

EU'S CONSOLATION PRIZE FOR WESTERN BALKANS; MINI SCHENGEN

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 Analysis

While the UK left the European Union, there are countries that are still dreaming to be included in it. The Western Balkan countries in particular are quite willing at this point. For this sake, Macedonia even went as far as changing its name to North Macedonia. Kosovo, in its efforts to enable its citizens with no-visa privileges to travel to the Union, ratified the land exchange agreement with Montenegro and approved the establishment of a special court in The Hague, which is investigating alleged war crimes by fighters from the Kosovo Liberation Army two decades ago.

In the face of these and similar sacrifices, neither Kosovo was able to obtain visa-free travel nor North Macedonia to begin EU negotiation processes. In October, French President Emmanuel Macron effectively blocked formal EU membership talks for Albania and North Macedonia. Macron put a stop to any possibility of the European Union's further enlargement,

citing the need for internal EU reforms, as well as highlighting the lack of reversibility within the accession process, should candidate countries backtrack on their path. Macron also had stated, "France is ready to step back if the negotiation methods change."

The rejection of EU negotiations will result in the EU becoming even more unpopular and less trusted in the Western Balkans, and it will also cause problems in the surrounding countries. For example, the North Macedonian government has decided to hold snap elections following the news that the negotiation process couldn't commence. Like the government change in Greece after the Prespa Agreement signed with Macedonia, there is a possibility that North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his administration will lose power in the snap elections. This may create fresh political problems in the country.



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A week before the EU broke the hopes of Macedonia and Albania, the prime ministers of the two countries held a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić for a new regional initiative, which was quickly nicknamed the Mini-Schengen. The idea was to create a Balkan version of a European open borders area called the Schengen area. The Mini-Schengen initiative gained more importance for Albania and Macedonia, as news in the Balkans spread that the EU would veto the negotiation processes.

At the first meeting in Serbia, countries agreed to explore the possibility of creating a passport and duty-free zone that would allow the free movement of people, goods, services and capital between participating countries and invited Bosnia, Kosovo, and Montenegro to join in.

Since then, two further meetings were held. The second one was in Ohrid, Macedonia, and the latest was in Tirana, Albania, on December 21, which was also participated by Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović. An upcoming meeting is scheduled for February in Serbia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which did not attend the meetings, expressed concerns over its compatibility with existing regional agreements, such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Meanwhile Kosovo has declined to join the initiative because of Serbia's refusal to recognize its independence.

Even countries within the Mini-Schengen initiative criticized the idea. While the Serbian opposition claims that the Mini-Schengen is an initiative to build Greater Albania, Albanian opposition and Kosovo responded with claims that it is a project to build the Greater Serbia. The probability of uniting such major countries is very low. This is so given the fact that Albania has been a NATO member for more than 10 years, while North Macedonia will soon be taken into NATO's wings.

But critiques state that, within this Mini-Schengen, Serbia and Albania's taking similar roles as France and Germany in the EU is seemingly realistic. Likewise, the economical

benefits of these two countries are expected to be higher than other countries.

The common concern of all the countries in question is that the Mini-Schengen could be an alternative to EU membership. This so-called mini-Schengen should only be a kind of preparatory phase of economic and economic networking of these three countries, prior to their full membership in the EU, meaning negotiations should run in parallel while this Mini-Schengen zone operates. Additionally the Mini-Schengen could not be an alternative to the EU accession or closer ties to the EU. Most trade and economic links are not in the region, but they are under the control of the EU members, so the Mini-Schengen cannot take over such position.

In order for the Mini-Schengen to be successful, it needs to include not just three, but all six countries of the Western Balkans. But the problem is that two out of the five countries that will form the Mini-Schengen - apart from Kosovo - have not recognized Kosovo's independence yet. Although Kosovo officials have declined to join the initiative because of Serbia's refusal to recognize its independence, being part of this initiative along with other countries will mean that Kosovo is in de facto recognized by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Mini-Schengen is not as bad as it is said to be, but the problem is that the short, medium and long-term projected earnings of countries were not well explained.

From the aspect of Serbia establishment, such a union will allow it reaching the open seas by using the ports of countries such as Albania and Montenegro.

Freedom of movement would positively affect all countries involved, increasing their competitiveness on the market with more than 20 million inhabitants. The World Bank and the IMF have estimated that this would help the region to achieve at least 3-4% economic growth as soon as next year. In addition to being close to the EU market, the creation of a market with 20 million consumers will attract the attention

of international investors. As the result, the increased investments will have positive results in the region where labor force is cheap and unemployment rates are high.

The World Bank estimates that the Mini-Schengen's implementation would save the Western Balkans economies with 3.5 billion euros. It also estimates that trucks in the region lose more than 26 million hours a year at border crossings. Due to the time spent at the border crossings, the number of trucks and drivers needed in the Western Balkans is approximately five times the number needed in the EU.

This initiative of the countries in the region, which have had problems in the recent past, has found the support of international powers. US Special Representative for the Western Balkans, Matthew Palmer, said the initiative on the creation of a "Mini Schengen" has the support of the United States adding that the idea seems promising. According to Palmer, the idea of

Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia in relation to the creation of a "Mini-Schengen" area in terms of the freedom of movement shows these countries are taking responsibility for their fate by controlling their future.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama claimed that the European Union has promised 1.2 billion euros of donations for the Mini-Schengen. But this promise is hard to believe simply because that same EU didn't keep its word about payments to Turkey for migrant crisis, not to mention about its words about starting a negotiation process with the Balkan countries.

Despite the lack of any Turkey's official statement about the mini-Schengen, the country naturally supports it. Because Turkey's Balkan policy's main axes are "high-level political dialogue, security for all, utmost economic integration and the preservation of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious social structures in the region".

Endnotes

¹ Denitsa Koseva, "Western Balkans divided over mini Schengen," INTELLINEWS, 26 November 2019; <https://www.intellinews.com/western-balkans-divided-over-mini-schengen-172310/?source=serbia>.

² World Bank, "Lower Trade Costs and Increased

Transport Efficiency in the Western Balkans, with Help from World Bank" <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/04/18/lower-trade-costs-and-increased-transport-efficiency-in-western-balkans-with-help-from-world-bank> (April, 2019).