

BULGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: OUTCOMES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS¹

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Abstract: The paper aims at outlining the main outcomes of the work of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of EU in relation to the Western Balkans. Some preliminary remarks are made on the reasons to include the European perspective of the region as one of the four political priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency in the first half of 2018. Afterwards the author presents the major messages, which followed the deliberations of the EU-Western Balkans Summit and were reflected in the signed Sofia Declaration. Some personal observations and general conclusions from the expert workshop on Capacity Building for the Western Balkans: Security Sector and Defence Institutions, organized by the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence, are also shared.

Key words: Western Balkans, security, defence, regional cooperation, resilience, capacity building.

1. INTRODUCTION

As it is well-known, one of the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of EU was the European perspective of the Western Balkans with an accent on connectivity (see e.g. [1]). Choosing this particular topic was not a surprise bearing in mind the location and the regional role of my country. However, the lack of active conflict and the gradual stabilization of the Western Balkan countries took off this topic from the Council's agenda for quite some time [2]. To say it in other words – Western Balkans stopped being a major security concern for the European Union. Although this should be generally considered as a positive trend, having no active debate on the future of the region contributed to the long-lasting stalemate in

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its European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which was the result of the complex character of the political relations among the countries in the area.

2. THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AS A PRIORITY OF THE BULGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF EU

The European Union and the other international organizations have always been highly engaged with the Western Balkans. The stabilization of the region to a very great extent was due to their presence, efforts and operations. Still, the lack of a structured high-level political debate on the future of the Western Balkans within the EU in the recent year almost exhausted and discouraged some of the countries in their pro-European aspirations.

That was the rationale behind the decision to have more vigorous discussions on the European perspective of the region during the Bulgarian Presidency. Our assessment was that a breakthrough is needed in order to start unbundling the Gordian knot of the complicated Balkan relations.

I do not wish to overestimate the achievements of the Bulgarian presidency in this respect since most of the problematic issues in the region remain (see e.g. [3], [8]). The European Commission's Communication on "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans" [4] calls for an approach, based on individual progress, but it is also clear that the European Union will not import the bilateral contradictions of the Western Balkan states and they have to be tackled in a good-neighbourly manner before joining the EU. I think this is the most solid pre-accession condition and the one, which might block the European integration for many years ahead.

Despite of that, some progress is visible and we are satisfied that our initial aim to revive the debate on the future of the region was successful. BG Presidency held numerous events at different levels dedicated to various aspects of the European perspective of the Western Balkans – economy, energy, transport, communications, etc. The culmination of course was the Sofia Summit when the leaders of EU member states in the presence of their Western Balkan colleagues signed the so called Sofia Declaration. This happened fifteen years after a meeting of similar kind held in Thessaloniki.

3. EU-WESTERN BALKANS SOFIA SUMMIT

The focus of the Summit was connectivity in all its aspects as well as the joint response to common security challenges such as illegal migration, organized crime, terrorism, hybrid threats and cyber security. All of these issues are tightly related to the resilience of the Western Balkan region and Europe as a whole.

The Sofia Declaration [5], amongst all, delivered two main messages. First, the countries in the region have a clear European perspective, which on the one hand means that they are encouraged to continue their efforts to join the European Union.

On the other hand, this is also a sign of recognition by the European Union for their civilizational place as a part of the overall European community.

Second message of the Sofia Declaration was the individual path for each country without making clusters and interdependencies among them, which might have additionally complicated their mutual relations. This seems to be a fair, merit-based and tailored approach. It also gives the chance to each state to proceed according to its own motivation.

Soon after the meeting we witnessed the positive development of the issue with the name of the now Republic of North Macedonia immediately followed by the process to join NATO. It is my belief that the progress in this respect was a result of various factors, both internal and external, only one of them being the productive ambience created by the Bulgarian presidency. Another one was the signing of a bilateral treaty between Bulgaria and FYROM earlier in 2017, which was a first step towards normalizing the bilateral relations of North Macedonia with the neighbouring states.

Positive trends were witnessed also in Bosnia and Herzegovina's willingness to join NATO and the European Union. In December 2018 the country was finally included in the NATO Membership Action Plan process, which gave it a more structured approach to Alliance integration in the future. It also managed to provide initial answers to the European Commission's enlargement questionnaire, which had been submitted to it in 2016.

The Sofia Declaration also encompasses a Priority agenda for stronger cooperation in different areas supporting the process of integration. These are the rule of law and good governance; security and migration (cooperation in Common Security and Defence Policy matters falls within this area); socio-economic development and young people; connectivity; digital technology; reconciliation and good-neighbourly relations. In each of these areas specific concrete measures are included.

Following the Summit, the Council came up with Conclusions on June 26th 2018 in regard with the enlargement policy, which also included the intention to start accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in a year time and upon achievement of progress in specific fields.

What does all of this mean? It means that there is a political will on the side of the European Union to work for further enlargement in South-Eastern Europe!

