

Albania's road toward the European Union through security dimension _____

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Abstract

The current defense doctrine of European Union uses two main concepts regarding the Western Balkans: security and preservation of the status quo. In the absence of a relatively stable security in its periphery, specifically Western Balkan countries, Europe seeks to maintain a special status quo, because it can't allow this space to fall into the other powers influence. In this respect, EU seems to be acting based on specific limited interest. Observing recent moves, the European Union is reluctant to engage in a "geopolitical war" with other powers, which can be avoided by including Western Balkans into EU. The drafting of the strategy for such area (first signs given in the Berlin process) and possible opening the negotiations with Albania and Macedonia will make the EU a stronger geopolitical player, as it is competing with Russia, China and Turkey, but it is also suffering from internal problems – from enlargement fatigue to populist movements, endangering its own existence.

Key words: *doctrine, security, euro-skepticism, status quo, geopolitical war*

Introduction

According to a study conducted by the St Gallen University, if the list of criteria for EU accession and implementation of the reforms imposed by Brussels is followed,

Western Balkan countries such as Albania and Macedonia will find it difficult to “find European development momentum” and can be accepted in the EU by 2050 (Morgan, 2017). As an obstacle to meeting this goal earlier, the study underscores the chaotic political situations in these countries, and the geopolitical clashes of major powers. Another key point of the study is that enlargement is based on the progress of a country and not on the “expansionist” Union policy” (Böhmelt, & Freyburgc, 2017).

There is a fundamental contradiction between EU bodies, as demonstrated in the recent disagreement between the European Commission’s recommendation and the decision of the EU Council of Ministers: on the one hand, accession to EU through achieved progress (Albania 2018 Report) and on the other the Commission’s political decision (EU to start membership) that finally has a broader, longer-term vision for building a future Europe.

The Commission came to the conclusion that Albania’s place is in Europe and the invitation should be materialized in concrete projects, which means that 2050 may be approached through stricter EU supervision.

According to Juncker, this would bring two advantages: first, “it would be dangerous to leave EU aspirant countries in strategic uncertainty, despite challenges in the Union”; and secondly, “a rejection of the ‘open door’ policy would be a big mistake for the European project, because it would activate Russia in the region and affect the loss of confidence of these countries in the European future.” For this reason, Juncker says that “I encourage the West to make important strategic decisions” (Borsa, 2018).

Sovereign countries vs. supranational institution - EU

But the June 26, 2018 report found that sovereign countries are stronger than the supranational institution - the EU, and overturned its decision. It was decided that for a period of one and a half years there would be monitoring of reforms and progress based on the Commission’s annual report. The decision to open negotiations with Albania will be made after an Intergovernmental Conference at the end of 2019 if it is judged to have made progress. The reforms will be based on five priorities: public administration reform, judicial reform, the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime and the protection of human rights. Most likely, Albania will be unable to make the expected progress for many reasons related to Albanian domestic policy (EU to open accession).

There are also reasons deeply rooted in EU policy for Albania not to be accepted at the end of 2019 or later. Due to the post-Brexit membership crisis, the populism that has alarmed politicians in many countries and the Euro-skepticism of some

countries, the sovereignty debate at the expense of supra-nationalism has come to the attention of many analysts.

As we demonstrated lately, France, Netherlands and Denmark disregarded the Commission's decision to open negotiations with Albania. In this way, the national interest of these states took precedence over the general European interest. There is an ongoing debate, but it is clear that there is a contradiction between national and supranational interests, which has hampered this process - or Albania's rapprochement with Europe. The "burdens" mentioned above, the objectives that Albania must fulfill in order to be "worthy" of the EU, are relative and interpretable.

In this context, having in mind the possible changes in the security architecture dictated also by the US role in NATO in relation to other allies, Albania may remain outside the area of influence of the European "empire".

Given Juncker's initiative to make a "strategic decision" for Albania, and the way the EU is now exercising its foreign policy, there is a tendency to surpass European Council's decision-making boundaries. According to the current EU Global Strategy, presented by Federica Mogherini in 2016, "no state should oppose external challenges affecting the Union internally" (The EU Global Strategy, 2018).

