**The Western Balkans in 21st Century – Stabilization and Democratization through Euro-Atlantic and European Integration**

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**Abstract**

After the wars which were ravishing the space of former Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) , eruption of instability was permanent feature which was stopping the development in that part of the world. The Paper is going to focus on concrete situation in the area of Western Balkans trying to put accent on the role of euro-atlantic and european integration processes (North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO and European Union –EU). The syntagm *Western Balkans* has been entered into the political discourse during the European Union summit in Zagreb in 2000 for the territories of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania, Two countries ; Slovenia and Croatia are now fully integrated in NATO and EU and are parts of wide european integration process. On the other side, all other Western Balkans countries have some kind of institutional ties with, both NATO and European Union, but still they are far away of full-fledged membership in that organizations. How in the future the relations between space exclusivity and europeanization is going to work?. There are so many unresolved questions (security, political, economic, ethnic, energy supply....) in the area of Western Balkans countries but as the role of international actors as: NATO and European union were important in stabilizing the situation, immediately after the wars in that area, one should say that NATO and European Union could contribute to bring these countries to free and democratic Europe. Integration of Western Balkans countries into NATO and EU is a two-way process. On one side it depends on the country aspiring for membership, and on the other side it depends when the organizations –NATO, EU – are willing and ready to open the doors to new members. So if we want to have a free and democratic Europe for the rest of the Western Balkans countries it is important to continue with the reforms of their societies and NATO and European Union should not stop with their enlargement policy.

**Key Words:** Western Balkans, North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO, European Union,-EU, Euratlantic integration, European integration, Strategic thinking , Enlargement of EU, Open –door- policy of NATO, Stabilization , Democratization

**Introduction - Western Balkans as a part of Europe**

In contemporary international relations, especialy European relations, Southeast Europe and especialy the Western Balkans are still seen as a part of unfinished issue. The security and economic formula 2+2+2 (two members of the Western bloc-Greece, Turkey ; two of the Eastern bloc-Bulgaria, Romania; and two countries which did not belong to any of the two blocs ( non-alligned Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia -SFRY, and neutral Albania) which was a base for the peace, stability and economic development of the region in the bipolar system of international relations (1945-1989) has gone. (Vukadinović 2002, )

In early 90s of the 20th Century, immediately after disappearance of bipolar relations and in the midst of a search for new structure of European and World order (Haas 1997; Gaddis 1994; Cammileri & Falk 1992; Singer & Wildavsky 1993.; Ikenbery 1996.; Fukuyama 1992;;Mearcheimer 1990,; Sloan 1991,; Brzezinski 1997.) post-socialist countries of the South Eastern Europe, including those that emerged after the disintegration of the SFR Yugoslavia have expressed their desire to pursue political, economic and security integration within the so called *Western way of life.* And in institutional sense this also meant integration with the leading international organization in the postbipolar world, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) .

With the abandoning of security and economic *status quo* in the South Eastern Europe Greece and Turkey, countries that were already institutionally integrated into the Western bloc on the levels of security - NATO and economy - European Community (Mileta 1993.) have preserved these ties and Turkey has even deepened them by starting negotiations on European Union membership in 2005. Two members that were on security (Warshav Pact) and economic level (COMECON- Council for Mutual Economic Cooperation) ) part of socialist bloc (Mileta 1988.) have immediately started radical post-socialist reforms. They became NATO members in 2005, and have joined EU in 2007.

Bloody disintegration of SFR Yugoslavia has slowed down the much needed post-socialistic transition of countries emerging after the fall apart of the former federation (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and SR Yugoslavia –ondays including Montenegro and Kosovo). All of them put the integration to NATO and EU as their main foreign policy goals. But the wars in territories of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991-1995.) and NATO's bombing SR Yugoslavia (1999) have slowed and determined their paths to integration into both NATO and EU. ( Vukadinović 2002)

Presence of international forces in the territory of Macedonia was preventing bloody ethnic conflicts in that country. The only exception was Slovenia which became a NATO member in April 2004 and one mounth later, May 2004, an EU member. Slovenia was the most advanced federal state within the former SFR Yugoslavia, it was spared large scale war destruction, and being a small but well organized country it managed to implement the needed reforms quickly and successfully.(Prokopijević 2005.)

