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**The Forgotten Countries of the Western Balkans – Still on the
Agenda of the European Union?**

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Abstract:

This paper is focused on the four candidate countries from the Western Balkans - Serbia, Montenegro, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Albania and their current relations with the European Union (EU). The aim of the work is to find out whether those countries will become members of the Union or they are already left behind due to the current priorities of the EU. The authors try to distinguish some of the reasons why the dialogue should be kept more alive. To achieve this goal, the paper takes into account the official relations between the two sides, the political situation in each candidate country and the consequences of the shifted agenda.

Content:

1. Introduction.....	p.3
2. Official position of the EU toward the Western Balkans.....	p.3
3. Current political situation in the candidate states.....	p.5
4. Reasons for the Western Balkans and the EU to foster their cooperation.....	p.10
5. Final Conclusions.....	p.12
6. Bibliography.....	p.14

1. Introduction:

For decades the debate about deepening the European integration or possible upcoming enlargements of the European Union (EU) had been leading the discussions for the direction of the development of the Union. Today the topic about the future of Europe again is very live due to the political and economical circumstances but with a shifted focus. Europe is facing the first triggering of Article 50, growing national and separatist movements and continuous economic gap between the different Member States and regions, among other external and internal problems. With this complex situation the Union is concentrated on its internal issues and the question about future enlargement seems to be left behind.

In the present paper we are going to focus on the official candidate countries for membership in the EU, which are from the Western Balkans - Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Serbia and Montenegro have already closed a few negotiation chapters (two out of thirty five), while Albania and FYROM have the status of candidate countries, but have not started membership negotiations yet. The only other country with the same status is Turkey. However, we are not going to include this country in our paper, because we believe it is a separate case with its own specific features.

We aim to find out whether the European perspective is still an option for those countries and how the shifted focus reflects on the candidate states. We are discussing the current relations between the EU and the said counties and the political situation in each one. We try to derive the factors that should be taken into account by both sides, regarding the future perspective of Serbia, Montenegro, FYROM and Albania being member states. The outcome of our position paper will be presented in the conclusions.

2. Official position of the EU towards the Western Balkans:

One of the first statements made by Jean Claude Juncker when he took office as President of the European Commission was that the EU has no plans to expand during his mandate. As one of his foreign policy objectives, the President announced “A pause for enlargement”:

“When it comes to enlargement, this has been a historic success. However, Europe now needs to digest the addition of 13 Member States in the past 10 years. Our citizens need a pause from enlargement so we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is

why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will of course continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years. As regards Turkey, the country is clearly far away from EU membership. A government that blocks twitter is certainly not ready for accession."¹

This political orientation regarding the enlargement has been confirmed recently in the White paper on the Future of Europe, published by the European Commission in the beginning of March 2017. The document is discussing possible future scenarios for the development of the Union. They vary from conserving the current status quo, to deepening the European integration either through the joint work of all Member States or through the so-called enhanced cooperation of different groups of countries. However, none of the five proposed scenarios is taking into account a possible future enlargement. Furthermore, the paper puts an emphasis on the EU consisting of 27 Member States. On the one hand, the use of the number 27 is supposed to highlight that the United Kingdom is no longer considered a Member State.² On the other hand, however, it is a clear sign that before 2025 no enlargement is considered forthcoming.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the dialogue that has been conducted between the EU and the candidate countries (even with those who haven't started opening negotiation chapters) is still maintained by both sides. Even though the prospects of membership have been distanced in time, the EU distinguishes the building of long-term stability in the region as a crucial element for their development. In order to secure the economic growth and to increase the regional cooperation, the so-called "Berlin process" started in 2014 and will continue until 2018. Six countries from the region are taking part in it - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. The process consists of annual high-level meetings between the six governments and various Member State representatives. The purpose of this process is to reaffirm the region's EU perspective by improving cooperation and economic stability within it.³

The Berlin process is supported by both the EU and the countries from the Western Balkans, as it has brought a positive impulse for regional cooperation through projects with economic

¹ The official website of the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, priorities: www.juncker.epp.eu

² By the time of the publishing of the White paper Article 50 from the Treaty on European Union (TEU) was not triggered yet by the United Kingdom.

