

FOREIGN POLICY ALIGNMENT OF WESTERN BALKANS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

Introduction

Since the Russian aggression in Ukraine on February 23, 2022, foreign policy alignment of the Western Balkans countries, all aspiring to join the Union, with EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has become a key issue just as EU's own internal unity vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine. This alignment in the Western Balkans is at times difficult, challenged both externally and internally—easier to achieve for the countries already members of NATO and more difficult for those not in NATO and with closer ties to Moscow.

To address these challenges, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office (AA) organized on April 29, 2023, in Tirana, Albania, a roundtable for a number of senior party and government officials from the Western Balkan countries to discuss the region's foreign policy alignment with EU's CFSP in light of the new global geopolitical threats. The participants discussed ways of strengthening the intraregional coordination on the issue and how to contribute to the stability of both the EU and the aspiring countries themselves.

The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule and was part of a larger CIG project supported by AA with the aim of helping consolidate the Western Balkans in the face of new geopolitical threats. This report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, or AA, but rather provides a summary of the overall discussion.

The EU remains committed to its enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans. The countries of the region must continue with reforms in the rule of law and judicial systems, while the EU should offer a clear European agenda and a roadmap for the aspiring countries and include the Western Balkans in its strategic planning. While the internal reforms determine individual EU integration pace, regional cooperation enhances the region's collective European prospects. A major achievement in this regard were the three Berlin Process's free movement agreements that were signed in November 2022 by all six Western Balkan countries and, to date, ratified by all of the parliaments with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Western Balkans have strengthened cooperation in the green energy transition, food security, and battling the climate change as well as in enhancing cyber security. These are good examples to apply in other fields including foreign policy harmonization.

Since the war in Ukraine, the Western Balkans' further alignment with CFSP, already a prerequisite for EU integration, is considered crucial to peace and stability in Europe and in the region. In fact, it is "a test for our readiness for EU," a participant said. While Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have fully aligned with the EU sanctions against Russia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are more reserved on taking similar decisions due to their internal political reasons and closer relations with Moscow. Kosovo is another key

reason why Serbia is not aligning itself on the sanctions. As a Kosovo participant said, “Serbia is afraid that Russia will use this against Belgrade on the issue of Kosovo.” On the other hand, “aligning with the EU sanctions against Russia was a moral responsibility and an act of solidarity with Ukraine,” a North Macedonian participant argued. “We were ready to pay the price.” Serbia’s reluctance to join the sanctions, in addition to its economic cooperation and historical ties with Russia, is coupled with a growing anti-EU sentiment of the population.

Recent parliamentary elections and lack of internal coordination on a number of issues including foreign policy impeded Bosnia and Herzegovina from a coherent foreign policy position on Russia’s aggression. The EU itself is manifesting some internal disagreements, with Hungary and Slovakia demanding some exemptions from because of their vulnerability to the Russian oil and gas and lack of an immediate alternative. Given the current geopolitical context, this leaves room for other non-EU actors, including Russia itself, to exploit the nonalignment and use it for their own benefits.

Besides Russia, other important points of EU alignment include sanctions against Iran and Belarus as well as cyber security.

While candidate countries are expected to progressively align with CFSP prior to accession, the EU should include the Western Balkans in its policy alignment compensation strategy, alongside the current member states. The EU should add dynamism to its foreign policy and enhance cooperation with the Western Balkans through committee meetings between the EU structures and the aspiring countries.

Recommendations

Both the EU and the Western Balkans should add dynamism to the enlargement process. The EU should outline a clear and credible European path for the region. A participant suggested that all Western Balkan countries simultaneously open Chapters 23 and 24 and that the region is collectively integrated into the EU. “Six different referenda for six relatively small countries from the Western Balkans would be exhausting for the EU and would increase the EU enlargement fatigue among the member states and their citizens.” The Western Balkans should take ownership in internal reforms and acknowledge that the EU integration is a merit-based process with no political shortcuts. A participant said that “the EU is about shared democratic principles and values.” The EU should seriously consider reforming the stalled enlargement process. The idea of a staged accession was mentioned as the most promising in this regard. Many speakers were in favor of having an enlargement date to be set by EU. A participant proposed that not only the European Parliament (EP) but also the national parliaments in the Western Balkans issue their own annual reports on enlargement. The EU should consider not appointing EP rapporteurs who come from the same party family as the ruling parties in the country of their reporting.

The EU should strengthen its credibility in the region. The region’s decreasing “pro-EU” sentiment comes mainly as a result of the dragged-out European integration process and unfulfilled promises from the EU. North Macedonia’s prolonged EU accession coupled with the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria influenced the growth of citizens’ dissatisfaction and “devastated the support for the EU in the country.” “There was the biggest drop of citizens in favor of the EU (to 65% from 85%) and this is because of Bulgaria and the lack of a clear European perspective.” Also, Montenegro’s conclusion of only three out of 33 open chapters since the opening of negotiations in 2012 slowed down the pace of democratic reforms and

faded expectations of accession in midterm. The accession process needs to be reformed so that the EU's credibility in the region becomes more credible.

