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# The Western Balkans: between stabilisation and integration in the European Union<sup>[1]</sup>

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Abstract: the European Union's Initiative for the Western Balkans

- **Creation of a substantial Connectivity Fund** as part of the European budget. Temporarily in 2019-2020, then integrated into the 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework with a provision according to needs and to geostrategic and economic challenges;
- **With adapted conditionality**: use of funds on reserve of progress made in the chapters 23 and 24. This conditional financing would foster vital reform and stimulate competition between countries, moreover the European funds would be conditioned according to the respect of the Union's values and the principles of the rule of law after accession;
- **Priority given to the economy**: by the swift implementation of a regional economic zone; and as a first stage, via integration into the internal market of the countries which are to join in a distant future – in the ilk of the Ukraine agreement;
- **Active mediation in bilateral disputes** - including in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue – that the countries have to settle prior to their accession, if necessary by arbitration, the respect of which would be linked to post-accession funds;
- **Greater role for civil society** in the accession process and "reconciliation" with Union financing. Decisive action on the part of countries for the integration of the Roma communities in terms of housing, education, vocational training.

On 23rd June 1993 in Copenhagen, whilst the European Council defined the accession criteria to the European Union for the candidate countries of Central Europe<sup>[2]</sup>, war was raging in Yugoslavia and the siege of Sarajevo challenged Europe. The irony of history with the fall of the wall of Berlin, was Yugoslavia, which might have pretended to a rapid rapprochement with the Union and whose cooperation agreement had already entered into force in 1983. But unlike Central Europe, "nationalism, the supreme stage of communism", in the words of Adam Michnik, destroyed Yugoslavian federalism and consumed what we would soon call the Western Balkans<sup>[3]</sup>. Ten years later, on 16th April 2003 in Athens, eight post-communist countries<sup>[4]</sup>, as well as Cyprus and Malta, signed their accession treaty to the European Union and on 1st May 2004, they became members. This fifth enlargement was the Union's response to the end of the division of Europe and the potential dangers of this.

Since this strategy has proven successful why not apply it to the Union's neighbours to promote stability and prosperity? This is what the Commission proposed in March 2003 with the European Neighbourhood Policy. Three months later, at the Summit of Thessaloniki, the EU announced to the Western Balkans their membership prospects. In December 2004 the Council decided to open membership negotiations with Turkey and Croatia. The Union turned its soft power into its key policy with its neighbours after the success of its fifth enlargement. Was it the Union's post-Cold War irenicism, whose model was to transform its neighbourhood? This was its golden age, in a period of optimism, in which, according to Romano Prodi, in March 2000, it was to develop "the most competitive knowledge economy in the world". Fifteen years later the 'circle of friends' in the neighbourhood has become a 'circle of fire'. Turkey has taken up with its old demons again: the coup and authoritarianism.

1. Opinions expressed here are the author's and his alone.

2. "The Union is based on the values of the respect of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law as well as the respect of human rights including the rights of people belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society typified by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women."

3. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, the Union Serbia and Montenegro (Serbia which then included Kosovo).

4. Poland, Hungary, Czech Rep, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania.

And the accession process of the Western Balkans remains slow, whilst their stabilisation is still fragile and incomplete.

The Union's policies with its neighbours are also part of a tumultuous European situation. The economic crisis has weakened the "European model" and limited its assistance capacities. Its leadership has been challenged by re-emerging countries like Russia, Turkey and China. According to Jean-Claude Juncker[5] the migratory crisis has broken the links of solidarity[6]. Europe's values are under challenge by the "illiberal" governments of Budapest and Warsaw. The legitimacy of the "European system" is in crisis as it finds itself at odds with part of public opinion, including that of the United Kingdom, which decided on 23rd June 2016 to leave the Union. All these crises are undoubtedly undermining the Union's soft power in the Western Balkans.

#### STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION ON TRIAL

The European Council of Cologne (3rd 4th June 1999) adopted the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), "a new type of contract offering a prospect of joining the European Union when the criteria defined in Copenhagen are fulfilled". At the European Council of Feira in June 2000, all of the States received the status of "potential candidates". This perspective was confirmed at the Summit of Zagreb on 24th November 2000 and especially at that of Thessaloniki on 21st June 2003, which defined the "agenda for the Western Balkans."

A founding summit, it formalised the accession process on the basis of a double conditionality. In addition to the Copenhagen criteria there came, in effect, specific conditions which resulted from the painful legacy of the recent wars: full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia -ICTY - regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations between States and their neighbours. The tools of the fifth enlargement were transposed to the Balkans, political dialogue and a free-trade area in the Stabilisation and Association agreements (SAA), technical and financial assistance, reform priorities

in "European partnerships" and preparation by the countries in question of "national programmes for the adoption of the "community acquis".

At the same time the Union launched the Stability Pact in Cologne in June 1999, to facilitate democratisation, development, cooperation and security in the Balkans in the ilk of the Helsinki Charter. Officially launched on 29th and 30th July in Sarajevo it formed the foundation of many agreements and cooperation networks in the areas of police work, justice, transport and trade. A free-trade agreement between the countries was signed in December 2006 which took the name of the one that linked the countries of Central Europe in the 1990's, the Central European Free-Trade Agreement (CEFTA). The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) on 11th May 2007, created by ten countries in the Cooperation Process in South East Europe: the five countries, which then comprised the Western Balkans, and the five neighbouring countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Romania and Turkey. Based in Sarajevo and mainly financed by the EU the RCC became a major player in terms of regional cooperation.

The Western Balkans were also the testing ground for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Following the Ohrid Agreement (8th August 2001) that brought the nascent civil war between the Slav majority and the Albanian minority in Macedonia to an end, the EU ensured their supervision by the Concordia Mission. In Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), the Union's Police Mission replaced that of the UN, and the military mission EUFOR/Althea took over from the NATO mission provided for in the Dayton Agreements[7].

