

## WESTERN BALKANS - THE IMPACT OF TERRITORIAL DISPUTES ON EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

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**Abstract.** Since 1991 the Balkan region started to face real changes in terms of geopolitical and geo-strategic and geo-economic perspective. The economic, political and cultural differences between the various peoples inhabiting this area began to be reactivated and gave birth to serious armed conflicts that have left behind thousands of dead. As effect, the economy collapsed across the region. Currently, the reintegration of the Western Balkans to Euro-Atlantic structures represents one of the major priorities of the European Union. Still, the process is facing numerous and difficult obstacles. Among them, the territorial disputes and minority rights continue to represent major challenges for the accession of that space to the great European family.

**Keywords:** *EU enlargement, Western Balkans, territorial disputes*

### **Introduction**

As a State border of the European Union, Romania is directly interested in the political, economic and social issues in the Balkan area, and especially in the Western area. *The Western Balkans* is an increasingly common term, used by the international institutions in their attempt to define the "enclave" represented by the Balkan states that have not yet joined the Euro-Atlantic structures.

More specifically, by Western Balkans, international institutions refer to Albania and the states shown up on the Europe political map after Former Republic of Yugoslavia collapsed (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and FYR Macedonia). Slovenia, although emerged from Former Yugoslavia is not considered a part of the Western Balkans. In terms of geography is rather an alpine state, a Central European state judging from religious and historical point of view, while politically it is already a European Union member since 2004.

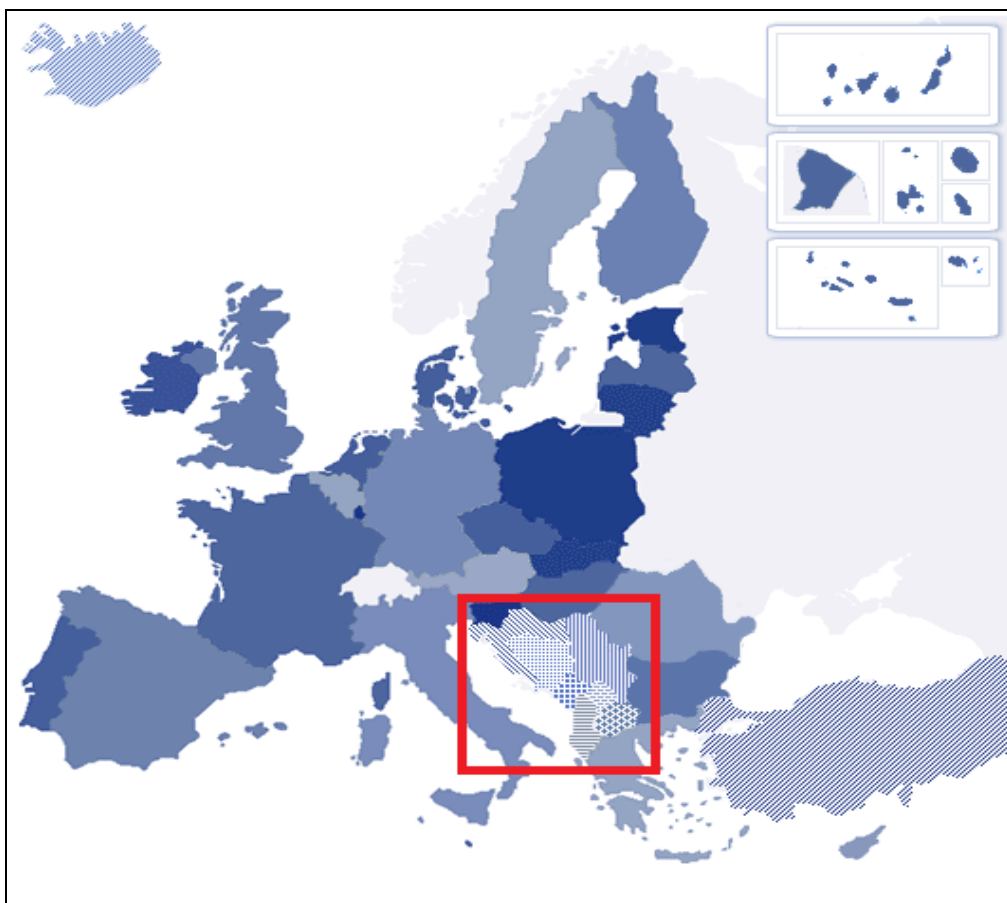
Kosovo status is an uncertain one, de facto an independent state recognized by 75 UN member states, de jure still a part of Serbia, Romania being one of the five UE member states refusing to recognize Kosovo's independence (together with Spain, Greece, Cyprus and Slovakia), self-proclaimed at the beginning of 2008.

