



Solidarity Beyond Borders: EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

Solidarity is the defining feature of the European Union. While it exists between member states, should it not also go beyond EU borders? This article argues that it should, namely be more cooperation between member states and countries wishing to accede. This would make the negotiation process highly effective, while also fuelling the desire of EU states to welcome new members and that of acceding countries to participate in the project.

Introduction

Solidarity is defined as a bond of unity or agreement between individuals, united

around a common goal. If the “individuals” are the member states, and European peace and prosperity are the “common goal”, it could be argued that solidarity is the defining feature of the European Union. Indeed, the EU constantly takes action in order to ensure that member countries and their citizens feel included in the Union. Since 1992, over 50 % of European citizens feel included and only in five member countries does this number fall under 50 % (Eurobarometer, 2013). On top of this, every decision taken by the European Commission is for the overall benefit of the community created over sixty years ago.

Even after Brexit, the EU looks like a unified entity. But, what about its enlargement? After all, the purpose of the union was to ensure continental peace and prosperity, and yet most countries in the Western Balkans are not members, even though

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some have been waiting for years to be accepted. With this in mind, should solidarity not go beyond EU borders? This is the question that will be addressed in this brief. Furthermore, it will be argued that the process of admission can be accelerated through more cooperation among member states and will study some current cases to emphasize the effectiveness of the revised process.

North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro are Western Balkan countries that have been waiting for over a decade to join the EU (Timsit, 2019) and they probably are the countries most likely to join in the next ten years (Heath, 2016). Although for now, more people want their country to join the EU than not, in all of these states, support is slowly decreasing as, naturally, the longer the wait, the harder it becomes for advocates to sustain enthusiasm (Bjelotomic, 2018).

But, before analysing the aforementioned issue, it is important to look at incentives, as they are the ones that fuel each side's desire to cooperate. In the case of the aspiring countries, it is quite clear that they seek the benefits that the EU offers to their economy and their citizens. On the other hand, the European Union's incentive is to gain influence into a new geographical area and expand. On top of this, they face competition from China, who wants to gain influence in Europe. The fact that Serbian Minister for Construction Zorana Mihajlovic stated that "It would not be immodest or wrong to call Serbia China's main partner in Europe" (Timsit, 2019) should be a matter of concern for EU leaders and a good enough motive to put more effort in helping the aspiring states even more.

The previously mentioned delay in the accession process is generally caused by the difficulties these countries are experiencing in meeting the Copenhagen criteria, a series of economic, political and legislative reforms that need to be implemented in order for the country to be ready to join the EU. While the economic and political criteria mostly mean a free-market economy and a stable democracy where everyone's rights are respected, the legislative changes are divided into thirty-five chapters (European Commission, 2016). Currently, Montenegro and Serbia find themselves still at the very beginning of the legislative reforms. Being ex-communist countries, it comes as no surprise that they have a rough time in trying to bring about change. High levels of corruption are the main reason (European Western Balkans, 2019). Also, a significant percentage of the population living in rural areas (*ibid.*), with arguably limited access to information and little incentive to support new political movements, is a cause as well. Therefore, what they need is help, and not just the financial aid that the EU is giving them (Bjelotomic, 2020).

Hungarian commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi has recently proposed a way to help these states by sending experts from member states to monitor the reform process in Western Balkan countries (Eszter, 2020). Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić stated his agreement with the proposal after a meeting with Várhelyi (RFE.RL, 2020). While these are good news, it certainly could go further by being even clearer and more helpful for aspiring countries: what these states need is not only closer oversight, but guidance. Highly developed countries in the EU such as Germany, France and Belgium should send experts to advise their counterparts in how

certain areas such as transport, energy and education can be improved in order to meet EU standards. Moreover, states that have recently gone through the same process such as Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania can offer support as well.

EU officials can check each chapter after the experts decide the country is ready for evaluation. Because these officials are also sent by the EU, there is a much higher chance that the standard required is the same in both the officials' and the experts' eyes. Therefore, in a short amount of time, the aspiring nation should be ready to move on to the following chapter and repeat the process. However, in the case of countries that have not yet been granted the title of "candidate for membership" such as Bosnia & Herzegovina or Kosovo, this should not be applied. Its leaders need to answer all the questions in the EU questionnaire before the state can be considered a candidate, but they have failed to do so on two occasions. In these kinds of cases, countries need to solve constitutional and other internal problems before receiving aid from the EU.