But the crackdown in the decision-making process between the Union and the member states undermines the European position. This strategy is seen as a necessity in raising the Union's profile in the international arena. Only after defining clear common interests and identifying threats from outside will the EU be able to gain the status as a major power and neutralize other powers, such as the US, Russia and China in its areas of influence. Under this logic, we should emphasize that the Albanian space is considered an important domain in the EU geopolitics.

However, with the decision taken for Albania, Europe has shown that preserving the status quo at the moment is its right move: a curtailed presence and a deadline postponement on paper, but with no guarantee of the future. Apparently, under the conception of the French, the Dutch and the Danes, but also the Germans as the Union's leaders, the Albanian space is not that relevant and is not in their strategic interest. That becomes a very complicated issue.

Under these conditions, the EU can consider Albania a EU partner rather than a candidate country, as it is happening with Turkey. This reluctance of the EU, depending on the future situation and the game of other actors, may provide another scenario for Albania's future: non-EU membership. In this case, EU can propose a different model, such as a privileged partnership or a good neighborliness, simply for the sake of stability on its periphery.

To sum it up, the latest decision shows that, if one day Albania joins the EU, it will happen not for its own sake, but for the benefit of the EU.

Keeping the status quo - a “clash of titans” in Albania

So Europe wants to continue maintaining a status quo, in terms of security. Two main concepts are today used within the framework of the European Union's doctrine of protection in the Western Balkans: the security and preservation of the status quo. In the absence of relatively stable security, Europe demands a special status quo in the Balkans, its periphery. Simply put: to have as much supervision as its interests go, not allowing this space to fall under the influence of other powers, because doing so would harm Europe itself. Keeping the status quo means a buffer zone, before security instruments are activated. From this point of view, it seems that the EU is acting as far as its interests go.

Considering the latest moves, the European Union appeared to be reluctant to engage in “geopolitical warfare”, a clash it had previously feared to wage in the Western Balkans (WB). The drafting of the WB strategy and the opening of negotiations with Albania and Macedonia reinforce the EU role as a geopolitical player. This is true, at a time when the main EU countries use the rhetoric of “enlargement fatigue”, due to fear from populist movements.

First of all, the EU fears Russia in the Balkans, after witnessing the event in Ukraine and now Russian undisputed presence in the Middle East. Europe has come to realize that it is no longer Russia of the 1990s, but rather an aggressive power that attempted a coup in Montenegro or continues backing Slavic nationalists in the region. Therefore, for the EU, Russia should be restrained from destabilization of the fragile Balkan countries.

In this regard, the European Council on Foreign Policy concludes that “Russia regards the Balkans as a battleground in its ‘political struggle’ ... and is seeking to exercise authority in this region ... and by doing so it is aggravating further tensions” (Galeotti, 2018). Additionally, this document issued by the Council states that Russia is limited in its influence in Albania and that Minister Bushati has stated that “Albania is a stronghold against Russian influence in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Croatia” (Rettman & Maurice, 2018). Russia is therefore a serious concern, but European officials fear Turkey as well. Currently, Turkey is undergoing strained relations with the EU. It is still unclear whether President Erdogan will fully disclose his agenda in the Western Balkans, while, unlike Russia, has built mechanisms on the ground. The primary danger is the co-ordination of Turkish policies with Russia in the Balkans, as is the case in the Middle East. Therefore, Europe is “rushing” to curb such maneuvers in the Balkans.

Turkey certainly needs to be taken into consideration, especially with its current course of its foreign policy. Its strategic position and historical legacy - applied

through soft diplomacy in the Balkans - enables Turkey to become involved in Balkan domestic affairs. Thus, Turkey cannot tolerate losing the Balkans. Not only Turkey needs to use the Balkans as a bridge to the West, but it also intends to exert influence on this bridge (Weize, 2018).

Turkey's intentions in the case of the Balkans are clear: impact on the region and other opportunities towards Europe, because, according to Davutoglu (2001), "an Anatolian country that has no influence on developments in Balkans . . . cannot even maintain integrity over this geopolitical sensitive area, and cannot even be opened to the world".