In line with the SAP the Stabilisation and Association Agreements were signed with all countries. But their entry into force after ratification by the Member States[8] - came much later for Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For Serbia, the lack of cooperation with the ICTY prevented the signature of the agreement until the arrest of Radovan Karadzic on 21st July 2008, then its ratification, until the arrest of Radko Mladic on 26th May 2011. For Bosnia-Herzegovina, discrimination in its electoral law[9] impeded the

5. Interview with the newspaper *Le Soir*, 22nd July 2015.

7. Agreements that brought the war to an end on 29th November 1995 and signed in Paris 14th December.

8. Macedonia 2004, Albania 2006, Montenegro 2010, Serbia 2013, BiH 2015, Kosovo 2016.

9. Only the Bosniaks, Croats and the Serbs can be elected to the supreme offices. The European Court of Human Rights deemed that this rule was discriminatory and in contradiction with the European Convention in the decision *Sejdić and Finci vs Bosnia-Herzegovina* 22nd December 2009. It is also in contradiction with the ASA. A second similar decision, *Ilijaz Pilav*, 9th June 2016.

agreement for a long time. Although the problem continued, the Council approved the proposal made by Germany and the UK to sign in exchange for the promise to make the necessary reforms. As for Kosovo, which unilaterally declared its independence on 17th February 2008, its agreement aspects involving the Member States' competence were redacted to prevent the ratification by the latter, since five of them did not acknowledge it[10] , hence there was ratification by the European Parliament only.

It was in terms of trade that the agreements were the most effective. Exports from the Balkans increased by 89% between 2007 and 2016 towards the Union (17.7 billion €) whilst exports from the latter have risen by 42% (26 billion €). In part the negative balance reflects productive investments for economic modernisation. These agreements are therefore vital for trade and for integration into the Union's market, which represents 76% of their trade in all[11].

As for financial aid, an important part of the SAP, a total 20 billion €, humanitarian aid aside, was allocated by the Union between 1995 and 2020. In July 1996, the OBNOVA programme (Reconstruction) committed 400 million €. The CARDS programme (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stability) took over after that with 4.65 billion € for the period 2000-2006. The IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) is a combination of the various types of assistance since 2007. Provided with 3.74 billion € for bilateral assistance over the period 2014-2020 to which we can add 2.96 billion for regional programmes, it offers technical and financial assistance, notably with the International financial Institutions. It also supports civil society, cross-border cooperation, transitional justice and reconciliation, refugee return and housing, the integration of the Roma communities.

At the same time, visa obligations[12] for short stays (90 days) in the Schengen Area were lifted in 2009 for Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and in 2010 for Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina after stringent reforms that followed the implementation of the agreements linked to facilitation and readmission [13]. Kosovo still has not fulfilled the conditions,

particularly the ratification of the agreement on the border with Montenegro.

Only Croatia has become a Member of the Union (1st July 2013). Montenegro and Serbia have been engaged in membership negotiations since 2012 and 2014 respectively. Albania and Macedonia are 'candidate' countries. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are still "potential candidates". Did the SAP not meet expectations of the Thessaloniki Summit since stabilisation is still not complete and the path to integration is still long? Is the European "prospect" inoperative? But here we are forgetting that the bloody dismantling of Yugoslavia (100,000 deaths and 2 million refugees) led to "incomplete States", to border disputes, to difficult reconciliation and ethnic cohabitation. And we are forgetting that the rule of law and good governance are often ignored by the political elites who are more enamoured with power than reform.

#### THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE USA: "MEDIATORS" IN MACEDONIA AND ALBANIA

Macedonia, the poorest republic in Yugoslavia was argued over for a long time by Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, and has experienced difficulties since its independence. Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016), leader of the party VMRO- DPMNE, established an authoritarian regime, with the introduction of the phone-tapping of opponents, notably of the SDSM[14] , the revelation of which initiated a period of instability after the elections in April 2014. The Macedonian crisis really does highlight the excesses of the Balkans' ills: corruption and authoritarianism, disdain of the Constitution and boycott of Parliament, extreme political polarisation, minority demands, outrageous invectives, and hard nationalism, foreign interference and attraction to the European Union.

But quite precisely the mediation of the European Commission and the USA was required to end the stalemate. The Pržno Agreement on 2nd June 2015 provided, amongst other things, a special prosecutor to investigate fraud and corruption, balanced media coverage and a mixed transition government until new elections could be organised. A further crisis

10. Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia.

11. European Commission, DG Trade.

12. Imposed at the beginning of the war of Yugoslavia on all States, except for Croatia.

13. The Member States enjoying competence for granting visas, they 'facilitate' this for businessmen, students etc ... against the obligation for « readmission » of illegal migrants.

14. VMRO-DPMNE Revolutionary Internal Organisation- Democratic Party for National Macedonian Unity. SDSM Social Democratic Union of Macedonia.

erupted when the president decided to “pardon” 60 people under investigation, including Nikola Gruevski. The narrow victory by the VMRO-DPMNE on 13th December 2016 did not lead to the formation of a government with the Albanian party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) because the former refused Albanian as an official language across the whole country, whilst the Ohrid Agreement only provided for this in town councils with an Albanian majority – estimated at 25% of the population[15].

The president refused to allow the SDSM to form a government for the same reason and in disregard of the Constitution. The quarrel was all the deeper since the request on the part of the Albanian party was part of a platform[16] set up by the Macedonian Albanians with the support of Tirana. And the standoff was all the greater since the independence of the special prosecutor disturbed occult practices. Russia took advantage of the crisis to support the VMRO-DPMNE via its ambassador in Skopje. “The Euro-Atlantic prospect for Macedonia is not the only one available. There is always an alternative ...”

After the election of the leader of Parliament on 27th April 2017 by the SDSM and the DUI and given the violence in the street and at the Assembly, the President of the Republic Gjorge Ivanov accepted Zoran Zaev, leader of the SDSM, as head of government, as requested by the European Union and the USA. The SDSM was the source of surprise in the local elections of October 2017, as it won 57 of the 81 town councils. And the law establishing a double linguistic regime was adopted on 10th January 2018. The situation is still fragile however, as illustrated by the Supreme Court’s conviction of 8 Albanians on 1st November 2017 to life sentences for having attacked a police station in Kumanovo in May 2015 (attack that led to the death of 12 and dozens of injured) : “You have just convicted 7 million Albanians,” shouted one of those sentenced and there were incidents in Kosovo, showing that Albanian activists are still prepared to fight against what they deem to be historic discrimination against them in the Balkans.

Greece’s obstruction to membership negotiations,

whose launch the Commission has been suggesting since 2005, is not the only explanation for the country’s misadventures. The answer lies rather more in the policy promoted by N. Gruevski, especially when it went together with the quest for national identity in the re-writing of history and a debauchery of heroic statues that was as costly as it was pathetic[17] . Gruevski’s criticism of “foreign forces” relayed by Moscow augured badly for the European future of Macedonia. Further discussions with Greece are due to lead to an agreement over a name in 2018. But the welcome change has not completely driven out uncertainty for a country which remains fragile due to its short history, its ethnic composition and its poor development.

