

## European Union and the Balkans: enlargement or empire?

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The crisis of the European Union's soft power in the aftermath of the French and Dutch rejection of the European constitution could be compared only with the crisis of the American hard power in the aftermath of the occupation of Iraq. The occupation of Iraq demonstrated the limits of American military power and transformed US into imperial power in the Middle East. The crisis with the European constitution risks transforming EU into a reluctant imperial power in the Balkans.

The orange revolution in Ukraine better than any other event in recent history has revealed an extraordinary paradox: that the European Union is a revolutionary power able to overthrow undemocratic regimes – and that this is exactly what EU is afraid to be. What the wave of color revolutions have demonstrated is that the enlargement of the European Union is driven less by the member-states's strategic interests or the Commission's bureaucratic inertia than the union's magnetic attraction for neighboring societies. The success of the EU's enlargement policy can be best explained by Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" – the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payment, arising from the appeal of your culture, political ideals, and policies – is relevant here. But the EU's soft power is not wielded by European governments or the EU Commission, nor reducible to its prosperity and freedoms; it inheres in the promise that if you are *like* us you could *become* one of us. This makes the EU more forceful than the combined weight of its individual members yet also vulnerable in its collective foreign policy, for this is fuelled by external demand not internal supply. It was the EU's soft power that was mostly hurt by the results of the French and Dutch referendums. The reasons for French and Dutch citizens to say "no" to European constitution could be extremely complex and contradictory but the impact of these votes now seems quite clear. The new consensus is that in the next decade we should live in a post-enlargement Europe. The process of enlargement would probably continue with getting Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia in, and Turkey around but the project of EU as an ever expanding world of freedom and shared sovereignty is considered dead. What European publics are soon to learn is that post-enlargement EU is more fragile and ineffective and surprisingly more dangerous than the enlarging EU. And this is first to be seen in the Balkans.

The crisis is approaching in the Balkans that is both dangerous and timely. What makes it dangerous is the fact that the European public is totally unaware of it. What makes it timely is the fact that this is the crisis that the European Union badly needs at the moment.

The exceptional place of the region in the current European crisis is determined by several factors-some of them are political, others geographic, but some are symbolic. The Balkans was critical in constructing European Union's post-cold war identity. It was through intervening twice in the wars that accompanied the break up of Yugoslavia that

the Union modeled itself as an alternative to the Europe of traditional nation states and traditional conflicts. Any failure of the EU to bring stability and development to the Balkans will not simply increase the import of immigrants and criminality in the member states but will de-legitimize the Europe project. It is in the Balkans that the EU should either demonstrate that its transformative power can work in regions where states are weak and societies are divided or it will sink into irrelevance. Because of the scale and the nature of its involvement the Balkans is the make-or-break test for the union. The EU can survive the premature death of its constitution but the EU cannot survive a new Srebrenica.

### **The fracture zone**

The outburst of violence in Kosovo in March 2004 failed to capture Europe's attention. The international community has decided to trivialize the disruption and not focus public attention on it. In comparison with the other international nation-building sites like Iraq and Afghanistan, the Balkans looked like a success story and nobody was in a mood to challenge this success.

Unfortunately the border between failure and success is the least guarded border in the postmodern world. And diplomats are the worst border guards. We can hope that the wars are over in the Balkans, but the smell of violence still hangs heavy in the air. What we face in the region is not the prospect of a new Balkan war but a nasty combination of state failures and small criminal wars.

The region's profile is bleak – a mixture of weak states and international protectorates, where Europe has stationed almost half of its deployable forces. Economic growth in these territories is low or non-existent; unemployment is high; corruption is pervasive; and the public is pessimistic and distrustful towards its nascent democratic institutions. Criminalization of politics in the Balkan states and statelets goes hand-in-hand with the internalization of the criminal networks.

The international community has invested twenty-five times more money and fifty times more troops on a per capita basis in post-conflict Kosovo than in post-conflict Afghanistan. But despite the scale of the assistance effort in the Balkans, the international community has failed to offer a convincing political perspective to the societies in the region. The future of Kosovo is undecided, the future of Macedonia is uncertain, and the future of Serbia is unclear. We run the real risk of an explosion of Kosovo, an implosion of Serbia and new fractures in the foundations of Bosnia and Macedonia.

