

Western Balkans

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The term Western Balkans was introduced into political discourse, as well as other discourses, during the 1990s “as a kind of euphemism for the term *Balkans*, which had negative connotations and with which most of the states created on the territory of Yugoslavia did not want be associated” (Petrović 2012: 22-23). The term was created by the EU, using the formula “Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania”, and the states it refers to are not related based on some common historical, geographical or other cohesive characteristic, but on the fact that they are not a part of the EU. As Tanja Petrović points out: “The question of what the *western Balkans* are can only be answered if we flip it around using negation, and ask what the *western Balkans are not*. The answer is obvious – they are not the European Union” (Petrović 2012: 25).

This pseudo-geographical and pseudo-technocratic designation, promoted since 1999 and especially during the Stabilization and Association Process, was supposed to overcome the problems of existing ethno-national denominations and divisions, and to unite the quarreling, impoverished and deeply corrupt states into a single entity on which the EU will implement its neighborhood and enlargement policy. Further formalization of the Western Balkans as a separate geopolitical space occurred at the 2003 Summit in Thessaloniki, which “cemented” the so-called European future for the Western Balkans states or determined their so-called European direction of development (Stojić Mitrović 2021: 51; cf. Hameršak et al. 2020). In processes aimed at political stabilization, economic liberalization and possible EU membership, the EU adopts a paternalistic, civilizationist and neo-colonial attitude based on conceptualizations of the Balkans as “anti-civilization, the alter ego and the dark side within” Europe (Todorova 1994: 482).

One of the first goals which emerged from the Thessaloniki Summit was visa liberalization, which facilitated the movement of citizens of the Western Balkans states into the EU. In return, the Western Balkans states had to establish control over movement towards the EU, which in practice primarily meant that they had to effectively control the movement of their own citizens, who still make up a significant part of asylum seekers in the EU, through stricter border controls and by accepting readmission obligations. The liberalization of visas was a regional process. Each country in the Western Balkans was given a so-called roadmap for liberalization, which:

were almost identical, but they took into account the specific situation in each country, with regard to the sense of existing legislation and practice. The roadmaps defined the prerequisites stipulated by the European Commission and which the “Western Balkans” country in question should adopt so that visa-free entry of its citizens into the Schengen zone could be considered. The conditions ranged from purely technical issues, such as issuing machine-readable passports with the gradual introduction of biometric data (including fingerprints), to the adoption and implementation of a number of laws and international conventions, and finally to very broad issues such as progress in the fight against organized crime, corruption and illegal migration (Stojić Mitrović 2021: 52; cf. Stojić Mitrović 2014).

As the number of non-citizens or citizens of so-called third countries which entered the EU from the territories of the Western Balkans increased, while the number of asylum seekers from the region decreased, the focus of migration policies shifted and are now increasingly directed at the integration of the Western Balkans into the European border regime. The integration is continuously evaluated through assessments of the transformation and implementation of legislation and the institutional framework, cooperation with European institutions, regional cooperation, harmonization of visa policies, etc., which is why different Western Balkans states are in different stages of integration into the European border regime.

In the complex imaginary of the European border regime, the Western Balkans represent one of the external borders of the EU which is surrounded by EU Member States. Much like other borderscapes, in the process of integration into the European border regime, the Western Balkans are being molded as a complex transnational and fundamentally alienated space, with their institutions implementing EU policy, their nation-state borders being guarded for the EU, and their nation-state territories being turned into spaces for detaining people on the move outside the EU.

In short, in relation to the EU, the Western Balkans function as a collectivized political subject, while in the European border regime it functions as an operational buffer zone, an externalized border of the EU, whose purpose is to “dampen” unwanted movements towards the EU through increased control, channeling, repression of movement and detention of people on the move on its territory and by directing them away from the EU (cf.

pullback, Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020). Presenting accession to the EU as a strategic interest, giving away sovereignty over the borders and territories of the Western Balkans states to the EU and its policies, institutions, and officials, was normalized. For example, during the negotiations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and Serbia (and North Macedonia), the EU requested that Frontex officials be granted impunity in relation to the administrative, civil and criminal jurisdiction of the Republic of Serbia (Stojić Mitrović 2021: 55).

The dependence of the Western Balkans on the EU is not only generative, in the sense that it was created by the EU for certain purposes, but is also economic by nature. The EU heavily finances the countries of the Western Balkans so that they reform themselves in accordance with EU requirements and perform the tasks delegated from the EU. However, even though the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the European border regime is clearly EUcentric, as the Western Balkans states have no say in the fundamental direction of the European migration policy, and, moreover, they renounce sovereignty over their borders and territories, their voice can certainly be heard when it comes to the actual implementation of those policies. The implementation of the European migration policy is turned into an instrument for achieving other political and economic goals, and decisions such as where to build a camp and where not to, which countries will need visas and which will not, become means of political pressure. In addition, financial resources from the EU lead to the creation of jobs in the securitarian and humanitarian sectors and the improvement of infrastructure, from roads in locations where camps are situated, to the expansion of electrical and mobile networks, etc. "By showing that they are reliable partners capable of fulfilling demanding tasks, the Western Balkans states are slowly improving their international political position" (Stojić Mitrović 2021: 55).

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