Albania, which was a part of socialist world, but at the same time was pursuing a policy of neutrality and isolationism in relation to security and economy integrations of the socialist world (Warsaw Pact and COMECON) also managed to protect its territorial integrity after the fall of the bipolar world, albeit with much assistance from the international community (especially the USA and NATO).

Therefore it is understandable why did the European Union, within a range of its regional approaches to post-socialist countries, (Vukadinović 2010) group these countries under the term *Western Balkans* and adopt a specific program , the *Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA*) for assisting them on their paths towards integration with EU. For other European post-socialist countries that were aspiring to EU membership EU had a different mechanism – Association Agreement. Naturally, due to specific problems caused by the war and other soft challenges to security that countries of the Western Balkans needed to address, the EU primarily insisted on stabilization, and only after that on accession.

So the syntagm *Western Balkans* has been entered into the political discourse during the European Union summit in Zagreb in 2000 for the territories of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania, i.e. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the then FR Yugoslavia[[1]](#footnote-2), Macedonia, and Albania. The newly adopted term is primarily a political syntagm used for identifying this group of countries that were at that time on a similar level of internal development, judged by the state of their overall post-socialist transition processes, level of their integration into Euro-Atlantic and European structures (or lack of it), and by direct or indirect consequences of military and ethnic conflicts in this region. (Petak 2000)

The psychological desire to move as far away from the traditional notion of Balkans (mostly connected with negative connotations: underdevelopment, corruption, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of order, frequent armed conflicts, etc. (Šolaja 2008, Kaplan 1999) lead to a sort of compromise between the international community and Balkan countries which accepted the term Balkans under the condition that a prefix “Western” be added to it.

It must be noted that NATO, although not taking over the term Western Balkans in its official documents, also insisted on political stabilization of these countries – through its Partnership for Peace program – and only then on reforms of their defense systems. In analyzing the requested reforms one can see that the so called *first set* of these pre-conditions set forth by both NATO and EU is almost identical. (Tomović & Čehulić Vukadinović 2012.) It refers to political conditions – regional cooperation, full cooperation with the International Crime Tribunal for Yugoslavia ( ICTY), return of refugees, strengthening the rule of law, fight against corruption, and democratization of all aspects of society. In other words, by applying the *stick and carrot* policy NATO and EU were trying to guide these countries to full membership in both organizations.Today, in spite of the still present and used term Western Balkans, each of these countries has different level of institutional links with NATO and EU, respectively.

 **Integration of Western Balkans countries to NATO and EU**

Analyzing the enlargement process of NATO and EC/EU it can be noticed that all “new democracies”, including the post-socialist ones, have first become members of NATO and only then of EC/EU. It was evident that Euro-Atlantic allies have maintained this principle for the countries of the Western Balkans as well. In reviewing their institutional bilateral connections it can be concluded that NATO made the first steps towards a particular country, and EU followed.

***Croatia's success***

Military aggression in which one third of Croatia’s territory was occupied, fight for physical liberation of the country, and Croatia’s involvement in armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina have all stopped Croatian progress towards NATO. Almost to the very end of the 20th century Croatia was, along with FR Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the most isolated Western Balkans countries by international community. In spite of the fact that NATO forces, as well as the EU member states and the USA, were assisting Croatian fight in various ways, due to this war that was forced upon it Croatia was left out of any NATO institutional ties and programs designed for post-socialist countries. The main reason was the fact that ondays Croatian government has strongly opposed and rejected to fullfil all kind of so called specific criteria which international community impposed to Croatia, most of them were inherited from and connected with the wars which were occured in the region. But even at such poor condition for Croatia the USA administration did a lot trying to help it. During her visit to Croatia in late May 1997, the US Secretary of State Madelaine Albright insisted on the following: Croatian support to and consistent implementation of the Dayton Agreement; return of refugees and displaced persons to Croatia; cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague. (Čehulić 2000, p..277.) A year later in his article *Croatia's Roadmap to Partnership for Peace* the US Ambassador to Croatia William T. Montgomery has higlighted the principal guideliness for Croatian participation in NATO's programe Partnership for Peace. American ambassador recommended Croatia to invest efforts in: reconciliation process; creating conditions for free return, life and work of all refugees from Croatia; consistent implementation of the Dayton Accords; democratization of the society with special accent on freedom of media, change of electoral legislation, and free and fair elections. (Vjesnik June 6,1998)

