

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Sciences

Belgrade, 19 02 2020

The Department of International studies has appointed the following members of the Master Thesis Defense Committee for the candidate Mikhail E.D. Byng: Prof. dr. Radmila Nakarada, Prof. dr. Nemanja Džuverović (academic supervisor) and assistant professor Dr. Ivana Radić Milosavljević. Having read the Master thesis of the candidate entitled *Understanding the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans as a key component of regional peace - The Case of Serbia*, the Committee is submitting the following Report.

REPORT

The MA thesis of the candidate Mikhail E.D. Byng, entitled *Understanding the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans as a key component of regional peace - The Case of Serbia* has 86 pages. Besides the Introduction and Conclusion the thesis has three chapters, five pages of listed references, and two Appendixes (eight pages), one containing the questionnaire used in the student survey and the other questions posed to the interviewed experts, policy makers and government officials.

In the Introduction, the candidate gives a brief outline of the history of the Balkan region, an explanation of the different terms used in reference to the Balkan region and why the term western Balkans as being Albania plus the ex-Yugoslav states with the exception of Slovenia is used in the thesis. M. Byng notes that throughout the thesis the term Balkans is generally used interchangeably with that of the western Balkans (with the aforementioned definition of the western Balkans in mind).

The main hypothesis of the thesis is that the EU enlargement process is an instrument to stabilize and develop the western Balkans. The research question of 'whether the EU enlargement process is a key component of peace in the Balkans' is to be tested, explains the

candidate, by extensive analysis of secondary data i.e. academic journals and texts, documents, media releases, and by specific research procedures i.e. surveys (semi-structured interviews and direct correspondence). In addition to the hypothesis, an outline of the following three chapters, i.e. the structure of the thesis is summarized.

In the first chapter, entitled “Theories of European Integration” M. Byng gives an outline of the two important theories of integration neo-functionalism and inter-governmentalism, considering them critical for the foundation of his research. Priority is placed on explaining these two major theories because they specifically relate to the European Union and European integration and because, as the author states the EU has “wavered back-and-forth in the direction of the two approaches”. In the latter parts of the chapter the candidate looks at domestic (from the perspective of Serbia), regional, and international reasons and considerations for EU enlargement, i.e. what the EU has to offer to the potential candidates for membership.

In examining the Serbian perspective on EU enlargement, the author combined his analysis with the summary of the results of a survey (which is pointed out as not representative but rather used as an illustration) which was carried out by the author with 20 undergraduate students from the University Of Belgrade Faculty of Political Sciences and highlighted in four cases: 1) Serbia’s prospects for membership in the EU and the likelihood of the EU existing in the next ten years, 2) Sentiments on Serbia’s future, 3) Views on Serbia and Croatia’s current relationship, 4) Views on Serbia and NATO’s current relationship.

Finally, the question of supranationality and its primary criticism is explored in this chapter. M. Byng discusses one of the main critiques of the EU (especially in the context of Brexit) namely, that states relinquish much of their sovereignty to become members of the European Union. At the same time, he attempts to understand why this payoff is worth it for the candidate countries of the western Balkans, and with this in mind further considerations are explored – economic crisis in the Eurozone, democratic deficit.

The second chapter (“Enlargement Fatigue vs. Accession Fatigue”) begins with a history of the wars of Yugoslav succession. A brief layout of the prior incarnations of Yugoslavia and mention of the long-standing aspiration and movement for south Slavic unity is highlighted by the author. The external players and presence of Great Power politics in the region are

emphasized, for this is a crucial dimension according to the candidate, because the region's history plays into the manner in which some actors engage in relations with the Balkans to this day i.e. Germany.

Bearing in mind that studies of the western Balkan region invariably make mention of Josip Broz Tito and his impact, the candidate also devotes some space to the figure of Josip Broz Tito and his role in maintaining a unified SFRY. The focus is placed on Tito's role in keeping the Federation together through the firm hand of his one party rule, his death, and the Federation's eventual demise. When discussing in more detail the nature and the causes of the dissolution, the author relies on Hobsbawm's mention of the economic aspect as being one of the primary causes of separatism in the broader European framework, and Susan Woodward's comprehensive research of the internal (inter-republican economic, political, constitutional relations) and external factors/processes contributing to the violent vanishment of Yugoslavia. Developing his analyses, M. Byng makes a comparison of Yugoslavia's federalism and that of the EU, relying primarily on comparative research done by Professor Samardzic and Dr. Kovacevic. He maintains that although there are some similarities, fundamentally the nature of the two entities were different. He points out that the EU provides many democratic outlets while that was not the case for socialist Yugoslavia. At its core, according to M. Byng, Yugoslavia was crippled by numerous issues that the EU is better equipped to face not to mention the lessons of history. The reality is that in the case of Yugoslavia, the changing external, geopolitical context coupled with an illiberal form of government, socio-economic instability, surpassed its transformative capacities.

