

# WASHINGTON'S AND BRUSSELS' CALL FOR WINING HEARTS AND MINDS ACROSS THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**P**erceptions and attitudes among the general public could signal certain positions and trends which sometimes numbers cannot sufficiently address. Throughout the Western Balkans (except for Kosovo and Albania) the role of the EU (and strangely enough NATO) when speaking about the Ukraine crisis in the media sometimes is portrayed as an inflammatory one or even going that far by suggesting that the “West” is behind the crisis, whereas there is sympathy for Russia’s actions portraying them as legal and legitimate. Some of the newspapers in the region even featured headlines promoting Putin’s triumphant role over Ukraine etc.

Ukraine is very topical these days but it is not only about this country. Even before, the discussions when NATO, even though authorised by UNSC Resolution, was intervening in Libya were the

same. It was rightly or wrongly charged with scepticism and disagreement across the region. On the other hand saying that EU/NATO have perfect track record at conducting foreign policy where constructive criticism cannot exist is also very wrong. The failed policy in Syria is just one example where further pressure is needed so that these organisations uphold their commitments.

Without going into details here whether Russia’s actions in Crimea were justified or not one question that pops out from these recent developments is how can countries having high support for EU and (in the Macedonian case) NATO accession when speaking about realpolitik turn out to be different? Are those high support figures only a result of the Western Balkans being selfish and look for more integration only for personal gain such as economic prosperity and enhanced security? What

happened to the statements of Balkan politicians and the societies in general when saying that 'we stand behind and share the values these organisations promote'?

Let's not be confused with these examples. If tomorrow there is a referendum for EU accession all of the countries from the region will overwhelmingly say yes. The question that the above-mentioned attitudes suggest is whether Brussels and Washington have distanced themselves from the public and 'winning hearts and minds' should be put again on their agenda?

Coming from Macedonia, the country with frozen NATO and EU accession prospects ever since 2008/2009, the support for accession into both institutions has always been very high reaching 80% regardless of whether you are talking to Macedonians or Albanians. The name issue with Greece undoubtedly is having implications when it comes to this public support. This ethnic cohesiveness is losing strength when accession of these two organisations is conditioned by the resolution of the name issue. The support fails dramatically between ethnic Macedonians whilst stays unchanged among ethnic Albanians.

Ever since the Greek veto for Macedonia's NATO entry in 2008 and later on with five in a row blockades for opening EU accession negotiations Macedonia's formal path of membership is in a stalemated position. In such a context high EU and NATO support from the public just puts further

pressure on the government in Skopje and some would argue that this weakens Macedonia's negotiating positions over the dispute. Unfortunately the way around this problem it seems was the idea to start lowering the pro EU and NATO support among citizens.

It is no secret that Macedonia's freedom of media is in a worrying position (according to the rankings of renowned NGOs like Press Freedom Index Macedonia is on the staggeringly low 123rd place). The influx of government sponsored ads show that the government apart from buying ad space is also buying loyalty from editors and owners. Lately, pro-government TV shows being aired on the TV channels with highest number of viewers are pushing anti EU and NATO content which directly influences how Macedonian citizens think about Euro-Atlantic integrations. Topics include: EU's failed Eurozone project, skyrocketing unemployment rates across the EU, NATO's double standards when intervening etc. The last one being that Macedonia's EU accession would destroy the country's gastronomic identity. Furthermore, state media correspondents more often interview anti-EU public figures with stories like the one that the entrance in the EU would seriously hit Macedonia's economy etc.

Debates over many of the flaws that the EU is having such as the democratic deficit, high unemployment or even NATO's debatable role in Libya regarding the change

of regime are wanted and needed in order to have greater accountability and oversight. At the end of the day they are markers of healthy democracies. The problem is that these debates do not come from grassroots level but looks like they are coming from the top which is problematic. For example, on the power point presentations that Macedonia's government officials use when 'chasing' foreign investments one of the comparative advantages they sell to potential foreign investors is that there will be no EU pressure for Macedonia in the next five years.

There are two hypothetical explanations about this. One is meant for the external audience and one for domestic purposes. By wanting to lower the public support the government signals to the EU and NATO that support does not last forever and there is a need for them to step up the pressure on Greece. Domestically it is to convince the citizens that EU and NATO are not that necessary so that the pressure for faster EU/NATO integrations would be lessened.

What may additionally affect the public opinion towards enlargement in the Western Balkans are the pro-

cesses inside the European Union that are sending negative message towards the potential newcomers. The announced in/out referendum in the UK, the news about the hordes of fake asylum seekers from the Western Balkans, the more vocal eurosceptics such as the UKIP, the rise of right wing political parties are all processes that also influence the perception of the EU.

This is where Civil Society can assume greater role in becoming more proactive instead of lethargic when it comes to the ongoing processes in the European Union and the possible effects on the Western Balkans. CSOs should be active both in Skopje, Pristina, Sarajevo, and Belgrade but also in Brussels, London, Madrid and Warsaw. The interaction between civil societies and academia is still very limited. It is rare for one to see Western Balkans civil society organization advocating in EU's or NATO's capitals. This needs to be changed in order to prepare the Western Balkans societies and the EU for assuming greater roles. At the end of the day, only well informed public can make wise decisions.