Croatia’s progress towards NATO began after democratic presidential and parliamentary elections in 2000, when Croatia, almost overnight, became a member of Partnership for Peace. Soon after this Croatia starts to participate in NATO’s Membership Action Plan. Along with Albania and Macedonia Washington includes Croatia into program for adjusting to the standards of the Alliance – the so called Adriatic Charter. This all led to Croatia being recognized as a country deserving invitation to full NATO membership during the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Croatia became the NATO member in 2009 on NATO summit in Strasbourg and Cologne. Since then Croatia actively participates in numerous political, humanitarian, civilian and military missions conducted under the auspices of the UN or NATO. (Nakić-Vojnović 2007) But the percentage of public support to NATO and Croatian membership in it has never exceeded 55 percent. ( Gareljić 2007)

Simultaneously with approach to NATO, Croatia has established institutional ties with the EU.

With exception of a short period of time when it was included into the EU PHARE program, until January 2001 Croatia was actually only entitled to annual trade preferences in trade with EU. The negotiations between the EU and Republic of Croatia on Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) have officially begun at the margins of the 2000 EU summit in Zagreb. By signing the SAA and the Temporary Agreement, which was to be implemented until the effectiveness of the SAA, Croatia has for the first time established formal relations with the EU. This was the most important formal step within the process of Croatian accession to EU before the official request for full membership status (in 2003) and acquiring the candidate status (in 2004). (Brnčić & Leppee & Mošnja 2004.). Of all post-socialist countries Croatia’s negotiations were the longest ones and the most substantive ones. (Tišma & Samardžija & Jurlin 2012.)

This was a result of internal political situation, certain *enlargement fatigue* that was felt within some EU member states, as well as a result of positions of some neighboring countries towards Croatia’s membership in EU (Slovenia). Finally on July 1st 2013 Croatia became the twenty-eighth member of the EU.

One could say that , as well as Slovenia in 2004, as a member of the EU Croatia has politically also leave the Western Balkans region and enter into the world of Western Europe. However, all problems of this narrower Western Balkans (without Croatia) will continue to have effect on overall situation in Croatia. For this reason Croatian political elites should use the membership in EU for further strengthening the cooperation both in Western Balkans region and in a wider Mediterranean area. Croatia should use its NATO and EU memberships to finally, within the existing regional programs of these organizations, define its policies towards the wider Mediterranean region. As a member of NATO and the new member of EU by advocating for further enlargement of both organizations, the Republic of Croatia could significantly contribute to strengthening of security, stability, democracy and long term prosperity in the turbulent region of Western Balkans.

*Bosnia and Herzegovina on the fringe of the Balkans*

Country that suffered the longest and bloodiest war after the break-up of former Yugoslavia can be grateful to NATO and US administration under President Clinton for stopping the armed conflict. (Simić 2010). But the very same international community has also forced a protectorate status upon Bosnia and Herzegovina and a political system that very few of the citizens of this country supports – the Dayton Agreement. Regardless of all advantages or disadvantages of its functioning in accordance with the Dayton model, integration of this country into European and Euro-Atlantic space is more of a symbolic character than expression of will of its citizen or realistic possibilities. (Vego 2012)

NATO and EU have simultaneously started their respective aid programs aimed at assisting this country in strengthening logistical infrastructure needed for independent development of mechanisms needed for closer integration to these two organizations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was accepted to Partnership for Peace program in 2006. It was also conditionally offered participation in the Action Plan for NATO membership in 2010 (however, the underlying issue of military property remains unsolved). Soldiers from Bosnia and Herzegovina participate in peace missions and other joint activities of the Alliance. On the other hand EU has, through Stabilization and Association Agreement (2008), initiated reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina but due to poor functioning of the Bosnia and Herzegovina as a unique state little has been achieved on closer accession to EU. (Cenić & Trninić & Vilendečić 2012)

Emergence of a state within the state – the Republic of Srpska – in combination with deeply rooted national divisions prevent this country from further accession to Euro-Atlantic integrations. (Nešković 2013)

Formal progress achieved on the path towards NATO membership is not equally well accepted in two entities, while recent Progress Report issued by the EU reveals that there is not much progress in functioning of the state. Lack of readiness by local players to invest joint efforts on solving the concrete, daily hardships and to unanimously declare their joint interest for membership in NATO EU respresent sufficient reasons for international community to be dissatisfied with the present situation. Global crisis and numerous problems throughout the world and in Europe are additionally decreasing the level of interest of both Europe and international community for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In turn, this results in a situation where almost complete development within the country is left to certain political inertia.. (Pasch 2012.)

