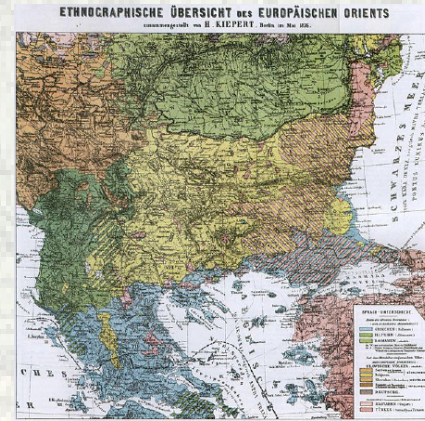


# Need a Push?

## Restoring EU Influence in the Balkans



The Balkans have historically been divided.

EU Credibility is on the line | Cassidy Henry

The credibility of the European Union (EU) is declining in the Western Balkans. Candidate states in the region see the date for accession negotiations fading further into the future; they now doubt whether they will ever join the EU. If this hope is dashed, these countries could easily relapse into nationalistic rhetoric and action against other states, as happened after the breakup of Yugoslavia or, more recently, with Kosovo. Respected international relations scholars, Tanja Borzel and Thomas Risse, pointed out in 2011 that the cause of this decline varies from enlargement fatigue within the EU to the sheer number of standards required of acceding states. Many current EU members are beginning to question if the Balkans (or any other country) should be admitted to the union, and they do so publicly.

Currently, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)<sup>1</sup>, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia wait at various stages of accession. These countries have been working towards EU membership since 1995. The EU Commission on Enlargement has recommended since 2009 that FYROM start negotiations to join the organization. Albania received a recommendation from the Commission to start accession negotiations in October 2013. The other candidate states have not yet received permission to begin these negotiations; rather, they are still heavily criticized for not meeting EU accession standards.

Simon Schunz, a researcher at the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies defines influence as “the modification of one or several actors’ behavior, beliefs or preferences by acts of another actor exerted for the purpose of reaching the later actor’s aims.” In the case of the Western Balkans, the EU’s influence is mostly imposed upon the states prior to EU membership through conditionality. Applicant states must meet

stringent requirements —conditions— to join the the EU. That conditionality is both a positive and a negative. If the countries complete it all, they get to join the EU; if they fail to complete even one part, they can not join the EU.

Implementation of the conditions imposed by the EU is based on individual states’ perceptions towards the EU. The EU’s ability to modify their behavior, the hallmark of influence, will be limited in states choosing not to pursue EU membership. Furthermore, when membership is not a possibility, the EU loses its ability to press politicians to choose reform. Politicians facing tough elections at home may choose not to introduce necessary but politically difficult reforms in order to keep their positions. On the other hand, they also want to claim responsibility for their country joining the EU. The Western Balkan states’ modification of internal domestic structures due to the conditions of EU accession is a prime example of EU influence.

In order to join the EU, states must fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria and enlargement principles, as well as adopt all prior EU legislation. The overarching themes of the Copenhagen Criteria are democracy, rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities and a competitive market economy. Gergana Noutcheva, an Assistant Professor at Maastricht University, declared in 2011 that conditionality of EU membership is “not only [focused] on achieving high standards of democratic and economic governance (the Copenhagen Criteria), but also on the consolidation of statehood in the [Western Balkans], both external (state borders) and internal (autonomous governance).” The states that have joined the EU since the fall of the Soviet Union reformed their laws to align with those of the EU. In the Western Balkans, the focus of the EU has been on domestic liberalization and interstate

cooperation, such as in Kosovo and Serbia.

Many of these required changes involve complex domestic bargaining and strict rules that result only in long-term benefit. Some politicians see the admittance to the EU as the whole purpose of changing the rules; while the changes implement better governance in the present, they do not gain immediate admittance to the EU. Many changes are considered extremely radical policy changes for these former communist states. The stringent conditionality imposed upon the Western Balkans adds to already stressed systems, in some cases overwhelming them. Other theorists have suggested that membership prospects need to be credible in order directly to influence institutional change and overcome domestic opposition.

Some argue that any criticism from Southeast Europe represents mounting dissatisfaction in the time lapse between application and joining the EU, rather than a sign of waning commitment. Alarming, the increasing domestic skepticism regarding EU accession could prove catastrophic for both the EU and the region. The Western Balkans have been the prominent example of successful EU influence for some time. If each country fails to meet the specified targets and still gains entry to the EU, the region has the potential to discredit the entire logic of conditionality. Some argue the cases of Bulgaria and Romania illustrate this potential. If such “conditionality as policy change fails,” the EU will face larger problems with the legitimacy of their accession standards.

The most recent instance of EU enlargement occurred earlier this year, with the admission of Croatia. Previously, there had been a five-year gap since the last enlargement. Since the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the Western Balkans are now completely surrounded by the EU, further pressuring them eventually to join the community or risk suffering economic damage. These countries already desire to be admitted to the EU, as shown by 4 of the 6 submitting applications amid the accession of Croatia and Slovenia.

Yet domestic opinion regarding accession is souring. Citizens of the candidate states question whether their countries will ever join the EU. Many doubt the necessary changes to their domestic law are worthwhile. For FYROM, the biggest impediment to its accession is a quarrel with Greece over the right to the name “Macedonia.” However, resolving the issue

would require leaders to spend political capital on a subject on which they disagree with their voters. As FYROM feels the effects of the global economic crisis, its citizens are beginning to lessen the capital politicians would need to expand. Macedonians’ greater desire for economic relief than for political grandstanding spurred negotiations with Greece toward the beginning of a high-level dialogue over the past year.

The freefall in the accession process’s credibility has only recently begun to reverse. Today, we see the emergence of high-level accession dialogues (HLAD) injecting new dynamism into the accession process, thereby strengthening confidence and boosting accession prospects of the candidate states.



While they watch their neighbors, many countries in the Western Balkans must await their chance to join the EU and the opportunities that could bring.

Creating a new way of doing business implies that the old way was no longer working. The Commission recognized its credibility had declined in the region and the HLAD were a direct response to restore it. Conversely, the HLAD could be a novel and dynamic approach to the stagnant regional integration process, as they could reflect a tacit acknowledgment of the lack of progress regarding integration. Prior to 2012, the European Commission simply continued its recommendation that FYROM begin accession negotiations, despite awareness that Greece would veto the proposal. The HLAD began in 2012, and FYROM began to take concrete steps to implement reforms and solve the dispute with Greece. It was this “proof” of the EU’s dedication to the eventual accession of FYROM that persuaded FY-

ROM to modify their behavior and pursue the policy changes that they had been delaying. Through concrete steps, Europe showed its ability to restore declining influence over prospective member states.

Little scholarship exists on the influence of EU conditionality and its implementation in candidate countries. This is an area of study the expansion of which may provide valuable future insight. Use of Schunz’s paradigm for assessment influence informs this research providing a valuable baseline delineating what influence is. Current evidence indicates that EU influence is decline in the Western Balkans. Unless they begin to implement more strategies like the HLAD, EU influence could decrease past a critical point. If that point is passed, the EU’s ability to stabilize the region could be endangered, as well as the reputation of the EU itself. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> The use of “Kosovo” or “FYROM” reflect the usage of the EU and not the personal views of the author.