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BUILDING FORWARD BETTER AFTER THE RAIN

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THE BALKANS AND EUROPE

BOTH ARE SITTING FOR THE EUROPEAN EXAMS

Miodrag Lekić

Ignoranti, quem portum petat, nullus suus ventus est.
— Seneca

THE Balkans, especially the region's western part, have been sitting for a series of European exams for quite a long time. It has not been easy. Advances have been made, but exams have also been failed—still, it remains possible to retake an exam. Although the awarding of diplomas is not yet in sight, the candidates have neither given up their studies yet, nor do they express a desire to enroll in other universities. At least they have not done so publicly.

But Europe is also taking its own series of European exams. Sure, those exams are of a different type, although the course of study, in its broadest sense, remains the same: Europe. The European Union has arranged to deliver a *lectio magistralis* next spring. The

topic will be the future of Europe. The concluding Conference on the Future of Europe is tentatively scheduled to kick-off on May 9th, 2022—on Europe Day, which marks the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, pronounced in 1950 by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman in the Salon de l'Horloge of the Quai d'Orsay.

“WHO DO I CALL?”

This debate is already open: it has already begun and consists of several levels of participation.

Everything has been conceived as a great exercise in democracy. All proposals concerning the most important issues for the European Union, including ideas regarding its qualitatively new functioning, will in the end be discussed in the

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Photo: Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum

Kissinger's famous question ("Who do I call if I want to call Europe?") is still more relevant than many would like to admit

Conference plenary. This body is to be comprised thusly—here we can quote from the official notification:

108 representatives of the European Parliament, 54 from the European Council (two per member state), and 3 from the European Commission. 108 citizens will participate to discuss citizens' ideas stemming from the Citizens' Panels and the Multilingual Digital Platform: 80 representatives from the European Citizens' Panels, of which at least one-third will be younger than 25, and 27 from national Citizens' Panels or Conference events (one per member state), as well as the President of the European

Youth Forum. Some 18 representatives from both the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, and another eight from both social partners and civil society will also take part, while the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will be invited when the international role of the EU is discussed. Representatives of key stakeholders may also be invited. The Conference Plenary will be gender balanced.

It is evident that everything has been very ambitiously conceived with respect to the method of work and the expected

achievements of this great intra-EU debate. Many topics are envisaged. Even the most sensitive ones, such as the functioning of the European Union (especially its financial and social policies), its foreign and defense policies, and the matter of EU enlargement.

The sensitive issue of reviewing the already adopted treaties and agreements, including the latest one—the Treaty of Lisbon (2009)—will not be omitted from the debate. Its inclusion, however, has already sparked disagreement, because some member states do not agree with the idea of changing the EU’s fundamental treaties. But this is the European Union, based on democracy and the right to be different: unity in diversity or diversity in unity; the European Union, with its not infrequent crises but also with an ability to overcome them with intelligent solutions.

This time, the exercise is about taking stock of the experiences that together represent the road that has been traveled so far. This even includes unexpected experiences such as, for example, the situation that a larger European Union, with more member states, sometimes creates the impression of a weaker Europe. This refers to the frequent blocking of decisions. And in this context as well, the EU also faces one

of its most important exams, which we can call the efficiency of its institutional decisionmaking mechanisms.

Despite the proclamation of the existence of the European Union’s foreign

policy, and the desirable model of greater autonomy and efficiency relating to that segment of the EU’s politics, Henry Kissinger’s famous question is still more relevant than many would like to

admit: “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?”

We know that such a telephone number still does not exist. As of now, in order to receive complete information about foreign policy, one can obtain the number of the central telephone exchange in Brussels, and one’s call will automatically be transferred to 27 other telephone numbers.

EXAMINING ACHIEVEMENTS

In light of all this, the EU’s real achievements in the Balkans can be examined. For example, there remains the indicative fact that five EU member states do not recognize Kosovo’s independence. We can point to an even more concrete fact, namely that the two persons most directly in charge of the EU’s foreign policy towards the Balkans—the EU’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and Vladimir Bilčík, a

Henry Kissinger’s famous question is still more relevant than many would like to admit: “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?”

member of the European Parliament and its Rapporteur for Serbia and Montenegro—come from countries that have not recognized Kosovo’s independence. Naturally, these facts do not diminish their respective personal competencies.

Bearing in mind the EU’s exceptional strengths as well as the limits that hinder the realization of its potential, some believe that today’s European construction resembles Italy in the Renaissance period. The Italian construction of that period was abundant in resources, knowledge, economic potential, culture, and talent; and it was made up of statelets that were divided by their particular interests, often dependent on foreign influences, and had various types of protectorate status.

