



### EU'S WESTERN BALKAN'S POLICY PUT TO TEST

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**On February 2, 2018, the European Commission launched its new enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans offering to help and “urgently redouble their efforts, address vital reforms and complete their political, economic and social transformation,”<sup>1</sup> for all six EU aspirant states - Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania.**

The Commission has urged the states of the region to implement reforms and make a clear commitment to the “fundamental values” of the European bloc. The strategy further states that, “joining the EU is far more than a technical process. It is a generational choice, based on fundamental values, which each country must embrace more actively, from their foreign and regional policies right down to what children are taught at school.”<sup>2</sup>

The strategy also includes six flagship initiatives ranging from initiatives to strengthen the rule of law, reinforced cooperation on security and migration through joint investigation teams and the European border and coast guards, expanding the EU Energy Union to the Western Balkans, and lowering roaming charges and rolling out broadband in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Ivan Krastev, Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia observed that “many factors have brought the Balkans back to the fore – not least the recent refugee crisis, which deeply rattled the

1 Kelly Blake, “European Union enlargement to Balkans in 2025 ‘realistic’”, *Casa Worldwide*, February 7, 2018, <http://sifutbol.com>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

region.”<sup>4</sup> Krastev's observation was based on the comments of a senior Turkish official who believed that, “the Second World War is over but the First World War is not yet finished.”<sup>5</sup> Despite being an exemplary model of regional integration, the re-emergence of geopolitics has once again put the continent into a test of territories, nationalism, and identity, and for that matter, the growing populism in Europe. The reassertion of nation-states is becoming increasingly noticeable in Europe.

On the other hand, a more emboldened ambition of shifting from a transit area of energy exports to an area of influence in Balkans, particularly, after the Ukrainian and Crimean crisis, Russian strategy is looking predominantly persuasive. A newly found China-Russia nexus has made the susceptibility of the non-EU eastern European member states more complex while inflicting paradoxes in geopolitical realizations. Russia has worked to gain influence in south-east Europe. It has a significant foothold in Serbia. It would certainly not benefit from Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia joining NATO. Integrating into EU would also not be beneficial for Russia. In fact, the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov gave a warning that the EU's repeated calls for Serbia to align its foreign policies with the bloc as a precursor to membership and to impose sanctions on Russia are the same "mistake" the West made by pressuring war-torn Ukraine to choose between it and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, the identity of the Balkans is dominated by its geographical position. It has always been known as the area at the crossroads of cultures. As a juncture between the Latin and Greek bodies of the Roman Empire, it is a meeting point between the Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, as well as an area of confluence between Islam and Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the convergence of influence among Muslim communities in the Balkans by Turkey in the wake of all time low relationship with the western European countries (particularly Germany) and the increasing leverage over Orthodox Christians by Russia could cause a semblance of Syria.

Balkan countries also control the direct land routes between Western Europe and South West Asia (Asia Minor and the Middle East). China plans to build a high-speed railway between the Greek port of Piraeus and Budapest, via Belgrade. It would be of immense value to China's “One Belt, One

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4 Ivan Krastev, “Europe is facing a potential crisis in Balkans. It has to act soon’, *The Guardian*, February 21, 2018. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

5 Ibid.

6 Dusan Stojanovic, “EU and Russia battle for influence in Balkan region”, *Independent*, February 24, 2018. <http://www.independent.co.uk>

7 Nevenka Jeftić Šarčević Edita Stojić Karanović (Edited), “Danube Strategy-strategic significance for Serbia”, Institute for International politics and economics, Belgrade. 2012.

Road" trade route initiative between Asia and Europe. China also hopes that the western Balkans will be eventually integrated into the European single market.<sup>8</sup>

Strongly connected with the pre-EU waiting program of Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania all aim to be part of the future enlargement of the European Union and reach democracy and transmission scores. It has been more a spur for reform and reconciliation in the region after the Balkan wars of 1990. Undoubtedly, EU has come a long way in embedding the single market and the single currency. Can it be set into a single democracy with the unsustainable status quo continuing in the Balkan states?

According to Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, "Investing in the stability and prosperity of the western Balkans means investing in the security and future of our union."<sup>9</sup> Holding out the prospect of membership to six western Balkan countries by 2025 tentatively, is basically to seek to breathe new life by strengthening controls on migration, and counter Russian influence in the volatile region. It would certainly create the politically conducive environment for the resolution of the bilateral issues so that they cannot be politically instrumentalized. The Commission's expansion strategy, nonetheless, gives a chance to Serbia and Montenegro to join. So far, this ambitious time frame looks more inspirational than realistic.

However, for the European citizens to express themselves politically and then translate them into actions and laws need broad based decentralized institution. The power of decision must have clarity. For instance, the European Council with the inclusion of the heads of the region will have a more integrated representation rather than the representatives of the governments or the heads of states. The role of citizens is also inexplicably manifested from the rise of extreme-left parties in the recently held elections to Brexit and to the future of Catalonia. The mismanagement of Eurozone has further contributed to the rise of anti-EU populism while worsening the regional tensions. This certainly perturbs the Union's stature and the new applicants.

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<sup>8</sup> Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Mikko Huotari, Alice Ekman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias (Edited), "Europe and China's new silk route", ETNC Report, December 2016.

<sup>9</sup> "New Strategy for Western Balkans", Brussels Diplomatic, February 6, 2018. /brusselsdiplomatic.com