The effect of this change would not only be to accelerate the process, but also to offer the citizens hope that their country is, at some point, going to join the EU. This is necessary as they are starting to lose hope, with 28 % of people in the Western Balkan region admitting that they think their countries will never join the Union (Simić, 2017). Furthermore, citizens will also benefit from constitutional, taxation, educational and other reforms. It seems, therefore, that nations in general, their citizens in particular, and even the EU would benefit from this act of solidarity.

People who are against this proposition would probably argue that citizens of the

Western Balkan countries might see this process as an infringement of the nation's sovereignty or that the human resource is too expensive for the EU. Firstly, with regards to the former, it should be counter argued that being part of the European Union implies losing some sovereignty, which is beneficial because it ensures peace. On top of that, after years of a planned economy, perhaps it is desirable to join a continental free market that will ensure a rise in GDP. Secondly, regarding the latter potential issue, this investment, as well as the financial one the EU is already making (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2020) are made with the purpose of expanding the Common Market in the Western Balkans. The costs of the investment are arguably exceeded by the benefits, such as the opportunity of an enlarged, more united European Union. But, what if these countries fail to cooperate or successfully implement recommended changes? In that case, the EU is in the position to stop providing help, in order to give the respective state's officials a motive to cooperate, as their chances to join the Union could be in serious jeopardy.

Countries need to solve constitutional and other internal problems before receiving aid from the EU

Finally, in order to provide some evidence for the applicability of this proposal, Serbia can serve as a case study. In its case, there is a considerable obstacle beyond completing the negotiation process to joining the EU, namely the conflict with Kosovo. Serbian officials are yet to recognize Kosovo as an

independent state and will not do so until given EU membership (Heath, 2016). The negotiation looks stuck in a state of uncertainty on both sides, as Serbia tries to uphold its interests and the EU to defend its values. The solution in this case is, in my view, to complete the negotiation process first, leaving this problem to be solved last. Therefore, Serbian Officials will have an incentive to recognize Kosovo, as it is the last step towards being part of the Union, the only obstacle left in the way.

Regarding the negotiation process itself, a significant problem Serbia is currently facing is corruption, as well as organized crime, lack of protection of fundamental rights and frequent media censorship. The experts sent by the EU could definitively solve such issues, by assisting in the reformation of the taxation process, the constitution, security services, education and infrastructure building. Furthermore, by constantly updating EU officials with the progress Serbia is making, the experts can also act as auditors, giving the Serbian Government an incentive to respect media freedom and human rights, so that the cooperation can continue.

What about countries further behind in the negotiation procedure? A relevant example from the past would be North Macedonia, whose most notable obstacle to beginning formal negotiations was, at the time, the conflict with Bulgaria (Marusic, 2019). Bulgaria drafted a list of demands before considering accepting North Macedonia in the EU, such as abolishing claims regarding the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. In this case, this significant hurdle could have more easily been overcome with help from Bulgarian experts, who could have guided Macedonian officials in meeting these demands more efficiently, as both

countries then, had the incentive to quickly solve their differences. Such situations where conflicts between countries prevent one or both of them from acceding to the EU do occur, and can now be more efficiently untangled. Nations that look far from joining the EU at the moment can take small steps towards beginning negotiations and someday becoming part of the Union, with the assistance of member countries.

To conclude, the existence of a union of states in Europe implies the fact that there is going to be a certain level of solidarity. However, EU officials never hid their desire to welcome new members, while Western Balkan countries have demonstrated, by applying for membership, that they want to take part in this project. With that in mind, solidarity should go beyond EU borders, not just because it is desirable for both parties, but because solidarity is an inherent value of the Union, inherent in almost every decision made by the Institutions.

What aspiring countries need is more than just financial aid, but guidance in their progress towards membership. Olivér Várhelyi's proposal is undoubtedly worth noting, as solidarity between member states and aspiring nations should exist. Moreover, the former should send experts in different fields, where certain changes need to be made in order for the thirty-five chapters of the Copenhagen criteria to be completed, one by one. This reform benefits both sides, as well as the citizens of the aspiring nation, as it seems to provide an effective solution to overcoming the deadlock in the negotiation process of two Western Balkan states, which shows its applicability. This solution is not only pragmatic, but in keeping with a community that respects its intrinsic values, most notably, solidarity, by completing the project of the European Union.

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