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THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES AND THE WESTERN BALKANS STATES.
PRE-ACCESSION EXPERIENCES AND PROPOSALS FOR MACEDONIA

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During the enlargement processes of 2004 and 2007, the European Union expanded by 12 new Member States. After another six years, on July 1, 2013, the organization was joined by Croatia. Other states still queuing to join the EU are the so-called the Western Balkans: Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo area (as defined in the UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99). Also Turkey is a candidate country. These changes were made possible due to the transformation of Central European countries after 1989. The road of the Balkan countries to the EU has turned out to be longer because of the wars and ethnic tensions on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Only Slovenia escaped them and joined the EU in 2004.

So far the only country that has started the accession negotiations, prior to the Balkan States, is Montenegro. They are a process of laborious talks between Brussels and the candidate countries. They may take several years, as in case of Croatia (almost 6 years) and the progress depends primarily on the reforms undertaken by the countries aspiring to the EU.

The objective of this discussion is to present the problems and challenges faced by the countries of Central Europe, and to compare them with the challenges faced by the countries of the Western Balkans, and above all by Macedonia. It seems that it is possible to find some similarities and draw conclusions from the experiences of other countries.

The starting point – the turn of 80’ and 90’ of the Twentieth Century.
The problems and stabilization of the situation

The collapse of communism in the analysed countries of Central Europe began in 1989, first in Poland, where it took the form of the so-called Round Table Talks and the election of June 4. In September Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-communist prime minister in this part of the

1 Due to the fact that some EU Member States do not recognize the independence of Kosovo, a discussion on the possible inclusion of this area within the organization seems to be pointless in the opinion of the author.
2 The article refers only to the Visegrad Group: the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary.
continent. Also in 1989, the breakup of communism took place in Hungary. In Czechoslovakia, the beginning of changes came in November under the name of the so-called Velvet Revolution. The political and economic transitions followed and were introduced peacefully.

The negative factors of the transformation manifested themselves as transient economic problems: inflation, rising unemployment, the need for changes in the industry, and finally reorientation of trade towards Western Europe. In case of Czechoslovakia the problem, but not impinging negatively upon its European aspirations, was the breakup of the country into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The process was carried out in a peaceful manner – contrary to Yugoslavia – and the two greeted the new year 1993 as separate countries.

Already before the fall of communism the European Communities established the relations with Yugoslavia and the countries of Central Europe, limited mainly to economic matters. Brussels decided to pursue a policy of parallelism consisting in negotiating, concurrently, with the Comecon and the Eastern bloc countries. The following years brought the bilateral agreements on cooperation and trade, the first such solution was applied to Hungary (September 1988), a year later a similar agreement was signed with Poland. The resulting system of preferences allowed export of many goods to the Community (Plonka, 2003, p. 25-32).

After the fall of communism, the European Community initially provided economic support, but the engagement in providing that support was made conditional on the implementation of democratic changes. In December 1989, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development was established. Citizens of the former socialist countries were guaranteed e.g. participation in Community’s education programs (Pöthig, 1996, p. 30-31).

The collapse of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia created a new geopolitical situation on the continent. Initially it was difficult to predict the consequences of those changes. The only reasonable way to achieve the goal seemed to stabilize the political and economic situation as well as the predictable neighborhood.

The reaction of the Communities to disintegration of Yugoslavia was not uniform, and bloodshed could not be prevented. The fact is that the Union and its members displayed a profound interest in the developments in the Balkans (Sela, Shabani, 2011, p. 29). At first, some comments suggested refusing the former Yugoslav republics the right to independence. The words of Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, who said that Slovenia could not survive as an independent state because it was too small (sic!) should be considered humorous (Klemenčič, 2006, p. 193). This indicated ignorance and complete misunderstanding of the Balkan issues. At the end
of 1991, the independence of Croatia and Slovenia was recognized by Germany, and other countries of the Communities, despite their critical attitude towards Bonn’s stance, also decided to follow suit. A further activity of the EU took the form of mediation, supporting the U.S. actions. This resulted in the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), which stabilized the situation, above all in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vukadinović, 2000, p. 1-18).

