

The promise of the European Union towards the Western Balkans

Reflections on the French Perspective

By Stephanie Fenkart

On 9-11 October 2019 the “*Young Generations for the New Balkans 2013: Towards Alternative Horizons*” went to Paris, the next capital after Berlin, The Hague, Pristina, Skopje, Belgrade and Vienna that we visited in 2018-2019. The initiative aims to turn the flashlights on youth, their progressive stances and hopes for the future. We want to pose tough questions about the region, about educational opportunities, regional cooperation possibilities, reconciliation, hopes but also illusions about the EU and their respective governments or regimes. The visit to Paris this time, therefore, was not a coincidence.

Understanding French concerns and hopes about current EU policy towards the Western Balkans is important. During the meetings at the residence of the French President, the Foreign Ministry, the National Assembly and at the Jean Jaures Foundation, the young experts from the initiative shared their vision, hopes and fears, but more importantly, their policy proposals.

While positions in the EU countries differ, an overall dilemma for the young changemakers becomes obvious. While full EU integration is the long-term goal of this generation, they widely acknowledge the still existing problems in their respective countries and their governments. Corruption, lack of rule of law, authoritarian leadership, curtailment of press freedom, lack of regional cooperation



and a generation which more and more seeks their future outside of their country of origin, are only some of the challenges the Western Balkans are facing today. While the young experts' appeal to the EU is to be strict and stringent towards antidemocratic tendencies in their countries, it becomes difficult to be outspoken about these issues, considering the skeptical attitudes towards enlargement

in some EU countries. To talk openly about backlashes in some countries may hinder the efforts to become closer to the EU.

At different meetings in Paris, the ambiguity of the French position became obvious. Even though the EU perspective for the Western Balkans was not questioned in general (“The perspective is there”, as one official said), the process of EU enlargement, as it looks like today, was. This culminates in the French formula “We cannot say yes, but it will not be a ‘no’ either “. This means that France cannot give “a green light” to the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, but they also do not mean to refuse a European perspective to these countries. Even though the reports of the EU Commission recommend opening of accession talks with [North Macedonia](#) and [Albania](#), France is questioning the level of implementation of reforms in these countries and argues for the possibility to reverse the process of integration if necessary. This proposal is based on the argument that there have been backlashes in the countries, which already are a part of the accession process, namely Serbia and Montenegro and of course Turkey. France’s position is that the EU needs to reform its enlargement process first, before opening accession talks with new countries.

While this argument is legitimate, it fails to take into account the domestic political situation in the region. North Macedonia changed the country’s name, ending a three decades long dispute with Greece as well as a friendship treaty with Bulgaria after long-time historical controversies - for the sake of opening the accession talks with the EU. France’s refusal to acknowledge this huge effort led to the political crisis and snap elections in North Macedonia on October 20th, 2019.



An idea of a new arrangement that has been recently circulating in political and expert circles is to establish a sort of “pre-membership” for aspiring countries. How this could look needs further examination. Overall, it is envisaged that aspiring countries will participate in EU decision making processes as observers without voting rights on issues which are of concern for the region. For example, creation of “Mini-Schengen” within the Western Balkan Six would be one such project which could also lead the region towards creation of a common market.

However, it has become quite obvious that the assumptions about the enlargement-process differ greatly between French officials, the EU Commission, the EU Parliament and most of the other Member States. The young experts argue, that the opening of talks does not necessarily mean accession now but the beginning of a process. The enlargement process will take many years. Nevertheless, this is perceived rather differently in France.

France, in its arguments, is also neglecting realities on the ground. While Turkey has been a candidate country for EU accession already since 2005, its accession process – rightfully, if we look at the ongoing events within and around Turkey today – has been put on hold. Therefore, it is questionable if the accession process itself, as argued by France, is that problematic. Of course, it can and should be adapted. A discussion about the technical procedures should be opened, but it could also happen parallel to the opening of accession talks for new countries and does not require the postponement of this decision, especially at the expense of governments who have shown strong commitment and engagement in reform processes.

If we look at the specific contexts concerning the relation of France to the Western Balkans countries, it is obvious that the attitude of France towards future enlargement depends mainly on domestic politics. Criminal groups from Albania are operating in France, making it very difficult to “sell” Albania’s future enlargement to the French people. With internal socio-economic problems (such as ‘gilles de jeunes’ protests) and the trauma of recent terror attacks by religious extremists, the French society is not happy to hear about any “enlargement” whatsoever.



Yet, France is not only skeptical towards enlargement, but also reluctant to grant visa liberalization to Kosovo – one of the major claims for Kosovar people, who have a feeling of “being imprisoned”, as the only country among the Western Balkans Six who has the restriction on free movement with the EU. Due to high numbers of asylum applications from Georgia and Albania in France, the countries which

already profit from visa liberalization, visa liberalization for Kosovo is not opportune for the French government at this moment. The non-granting of visa liberalization, therefore, is a clear political decision.

It is one thing to argue for the possibility to reverse the enlargement process if countries turn in the direction of authoritarianism and corruption. It is another issue to punish Kosovo for asylum applications from Albania and Georgia. Or to punish North Macedonia for democratic backslides in Serbia and Montenegro for that matter. It seems to be the fate of many Western Balkans states that they are punished for the behavior or relations of their neighbors. At the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003 the member states of the EU gave a promise to the Western Balkans countries by stating:” The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.” To reject the opening of the accession talks also has widespread influence on the credibility of the European project and concerns all of Europe.

However, lack of cooperation and support towards one another among the Western Balkan countries does not make it easier for the EU to consider their separate cases. More regional cooperation among them would be useful. This would include a better cooperation between member states. Unfortunately, we observe deterioration in neighboring relations especially during electoral campaigns, which fuel nationalism and exclusion rather than cooperation.

Nevertheless, if the Western Balkans lose the European track it will backfire on the EU in terms of security, in terms of migration (“If the EU doesn’t come to the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans will come to the EU”) and in terms of representation of interests. With multilateralism at the core of the European project, individual Member States sometimes need to refrain from foreign policy decisions conditioned by domestic issues. The question should be asked about what the EU gains from stepping back from its promises compared to what it would gain, if it said “yes” to the start of the process. It is an easy cost-benefit analysis.



If the countries surrounded by EU member states fulfill what the EU has asked them to in order to open the accession talks, the EU must stick to its promises. If it fails to do so, the people in the region will increasingly become dissatisfied with the EU and nationalists will regain power over more moderate and liberal governments. But there is also an external component in this power-game. The vacuum, which the non-fulfilment of the European promise leaves, can easily be filled with Russian, Turkish and even Chinese interests. If the EU looks at the map of Europe it clearly can be seen why the European project is so successful. It relies on cooperation and integration because only the sum of the member states makes the EU a global player, which can defend its interest in the global world.

Close monitoring and implementation of democratic principles, rule of law and human rights, as well as the fight against corruption, must play a much more decisive role than before in the new European Commission's assessment of the Western Balkans' integration progress. These principles are at the core of the European project and lack of their implementation will backfire on the EU, considering the geographical proximity, emigration and close cooperation with the region that already exists.

Konrad Adenauer, a conservative politician and the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany said already in 1954: "The unity of Europe was a dream of a few. It became the hope of many. It is today a necessity for all."