Emerging from the dictatorial regime of Enver Hoxha – comparable to that of North Korea – Albania has experienced a difficult transition marked by extreme polarisation between the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Party (SP), the boycott of the Assembly by one or the other and powerful groups of organised crime[18]. A positive break did however occur in 2016 with the unanimous adoption in July of constitutional amendments for legal reform by the Assembly, notably including a historic vetting procedure of magistrates before their re-appointment or exclusion. In the European Union’s negative opinion to Albania’s membership request made in November 2010, this reform was indeed requested in exchange for candidate status. This was granted by the Council in June 2014. All the more as there is a wide public support to the process[19]. The old members of the DP tried for a last time to prevent legal reform in February 2017 with a ferocious campaign against the vetting of magistrates and its boycott of Parliament and the demand for a government of technocrats until the elections in June 2017. An agreement between its young leader, Lulzim Basha, and Prime Minister Edi Rama brought the boycott to an end. The elections led to a very clear majority for the SP and the vetting process was launched. But political polarisation has taken off again, which makes the continuation of major reform even more difficult with the risk of slowing the opening of membership negotiations. The extraordinary influence that the European Union and

**15.** Macedonia is the only country in which the census planned for 2012 was not completed.

**16.** Which also asked: equal development between the two communities, a new minister to supervise the respect of it, an investigative committee into the scandals of which the Albanians have been accused, the participation in a working group on the name issue.

**17.** Nicola Gruevski erected many monumental statues at the heart of Skopje, some of them were « Greek Heroes » like Philip II of Macedonia and Alexander the Great.

**18.** To the point that the American Ambassador in Tirana publicly mentioned “Twenty families of four clans who have taken over Albania” on 2nd October 2017.

**19.** 72%, Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Tirana, 1st February 2016.

the USA had to exercise to exit the stalemate also reflects powerful reticence about the establishment of the rule of law.

### ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND PROTECTORATES IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA AND KOSOVO

In **Bosnia-Herzegovina**, the heart of the conflict that devastated the Balkans, the three ethnic groups did not manage to rise above the Dayton Agreements to establish a functional State that spoke with one voice[20]. The Bosniaks find it hard to accept the Dayton Agreements which approved the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska, RS) on its front line and still entertains the idea of a unitary State. The Dayton Agreement is important for the RS whose Constitution allows it to invoke its "vital interest" to oppose any project that would reduce its competences, it has even threatened secession via its President Milorad Dodik. As for the Croats they have openly expressed their wish to leave the Federation to create their own entity.

Ethno-democracy is preventing any kind of progress. Since the end of the war a million inhabitants have quit BiH, where the Bosniaks have become the majority for the first time ever[21]. Sarajevo is no longer quoted as being the multi-cultural city that it was, and the influence of strict Islam is making itself felt there, whilst the Catholics deem that it is difficult for them to exercise their rights at times. But it is especially the transitional justice that is crystallising opposition. On two occasions President Dodik has threatened to organise a referendum against the competence of the State Court created in 2000 – then revised in 2005 – notably to judge war crimes. This happened for the first time in 2011 against the bias of this court and to denounce some points of law. He relinquished after the European Commission was asked to "undertake structured dialogue on the functioning of legal system," which concluded that there was a need for reform, as the RS had indicated, but to which Bosniaks were opposed, hence the second threat of a referendum in July 2015, which was finally abandoned two years later.

However, the RS organised a referendum that was deemed unconstitutional on 25th September 2016 to establish 9th January 1992, the day of its declaration of independence, as National Day. During this celebration on 9th January 2017, Milorad Dodik declared, *"Bosnia is a useless State, a monster, a failure on the part of the international community."* He went further on 9th January 2018. *"The Serbs have two States, Serbia and the RS and we want to form just one,"* without ruling out the organisation of a referendum when the conditions were right. These public declarations – generally before elections – immediately create response on the part of the Bosniak leaders. Then follows a poisonous climate, which *"is excellent for the political elites because they can easily manipulate the population."*[22]. In April 2016, Milorad Dodik expressed his commitment to European integration however and stated that the *"RS does not want to split and is ready for dialogue"*[23] – which he repeated in September 2017 – but these contradictory declarations are confusing matters and maintain the feeling of doubt: commitment is forgotten and the threat retained. It is in fact Serbia that has been tempering the RS's propensity to secession.

It is true that with its 14 governments and 180 ministers for 3,350,000 inhabitants BiH is a very costly institutional aberration. In Mostar it has been impossible to hold local elections since 2008 and the town is deeply divided[24]. Dayton stopped the war, but nothing followed for the organisation of peace. A new Constitution was almost born in April 2008, but the SDA[25] opposed it. And bids to reform with the mediation of the EU and the USA have not been successful either. However, for the last 20 years the international community has maintained a protectorate via the Office of the High Representative (OHR), provided for by the Dayton Agreements, which has now become an anachronism. Appointed by the Peace implementation Council, PIC, the HR gives account to the UN Security Council every six-months in reports that are very quickly forgotten. Used or blamed, often impeding the Union's initiatives, it is not facilitating the transition from "Dayton to Brussels", whilst its role had been key immediately after the war.

20. Bosnia is divided into two entities: the Republic of Serbs and the Bosno-Croatian Federation – itself divided into ten cantons and the district of Brcko, according to the Dayton Agreements.

21. According to the 2013 census whose results were published in 2016.

22. Miladen Ivanic, Serb President of the triumvirate, interview in Dnevni List, 2nd February 2016.

23. At the Economic Forum of Jahorina 20th April 2016.

24. Even the schools have separate classes between Croatian and Bosniak children in what is called "two schools under one roof"; public transport is separate.

25. The Islamic Path Party that became the Just Path Party led by Bakir Izetbegovic.

In spite of there being no constitutional reform to eradicate ethnic discrimination the European Union did however accept the signature of the SAA in exchange for reforms that had been blocked for a very long time. A welcome shock came with the coordination mechanism for relations with the Union that had been under negotiation since 2011 and was agreed in August 2016; a further IMF loan was accepted together with radical reform – SAA was adapted following Croatia's accession. In this optimistic spirit the Council accepted BiH's bid to apply for membership on 15th February 2016 and asked the Commission to prepare its opinion, in compliance with article 49 of the Treaty. By doing this the Union hoped that BiH would rise beyond its ethnic divisions, but the leap has not yet taken place.

