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The Europeanization of the Balkans

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ABSTRACT

Europeanization, the process of adopting EU rules, laws and regulations covering virtually all aspects of life in a member state of the EU, has exhibited a disparate record of success in the Balkans, causing endless debates on the unique character of this area contrasted to the rest of the EU. Even within the area itself, the pace of moving “Europeanization” forward has been uneven and a probe is needed to identify the reasons for this. Knowing where the Balkans are coming from, will assist us better understand where they are heading to as well in terms of their efforts to fall in line with required EU rules, laws, directives etc in the course of Europeanization.

The specific task though is filled with immense differences with the rest of other successful EU candidate countries and finally, members. The Balkans to start with, dubbed as the ‘tinderbox of Europe’ due to its heavily violent history, remains an area filled with a heavy history of conflicts, disagreements etc and its recent past after the break-up of former Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Croatia, parts of that union entered the EU rather swiftly due to their strong backing by key members of the EU, i.e. Germany, France, Britain etc. Unfortunately, the other new state candidates of the area, Montenegro, Serbia, FYROM and Albania (Accession negotiations and chapters have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia)* are loaded with too many basic problems that need to be sorted out first, some of them being very obvious in the ‘Europeanization’ process and others remaining inexplicable and downright, political. A claim in the literature that political elites in the Western Balkans used institutions of post-conflict justice for local political purposes in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars thus, hijacking a smooth process to Europeanization seems weak and beckons the greater issue of the absence of a much-needed benevolent paternalism of the EU itself. Further considerations on this that, ‘natural’ separate identity convergences from the European Idea (Europeanization being the process) in accession candidate states from the Balkans explain fully their sluggish and/or stalled Europeanization are also extremely tenuous and are unfortunately and peculiarly, racist and dangerous. For example, arguing that Catholic Croatia was more ‘European’ than Orthodox Serbia and this is why the former entered swiftly whereas the latter has not is, borderline, arbitrary.

Oversimplifying the Europeanization process looking for culprits instead of being attentive to real issues on the ground, is a dead end road serving none, either Europe or the Balkans as a region. As the known dictum implies, “*The road to hell is paved with good intentions*”. (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

None doubts that the Europeanization of the Balkans is, a coercive, demanding and externally-driven process thus, increasing pressures on heavily-burdened populations in the said countries of the area which have been, historically, through much more than many other current or future fellow state members of the Union. The EU’s recurrent foreign policy’ centrifugal tendencies fitting more certain member states’ own national interests rather than the publicly-declared EU’s foreign affairs’ agenda is a known fact and a source of unfortunate complications itself too large to ignore. The EU acting as above and at the same time, trumpeting the sought ‘Partnership between itself and the Balkans’, stands on rather thin ground. To date it has shown signs of being rather, a one-way, reeling and patronizing process.

The Balkan accession candidate countries are unfortunately, stuck in a complex and heavy Europeanization process and agenda with two sign poles marking the course: blatant EU intervention and an absent political economy mechanism on the ground in the accession candidate countries that will allow local actors to ring about the needed reforms and drastic changes. Realities on the slippery ground of the Balkans and high value attached to bringing the Europeanization process to fruition for the EU ensure that the drawn out process of accession will continue but an intelligent alternative remains to be urgently invented for both partners reach their port of call soon. This will allow much better days to come for the people of the Balkans and Europe to put the perennial crises in the Balkans, it’s very backyard, to rest and enjoy the gratitude of the peoples who, ironically, need the European Union most!

Key words: Fortress Europe, Brexit, Balkans, Former Yugoslavia, Breakup, EU Policies/Disarray, Russian/American/Turkish interest, Time-wasting EU, Multi-tier groupings, the Euro,

The Europeanization of the Balkans

Too late for the Balkans For Europe Or For Both??

The EU is a complex economic, political and cultural alliance that today involves most of the European states. This alliance has already covered seventy years of European modern history, constantly in motion and change due to internal and external factors. Having started as an economic agreement amongst six states, today's EU (ECSC and EEC back then) was developed on the idea of peace, equality and growth of all European nations it became on the way, a ruder clumsy political entity with expanding borders and a shrinking political vision. Looking back from today's perspective, the world was indeed a different place at the time the EU was established and we assume that nobody back then had thought that the Balkan countries would eventually (and inevitably?) join the EU family.

