

DARKO ANGELOV*
**Reinventing EU Enlargement:
Macedonia and the Western Balkans:
Integrating Europe's Inner Courtyard**

Dear Rector Dr. SHATTUCK, Prof. ENYEDI, Honourable representatives of the Budapest Diplomatic Corps, dear lecturers and students of the Central European University,

It is a profound honour to return to my university and to be able to address you in this capacity.

Allow me to start this address by being the devil's advocate and ask directly the question that I am certain bothers many of you present here and that are not from the Western Balkans. And the question is: is there any room today to speak of enlargement per se, when we have a European Union so much absorbed by its own internal challenges, be it implementing the Lisbon Treaty revamping the structure of the Union or the unprecedented financial and economic crisis of today? Would a Union still fresh from the latest enlargement round and even the big-bang of 2004 be prepared for yet more members?

The answer is an outright yes, as many rightfully have asserted that enlargement has always been the most successful policy of the Union, and often carried out at turbulent times for the existing member states and for the European institutions. Just a small reminder that the big-bang of 2004 was only two years since the full fledged launch of a major EU project, the single currency, the Euro.

The enlargement with Portugal and Spain back in 1986 matched the time when the then European Economic Community has negotiated the Single European Act, the first major overhaul of its institutional set-up since the founding 1957 treaty of Rome.

The enlargement of 1995 with Austria, Sweden and Finland was also amid major reforms of the transformed Union and the implementation of the 1993 Maastricht Treaty.

So, it never was a dull moment for Brussels when there was a new round of enlargement. And enlargement always provided the much needed new vigour for overcoming the pending challenges. Last but not least, the countries of the Western Balkans with their combined population of some 24 million and relative macroeconomic stability poses half less the challenge compared to the last major enlargement of 2004.

To be able to answer the initial scepticism of whether there is ever a good timing for talking about further enlargement with the Western Balkans countries, I will also dare to challenge the very notion of a Western Balkans region and to dispel the myth that Brussels should fear yet another major big-bang enlargement as the one of 2004. Simply, there cannot be a new enlargement en-block simultaneously with all the countries of the so-called Western Balkans. This artificial, purely political term with no historic rationale has been coined only in the late 1990s to label what

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was left out from the fast track of EU enlargement in Southeast Europe, once Bulgaria and Romania were due to join-in. This unfortunate term very much goes to the core of the problem. That we speak of an artificial state of play that can not be persisted in a status-quo.

The Western Balkans, a sub-regional grouping of countries, no matter the geographical proximity, is also a varied region, yet full of similarities deriving from the shared past. However, a look at where each different country of this sub-region stands when it comes to EU accession reflects the peculiarities of each.

Macedonia is a country that formally applied for membership in 2004, received the status of an EU candidate in 2005 and in 2009 the European Commission finally, after an unprecedented four year delay largely due to Greek lobbying, recommended that it should commence the accession talks. I will come back to Macedonia later on.

Croatia, a country that signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement second to Macedonia in 2001, in 2004 became an EU candidate, whilst in 2005 it started the accession negotiations that might be completed by end of this year. Montenegro filed its application in 2008, whilst Serbia and Albania submitted their applications in 2009 and are hopeful that in the near future they will be granted the official status of candidates for membership.

As we can see, this grouping of states is at various, yet proximate stages of the EU accession process. However, aside of the standard criteria for membership, these countries had to live up to additional challenges such as recent independence, overhauling the former socialist system, and last, and definitely not least of a challenge for many of the said countries: coping with the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Of course, at this presentation I will focus primarily on my country, the Republic of Macedonia, and will leave the rest to my colleagues, the ambassadors from the respective states.

However, analysing the Macedonian path towards Brussels I am certain will provide an insight on the lenses with which the EU sees the region and the approach it has utilized throughout the last two decades. Macedonia from day one of its proclamation of independence in 1991 is a proof by itself that we can not pursue a simplistic view over the so-called Western Balkans. A small country of two million, it was the only former Yugoslav republic that seceded from the federation entirely by peaceful means embracing a liberal democracy with full respect for its ethno-religious diversity.

Few know and many have forgotten that in 1991 the new nations of the former Yugoslavia were subjected to a scanning process by the then European Community assessing the countries on merits of the level of democracy, freedom of expression, minority and human rights, market economy, etc. The assessment was supposed to be the foundation for the eventual decision of the European Community for the recognition of their independence based on whether and which of the four newly independent states of the former Yugoslavia meet the criteria of state sustainability in accordance to the set standards of the Community. Two years later many of these standards became known as the so-called Copenhagen Criteria for EU membership. For this purpose, the European Community in 1991 established an Arbitration Commission comprised of the presidents of five constitutional courts of the member states of the Community, chaired by the President of the French Constitutional Court Robert Badinter. The Commission came to the conclusion that in 1991 only

Slovenia and Macedonia met all the criteria and deserved to be recognized as independent states by the European Community and its member states.