What does it not mean? It does not mean that EU integration will come as a gift. Yes, at the end of the day accession is a political decision, but it is not a one-way effort or will. It requires action from both sides – EU to support effectively the aspiring countries and the candidates to actively pursue their aim to join EU by performing reforms and meeting the accession standards. The question that I often hear in the Western Balkan countries – what will the EU do for us when we join it - should be transformed into – how joining the EU will be of benefit for our country, but also for the EU itself. Integration should be observed as a win-win game and a two-way process, not a development aid.

4. CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS: SECURITY SECTOR AND DEFENCE INSTITUTIONS WORKSHOP

Having said that, I wish to make a few remarks specifically on Common Security and Defence Policy. And its relation to the security and defence reforms (see e.g. [6], [7]).

On May 11th 2018 the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence organized an expert workshop on capacity building in the security and defence areas and I was personally in charge of this event. I should admit that it was an extremely hard task, in fact harder than organizing the informal defence ministerial in Sofia. Analysing this circumstance we came to the conclusion that the topic itself was very “hard to swallow” both for EU member states and Western Balkan countries. Security and defence are a question of national sovereignty and due to that - highly politically sensitive. First, EU member states have different assessments on the security situation in the region, which determines the various views on whether and how EU should be further involved with capacity building activities in these areas. Secondly, the relations among the Western Balkan countries themselves additionally complicated the organizational process.

Nevertheless, the workshop had a large participation, including representatives of EU, NATO, OSCE, some of the EU member states and five of the six Western Balkan countries². The work was separated into two panels: the first one with a focus on the specific reforms that the Western Balkan states perform in the security and defence sectors; and the second - on the current involvement of the international organizations with capacity building in the region.

Our conclusions from both the organizational experience and the expert deliberations can be summarized as follows:

1. Western Balkan countries aspire for EU membership. This is not a collective goal, but an individually chosen and coinciding goal. This fact could be a strong motivation for security and defence sector reforms on the one hand; as well as for overcoming some bilateral tensions on the other.
2. There is a common understanding on most of the security threats and concerns, such as organized crime, radicalization, terrorism, cyber and hybrid attacks, etc. There are also common internal problems, which affect the functioning of the security and defence sectors: low interagency coordination; corruption; lack of well-established systems for democratic control over the armed forces; rule of law and good governance challenges, etc. These common elements could actually form the basis of pragmatic regional initiatives and further interaction with the EU and the other international organizations. They could well be an object of future Capacity

² The only country, which was not represented, was Montenegro due to sudden illness of the planned participant.

Building in Support of Security and Development projects even in the context of the idea for a European Peace Facility.

3. When we talk about the engagement of the international actors in the region, it is evident that they have a serious step there – missions and operations, projects, special representation, etc. The participants in the workshop from the different missions such as EUFOR Althea, EULEX, KFOR, but also NATO liaison offices and OSCE stressed on the excellent coordination that they have on the ground, including regular meetings at staff level and distribution of tasks according to respective mandates. Still, the question of whether this operational cooperation is actually supported by strategic cooperation among the international organizations remained open during the discussions.
4. Capacity building should be based on the specific local needs, which guarantees a certain level of local ownership and effectiveness of the projects. This is a well-known lesson learned from different kinds of operations and interventions, but defining the local needs and addressing the specificities of a country or even part of a country is something that still needs further improvement. Otherwise, the international support is not taken seriously on the ground and based on that there exists a stereotype that organizations come for their own sake and provide what they can without really caring about the real necessities of a certain country/area.
5. When we, at EU level, discuss the future of an operation or the scope and character of its mandate, this should be done and presented to public with the highest caution, because a sign for a withdrawal from a region or a country might look like an abandonment for the local community with all negative consequences that this might have in terms of security and political stability. This is especially true for the Western Balkans.
6. Strategic communications are crucial and twofold. Strong political messages from EU to Western Balkan countries are needed to inform most of all those citizens of the Western Balkans who oppose the European integration of their countries. Needless to say, this is a part of the resilience building process. At the same time some of the European societies also need to learn about the positive impact that this region has and will have to Europe and European security. Long established negative thinking should be gradually overcome and if we do not wish for this process to take decades, active policies in this direction should be implemented.

5. CONCLUSION

In order to conclude, I will once again reiterate that the year 2018 was a key year for the regional development of the Balkans. While the overall security situation in Europe and around the Globe was deteriorating, it seems that some of the long-

lasting problems on the Balkans began to find their path to final and positive solution. The role of Bulgaria in these processes was definitely constructive – the one of initiator, mediator and leader. It was successfully overtaken by the Austrian and Romanian Presidencies giving a historic chance for the Balkan region to produce encouraging news.

It is of great importance now that this momentum is being kept and both the Western Balkan countries and the Euro-Atlantic and European structures continue to insist on the need for a persistent effort in maintaining regional cooperation, good-neighbourly relations and European perspectives.

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