Tension continues, especially as the co-President[26] Bakir Izetbegovic, asked the International Court of Justice to re-examine Serbia's responsibility in the war, without the agreement of the triumvirate and against the wishes of the federal government. This tension rose again following the obstruction to the reform of the electoral law that was vital however, in view of the elections in October 2018. Given the risk of instability the Council renewed the EUFOR/Althea mission mandate on 16th October 2017 together with its executive powers. BiH's progress towards the Union will necessarily mean making drastic reforms to prove that the three ethnic groups want to live 'in one united sovereign country', as the Council recalled. Russia is taking advantage of this situation to strengthen its ties with the RS, and Turkey with the Bosniak side of the Federation.

Unlike the six Yugoslav Republics, Kosovo was a Serb province to which Tito granted autonomy in 1974. Its suppression by Milosevic in 1990 firstly led to non-violent resistance by Ibrahim Rugova, then to the formation of the liberation army in 1996 (UCK) after the international community "forgot" Kosovo. Violent repression on the part of the Serb army which drove out hundreds of thousands of Albanians led to the NATO bombings until the Serb withdrawal in 1999. The negotiations of Rambouillet failed in March 1999

with Serbia's refusal to grant greater autonomy to Kosovo. The UN Resolution 1244 of 10th June granted it "significant autonomy" and placing it under the international mandate of UNMIK, a UN interim administrative mission, that of NATO, KFOR, that guaranteed security. Forgotten once more by the international community Kosovo made itself known again during violent clashes in March 2004. The plan that it asked former President Ahtisaari to prepare was rejected by Serbia because it advocated "supervised independence". The last resort initiative on the part of the Union led by Ambassador Ischinger with the USA and Russia, also failed. Noting the stalemate Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence on 17th February 2008 with the full agreement of the USA and Member States of the European Union. Five EU States refused to acknowledge it - Greece, Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Cyprus – nor did Russia and China. It remains a State with limited sovereignty, subject to three "protectorates": of NATO by KFOR, of the UN by UNMIK but de facto without any power since EULEX took over.

EULEX - EU Rule of Law Mission, police, justice and customs – created in 2008, is the biggest civilian mission ever deployed by the Union with over 3000 agents seconded by the Member States at the height of its intervention. Approved by Kosovar law, it was extended until June 2018 for justice alone, in a reduced format with its executive powers. The police and customs components were successful, that of justice lost a major share of its legitimacy. And yet it was the source of high expectation after UNMIK failed to stem corruption. But operating in a complicated environment and on difficult cases with non-permanent foreign judges EULEX – just like the OHR in BiH – became the tool of a protectorate with an ineffectual mandate which removed accountability of local authorities, causing the mistrust of the populations.

Mistrust has already emerged of the Special Court established to rule over allegations of organ trafficking[27] and other war crimes committed between 1998 and 2000 by some parts of the UCK. Established as part of a Kosovar legal system by a

26. BiH has a collegial presidency of three elected members for four years: Bosniak and Croat elected by the Federation and Serb elected by the RS.

27. Allegations made by Swiss Senator Dick Marty in a report to the Council of Europe in December 2010, whereby organs are said to have been taken from Serb prisoners for commercial ends during the war.

law dating 3rd August 2015, but comprising foreign magistrates, financed by the European Union with its HQ in The Hague to protect the witnesses, this Court was accepted by Pristina to prevent the UN creating a special tribunal, as Russia and Serbia would have liked. As the Court prepared to make its first indictments the Assembly of Kosovo, with the support of a UCK petition, tried to repeal the law by which it was itself created on 22nd December 201. The Quintet[28] recalled on 8th January 2018 that the Special Court "was the only means for Kosovo to show its commitment to justice and the rule of law and to continue receiving international support", brandishing the threat that would weigh, if this was not the case, over the country's rapprochement with the EU and the Atlantic Alliance.

A power struggle then ensued, especially since 76% of Kosovo-Albanians believe that this Court is unjust and that most Kosovars are convinced that it will not serve justice[29], including President Thaci, who did in fact support its creation when he was Prime Minister[30]. It is true that after the presidential pardon that he signed on 29th December 2017 for three former UCK soldiers who were sentenced to 30 years in prison for the murder of a whole family, justice seemed to disappear before the cause of this organisation. It is the traditional type of opposition, just like after any war of independence, between those who believe themselves to be the untouchable "liberator" and those who plead, on the contrary, for truth and justice[31]. Kosovo has now entered a period of turmoil, which was illustrated by the murder of the moderate Serb leader from the north Oliver Ivanovic on 16th January 2018.

With a real unemployment rate of over 40%, emigration estimated at 15% of its population since 2008, endemic corruption and powerful organised crime, the Kosovar State is proving incapable of developing the country. It is maintained by financial transfers on the part of its diaspora and international aid. It is the only country in the Balkans that has still not fulfilled the conditions for the liberalisation of visas by the EU. Its political class, with its clan warfare and rapid enrichment, is constantly avoiding

its responsibilities. The former Prime Minister, who then became President, Hacim Thaci now criticises his mentors, like on the Special Tribunal. His successor Ramush Haradinai, also attacks the Union, masking his inability to rise to challenges, whilst his nepotism has led to a record figure with a government of 100 members[32]. In Pristina as in Sarajevo, from victim to victimisation, sometimes there is only one narrative. And the challenges are great involving a State with limited sovereignty which is only acknowledged by 114 countries. Turkey is trying to establish a footing there, but Kosovo has remained linked to the EU to date and especially to the USA[33], which are in fact its grand protectors.

#### 'STATE CAPTURE', SOVEREIGNTY AND GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Surely, we would not find a wide consensus for EU membership in the Western Balkans as existed in Central Europe. Apart from the weakening of the Union, the reasons for this are multiple: a share of the political class is more concerned by power and its short term gains, which is not precipitating reform and leaves some regions in dire circumstances, in slow transition, which limits investments and benefits corruption as well as organised crime; very high unemployment, which is forcing young people to leave, whilst a drastic decline in the population is possible[34]; Roma living in miserable conditions are often asylum seekers; the return of hard ethno-nationalism is impeding sovereignty and the construction of the State. Yet the voluntary transfer of elements of national sovereignty implied by membership means that the candidate has to be sovereign and speaks with one voice. The paradox of this process is that candidates must build their State and establish their sovereignty, a part of which they will transfer to the European Union! And it is a paradox for the Union itself, which helps build States whose competences it will receive!

