

WESTERN BALKANS' CRITICISM ON THE EU

Emin Emin



INSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Emin, Emin. "Western Balkans' Criticism on the EU", INSAMER, 09.03.2021.  Analysis

Public criticism on the EU is a new and unprecedented development in Western Balkans politics. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama for instance stated that the EU treats Western Balkans countries as second-class entities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić also criticized the EU, after the union left the Western Balkans alone in the early stages of Coronavirus, and its aid came long after Chinese and Russians aid arrived early in the region. Vučić stated that "European solidarity does not exist", calling it "a fairy tale on paper".

Statements of these two leaders represent a significant reversal of what has been said so far about how the EU is perceived in the region. There are different reasons behind the increase of such criticism against the EU.

First of all, the protracted EU accession process has led to a decline in the beliefs of Western

Balkans countries that they would become member states any time in the future. For example in 2020, none of the six Western Balkan countries has made progress in the European integration process. It is true that the Balkan countries could have done more, but this still raises the question of whether the process itself "works" since many countries do not progress for decades.

It is wrong, even a nonsensical assumption of some EU member states, that the longer the negotiations last, the more prepared the country will be when it joins. A very simple explanation for this is that the countries that are still far from gaining future membership would not make their maximum effort to do their homework. When Juncker said in 2014 that the EU would not expand for the next five years, Western Balkan countries immediately reduced their efforts and this reflected on the progress in the negotiations.



INSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

Why does something in 2015, when there will be no promising rewards?

Another point of criticism on the EU is that most countries in the region are “handed over” with security instability and complete political and economic dependence on the West. Meanwhile, in the prevailing diplomatic discourse, the stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans are viewed in the context of two integration processes: the region’s NATO and EU membership. There is a stereotype that these processes stabilize and motivate the democratic, economic, social, and security transformation and planned Europeanization of the countries in the region.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the EU’s decision to restrict the export of certain medical supplies to countries outside the union has also affected its image in the Balkans. The absence of aid from the EU, of which the Western Balkan countries - with undeveloped health systems and weak economies - needed assistance, has turned the region once again into an arena for rising non-western political, economic, and military powers seeking to extend their influence.

At that moment, the EU’s failure to take rapid steps in the distribution of vaccines, even banning the export of vaccines to Western Balkans, has caused criticism towards it. Although EC President Ursula Von der Leyen reiterated that the Western Balkan countries do not have an EU mechanism to restrict the export

of vaccines - i.e. companies that comply with EU agreements can export vaccines to this part of Europe¹ - there are no hopes that the vaccines will immediately arrive in Western Balkans.

News of Macedonia’s recent blockade over a bilateral dispute with Bulgaria has unleashed a new injection of hopelessness into EU-Western Balkans relations. Bulgaria’s position is very reminiscent of the stubbornness of Greece, which has kept Macedonia under a blockade for a whole decade. As the debate continues, North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, who gave up his name for the sake of including his country to become an EU and NATO member state, expressed negative emotions towards the EU if the issue of Macedonian identity is at stake.

While all this is happening and we are constantly receiving negative signals regarding the region, it is claimed that Montenegro can become an EU member in 2025 if it realizes all its reforms. Montenegro appears to have received assurances from Brussels that it could become part of the EU if it fulfills its duties. Similar guarantees were given to North Macedonia and Albania. Such guarantees were given to Kosovo for visa liberalization. However, all promises made have been delayed for now. Nonetheless, something serious and necessary needs to be improved in the European Union’s relations with the Western Balkans for the desired enlargement to be truly believed.

Endnotes

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_505