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Nationalism, EU Integration, and Stability in the Western Balkans

Introduction

Ethnic nationalism was a key factor in many of the tragedies the Balkan region experienced in the 1990s, and a tool frequently used by Balkan politicians in order to strengthen their power. While it seems that all of the Balkan countries have showed considerable commitment towards democratic and EU-oriented reforms, tensions between ethnic groups and nationalist rhetoric among political elites nevertheless remains a feature of politics in the region. This contribution aims to show that threats of nationalism and instability have recently been used by politicians in the Western Balkan countries towards international organizations in order to increase their leverage in membership negotiations. In particular, the threat of nationalism has been used in order to increase pressure upon the European Union to speed up the EU integration process, which is therefore the focus of this article. It seeks to explain the logic behind this rhetoric, and to present various views on the question of whether there may be links between the absence of visible progress towards EU integration and increased tensions between ethnic groups and threats to stability in the region. This is done by providing examples of official statements and media pronouncements and seeking explanations for them in studies of nationalism and EU integration. The contribution also poses the question of how the EU's transformative power in the region can be sustained.

Nationalism in the Western Balkans since the 1990s

After the 1990s, when politics promoting nationalism and unity based on ethnicity culminated in a series of wars and armed conflicts, the Western Balkans countries have faced the task of creating civic national identities based on international norms of democracy, human rights, and free markets. All of the countries in the region have chosen the path of creating such identities within the political and economic frameworks provided by international organizations including the EU, the OSCE, NATO, and the UN.

International organizations have identified ethnic-related tensions and aggressive nationalism as threats to democracy and international security, and therefore carry out activities with a view to addressing emerging conflicts, as well as strengthening the capacity of institutions and promoting adherence to democratic values as a means of preventing conflicts in the long term. For

instance, the OSCE plays a role in early warning and early action, notably through the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and also engages in capacity-building, the provision of training and legal aid, and institution-building. The EU demands improvements to minority rights and good-neighbourly relations, as outlined in its *acquis*, as well as economic and political reforms in enlargement countries as a precondition for securing the promises associated with EU integration and EU membership. As will be further elaborated on below, this has provided mainstream politicians with arguments for a political agenda shaped by the priorities of EU integration. Political elites have shown commitment towards undertaking reforms to meet the EU's conditions for membership, and express public support for the EU. Croatia became a member of the EU in 2013. The EU has opened accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro and granted candidate status to Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo remain potential candidates.

However, tensions between ethnic groups are still present in the region. In Bosnia and Kosovo, ethnic divisions have been institutionalized through a system of power-sharing between ethnic groups. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo, with its majority population of ethnic Albanians, as an independent state. Ethno-political violence sometimes resurfaces, notably in the northern parts of Kosovo and recently in FYROM. On 9 May 2015, ethnic Albanian fighters clashed with Macedonian police in the small town of Kumanovo, leaving 22 people dead and dozens wounded. In recent years, nationalist rhetoric has become increasingly prominent in the political debate. In some cases, it has focused on internal divisions between ethnic groups, while in others, ethno-politics has shaped foreign policy priorities and regional relations.

FYROM

In FYROM, politics is still divided along ethnic lines, with political parties representing the interests of their own ethnic groups. Since 2001, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) has regulated ethnic relations. Following this agreement, the country made progress in undertaking reforms and integrating its ethnic Albanian community. However, the rate of progress has significantly declined since 2008, when Greece blocked further NATO and EU integration, due to the dispute between the two countries over the name "Macedonia". Since then, relations between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in FYROM have deteriorated, nationalism is on the rise, and democratic reforms have stalled.¹ Albanian politicians have called for full implementation of the OFA, which is also a condition for EU membership. FYROM's Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's nation-building policies have been criticized for

1 Cf. Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *The Unfulfilled Promise: Completing the Balkan Enlargement*, May 2014.

privileging Macedonians at the expense of ethnic minorities.² A recent wire-tapping scandal revealed corruption and criminality as well as anti-Albanian sentiments among politicians. After the incident in Kumanovo, conspiracy theories emerged alleging that the incident was staged by the government to draw attention from the wire-tapping scandals and towards ethno-politics.³