The temptation is great to retain power via clientelism, control of the media and abuse of "ethnic" values and minorities brandishing the fear of the other. The Balkans are a mosaic of minorities. Albania has acknowledged nine, and Serbia 20 which each

28. Coordination group: German, France, Italy, UK and USA.

29. Survey by PAX, Center for Peace and Tolerance and Impunity Watch, presented in Pristina 9th October 2017.

30. Indeed he declared to The Independent on 30th August 2015: "After the war not everything went according to plan. Many Serbs were attacked (by individuals from the UCK) out of vengeance or for financial reasons (...) we now have the Special Court to throw all of the light on this. We have nothing to hide."

31. Enver Robelli: « The shame of Kosovar society: no one talks about the victims », Prishtina Insight, 4th January 2018.

32. 5 Deputy Prime Ministers, 21 Ministers and 73 Deputy Ministers, according to Agron Demi, Prishtina Insight, 21st December 2017.

33. And this was all the more so after the agreement signed on 20th December 2017 with the American company ContourGlobal for the construction of a lignite power plan Kosova C of 500 megawatts which will provide half of the country's electricity, with ownership going to the Kosovo in 20 years' time.

34. Except for BiH, all of the Balkans might experience a 15% decrease in their population by 2050 according to the UN's Population Division June 2017.

have a National Council to defend their rights. The balance remains delicate between minority rights and national cohesion. There is also singular governance in the face of significant corruption[35] and the 'State capture'[36], especially in BiH[37], whilst the parliaments, which are weak and sometimes under boycott and the media are held in check, and only play their role as a counterbalance in a limited way. The rift between the formal commitments made by the leaders and informal practices is still a challenge for the Balkans and the Union.

The temptation is also great to turn neighbours into scapegoats, in spite of fresh off the press declarations, of good neighbourliness. The double complaint made by Croatia and Serbia for the genocide of the other before the ICJ, the rehabilitation of war criminals of the Second World War by Zagreb and its refusal to implement the arbitration decision regarding the maritime waters with Slovenia, undermine stability. However, the latter occurs via integration into the Union, as Ivica Dacic, Minister for Foreign Affairs, declared "we have not had stability in the Balkans for a 100 years, but we now have the same goal: to become members of the European Union," thereby supporting the SAP's demand for "good neighbourly relations" Many gestures have taken reconciliation forward: the spectacular rapprochement between Albania and Serbia by Prime Ministers Vucic and Rama, notably with the historic visit of the latter to Belgrade on 11th November 2014; the visit by the three co-presidents of BiH to Belgrade in 2014 and then Aleksander Vucic's attendance in Srebrenica in July 2015; regrets expressed by President Izetbegovic on the site of the Serb martyrdom in Kazami on the heights over Sarajevo in June 2016; the commitment made at the Vienna Forum in 2015 to settle their differences via negotiation; the historic signature by Bulgaria and Macedonia of a Friendship Treaty for good neighbourly relations and cooperation" on 2nd August 2017.

As for the ICTY although it helped establish the truth, it owes this more to decisive action on the part of its prosecutors and their methodical collation of the facts, whilst some of its decisions damaged its credibility.

And especially after the formal cooperation of the States via the arrest and transfer of criminals, their informal non-cooperation continued to make them heroes who had defended their mother country. But "*the contribution to the re-establishment of peace and reconciliation is a political responsibility. There is no peace with a judicial decision.*"[38]. Facing up to the past has therefore remained limited and nationalism persists. Reconciliation will only really progress via civil society, via action such as the Youth Initiative for Human rights or RECOM[39].

The weakness of the rule of law led the European Union to step up its membership criteria by the adoption of a "new approach" by the Council in December 2011: the processing of chapters[40] 23-24 devoted to justice, fundamental rights, corruption and security is placed early in the process; with detailed action plans real results – track records – are vital and the progress of negotiations is linked to progress being made in these chapters. It is a major adaptation with effective benchmarking that comes in addition to two other founding pillars for accession, namely economic governance and the reform of the civil service. The process will become credible in the eyes of the Member States and civil society on condition that the quest for stability by the Union does not dominate over the need for democracy. The challenge is such however that it will not be met unless civil society becomes the "fourth pillar" of the process with the Union.

The Union's soft power, even if it is supported by the prospect of membership, will only succeed if the political elites are determined and that there are strong pressure groups. As long as the transition towards institutional democracy is still a major challenge in the Western Balkans, their integration of the Union will remain difficult.

## SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO: MEMBERSHIP IN 2025?

In his inaugural speech to the European Parliament in 2014, the President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker caused a stir in the Balkans as he maintained that no further members would be joining during his

35. The most corrupt institutions according to the Balkan Barometer 2017 are the political parties 82%, justice 80% and the hospitals 79%. And 73% of the citizens believe that their government does not fight corruption effectively (CCR, Sarajevo, October 2017).

36. A system whereby politicians, economic or pressure groups have policies, laws and regulations adopted or they circumvent existing rules (public procurement, administrative authorisation) to their advantage, to that of their party or their business.

37. Milada Vachudova: 'The Thieves of Bosnia', Foreign affairs, February 2014.

38. Pierre Hazan: 'La justice face à la guerre', Ed. Stock, 2000.

39. Youth Initiative for Human Rights; RECOM: 'Regional commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other serious violations of human rights, committed in the former Yugoslavia 1991-2001'.

40. European legislation was divided into 35 thematic chapters for the negotiations.



mandate. He was however only stating the obvious since the process had not made much progress. He therefore caused a surprise during a press conference on 9th November 2017 as he declared, "I really think that Serbia & Montenegro will be members of the EU before 2025."

In spite of its Russian tropism Montenegro rapidly understood that its future was both outside of the Union with Serbia and in the European Union. After a referendum it proclaimed its independence on 3rd June 2006, which the Serb minority did not accept. Domestic tension then followed, and the opposition boycots the Parliament at times. The accession negotiations, opened in 2012, have progressed as far as the launch of 30 chapters, three of which have been provisionally closed. Some wonder however about the effective ability of the "Djukanovic clan" in office for the last 27 years, to implement the reforms included in the plans for chapters 23 and 24. It may be difficult to cut the branch one is sitting on.

