

SPECIAL SECTION:

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

FOREWORD

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The first part of this volume contains a selection of the academic contributions presented at the international conference “The European Union and the Western Balkans – Between Lessons Learned and Innovative Ways Forward”, organised on 17 June 2015 at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest by the Department of International Relations and European Integration (DRIIE).

The event was an opportunity to bring together young researchers from Romania, the Western Balkans and EU member states in order to explore the main achievements, failures and limitations of the last two decades of EU foreign, security and enlargement policy in the Western Balkans (1995-2015). Its aim was to highlight to what extent the European Union has succeeded or failed in each country of the region, and why there are differences among the region, thus encouraging a comparative perspective. The presentations touched a very diverse set of topics such as: EU enlargement in the Western Balkan – between a “freeze” of the process and a continuation by other means, rule of law assistance in the Western Balkans and the rise of the “new approach to enlargement”, comparative studies on the impact of conditionality on domestic political outcomes and the current political and security issues in the Western Balkans. The conference concept had two departing points: on the one hand, the perceived “freeze” in the enlargement process following the appointment of the new Juncker Commission in 2014 and on the other hand the potential impact of the latest events in Ukraine on the Western Balkans region.

When Jean-Claude Juncker was elected President of the European Commission in 2014 with the self-assumed mission to create “A new start for

Europe", he announced that no new members would join the European Union in the following five years, but that enlargement negotiations would continue, because there were countries which needed a credible European perspective, especially in the Western Balkans. While this approach initially sparked fears that the European Union might start to "neglect" the region, there are signs of an on-going commitment to the integration of the Western Balkans, albeit at a much slower pace. The continuation of the EU-mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo and the green light given by the Council for the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina are two cases in point. But political turmoil, stagnation and lack of progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria in the Western Balkan countries, as well as specific difficulties in some cases, require alternative solutions to the established path of the EU enlargement process.

On the other hand, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the ensuing crisis in Ukraine brought the temptation to use comparisons with the Western Balkans for the management of international crises. From the "Kosovo precedent" invoked in support of the secessionist referendum in Crimea to the warnings regarding a potential "Bosnization of Ukraine" through internationally-mediated cease-fires, journalists, analysts and politicians alike used references to the Western Balkans to state their case. Although a look at past successes, failures and unintended consequences in the Western Balkans could be useful for designing better responses to secessionist claims and armed conflict in Europe, careful attention has to be devoted to the study of each case's particularities in order to avoid the politicization of such comparisons. In the same context, some political discourses of current European leaders pointed to a sense of urgency in addressing Russia's increasing meddling in the Western Balkans, thus raising questions about the European Union's "monopoly" on the future development directions of the countries in the region. Hence, the conference was also meant to assess to what degree the EU still represents the main reference point in the region.

Lastly, a distinct aim was to reflect on Romania's position towards the Western Balkans, and on the types of support that it can provide in both diplomatic and academic terms. Romania's mandate of the SEECP presidency in 2014 was deemed as successful and helped reach important breakthroughs in regional cooperation.

The papers in this volume address some of the main dimensions (political, social, security, sovereignty or diplomacy-related) of the European integration process of the Western Balkans, by focusing on country (or

comparative) case-studies (papers of A. Hoti and D. Gërguri; D. Ioniță; and O. Moise) or by looking at the region as a whole (papers of R. Ferrero-Turion; and E. Luli). Moreover, some papers analyse intra-EU transformations and internal challenges triggered by an evolving enlargement process (papers of V. Jakovleski; and M. Oproiu). The book reviews in this volume focus on three innovative approaches in analysing the EU's (and other international organisations') role in stabilising the region as a whole, or in individual case studies (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo). The reviews highlight the theoretical and empirical contributions provided by the three young Romanian social scientists - Dr. Gabriela Horoșanu, Dr. Dan Lazea and Dr. Miruna Troncotă by placing their books in the overall European debate on the topic.

To sum up, it is interesting to note that the general perspectives on the region's future are not marked by pessimism and grim predictions anymore, but rather by pragmatic analyses highlighting both the advancement and drawbacks in this process. An important lesson learned from these academic contributions on the European integration of the Western Balkans is that political contexts may influence EU accession, but each country has its own ways of "learning by doing" in order to fulfil the required standards. And even if the process became more complicated throughout the years (through the Commission's strengthening of conditionality benchmarks), the countries in the region - including those confronted with limited or contested statehood - found ways to continue the reforms as EU accession remains their most important incentive for democratic consolidation, economic development and regional cooperation.

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Mihai Ghigiu, and Ioana Melenciuc, as well as the participants in the conference and the reviewers.

Ultimately, our hope is to enhance the Romanian expertise on the Western Balkans, including by facilitating contacts between local scholars and their counterparts from the Western Balkan countries. As more and more EU-funded research schemes require transnational/trans-regional partnerships, we would like to capitalise on this opportunity in order to create viable networks and position the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration as a regional hub of academic expertise in the field of European integration of Romania's neighbours.