The states now known as the Western Balkans, with the exception of Albania, experienced to a greater or lesser extent the turmoil of ethnic wars. They were associated with of the ethnic complexity of former Yugoslavia (Eberhardt, 2005) as well as with the declarations of independence of the individual union republics: in 1991 Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia decided to make such a move, a year later, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In consequence, on 27 April 1992 the creation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisting only of Serbia and Montenegro was announced (Wojnicki, 2003, p. 65). In 2006, Montenegro declared independence, thus completing the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The period of greatest unrest in the Balkans was associated with the Serbo–Croatian war (lasting until 1995), the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), the NATO air raids on Yugoslavia as well as the Kosovo problem (1999) and its declaration of independence in February 2008 (see more: Kuczyński, Ray-Ciemięga, 2000; Pawłowski, 2008).

Therefore, political and economic transformation in both analysed areas began in a quite different manner. The peace in Central Europe stood in contrast with the tensions in the Balkans. The post-Yugoslavian countries, as well as Albania, remaining on the sidelines of the European events, were at a disadvantage in the unofficial race for accession to the Union. Ethnic conflicts meant that post-Yugoslavian countries could not join the EU as quickly as they would like to. In individual cases the cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia established in 1993 left a lot to be desired. In case of Croatia (the instance of General Ante Gotovina) it resulted in a delayed commencement of negotiations (Koźbial, 2008, p. 48).

The political importance of the two regions, in spite of their different size and population, is of utmost significance. The Visegrad Group members currently occupy a territory of over 533 thousand km² (slightly smaller than France), inhabited by nearly 64 million people (almost as many as in France). The Western Balkan countries have a total area of over 207 thousand km²

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3 According to the data from 1991, on the territory of Croatia the Croats constituted 78.1% of the total population, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniaks constituted only 43.7% of the population, the Serbs in Serbia 62.5%, the percentage of the Macedonians in Macedonia amounts to 64.6%. In Montenegro, the statistics did not include the Montenegrin nationality as a separate one at all.
(the size of Belarus), and are inhabited by nearly 19 million people (about 3 million fewer than the population of Romania). Table 1 illustrates the data.

Table 1. The area and population of the Western Balkan countries and the Visegrad Group countries – a comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western Balkan countries</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
<th>Population (in thousand)</th>
<th>Visegrad Group countries</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
<th>Population (in thousand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>28 748</td>
<td>3 011</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>78 866</td>
<td>10 162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
<td>51 209</td>
<td>3 875</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>312 679</td>
<td>38 384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>13 812</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>49 035</td>
<td>5 488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>25 333</td>
<td>2 087</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>93 030</td>
<td>9 939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>77 474</td>
<td>7 243</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>10 887</td>
<td>1 847</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>207 463</td>
<td>18 716</td>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>533 610</td>
<td>63 973</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Accession requirements and the course of negotiations**

The accession process of post-communist countries, both Central European and the Balkan, to the EU should be considered a political process. It is not to be judged according to purely economic categories, for if they were taken into account Brussels would probably not decide on the enlargement to the east, or much less in the direction of the Balkans. Possibly, even the accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 80s would not occur (Tichy, 1997, p. 31).

On the other hand, the process of enlargement of 2004–2007 proved to be in reality beneficial also for the EU Member States. After all, we observe a substantial expansion of markets, which, including all countries of 2004–13 enlargement, amount to more than 100 million people (about one fifth of the current population of the Union). Such a potential was not to be despised.

Having undertaken the talks concerning enlargement to the east the UE required from the potential candidates a significant effort towards implementation of political and economic reforms:

- consolidation of democracy, stability of political institutions, the rule of law, protection of human rights and ensuring the rights of minorities,
- introduction of free market economy, which would be strong enough to meet the future requirements of the common market,
• creation of capabilities for EU membership and fulfilling the related obligations concerning the objectives of the political, economic and monetary union.

These requirements were defined during the meeting of the European Council in Copenhagen on 21–22 June 1993, and are referred to as the so-called Copenhagen criteria (Fouéré, 2007, p. 196-197; Tebbe, 1997, p. 66).