What made the EU attractive for all European countries at the very beginning was first, the promise of equality within the union. Equality is aside from freedom, one of the most desirable virtues of every human, though extremely hard to achieve and especially so in the political, economic arena. Postulates of the mostly accepted political theory of today, *neorealism*, explains the world as a very competitive place with strong powers endlessly fighting for dominance over others. The establishment of the EU in the light of that theory would be motivated by the law of size/weight of a political player; the bigger the political entity is, the greater the influence that can be achieved in the world's economic and political process along with more stability and safety for their citizens. This is why all small countries gravitate towards the EU as the biggest political entity in Europe today and closest to the elusive goal of a, "Supra State based on the Rule of Law".

One issue today seems to be very important for the EU in acceding new members; the question of the size and overall importance of new member states. Should the EU expand further? Until now the EU opted for political life mostly in an isolated realm where matters of security and development were, almost exclusively, the product of intra-European interactions. On the global level, the EU did not manage to establish a **monolithic** position of power and as a result it is vulnerable to dangerous foreign influences. Although, having a large and multi-ethnic population filled with potential the EU seems to have **persistent** teething problems with the structural constraints of its very own system.

In the light of modern political developments the EU is facing some very substantive challenges, with new powers growing on the global stage and old powers intensifying their political, economic even military confrontations protecting their precious status. Facing this complex world scene, time for action by the EU may expire sooner rather than later. In order not to fall back, the EU has to entrench its influence on the wider territory of Europe, and especially so in the perennial Balkans.

However, Jean Claude Juncker, the EU Commission's President in his address in 2014 clearly expressed a completely opposite political doctrine and effectively, put on hold once more (!) the weaker Balkan states :

“When it comes to enlargement, [...] this has been a historic success [...]. However, the Union and our citizens now need to digest the addition of 13 Member States in the past ten years. The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will continue and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place...”

(The EU Commission's President Jean Claude Juncker was quoted in Strasbourg on 15.July 2014[<https://goo.gl/jnmR>])

We cannot help noting, when it comes to the Balkans, that it is the very area that has been pushed to the margins of European political and economic interests several times in its long and turbulent history, though geopolitically the Balkans represent a strategic expanse towards the Middle East and more directly so, to a very active Turkey. Probably because of this historically long run marginalization or in spite of this, it was the Balkans that set fire to a wider conflict that turned into the First and by its far-reaching consequences, into the Second World War as well.

On the other side we should not forget that during their long history, Balkan nations added important achievements to European and world heritage, i.e. philosophy, literature, democracy etc. Consider as an example how the Greek language enormously enriched European vocabulary and inspired progress in different fields. Balkan nations were always guided by strong family principles and patriotism culminating into the anti-Ottoman and later on, anti-fascist and resistance to the Stalinist type of totalitarianism. The Balkans used to surprise Europe in the past with some very strong and fresh ideas, proving their commitment to independence and freedom. The Non-aligned Movement formed in the sixties was proof that Balkan people together with their leadership (President Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia and a Croat) were able to produce comprehensive, new political doctrine as well as to assemble a large number of countries into an internationally-sanctioned movement of weight and clout injected between the Cold War-battling West and East.

Putting on hold for so long the relatively, small Balkan states, may prove to be a very risky endeavor for the future evolution of the EU as it may be leaving one strategically very important part of European territory vulnerable to possibly other external influences with unpredictable consequences for the future smooth functioning of the EU as a solid alliance of states and economies. Once again EU is biding its time and seems incapable to acknowledge the right moment for action when it comes to the Balkans. It was only in the recent nineties that the EU consciously chose the same posture and even after the Yugoslav conflagration was in full scale