Albania

Rather than being concerned with ethnic divisions at home, Albanian politicians have been vocal advocates of the interests of ethnic Albanians abroad. Since 2012, nationalist rhetoric has been increasingly present in Albanian politics.⁴ On a number of occasions, former prime minister Sali Berisha has made references to the unity of ethnic Albanians in the region.⁵ Two nationalist parties appeared on the political scene – the Red and Black Alliance, advocating unification of ethnic Albanians, and the Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity, which supports the interests of the Cham Albanians (who lived in Greece until the end of the Second World War), as well as other ethnic Albanian groups. While still used by some parties during the election campaign, this rhetoric diminished in 2013, when the Socialist Party-led coalition under Prime Minister Edi Rama took office.⁶ However, Rama's government has emphasized Albania's strong ties with Kosovo on several occasions. In March 2015, the governments of Albania and Kosovo held a meeting in Tirana under the slogan "One land, one nation, one dream". Images illustrating the merging of the Albanian and the Kosovo flags were displayed during the meeting. The two governments signed eleven agreements on co-

2 Cf. Kester Eddy, Macedonia: Recreating history through Skopje 2014 urban renewal project, in: *Financial Times*, 12 September 2015, at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/646c0e0c-13bd-11e3-9289-00144feabdc0.html>; Simonida Kacarska, The EU in Macedonian Party Politics – consolidating and dividing, in: Corina Stratulat (ed.), *EU integration and Party Politics in the Balkans*, EPC Issue Paper 77, European Policy Centre, 2014.

3 Cf. International Crisis Group, *Macedonia: Defusing the Bombs*, Crisis Group Europe Briefing 75, Skopje/Brussels, 9 July 2015.

4 Cf. Alba Çela/Joana Kosho, *The State of Albanian Democracy at the eve of 2013 General elections*, Tirana 2013, at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/10055.pdf>; Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2014, Albania*, at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2014/albania>.

5 Cf. Dušan Reljić, *The "Albanian Question" after the Turn in Tirana*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, 23 July 2013, at: <http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/point-of-view/the-albanian-question-after-the-turn-in-tirana.html>; Benet Koleka, *Albanian leaders fan flames of nationalism, unnerving West*, Reuters, 16 April 2013, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/16/us-albania-election-nationalism-idUSBRE93F0WJ20130416>.

6 Cf. Freedom House, cited above (Note 4).

operation in areas such as security, border control, and education, although these agreements were arguably more symbolic than substantial.⁷

The concept of “Greater Albania”, the idea of a single country uniting all Albanians in the region, enjoys public support among a substantial part of the population. In a survey carried out in 2013, 55 per cent of respondents answered that they would vote for Albanian unification with Kosovo in a referendum.⁸ It became a source of heated conflict in October 2014, when a drone with the symbol for “Greater Albania” was flown during a football match between Albania and Serbia. The day after the match, a number of small Albanian businesses in northern Serbia were attacked, and the Albanian embassy in Podgorica was vandalized.⁹

The Threat of Nationalism in Negotiations with International Organizations

On several occasions, the threats of nationalism, increased tensions, and instability have been used as arguments in the Western Balkan countries’ negotiations with international organizations. So far, this has been restricted to messages directed towards the EU and NATO regarding their potential membership of these organisations. Politicians and political analysts have warned that if the pace of EU integration is not increased, this may contribute to a revival of nationalist sentiments in the region, radicalization and, consequently, the resurfacing of ethnic conflicts.¹⁰ For instance, politicians have argued that ethnic tensions and stalled democratization process in FYROM are a result of the EU’s “enlargement fatigue” and consequent passivity with respect to the country’s reform process. During the Vienna Economic Forum in May 2015, most of the six Western Balkan prime ministers made similar arguments. Montenegro’s Prime Minister Milo Đukanović, underlined the importance of Euro-Atlantic integration for ensuring stability in the region. Speaking about the incident in Kumanovo and the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Đukanović stressed the need for increased assistance from the international

7 Cf. Gjergj Erebara, Albania’s Nationalist Show: All Bark and no Bite, in: *Balkan Insight*, 25 March 2015, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/albania-s-nationalist-show-all-bark-and-no-bite>.

8 Cf. Çela/Kosho, cited above (Note 4), p. 41

9 Cf. Euronews, 17 October 2014, *Albania-Serbia Nationalist Tensions Rise*, at: <http://www.euronews.com/2014/10/17/albania-serbia-nationalist-tensions-rise>.