In the dialogue with the countries of the Western Balkans the EU refers to the above mentioned criteria in its annual reports and assessments. They are in fact considered as an absolute priority in the negotiations, the determinants of a successful transformation. Their unaccomplishment is the obstacle for EU membership. Any kinds of internal political problems, abnormal functioning of state institutions, improprieties in holding of elections, etc. are pointed out by the EU institutions. The same applies to problems of disrespecting the rights of national minorities. Such objections were raised in case of Macedonia as well as other countries in the region. The countries on the threshold of negotiations, or already negotiating (as Montenegro) are therefore assessed in the same manner as the members of the Visegrad Group over a dozen years ago.

Pre-accession strategy intended signing of the so-called European agreements providing for an association with the then existing European Communities. They proposed economic cooperation and political dialogue that would lead to accession. They were signed by Poland (Czachór, 2009, p. 38), the Czech Republic (Müller, Smekal, 2009, p. 68), Hungary (Brańka, 2009, p. 134-135) and Slovakia (Delong, Žarna, 2013, p. 14-15).

Also in this respect the similarity to the Balkans can be indicated. After the NATO intervention in Kosovo Brussels engaged itself deeper in the stabilization in this part of the continent contributing to the implementation of SAP (Stability and Association Process) on the basis of which the SAA (Stability and Association Agreement) was signed (Koźbial, 2009, p. 373-375; see also: Helmerich, 2008). In case of the Balkans, the order of signing of these documents reflected the progress in talks with Brussels. In 2001, an agreement was signed by Croatia and Macedonia and later by the other countries, the negotiations with regard to Kosovo are ongoing. The SAA were a prelude to closer relations with the EU.

Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia applied for accession to the EU in 1994–96. The order was of no relevance. The negotiations with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary started in March 1998, with Slovakia in February 2000, which was due to 4-year-rule of V. Mečiar’s government (1994–1998) and internal political tensions resulting in an unfavourable assessment of Slovakia formulated by the European Commission in 1997. It was accused of instability of democratic institutions, inadequate
functioning of democracy and the restriction of the rights of the opposition. In addition, Slovakia did not fulfill the criterion of economic development (Delong, Žarna, 2013, p. 18-20). The Balkan states were also submitting their applications for accession to the EU. Macedonia did so in March 2004.

At the summit in Copenhagen, in December 2002, the accession negotiations with the Central European countries were concluded. They lasted for over 4.5 years, in case of Slovakia almost two years shorter. After the signing of the accession treaties and the accession referenda, the countries became the members of the EU on 1 May 2004. The referenda clearly showed that the societies of the countries concerned supported the process of integration with the EU. In Slovakia 92.5% of those entitled voted in favor of accession to the EU, in Hungary 83.8%, in Poland 77.5%, and the Czech Republic 77.3% of the voters (Fiala, Pitrová, 2005; Höreth, 2005, p. 151). Referendum on the issue is not mandatory (unless required by domestic law), but it is held in accordance with the unwritten rule operating in the countries that join the European Union after the negotiations. Therefore, they are to be expected also in case of the Balkans (it was held in Croatia in 2012).

Probably also in Macedonia the accession to the EU would get a positive response of voters According to public opinion surveys from the years 2003–2007 the support for such a decision ranged between 87.8 and 91.4%. Potential membership was frequently associated with hopes for economic growth, reduction of unemployment, foreign investments and overall stabilization (Bozinovski, 2007, p. 244-246). After 2007 the support for the accession should also be considered very high. As of November 2012, it amounted to 84% (Public opinion survey IRI, 2014).

Contacts of the EU – the countries aspiring to membership should also be seen in economic terms. Brussels guaranteed its partners financial support. In case of the Visegrad Group they were PHARE, ISPA and SAPARD. Analogous help was prepared for the Balkan states in the form of OBNOVA, CARDS, and finally the IPA programs. In 2007–13 the analysed countries received as a part of the IPA the support amounting to over 5.1 billion euro, of which Macedonia got over 615 million euro (http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/instruments/overview/index_en.htm, 3.01.2014). The funds are mainly allocated for the support of initiatives related to cross-border cooperation, regional development, rural development and human resources development.

The EU countries are also major trading partners of Macedonia. They account for 60% of exports and 48% of imports of this Balkan republic. Therefore, it is fully justified to consider the economic relations an important factor (Waisová, 2002, p. 59-63).
One of the elements of the assessment undertaken by the EU institutions is the contribution of the individual countries in the neighborhood and regional cooperation. In case of Central Europe both the creation of the Visegrad Group (1991) as well as of the CEFTA, the organization of an economic nature (1992), was highly assessed. Although in both cases the cooperation leading to the EU was not coordinated, they were undoubtedly the examples of an intensified cooperation.