Admittedly in some other cases the EU prove to be too slow also and passive when dealing with sticky issues. One of the examples is Cyprus, the island state that became member of the EU in 2004 and brought onto the EU's plate the simmering problem of Turkish invasion and occupation in 1974 that holds 40% of the territory of sovereign Cyprus to date, forty three long years later. Since the accession of Cyprus in 2004 so far, the EU has done nothing crucial to resolve the Cyprus-borne problems and demand the withdrawal of foreign troops from the sovereign territory of the state of Cyprus, its own full member state and full Euro-zone member.. Theoretically, the EU has substantial influence and leverage on Turkey, a candidate itself for accession to the EU, after having embarked on this path initially back in 1961. The unfortunate example of Cyprus is an example of European apathy but also demonstrates an unprincipled political attitude towards the very serious problems of small states obviously because of EU weakness towards different economic and political relations with 80 million Turks. Or is it?

Can anyone really support the unsustainable position that the EU has one unified policy on at least its own borders and over its own let us say, dominion? Unfortunately, the foreign policy arena is the one singular area where the resilient disparity of multiple foreign policies by the EU's members shows its unpleasant face...This is has had a substantive and long-lasting impact on the Balkans in their territorial, state and power profile today.

From the outset, the Balkans seem to have been a neglected region in the EU's strategies, simply because the EU has been dealing in an introvert and self-protective and gave essentially, a priority to its own internal issues, internal structure and functioning of the organization the EU is. Holding the Balkan aspirants to high standards is understood as part of a comprehensive strategy. This strategy and implementation are aimed at turning the countries of the region into virtual member states fulfilling all the technical requirements and thus, getting them to deal with sticky issues early on. More importantly, this is hoped to also help assuage concerns on behalf of European citizens over the potential negative consequences of these specific new entrants on the existing member societies, thus lending more legitimacy to the strategy and also policy. This is a source of great problems to allow to develop..

Never has anything good come about one's turning her back to an issue at hand... Even worse, the complex Balkans are many issues together..

EU politicians and strategy makers seem not to be able to see that by waiting out for stability to develop in their own house, events will simply bypass them and they may very well lose any tenuous grip they maintain on important matters in their own backyard. The Balkans are not on the moon..

The explosive and massive in numbers and nature refugee/immigrant crises that took the EU by surprise during the last few years are a valid proof to EU policy makers that no country exists in a vacuum. Quite the opposite, the globalized world moved by technology and economics faster than policy makers can, is a Brave New World that can swipe away any border or security line of the neo-isolationists. Isolationism never resolved anything. Flexibility and studied vision are urgently needed for the EU to find its way in the politically meandering Balkans.

The political and economic situation in the Balkans in the last thirty years has been, perhaps the most dynamic in the whole of Europe, a fact that unfortunately, was not reflected in a much-needed corresponding serious and responsible EU policy towards the Balkan states. The most turbulent event after the Second World War on the European ground was the forceful breakup of Yugoslavia - sovereign state of the constituent six autonomous republics and their multinational populations. Former Yugoslavia was the only state in the whole world at that time ruled by a rotating presidency, regardless of the size of the Republic that was assuming the presidency, similar to the current EU-practice!!

The EU at that time proved unable to intervene effectively in politically and prevent the most bloody national clash in the territory of Yugoslavia. Both the EU and her administrative apparatus, were completely unprepared for such a bloody clash among nations that lived so long in brotherhood and spoke mostly variations of the same language! We know from the statistics that almost a quarter of marriages in former Yugoslavia were among different ethnic groups. EU politicians expressed an incoherent political attitude towards the multiple crises that unraveled, Germany was more than willing to quickly recognize Croatia and Slovenia contrary to France's more diplomatic stance who was more ready to save federal Yugoslavia from its catastrophic break up in lives and massive problems. Serious political analysts believe that this incoherent EU attitude even encouraged and assisted the sides in dispute to endless rounds of clashes.. As a result, new Balkan states were formed in the place of former Yugoslavia with some of them struggling to maintain their identity to date. Fitting examples of this are, FYROM/ Macedonia (facing substantive problems with very its name and with its Albanian citizens), Bosnia-Herzegovina (forcefully reformed with three confederate entities with persistently strong tension and tremors among them) and of course, Kosovo. All these states gravitate towards the EU with different dreams and aspirations. Until now only Slovenia and Croatia managed to enter the EU while other ex-Yugoslav republics are still fledgling candidates.