³ The Western Balkans' Berlin process: A new impulse for regional cooperation, www.europarl.europa.eu

and social value. It was initiated in order to keep the advancement in EU integration, having in mind the widespread nationalist eurosceptic movements and the suspension of the enlargement process, announced by the EC President. However, despite the ongoing political dialogue between the candidate countries and the EU, the Western Balkans are lacking political commitment to the European goal. This observation was stated by the Commissioner for EU Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn at the Western Balkans Six Leaders' Summit in March 2017. He put an emphasis on how important it is for the political leaders to be ambitiously engaged in the whole process of reforms if they want their countries to have some visible progress.⁴

3. Current political situation in the candidate countries:

The current political situation in the candidate countries is very complex. Serbia and FYROM are facing ongoing mass protests due to rather different, but political reasons. Albania is in the middle of a political crisis, as well. The only beam of light is coming from Montenegro - the country's accession to NATO is within easy reach and the country is probably the one having highest chances of joining the EU first. By analysing the political situation in each country we aim to find out where the European goal is situated in this context.

- **Serbia:**

In 2009 Serbia formally applied for a membership in the European Union and in 2012 was granted a candidate status. The accession negotiations between the EU and Serbia started in 2014 and so far two chapters have been closed.⁵ However, there are three factors which demonstrate that Serbia might have lost the interest and motivation to working devotedly for joining the Union sooner than later.

Firstly, the number of those opposing the EU membership in Serbia is higher than those that favour it - in 2016 21% of the Serbian citizens were in favour, 40% were against and 31% could not decide whether it is a good or a bad thing.⁶ Compared to the past, the percentage of

⁴ Speech by Johannes Hahn at the Western Balkans Six Leaders' Summit, Sarajevo, 16 March 2017, www.ec.europa.eu

⁵ European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Serbia, www.ec.europa.eu

⁶ Balkan Barometer 2016: Public Opinion Survey, Regional Cooperation Council

citizens, believing that EU accession would be “a good thing”, was 36 percent in 2011⁷, which demonstrates that citizens’ support for the EU has declined through the years. Secondly, this trend reflected on the campaign for the presidential elections in Serbia in the beginning of April 2017 as none of the presidential candidates included EU membership in their campaign pledges.⁸ On 2nd of April the current prime minister Aleksandar Vucic won these elections by a majority of 55,6% of the votes.⁹ The results of the elections were followed by mass protests against his victory, mainly by students participants, who demand his resignation as they believe that the elections have been manipulated by the president-elect and that votes were incorrectly assigned to him.¹⁰ Demonstrators are protesting under the slogan “Let’s overthrow the dictatorship”, as they are afraid that the president-elect will not respect the democratic principles, freedom of speech and that he will keep the status quo without implementing any meaningful reforms.¹¹

Thirdly, Serbia is maintaining very close relations with Russia. In December 2016 the government of Vucic agreed with Russia to be provided with six MiG-29 warplanes and also scout vehicles and tanks. Neither the reasons are clear, nor what would Serbia have to do in return.¹² But the close military cooperation with Russia is giving a sign to the EU that deepening the relations with the Union is not a top priority for Serbia right now and that there is some gap in the dialogue between them.

The combination of these three factors demonstrates that the European orientation of Serbia is unstable at this moment. The country has many internal issues to deal with, such as respect of the democratic principles, free media, fight with corruption, establishing the rule of law, etc.¹³

The European Union is the pillar of these values in Europe, but as the Union itself is facing difficulties to produce effective solutions to many of the current problems, the unattractiveness of the EU is likely to continue growing in the Balkan country. Therefore, the EU should undertake the necessary measures to attract the support of these Serbs who cannot decide whether the membership is a good or a bad thing, and thus to increase the support and public pressure for quality and irreversible reforms within the country. Reforms which should

⁷ Toshkov, D., Kortenska, E., Dimitrova, A., Fagan, A., Maxcap, The ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Europeans: Analyses of Public Opinion on EU Enlargement in Review, April 2014

⁸ Cvijc, S., EU the biggest loser in Serbia’s elections, 5 April 2017, www.politico.eu

⁹ Data from the official website of the Republic Electoral Commission of the Republic of Serbia, www.rik.parlament.gov.rs

¹⁰ Serbian Presidency Candidates Spar Over ‘Poll Irregularities’, 9 April 2017, www.balkaninsight.com ¹¹ Serbia Protests: Thousands Demand Vucic’s Resignation, 10 April 2017, www.balkaninsight.com

¹² Six MIG 29 aircraft to arrive to Serbia by the end of March, 21 December 2016, www.telegraf.rs

¹³ European Commission, (2016), Serbia 2016 Report, Commission Staff Working Document

be undertaken not because they are the key to entering the EU, but because they will guarantee a better life for the Serbian citizens.