The recent socio-political turmoils in Bosnia and Herzegovina (demonstrations in Bihać, Tuzla, Mostar, Sarajevo) demonstrate the fragility of this week country.

***Serbia's chances to come closer to Europe***

Similar to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia is both institutionally and psychologically still far away from NATO. Differing from Bosnia and Herzegovina where NATO was crucial in stopping the bloody war, Serbia is still viewing NATO as an enemy that has attacked its sovereignty in 1999 (action in Kosovo followed by 78-day NATO air strikes on strategically significant targets in Belgrade and Novi Sad, which culminated in the introduction of a United Nation mission and peacekeeping forces in Kosovo). (Simić, 2010) By applying the *stick and carrot policy* NATO and EU are trying to get closer to Belgrade and are awarding every, even the slightest democratic progress in the country. Serbia was admitted to Partnership for Peace (Riga, 2006), but it was clear that without the democratization of the whole Serbian society and forming of a stable pro-Western government there will be no further integration of Serbia into Europe. In the post-Cold War times Serbia was defeated in all wars it led (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo), and its territory has shrunk with the secession of Montenegro and Kosovo. But still, Serbia has not experienced internal social catharsis and is constantly facing dangerous remains from the recent past in various segments of its social development. Within such context all positively assessed reforms and transformations of the military forces are being offset by internal political instability and weaknesses of the society. Thesis offered by some segments of Serbian political elites that Serbia may enter the EU without NATO membership, (Petković 2011) and comparisons with neutral status of Austria or Switzerland are not very realistic.

The so called Independence Declaration of 2009 was intended to point to Serbian desire to separate the Euro-Atlantic process and to stay outside of NATO - i.e. to remain neutral (Savić 2011) – while still aspiring for EU membership. (Urošević 2013) Although the Declaration was primarily a declaratory response to court judgement on Kosovo, it was obvious that ondays Tadić’s administration did not wish to alienate itself from Europe. (Milić 2011)

However, in spite of this stalling in institutional relations with NATO, the European Union is continuing with the *stick and carrot* strategy. Serbia has the Stabilization and Association Agreement, and as a reward for Serbian willingness to talk with Prishtina after the incidents on Serbian-Kosovo border it received a candidate status in 2013.

But, following the presidential elections and raise to power of the new coalition with president Nikolić, statements that Serbia will “never abandon its Southern province” and that “choice between Kosovo and Europe is not an option“, that in Kosovo „the genocide is in progress against Serbian minority!, (The Guardian, July 29, 2012. ) are gaining on strength and frequency in Serbia.

But at the end due to the willingness of president Nikolić government to make a positive step towards opening negotiations with Kosovo Serbia has in January 2014 received a date for opening negotiations with the EU for its membership. The very optimistic expectations of Beograd that Serbia will join the EU in 2016 are probably unrealistic. The crucial point for EU is if Serbia is going to show its readiness to implement the agreements reached with Kosovo.

Namely the agreement reached between Serb Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and Kosovar Prime Minister Hashim Taci on April 19,2013. is certanly a big deal. It is set to establish a power-sharing arrangement in the north of Kosovo with authorities that are acceptable to both sides. Up till then the Serb-majority northem territories were run by authorities supported by Belgrade and they rejected Pristina's role.The agreement will enhance local government through an association of Serb-majority municipalities and institute new arrangements for the police and the judicary. The agreement ,if it will be correctly implemented, will be an important step toward more normal relations between Serbia nad Kosovo and should help to defuse one of the some remaining unresolved problems in the Western Balkan. (Lehne 2013)

The EU does not make a Serbian recognition of Kosovo independence a condition for accesion , but does insist upon normalization of relations, a commitment that Belgrade accepted.