It is rather more Serbia that is proving the Union's force of attraction. After the consultative opinion of the ICJ on 22nd July 2010, which said that Kosovo's declaration of independence was not contrary to international law and to the UN's resolution 1244, President Tadic accepted that the EU "facilitate" dialogue with Kosovo – which was to establish good neighbourly relations and which was a condition for the opening of membership negotiations. It was the UN resolution 64/298 dated 10th September 2010, which approved this for the "achievement of progress on the path to the EU and to improve the lives of the population." The so-called "technical" dialogue that was launched in March 2011 was followed by "political" dialogue started by Boris Tadic's successors.

And his successors are leaders of parties, who to date, have been the most nationalistic: President Nikolic and his Prime Minister Vučić of the Progressive Party (SNS) and Minister Dačić of the Socialist Party (SPS). Like the HDZ in Croatia these parties have "converted to Europe" – a conversion of reason rather than of the heart, since President Nikolić justified Serbia's membership as "a necessary evil" because "we are in Europe, surrounded by Europe and the conditions set

by the EU are normal"[41]. The elections in 2014 and April 2016 confirmed the choice of power. Conditionality was validated by Serbia's determination to use this to change the course of history, thereby finding a solution to territorial disputes in integration[42]. The support of Serb public opinion is proof of this incidentally[43], even though it remains limited.

Many agreements have been signed during a number of meetings in Brussels facilitated by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Catherine Ashton then Federica Mogherini) on the movement of vehicles, the mutual recognition of diplomas, energy and telecommunications, notably in April 2013[44] and in August 2015. One remarkable fact: the 43 judges and 13 prosecutors were sworn in by President Thaci on 24th October 2017, thereby confirming the judiciary integration of the north into independent Kosovo, whilst fully respecting the rights of the Serb minority. However, implementation is often impeded by Belgrade and several agreements have fallen by the wayside, in particular the rather emblematic one regarding the Association of Serb Municipalities in the north, because Pristina was unable to establish it. Dialogue is indeed at a turning point. For Kosovo it aims to achieve the total normalisation of its relations with Serbia, including its recognition, whilst Serbia's objective is to achieve specific rights for its minority that is concentrated mainly in the north and progress towards the Union by satisfying conditions, but refusing to acknowledge Kosovo. This is what Pristina has noted, whilst the country that has only been acknowledged by 23 Member States and is still outside of the UN, has only a limited sovereignty. Its credibility is waning as the government is proving incapable of honouring the commitments that it has made.

The opening of chapters 23 and 24 as part of the membership negotiations in June 2016 has underpinned Belgrade's policy. But slow progress on these chapters limited the opening of any new ones to two in December 2017 – in line with the new approach – bringing the total to 12, of which two have been provisionally closed. President Vucic's growing

41. Interview in Sputnik 9th May 2016.

42. Jacques Rupnik, *Les Banlieues de l'Europe. Les politiques de voisinage de l'Union européenne*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2007.

43. February Survey 2017: 47% for the integration of the EU, 29% against. And 64% of citizens believe that the reforms made for membership will improve their life.

44. 'Association of Serb Municipalities in the north, and a special system for the police and the judicial. Agreement found also regarding energy and telecommunications in August 2015, finally implemented at the end of 2016.

authoritarianism, his total control over office and his hold over the media are the cause of concern, as revealed by the demonstrations in Belgrade against him, against corruption, in support of the freedom of the media after the elections in April 2017. Serb think-tanks believe that the European Union has privileged stability over democracy, thereby taking the risk of integrating a new authoritarian regime. It is true that Belgrade has enjoyed a “bonus” to date in terms of dialogue and its regional commitment, thereby attracting Brussels’ goodwill.

The outcome of the dialogue remains uncertain however. “It is time for our nation to be realistic ... We must not allow ourselves to lose or to give what we have to someone else, but we must not wait for the things that we lost a long time ago to be returned to us either ... the Serb nation must stop hiding its head in the sand.,” wrote President Vucic in the Blic on 23rd January 2017, indicating a potentially courageous decision regarding Kosovo. However, from the President to the Ministers, everyone continues to maintain that “Serbia will never acknowledge Kosovo”. Is this from fear of losing a part of the electorate or the desire to keep this key card until the end of the negotiations? The Union has not requested recognition but “a legally binding agreement” to guarantee the existence of the State of Kosovo and to ensure that Serbia will not impede regional cooperation after its accession.

The leniency that the EU is said to show to the governments of the Balkans in general and to Serbia in particular, is also to be found in the influence that the major powers are trying to exercise there.

### THE NEW GAME OF RE-EMERGING POWERS

The appetite of the re-emerging powers in the Balkans is on a par with their strategic and economic visions. In 2014 the 3rd China-Central and Eastern European Summit (16 States) took place in Belgrade and the 6th took place in Budapest in October 2017. And the visit by President Xi Jinping in June 2016 led to the purchase of the Smederovo Steelworks and 22 cooperation agreements. China sees Serbia as a portal to its Silk Road, where the Belgrade-Budapest

railroad would enable the transport of its products from the port of Piraeus (which it purchased) to the heart of Europe. Work started in November 2017 on a loan to Serbia of nearly 300 million \$ for the first section.

But it is clearly the legacy of the former empires which weighs the most in Russia and Turkey’s new game. Russia is playing on history, on the Slav and Orthodox links, on the “original sin” of NATO’s bombings in 1999, on energy and on its opposition to the independence of Kosovo, to develop its relations with Serbia and also with the RS, the conservative parties in Macedonia and the Serb parties in Montenegro. Every crisis is an excuse for the assertion of an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic alliance of the Western Balkans. Because it has firstly been Russia’s obsession to prevent other countries from joining NATO that has driven it along. Hence Montenegro witnessed Russia behind the supposed coup in Podgorica in October 2016[45], i.e. four months after the country signed its membership agreement to become the 29th NATO member on 5th June 2017, thereby making the north Mediterranean a NATO area from Spain to Turkey, except for the 20km of Bosnian coastline. It is easy to understand why Serguey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister spoke in Belgrade on 12th December 2016 of “Djukanovic’s betrayal”, who was a Moscow ally for a long time. In retaliation Russia banned the import of Montenegrin wines on health grounds. However, relations between Russia and the RS are close, in the ilk of the links between Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik, - to the point that his Assembly adopted a (non-binding) resolution against the accession of BiH to NATO[46].