This factor is taken into account in the assessment of the Western Balkan countries. It plays an important role because of the historical reasons and recent military conflicts. The examples of cooperation in the Balkans are the initiatives such as: SEECP (South-East European Cooperation Process) – constituting a forum for political and diplomatic dialogue, AII (Adriatic and Ionian Initiative) or the CEFTA 2006. Members of the CEFTA 2006 and the SEECP include Macedonia. However, it should be noted that the bilateral neighbourly relations are not less important.

It is worth adding that the ability to cooperate with other countries and to create coalitions, also of a regional character, is significant even within the EU itself. The cooperation of Benelux and the Nordic countries has been discernible for a long time. From a practical point of view it matters a lot during the voting processes in the EU Council. Currently, the Visegrad countries have a total of 60 votes, which is more than France and Germany combined (although the population of France and Germany is over twice as numerous as that of the countries of the Group) (Koźbiał, Natanek, 2012, p. 72). Time will tell whether the Visegrad countries or the Balkan countries will seize similar opportunities creating just this type of "blocs" in the region.

Graph 1. GDP of the Visegrad Group in the years 2002–12 as compared to the GDP of the EU (EU GDP = 100)

Undoubtedly, after 10 years of membership in the Union the claim that the development of the Visegrad Group is an undeniable fact is fully justified. The increase of GDP is noticeable, it is the most evident in case of Poland and Slovakia, the least when it comes to Hungary. The comparison of the GDP of these countries to the average GDP of the UE is presented in graph 1.

**Proposals for Macedonia**

The Republic of Macedonia is an excellent exemplification of the post-Yugoslavian state with the aspirations to the EU. The European integration from the very beginning of the independence, proclaimed in 1991, has been one of the main foreign policy objectives of Skopje. Its way to the EU has not been finalized so far.

It should be emphasized that the pursuit of the EU was not only the goal of the political elite but also of the majority of the population, as indicated by the results of research conducted in July 2012 by the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” in Skopje (Кржаловски, 2012). For more than 61% of the surveyed the strategic orientation of Macedonia is Euro-Atlantic integration. For 25% the accession to the UE will be possible in the perspective of 6-10 years, to almost 24% within 5 years. 20.2% is of the opinion that it will never happen (Кржаловски, 2012, p. 7).

In 2001, the EU signed the Stability and Association Agreement with Macedonia, it came into effect three years later (Sela, Shabani, 2011, p. 29-30). In March 2004, the government in Skopje submitted an application for membership in the Union. In December 2005 the State was granted the status of a candidate country, which was the expression of recognition of the progress made and the encouragement to undertake further steps towards accession (Mirchev, 2007, p. 213).

Since the 90s the biggest problem unsolved to this day has been the refusal of Greece to recognize the name "the Republic of Macedonia". Greece does not agree to start negotiations with the state of this name, which, from an objective point of view, should be considered an unconstructive and selfish stance. In 2008, in Bucharest Athens blocked Macedonia's accession to NATO. The situation seems to be a deadlock and the EU institutions have done very little to persuade Greece to change its attitude.

A research should not be based on speculations, nevertheless it can be assumed that if it were not for the controversy over the name of the country perhaps Macedonia would be already a member of the Union. After all, over 8 years have passed since granting of candidate status. Already in 2009 the European Commission recommended the opening of the negotiations (Com-
munication from..., 2009). They have not been opened so far (as of 1 February 2014).

The most recent assessment of progress and situation of Macedonia made by the European Commission took place in October 2013 (Communication from..., 2013, p. 17-19, 29-31). The evaluation was generally positive and the Commission recommended the opening of negotiations for the fifth time, rightly emphasizing that further procrastination „calls into question the credibility of the negotiation process” (Communication from..., 2013, p. 22) and is also a threat to the further efforts undertaken by the country. The importance of an immediate solution of the name issue was stressed.