- **Montenegro:**

Montenegro declared independence from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006 and in 2008 the country applied for EU membership. In 2010 the Council granted the state a candidate status and the accession negotiations started in 2012. Hitherto, two negotiations chapters has been provisionally closed.¹⁴

Moreover, the country is on the path of joining NATO very soon. In the end of March 2017 the US Senate approved a treaty allowing Montenegro to join the Alliance. The approval is accepted as a recognition of all the efforts that the state put into implementing reforms so far.¹⁵ It is believed that the NATO membership (which might happen by the end of 2017¹⁶) will boost the country's democratic reforms, trade, security and would foster the stability in the region. However, the membership in the organization is controversial issue inside and outside the country. Within the country there is strong opposition to joining NATO - the opposition parties in Montenegro, which are also pro-Russian, are against their country joining the Alliance.¹⁷ Furthermore, an opinion poll conducted in December 2016 shows that only 39.5 per cent of Montenegrins are in favour of NATO membership.¹⁸

In October 2016 parliamentary elections were held and the pro-European parties won and formed a government. The results of the general elections were rejected by the pro-Russian opposition, claiming that they were rigged and marked by numerous irregularities.¹⁹ There was even a coup attempt during the day of the elections and the state prosecutor of Montenegro, Milivoje Katnić, later said that it was organized by nationalists from Russia who did not believe that the party, ruling the country since 1991, could be changed by regular elections.²⁰ It is believed that the coup was aiming to deviate the country from its Euro-Atlantic path and specifically from becoming a member of NATO. However, in the 2016

¹⁴ European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Montenegro, www.ec.europa.eu

¹⁵ Tamkin, E., Montenegro Has the U.S. Greenlight to Join NATO. Now What?, 12 April 2017, www.foreignpolicy.com

¹⁶ Only the Netherlands and Spain have not approved Montenegro joining NATO yet

¹⁷ Tomovic, D., Montenegro Opposition Asks Bannon to Block NATO Accession, 3 March 2017, www.balkaninsight.com

¹⁸ Tomovic, D., US Senate Approves Montenegro as NATO Member, 28 March 2017, www.balkaninsight.com

¹⁹ Tomovic, D., Montenegro Prosecution Accused of Fabricating Russian Plot Claims, 7 November 2016, www.balkaninsight.com

²⁰ Surk, B., Montenegro: 'Russian nationalists' behind election day plot, 6 November 2016, www.politico.eu

report on Montenegro, the European Commission commented that the general elections were conducted under a substantially revised legal framework and, overall, in a more participatory and transparent manner.²¹

Although the significant differences in the orientation of the political elites in the country, the current government is devotedly working for the sooner integration of the country into the European Union and NATO, believing that the presence of these organizations in the region is strongly needed in order to preserve the peace and prosperity of the countries.²² On the one hand, it is good that the Montenegrin political leaders recognise the importance of implementing reforms for the better future of the country. On the other, conducting reforms should be done consciously and not with the sole goal of joining the EU and NATO, but because such irreversible and positive changes are crucial for the creation of internal mechanisms for maintaining the peace and boosting the economy both in the country and in the region.

- **The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:**

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the Thessaloniki European Summit in 2003. The country applied for EU membership in 2004 and was granted a candidate status in 2005 by the Council. The accession negotiations between the EU and FYROM have not started yet.²³

For almost two months (as of the middle of April) the parties in the Macedonian parliament have been unable to form a government and elect a speaker of parliament. The President Gjorge Ivanov is refusing to give the formed coalition a mandate, even though it holds the majority in the parliament, and his decision is widely supported by the Macedonian society, which is protesting every night in numerous cities and smaller towns. The reason for the current political crisis is the proposed by one of the main parties so-called Tirana platform - it seeks equality between Macedonians and Albanians in FYROM.²⁴

The European Union is following the development of the Macedonian political crisis. During his visit in the end of March, Johannes Hahn stated that the government should be formed as

²¹ European Commission, (2016), Montenegro 2016 Report, Commission Staff Working Document

²² Marković, McCain: Montenegro's integration into NATO and EU is bright spot in turbulent world, 12 April 2017, www.gov.me

²³ European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, www.ec.europa.eu