***Kosovo – a long way to go***

Kosovo as an independent state is the project of the United States of America. (Vukadinović 2008) Although United States are the most powerful member of the Alliance, to Kosovo’s regret this fact did not help in all members recognizing Kosovo’s independence. In the post-Cold War times Kosovo lies within NATO’s sphere of interest not only because of the NATO's out-of-area action conducted there in 1999, but also due to extended presence of large contingent of NATO forces in that country. (Rreecaj 2008) .However, in Brussels potential membership of Kosovo is not being officially mentioned for the time being, for it is waiting for all members of the Alliance to recognize the newly independent state. The same may be said for the relation between the EU and Kosovo. Five member states of EU (Spain, Cipar, Slovakia, Greece, Romania) do not recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state. Still, there are ways in which NATO and EU members are cooperating with Kosovo, not to mention the fact that EU, NATO and UN forces are physically present in Kosovo. Based on this it might be said that Kosovo is in a rather specific situation, because it is simultaneously a subject, and an object of contemporary international relations. The main question is: for how long we can have that kind of NATO-EU-Kosovo relations?

The progress in Serbia-Kosovo negotiation process helped Pristina a lot in its approach to EU. Due to the cooperation in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue and some concrete results EU has rewarded Pristina by progress toward a Stabilization and Association Agreement and EU is ready to talk in the future on visa liberatization with Kosovo. (Lehne, 2013) One could be aware that the full normalization of bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia is still years away. So continued active EU involvement will be crucial.

***Albania and the strong expectations***

The post-Cold War Albanian desire to join NATO was a proof of newly elected government that it will put an end to long lasting Albanian policy of isolationism and its specific type of neutralism. Situation in the region (not only the armed conflicts in the territories of the former Yugoslavia, but also continuing crisis over ethnic, religious and territorial issues in the neighborhood) has contributed to the fact that public opinion in Albania was constantly expressing the highest level of support to integration of their country to the Alliance. Even in times of stabilization in the Western Balkans and objective hardships that Albanian population was suffering during the transition and painful internal reforms, (Brokaj 2001) this support was not falling below eighty percent. Albania was among the first countries that joined NATO cooperation programs, such as North Atlantic Cooperation Council, Partnership for Peace, Membership Action Plan, within which it was developing various political, military and civil activities with the member states. Signing of the Adriatic Charter was in a way American recognition and reward for Albanian loyalty and cooperation with NATO, while call to join the Alliance together with Croatia, extended on NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, was the icing on a cake of all Albanian efforts. For Albanian government this was certainly a reward, but also an obligation to start addressing Albanian internal problems (mostly connected to soft security challenges such as drug trafficking, crime, corruption) with more firmness and commitment. ( Malnar 2009)

European Union insists on the very same criteria. Albania has signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (in 2006) but mostly due to insufficient reforms towards democracy and rule of law it did not achieve a stronger institutional integration with European Union.

***Macedonia and the question of the name***

Macedonia was not exposed to bloody armed conflicts after the fall-apart of the former Yugoslavia. However, in its post-socialist development it was not exempted from internal ethnic conflicts (including the us of armed forces) caused by dissatisfaction of Albanian population with its status in the new state. Religious and territorial problems gradually followed ethnic ones. The Ohrid Agreement has legally regulated status of unsatisfied national minorities but its implementation was facing numerous problems of objective and subjective nature. Military presence of international community is Macedonian reality for some time now. Internal instabilities that can easily spread over Macedonian borders in combination with Greek–Macedonian dispute over the name of the new state (among other) resulted in a strong orientation of Skopje towards the West, inclusive of NATO and its strongest member, the USA. Same as Albania, Macedonia was also intensifying its cooperation and partnerships through all existing NATO programs available to post-socialist countries. Together with Albania and Croatia it was contributing to international peace through activities within the Adriatic Charter. Level of public support to NATO membership in those times was never below sixty percent, while in times of intensified internal crisis it was rising up to eighty percent. Membership in the Alliance was primarily seen as a guarantee for lasting internal peace, stability and prosperity of the country.

Thus the fact that Macedonia was not invited to join NATO with other two members of Adriatic Charter in 2008 resulted with deep disappointment in Skopje. Even more so due to the fact that first hints of such negative outcome started only at the eve of the Bucharest summit and during the summit itself. Greece as full member of the Alliance has used the fact that Alliance decides with unanimous vote and by voting against has effectively blocked Macedonian membership.

 NATO leadership has expressed regret over such development and reinstated that NATO doors remain open for all potential members that fulfill the criteria. However, there will be no additional screening for Macedonia. Namely, Macedonia has met all the criteria and it will be admitted to membership as soon as it solves its bilateral disputes over the name with Greece. But the situation has significantly changed since these optimistic and comforting statements at the Bucharest summit. In spite of Macedonian active cooperation with NATO within the Partnership for Peace and Membership Action Plan, disappointment after the Bucharest summit has resulted in slow down of implementation of necessary reforms in Macedonia.