However that may be, Europe remains a great geopolitical, economic, and cultural stage of the contemporary world. It remains a great subject of international relations, endowed with knowledge, courage, and ability to write new pages both with regards to its development and the role it seeks to play in the world through a reexamination of its historical path. The Old Continent does not want to be relegated to a museum of history, culture, and art. That is why the

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EU remains relevant—foremost economically, but also geopolitically.

On the other hand, Europe is also viewed, not without reason, as one of America’s power centers—after all, it

continues to host the headquarters of NATO.

It remains to be seen how much the announced (or hoped for) changes to the EU will result in new modalities—somewhere between autonomy and a traditional union.

The Conference on the Future of Europe could demonstrate the EU’s strength through the adoption of a potentially new vision and concrete solutions for its more efficient functioning.

For now, it seems that the proclaimed goals of the Conference consist in building “strategic autonomy” and a “strategic compass.” One might say that these two ideas also resemble slogans. Perhaps. But new slogans can potentially lead to a new politics and new policies. We shall soon see.

IMAGINARY AND REAL BALKANS

The fate of the Balkans largely depends on the fate of Europe—more precisely, the fate of the European Union. That is why the year of the great debate about the future of the EU and

its strategic innovations is being followed in the Balkans with great interest.

There is no doubt that the EU's "strategic compass" will reach the Balkans. Everything coincides with the new enlargement methodology that the Western Balkan countries need to adopt in taking further steps toward EU integration.

A separate analysis of the Balkans—bearing in mind the inertia of latent prejudices about the region that, due to its specific past, allegedly lags behind other parts of Europe in both cultural and political terms—contains certain contradictions.

The Balkan region is one that is characterized by various specificities and particularisms. One of these is the indisputable fact that the region is the cradle of European civilization. This primarily refers to the ancient Greek culture, especially its typology of enlightenment.

A Balkanite named Aristotle is the father of various scientific disciplines and the founder of what was called European and is now called Western rationalism. Namely, first Europe became culturally Hellenized and then the world became Europeanized.

Here we come upon complex, even contradictory, concepts about the Balkans. There is no full agreement about even the geographical boundaries of the Balkans, let alone their cultural boundaries. Some countries located

more towards the west are trying to "flee" from the Balkans.

The Balkans are usually seen as a region peopled by various ethnic groups and distinctive nations professing different religions. It is a region said to be char-

acterized by fragmentation, the historical dominance of foreign empires and local resistance to them, nationalism, a historical perspective in which the "past has not passed" or at least passes with difficulty, and so on. All this takes place in different historical cycles—that is, in phases of authentic coexistence of different nations or in phases of mutual intolerance and internecine conflicts. And everything happens in specific international contexts that stimulate one or another of these two directionalities.

If one can say that Bulgarian sociologist Maria Todorova has given particularly relevant and precious considerations about the historical complexity of the Balkans in her book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), one must also add that American political scientist Samuel

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Huntington has pointed to the spiritual components of the overall Balkan complexity in his bestseller, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). Here we can reproduce an important thread of his analysis:

Differences in material interest can be negotiated and often settled by compromise in a way cultural issues cannot. [...] [W]hat might seem to be a straightforward territorial question between Albanian Muslims and Orthodox Serbs concerning Kosovo or between Jews and Arabs concerning Jerusalem [cannot] be easily settled, since each place has deep historical, cultural, and emotional meaning to both peoples.

From a geopolitical perspective, which is often defined by the current status relationship of the Balkans with the European Union, there are three groups of Balkan countries.

First, Greece became an EU member state in 1981. Even its accession to the European Community did not pass without controversies and polemics among its European partners. Namely, alluding to the great cultural and historical debt of Europe and the rest of the world to Greek civilization during the debate about whether Greece had met the criteria for accession to the EU, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing told his European colleagues, in one formulation, that "one does not

leave Plato waiting at the door of Europe" and, in another, that "one does not permit Plato to play in the second division."

Second, Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, while Croatia became an EU member state in 2013.

Third, there remained those countries that—withstanding differences in the speed towards which they have moved in their respective EU accession processes—were shaken the most (and most directly) by the geopolitical earthquake caused by the wild and ruleless disintegration of Yugoslavia. Albania also joined this group of countries on the road to EU accession, carrying the heavy burden of its previous historical cycle of totalitarian rule.

Hence, this third group includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo (not recognized as an independent state by all, both in the region and amongst EU member states). Together, they are regarded by Brussels as more or less associated partners.

