

Полемика

УДК: 341.171(4-672ЕУ:497)

32(497.2):341.171(4-672ЕУ:497.7)

---

Vasko Naumovski

---

# THE PROCESSES OF (DE) STABILISATION IN THE BALKANS THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

---

POLITICAL THOUGHT

---

63

## Introduction

While commemorating 70 years since the signing of the Paris Agreement<sup>1</sup>, which established the European Coal and Steel Community, in 2021 the process of European integration is not living its best days, especially not in the Balkans. The internal functional inconsistencies in the Union, the slow pace of work (partly caused by the health and economic crisis), the strengthening of national versus supranational interests, and the clear lack of leadership have significantly changed the agenda of priorities, with the usual “victim” being the expansion.

At the same time, in the broader context of relations with its neighbours, the EU is facing a security crisis on its borders, and a situation which escalation would confront the Union with perhaps the greatest security challenge since its inception. The Russian-Ukrainian turmoil<sup>2</sup> undoubtedly causes concerns in many EU member states, especially those directly bordering one of these two potentially warring parties. The prolonged tensions are certainly compounded by the energy aspects of the relations with the Russian Federation, as well as the security crises at several critical points on Russia's borders with some of its neighbours.<sup>3</sup> The EU's ambitions to become an influential global actor will have to be based on its ability to resolve crises in its immediate surroundings.

At the same time, no visible progress can be registered in the Balkans in the approach of the countries in the region to the EU. Regarding the current membership negotiations, after a two-year break, at the end of 2021, Serbia opened five new chapters (four of which are from the so-called fourth cluster, according to the new methodology), and has closed only two chapters (after eight years of negotiations). Montenegro, meanwhile, entering the tenth year of negotiations, has closed only three chapters. Compared to the enlargement cycle with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (2004/07), there is a drastic difference in the duration of the negotiations, which in turn causes a decrease in motivation, enthusiasm and commitment to the reforms needed to meet the membership criteria.

The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo, does not indicate a final stabilization of these two societies. Namely, the radicalized rhetoric of the leadership of the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>4</sup>, calling into question the viability of the federation, as well as the stalemate in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, diminish the

- 1 Signed on 18.04.1951 in Paris, and entered into force on 23.07.1952, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community.
- 2 Since March 2021, a series of security incidents have started on the territory of Ukraine under the control of pro-Russian armed groups, as well as on the border between Russia and Ukraine, accompanied by military deployment of troops on both sides of the border, and intensive diplomatic activities aimed at reducing tensions.
- 3 In mid-November 2021, the crisis between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated again (albeit briefly), in January 2022, several days of protests erupted in Kazakhstan (resulting in dozens of casualties), and the internal political crisis in Georgia became more complicated (with possible implications on the relations with Russia).
- 4 Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodić has repeatedly announced that a break-up of the federation is possible (as well as that he will advocate a “peaceful break-up”), a renewal of the army of the Serbian entity, and a boycott of joint institutions.

prospects for progress in bringing these countries closer to the EU. The kind of “arms race” in the region<sup>5</sup> also highlights the security aspects of the relations in the region, reaffirming the need to focus on the EU.

Regarding the countries awaiting the start of negotiations, in the Macedonian and Albanian accession processes, in 2021 there was no progress in their status. If in 2019 the stalemate was a result of the need to reform the negotiation methodology<sup>6</sup>, in 2020 and 2021 the start of the negotiations was conditioned by resolving the bilateral Macedonian-Bulgarian problem. Bulgaria is exercising its veto power at a time when it is unfavourable for the enlargement, stimulated further by the internal political developments. And after three election cycles<sup>7</sup>, the fragile ruling coalition<sup>8</sup> is facing the challenge of creating a common position on the dispute, knowing that some of the government coalition partners have strong nationalist positions on this issue. On the other hand, the parliamentary majority maintained by the Macedonian government<sup>9</sup> largely depends on the start of the negotiations, given that it was the European perspective that was the reason for maintaining and increasing the parliamentary majority.