As for Serbia the government repeats copiously that its priority remains membership of the EU, but without sacrificing its friendship with Russia. Its refusal to implement the European sanctions against Moscow, its recent purchase of 6 second hand Mig 29s and the regular visits made by President Vucic and his minister Dacic to Moscow, reflect the close links that tie the two countries together. Moscow provided an emergency loan to Serbia in 2013 and another for the renovation of the railways[47], and

45. Which led to the arrest of two pro-Serb and pro-Russian opponents, others who were presumed guilty, Serbs and Russians who left Montenegro very quickly.

46. BIRN/Balkan Insight, 8 June 2017.

Gazprom purchased the refinery in Nis. We also note the clear rise in activities on the part of organisations advocating for stronger relations with Russia and the abandonment of the idea of joining the EU[48]. But the low impact of their free-trade agreement, Belgrade's refusal to grant diplomatic protection to the "Russo-Serb Humanitarian Centre" established in Nis in 2012 and its participation in eight times more military exercises and missions with NATO and the Union than with Russia[49], are all elements that temper this relationship somewhat. In Belgrade's eyes, beyond the traditional strong links, it is rather more a question of simultaneously maintaining the counterbalance of Moscow over Kosovo in the UN and of playing on this ambiguous relationship, whilst retaining its nationalist electorate and progressing its cause with Brussels. Russia's policy is clear: to divide the "West", strengthen its economic presence in this future Union member and especially, to prevent Serbia from becoming a member of NATO. Although Serbia wants "not to become a NATO member but remain militarily neutral" as Ana Brnabic declared in the European Parliament on 10th October 2017, it has been participating however in the Partnership for Peace since 2006 and committed to close cooperation via an Individual Action Plan in January 2015. The propaganda and ambiguity of those in office contribute to the tension in Serb society. But although the heart of Serbia is Slav, its logic really does seem to lie with the EU.

As for Turkey, it is forming links with the former territories of the Ottoman Empire in line with the plan of former Prime Minister Davutoglu, as it counts on history, economic ties and muslim solidarity. Via economic trips, cultural aid and political support – Ankara has stepped up its action in the Balkans, particularly in BiH and Kosovo. President Erdogan went as far as declaring in Pristina on 23rd October 2013: "Turkey is Kosovo and Kosovo is Turkey. We are all children of the same country, strong and united like brothers," causing the wrath of Belgrade. In October 2017 his official visit to Serbia ended in a triumphal break in Novi Pazar in Sandjak, the former Ottoman crossroads. However, Turkey's influence remains limited, especially since the rift with the

Gülenist movement which led to confusion, notably as the network of schools which he created in the region were criticised on Ankara's request.

Although the influence of Russia and Turkey is undertaken relatively openly there is a more secret and ambiguous trend – that of the fundamental Islamic groups which established themselves with the Mujahedeen during the war in BiH. Whilst de-Islamisation took place in Yugoslavia during Tito's era, Islam is growing in a complex manner, between tradition and modernity, "which opens the way to radical preachers"[50]. Since the war dozens of Koranic schools, humanitarian associations and mosques have opened in BiH, all financed by the oil monarchies. The country is said to host some 64 "sharia" communities, with 4000 people who might become as many bases for the withdrawal of fighters returning from the Middle-East[51]. BiH and Kosovo are amongst the countries which provided the most fighters for Daesh, in proportion to the size of their populations: 250 and 314 respectively[52], followed by Macedonia with 140 and Albania with 30. 19 organisations were banned in Kosovo because of "incitement to hate or the recruitment of terrorists" and 14 imams have been arrested, including the one from the grand mosque of Pristina. Although many fighters returning from Syria and Iraq were sentenced to prison, control of them remains difficult, notably in the mountainous regions of BiH.

It also involves the old "Albanian issue" which runs alongside talk of the myth of "Grand Albania" revived by Sali Berisha as the country celebrated the centenary of the country's independence in 2012, or by Edi Rama in June 2016 as he declared in Pristina: "Albania and Kosovo are but one country, one people, a joint dream." This was repeated by Hashim Thaci on 20th April 2017: "If the European Union closes its door on Kosovo, then a union of all the Albanians in the region will move to form a single, unified country." For his part, in July 2016, Bakir Izetbegovic launched a "regional coalition" at Novi Pazar of his party, the SDA, to federate all of the Bosniaks. The idea continues in effect amongst some leaders of cutting up the borders to create mono-ethnic States: North

47. 500 and 800 million dollars respectively

48. Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Belgrade, May 2016; according to which 109 organisations including 30 media, actively produce propaganda for Russia as well as the Orthodox Church.

49. According to Prime Minister Ana Brnabic at the Belgrade Security Forum, 11th October 2017.

50. Jean-Arnaud Dérens and Laurent Geslin: 'Dans les Balkans, le plus vieil islam de l'Europe', *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2016.

51. Tatiana Dzonzina, Suleiman Muça: 'De-radicalising the WB', *Albanian Daily News*, 23rd June 2017.

52. Center for Security Studies, Pristina, November 2017.

Kosovo and RS with Serbia, Albanian territories with Albania and Kosovo, which has always been rejected in international negotiations because of the evident danger of violence. Beyond the extreme language which the Balkans are used to these theories and declarations feed activist groups in the different minorities, which is adventurous in a region where such dreams have ended in bloodshed, like that of Grand Serbia. They lead to a dangerous climate, especially if these ethnic claims should one day don the garb of Islam.

"If joining the European Union were no longer on the agenda, the regional would become a grey zone in which other players would become more influential," declared Edi Rama on 17th April 2017. These external influences and the dangers that they represent, as well as the migratory crisis, are the ones that pushed Angela Merkel to launch the Berlin Process on 28th August 2014 to re-engage the Union in the Western Balkans.

### TOWARDS THE RE-ENGAGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

At the Berlin Conference the Balkan leaders promised to step up reforms for good governance, for the rule of law and to facilitate active participation by civil society as well as the pluralism of the media. They also spoke in support of settling bilateral issues, promoting reconciliation and developing regional cooperation, notably in terms of transport and energy. Nothing really new in comparison with the many conferences of the same kind since Thessaloniki, except that it was taking place in Berlin, at the heart of Europe's leading power and convened by the Chancellor. Vienna took over on 27th August 2015 by highlighting the transport and energy networks in what was to become "the connectivity agenda", and by getting the leaders' signatures on a charter for the solution of bilateral issues.