The report of the International Commission on the Balkans that was published in March this year makes clear that the real choice the EU is facing in the Balkans is enlargement or empire. Either the EU devises a bold strategy for accession that could encompass all Balkan countries as new members within the next decade, or it will become mired instead as a neo-colonial power in places like Kosovo, Bosnia, and even Macedonia. Such an anachronism would be hard to manage and would be in contradiction with the very nature of the European Union.

Unfortunately the signs of such a debilitating future are already visible in the quasi-protectorates – Kosovo and Bosnia. With no real stake in these territories, international representatives insist on quick results to complex problems; they dabble in social engineering but are not held accountable when their policies go wrong.

### **George Orwell's lesson**

Bosnia is the country that has received most democracy assistance per capita in the world and at the same time the Office of the High Representative using the powers provided by the Dayton agreement is in the business of dismissing elected officials almost on a daily base. Paddy Ashdown himself is the best embodiment of this reluctant and almost locally demanded new imperialism. But if Europe's neo-colonial rule becomes further entrenched, it will encourage economic discontent; it will become a political embarrassment for the European project; and, above all, European electorates would see it as an immense and unnecessary financial and moral burden. Colonialism by default is what post-enlargement EU is facing in the Balkans.

You do not need a colonial project to become a colonial power. George Orwell's 1936 essay **Shooting an Elephant**, recalling his experience as a minor colonial police officer in Burma, explains it best. One morning, Orwell was told by his superiors that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar, and that he should do something. He took his rifle and moved in the direction of the bazaar, deeply reluctant to shoot the large animal. When he reached the bazaar, he found a huge crowd of people.

“And suddenly I realized,” Orwell wrote, “that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had to do it. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at”.

Orwell's Burma incident gave the writer “a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism – the real motives for which despotic governments act”. It reminds me a lot of Europe's Balkans story today. The only alternative to imperial Europe is enlarged Europe. But is the EU's expansion in the Balkans really possible in the context of the “no” epidemics that started with the May events in France? Could the Balkans survive the rise of the “bad public” in Western Europe?

The most surprising feature of the current debate in Europe is that enlargement – the most impressive success of the union – has been turned into its most vulnerable spot. Scared by the scale of the anti-establishment uprising that is underway in Europe, the elites are afraid to make their argument in favor of the further enlargement. What lacks in the debate is a real discussion of the costs of non-enlargement when it comes to place like the Balkans.

### **The land of “unknown unknowns”**

The policy of constructive ambiguity embodied in documents like United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 for Kosovo (1999) or the Constitutional Charter of Serbia and Montenegro (2002) worked yesterday and it is not working today. It can be credited with draining the tensions in the post-Milosevic Balkans, but now the politics of constructive ambiguity risks turning into the politics of destructive ambiguity. The consensus among Balkan observers today is that the region is at breaking-point and there is an urgent need for European action. The current status quo is a clear and present danger. The decision of the international community to move with the status talks on Kosovo is a realization of this dangerous reality.

The risk is that in the absence of a European Union membership perspective the status negotiations for Kosovo will open not the road to peace but a road to war. In the absence of membership perspective there is no real incentive for Belgrade to go to the negotiation table, so what we can expect in the coming months is either never ending negotiations or imposed solution that can paralyze the region for the next century. Closing the status issues in the Balkans in a constructive way is possible only in the EU accession framework. In the absence of a clear perspective for joining the EU, Macedonia will not survive as a state and Kosovo and Bosnia will remain protectorates forever.

So to the real question: is the European public ready to endorse imperial Europe if it is not ready to endorse enlarged Europe? And will this imperial Europe be less costly in financial, political and moral terms?

In the language of the “real politik” blocking the accession of the Balkans to the European Union equals the destruction of pro-reform leaders and constituencies in the region and turning the Balkans into the land of “unknown unknowns”.

The irony of the situation is that post-enlargement EU means imperial EU. The hope is that in one of the unexpected twists in history the Balkans will save the EU just before the EU saves the Balkans. The nature of the Balkan crisis could make European publics aware of the real danger of the decline of EU’s soft power and force them to make a different choice than the one that is in making now. If not, let’s pray for the efficiency and benevolence of the new empire.