When the Cold War came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 starting with the reunification of Germany the former superpowers discovered that other countries also felt freer now to pursue their independent foreign policies. The Balkans used to be the backyard of such a country for centuries. .This gave the room to one historically important player in the Balkans, Turkey to express a very active and natural interest in the area as it started itself to witness the beginning of the breakup of former Yugoslavia. The Turkish-structured political dogma towards the Balkans was expressed during a lecture delivered in October 2009, by Ahmet Davutoğlu ,foreign policy adviser to then Prime Minister Erdogan. He laid out his vision of a new '*Pax Ottomanica*' in the Balkans. He argued that the only time the Balkans had escaped the fate of being a periphery to large empires was during the Ottoman Empire, and that this central status could be re-established with a new Ottoman commonwealth:

"We desire a new Balkans, based on political values, economic interdependence and cultural harmony. That was the Ottoman Balkans. We will restore these Balkans. People call this 'neo-Ottoman'. I don't point to the Ottoman state as a foreign policy issue. I emphasize the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman era in the Balkans is a success story. Now it needs to come back."

Even some EU politicians have an illusory perception of the Balkans as a bearer of an Ottoman political and cultural legacy which is also a reading probably based on today's loud Muslim political offensive in the Balkans. As a result Balkan countries are left politically vulnerable to more and more invasive Turkish political influences and many times even to hidden Turkish political and military bullying. Nothing can be further from the truth than the idea of the Balkans still carrying or wishing to carry on the Ottoman legacy. The Ottoman period was in reality, a period of the Balkans' occupation; a long and miserable period in which different Balkan nations tried to keep their languages and cultural heritage alive as well as...their lives. Painful Devshirme* is still part of the collective memories of the Balkan nations. Balkan nations fought brazenly for their freedom from Ottoman occupation at the doorstep of the rest of a sleeping Europe which was unable to see beyond the bubble of their own existence. Balkan states are even now seen by some serious EU political stakeholders more as a source of different problems, than countries able to add substantively to the European family.

A telling example of the Turkish political bullying is the incident that alienated all of Serbia in October 2013. Because of it, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić cancelled a pre-announced trilateral meeting in response to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement during a visit of his in Kosovo: "*Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo!!*" Nikolić called it "*an aggression without arms,*" and for many it was an obvious proof that Turkey is a one-sided and self-serving actor in the Western Balkans. Turkish military presence in the Aegean Sea around Greek islands is a daily provocation to Greece together coupled with the open aspiration of the current president of Turkey to change historical agreements over sea rights in favor of Turkey, by simply referring to them ninety years later simply as, '*anachronistic*'.

During the last few years, with the examples of Greece and other Mediterranean countries center stage, it has been clear that the EU has been looking at its southern partners from a long distance and without the cloak of the much-advertised spirit of '*equality*' and '*cooperation*' that should be in the heart of EU policies or *primus inter pares* (first among equals) relations. After the political and economic scenery had become much more slippery, the very political tone among EU partners has changed in spirit and essence. In the case of Greece, public atmosphere molded by agenda-driven mass media was extremely negative toward all things Greek, i.e. the population, their lifestyle and their core values. Some EU officials were very cynical in their statements. We were veritable witnesses of political bullying on an epic scale, more reminiscent of some other historical periods. The world's tumultuous arena has provided major opportunities for the EU to develop a diplomatic presence and to maximize its diplomatic impact, but also solidified major constraints on its ability to do so.

On the other hand Balkan governments readily use assistance and pay for the advice of well-known European politicians, like former British PM Tony Blair (adviser for the Serbian government and Albanian as well), Alastair Campbell (Tony Blair's spokesman) and others, which means that they are eager to learn and move forward. Balkan people have a long experience in how to deal with such pressures and survive in difficult times. They have been doing it for so long, it is indeed second nature to them.