The absence of a clear progress in this direction will increase the internal pressure from the coalition partners, but also from the opposition and the general public, which would further problematize the political situation. In essence, the postponement of the start of the negotiations goes in favour of the political destabilization of the country, and further reduction of the support for EU membership, as well as in favour of the external actors who oppose the enlargement of the Union.

To what extent can the political stabilization of the Bulgarian political scene contribute to the closure of the bilateral dispute, which would mean diminishing the potential for creating a new, long-lasting “frozen” conflict in the Balkans? The influences of external actors are not alien to the Bulgarian society either, having in mind the long tradition of cooperation with countries outside the EU and NATO and other structures typical for past regimes, which have their share in the political developments<sup>10</sup>, but also in the academic

5 Serbia decided to procure 30 military helicopters in 2022 and 2023, and supported the domestic military industry with 145 million euros; Croatia is procuring 12 French-made warplanes; Hungary also procured 20 new military helicopters; Bulgaria, meanwhile, has decided to purchase eight F-16 fighter jets.

6 In October 2019, France stressed the need to reform the negotiation methodology before agreeing to a decision to start negotiations, while some member states opposed the start of negotiations with Albania due to the need for further reforms in this country.

7 Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria were held on April 4, July 11 and November 14, 2021, with the new government elected on December 13, 2021.

8 The Bulgarian government is made up of four political parties: “We are continuing the change”, “Democratic Bulgaria”, “There is such a people” and the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

9 The government consists of four parties/coalitions: SDSM, DUI and “Alternative”, formed after the turmoil in the Parliament, where the party “Alternative” was part of the announced new majority, and then became part of the existing one.

10 For example, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Bulgaria, as well as a long-time chairman of the VMRO-BND party, Krasimir Karakachanov, is a registered collaborator of the Bulgarian secret services, under the pseudonyms “Doncho” and “Ivan”, covering the issue of “pro-Macedonian nationalism”; see more in the “Register of State Security and Intelligence Service Associates”: <https://agentibg.com/index.php/bg/2014-02-18-16-00-28/177-2014-12-12-13-49-48>

community, the media, and even among the Bulgarian clergy<sup>11</sup>. This phenomenon can also be seen in the formation of the new composition of the Bulgarian government<sup>12</sup>. After three parliamentary election cycles in one year, the formation of the new government is not without risks - the four political parties do not have fully harmonized positions on many issues, especially concerning the open issues with our country. The demand for a generally acceptable position from all coalition partners has resulted in an attitude that implies "maintaining the existing position, but also upgrading it." One of the challenges for the new Bulgarian Prime Minister will be to unite the coalition partners in the process of adapting their position, in order to create an atmosphere in which Bulgaria will give up its veto power.

The initial positions of the new Bulgarian government were accompanied by more moderate and constructive statements, which should be confirmed in practice in the coming months. Bulgaria has proposed setting up working groups<sup>13</sup>, which should facilitate the realization of the potential of good-neighbourliness, putting the debate on historical topics in the background. If the work of the new working groups is carried out in good faith, we will be able to improve the atmosphere in the bilateral relations. Expanding the topics discussed will open the door to progress, in contrast to the current situation dominated by historical topics. The allocated time period of up to six months may be acceptable if used for a new, honest approach, rather than as an alibi for a new delay.

Good-neighbourliness and friendship should be concretised through projects in the economy, trade, infrastructure, culture and other areas that are not burdened by the differences inherent in historical discussions. Finally, the essence of the criteria for EU membership is in meeting European standards in many areas<sup>14</sup>, and not in historical disputes, which are often incomprehensible to most EU member states.

The European Union, for its part, seems to have no answer to the situation in which a member state uses its veto power over a bilateral dispute with a candidate country. Previously established precedents of enlargement blockades<sup>15</sup> have resulted in undermining the credibility of the process itself, but also of the European Union. In addition, the public opinion and support for EU membership is not high, which discourages the decisive moves of the European leaders to admit new members. In part, in some Member States the negative attitude towards the enlargement is a consequence

11 "Bugarski episkopi kao tajni komunistički agenti", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/hr/bugarski-episkopi-kao-komunisti%C4%8Dki-tajni-agenti/av-17512904>.