This article aims to highlight the obstacles faced by the South Eastern Europe state entities, in their attempt to become part of the European Union, but also the obstacles that the EU has to face to be able to integrate in the future an extremely complex space, also known as the "powder keg of Europe" and characterized by a permanent state of conflict, ethnic cleansing, religious intolerance and poor economic development.

### **Advantages and obstacles of Western Balkans integration**

Geopolitically speaking, the reorientation of the Western Balkans towards the West is becoming more evident in the last five years. Each of the states part of this region tried to accomplish a series of reforms dedicated to modernization, democratization and aligning to European Union rules and legislation. For European states, Western Balkans integration is not only a new wave of enlargement but also the last one, a wave that would lead to the completion of the European project, reunion of a Europe divided for centuries.

Following the redefinition of the energy strategy, in terms of geo-strategy, Western Balkans became a real stake, with the capability to become an energy hub, and transit area for major projects.



*Figure 1 EU Members and candidate countries. Western Balkans Countries*

Also, by including this space in the EU, outbreaks of conflicts situated at the edge of Europe could be more easily controlled and the phenomenon of organized crime (a trans-boundary one, beyond borders) would have to face a real enemy represented by the European justice, Balkan states justice institutions considered unprepared to cope with such challenges.

On the other hand, the economic and financial crisis that Europe is facing starting 2008, made the UE enlargement to no longer be considered a priority for the western Europeans. On the contrary, fear that European border would open for new massive immigration waves has led to a radicalization of the western European citizens when bringing into question the integration of countries like Albania, FYR Macedonia or Serbia. This phenomenon, also known as “enlargement fatigue” is increasing and due to the fact that the accession of new member states is established by referendum in some countries, may turn it into a real obstacle for the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

### **Territorial disputes**

However, two of the major themes that the authorities from Western Balkans states need to handle in order to be accepted under European umbrella are the territorial disputes and the minorities status, two extremely sensitive issues, both representing the heritage of the former Yugoslavia. Through a comparative analysis of two territorial disputes in the Western Balkans space, we will try to highlight the challenges and obstacles needed to be overcome by this region in order to become from a region deeply affected by conflicts and war, a region dominated by regional cooperation, ethnical tolerance and good neighborly relations.

At the time, we have two schools of opinion of how the EU should conduct the accession of the Western Balkans. The first and predominant one, believes that states should join the EU as they succeed in fulfilling the negotiation criteria, while the second one believes that by joining separately, the relations between certain states would definitely deteriorate and lead to a jam in the integration process (explained by the fact that some states, once they are admitted into the EU, will refuse the accession of the states they are in conflict with regarding territorial disputes) and in the same time to a demotivation of those left out.

In favor of those believing that Western Balkans should be a part of the EU in a single wave when all the states meet the criteria we have the events started in 2004, year of Slovenia's accession. For Slovenia, joining EU meant his return into the big European family and the recognition of the fact that Slovenia remained the most developed country in the Former Yugoslavia. Slovenia was considered a state that was to become, geopolitically speaking, a bridge between the European Union and the rest of the Slavic states wishing to become member of the EU.

The next step was to be represented by Croatia. However, for Slovenia, the EU accession meant a good opportunity to use his new position and to try to solve in his benefit a series of territorial disputes with his neighbor. Apparently two states with a common background (for centuries in the spheres of influence of Austria and Germany), with a population in his majority catholic and without any major conflicts, the relations between the two states have deeply deteriorated after 2004. Their main territorial dispute developed around issue of Gulf of Piran. This is a subdivision of the Gulf of Trieste in the north of Adriatic Sea, with an area of approximately 20 km<sup>2</sup>. Ever since 1991, when they proclaimed their independence, there were many tensions regarding the control of this bay, but the peak was reached during the period of December 2008 and October

2009, when Slovenia as a member of the EU managed to completely block Croatia's attempts to join the EU.

Delimitation of territorial waters, and also the terrestrial border between the two states has brought a strong sense of frustration and dissatisfaction among Croatians directed toward neighbor state. A survey of the Gallup Balkan Monitor shows a very high level of mistrust of the Croatian population in a state that has always had a good neighborly relation with.