***Devshirme[a]** (Ottoman Turkish: *دوشیرمه*, *devşirme*, literally "lifting" or "collecting"), also known as the blood tax or tribute in blood, was chiefly the practice where by the Ottoman Empire sent military officers to take boys, ages 8 to 18, from their families in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in order that they be raised to serve the state. This tax of sons was imposed only on the Christian subjects of the empire, in the villages of the Balkans and Anatolia. (Wikipedia)

As Albanian Prime Minister Edy Rama pointed out in his interview to “Politico” in April 2017 “*Some European generations didn’t see any war .We are in the Balkans for generations, we saw wars,we got the point*”. In the same interview Rama also said that Europe would face “*a nightmare “ if Balkans “were to go crazy” because EU accession is off the agenda ,with the region becoming “a grey zone in which other actors have more influence than the European Union”*.”(Politico April 2017) A great and genuine example of this back on April 28th, 2017 was Senator John McCain’s public statement, Senator of Arizona and Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, “*It’s when American leadership leaves that it creates vacuums and then bad things happen. It cries out for American and European leaderships. Tensions are up!*”

Of course, the other major contestant and long time ally of Serbia, forerunner of the crumbling former Yugoslavia, a resurrected Russia reentered the Balkan scene again. A tentative target date for the accession of Serbia is 2022–2025, provided that other bilateral issues do not create more obstacles. Tentative timeframes in the Balkans of course, carry out their own heavy meaning [<https://goo.gl/jnmR>]

The EU in Disarray:

It is now clear to all in the EU and the Balkans themselves, from the intelligentsia to governments, from the middle class to the social and business leaders throughout the member and accession candidate states that the Grand Journey of the EU to be everything to all People, has come to a halt.

The British Referendum that shocked all when it delivered a clear Exit vote did not happen in a vacuum. Legitimate frustration by the voters who saw increasingly scant resemblance between the promise held high by the EU Dream and its Reality now. Trying to squeeze an increasing number of disparate states of varying levels of economic and political development through the crucible of sometimes excruciatingly painful adjustments in a fast track mode to wear the EU ‘straightjacket’ was apparently something none had priced in before in order to fathom the very citizens’ own reaction. After the Greek Thriller, Brexit’s Shock and the increasingly imperceptible agenda by EU bureaucrats on 500 million in the sprawling EU, fatigue has really set in and is obvious across Europe at all social strata and beyond.

The inevitable reflection that came about within the EU may have its own mixture of blessings as it unleashed alarm bells from the ‘citizens of Europe’ to the top both in their own national governments as well as to the EU bosses and hordes of bureaucrats in Brussels that something has gone seriously astray either in conception or in execution or even worse, in both!

Studied introspection has brought about a series of alternate routes and paths to pursue instead of insisting to obsessively continue the same course and plan charted many years ago when realities on the European ground were really different than now. Five alternative schools of thought have come to the fore and similar possible paths with no decisions having been made yet. Reviewing them in the meantime is useful in order to grasp what is at stake and what directions the EU super train will take.

The “*White Paper on the Future of the EU of March 1st, 2017* “amplified the above.

The decision of the UK to leave the EU has given rise to a fundamental debate about the future of political and economic integration in Europe. In this debate the concept of a multi- speed Europe is finding increasing support. But a multi- speed Europe suggests that all countries are heading in the same direction, that is, towards more integration. One alternative would be a multi-tier EU, under which members can choose to belong to a variety of ‘country clubs’. Each tier or ‘club’ could then be characterized by a specific form of policy co-operation or integration like an internal market, a customs union, the Schengen zone with common external border controls and immigration policies, the Eurozone, possibly zones of tax coordination or fiscal integration with a common budget and so on. What about the Balkans who are at the door waiting for it to start opening if the EU is about to change almost totally? The last thing the volatile Balkans need right now is additional volatility and fluidity of the EU itself.

Five Different Flight Plans For the EU

1. The EU27 (post-Brexit) focuses on delivering its positive reform agenda with no changes

This is definitely the most effort-free suggestion as no brain power must be invested in suggesting something new and dramatic. The problem is that it is also the most unlikely scenario as visions of where Europe is heading to, are so disparate and so ingrained with negativism (i.e. disillusion, frustration due to the increasing gap between stated policy and actual policy, increased voicing of disagreements publicly etc) that virtually all accept that the agenda itself needs to be re-engineered.)