And then the Macedonian saga became to unfold, to this very day. Macedonia's southern neighbour, Greece, instead of being at the bulwark of affirming Macedonia's establishment in Brussels, put its first in a nineteen year long row of vetoes be it at the United Nations, the EU or NATO. With the absurd claim that an independent state maintaining the same name it had as a constitutional part of the Yugoslav Federation, that of the Republic of Macedonia, by its very name presents a security threat to the NATO and EU member of Greece, with one of the world's biggest military expenditures per capita, was and still is unserious at best.

Due to the Greek political blockade in Brussels and New York, accompanied by a partial economic embargo throughout the first three years of independence and eventually in 1994 a full-fledged trade embargo on Macedonia by Athens, resulted in Macedonia joining the United Nations only in 1993 and with the economic embargo of 1994, pressured to undertaking an interim accord with Greece with one-sided concessions on Macedonia's side.

Prolonging the international legitimization of Macedonia, a country that has met all the European and international standards set by Brussels, at those times of unparalleled violence elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, jeopardized not only the maintenance of peace in the country itself, but very much risked flaming the then still peaceful southern Balkans and Kosovo within it.

I will not further continue into the details of the relationship between Macedonia and Greece in the first half of the 1990s, yet it is crucial to be aware of the extraordinary, unprecedented pressures and blackmails that Macedonia was put at during which it also had to manage state-building and carrying out the transformation of its society from the mode of socialism to pluralism and a market oriented economy. Eventually, under the pressures of a Greek economic embargo combined with an international embargo towards rump Yugoslavia led by Milosevic on its northern borders which it had to maintain, Macedonia made a major painful compromise to be able to preserve its statehood.

Under the Greek trade embargo and political ultimatums, in 1995 it agreed to change its constitution, to make the elsewhere obvious, in Macedonia's case, explicit: Macedonia amended its constitution stating that it fully respects the territorial integrity of all of its neighbours. Or to be more precise, with these amendments, deriving from the interim accord that Macedonia signed with Greece under the auspices of the United Nations, the Republic of Macedonia declared the following, I quote:

"Nothing in its Constitution can or should be interpreted as constituting the basis of any claim to any territory not within its existing borders, nor the basis for interference in the internal affairs of another state in order to protect the status and rights of any persons in other states who are not citizens of the Republic of Macedonia."

In 1995, as part of the Accord, Macedonia also changed its national flag under Greek pressure. And most painstaking, it reaffirmed that it would maintain its membership at the United Nations and all other international organizations under a provisional reference name of "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" followed through by a UN mediated process by which the two countries would resolve their differences on Macedonia's name.

Almost seventeen years later, Macedonia remains a country in a limbo, throughout the nineties by many assessed as the beacon of hope in the restless region, it received no valorisation for continuously having to cope with ever increasing additional unprincipled conditions, first in order to receive its formal recognition as an independent state, and to this day, for its EU and NATO integration.

Despite the hurdles being the result of the lack of vision south of Macedonia's border, the country has firmly persisted on its path towards EU and NATO accession. Undertaking reforms has remained at the core of the mandates of all Macedonian governments, and even at these volatile economic times, Macedonia is a good example of the perseverance to the path of solid governance amidst objective and many of the said subjective circumstances.

At times when Europe is shattered by the world's deepest economic crisis in generations, Macedonia, despite being in the said political limbo when it comes to its strategic aims of joining the EU and NATO, has remained macroeconomically stable with a budget deficit of meagre 2.7%, inflation of 0.8%, total public debt of only 32% when the EU-set maximum is at 60%, and an economy that in 2009 shrank by tolerable 0.7%, after years of growth of average 4% per annum. This data alone also speaks of how little ground there is to look at a candidate country and a region through simplistic lenses. And let me once again underline the unprecedented conditions under which Macedonia has achieved and is still maintaining all of this.

With the enlargement of the Union in 2004 and 2007, whilst having Macedonia caught into the status-quo of so-called enlargement fatigue, it is worth reminding ourselves to the original pretext behind the grand idea of a united Europe. Before becoming the big idea of today, that of an economic and political alliance, Europe was brought together as a peace-making project. Yes, we have easily forgotten that Europe and the European Coal and Steel community as its first successful organized form was at its core a peace project. There was war, a major war, that of the Second World War, that prompted the western-European states to join hands in an organized manner.