²⁴ Mejdini, F., Albanian Parties Set Terms For Macedonia's Next Govt, 8 January 2017, www.balkaninsight.com

soon as possible in order to carry through the ongoing reforms.²⁵ European Council President Donald Tusk warned FYROM that the ongoing crisis is threatening its relations with the Union and with NATO.²⁶ On the other side, according to the President Ivanov, by not condemning the Albanian platform, the international community (and the EU in particular) has failed to recover the lost trust and its credibility to help resolve the deep issue.²⁷

However, according to a survey, conducted by Balkan Barometer in 2016, almost half of the Macedonian citizens consider the membership in the Union a positive thing, while only 15% believe it is bad.²⁸ Regardless whether FYROM and its society still have trust in the EU and want to be part of it, at this point the country is facing too deep internal problems (with external dimensions) to be able to focus on reaching the European criteria for membership. Firstly, it needs to have political stability and evince desire of the coalition to work towards European goals. Just after that reforms and other measures will be able to find a ground.

- **Albania:**

Albania was identified as a potential candidate state along with FYROM and other countries from the region during the Thessaloniki European Summit in 2003. It formally applied for membership in 2009 and was “awarded” candidate status by the EU in 2014. The negotiation process has not started yet²⁹ but in the last Report on Albania from 2016, the European Commission recommends the EU to consider opening accession negotiations under the condition that the country moves forward in implementing judicial reforms.³⁰

The political crisis in Albania has different roots than the one in FYROM. Exactly six months before the upcoming elections in June the opposition started protesting. It wants a technical government without the current premier Edi Rama to be formed in order to secure free and fair elections. According to political analysts, only internationally mediated negotiations between the government and the opposition can defuse the crisis, because

²⁵Quote from the official Twitter account of the Commissioner Johannes Hahn, 21 March 2017, 15:26h., www.twitter.com/JHahnEU

²⁶EU's Tusk warns Macedonia not to risk its EU, NATO ties, 15 April 2017, www.reuters.com ²⁷ Marusic, S., Macedonia President Denies Zaeu Right to Form Govt, 1 March 2017, www.balkaninsight.com ²⁸ Balkan

Barometer 2016: Public Opinion Survey, Regional Cooperation Council ²⁹ European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, Albania, www.ec.europa.eu

³⁰ Balkan States ‘Reforming, at Different Paces’, Brussels Says, 9 November 2016, www.balkaninsight.com

“unfortunately, Albanian politics is not mature enough and needs a non-Albanian speaker as a referee to find consensus”.³¹

Political stability and common political will are basis for a productive development in any chosen direction. Albania, as well as the rest of the candidate countries, have numerous issues, regarding the rule of law, minority and human rights, fight against corruption, etc³², therefore a lot of measures should be undertaken and implemented. The lack of trust between the parties in each country and their incapability to cooperate is undermining the possibility for collective actions, which is needed when aiming such significant goal as EU membership. Nevertheless, at this complex and fragile situation in Albania, the EU should be more keen to participate actively in the dialogue with the country, its government and society, and not just demand from the governments without taking into account the specifics of each state and of the region as whole.

4. Reasons for the Western Balkans and the EU to foster their cooperation:

The conduction of crucial reforms is not the only dimension of the EU but just the ground for future development and progress. Both sides (the EU and the candidate states) have wider aims towards their future that should also be perceived by them, as the reforms are just the means for their achievement. In the following paragraphs we are going to name a few of them in order to present the greater perspective.

Firstly and most importantly, one of the main reasons for the formation of the Union was to guarantee peace and stability in Europe, and the EU continues to do so 60 years later. The Former Yugoslav countries had numerous wars between one another in their near past, therefore they are aware of the significance of this achievement. In this aspect, the joining of the Union is of great importance for both sides, as European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said:

*“If we leave them alone - Bosnia-Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Albania, all those countries - we will have war again.”*³³

³¹Mejdini, F., Observers Suggest Foreign Mediation for Albania's Crisis, 15 March 2017, www.balkaninsight.com

³²European Commission, (2016), *Albania 2016 Report*, Commission Staff Working Document

³³Gotev, G., Juncker to US: If the EU collapses, there will be war in Balkans, 24 March 2017, www.euractiv.com

In the same sense, Edi Rama, prime minister of Albania, explained:

*“As long as the people and political elite of the Balkans do not lose faith in EU membership, they’ll stay calm. The borders will be in danger when the European Union sits on its hands and, in doing so, abandons us to the Russians”*³⁴

Achieving peace in the region is the greatest possible goal that can be set. The EU and the candidate countries should give it the needed significance when considering their future together, because without peace any progress is possible.