10 See, for instance, Neil Buckley, Membership: Currency crisis exacerbates ‘enlargement fatigue’, in: *Financial Times*, 8 May 2012, at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c727f85c-92c8-11e1-b6e2-00144feab49a.html>; Dušan Reljić, cited above (Note 5); Otto Schily, *If the EU reneges on Balkan enlargement it’s at its own peril*, *Europe’s World*, 1 October 2009, at: <http://europesworld.org/2009/10/01/if-the-cu-reneges-on-balkan-enlargement-its-at-its-own-peril>.

community to prevent tensions from rising further and other negative consequences.¹¹

Albanian Prime Minister Rama has been one of the most vocal advocates of accelerating EU integration to prevent the growth of nationalism. In April 2015, he publicly stated in a televised interview that “the unification of Albanians of Albania and Kosovo [...] is inevitable and unquestionable”.¹² According to Rama, this unification can happen in two ways: “in the context of the EU as a natural process and understood by all” or “as a reaction to a European blindness or laziness”,¹³ potentially leading Albania and Kosovo to “unite in a classical way”.¹⁴ Commenting on Rama’s statement, Kosovo’s deputy prime minister, Hashim Thaçi, said that such a “traditional unification” could become reality in the future as a result of Kosovo’s isolation from the EU, and urged for faster NATO and EU integration.¹⁵

Few attempts have been made to carry out in-depth analysis of these statements, which were made only recently. However, a handful of think-tanks and media outlets consider Rama’s April statement to have been a means of pressuring the EU to speed up accession negotiations.¹⁶ This is perhaps even more plausible considering the EU’s reaction, which stressed that the Western Balkan countries are advancing towards the EU at their own pace; that their commitment to EU principles includes regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations; and that such statements are unacceptable.¹⁷ Rama’s statement was interpreted by Serbia as a provocation, and the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded that it the comment was detrimental to bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia as well as to regional stability.¹⁸ While Rama later clarified that his statement was his personal opinion

11 Cf. Government of Montenegro, *Tirana: Prime Minister Milo Đukanović attends 2015 Vienna Business Forum*, 28 May 2015, at: <http://www.gov.me/en/News/149444/Tirana-Prime-Minister-Milo-jukanovic-attends-2015-Vienna-Business-Forum.html>.

12 Cited in: Fatos Bytyci/Matt Robinson, *Albania and Kosovo to unite, inside EU or not – Albanian PM*, Reuters, 7 April 2015, at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-albania-kosovo-unification-idUKKBN0MY19320150407>.

13 Cited in: *ibid.*

14 Cited in: Maja Poznatov, “*Greater Albania*” statement awakens old ghosts in Balkans, EurActive, 10 April 2015, at: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/enlargement/greater-albania-statement-awakens-old-ghosts-balkans-313685>.

15 Cf. *ibid.*

16 Cf. Adelina Marini, *Western Balkans Are Beginning To Put New Conditions to EU*, euinside, 9 April 2015, at: <http://www.euinside.eu/en/news/albania-kosovo-serbia-tensions>; Fedja Pavlovic, *The greater, broken Albania*, euobserver, 17 April 2015, at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/128340>; Stratfor Global Intelligence, *Albania and Serbia Are at Odds Again*, 10 April 2015, at: <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/albania-and-serbia-are-odds-again>.

17 Cf. Top Channel, *BE: E ardhmja e Ballkanit, në Evropë*, 8 May 2015, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXVcbFIHBK8>.

18 Cf. Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Reaction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the statement of the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama*, 9 April 2015, at: <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/14046-reaction-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-regarding-the-statement-of-the-prime-minister-of-albania-edi-rama>.

and had not been intended as a provocation, it did, at the same time, serve to further underline Albanian support for Kosovo, and tensions between Albania and Serbia.

Parallels can be seen in threats made by accession countries to withhold co-operation on neighbouring countries' membership of international organizations unless co-ethnics abroad receive more favourable treatment. After the incident in Kumanovo, Rama stated that it would be impossible for FYROM to become a member of NATO without ensuring implementation of the Ohrid agreement, and that this had also been agreed among all NATO member states during the Wales summit.¹⁹ At the same time, Albania has been a vocal supporter of Kosovo's efforts to secure membership of NATO and EU, while Serbia has expressed strong opposition to Kosovo's attempts to join the OSCE, arguing that it would impede the work of the OSCE in Kosovo and the region, and shift the Organization's focus back onto the Serbia-Kosovo issue.²⁰ This further serves to underline the importance of membership of international organizations in the political priorities of all of the Western Balkan countries.

