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**Contribution to the discussion on the Future of Europe Conference**

The zoom discussion of **PISM** (Polish Institute of International Affairs) and **SDMO** (Slovenian Association for International Relations) titled: **”The EU in the Changing World – Perspectives from Poland and Slovenia”** on 13 May 2021, has tackled EU’s global positioning and the Western Balkans enlargement challenges. Discussion in full is available on youtube. Some points raised in the debate may be of value as contribution to the Future of Europe Conference debate. First part of the debate was devoted to the EU’s future global role and the second to Western Balkans enlargement.

Participants in the discussion from PISM were: Lukasz Jurczyszyn, Marta Szpala, Melchior Szczepanik and from SDMO: Jože Kunič, Mirko Cigler, Marjan Šetinc

Following are written contributions by Amb. Marjan Šetinc and Amb. Jože Kunič:

**On EU’s global positioning**

**Marjan Šetinc, SDMO President**

EU is busy with Resilience and Recovery plans…with pandemic…migrants, is facing challenges internally as externally. There is little doubt that we are witnessing an incredibly dynamic, vigorous global situation, probably instigated by the realisation on both sides of the Atlantic that economic, military and technological rise of China is a threat to Euro-Atlantic dominance.

Three economies (China, USA and EU) presently account for 50% (49,56%) of the world’s GDP in terms of PPP (the latest 2021 World Bank estimate). Brexit pushed EU behind US in PPP GDP terms. In PPP terms China has far the highest GDP at 26.657 billion USD, US with 22.675 billion USD and EU with 20.918 billion USD are considerably behind, but it is not just for the GDP, the military and defence expenditure of China in 1999 were just 6,7% of America’s military spending which 20 years later grew to 35,7% of American military and defence spending at 732 billion USD (2019)! EU cumulative military and defence expenditure reached 208 billion USD or 28,4% in 2019 of the US military budget. But most important is the technological race which is impacting (and outbalancing) global geopolitics…

The Economist 1st of May cover story: The most dangerous place in the world…describing the intriguing Taiwan situation which stirred strong reaction in China but also in Taiwan. Two days later, in [an exclusive interview](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1869649.shtml) with the Associated Press, China’s Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng warned the U.S. against playing the “Taiwan card.” He also implied that China is open to resorting military force…

Henry Kissinger (US State Secretary under President Nixon), just a few days earlier, spoke at Chatham House saying that ”The United States will have to reach an understanding with China on a new global order to ensure stability or the world will face a dangerous period like the one which preceded World War I. And warned of the disaster for the world in case of two greatest technological military clash.”

The European citizen is wandering: Where should EU stand in this confrontation – what position would EU be taking? The European political analysts are no doubt already challenging this question?

When we talk about EU’s place globally, how to maintain its position in the future, we are inevitably faced with challenging questions like, where do we belong, what strategic moves should EU do, where should EU focus its political influence? Are the present EU policies the right policies concerning i.e. Turkey, Iran, China, Russia, Africa (i.e. should EU follow the Chinese approach to match the Belt and Road program for Africa?)

The economic and political situation in the world is quickly changing. Where is EU today in facing the rise of China and the America’s intention to retain her global dominance? Can US compete with China without Europe and vice versa. Are global challenges inevitably forcing EU into economic and political cohesion and acting together…? Should we unite forces for mankind progress? It is becoming clear the human future is in multilateral cooperation, how fair it has been, should the Europocentric view be re-evaluated?

There is a continuing tendency to hegemonisation of the planet which is not something unknown back in history…

The challenge for **global primacy** seems is getting a momentum. However, challenge should be focussed into a carbon free planet and saving the planet for future generations which requires serious political wisdom of global powers, this is a strength of the EU and should be a major determinant against confrontation and policies leading to political blocks and a (new) cold war.

