

Western Balkans and the Enigma of EU Accession

With the exception of Slovenia, the Western Balkans (WB), still in the wake of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, face daunting challenges to gain accession to the EU. At different stages in the process of inclusion the six countries have developed unevenly with inchoate institutions, glacial state building, and elusive civil polity. Omnipresent are inefficient judiciaries, malfunctioning public administration, and crime and corruption. These unsavory conditions retard entry to the EU. WB candidate status is circumscribed by strict criteria such as rule of law as fundamental to democracy.

However, WB, individually or collectively, may consider other approaches beyond the means to accelerate EU accession. In the context of rapidly changing international relations and geo-politics, WB could envision alternatives that circumvent the hurdles they face for entry into European regional institutions, particularly EU and NATO.

Perhaps WB opine the criteria for their acceptance are dissimilar to those set for recent EU entrants. An underlying concern therefore is whether WB pursuit is Sisyphean and their goal of membership unattainable. Aware that EU's present configuration is subject to changes, WB may assess that EU's future character might not be conducive to their needs.

History shows that the EU evolved from the Coal and Steel Community to EEC, and EC. Aware that EU is not static, aspirants may choose to evaluate whether the ongoing EU metamorphosis and expansion will meet their specific aspirations.

Given the economic rise and political clout of Asia, influential countries are focusing on that region. The EU is adjusting to this reality also in its current foreign and security policies. Its present loose union conceivably could be converted in the future to a federal or confederal configuration. Clearly, EU capitals would resist this shift as threats to their national sovereignty. Beyond that, these developments would be replete with complexities and manifold implications for geo-politics.

Nonetheless, in calculating their position in a mutating, albeit incremental, world order, WB would be obliged to evaluate their prospects in a possibly transformed future EU. In addition, the EU is now engaged in harmonizing its organization and decision-making structures attentive to its publics and external exigencies. These are important factors that the WB must also address.

Having rejected what some WB countries considered a heavy-handed Belgrade domination of former Yugoslavia, it is conceivable they may shy away from a Brussels supranational state that has not only imposed difficult conditions for membership but also could limit implicitly their autonomy or even independence.

It is not far-fetched to consider nascent challenges to the Westphalian concept of the nation-state. In the context of rapid changes globally, including the rise of new powers, innovative trade, economic, political, and strategic alliances will be forged, and new matrix

and status of international institutions will emerge: for example, the composition of the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, revealing unprecedented power relations.

WB cannot rely on largesse from international financial institutions or expect easy access to new formations and alliances. The financial crisis that Greece, Ireland, and Portugal now face are serious and the EU is not inclined to assume additional burdens of this nature. Alternatively, WB must undertake serious internal reforms and abandon traditional norms that impede progress in social relations, political decision-making, and economic initiatives. They must shed autarchic policies and instead seek opportunities to strengthen trade among themselves as well as other areas of common interest.

Concomitantly, tolerance should be encouraged so that religious, ethnic differences are respected. Political parties formed on strict ethnic lines should be eschewed and supplanted by parties that transcend these primordial clusters. In the ex-Yugoslavia, Prime Minister Ante Markovic's Reform Party espoused pragmatic policies but unfortunately did not win popular support.

Imbedded in these sclerotic traditional norms are seeds of conflict which entice foreign intervention ostensibly to protect inhabitants from untoward acts committed by nationalists. This situation raises questions regarding the appropriateness, magnitude, and duration of military intervention. Clearly, warranted intervention requires external powers to assess budgetary, strategic, and national security concerns with respect for universally accepted principles enshrined in domestic and international covenants. And of course foreign military intervention should be obliged to consider the implications of civilian casualties as well as the rights of sovereign states.

To the extent that the WB fail to implement domestic policies that conform to universally accepted democratic principles, the prospects of foreign intervention lurk. The underlying presumption is that EU membership conditionality will engender maturation and that NATO security umbrella will discourage chances of violent conflict. The challenge that WB leaders face is to manage conflict and display vision.

Education is a critical area for capacity building. Imperative is the preparation of the WB youth to meet the challenges of a competitive future and to promote a process of socialization that builds trust across ethnic and religious lines. And rewriting history must adhere to the canons of scientific inquiry and historiography.

With infrastructural advances, institutional efficiency, and social cohesion, WB will be in a better position to chart a future within or outside the ambit of the EU if indeed membership is deferred indefinitely. The asymmetry between current EU and NATO membership, emerging international realignments and trade relations, and the vast implications of globalization present a unique historical crossroads for WB to define and pursue their individual or collective interests.

In this scenario, WB leaders and their citizens would have an opportunity to weigh the costs and benefits of joining the EU, their own responsibilities as members, and their relative status and clout. On the other hand, WB could consider how they would fit in an apparently emerging new world order, not divided by ideology, as during the Cold War and

the existence of the Non Aligned Movement, but by intricate levels of economic, financial, resource disparities, geographic power shifts, palpable global instability, and unruly non-state actors.

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