The Logic behind Nationalism versus Westernization and EU Integration

In order to better understand the logic behind the warnings expressed by Western Balkan politicians outlined above, it may be useful, first, to look into underlying factors behind the presence of nationalism in societies, and the use of nationalism as a tool to establish or maintain political or social power. Second, this can be complemented by explanations of why political elites and citizens support EU integration and the establishment of a civic political culture, and a relationship between the state and its citizens based on civic rather than ethnic factors.

According to David Brown, ethnocultural nationalism arises as a response to a lack of state legitimacy.²¹ As a consequence of perceived social injustice and lack of trust in national authorities, adherence to the ethnic group may be reinforced. Similarly, George Schöpflin argues that an excessive focus on ethnicity may result from weak state capacity and civil society.²² Assuming that ruling elites aim to preserve their domestic power base,

19 Cf. Government of Albania, Prime Minister's Office, *The word "terrorism" cannot be tolerated in relation to the tragedy of Kumanovo*, 20 May 2015, at: <http://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/speeches/the-word-quot-terrorism-quot-cannot-be-tolerated-in-relation-to-the-tragedy-of-kumanovo>.

20 Cf. International Radio Serbia, *Dačić: Albania must respect OSCE principles instead of worrying about Kosovo*, 19 February 2015, at: <http://voiceofserbia.org/content/dačić-albania-must-respect-osce-principles-instead-worrying-about-kosovo>.

21 Cf. David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism – Civic, Ethnocultural & Multicultural Politics*, London 2000, pp.43-44.

22 Cf. George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, London 2000, pp.42-46

an effective means to do so is to appeal to the interests of the members of a group, provided that it also coincides with their own power interests. Politicians might thus be more prone to the use of nationalist rhetoric, symbolism, and myths if they believe that this can help them to gain support and maintain power. They may also seek to shift the focus of the political debate from areas in which ruling elites might have vested interests, such as the structures of economic and political power, to appeals to nationalist sentiments based upon a shared group identity.²³

The presence of international organizations in the Western Balkans during the 2000s has contributed to the shift in popular support towards moderate and pro-Western political parties at the centre of the political spectrum, rather than rent-seeking politicians and nationalist parties. International organizations have been able to exercise leverage by pointing to the benefits of reforms, including enhanced security and improved economic conditions. The EU's leverage has been particularly effective, as it has provided politicians with convincing arguments they can make to their electorates in favour of EU membership, including improvements in living standards (economic performance, standards of service, and rights protection) and the ability to work and travel in other countries.²⁴

As a result, the benefits of gaining public support by the use of nationalist political rhetoric have been offset. The political will to maintain a commitment to reforms proposed by international organizations and to the EU integration process thus partly arises as a result of public support for the EU. Beyond pointing to advantages of EU membership, politicians have also gained popular support by making concrete changes and reforms in areas ranging from infrastructure to strengthening institutions and the market economy. In addition, reforms have made political and economic systems more efficient, transparent, and merit-based, making it increasingly difficult for politicians to further rent-seeking or nepotistic agendas. The EU has also functioned as a guarantor of the legitimacy of domestic politicians. By requesting that reforms are undertaken in line with the rules and principles of the EU, it has signalled to the public that politicians are held accountable by international organizations. This has served to mitigate the low public faith in national politicians in the Western Balkan countries.

23 Cf. V.P. Gagnon, Jr., Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia, in: *International Security* 3/1994-95, pp.130-166.

24 Milada Anna Vachudova, The Leverage of International Institutions on Democratizing States: Eastern Europe and the European Union, EUI Working Papers, San Domenico (FI) 2001, p. 5

The Links between a Slow-down in the EU Integration Process and Nationalism

Politicians in the Western Balkans have tended to argue that if the prospect of further benefits from EU integration in the near future is lost, public support for the EU will drop as a consequence. This can be seen in action, for instance, with regard to the visa-free regime with Kosovo. Kosovo has argued that the demands outlined in the framework of the visa liberalization dialogue with the EU have already been met.²⁵ In the interview in which Rama made reference to unification between Albania and Kosovo, he also stated that “it was a disgrace for the EU that the visa liberalization process had not been completed for Kosovo citizens”.²⁶