After Greece's veto of Macedonia's applicaion for NATO membership the same goes with Greece's obstruction of the Macedonia's process of EU integration. Greece is stll stronly opposed to the use of the country's constitutional name: the Republic of Macedonia. Numeros comprimise proposals concerning the name issues have been put forward, but were rejected on both side. (Macedonia, Greece)

So the Macedonian accession to European Union is also in a stall-mate. After signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2001) and acquiring the status of candidate country (2005) Skopje was warning that Macedonia is tired of waiting for the date to begin negotiations. In the meantime the Ohrid Agreement is not yielding expected results, ethnic differences are growing stronger, same as the numbers of Albanian population. In the long run this *status quo* that NATO and EU are maintaining towards this country can’t be good, neither for Macedonia, nor for Western Balkans. It will be very difficult for Macedonia to resist internal pressures without external assistance. (Slaveski 2013)

***Montenegro – is small the beautiful?***

Besides Kosovo, Montenegro was the last country of the former SFR Yugoslavia to gain its independence in 2006, and has immediately made a solid start in implementing reforms needed for accession to NATO and EU. Namely, as during the so called Community of Serbia and Montenegro defense and security issues were under the realm of the joint state, with its independence Montenegro had to start from the scratch in these areas. Ranging from legal regulation to establishment of operational security forces, everything that was done in this small country on these issues was done in accordance with NATO standards and principles. (Tahirović 2008)

NATO recognized this and admitted Montenegro into Partnership for Peace immediately after the independence (2006). This was a clear advantage for Montenegrin armed forces, as well as for the whole society. Later Montenegro fell as collateral victim of NATO politics when due to conflicts in Georgia it was not admitted to Membership Action Plan. Montenegro had to wait until 2009 to enter this program. Again, as a collateral victim of NATO’s internal crisis it was not admitted to NATO membership during the Chicago summit and now must wait for the fourth wave of NATO enlargement. If it continues with successful reforms and activities within the existing NATO programs there is no reason for Montenegro not to become the next NATO member from the Western Balkans region as soon as the Alliance decides on the new enlargement.

Montenegro’s path towards the EU was similarly successful. (Đurović 2012) After signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2007) Montenegro has bravely requested EU membership. The fact that it was given the candidate status, as well as the date for beginning the negotiations, additionally encourages political elites, as well as citizens of the country, to persist on Euro-Atlantic and European path. (Đurović 2010)

Institutional accession of Montenegro to NATO and EU gives favorable winds to political elites who were, because of that, able to solve some dilemmas of their own, as well as dilemmas expressed by the public opinion in Montenegro. Namely, every time a slow-down in this path towards the West is being sensed Montenegro calls upon its traditional connections with Russia. Some radical advocates of this Russian-Montenegro ties attempt even to substitute European path with closer relations with Russia. Montenegro may be taken as an example by all remaining Western Balkans countries, as well as any other country aspiring to NATO and EU membership, as a positive example of modern, globally interlinked international community. And since NATO and EU have well established relations with Russia, membership in these organizations does not have to mean automatic break-up of connections and relations with Russia.

**Predictions and Policy Recommendations for further co-relations between Western Balkans and NATO/EU**

International community through NATO and the EU has been indispensible influenced in the post-socialist transition, democratization and stabilization of the whole societies of the Western Balkans countries. It must be accented again that the manner in which SFR Yugoslavia has disintegrated has had a major impact not only on the tempo of integration of this region with Europe, but also on conditions under which these countries may enter NATO and EU. In almost all countries of the region citizens are frustrated with the length and complexity of this process. And this makes it even more difficult for political leaderships in these countries to continue with deep and sometimes painful reforms. Montenegro's Minister of Foreign Affairs Milan Ročen has said that „thanks to the EU his country made more reforms in one year than it would have manage on its own in ten“ (The Economist, October 15, 2011.)