In the report the European Commission also drew attention to the arising problems. They include the issue of media freedom and government’s dialogue with them, the need for further progress in the fight against corruption and organized crime, measures to condemn the lack of tolerance towards sexual minorities, and finally the need to match employees' skills with labour market needs and the implementation of public finance management (to ensure maximum utilization of the EU funds). Among the successes of the Macedonian reforms one can count introducing most of the reforms in the judiciary, good relations with the neighbours and playing an active role in regional relations, as well as a high level of adjustment to the EU legislation in areas such as movement of capital, postal services and company law. The adjustment in terms of both political and economic criteria have been assessed as at least satisfactory.

The conclusions by which Macedonia should be guided can, in the opinion of the author, be reduced to the following proposals:

- further democratization of political and social life (Democracy Index, 2012)
- compliance with the provisions of the Ohrid Agreement (2001) which became a testimony to the normalization of the internal situation and non-violation of the rights of national minorities,
- involvement in the processes of regional cooperation,
- turning continuous attention to bilateral relations with its neighbours, particularly with Albania and Greece,
- intensifying the activities related to media freedom – as one of the primary determinants of the democratic state.

4 In the ranking of the Economist Intelligence Unit for 2012 Macedonia was included in the group of countries with so-called. defective democracy. It was classified on the 73 position.

5 According to the report, of the organization Reporters Without Borders for 2013 Macedonia falls under the terms of the worst among the countries of the Western
undertaking another attempt to resolve the „name controversy” with Greece,
consistent fight against corruption and organized crime,
efforts to improve the economic situation, in particular the fight against high level of unemployment\(^6\) (20 years, 2011, p. 19),
respecting the rights of ethnic minorities and combating intolerance in relation to LGBT people.

These are mostly the activities that can and should be undertaken in terms of internal policy of the country. However, the government in Skopje does not have an influence on all of them, because international problems should also be taken into consideration. The dispute with Athens in which the EU institutions need to engage in order to achieve a reasonable compromise can again serve as an example. However, these are undoubtedly conditions \textit{sine qua non} without which the membership in the Union will not be possible.

Inevitably, the integration with the EU still remains a challenge for the authorities of the Republic. Similarly, this applies to other Western Balkan countries. In economic terms, this area lags behind Central Europe. It is evidenced by the data referring to the GDP of the region in relation to the average GDP of the 28 EU countries (with Croatia), which is presented in graph 2.

Graph 2. GDP of Western Balkan countries in comparison to the GDP of the EU in 2012 (EU 28 = 100)

Balkans taking 116. place in the world. During one year it recorded a decrease of 22 positions. In 2006 it was still on the 42 position.
\(^6\) In 2010, the unemployment rate was 32\%, being one of the highest in the region. In 2005 it was 37.3\%.
Summary

The enlargement of the European Union is subject to various factors that affect this process. It depends on: 1) the activities of the candidate countries, 2) the EU Member States, 3) the EU institutions. These factors are interrelated and it is extremely difficult to point out which ones prevail.

Not without significance is the impact of the international, political and economic situation. The international situation favoured the accession of the Visegrad Group. A prompt decision to „open the gates” of the EU enabled a smooth introduction of the negotiation process in result of which new countries joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. It was taking place in the period of economic growth and general prosperity of Europe.

This period has not been made use of by the Balkan countries affected by ethnic conflicts often dictated by ambition. Only Croatia in 2013 succeeded, so far, in joining the organization. Other countries have been left behind. The delay is due not always to non-compliance with the criteria for membership but also results from political problems with the neighbours. Greek-Macedonian dispute about the name of the country shows that problem most emphatically.

Today, the situation does not favour the enlargement of the UE. Both economically (the prolonged crisis in the euro zone) and politically (eurosceptic attitudes in several EU countries) the situation is incomparable with that of several years ago. Moreover, the societies of the EU countries seem to be tired with the enlargements of the first decade of this century.

Nevertheless, the European Union is undoubtedly the political and economic stabilizer of the situation in many areas of the continent. Membership in the Union creates a solid basis for the development of the countries. In case of Macedonia, given its geopolitical position, it is difficult to indicate any alternative to the accession to the organization. However, there is no answer to the question when it is possible to happen. As in case of Central Europe, which is clearly visible 10 years after the enlargement, in case of the Balkans the enlargement is due to bring success.

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