Only in recent years has there been serious talk of China in the Balkans. It may be argued that the EU does not consider it a threat, but the first geopolitical risk, set out in the Eurasia Group's 2018 report, is "China filling the vacuum" (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2018). The report in question states that "Trump has renounced the US commitment to Washington-led multilateralism and generated much uncertainty about the future US role in Asia, creating a power vacuum that China can now begin to fill . . ." and ". . . For most of the West, China is not an appealing substitute. But for most everybody else, it is a plausible alternative. And with Xi ready and willing to offer that alternative and extend China's influence, that's the world's biggest risk this year." Under these circumstances, it should be noted that in the Balkans China is an active player and has set clear long-term objectives. In case of a vague strategy for WB integration to EU, it turns out that China is ready for intervention.

It is worth emphasizing the "One Belt, One Road Initiative" - a strategy proposed by President Xi, which focuses on interconnection and cooperation between European countries and China. With the implementation of this strategy, China has become an important actor in the Balkans. While establishing a network of infrastructure links through Eurasia, the Balkan countries possess a valuable asset: their geographical position. China - like other Eastern powers - considers the Balkans a geopolitical bridge between the Mediterranean and Central Europe, and beyond, between the West and Eurasia. For China, the Council of Europe's Foreign Policy document states that "... it is an ambitious global actor and seeks to gain influence through investment... Even Russia has not achieved in the Western Balkans what China has done so far" (EU Global Strategy, 2018).

We should also mention the undisputed role of the US against the backdrop of European efforts to dominate the Balkans. In relation to the Albanian space, a pro-American space, the US has openly demonstrated strategic interests, especially in security architecture. In this theater of geopolitics, the American - having the role of the show director - paves the way for EU acceptance, considers Russia a strategic opponent, categorizes Turkey as a shaky ally, and regards China as an important global actor, most likely a rival of the future.

As noted at the outset, the EU must become a fierce geopolitical player. If the EU is not vigilant to these wake-up calls (these new geopolitical realities), the strategy of European bureaucrats for WB integration will fail. The main example is the Berlin Process. When the Berlin Process was launched five years ago, it was supposed to trigger a new dynamic to regional cooperation and bringing the Western Balkans closer towards the EU. By circumventing formal institutional structures and bringing in all EU members, the process could avoid excessive duplication of existing structures, but as Bieber (2019) says “. . . much has changed since Berlin . . .” because as this process “has been hijacked by some member states, the EU policy towards the Balkans has been undermined by the shortsighted politicking of members” at a time when the EU is aware that “neglect breeds crises, destructive external intervention and democratic backsliding in the Balkans.”

FRONTEX: signal of Albania’s EU integration through the security dimension

Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, during the ceremony of the launch of FRONTEX in Tirana, declared that “he wants Albania to be part in the European family” (Albania - part of the European family).

It should be noted that FRONTEX is the European Borders and Coast Guard Agency, and is thus formulated by the French “Frontières extérieures” (“External Borders”). This implies that the Albanian borders are already borders *de jure* recognized by the European Union (even external ones), which further implies a step further towards Europe for Albania.

Avramopoulos adds that this is “a step further towards security and immigration challenges”, that “. . . security is at the center of our attention. . .” and that “. . . what is happening in Albania and the Western Balkans affects the European Union, and vice versa ”(Lami, 2018).

It is noted that the European Union is gradually overcoming the above mentioned dilemma of how to integrate Albania into the Union, emphasizing security before advancing through the criteria. To put it in another way, Europe is realizing that Albania – even with this political class and culture - cannot unite with the European part of the continent, if it were to fulfill the criteria required by the Commission. And the Commissioner makes it clear that “Albania is part of the European family. Our challenges are common. They know no boundaries. The progress we are witnessing today is yet another concrete action and evidence of our commitment to bring us closer. To make us stronger” (Lami, 2018). It is important

to emphasize that Europe is gradually understanding the priorities: security before criteria.

Let us first explain this dilemma. The Union is confused about Albania's integration: through meeting standards or through a political decision as a consequence of the security dimension.

Albania, far beyond the wishes of its inhabitants, is far from being a European country. In this sense, reforming to enter Europe – as noted above - is likely to happen by 2050. But with reference to current regional and European security challenges, Albania can become part of the Union first - through supervision by the EU institutions i.e. being fully involved into European security infrastructure. This dimension would then integrate other sectors of Albanian society.