**On EU’s enlargement imperative of Western Balkan countries**

EU’s global impact starts, no doubt, in its neighbourhood. The 2003 Thessaloniki summit was a success for EU and encouragement for Western Balkan! Since then the accession perspective/process has turned into a moving target, with very hesitant EU side, setting accession requirements (conditions) almost as unachievable/ unattainable hurdle for Western Balkan candidate countries. Accession process is further slowed by the neighbouring EU countries which are stepping in with absurd demands, probably encouraged by the change of Macedonia’s name achieved by Greece, where the EU stepped aside, done too little to calm the case, in fact left the Greek pressure to drag on for years.

On 1 May President Stevo Panderovski of North Macedonia gave an interview on the Euronews TV channel, the sentence he said should loudly resonate in the Brussels corridors (and, of course, corridors of the major EU member states decision makers), he said: ”delaying opening of accession negotiations is destabilizing the region (Western Balkans)”.

If bilateral conditioning (black mailing) is not banned by any EU treaty, bilateral problems are left to countries involved. There are unresolved problems between present member states and do not put their membership under question mark.

Oliver Varhelyi EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement passed the idea to decouple Albania and North Macedonia in the accession process. *This would put North Macedonia to the mercy of Bulgaria (and in turn Albania) – (cultural pressure, Albanian territorial pressure…)*, which makes president Panderovski’s worry very real …

Uncertainty of the accession process is opening these countries to other influences and partnerships. China and Russia do not hesitate to fill the gap. China with projects and investments and Russia through its historic ties *(according to some analysts is losing influence?)*. But it’s not only Russia and China also Turkey, the rich Gulf countries are here especially in parts of the Western Balkans with predominant Muslim population.

However, not everything is so bleak *(or has gone the ”wrong” way)*, from our point of view.

The enlargement fatigue within the EU has been delaying the accession process but has, against all odds, produced some positive developments.

In 2008 Slovenian Presidency succeeded in a breakthrough with visa liberalization for all non-EU Balkan countries…Slovenia was also strongly supportive of a [visionary EU-Western Balkan Transport Community](https://www.transport-community.org/) that was set up in October 2017 and includes today *all six Western Balkan countries*: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. *This Community aims at full integration in the fields "of road, rail, inland waterway and maritime transport as well as the development of the transport network between the European Union and the six Western Balkan Parties."* Next is so called Mini Shengen. The deal was signed during an online meeting of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia last year. *(Emerging Europe).*

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama have signed a deal on 9 November 2020, which will let citizens of both countries travel to and from the other without the need for a passport.

Is there a middle way for these countries?

In early 2020, European Stability Initiative published a report on the crisis of the EU accession process in the Balkans: [Hamster in the Wheel – Credibility and EU Balkan policy](https://www.esiweb.org/publications/hamster-wheel-credibility-and-eu-balkan-policy). They argued that the EU has a strong political and economic incentive to offer to any *interested* Western Balkan nation the chance to join its Single Market as **an interim goal** in a reformed two-stage EU accession process. And that there was a precedent for this: the "Finnish road to accession." But the question is whether the proposal is realistic? Or is it further delaying the accession?

Is Western Balkan in a strategic focus of the EU? I think it should be. It has for long, from the sixties of the last century, been a cheap labour mine for Europe – *Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Benelux, Nordic countries - Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Albanians* - they were/are a valuable (young skilled) work force which has been for long contributing to the economy of the EU… (*now followed by other Balkan nationals and East Europeans, especially after recent accession to the EU, leaving Balkans to those who remained behind?)*

Involvement of EU in all Western Balkan candidate countries is in no doubt quite substantial, however it should be much stronger, especially in investments which would create jobs and offer perspective to young and skilled people.

Should EU accelerate the accession process… Yes, it should speed up negotiations. But more importantly: The accession (process) would definitely diminish the conflicting situations based on national divisions.

**The Future of the EU and Western Balkans**

Contribution by prof. dr. Jožef Kunič, Honorary President of SDMO

European union was always perceived as the group of nations with the same status. They were and still are equally represented in the Council, each member state has its commissioner and has the relative number of their members of the EU parliament. De facto the conditions of stable and effective EU are well defined and preservable balance of power among the member states is formally guaranteed. We are talking about One – speed EU.

