

European Strategy for the Western Balkans: from Thessaloniki to reality

29|Junho|2010

Sónia Rodrigues

in [Fifth Pan-European Conference on EU Politics](#) | *European Consortium for Political Research - Standing Group on the European Union* | 23-26 June 2010

Summary

This paper will focus on the European Union's strategy towards the Western Balkans, forged on the Zagreb Declaration 2000 and reconfirmed on the Thessaloniki Summit 2003. How the European policies for the region handles with the structural difficulties and the historical challenges of the countries resulting from the former Yugoslavia? In which sense is the European integration perceived as the main option of foreign policy for the western Balkans countries?

The central approach in this presentation will rely on the analysis of the strengthening of the Serbia's European path and on the ambiguous role of European Union in Kosovo. The status of EU accession negotiations with Croatia and Macedonia, as well as the small steps of Montenegro and of Bosnia-Herzegovina towards European integration, will have general considerations.

First of all, I will start by explain the meaning of the title of this paper: *The European Strategy for the Western Balkans: from Thessaloniki to reality*.

How the title shows, the European Union has a specific strategy for the Western Balkans, in which Slovenia is excluded, because it's an European member state since the 2004 enlargement, and Albania is included along with the former Yugoslavian republics: Croatia and Macedonia, as candidate countries; Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo, as «candidates» for being future candidate countries.

From Thessaloniki, because the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit marks the beginning of the European strategy towards the western Balkans, in which the future full integration in the European institutions are agreed and specified by all parts, in the declaration's own words, "The future of the Balkans is within the

European Union” [1] and acknowledges that the means to achieve it are through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). However, the agreement also states that the western Balkans progress towards European integration will depend of their own merits in meeting the Copenhagen criteria, in which the full and unequivocal cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is imperative.

And *to reality*, because since June 2003 until June 2010 some changes had occurred. First, in the western Balkans scenario: Slovenia is member state, Croatia is only in a few steps distance from full European membership, the main challenge for Bosnia-Herzegovina is to survive as one single state with two antagonistic republics; and Serbia has lost the territory of Montenegro, by the 2006 referendum, and of Kosovo, by the unilateral declaration 2008. Second, in the European Union, enlargement perspectives have changed because, nowadays, is undeniable that the last European enlargements, in 2004 and 2007, have reinforced the enlargement fatigue effect on the European Union institutions, which had been softened by the Lisbon treaty but has been reinforced again by the present financial and economical Greek-European crisis, which will have effects, if not in the European enlargement for the western Balkans [which was reconfirmed in the high-level meeting EU-Western Balkans [2], in Sarajevo, earlier this month], at least on the general rhythm of further enlargement of the union.

In this way, from one country, which was Yugoslavia in the 90's, Europe have now 6 independent states and all of them have chosen the path of European Union's integration, as their main option of foreign policy.

Since the 90's that the western Balkans countries have been difficult neighbours for the European Union. First, because they have being in almost constant state of war or imminent conflict. Second, because the former Yugoslavian republics have became, simultaneously, an affair of European «foreign policy» and European «internal policy» [3], in the sense that the perspective of European Union integration has a crucial role on the democratic processes of states with democratic deficits, in differentiated ways but with a common purpose:

democratization with the aim of European integration and as a way to maintain the peace in the Balkans region.

This double aim in the EU-Western Balkans strategy can easily be confirmed with the impact of the unilateral declaration of Kosovo, in the February 17th 2008, in the relations EU-Serbia.

Just a few days before the unilateral declaration of independence, made by the provisional Kosovo institutions, the mission EULEX [4] was approved with only one abstention from Cyprus, despite also Spain, Greece, Slovakia and Romania also were and are against independence of Kosovo from Serbia sovereignty. Since then, the European Union has adopted this kind of ambiguous position towards the Kosovo issue and the Serbia European integration: "the commission's proposals do not prejudge EU member states' positions on Kosovo's status". However, at the same time, the European Union has in Kosovo the EU Special Representative, whose mandate is to "advise and support to the Kosovo Government in the political process"[5] and the head of the International Civilian Office, whose objectives are to "ensure full implementation of Kosovo's status settlement"[6] and to "support Kosovo's European integration"[7] – both in the person of Pieter Feith - , as well as the EULEX mission to "advise the competent Kosovo institutions on all areas related to the wider rule of law"[8].

In this sense, we can easily apprehend that European Union institutions will deal with Kosovo [9], always under United Nations 1244 resolution as the main institutional framework, but also as if that territory in dispute was not an ambiguous state in the process of European integration. Or, in other words, we can say that European Union - as a former member of the troika, along with Russia and USA, in the period after submission of the Martti Ahtisaari's plan - did not had allowed the unilateral declaration of Kosovo but also did not had contested it afterwards.

