

Euro-Atlantic Integration of the Western Balkans: The View of the Devil's Advocate

Mehmet Elezi *

In this short essay, I will take the position of the “Devil’s Advocate.” I am not doing so, however, simply out of a contrarian urge. Rather, I am doing so aiming to provoke fresh thinking, to furnish new ideas, and to bring forth new, courageous commitments for the integration of the nations of the Western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Purely as a coincidence, the Devil’s Advocate on this occasion is writing from Albania. But the challenges of integration are to a lesser or greater extent faced by other countries of the region.

The Devil’s Advocate may surprise some of his readers with his view of what represents challenge number one: Free and fair elections.

In Albania, the former communists returned to power in 1997 through a violent revolution. This was a first in post-Cold War Europe. Since then, they have not legitimized their hold on power through a free vote. According to international observers, all rounds of elections have been beset by problems. Currently, Albanian society faces an extreme polarization within the population, of the type more associated with Latin America. Extremely great amounts of money circulates in the hands of the very small number of people in power, most of it dirty money. Since these elites are appealing to a very poor electorate, members of the ‘establishment’ can buy the votes of the people in three parallel ways: they can buy off the voters; they can buy off the commissioners; and they can buy off observers. In addition, there appear to be other ways to manipulate the outcome of the elections as well.

In light of this, the country is threatened by at least three dangers:

- The danger of destabilization. A permanent violation of the people’s right to vote may turn into a time bomb for Albania’s internal security situation.
- The danger of the failure of reforms. A government that comes into power on the heels of electoral fraud cannot be legitimate, and an illegitimate government cannot implement democratic reforms.
- The danger of the destruction of political pluralism. If the vote is violated systematically, democratic competition involving alternative political options ceases to function. Thus, political pluralism turns into Chinese ‘pluralism.’ It would serve as an alibi of a leftist government that features all the characteristics of right-wing totalitarianism. Mafia and organized crime flourish under this sort of governance.

* Dr. Mehmet Elezi is Director of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS) in Tirana, Albania.

The Devil's Advocate raises his finger again, this time to point out the second challenge to integration: the economy. The grave problems in this sphere could potentially provoke dangerous political or social crises. Here are some of them:

- Significant unemployment. According to independent sources, it is as high as 50 percent.
- The informal economy. Together with remittances from emigrants, it is the main source for survival. However, until 1996 Albania was a model among former communist countries for its successful economic reforms; what turned everything on its head were the pyramid schemes, a phenomenon of the informal economy.
- Tax evasion. The government loses around 100 million USD in revenue a year just from cigarette smuggling. Another example: construction companies sell apartments at Western prices. But in the records, they list a selling price only one-third or one-fourth of the actual price, in order to avoid paying taxes. The government does not do anything because there are important government politicians behind these companies, and the administration is corrupt.
- Demographic shifts. Thousands of families have displaced and moved to the capital and other coastal cities. Their communities are not urbanized; they often lack water, power, decent streets, health services, and schools. Unemployment is endemic in these slum areas.

As a consequence of all these issues, foreign investment continues to avoid Albania. Investors want security, the rule of law, and public order, and Albania is able to guarantee none of those things.

The third challenge to integration that the Devil's Advocate sees lays with all three branches of the government, as well as with the "Fourth Estate," journalism. What can be said of the legislative and executive powers, if they are result of dubious elections? The judicial power has been criticized for its excessive politicization, as well as for its corruption and flirtation with organized crime. The Fourth Estate suffers from the misuse of freedom. It reminds you of the cynical saying, "There are independent journalists, but they are very expensive." The media has been bought off by the government, especially by two or three of its most important clans. A journalist close to the government publicly stated that his salary was four to five times higher than the salary of the head of state. But, as is often the case, one's declared salary is only the top of the iceberg.

The Devil's Advocate now brings up a fourth obstacle: What about the regional challenges and dangers?

The uneasy coexistence between Belgrade and Podgorica resembles an arranged marriage, which is expected to end soon. Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks a functional state structure built on the principles of coexistence. Kosovo does not yet know its final status, and insists on independence. The Ohrid Agreement in Macedonia is being dragged out, and this might take Skopje's boat to dangerous waters.

The landscape is made even less stable by voices demanding alterations to national borders. Two years ago, the Sciences Academy of Skopje published a map for the break-up of Macedonia. The government in place at the time did not distance itself from this project. The same political party, now in opposition, still clings to this idea of division. On the Albanian side, there is no institutional support for this idea, but there is a view holding that Albania should be prepared if Skopje forces the option of division.

It seems that Belgrade's primary aim is the division of Kosovo. Mitrovica is a divided city, and the Kosovar Serbs have established parallel institutions. This implies that the impetus toward separation on the part of the Serbs is stronger than the declarations in favor of coexistence and Euro-Atlantic integration.

A Devil's Advocate from Prague or Bratislava might here ironically ask if it were not probably better this way for the purposes of long-term stability? But the Albanian Devil's Advocate reminds his brethren to be careful, as we are in the bloodied space of former Yugoslavia. This space is neither the Czech Republic nor Slovakia, and is unlikely to carry out a velvet separation!

After this challenge has been addressed, the Devil's Advocate would like to pose a provocative question about the so-called 'sandwich theory': Is there a danger that those countries with prominent pro-American feelings, confronted with a difficult transition, will face a 'sandwiched' future between Washington and Brussels?