2. Nothing but the Single Market for the EU-27

In the midst of an increasingly and rapidly globalized world far beyond economics and markets, trying to stop the behemoth that the EU has become and make it attempt a spectacular U-turn would be much like trying to stop a mammoth-like elephant during its final dash to the finish line.. It would be almost impossible to conceive, design and even more so, execute. Trying to reform an EU that has been focused on the same single-minded goal to go further and deeper for decades with varying success will be incredibly difficult in terms of garnering the requisite political agreement among no fewer than 27 countries but also, shifting a historically unbearable amount of political responsibility on all leaders ... No matter how big or small, no leader can assume such a responsibility for such a historic about face without lingering on the edge of the abyss with his/her political future. There is no tangible alternative they can use to convince their constituents this is best to do compared with the course to date.. So, economically and politically it is a gigantic task impossible to shoulder..

3. Those Who Want More Do More-Member States to be allowed to more together in chosen areas

This is a definite tendency among existing Member States of different socio-economic and geo-political profiles that has been in the making for a number of years. It is the result of a rather lengthy gestation period where different weights, capabilities, aspirations, national agendas submitted, intrinsic problems, essential realities of each paved the way for a centrifugal new path. Certain member states more ambitious and more able to do so due to a different cache of realities felt they were victimized by lower revving member states..

The concept of 'Country Clubs' has become the buzz word that aptly describes the perplexing scenario of certain commonly-profiled member states of the EU who wish and can do more and go many extra miles in all directions but feel blocked by wearing the same EU 'straightjacket' all other member states are wearing loaded with do's and don'ts!. The recent second greatest shock to the EU since inception, of the UK's Referendum vote to exit could be a deadly prelude to this new attitude among member states of the EU to reclaim control of their destiny. It is not an accident this appeals especially to the big and mighty of the EU. BREXIT is part of the institutional history of the EU that is now being negotiated between Britain and the EU's Commission. Is this the death knell for the EU or the baptism of a newborn EU?

4. Smaller and Lesser is Best:

The EU 27 to focus on delivering more and faster in selected policy areas while doing less elsewhere. This is in essence, cherry picking among issues and tasks and its fine. No organization can do all at the same time and avoid costly problems and delays. The grand issue at stake is how to make such decisions in a revamped EU that is smaller in vision of disparate membership (nation states of varying size and capabilities) and more importantly, wounded after 'retreating' to a different kind of EU? Will a EU that will function from now on under a new banner of 'Smaller & Lesser' have any realistic chance of succeeding and reaching its final destination port?

We respectfully submit that the chances for success are against such a risky experiment..

5. Doing Much More Together:

In this scenario Member States decide to do much more together across all policy areas. The perennial complaint among European citizens against not the idea of the EU but its daily practice is of a distinct feeling of a top-down approach in implementing laws, directives and even proposals. Throughout the EU, citizens feel their mother country state has been replaced by the EU 'state apparatus' amidst their feeling of alienation from the EU idea.

Generally speaking, 'Doing much more together' in the EU among states would be a positive path to follow with equal rights and obligations for all, majority voting (or even, qualified majority) in place to encourage collaborations, improvements in communication to avoid erroneous perceptions of the EU on funding and executive decisions. For example, large countries in the EU and elsewhere (i.e. UN, IMF etc) have the tendency to complain of their larger contributions to the common budget without smaller and weaker members carrying their own load. The EU is a grand effort to transform Europe in the most positive of ways and as such it will take time, greater than just a lifetime.

A better and more equitable division of labor, finances and projects by the EU for its citizens and its member states will go a long way to promote and cement the new plan for it to do much more together as a Union instead of having weaker/poorer state members feeling they are being handed down order from the big and mighty above them.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the weighty aspirations the Balkans had and still have over their historic quest of becoming full members of the EU and all the dreams for peace and prosperity they have invested in with the EU, a possible spectacular U-turn of the EU in its quests will be a shocker for the hapless Balkans of immense magnitude and duration. The avowed '*Europeanization process*' of the Balkans could be rendered so complex and so diluted in essence that the EU may become essentially, irrelevant to the Balkans' own political and economic plan and vice versa.