The actual role of the EU in the break-up of Yugoslavia is also explored by the candidate, among else, because the role that the EU played in the disintegration of Yugoslavia is a consideration which affects the sentiments of many throughout Serbia to this day. There is the perspective carried by some, even in the present, that Europe's response to the instability within Yugoslavia was unproductive. The early recognition of Croatia (and Slovenia) as an independent state, prematurely by Germany (in opposition to what was agreed within the EC), brought back disturbing and harrowing memories that affected the tone of the EU's actions toward Yugoslavia. Taking a look at this historical context the candidate naturally highlights Germany's role. The candidate suggests that the European Community appeared to provide Germany with the means

for accomplishing its own geo-political aspirations, and when the EC collided with these aspirations (by committing to not recognize Croatia and Slovenia) Germany veered away.

Following this contextualization, the candidate proceeds to analyze the European Union, uniquely placed at the forefront of regional integration. He points out that its successes and failures have set a pathway for similar entities in many different parts of the world to follow suit or to avoid the pitfalls which may exist. The manner in which the Union deals with its problems provides a template of what to follow and what to not follow.

Attention is then turned to a case study of Serbia and the sentiments of the populace concerning the EU and the EU integration process. A survey carried out by the author (which is not representative) confirms much of the data already released by established companies like Gallup, which is that there is some doubt among Serbia's populace in relation to the EU process - particularly its length. This has led him to conclude that besides the enlargement fatigue in the EU, accession fatigue is emerging in those countries, like Serbia, whose

Croatia's stretch within the EU is then brought into focus. Croatia has been in the EU since 2013. The candidate refers to the data which shows that there has been some economic benefit to EU membership, but that the onus still rests on domestic politicians to ensure that these benefits are stretched out and balanced across the entire country. Considering the benefits of EU membership in the realm of peace, the author notes the rise of right-wing extremist groups within the country. M. Byng interprets this as being part of a more widespread trend throughout the continent, with Croatia's history of Nazi occupation providing some context. The rise of military expenditure, as well as the problem of national minority rights, the return of Serbian refugees and their property - much of which were lost during the 90s war - and the governments actions in the form of constitutional amendments to protect minority groups are also discussed by the candidate. As far as how beneficial the EU membership has been for Croatia, the candidate concludes, that the result is mixed.

In relation to the EU, the author explores in the last part of the chapter, the limits of political conditionality. His main point is that there is only so far that insisting on conditions being met for EU entry can be utilized. In addition, according to Byng there are limits to what is politically feasible for politicians domestically. According to him, this reality is summarized best

in the following: “conditionality will bring about substantial change if the expected political costs of compliance with EU requirements do not exceed the benefits of a – credible – membership perspective (Ethier 2003; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig et al. 2006; Vachudova 2005, as cited in Freyburg T., & Richter Solvieg, 2010).

In chapter 3 entitled, “Does EU survival equate to Balkan Peace?” the author attempts to round up his research, thesis, by drawing on the EU’s original mandate of being a peace-building entity. Underlining that peace building is at the very core of the Union’s founding, being its *raison d’être* (Ejdus, Juncos, 2017), the author argues that this commitment to peace promotion (although not fully consistent) should be stretched out to include the western Balkans. M. Byng, in fact concludes that the Balkan region’s push toward the EU can be classified as an important part of an overall process toward a more peaceful world. Therefore, the final sub-chapter focuses on the EU enlargement within the Balkans potentially being the EU’s crowning achievement. Although the process for membership within the EU is by no means short, and conditionality requirements are extensive, the author consider that it is crucial that nevertheless the western Balkan countries have committed to the path, aware of the possibilities not only for an improved economic situation but also for regional stability and long term peace.

The Conclusion represents a summary of much of what was discussed by the author in the preceding three chapters. It leans again on the survey carried out by the author to assess the sentiments of students at the University of Belgrade concerning whether accession into the EU as a good thing for Serbia and their sentiments concerning Serbia’s future. Concerning the EU accession process, Byng points out that sentiments are generally more positive than negative: with 75% viewing the process of fair, good, or excellent and only 25% seeing the process as bad or worse. Concerning the sentiments of the group about Serbia’s future the respondents have a somewhat similar response. Some 70% view the future for the country as fair, good, or excellent, while some 30% view the future negatively. His final conclusion is that at its core, the EU enlargement process is only part of the overall journey toward peace in the region. The domestic element, cooperation among the regional partners themselves, and the resolution of past grievances left over from the wars - which include minority rights, refugee issues, a resolution to the Kosovo issue (in the case of Serbia) are also critically important.

The members of the Committee would like to point out that the MA thesis of Mikhail has satisfied all formal criteria required by the existing procedures. The aim of the thesis, to assess to what extent the EU membership of western Balkan states has a peace building potential has been accomplished, for the author has pointed out both the possible positive contributions as well as the shortcomings of this process. The attempt to combine the analyses of secondary resources with a small empirical endeavour (as an illustration) has given the thesis an added value. At the same time, the Committee would have appreciated if analysis in some parts could have been more explicit and concrete, particularly concerning the potential and ongoing response of EU, its handling of some of the acute peace threatening problems in the area, and in particular in Serbia. The thesis is well written and the candidate has demonstrated a high degree of English proficiency.

Having in mind all that has been said, the Committee concludes that the master thesis entitled written by E.D. Byng fulfils all of the preconditions for a public defence.

Committee:



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