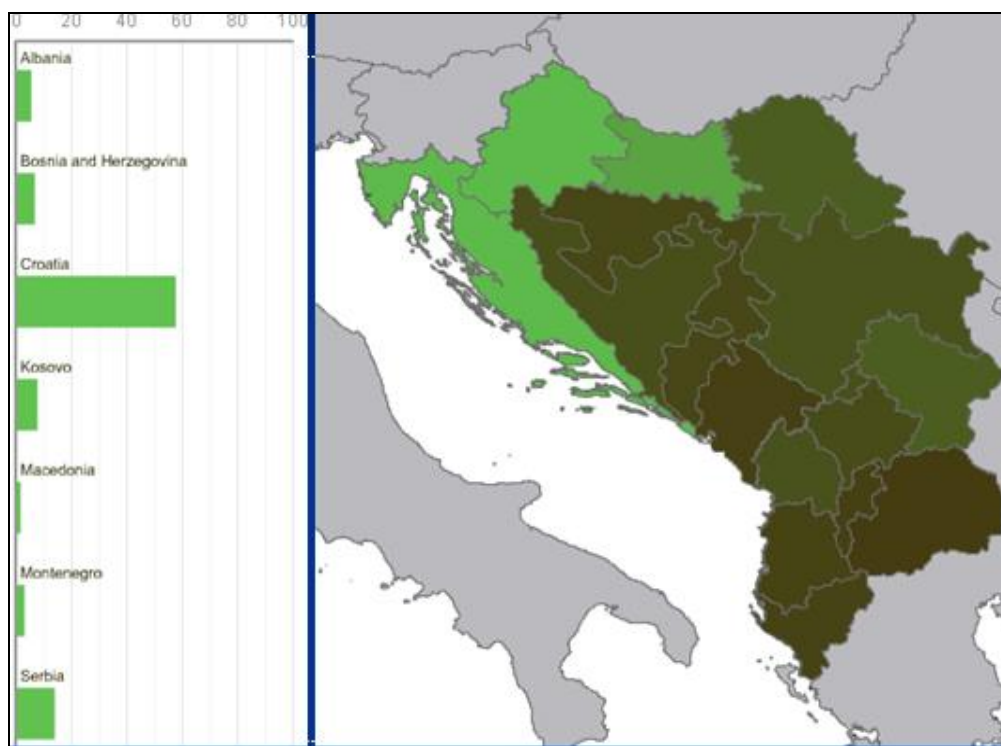


Figure 2 How hostile do you consider Slovenia to your country?

For the European Union, the ten months blockade imposed by Slovenia was a lesson. The possibility that Croatia should seek to solve in the same way his problems with Serbia and Montenegro (delimitation of territorial waters in Gulf of Kotor looks like the case of delimitation of territorial waters in the Gulf of Piran) brought concern among political circles in Brussels.

Moreover, none of the Balkan states can say at the time that had solved his problems with the neighboring countries. The example given by Greece that refused the FYR Macedonia accession to NATO in 2008 is the proven fact that in Balkan area conflicts are far from being solved, many times communication between parts being inexistent.

At the time, the situation of Gulf of Piran is still unsolved, but the parts agreed that on this issue should present his decision an international court of arbitration after Slovenia's population agreed on that. As a consequence, Croatia has resumed his

negotiations with the EU and according to the latest evolution, at the end of 2012, Croatia is likely to become the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the European Union. Unlocking the relations between Slovenia and Croatia in the early 2010 coincided with an improvement in relations between Serbia and Kosovo's political leaders.