This is at last the historic litmus test for both the EU as a supra state and as a pan-European institution to prove its mettle. Can it stay the course it has carved out for itself and for all of Europe or will it exclude through its lighter-weight EU-building agenda an area that can historically claim it is the cradle of Europe itself but has been abused by Europeans for centuries as their battle field with rivers of blood and mountains of sorrow?

It is shameful to treat the Balkans as 'outsiders' and leave them out in the cold for any time longer amid wishes as an area to be tugged onto the metropolis of Europe again and come out from the bitter Balkan winter it has experienced without any real and sustainable peace and prosperity for more than a few years.

The void that is left by the lack of a more intensive, focused, deeper and broader set of policies by the EU after so many years of promises and aspirations in the Balkans leaves the latter weaker, disappointed, disillusioned and open to new promises and aspirations. This is the essence of geopolitics in an area of Europe that has paid a heavy toll for its very location and ethnic makeup. None can deny the geopolitical importance of the Balkans to themselves and to vying outside powers. The irony here is that the European Union has been regularly absent as a positive change actor during the most critical times for the Balkans after World War II. Even though it had no firm and productive proposals to submit as an organized actor, certain of its powerful members rushed to promote their own national interests in the Balkans through swift recognition of new-born states in the Balkan, i.e. Germany spearheading the effort in the case of Slovenia and Croatia. Kosovo was also strongly supported by the US and others but without the US it would not have embarked on a path to becoming a state seeking recognition. Russia on the other hand has proven the most credible, reliable and sturdy ally of Serbia to this date. In fact, their relationship has becoming broader and deeper among all facets of activities, politics, economics, military etc with Serbia, an EU accession candidate country to have much bigger economic transactions with Moscow than with Brussels through a Customs Union Agreement.

Through the above practices partial alliances runaway states created after the breakup of former Yugoslavia have found comfort and economic viability in the short run to continue breathing until they are convinced to take the next step forward. A stalling EU busy making statements that no new members will be acceded any time soon is simply shooting itself on the foot when it comes to the extraordinary case of the Balkans who need active support in a wholesome manner now and not tomorrow. Other powers like the US, China, Russia and neighboring Turkey are ahead of the EU in latching the remaining orphaned new states onto their chariots. They have proven to be more methodical, swifter and more effective with timing having been their greatest ally.

The Berlin Process launched by the EU in 2014 in order to revitalize and accelerate the prospects of the Balkan States to enter it sooner has quickly proven to be too little, too late. It really is time for a decision for a more effective EU to step into its own historic backyard, the Balkans and decisively promote the natural birth place of the weakened and suffering new Balkan states to them again, Europe itself!!!!

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Devshirme[a] (Ottoman Turkish: دوشیرمه, devşirme, literally "lifting" or "collecting"), also known as the blood tax or tribute in blood, was chiefly the practice where by the Ottoman Empire sent military officers to take boys, ages 8 to 18, from their families in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in order that they be raised to serve the state. This tax of sons was imposed only on the Christian subjects of the empire, in the villages of the Balkans and Anatolia

The boys were then forcibly converted to Islam with the primary objective of selecting and training the ablest children and teenagers for the military or civil service of the empire, notably into the Janissaries.

Devshirme started in the mid-1300s under Murad I as a means to counteract the growing power of the Turkish nobility. According to Alexander Mikaberidze the practice violated Islamic law.[7] Mikaberidze argues that the boys were "effectively enslaved" under the devshirme system, and that this was a violation of the dhimmi protections guaranteed under Islamic law. This is disputed by scholars of Ottoman history, including Halil İnalcık, who argues that the devshirme were not slaves.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the practice formally came to an end. An attempt to re-institute it in 1703 was resisted by its Ottoman members who coveted its military and civilian posts. Finally in the early days of Ahmet III's reign, the practice of devshirme was abolished.