Another claim has been that the absence of the EU as a driving force may contribute to stalling economic and political reforms, continued inefficiencies and opportunities for system abuses, lack of foreign investments, and continued low standards of living in comparison to EU member states. Some have argued that the current political crisis and halt in the reform process in FYROM has been exacerbated by the EU’s passivity in the country.²⁷ Given the logic of the choice between pursuing a nationalist and a Western or EU-oriented agenda, as outlined above, in the longer term, such factors could in theory lead the population to become increasingly susceptible to the arguments of nationalist politicians, while tempting politicians to appeal to their electorates’ discontent through populist and nationalist agendas.

The relationship between the EU and candidate countries is asymmetrical. All other things being equal, the benefits of joining the EU are larger for the accession countries than for the existing EU member states.²⁸ This makes the terms set by the EU practically non-negotiable by the accession countries. To move forward in the EU integration process, they must be willing to accept the EU’s changing demands, as well as long transition periods. They must also be willing to undertake reforms that might in some cases be difficult or even unpopular among certain groups. One such example is Albania’s reform of its justice system. The current system is affected by politicization, limited accountability, insufficient resources, backlogs, and corruption,²⁹

25 Cf. Republic of Kosovo, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Kosovo delegation is seeking the support from EP regarding visa liberalization*, Brussels, 18 November 2015, at: <http://www.mfa-ks.net/?page=2,217,2945>.

26 Poznatov, cited above (Note 14).

27 See, for instance, Naser Pajaziti, *Parties in FYROM: The agreement for the solution of the crisis is still undefined*, Independent Balkan News Agency, 4 June 2015, at: <http://www.balkaneu.com/parties-fyrom-agreement-solution-crisis-undefined/#sthash.rGsfh6kZ.dpuf>.

28 Cf. Andrew Moravcsik/Milada Anna Vachudova, National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 1/2003, pp. 42-57, here: p. 46.

29 Cf. European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document, Albania, 2014 Progress Report*, SWD(2014) 304 final, Brussels, 8 October 2014, Accompanying the document: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the

which provides space for abuse. The prospects of negative consequences for those with vested interests in the system may lead to reluctance to accept changes, which could considerably delay further formal steps in the EU integration process.

While the economic benefits of integration of the Western Balkans in the EU for existing member states are small, the most important aim of the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy is to guarantee stability and peaceful development in the EU and its immediate neighbourhood.³⁰ Warning of a possible revival of nationalism and growing instability, politicians in the Western Balkans have aimed to change the dynamics of their countries' relationships with the EU. They have stressed the potential security risks if the EU integration process is not sped up, while also making direct links to recent clashes between ethnic groups and nationalist rhetoric among politicians.

A prerequisite for the EU to be able to exercise leverage through its enlargement policy is that membership prospects are credible, i.e. that a candidate will be accepted once the accession criteria have been fulfilled.³¹ The threats directed towards the EU have referred to its supposed "enlargement fatigue" in the face of economic crisis and rising support for political parties with nationalist and populist and anti-immigration discourses. Electorates in EU member states have become less supportive of enlargement, with 57 per cent of Europeans opposing further enlargement in 2013, as compared to 37 per cent in favour.³² As a result, EU member states are increasingly playing a role in setting out the conditions for progress in the EU integration process, which arguably leads to changing demands and makes the process less predictable. Upon his appointment as President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker publically stated that no further enlargement will take place within the next five years.³³ While it is in any case unlikely that the Western Balkan countries would have joined the EU within this period would, this statement was interpreted by the accession countries as a political signal that the process is slowing down. Rama has on several occasions commented that the EU's enlargement fatigue will be met by a "patience fa-

European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2014-2015*, COM(2014) 700 final, p. 11.