Measures to discipline the various fields have been noted before, and now, this operation is a concrete step towards a closer enlargement: not through the progress of a country, but through the Union's "expansionist" policy (Blockmans & Wessel, 2013). This depends on the decision-making process of the EU bodies (unlike the June 26, 2018 decision to not open negotiations with Albania; in this case, it turned out that sovereign countries were more powerful than the supranational institution - the EU). Juncker at the time stated that "it would be dangerous to leave aspirant countries in the EU in strategic uncertainty despite challenges in the Union" and "encourage the West to make important strategic decisions" (Zalan, 2017).

As part of the FRONTEX mission, the Commission was forced to take action in the wake of the 2015 immigration crisis, in order to improve the security of the Union's external borders. According to the BBC, it has been demonstrated that this Agency has a limited mandate, insufficient staffing and lack of authority to conduct border management operations (Migrant crisis, 2015). Further, some governments regard the Agency's mandate as a violation of national sovereignty, mainly Poland and Hungary. But this is an internal problem of the Union and not subject to this paper.

Of course, border protection goes further than the humanitarian crisis of refugees. In such context, there are two other factors directly related to Albania. The first factor is related to the internal stability of the country. The report on the security environment states that "NATO and the EU must be committed to encouraging countries in the region to continue the reform process" (Andreychuk, 2018). The lack of internal stability creates vacuums, which - according to the report - "can be filled by forces with anti-democratic and anti-Western agendas" (Ibid). A crisis in the Western Balkans can bring about severe consequences for European security and stability. This leads us to the second factor which is related to the regional and European stability. The same report states that "NATO's continued military presence in its Western Balkan partner countries is essential to regional stability" (Ibid).

There is a tendency in the Europe decision making process. EU is being inclined toward strategic decision making rather than maintaining the status quo.

At a time of an anachronic NATO?

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is at a time when there are strong disputes between the US and its allies over the very existence of the alliance. It is a moment when - according to the Americans - there is no direct threat to Europe. But not for countries that might be targeted by Russia. As Friedman (2019) points out in the article titled *NATO Anachronism*, “Americans have an interest in confronting the Russians, but do not need a NATO war plan to do so.” So we are faced with a reality when the EU has to take its destiny in its own hands.

And EU tends to demonstrate this too in its periphery, where it fears Russia, which sees the Balkans as a battleground in its political clash. It fears Turkey, which apparently has not fully disclosed its agenda in the Western Balkans, while, unlike Russia, has built up its mechanisms on the ground. It also fears China, which is proving to be a successful “predator” wherever there is a vacuum.. Further, Friedman notes that “there is a changing reality”. Under this presumption, Albania should adjust to the new trends. As we refer to this article on NATO, emphasising that:

... this is not an American or European abandonment of NATO. It is simply a reflection of the fact that a military alliance has a mission, and the mission on which NATO was founded is gone. The general principle that brought NATO members together – that Europe and the U.S. have common security interests – will always be set against a realistic appreciation of the situation. Retaining a military alliance that is irrelevant to the reality increases rather than decreases the danger to Europe and the United States. But NATO is an anachronism that has survived long past its original mission.

It is an imperative for Europe to get directly involve in mentoring, monitoring or even supervising Albania, and the latter should imply to the EU’s new doctrines.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on Juncker’s initiative to make a “strategic decision” for Albania, but also on the way the EU already exercises foreign policy, there is a tendency to surpass the narrow-minded thresholds of the European Council’s decision-making. This is clearly stated in the current EU strategy, which states that “no external challenges affecting the Union from within should be opposed”.

Based on the arguments given in this paper, some conclusions are worth mentioning. Junker points out that West should make important strategic decisions. And one of these strategic decisions must be that Albania has to be supervised in implementing its reforms.

The deadlock Albania faces from some sceptical countries should be avoided, as security should precede criteria when it comes to EU priorities. These countries should consider – as Mogherini says – that “. . . no state should oppose external challenges affecting the Union from within”.

EU must become a powerful geopolitical player. If it doesn't act so, there will be vacuum, and other powers are ready to intervene. Therefore, the opening of negotiations with Albania, there is a need for a proper strategy for strengthening relations between EU and Albania. When two parties have the same aspirations, this will be easy to be achieved.

Under the credentials of a powerful geopolitical player, EU should follow the lead of creations of empires, which have expansion into their DNA.

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