This process continued in Paris on 4th July 2016 when the RYCO, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, was launched on the Franco-German model. The Trieste Summit on 12th July 2017 established the

Berlin Process in real, much expected initiatives: "the connectivity agenda, with 7 project for a total 500 million € of which 194 million supported by the Union's' budget and the remainder in loans from financial institutions, which brought the total number of projects up to 20 for a total of 1.4 billion €; signature of the Transport Community Treaty<sup>[53]</sup>, which provides that the Western Balkans will take up the *acquis communautaire*, like that of energy signed in 2006; a regional economic zone – on the initiative of Albania and Serbia -to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, investments and qualified workers, with a detailed action plan; facility for the development of SMEs and Innovation, with 48 million € from the Union, under the responsibility of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry; a Research Foundation for granting aid to young researchers.

And so the Union has re-engaged via real regional projects since the SAP alone cannot guarantee more stability to the Western Balkans and the perspective of accession is still a far off goal for some. Yet their stability is vital whilst the "Balkan Route" places these countries at the heart of migration to Europe. In the eyes of Federica Mogherini, who brought six leaders together in Brussels on 19th December 2017, "2018 will offer a unique opportunity for irreversible progress to be made towards EU integration, on condition that the greatest importance be given to vital reform, particularly the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights," which the leaders promised to do of course, as well as "to strengthen their good neighbourly relations and promoting regional understanding."

In its enlargement strategy, expected in February, the Commission will explain how 2018 will be "a unique opportunity", with a roadmap for Serbia and Montenegro to continue their membership process and via proposals to open negotiations under certain conditions with Macedonia, and with Albania whose courageous reforms cannot be ignored. Stability in the Western Balkans will indeed be greatly secured by the accession of Serbia and Albania, since Croatia has already become a member; the Albania we are talking about here is not only designated for its own

<sup>53</sup>. Except for BiH regarding issues of domestic competence which it signed in September.

merits, but also as an influential State, which is listened to in Kosovo and by the Albanian minorities and also as proof that the Union does not rule out a State with a Muslim majority.

Is the European Union's new awareness of the Balkans enough for the long awaited reforms to be launched and for them to become permanent? It seems not, because financing is far too low in view of the needs and expectations. Bulgaria and Serbia have the same sized population. But 11.7 billion € are planned for the former in 2014-2020 in comparison with 1.5 under the IPA for the latter, i.e. a ratio of one to eight. Serbia will undoubtedly receive eight times more one day. But it is now that it needs more funds. It is time to end the division between new member countries to whom too much is paid for the sums even to be absorbed and candidate countries which cruelly lack the means to succeed their transition. The credibility of the Union vis-à-vis its citizens, investors and in the face of the re-emerging countries depends on this. The price of instability is always very high. Stability can also be bought via increased financing.

It is high time that the Union create a significant, temporary (2019-2020) "Connectivity Fund" from the European budget - which is also open to education and healthcare - before it becomes a permanent part of the multi-annual financial framework 2021-2027, to a total that matches the needs and issues at stake, both geostrategic and economic; i.e. opening post-membership programmes to the candidate countries and notably the Cohesion Fund. Financing would however be made under conditions: the States would have the right to draw on them if real progress in chapters 23 and 24 were made and for which everyone would have to prepare an action plan. This conditionality would stimulate reform and lead to virtuous competition between the States to benefit from the financing. Moreover, after accession European funds would be conditioned on the respect of European values and the principles of the rule of law<sup>[54]</sup>.

Secondly, priority should be given to the economy via the speedy implementation of the regional economic zone. As for the countries whose membership prospects remain distant, maintaining the illusion of a fast process will simply increase frustration. Also, a roadmap should be drafted so that they can integrate the internal market, as a first stage, in the ilk of the agreement with Ukraine.

Thirdly, the European Union should commit to start active mediation in the numerous bilateral disputes "because all of these problems have to be solved prior to the countries joining," as Jean-Claude Juncker declared on 9th January 2018, as he advocated their use of the arbitration services of the ICJ if necessary. But to avoid the situation in which the arbitration decision is rejected - as Croatia did with Slovenia - European funds would again be conditioned according to its respect. As for Serbia-Kosovo dialogue it has, in the eyes of both parties, become ridiculous with each deeming itself to be victim of the other's bad faith. Since facilitation is no longer enough, active engagement by the High Representative has become necessary with follow-up given to the decisions taken. Fourthly, "civil society" should be invited to play the fourth pillar in the pre-membership process at different levels in which its role is vital, notably for the implementation of chapters 23 and 24 and by civil action for reconciliation that the Union ought to finance. Finally, the integration of the Roma communities should become a national priority of the governments thanks to significant measures taken notably in terms of housing, education and vocational training, especially since most of the Balkan region will be witnessing dramatic demographic decline.

Although the political classes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo deem that the European Union owes them preferential treatment, the Balkan leaders realise that the interest that the EU has, in the main, a great deal more to do with their geostrategic position and the dangers that the failure of their transition would imply. And they know how to play on this. They also know that the Union and its public opinion, given the many internal problems they face are not in a hurry to receive them. It would however be dangerous

<sup>54</sup>. To prevent them challenging or not respecting the rule of law as Hungary and Poland are doing today.

for lukewarm support to dominate over the Union's strategic interest, since the stability of the Western Balkans is a guarantee of our security. Indeed, the European Union should "open up to the countries of the Balkans ... it is a condition for them not to turn their backs on Europe and move either towards Russia or Turkey or towards authoritarian powers which do not defend our values," as President Macron declared in a speech that marked the end of the return of France on the European stage[55].

The integration process there is an investment in Europe's security that public opinion would accept more easily if a "partnership" substituted Turkey's membership project as suggested by Emmanuel Macron on Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit

to Paris on 5th January 2018[56]. It is time for the Union to launch a strong initiative to make its re-engagement in the Western Balkans even firmer, by honouring the promise made fifteen years ago in Thessaloniki, to reduce the attraction of external sirens and to prevent further violent crises. As Federica Mogherini declared in Sarajevo on 4th March 2017 after a difficult visit to the Balkans: "*What is at stake here is peace, stability, security and economic opportunities for all, regional cooperation, and what I might call, the reunification of our continent.*"

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