The answer to this question is related to two other crucial issues, namely the very future of relations between the European Union and the United States and the question of the future course of the nations of South Eastern Europe—whether or not these countries are determined to walk the road to democracy and market economy.

A dramatic Euro-American split is not likely to happen, for at least three reasons. First, Europe itself is not united; during the Iraqi crisis, Paris, Berlin, and some other capitals were against the military intervention of the coalition led by the U.S., but on the other side, Rome, London, Madrid, and some others were part of this coalition. It cannot be said that the first party is "Europe" and the latter is not, or vice-versa. Second, as Zbigniew Brzezinski argues in his well-known book *Out of Control*, a genuine Euro-American rivalry is now and perhaps for a long time to come simply impossible. The U.S. is much more developed; its economic, technical, and (especially) military capabilities are regarded as technological decades ahead of those of the European and Asian powers.

The third reason, and maybe the most important one, is that sharp divisions usually happen when confrontations take place between large, competing interests. But does such a confrontation between Washington and Brussels exist?

Two very different visions of the architecture of a new world order did become apparent during the Iraqi crisis: a unipolar world (the American vision), and a multi-polar world (the French vision). In addition, some analysts have emphasized that there is a sizeable divergence in opinion between the U.S. and Europe as far as the use of power is concerned. Robert Kagan deals with this issue in his well-known essay "Power and Weakness." According to Kagan, "Americans come from Mars, whereas Europeans are

from Venus,” or the “Americans speak about the dangers, the Europeans about the challenges.” The symbolism is crystal clear. Kagan says that the Americans think that, however we may try to solve our problems, we cannot give up the use of force as an option when its use becomes unavoidable. The Europeans, by contrast, prefer the use of “soft power,” employing peaceful means and excluding the use of force as an option.

Thus the differences between the U.S. and the EU are related to divergent visions of how to achieve the new world order, or to differences in what is called ‘strategic culture.’ But between the U.S. and the EU, whatever the differences in strategic culture, there are no contradictions in strategic interests. Brussels and Washington are united by the same values of Western civilization, of freedom and democracy. Brussels and Washington are brought together by the same strategic interests in the development and security of their continents and the whole world, which are threatened by the explosion of global terrorism.

In this context, fears that the formerly communist portion of Europe may be ‘sandwiched’ between the U.S. and the EU do not seem to have much basis in fact. It is crucial that these countries remain engaged on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration: this is the common vision that both Washington and Brussels share for their future.

The Devil’s Advocate, however, is proving remarkably persistent. The Balkan countries may at some point be integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community, he says, but will it happen given the mentalities of the politicians involved? Mentalities, more based in emotion than reason or interest, are notoriously difficult to predict. This is illustrated by some stances taken by Athens, regardless of the fact that Greece was fully integrated into NATO and EU a long time ago.

To take one example, Greece has granted pensions to Albanians who declare that they are members of Albania’s Greek minority. These pensions are much higher than the salaries of the teachers, doctors, police, and military in Albania. Many poor Albanians are attracted to register themselves as Greeks without actually having any Greek ancestry. The size of the Greek minority is growing as a result of the Greek government’s buying people off. Lately, Athens has stated that it would grant Greek citizenship to 300,000 citizens of the Republic of Albania. This means giving Greek citizenship to almost all Albanians of Orthodox faith, by equating the Orthodox religion with Greek nationality.

Such a precedent may be dangerous for the region. What happens if other countries follow Athens’ example: Albania with the Albanians of Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, and the Presheva Valley; Serbia and Croatia with Bosnian Serbs and Croats; Bulgaria with the Macedonian population and Romania with Moldavians; Hungary with the Hungarians in Transylvania and Vojvodina; and more? Italy could lay claim to all regional Catholics, Turkey to all regional Muslims, and so on, by proclaiming all of them as their citizens.

On the other hand, every Albanian who goes to Greece as an economic émigré is forced to change his name and be baptized by the Greek Orthodox Church. Otherwise, he should immediately go back home. There are hundreds of thousands of Albanians in

other Western countries and the United States. Their stay in these countries has never been predicated upon a change in their name and confessional affiliation, as is the case in Greece.

Albanian economic immigrants to Greece are maltreated—this is according to various international institutions, including the Greek Helsinki Committee—and they are used to politically blackmail Tirana. They are expelled whenever there are disagreements between the two neighbors. These operations are known as ‘sweeper operations.’ On the other side, their free movement back to Albania is hindered. The queues of Albanians at the Greek border crossings to go home for holidays extend as far as 10 km. Babies have been born waiting in line, and people have died there waiting for over one week, day and night out in the open, just like in Cortasar’s famous novel *Southern Highway*.

In the meantime, Greece and Albania technically have been in a state of war since the Second World War, and the situation continues.

If I were to write on behalf of integration’s advocates, or from my own personal opinion, I would have presented a different view, a much more optimistic one. But, as I warned from the outset, it is the Devil’s Advocate, not I, who is posing these challenges.

By confronting opposing voices, the truth comes out more clearly. So, what do the Western Balkan countries need in order to accelerate their integration into the Euro-Atlantic community?

We can see clearly that first of all these countries need more help to build genuine democratic institutions, and that begins with Her Holiness, Her Sanctity, the primary value of democratic culture, the Free Vote, the Free and Fair Election. The arrival of transparent, fair election processes in the Western Balkans will not magically complete the integration process overnight, but it is the crucial step from which all the others follow.