In what concerns to the impact of the 2008 Kosovo unilateral declaration on Serbia politics, despite the democrat Boris Tadic had had won the presidential

elections, on the 3th February 2008, the governmental coalition did not resisted after the 17th February, mainly because the two parties in government did not have agreed on keeping the European option along with the categorical defence of Serbia territorial integrity. The following May elections gave the victory to the ultra-nationalist from the Serbian Radical Party, of Tomislav Nikolic, but was the Democratic Party in an unbelievable colligation with the Socialist Party, from the former Slobodan Milosevic, that formed the government. Later in July, Radovan Karadzic was detained by the Hague Tribunal, fact that reinforced the European union's option made by the Serbian political elite in power, although always refusing the Kosovo unilateral declaration of independence.

Nevertheless, the full cooperation with the Hague Tribunal is a condition *sine qua non* for further European integration - and Ratko Mladic is still wanted for alleged being architect of the murder of around 7500 Muslims, in Srebrenica in 1995 -, this month the Council of the European Union has approved the Stabilisation and Association Agreement ratification[10] with Serbia. At the same time, let's not forget that the International Court of Justice[11] decision, on the legality of the Kosovo's unilateral declaration, will come out this year and a decision against Serbia claims will increase the radical ultra-nationalism [12] towards the territory of Kosovo.

Once again, the European integration perspective, as a normative instrument for having peace and stability in the western Balkans, can be confirmed by this European balance between Serbia integration and Kosovo independence.

After the referendum in Slovenia to allow international mediation in territorial dispute with Zagreb [13] , the test of future EU enlargements will happen with Croatia in 2013. In Macedonia, the historic conflict between Skopje and Athens over the name that the former Yugoslav republic could use, lasts for nearly twenty years and there is no prospect for a consensual solution, which will delay the progress of European integration of the Macedonians. Bosnia-Herzegovina will have to maintain a strong international presence in order to continue to exist as a single state and in relation to Montenegro, we have to wait and see how the reforms implemented will be consolidated. Albania have to become

aware that the existence of opposition to government is crucial to a democratic state.

The approval of the visa free travel in Europe for the Western Balkans countries - for now, just with Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro - shows how it is possible to have further European integration, while enlargement is taking place more slowly.

The European Union's strategy towards the Western Balkans confirms the engagement in the enlargement, as the European framework, in dealing with the western Balkans recent democracies or democratic regimes in transition [14] . In other words, the traditional role [15] of belonging to the European Union as an indicator for a consolidated democratic regime [16] - along with the economic benefits of being inside a political/economic group of European democracies - can be highlighted as the main objective for the western Balkans states in their purpose of belonging to a space of peace, stability and prosperity.

Notes:

[1]«*Thessaloniki Declaration*». EU-Western Balkans Summit. 21st June 2003.

[2]«*Statement by the Chair of the High-Level Meeting on the Western Balkans*». Spanish European Council Presidency. Sarajevo, 2nd June 2010.

[3] POND, Elizabeth - *Endgame in the Balkans: Regime Change, European Style*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

[4]EULEX - *European Union Rule of Law Mission*. In <http://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/en/front/>

[5] «Council Joint Action appointing an European Union Special Representative in Kosovo». European Council. 25 February 2010. In <http://www.ico-kos.org/archive/pdf/jointaction/jointactioneng.pdf>

[6] Despite the Martti Ahtisaari plan was not approved by the Security Council, his recommendations are still being followed by the Government in Kosovo as well as by the International Civilian Office – which was made-up the United Nations Kosovo's status settlement. See «Letter dated 26 March 2007 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council». In <http://www.unosek.org/docref/report-english.pdf>; «Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement». In http://www.unosek.org/docref/Comprehensive_proposal-english.pdf; «Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo». In <http://www.kushtetutakosoves.info/repository/docs/Constitution.of.the.Republic.of.Kosovo.pdf>

[7] International Civilian Office. In <http://www.ico-kos.org/>

[8] COUNCIL JOINT ACTION 2008/124/CFSP of 4 February 2008 on the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, EULEX KOSOVO. In http://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/en/info/docs/JointActionEULEX_EN.pdf

[9] «*Kosovo - Fulfilling its European Perspective*». European Commission. 14th October 2009. In <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/1516&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

[10] «European Union approves SAA ratification». B-92. 15th June 2010. In http://www.b92.net/eng/news/in_focus.php?id=96&start=15&nav_id=67784

[11] «Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo». International Court of Justice. In <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?p1=3&p2=1&code=&case=141&k=21>

[12] According to the idea that the perspective of European integration smooths the radical ultra-nationalist and vice versa. See BROWN, Michael et al - *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*. Cambridge/Massachusetts: The Mit Press, 2001.

[13] «EU relieved after Slovenian vote on border dispute». EUObserver. 7 June 2010. In <http://euobserver.com/15/30222>

[14] SCMITTER, Philippe C. - *Portugal: from Authoritarianism to Democracy*. Lisbon: ICS - Social Sciences Press, 1999

[15] PRIDHAM, Geoffrey - «*European integration and democratic consolidation in Southern Europe*». In *Southern Europe and the Making of the European Union: 1945-1980*, António Costa Pinto & Nuno Severiano Teixeira (eds). New York: Boulder.

[16] DIAMOND, Larry; PLATTNER, Marc (eds) - *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies – theories and perspectives*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1997