Europe had its eyes on the Balkans, though often reluctantly, only at times of war. This was the case of the 1990s, but even then, it was only after an initial failure of Europe to comprehend and to deal with its immediate courtyard. Instead of fully grasping the situation, Brussels did not uphold the only right course for pacifying the Balkans on the long run: that of setting an unconditional-beyond-the-usual-conditions path towards EU membership for all countries of the region.

Instead, by not ceasing the moment by energetically supporting democratic change when it eventually happened in some Western Balkan countries or ultimately, by not supporting Macedonia's persisted commitment to peace and multi-ethnic democracy by providing it with an unhampered path towards full EU accession, free from absurd blockades, the EU only created an inner courtyard. Indeed, the Western Balkans emerged to become an inner courtyard of Europe, a pool of countries strained by the pressure of seeing its immediate neighbourhood enjoying the privileges of EU membership, especially frustrating be it that of the right of veto for the accession of new members.

To those Euro-enlargement sceptics we can only make one clear statement: the Western Balkan region needs a fair chance meaning just, merit-based treatment on the road towards EU membership. There is no danger of a small region with even smaller countries of possessing a threat to the EU by its eventual incorporation into the Union. Let us look at Macedonia as an example of the exhausting, yet restless

commitment to the European idea, a country that aches for appreciation and acceptance in the European family of nations. Macedonia and the countries of the region ask for a fair chance to be given to the whole region, whilst each country is being individually assessed on its way towards a deserved membership in the EU.

In only two days from now, in Sarajevo, the European Union will host an EU-Western Balkans summit marking the tenth anniversary since the launching of the new enlargement track, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, first signed by the Republic of Macedonia in 2001. A decade later, it is time to reflect on what the countries of the region have achieved and what the EU has accomplished when it comes to integrating its inner courtyard.

We can assess now that the Western Balkans has exactly remained this, an inner courtyard of the Union, a region encircled by EU member states, new and old. Whilst this creates incentives for an accelerated approximation of the countries of the region into the EU, prolonged be it, as it is, this also produces frustration, a potential for instability as well as missed economic opportunities, both for the aspiring countries themselves as well as the EU.

The Union, no matter it is absorbed by its own “reinvention” after Lisbon and moreover, the financial crisis, it should not take the Western Balkans for granted. A peaceful country as Macedonia, which has maintained a vibrant multi-ethnic democracy and macroeconomic stability even during the least glorifying moments elsewhere in Southeast Europe, should be turned into a proof that the Balkans needs not to be aflame in order to draw the attention and commitment of Brussels.

As the broader region sways into years of peace, gradually becoming forgotten by the self-absorbed EU, it is about time that Brussels formally recommits itself to fully incorporating the Balkan heartland into the Union with a tangible time-line of progression for each country, purely based on merit and the readiness of a country to join the club.

The longer the enlargement process is being prolonged out of irrational selfish considerations of a member state of the Union, the more the very credibility of the process and of the EU itself will be irreversibly damaged in the Balkans, but also beyond the outer borders of the Union.

A one time event such as the one in Sarajevo may and will remind us on the region, of where everyone stands when it comes to EU integration, but it alone will not suffice to make the needed leap.

The EU needs a sober perspective at the Western Balkans, moreover it needs to follow its own assessments and values, such as the recommendation of the European Commission of 2009 that the Republic of Macedonia is prepared and should start the accession talks, a recommendation not followed through by the Council due to a veto by a member state of the Union.

This is the second time that the EU has not respected its own expert assessments over Macedonia, first by ignoring the findings of its own Arbitration Commission in 1991 that Macedonia meets the criteria for recognition of its independence, and now again by the unprecedented move of the Council not implementing a recommendation of the Commission for start of accession talks of a candidate country. If the EU would finally live up to its responsibilities towards Macedonia by opening the accession talks, that would send a major positive signal across the region that painful reforms do provide for tangible results, as it is tangibility that the region needs, not empty rhetoric.

In that direction, a moratorium of neighbourhood disputes between old and aspiring members, as well as in-between aspiring members, is what is needed up until each and every candidate country joins the Union. In particular, when such disputes do not possess any threat to the political, economic or social stability of the EU member states. Moreover, we see an inconsistency of attitude by Brussels when we witness similar, many more severe disputes persisting among existing members of the Union, some of which having been present even before the countries' European accession.

At best, if not a full moratorium is agreed, the bilateral disputes should always be left not to hamper the negotiation process of a candidate for membership until the final chapter of the accession talks is closed.

The Western Balkan countries need the EU as well as the Union needs them. Not a cliché, this statement has a deep political, security, and economic rationale for both sides of the equation. The Hungarian presidency of the EU in 2011 will be an opportunity for the Union to pay a more substantial focus to its southeast inner courtyard and make for Sarajevo not to be just a flashpoint in a long list of courteous conferences.

Thank you very much for the kind attention!