Here it can be added that on the basis of having so far opened the most chapters in the accession negotiations, Montenegro is the regional leader in the EU integration process; but it has also encountered serious delays over the past years.

When looking at a political map of the Western Balkans, its territory resembles an island—one that is entirely surrounded by EU member states on both land and sea.

It must be pointed out that the total population of those belonging to the aforementioned third category corresponds roughly to the number of people presently living in, say, Romania. This fact can be helpful in perceiving both the substance and the dynamics of the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries.

Metaphorically speaking, one could say they are like a fleet of very unstable ships sailing on a rough sea. And the port of Brussels is currently undergoing some repairs, which does not particularly encourage their captains to adjust either their respective speeds or the stability of the vessels.

Certainly, all the countries of the Western Balkans aspire to become member states of the European Union. Truth be told, this shared aspiration is much stronger than the ability of each of the region's countries to carry out the reforms needed to adopt EU standards. This refers specifically to reforms in the areas of judiciary, human rights, media

freedom, and the fight against crime and corruption. Not coincidentally, these criteria have been defined as constituting the EU's top priorities or conditions for the countries of the Western Balkans to meet before joining the Union.

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It must be noted, however, that the aforementioned criteria were at the bottom of the list of those to be met in the first, historical, phase of the development of European integration. This was the case for one simple reason. Both the founding states of what has become the EU and the countries that were part of the initial waves of enlargement had, by and large, already met these criteria before the onset of their respective negotiations to accede. The topics of the negotiations dealt with quite different issues.

At this moment it is rather important to convincingly reject the hypothesis that is pessimistically or cynically used to explain the serious delays in the enlargement of the European Union. This is a “double bluff” theory. This alleged bluff is twofold and is expressed, on the one hand, by the aspirant Western Balkan countries, and, on the other hand, by the EU institutions. It consists of the following: behind the official proclamations by both sides regarding the region's future

membership perspectives lies distrust and insincerity—at the end of the day, we're all bluffing together. This is characterized by the view held by one side that the aspiring Balkan countries do not intend to carry out the necessary reforms and by the other that Brussels does not intend to further enlarge the European Union.

Even if we should consider this “theory” more as a joke, we should still note that for all practical purposes the integration process is standing still. In the lexicon of the Brussels institutions this is called “enlargement fatigue.”

In other words, the European Union has been worn out from the cumulative efforts of past enlargement processes, which then is translated to mean that further enlargements must cease, or at least be postponed. This is also said to be due to the allegedly negative inclination of EU citizens towards further enlargement processes.

On the other hand, we can note that the Western Balkans are worn out from the lengthy wait at the door of Europe, as Giscard would have said.

As a consequence, we can observe a scene characterized by a double weariness—a double fatigue. And no Plato is coming to anyone's rescue.

NO GEOPOLITICAL VACUUM

It is not hard to conclude that the status quo framing present-day relations between the Western Balkans and the European Union could result in a stoppage of the latter's geopolitical dynamic in the region. Evidently, such a situation encourages the entry of other players into the same region.

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One of the elementary lessons of history is that geopolitics abhors a vacuum. The empty space is quickly filled with one-time traditional, ever latently friendly countries or new alliances. It is, after all, perfectly legitimate to enter into alliances

on the basis of demonstrably reciprocal interests and preferences, and to do so without endangering third parties.

The three non-EU countries that gravitate most towards the Western Balkans, each in its own way, are China, Russia, and Turkey. Naturally, American influence in the region is also present, frequently in the form of bilateral cooperation, through NATO, and sometimes in the role of a traditional partner of the EU and its member states.

But each of these powers maintains interest-based relations with the Balkan countries, developing various forms of cooperation.

At the moment, the international players present today in the Balkans do not display—at least not visibly—traces of the historically harmful tradition exercised by certain external influences that treated the region as an experimental laboratory, which ultimately led to new destabilizations. In a way, there remains a not-so-new aspiration towards the measurement of power and influence that is, after all, manifested overall in international relations.

We live in a rapidly changing world, and this includes global changes in the balance of power. It is unlikely that the Balkans, as a traditionally turbulent region, can become an isolated island of stability in the event that international relations move towards a new or recycled form of cold war—without, that is, serious strategies and capabilities to overcome mounting crises, but with the actors’ capabilities to “produce” and “manage” crises.

The absence of clearly formulated international strategies coupled with the growing frustration with the status quo in the Balkans resulted, inevitably, in the appearance of new planners: conceivers of new borders and boundaries in the style of the “final solution” masterminds of yesteryear. One such “solution,” which

has recently come from Slovenia in the form of “non-paper,” has considerably stirred the spirits in the Balkans and probably in Brussels, as well.