- 30 Cf. European Commission, *Good to know about EU Enlargement*, Brussels, March 2009.
- 31 Cf. Sandra Lavenex/Frank Schimmelfenning, Relations with the Wider Europe, in: *The JCMS Annual Review of the European Union in 2007*, Special Issue, September 2008, pp. 145-164, here: p. 146.
- 32 Cf. European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 79 Spring 2013, Tables of Results, Public Opinion in the European Union, Fieldwork: May 2013*.
- 33 Cf. Jean-Claude Juncker, *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change*, Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014.

figure” on the part of the Western Balkan countries, and he has urged the EU to take action to avoid any negative consequences this might bring.³⁴

“Enlargement Fatigue” and the Risk of Renewed Ethnic Conflict in the Western Balkans

Should the warnings about potential security risks associated with a slow EU integration process be considered merely as a way to speed up accession negotiations? Or is there in fact reason to be concerned about fading prospects for democratization and EU integration in the Western Balkans? Public support and elite commitment to EU integration have been identified as key factors allowing for the effectiveness of the EU’s leverage through its enlargement policy. In the Western Balkans, visible progress in the EU integration process is still a way for the ruling parties to gain votes. Parties across the political spectrum in the Western Balkan countries still show commitment to the EU integration agenda. Support among citizens for EU membership is still high, at 92 per cent in Albania³⁵ and 80 per cent in FYROM.³⁶

At the same time, the remaining Western Balkan countries are unlikely to gain admission to the EU soon. After receiving candidate status in 2003, it took Croatia ten years to finally join the EU, and there are no indications that the process for the other countries will be any shorter. It is therefore even more important that the EU integration process remains predictable if countries are to remain committed to it. A degree of convergence between the expectations of accession countries and the EU on the countries’ progression towards the EU is necessary. Currently, such convergence seems to be lacking. In 2014, 53 per cent of Albanians believed that their country was ready to become a member of the EU, an increase of 23 per cent on the previous year.³⁷ In April 2015, Rama stated that the country was ready to open membership negotiations,³⁸ while the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations has said that negotiations will not open this year.³⁹ FYROM’s President Gjorge Ivanov has stressed the need to set a

34 Cf. Deutsche Welle, *Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama: “The past cannot hold us back”*, 22 October 2015, at: <http://www.dw.com/en/albanias-prime-minister-edi-rama-the-past-cannot-hold-us-back/a-18012998>.

35 Cf. Open Society Foundation for Albania, SOROS, *National survey on perceptions & expectations towards a potential EU membership of Albania*, Tirana 2014, p. 74.

36 Cf. Institute for Democracy Societas Civile-Skopje/Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Survey on “Macedonia’s EU Integration”*, 19 September 2014, at: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_38833-1522-2-30.pdf?140919082453.

37 Cf. Open Society Foundation for Albania, cited above, (Note 35), p.74.

38 Cf. Independent Balkan News Agency, *Albania is ready to start negotiations with the EU, says PM Rama*, 22 April 2015, at: <http://www.balkan.eu.com/albania-ready-start-negotiations-eu-pm-rama>.

39 Cf. Wolfgang Tucek, EU-Kommissar Hahn: “Ohne Rechtsstaat keine Investoren” [EU Commissioner Hahn: “No Investors without the Rule of Law”], in: *Wirtschaftsblatt*,

date for the start of EU accession negotiations (and to discuss the naming dispute as a “chapter” in these negotiations), and for NATO to acknowledge that Greece’s veto to FYROM’s application for NATO membership violated an agreement from 1995.⁴⁰

Remaining Ethnic Tensions

As we have seen, there are still tensions between ethnic groups within states, as well across borders of the countries in the region. Ethnic groups still reach out to defend kin groups across state borders. Therefore, ethnic polarization at home can still have wider impacts on relations in the region, and local conflicts may easily escalate into regional concerns. If reforms stagnate in one country, this may also affect regional stability. If prospects of EU membership fade, could this contribute to reinforcing ethnic tensions? The statements by Rama indicate that politicians might be willing to try other tactics to increase pressure upon the EU to take further steps to move forward the EU integration process, or alternatively, look for arguments that will gain them votes elsewhere. Arguably, the latter tactic was used by then Albanian prime minister Sali Berisha in 2012. In FYROM, politicians still enjoy support for their ethnic agendas, and the slow-down in domestic reforms has increased their propensity to further these agendas to gain support. If political elites no longer see incentives to pursue ethnic reconciliation, minority rights protection, and democratization, these processes are likely to stagnate. In a region where unemployment is high, where service delivery is inefficient, and where trust in state institutions is low, people are more responsive to radical solutions to their situation, and nationalist or populist arguments may fall on fertile ground.