Another better observed advantage of the European Union is, of course, its economic perspective. The open market is offering great possibilities for the business and the citizens, as well. For instance, Croatia - another former Yugoslav country that joined the EU just recently, is now performing much better in economic terms than its Western Balkans’ neighbours - its GDP is more than three times bigger than the one of Albania and more than 10 times bigger than Montenegro’s GDP.³⁵ However, the region has significant advantages, such as high degree of macroeconomic stability and geographic proximity, which will facilitate the economic growth, once the countries demonstrate their full dedication to the European cause. On the other side, the European Union should also be looking forward towards incorporating those new markets, as they offer wide range of opportunities for investors, including the development of new sectors such as innovation, as well as favourable tax and labour costs.³⁶ Despite the rather low economic indicators of the countries, the growth of the common market is always favourable for the trade and for the development of the states.

Another reason why the membership in the EU should be important to both the Union and the candidate countries is environment. The European Union is setting the world standards for clean water and air, development of green resource-efficient economy and for fighting the climate change. The protection of the environment is of great importance not only for us, but for the future generations and for the world as a whole. Meeting the standards and following the European direction in this sphere by as many countries (not only European) as possible, should be a principal goal for the EU. On the other side, each country should think in perspective, regarding the future of its land, water and air, of its generations.

³⁴ Albania's Rama says 'political temperature' rising in Balkans: paper, 30 March 2017, www.reuters.com

³⁵ Data from Statistics Times: www.statisticstimes.com

³⁶ Sanfey, P., Milatovic, J., Kresic, A., How the Western Balkans can catch up, 19 February 2016, www.ebrd.com

Certainly, those are just few among many reasons why the fostering of the cooperation is needed and worth it.

5. Final conclusions:

After analysing the current relations between the four candidate countries and the EU, the political situation and the mutual benefits from cooperation, some conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the countries might have some similarities in their problems, but they also differ a lot. In all of them it is very hard to reach political consensus, and this is causing inability to either form a government or to conduct crucial reforms, or even both. In this case the EU could serve as a mediator in the political dialogue, helping the parties in the countries to identify their common goals and set them as a priority in the name of the common good.

Secondly, the reforms needed to be done should not be perceived by the states only as a must-do in order to join the EU, but as a crucial step towards a stable economic and political development and better achievements. Establishing the rule of law, respecting human rights, freedom of media, to name few, are major values which must have their guarantees in each country, regardless their orientation. As Commissioner Johannes Hahn said in November 2016:

*“Today we reiterate the EU’s continued support for these efforts and call on the governments of the enlargement countries to embrace the necessary reforms more actively and truly make this their political agenda – not because the EU is asking for it, but because it is in the best interest of their citizens, and Europe as a whole”.*³⁷

On the one side, there are the internal issues specific for each country - political, economical, ethnical, etc., which combined all together are slowing down the speed of the four Balkan countries on their way to the European union. On the other side, as the current report stated in the beginning, no enlargement of the EU is going to happen before 2025. Thus, the position of the Union might have also discouraged the candidate states to conduct and implement their reforms faster, as they will not be awarded soon for their commitment to the process.

As stated in the 2016 Communication on the EU Enlargement Policy of the European Commission, the countries should recognise that the process of negotiations and meeting

³⁷ 2016 Enlargement Package: credible enlargement process key to driving transformation and anchoring stability in Southeast Europe, 9 November 2016, www.europa.rs

certain criteria is a part of a wide process of modernisation and reforms. Its only aim is not the fact of joining the EU as a good end of the negotiations. The reforms should be embraced actively and truly by the governments of the candidate countries because it is in the interest of their citizens on first place. Thus, if they manage to provide better political and economic environment for them, public support for further European integration would grow.³⁸

Currently the European Union is focused on its internal issues. It keeps up the dialogue with the candidate countries - Serbia, Montenegro, FYROM and Albania - but not as thorough as possible. This approach of the EU might be discouraging for the countries and they might lose motivation to conduct further reforms. The lack of political stability and economical prosperity is not beneficial neither for the candidates, nor for the EU. Both of them should realize the importance of the membership and take the needed steps towards it, because the progress of the region is of a mutual interest for both sides. The European perspective is still an option for the candidate countries but the shifted focus of the EU will prolong the accession negotiation process further in time.

³⁸ European Commission (2016), 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy

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