12 "Bulgaria: Teodora Genchovska fills cabinet with secret service agents" <https://nezavisen.mk/bugarija-teodora-genchovska-go-napolnila-kabinetot-so-bivshi-agenti-na-tajната-sluzhba/>

13 It was announced that the working groups will cover the areas of: economy, infrastructure, European integration, culture and historical issues.

14 The membership criteria, known as the "Copenhagen Criteria", adopted in June 1993, refer to the fulfilment of the political criteria, the economic criteria, as well as the harmonization of legislation.

15 The Greek-Macedonian dispute, as well as the bilateral disputes between Slovenia and Croatia, Cyprus and Turkey, and others.

of the effects of the refugee-migrant crisis in recent years, because the admission of new members is associated with new migrant movements.

When it comes to the protection of the common European values, however, they seem to be promoted more to the candidate countries than to some of the member states, where national interests are dominant. The very negotiations for enlargement are the strongest impetus for reforms and Europeanization, which in turn will mean attaining a permanent stabilization of the region, and preventing new conflicts between states and peoples in this area.

The reforms aimed at meeting the membership criteria can, and should be, continued regardless of the start of negotiations, but still, the motivation for that process, its quality, as well as its results, will undoubtedly be at different levels if implemented within the framework of the negotiation process. Also, the accession of the countries from the region to the EU is in the best interest of the countries from the same region that are already members of the Union. That is, their real national interest is to have neighbours that are part of the same Union, in a conflict-free environment, in order to use their position for regional leadership and support for the enlargement.

The internal political situation in our country is also a factor that influences the resolution of the whole situation. The positive signals from Sofia should be followed by appropriate responses from Skopje, having in mind that the possible benefit from resolving the dispute would be greater for the candidate country, and not for the one that is already inside the Union. The election of a new government, although dominated by the same political parties, opens the possibility for a new episode in the approach to the dispute with Bulgaria, but also to the relations with the opposition and other social processes.

The start of the negotiations for membership seems to be one of the key factors in maintaining the current parliamentary majority, and if no progress is made in this area, the pressure will increase from within, from the coalition partners themselves, but also from the opposition and the general public. Hence, the government's contribution to the negotiations with Bulgaria is significant, and essential not only for the realization of its programme, but also for its survival.

In 2022, there are several election cycles ahead, the results of which will have an impact on the regional developments. The issue of the EU enlargement is unlikely to dominate the French presidential election campaign, which chairs the Council of the EU in the first half of the year, but will prevent decisive moves by this country regarding the process itself. The announcement of a European summit dedicated to the Balkans at the end of the presidency confirms that France will commit to the enlargement after the elections. The parliamentary elections in Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia will also be held in the first half of the year, and possible leadership changes there could affect the resolution

of some enlargement-related issues, as well as the relations of the region with the EU, including its wider co-operation.

The membership negotiations for the countries that are negotiating or will be negotiating for the next round of EU accession are very different from the negotiations that were conducted with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Namely, the various geopolitical aspects, the economic dimension, and the modified methodology are only part of the factors that influence this process. It can be expected that, unlike previous cycles, the negotiations would now take more than ten years, which significantly changes the motivation, enthusiasm and support of public opinion in the candidate countries. If the goal to be achieved is further away - the mood for implementing unpopular reforms and compromises is lower.

Therefore, in order to amend the damaged credibility of the process itself, but also of the Union, it is advisable to consider alternative ways to accelerate the process, or its adaptation, so that countries and their citizens will remain focused on the Europeanization of their societies. Instruments that may be useful include increasing pre-accession assistance (especially its cross-border cooperation component), intensifying academic exchanges, broad support for reform processes in critical areas (rule of law, anti-corruption, environmental protection, etc.), as well as determining a proposed time frame for conducting the very negotiations (regardless of how flexible it may be).

The declarative commitments for the so-called European vocation of the Balkan countries have long been insufficient to maintain support for the EU accession among the citizens in the region. Similar to the monitoring of the reforms in the candidate countries, there is a need for visible and concrete results on the part of the EU, in order to confirm the commitment to include all Balkan countries in the EU.