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**Bestuurskundig essay van de Kosovaarse ambassadeur in Nederland:
The EU must embrace the Western Balkans for the sake of peace,
stability and prosperity**

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Bestuurskundig essay van de Kosovaarse ambassadeur in Nederland

De toetredingsonderhandelingen tussen de EU en staten uit de Westelijke Balkan duren nog altijd voort. Vrij recent speelde Nederland nog een rol in deze ontwikkelingen door een veto uit te spreken in de Europese Raad tegen het beginnen van onderhandelingen met Albanië en Noord-Macedonië. Een land dat ook een belangrijke rol speelt in de toetredingskwestie is Kosovo. Sinds de ambassadeur van de Republiek Kosovo in 2018 aantrad in Den Haag, heeft hij deze ontwikkelingen uiteraard ook op de voet gevolgd. In dit essay zet de ambassadeur zijn visie op deze Europese kwestie uiteen.



Drenis Bytyçi en Justin Spruit

The EU must embrace the Western Balkans for the sake of peace, stability and prosperity

By Lirim Greiçevci

Some 21 years ago, the Kosovo people were on the verge of annihilation by a brutal regime from Serbia. Men, women, children were being massacred and deported from their homeland on the doorstep of Europe. The European values were being tested on European soil to their limit. In March 1999, NATO warplanes finally started to drop bombs on the Serbian targets to force them to stop the carnage. Ultimately, NATO prevailed and Kosovo was placed under international protection. In 2008, Kosovo became independent. To date 23 out of 28 EU member states recognise it as an independent country and our strategic goal is to join NATO and the EU. We look to the EU not just as a club where you meet technical criteria to join, but more importantly, as a guarantor of peace and stability in our region. The EU must live up to its role.

While NATO was ultimately able to secure the peace in our region two decades ago, the EU was tasked with cementing the peace by way of offering a clear EU perspective to all independent countries that had emerged out of the collapse of the former Yugoslav federation. Two of them, Slovenia and Croatia have already acceded, the others Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are candidate and prospective countries. The progress has been slow at times due to still lingering political issues and other times because of EU's hesitation to move to the next phase.

The EU has been enormously supportive of Kosovo. For no fault of its own, Kosovo started its journey to join the EU much later than all the others in the Western Balkans. Notwithstanding five non-recognising EU members, Kosovo managed to negotiate and conclude a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2016. It is the first contractual relationship that will hopefully lead to the next step in the EU integration process: candidate status. The EU has been the single biggest aid donor per capita in Kosovo. The largest European Security and Defence Policy mission, EULEX, was launched in Kosovo after the declaration of independence in 2008.

Kosovo and Serbia started a dialogue to normalise relations under the EU auspices as the facilitator in 2011. Some 25 agreements were reached, most of which have not been fully implemented. The EU proved capable in brokering the first ever agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, but did not prove adequate enough to enforce the implementation of those deals. The failure to do so has led to feelings of disillusionment and erosion of legitimacy in the eyes of the domestic public. The EU's approval ratings have been consistently high in our region. This may no longer be the case due to several reasons.

Following a traumatic event such as Brexit, Mr. Juncker, the former President of the EU Commission, made an unhelpful statement arguing that there would be no new enlargement in the next five years. This further emboldened the governments in those EU member states where the enlargement fatigue is more prevalent in order to slam the breaks of further EU integration. The diminishing role of the UK as one of the strongest proponents of EU enlargement to include the Western Balkans, the absence of a strong US presence in Brussels in order to nudge the EU member states to help stabilise the Western Balkans and the rise of populist parties in Europe have put into question the integration of our region into the EU. The recent failure to allow Albania and North Macedonia to open accession negotiations is only one of the symptoms of a crisis of leadership in the EU. Both Albania and North Macedonia have made unprecedented steps to meet conditions to open accession negotiations. Albania has embarked on a comprehensive reform of the judiciary, a full vetting of judges and prosecutors, unlike any other country in Western Balkans. North Macedonia changed the name of the country and normalised relations with Greece and Bulgaria so as to avoid yet another veto in its Euro-Atlantic path. But none of that was enough for a number of EU countries to allow them to move further up the ladder in the EU integration process during the last EU Council summit. Ripples of deep disappointment were felt all across our region.

In the case of Kosovo, opening of accession negotiations is a rather more distant prospect. The EU, however, let the people of Kosovo down big time when despite meeting all technical criteria for visa-free travel to the Schengen area two years ago, Kosovo still remains the only country in South East Europe isolated. Most of young people in Kosovo have never set foot in any EU country. The youth of Kosovo are the only Europeans who cannot travel freely to Europe. In fairness, the EU Commission did confirm that Kosovo had fulfilled all conditions for visa-free travel. The European Parliament voted in favour. Some member states seem not to trust the assessments of their own Commission. It is virtually impossible to explain back home why this is the case.

The reluctance by certain member states to take a positive decision on visa-free travel for Kosovo has dealt a huge blow to the only leverage we may have to achieve a normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, i.e. the prospect of both countries joining the EU and the ability of the EU to deliver.

The credibility of the EU is at stake in our region. EU countries must look beyond their narrow national or party lines and look at the Western Balkans as a European region. We are Europeans and we have nowhere else to go. Failure to do so may open the gates to malign influences by external actors who do not have the interests of Europe as a whole at heart. We believe in the European project. Let us make it a reality for all Europeans.