Western Balkans countries find themselves in different institutional status in regards to progress towards a full membership in NATO and EU. This confirms that although both organizations have a regional approach towards the region each and every country is being assessed individually. Although it is nowhere written that NATO membership must precede EU membership, history of the post-Cold War enlargement of the EU shows that all new democracies that emerged after the bipolar era had actually undergone exactly this path – NATO membership first, and EU membership after that. Also, if one analyzes criteria for membership of the so called *new democracies* in these two organizations (criteria are strictly defined for each candidate in relevant final summit declarations) it is clear that primary criteria are almost identical, regardless of the country in question. They are aimed at political stability, creation of conditions for functional regional cooperation, and level of democracy (human rights, rule of law, and suppression of various forms of crime). NATO membership is a signal to European Union that candidate country is a politically serious and democratically stable state ready and capable to intensify implementation of specific additional reforms in particular segments of its society.

The open door policy or enlargement remains as official policy of both NATO and EU, (Asmus 2009.) but there will be no new admissions to NATO and EU membership for quite some time. In comparing enlargement policy of the two organizations with their other internal policies it can be said that enlargement was the most successful NATO’s policy since disappearance of the bipolarism, while EU in total had to face more challenges than benefits from this process. So probably the accession of Croatia to European union was the last round of enlargement to the Western Balkans this decade.

With the exception of Serbia, all other states in the Western Balkans aspire to membership in both – NATO and European Union. By entering of these countries into the NATO and EU a community of democratic states will form an area of security in this part of Europe in which prospects of some future bloody wars such as those in the recent past would become much less likely. Within such secure area, with NATO and EU as principal pillars, even those issues that are still being opened could be solved faster and easier (issue of borders, rights of ethnic minorities, asymmetrical security challenges).

In the Western Balkans region NATO has conducted its first out-of-area post-bipolar actions (Goražde, Kosovo) and has started with operationalizing its new peace keeping and peace building missions. This has turned Western Balkans into a training field for concrete implementation, training and improving the new forms of NATO activities within the new global order. These actions have demonstrated NATO’s new operational and institutional value (and have subsequently became NATO’s standard approach to solving crisis worldwide) and have been used by all those arguing that despite of dissolution of Warshaw Pact the NATO still has an important role to play. European Union has failed to benefit from its role and presence in the Western Balkans in a similar manner. Within its efforts on developing a more independent Common Foreign and Security Policy- CFSP, including creation of forces for its concrete implementation, Brussels did not succeed in using the Western Balkans as a great *case study* for strengthening its integration processes and in acting as unified player on international scene – by solving the situation in its own backyard, in Western Balkans. In allowing NATO to take the lead in this situation EU has lost the credibility of a player which must be taken into consideration in cases of regional or global crisis.

Western Balkans is the region where *unstable stability* still prevails, but challenges to security are no longer primarily military ones. They have been replaced by a wide array of the so called *soft-security* challenges (ethnic, religious, national, border issues, energy supply,drugs, prostitution and human trafficking, other types of crimes, ecological issues, economic stagnation, terrorism, and similar) .(Prifti 2003)

Western Balkans is the only part of Europe where NATO and EU still have their forces present as guarantors of peace and stability (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo). This also represents a sort of security that both organizations will remain present in the region. All of Western Balkans countries have contributing to the NATO and EU miltary or civil missions around the world (from Afganistan to Horn of Africa) . Some countries also suggested that they might be able to provide support to transitioning countries in the wider Mediterranean reagion in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, based on recent lessons from experiance in their own transition. (Cross & Kentera & Craig &Vukadinović 2013)

But it must be said that from the point of Euro-Atlantism, and especially if viewed globally, Western Balkans is no longer a region holding top positions of the world politics due to its problems and unsolved issues. Stabilization and integration of this region will continue gradually, with insistence on stronger engagement of local players. In early 1990s when post-bipolar structures of the international community started to emerge Western Balkans was primarily turned to the West. (Lenci & Martin 1998). Today, after more than twenty years of transition, conditions for easier penetration of other players into this area were created. Russia and Turkey together with some other Arab and Asian states are increasingly important partners on which countries of the Western Balkans may count, along with the West.( Kupchan: 2011, Laqueur 2011 )

Despite of this, even in the absence of trust among some nations in the region, poor economic and social situation, huge rate of unemployment and some unfinished territorial disputies NATO and EU could help to establish initial forum for dialogue among the countries Long-term euro-atlantic and european integration was and still is viewed as the primary mechanism for securing and lasting peace, stability and democratization of the region.

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1. Today these are: Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)