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HALF-HEARTED EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE BALKANS - DAILY SABAH - 14.05.2018

Teoman Ertuğrul TULUN

Analyst

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Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun*

The European Union (EU) Commission President Jean-Clade Juncker is reported to have declared in a very recent interview (published in Dutch daily newspaper Trouw) that We Europeans sometimes think that we are the boss of the world, but that, we forget that we are a small and weak part of the universe. We are losing economic power. We are slowly but surely falling from 25 percent of global gross national income to 18-16 percent and we are on the losing side also demographically. Juncker also added that we exist culturally, but we are not dominant. So I always invite everyone here to a more pronounced modesty. We must indeed listen to the rest of the world.

It is possible to find the trace of Junckers rather gloomy characterization of the declining role and influence of Europe in the strategy recently announced by the EU Commission on the EU engagement towards the Western Balkans. The strategy considers the EU enlargement process in the region as the part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the EU by 2025. In this respect, the EU Commission first adopted the above-mentioned strategy in February 2018 under the title of A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Afterwards, on 17 April 2018 in Strasbourg, the 28 member College of Commissioners recommended to the EU Council to open accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia (in the strange terminology adopted by the EU upon the insistence of Greece: former Yugoslav Republic

of Macedonia).

EU has been, on paper, extensively engaged with the Western Balkans since the 2003 Thessaloniki EU Council summit. The term Western Balkans was initially employed by the EU policy makers in order to describe the part of the Balkan peninsula that remained outside of the European Union. It included seven states that were formed after the break up of Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) and also Albania. Following the EUs Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003, commitments were made to include all the Western Balkan states in the European Union, and since then, Slovenia (in 2004) and Croatia (in 2013) have become EU members. Other Balkan countries such as Bulgaria and Romania had become EU members in 2007. In fact, the artificial Western Balkans approach of EU disregards the historical integrity of Balkans. From my perspective, it is a misnomer which prepared the ground for misdesign of the region. This misnomer and misdesign allowed the EU policy makers to marginalize Turkey in the Balkan region. Even if the enlargement process does not totally exclude Turkey, the Western Balkans approach separated Turkey from the rest of the Balkan states. Doing an analysis of EUs statements reveals that Eastern Balkans has never been defined by the EU. Apparently, in the EUs mindset, Eastern Balkans is what is left of the Balkans after taking into account the Western Balkans, meaning that Eastern Balkans is Turkey.

The said strategy underlines that the prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It describes such an enlargement as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe. The strategy of the EU, while explaining the respective European paths of the Western Balkan countries, describes Montenegro and Serbia as the current front-runners in the process. Albania and in their biased terminology the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are labeled as countries making significant progress on their European path of which the Commission is ready to prepare recommendations to open accession negotiations, on the basis of fulfilled conditions. As to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the strategy declares that the Commission will start preparing an Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership application. As regards Kosovo, the strategy ambiguously states that Kosovo has an opportunity for sustainable progress through implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and to advance on its European path once objective circumstances allow. It also stresses openly that Kosovo will benefit considerably from a definitive normalization agreement with Serbia.

The High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission Federica Mogherini, together with Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn, presented the annual Enlargement Package in the European Parliament on 17 April 2018 in Strasbourg. They declared the EU Commissions recommendation to the EU Council to open accession negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania. They described the decision of the Commission as a step forward not only for Macedonia and Albania, but also for the entire Western Balkans region.

EU faces an imminent Brexit. There are reports in the international press that in Eastern Europe, the E.U. faces a rebellion more threatening than Brexit. It can be said that the EU, as openly revealed by EU Commission President Juncker, is losing influence in the

international arena. It thus needs new blood and it is in need of reversing its demographic decline. In such a state of affairs, the EU Commissions preference to push forward the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans and its recommendation to start the accession negotiations with the rather underpopulated countries of the region can be considered as a well-advised move. It seems that the Commissions decision and recommendation for enlargement in the Western Balkans is not only a geostrategic investment for a stable, strong and united Europe, but also a kind of life line support for the vitality of the EU.

This approach of the Commission needs an approval by the EU Council. However, in his speech to the EU Parliament on 17 April 2018, President of France Emmanuel Macron ruled out any expansion of the EU until the 28 member countries of the Union undertake serious reforms. He interestingly stressed in his speech that he does not want to see Balkan nations turn towards Turkey or Russia. It is reported in the press that, during his recent visits to Balkan countries, the EU Council President Donald Tusk said that adding Albania and Macedonia to the blocs ranks would be tough but worth the effort. In fact, Macrons remarks on EU expansion openly show us that the half-hearted EU enlargement in Balkans will most probably have a tough and rather unpromising future.

Macron also owes an explanation to the Turkish public on why he does not want to see Balkan countries turn towards Turkey. Considering that European media outlets and EU officials have so far failed to explain why Turkeys engagement with the other Balkan countries is harmful (Turkeys engagement is in fact beneficial), Macron must explain why he has chosen to unfairly target Turkey in his speech.

* Analyst at Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)

https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2018/05/14/half-hearted-eu-enlargement-in-the-balkans

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About the author:

Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun is an analyst at Ankara-based think-tank Center for Eurasian Studies. Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun received his Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Administration from İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University in Ankara. His area of research include European Union Studies, Globalization, Xenophobia, Hate Speech Studies and International Relations.

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Posta: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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