The Western Balkan countries should show pragmatism in foreign policy alignment to the EU. Candidate countries, especially those negotiating EU accession, are expected to progressively align with CFSP. A participant suggested that the Western Balkans' foreign policy alignment should be proportional to the level of EU accession. "The closer the integration, the greater the alignment." As a potential candidate country, Kosovo is not officially required to fully align to CFSP, but it has joined the EU's sanctions against Russia, though this is more symbolic than substantive as Kosovo had no relations with Russia even before the war. A speaker suggested that Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina should follow the examples set by the other countries in the region and explore ways of introducing gradual sanctions, if full alignment isn't possible due to political circumstances. Reporting about the war in Ukraine in the region needs to be improved and resources given to Balkan correspondents to report directly from Ukraine as opposed to re-channeling Russia's newsfeed.

The region should consolidate its own common foreign and security policy. Most countries in the region fully subscribe to CFSP, while others consider their policy alignment as "progressive." However, the Western Balkan region does not have a consolidated regional policy. They should strengthen cooperation and establish a joint communication strategy on the foreign policy alignment. Aligning with the EU's foreign policy is also aligning foreign policies within the region. With the recent geopolitical threats, a consolidated region preserves its security and prevents negative influences from outside.

EU should offer more help in alignment and create a "safety net." So far, the EU adopted ten packages of economic sanctions against Russia. However, exemptions have been made for Greece, Hungary and Slovakia. While the vast majority of member states share a common response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, some of these exemptions damaged EU's reputation as a unified global player. "Before the EU asks from Serbia to join sanctions against Russia, a participant said, it should first reflect on the level of harmonization in its own foreign policy." Some participants suggested that the EU should understand better the sensitive position of the Western Balkan countries which have established close economic ties with Russia, China, and India and the consequences those sanctions would cause to their economies without an "alternative plan". E.g., some of these countries fully depend on Russian sources of energy and some on Russian and Ukrainian tourists. A number of participants have asked EU to create a "safety net" to help mitigate negative effects of alignment. Serbia needs help in increasing its resilience against Russian pressure and gradually harmonizing with the EU on this issue. When the candidate countries take steps, clear support from the EU in the form of assistance packages is needed. The most challenging part of aligning to the CSFP is the implementation. "We need to better understand how the decisions on foreign policy are taken, what coping mechanisms are in place and how the monitoring is established." The Western Balkan countries need to build the institutional capacity to implement those restrictive measures. And the EU can help with that.

From "policy takers" to "policy makers." The candidates from the Western Balkans have a lot to offer to the Union on foreign policy. There are a number of good examples in that regard—e.g., the migrant crisis and the help provided by the Balkan countries to manage it. "When one aligns with the EU, EU should not only help immediately through assistance,.. but should involve us in its meetings related to foreign policy," in policy deliberations, including the discussions of compensation tools to mitigate detrimental consequences of policy

alignment. Over a hundred mechanisms in the EU deal with the issue of sanctions. The Western Balkan countries need to be briefed better about their deliberations in order to be on the same page. Joint EU-Western Balkans sessions on foreign policy alignment could be useful as well.

The EU should engage deeper in joint strategic communication with and in the Western Balkans. The strategic communication imperative applies to both the narrative about the EU in the Western Balkans and the narrative about the Western Balkans in the EU. Improved coordination among EU institutions and the region would show a serious EU commitment to expansion. The EU should also provide more financial resources in fostering independent media in the region and combating online propaganda which diminish the pro-EU sentiment. More TV coverage of the EU, its policies, its impact, and with participation of EU and member states officials and sincere public debate on EU membership would benefit as well. Simultaneously curbing Russian propaganda in the region should be done. The Western Balkan governments must state clearly to its citizens the benefits of following and joining the EU.

Regional cooperation is the sine qua non of the Western Balkans' European perspective. Apart from being an accession requirement, regional cooperation is an imperative for the stability of the Western Balkans and Europe. Not only it helps overcome the countries' lingering bilateral issues but also strengthens their regional position in light of Russia's and other non-EU actors' increased meddling in Balkan affairs. While the Berlin Process was considered the main platform of economic cooperation, the Open Balkans proponents suggested that it complement the Berlin Process to reiterate the region's leaders' political commitment to EU accession.

The Western Balkans' foreign policy alignment with CFSP is a prerequisite to accession. While most countries are fully aligned and Serbia condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Serbia's position on sanctions might change only due to internal political reasons. Conditionality of foreign policy alignment with the accession process does not work unless the EU's foreign policy is seen as a common interest for the candidate countries as well. However, the countries in the region should acknowledge that foreign policy alignment is an obligation towards EU, not the other way around. The EU should understand the geopolitical position of the more reluctant countries regarding sanctions against Russia and offer viable alternatives. Economic compensation packages and the enhanced defense cooperation were believed to reduce the candidate countries uncertainties. The EU's commitment to enlargement should translate in more technical assistance, financial resources and strengthened cooperation. The EU should start increasingly treating, on a number of issues, the candidate countries as if they were member states and incentivize them to behave as such.

In conclusion, there was consensus among the participants that the Western Balkan countries should speed up reform and the EU should offer a viable path to membership with an aspiring date.

Participants

English Language Alphabetical Order

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- Lutfi Haziri**, Deputy Chairman, Democratic League of Kosovo
- Jelena Jerinić**, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own
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- Simonida Kordić**, Chair, Constitutional Committee, Parliament of Montenegro; Member, Presidency, New Serbian Democracy
- Mimoza Kusari Lila**, Head of Parliamentary Group of the Self-Determination Movement, Parliament of Kosovo
- Bojan Marichikj**, Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia; International Cooperation Secretary, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
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