



REPERCUSSIONS OF FROZEN CONFLICTS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In the Western Balkans, there are at least two different additional keywords which do not bring good news along – "Balkanisation" and "frozen conflicts". "Frozen conflicts" are usually described as post-armed contexts, without a peace accord or a consensus on a way forward. "Balkanisation" is used as a "*division of a multinational state into smaller ethnically homogeneous entities and is used to refer to ethnic conflict within multi-ethnic states*"¹. At present, frozen conflicts could, de facto, also include conflicts which ended with peace accords which have reached their implementation limits or have found them on difficult implementation milestones, where sides that had taken part in armed conflicts would need to put an end to issues. These both retrograding tendencies, used in doses required by selfish needs of daily politics and ethnocentric political agendas in the region, take the region away from the processes which imply integration, cooperation and productive interactions.

At the same time, anti-enlargement forces within the European Union prosper from any further specific weight being added into these disintegrating and conflictual tendencies, behaviours and practices. Back in 1973, Hurwitz² identified five distinct approaches to stability: (1) stability as the absence of violence; (2) stability as governmental longevity/endurance; (3) stability as the existence of legitimate constitutional order; (4) stability as the absence of structural change; (5) stability as a multifaceted societal attribute. A decade later, Dowding and Kimber added a sixth: stability as a pattern of behaviour³.

¹ Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>

² Hurwitz, L. (1973). 'Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability', *Comparative Politics* 5,449-63

³ Dowding, K and Kimber, R. (1983) 'The Meaning and Use of Political Stability', *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983) 229-243

Shaping of EU's strategic response needs to cope with the reality

New strategic approach of the European Union, as suggested by the European Commission in the new strategy⁴, has clearly recognised these problems when recommending resolution of all bilateral issues prior to integration. Practice teaches us this is important, but far from sufficient and enough. Burdened by the lack of mutual trust, regional aspirants fear that those joined prior to them will direct blackmail efforts at achieving what they were not able to do in bilateral disputes and armed conflicts. Efforts of aspirants include practices that are to keep up appearance before the EU rather than to resolve problems both on and under the table. Reaffirmation of the merit-based progress in the process of European integration opens a pragmatic chance for a fair and transparent measurement. However, prolongation of resolution of latent and open post-armed conflicts in the long run threatens and undermines regional stability.

Contexts in the Balkans that are being euphemically called frozen conflicts tend to gain and strengthen their importance, creating legal vacuums and uncertainty. These conflicts have their own self-preservation mechanisms strongly embedded in corrupt formal and informal decision-making structures, beneficiaries of gray and back economies and markets and organized crime in different forms. Often, rhetoric used to address some acute disagreements flirts with the memories to past armed conflicts. Absence of proper structural changes in these situations is dangerous and risky. "Frozen conflicts" in the Balkans are never frozen as they do not bring any prosperity along, just fear from what the future will bring. They drive away opportunities for economic development⁵ and evolution of civilized political culture. They gradually but surely destroy social cohesion and never contribute to articulation of a single grand vision for a country and proper articulation of its interests and needs.

As the Economist pointed out a decade ago⁶, "from Cyprus, through the Balkans and into the former Soviet Union, a string of nasty small wars have been settled not through peace deals but simply by freezing each side's positions".

4 Text of the Strategy: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

5 Deutsche Welle Interview with economic expert Vladimir Gligorov on the occasion of the 2017 Trieste Summit - <http://www.dw.com/en/can-trieste-summit-thaw-long-frozen-conflicts-hindering-balkan-progress/a-39663828>

6 "Frozen conflicts – Europe's unfinished business" Economist, 19 November 2008 - <https://www.economist.com/node/12494503>

Unsynchronised and insufficient efforts for timely articulation of exit strategies out of lasting situations which had been meant to be temporary appear on ad hoc basis just to stir up political atmosphere in countries of the region without ensuring appropriate follow-up even for things which came out to be positive in their interventions. Open-ended post-conflict processes are left to still weak democracies and economies in transition to resolve problematic issues which could declare an end to successful implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ohrid Agreement in Macedonia and successful completion of agreements reached between Belgrade and Pristina under the Brussels process. Reluctant, insufficiently structured and *ad hoc* involvement of EU representatives and institutions in these processes leaves space for unwanted local manipulations and accusations of partiality. Real change appears to demand consistent actions outside the comfort zone of both – local stakeholders and the European Union.

European Union owes to itself and to the enlargement process, as well as to stability of the whole idea of unity in diversity, integration and tolerance to develop a mechanism which is to once and for all prevent easy conversion of bilateral issues and disputes of both new and old member states into multilateral ones. So far, it has been proven that this practice limits reach of both logics – the one of integration and the one of enlargement – and leads exclusively to unproductive populism driven outcomes.

Conclusion and recommendations

Frozen conflicts exist with all their negative features not only in those post-conflict countries and societies where there is no peace agreement, but also in countries where implementation of peace accords is being tested, challenged or has reached its maximum. In the Balkans, these are inseparably linked to the Balkanisation processes in their worst. These tend to evolve their own twisted logics, over time, their self-preservation becomes their sole purpose used for populist political platforms and disposable needs and irreversibly damage effects of efforts for reconciliation and restoration of social cohesion. Regional stability cannot rely on frozen conflicts in this sense. Postponement of post-conflict arrangements and agreements cannot be prolonged indefinitely if the region aspires to enter the European Union. Countries that are at present seen by the European Union as aspirants and candidate with an open perspective of EU membership, should be with their political and strategic practices distancing themselves wisely from features of conflictual practices and statuses identified in the EU neighbourhood.

- Implementation of post-conflict arrangements in the region need to see an end through comprehensive exit strategies followed with clear and measurable benchmarking;
- In addition to insisting on resolution of bilateral issues prior to integration, the European Union has to develop a mechanism for prevention of conversion of bilateral issues and disputes into multilateral;
- The EU and its member states to show explicit sensitivity to absence of appropriate political culture of decision-makers in the region and effectively develop "zero tolerance" to hate speech and rhetoric which contribute to deepening of conflicts;
- Western Balkans politicians whose political platform are declared as pro-European need to recognise the danger of promotion and acting in favour of elements of frozen conflicts, which has been so far used by the EU primarily for the European neighbourhood;
- EU-led mediation and involvement in resolution of conflicts and disputes in the region needs to develop clear and viable exit strategies in early stage of the process with clear action points;
- European Union must not allow frictions within the region to interfere with the quality of reforms and integration.