There were some examples of trying to establish a separate block of the EU states, sometimes with the support of some foreign country. This would lead the European construction straight toward disintegration, as some could also take advantage of it.

China promoted the idea of creating alliance 16 + 1. 16 states of central and eastern Europe would strengthen economic links with China. Later this group evolved in 17 + 1, joining Greece in 2019. Although the initiative 17+1 initially had some successful projects, EU succeeded to somehow moderate Chinese influence on the EU unity.

The Three Seas Initiative, is a forum of twelve states in the [European Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Union), along a north–south axis from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea in [Central and Eastern Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_and_Eastern_Europe). This initiative is supported by the USA. The initiative is focusing on funding of cross-border infrastructure projects. We can not exclude the possibility that behind the idea of creating this initiative there is the idea of creating a separate block of eastern members of the EU, creating the tampon zone between the western part of the EU and Russian federation.

The Visegrád Group is a cultural and political alliance of four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), all of which are members of the EU and NATO and advance co-operation in military, cultural, economic and energy matters with one another. It is evident that under the presidency of Mr. Trump the Visegrád group was supported by the USA. The visit of Mr. Pompeo, state secretary, just confirmed it.

Traditionally, the UK played the role of the European balancer, but they opted to leave the EU. The only countries which have the ability to be the balancer are Germany and France. At this moment they seem to try to play this role but yet they haven`t been very successful.

If the EU Parliament together with some important and economically strong members is not successful in balancing the CEE countries, the way towards the Double-speed EU may be opened. After the elections in the USA where Mr. Trump was replaced by Mr. Joe Biden, we can expect that the policy of diminishing the power of the EU will probably be changed. We can not be sure, but it seems that the way towards the split between eastern and central EU will no more be widely open.

European perspective for the Western Balkans will be among the priorities during Slovenia’s Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of this year. Slovenia is among the main initiators of constructive discussion regarding the future of EU enlargement policy. Yearly multilateral meeting of the leaders of the WB countries is called Brdo-Brioni process, which was established by the president of Slovenia Borut Pahor and the president of Croatia Ivo Josipović. It is important that in this month, shortly before Slovenian EU-Council presidency, The Brdo - Brioni meeting will be realized. Let me mention that the Brdo-Brioni process inspired the creation of the Berlin process.

Now the countries of the WB do not expect to become the members of the EU in visible future although they would like it, and the need of the regional cooperation resulted in the creation of some alliances in this region.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (SNS), Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia Zoran Zaev (SDSM) and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama (PS) signed on 9 October 2019 in Novi Sad a Joint Declaration of intent to establish a “Mini Schengen” among the three states. The signed declaration should help the Western Balkans region to start functioning on the basis of four key freedoms on which the European Union is founded - freedom of movement of people, capital, goods and services. It was stressed that the respective initiative is not a compensation or alternative to membership of the countries in the region in the EU. But in fact it replaces some advantages of freedoms which enjoy the EU members. De facto this initiative is a compensation of the EU membership.

Is the EU going towards One-speed EU or towards Double-speed EU? It seems that there are some world superpowers interested in the creating Double-speed EU, EU with two blocs of countries with the possibility of mounting tensions between them. Yet, EU has always been able to surpass such for the unity dangerous ideas and especially after the UK decision to leave the EU, the idea of one-speed EU, strong and stable, is very active. Although the position against the Double - speed EU is supported by important European forces and also by many EU citizens, we can not neglect the possibility that the EU becomes the Double-speed EU. Let us hope that the Conference on the Future of the EU will diminish such a possibility.

The Western Balkans countries strive to enter the EU, but the EU with the democratic values, following the ideas of the Founding fathers. If the EU becomes a Double-speed EU, the WB countries would enter into the eastern part of the EU, a very different alliance with more autocratic values, with less respect of human rights and less freedom of media, not respecting the rule of law and independent judiciary. Is there still any sense to enter such an alliance?

I think that the Double – speed EU is not a good option, neither for the EU nor for the entire world. We should preserve the united EU and do our best that it becomes politically stronger and economically more successful.