



**SÜDOSTEUROPA-
GESELLSCHAFT**

in cooperation with



Auswärtiges Amt

International Conference

**“The EU and the Western Balkans: The Objectives of the Slovenian
EU Presidency – Implementation and Continuation”**

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Building on the discussion on flexibility vs. a holistic approach of the EU towards integration of Western Balkans, this paper argues in support of greater flexibility and differential treatment of individual countries based on their merit and specific conditions. This position stems primarily from the perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which is seen a case in itself, which requires a tailor-made approach. The EU should not continue treating BiH the same as it treated for example the Czech Republic or other more successful transition countries from Central Europe.

This, however, is a cumbersome and slow process which fatigues both sides. BiH has not followed a classical transitional path to democracy. We skipped the phase of classical liberalization, and instead went straight into a conflict soon after the first multiparty parliamentary elections were held. BiH thus had not gone through a linear transitional process, and it can be seen today as a post-post-conflict, but still pre-transitional society. Such democracy is characterized by ethnicity-based party politicking, confrontational discourse, and pressures on media, biased press, reform stalemate, inflammatory rhetoric and perpetual political crisis.

As such, BiH fulfills the formal conditions for democracy: holds free parliamentary elections, has a multiparty system, legislation which establishes the principles of free media and freedom of association and speech, access to public information, etc. But, it lacks democratic substance: active citizens participation, horizontal and vertical accountability, true freedom of media, issue-driven public discourse and political dialogue, and issue-driven policies. However, the predominant view from EU countries is focused on the fact that BiH is too complex, dysfunctional, with expensive and irrational structures. The EU policies thus disregard the fact that BiH is short on democratic substance, and instead focus on providing formal / structural / technical remedies to Bosnia's problems. Such remedies are seen as insufficient and they are rooted in the following disparities between EU and BiH.

1. There is *normative incompatibility* between BiH and EU systems of values.

The current, predominant system of values in BiH is rooted in the exclusivist and divisive nature of the Dayton structures. Divisive structures inhibit the projection of EU norms,

which are essentially integrationist in nature. This creates a “cultural/normative” clash between the two systems, or two societies, which contests the applicability of EU standards in BiH. Political elites in BiH which seek to maintain the divisive status quo will resist any efforts of the EU to integrate the country internally in order to facilitate its future integration in the EU.

2. The predominant norms which have been created through such a divisive system in BiH position themselves as *counter-norms* to those norms which represent EU values (democracy, human rights, civil liberties, etc.). As such, those norms act as barriers or resistance to the spread of more democratic norms in BiH society. When surveyed about the position on EU integrations, over 75% of BiH population expresses their strong support. However, this support drops by almost a half when conditioned by matters which impinge on issues considered to be of ‘national interest’ (e.g. arrest of war criminals, or abolishment of entities). So, the public support to the EU exists only in as much as it does not infringe the entrenched national divisions.
3. BiH can be seen as what some people call a *grey-zone or reluctant democracy*. It distracts the EU policies by claiming the success for partial or superficial reforms (e.g. infamous police reform). By agreeing to such incomplete reforms, the EU agrees to the claims of local political elites that BiH is unable “to do better”.
4. As a result of the above approach, the EU fails to *internalize* the EU norms in BiH society. It agrees to recognizing partial successes only, and turns a blind eye on failures to create and implement proper reforms. For example, the EU Progress Reports in BiH does nothing even near the qualitative statements it gave in Slovakia’s Progress Reports in 1997 during Meciar’s first government, when it called the behavior, policies and practices of that government and going against the “normal democratic behavior”. Progress reports on BiH lack such qualitative positions, words and statements of condemnation of unacceptable behavior, and thus fail to call for anything beyond the insufficient technical remedies.

5. Finally, the EU is not utilizing its positive image to protect and support democratic values. In countries of Central Europe, and even Slovenia and Croatia, there was a sense of a “return to Europe”, which generated considerable public support and enthusiasm for EU integrations. In the absence of such indigenous sense of ‘belonging to Europe’ among the BiH public, the EU has not offered any alternatives which would make BiH feel closer to Europe. To the BiH public, the EU is too distant, too abstract, outside its reach. The only motif the local political elites are projecting is not to be the only country left out of the EU, or even not to be the last one. There is no strong internal drive and serious bottom-up pressure for integrating into the EU, which is why such pressure should come from the outside, from the EU.

Recommendations:

1. The EU needs to start thinking beyond the creation of a *virtual democracy* in BiH. It needs to provide a vision, a framework of democratic norms, values, principles that BiH citizens could subscribe to without fear of having to surrender their own ethnic and religious identities, which they feel so strongly about.
2. The standard EU *toolbox of policies* will not deliver this. The EU needs to help BiH overcome the fear of a constant and eternal entering into the EU.
3. However, the EU policies need to focus on moderating the internal social and structural divisions by:
 - accommodating the social craving for a more positive symbolic identification with a system of values that recognizes ethnic distinctions, but surpasses internal divisions;
 - constantly promoting EU values and norms, which prove a *supra-framework* of values;
 - making the vision of BiH inside the EU tangible and within the reach of BiH society (complete visa liberalization, accessible and affordable travel opportunities, etc.)
 - exposure to new ideas (student exchanges, access to research institutions and funds, etc.).

4. Confront those political elites which maintain and protect the status quo, with the support of those who oppose it. This requires abandoning the *politically correct* approach to democratically elected elites, which act undemocratically. In this case, the EU would need to take the gloves off its hands, but that's exactly what it did recently in Serbia, and a decade ago in Slovakia.

Conclusion:

This all may provoke a conclusion that the EU and BiH systems and societies are incompatible to the point of giving up. There is a widespread view among the EU officials, and media and member countries, that the EU needs to 'digest' the last enlargement before it moves forward. However, indigestion is not a fatal disease, and its better to suffer from a little bit of indigestion, than to leave a much more serious illness in the Balkans take its toll. This is why the EU should not only not give up on the Balkans, but should be even more rigid and insist on substantive application of its democratic values, principles and standards in this region. The EU has to realize that it is an end goal, as well as a process to get to that goal, and it should adjust its policies towards BiH accordingly.

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Berlin, September 13th 2008.