giant somewhere behind the problems.

[1] UNCTAD, Bilateral FDI Statistics, <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx>

[2] WTO, World Trade Profiles 2017. https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/trade_profiles17_e.pdf