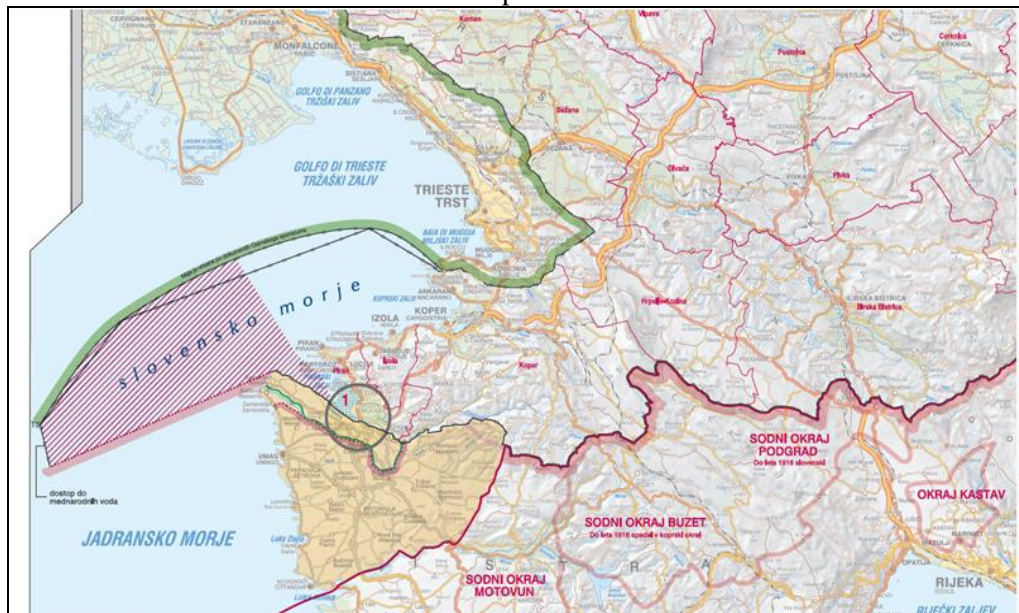


Figure 3 The territorial dispute between Croatia and Slovenia over Gulf of Piran

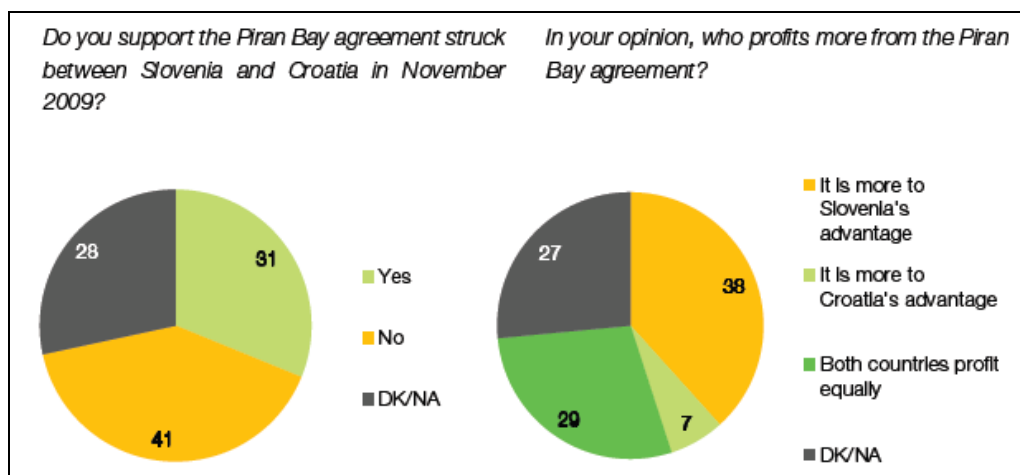


Figure 4 Croats perception regarding Piran Bay Agreement

Inside EU there are more and more voices conditioning a possible accession of Serbia by the recognition of Kosovo's Independence or at least establishing normal relations between Belgrade and Pristine. Thus, at the end of 2010, Serbia's president, Boris Tadić announced that Belgrade is ready to start discussion with Pristine

concerning a series of issues that would normalize relations among the two parts, but without recognizing Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state.

One of Serbia's political strategies is now his desire to reintegrate northern part of Kosovo within Serbia and also the orthodox monasteries, part of the UNESCO heritage to become Serbian territory. In the same time, Serbia's attention seems to be moving more and more towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. The republic of Srpska, the region bordering Serbia inhabited by a majority of Serbian population could see in Kosovo model a good opportunity to unite with Serbia. As such, Croat and Muslim leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also representatives of the international community do not hesitate to express their concern regarding the future of this country, strong divided and affected by centrifugal movements that are likely to destabilize her.

### Conclusions

Although in terms of population or territorial dimensions Western Balkans space does not seem to be a space difficult to absorb by the Euro-Atlantic structures, his highly fragmentation along ethnic, religious and political criteria makes the process of enlargement a very difficult and hard to achieve one. If between Slovenia and Croatia could develop such a strong geopolitical fault line, it is very easy to guess that for the European, Serbian and Albanese negotiators would be difficult to reach a compromise concerning the status of Kosovo and the Serbian communities in his northern part.

Economic involvement of the European Union in the Western Balkans should continue, so as the involvement of the international community in maintaining peace and security in the region. Nationalistic tendencies and the possibility to recur some frozen conflicts are still very likely in the Balkans and a series of endemic problems such as unemployment, corruption or ethnic tensions may deteriorate regional stability.

Romania, as a NATO and EU member should continue and even intensify his diplomatic efforts to help Balkan countries and to share with them the experience gained in the four years as a member of the European community.

At the same time, for Romania, the accession of the Western Balkans to EU may have a major importance from geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic point of view, taking into consideration the fact that after the accession the Danube axis will become in his integrality a part of the EU space, translated into a stimulus for trade and free movement.

The Western Balkans accession should also bring Romania new allies, and together we should be able to promote regional interests and issues specific to The Black Sea and the Danube basin.

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