Developments of this kind could be observed in Turkey in the mid-2000s. Though accession negotiations were launched in 2005, EU member states expressed concerns about accepting Turkey as a full member of the Union, and negotiations also stalled over the Cyprus issue. As a result, politicians chose to pursue a nationalist agenda rather than social and economic reforms driven by the EU integration process, which had previously been a source of electoral support.⁴¹ However, given the strong support for EU integration among politicians and electorates in the Western Balkan countries, such a scenario may still appear unlikely for now at least.

Reforms already undertaken may also serve to prevent some of the backsliding towards nationalist or partisan politics, at least in the short term.

22 July 2015, at: http://wirtschaftsblatt.at/home/nachrichten/europa_cee/4781941/EUKommissar-Hahn_Ohne-Rechtsstaat-keine-Investoren.

40 Republika English, *Macedonia is facing today a new turning point*, 2 August, 2015, at: <http://english.republika.mk/president-ivanov-macedonia-is-facing-today-new-turning-point>.

41 Cf. Ruairi Patterson, *Rising Nationalism and the EU accession process*, in: *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 1/2008, pp. 131-138.

Once constitutions have been changed, policy-making and economic procedures made more efficient and transparent, and civil societies made increasingly aware of their democratic and human rights, this process cannot easily be reversed. There are also indications of a contrary trend in the way Western Balkan countries are responding to the problems supposedly caused by “enlargement fatigue”. During the Vienna Economic Forum in May 2015, the Western Balkan leaders, rather than focusing primarily on regional conflicts, underlined the importance of regional co-operation in moving forward in the EU integration process. They also went further by saying that they would cooperate on their priority of improving connectivity in the region, whether these efforts were supported by the EU or not.⁴² While the remarks made by Western Balkan politicians could be seen as warning signs that the EU is losing its grip on the region, they also suggest a willingness to set aside old grievances for pragmatic purposes. In this case, the threat of “enlargement fatigue” served to unite the Western Balkan leaders in pursuit of a common goal rather than creating divisions.

Conclusion

Western Balkan politicians have warned that unless EU integration processes in the countries of the region speed up, there is a risk of ethnic tensions resurfacing and potentially causing the outbreak of conflicts. As this contribution has shown, these warnings have been used to increase pressure on the EU, as the benefits of EU integration are clear to politicians as well as the general public in the Western Balkan countries.

However, it may well be worth reflecting upon the potential consequences of diminishing international influence in the region. Ethnic tensions are still present, and clashes between ethnic groups occasionally lead to violence. The use of nationalist and populist rhetoric may still be used as a way to mobilize political support if politicians see benefits in doing so. The EU and other international organizations have provided important tools for mediation among different groups, for maintaining stable regional relations, and for enhancing the protection of minority rights. In the long run, they are contributing to building institutions that can channel tensions between groups in society through fair and democratic processes.

Until such institutions are fully in place, the benefits of EU integration must remain clear to the public. Reforms must have clear results, including in the short term, and these need to be communicated to citizens. Ultimately, it is up to the leaders of the Western Balkan countries to deliver on agreed reforms. The EU and other international actors, for their part, must be sure to

42 Cf. Gjergj Erebara, *Balkan Feuds Re-Surface at Leaders’ Tirana Summit*, in: *Balkan Insight*, 28 May 2015, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/regional-cooperation-emphasized-while-old-and-new-disputes-lingers-in-the-balkans>.

exert pressure on politicians not to delay reforms that may not be in line with some of their interests, even if they have a commitment to Western-oriented reforms and EU membership in general. Ethnic violence, racism, and incitement of hatred must be strongly condemned. In general, the EU should maintain and enhance its political presence in the region and devote sufficient resources to enlargement.

As regards EU integration, the speed at which accession countries progress towards EU membership depends on their merit, i.e. on the fulfilment of the criteria set out by the Commission. Disagreements between a candidate country and the EU about the country's progress in the integration process should be addressed. The EU integration process should remain predictable to candidate countries, with clear links between compliance with the EU's criteria and rewards. Yet as things stand, when accession countries have fulfilled their agreed priority commitments, they can only take further steps in the integration process if they also receive the political support of EU member states. To enhance this support, the benefits of EU enlargement, including its contribution towards stability in the Western Balkans, must also be made clear to the electorates of EU member states.

The European Union and its member states should bear in mind the vital role of the EU in contributing to stability in the Western Balkans, and the Union should have a clear strategy on how it intends to maintain its transformative power in the region.