One thing is for sure: what the Western Balkans needs is not “non-papers” but rather “real papers,” which presupposes the drawing up of real strategies. Otherwise, we will face the risk of reverting to some form of “geopolitical Darwinism.” In the Balkan way; having recourse to our own resourceful devices; with the possible return to the negative tradition of the Balkans.; the one from which originated the “Balkan powder keg” syntagm.

A TIME OF SHORT TELEGRAMS

We live in the time of Twitter, with its 280-character maximum symbolizing the reduction of complicated and complex questions into a certain small number of sentences.

Analogously, “short telegrams” (to remain on a metaphorical plane) cannot replace “long telegrams”—that is to say, serious analyses. And there were telegrams of both sorts in the past; and some exerted a not insignificant degree of influence on the course of history.

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Let us recall one such famous telegram: the “Long Telegram,” the contents of which was transformed into a grand strategy of global proportions.

In the middle of the last century—more precisely, in 1946—U.S. diplomat George Kennan, Chargé d’Affaires at his country’s embassy in Moscow, sent to Washington an exhaustive report on the characteristics of Soviet society. An integral part of his analysis was a proposal for how the United States and its Western allies should “contain” the Soviet totalitarian system, so as to ultimately defeat their rival.

The report largely became the official strategy of the United States in a decades-long rivalry between two great powers—America and the Soviet Union—that dominated the bipolar world. The outcome of the Cold War was such that history confirmed that Kennan’s core insight and the resulting American strategy were correct. The telegram had helped to formulate what some subsequently came to call a “policy of criteria.”

Kennan’s report from Moscow has come to be known in the history of diplomacy under the name, “The Long Telegram.” On an actual and

symbolic plane, the “Long Telegram” demonstrated a serious and thorough knowledge of material facts. It also put forward a sound analysis of the Soviet political and economic system’s causal relationships, its military capabilities, and even the psychological components of its “national idea.”

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Thanks to the performance of such a complex analysis, Kennan arrived at certain conclusions, from foreseeing the outcomes of various processes to defining the real strategies that would defeat the rival Soviet regime in the long run. In fact, this was a method

that had been pioneered much earlier by one of the pioneers of both sociology and positivism, Auguste Comte, according to the following formula: “savoir, prévoir, pouvoir,” which means, in essence, “to know, so as to predict, so as to be able to act.”

That is why there is a thesis that hidden behind the causes of instability is, precisely, the lack of comprehensive analyses and strategies in the world of today—a contemporary world that fails to constitute itself as a functional system, preferably according to the principles of multilateralism, liberal democracy, criteria of justice, and the norms of international law.

All things considered, we live in a time of short telegrams—by which we mean, to extend the metaphor, the (non-)solidity of analyses and the political and diplomatic initiatives constructed on such an unsolid basis.

After all, it may not be a coincidence that Twitter is today a modern and dominant form of political and even diplomatic public communication. The point here is that complex—sometimes even extremely complex—situations are reduced to a certain number of characters. The result? An illusion that the job has been done; but in reality, all that has been done is to delay its completion.

A large, unfinished, and delayed job also refers to the Balkans or, more precisely, the Western Balkans.

STICKS, CARROTS, COURAGE

Let us now come back to the subject of the place of the Western Balkans in Europe. It is necessary to abandon stereotypes and come to terms with reality. The well-known “stick and carrot” approach, sometimes understood mechanically, could not compensate for the lack of a well-conceived strategy.

On the other hand, the constantly repeated warning that “either the Balkans

will be Europeanized or Europe will be Balkanized” has remained.

Two facts are certain. *First*, all Balkan countries have a common position, notwithstanding their many disagreements.

If geopolitical games require the use of classical means such as the “stick and carrot” approach, it is probably necessary today to add “courage” to the formulation, as well.

Probably the only strong consensus in the Balkans today is that the European Union is an absolute priority. *Second*, the European Union has repeatedly expressed that its goal is to complete the process of European integration.

These are two identical, ultimate goals that objectively open up realistic possibilities. There remains the matter of politics being the art of the possible—the art of seeking the modalities of integration.

If geopolitical games require the use of classical means such as the “stick and carrot” approach, it is probably necessary today to add “courage” to the formulation, as well.

A sincere and courageous partnership is an imperative for both sides to achieve success—a genuinely plausible form of success.

Courage will probably also help in producing the appearance of the favorable wind about which Seneca wrote so long ago. ●