

## Book Review

**Tatjana Sekulić. 2020. *The European Union and the Paradox of Enlargement: The Complex Accession of the Western Balkans*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology). 267 pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-42294-3 (Hardcover), 978-3-030-42295-0 (eBook), € 80.24/€ 53.49**

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The key question in Tatjana Sekulić's *The European Union and the Paradox of Enlargement: The Complex Accession of the Western Balkans* is: Is the enlargement of the European Union by the states of the Western Balkans possible, and if so, under what conditions? Her study consists of seven chapters, including a Preface that indicates the theoretical and methodological approach as well as the sources used, and a Conclusion. The author is a sociologist and political scientist, professor at the University of Milan-Bicocca, and a specialist in the field of European integration, with particular emphasis on the European aspirations of the Western Balkans.

The first chapter (“Europe from East to West, from South to North: Harmonization in Turbulent Times”) emphasizes the essence of the systemic transformations in Europe at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, with particular attention paid to the transitions and democratic consolidations. Chapters Two (“Dimensions and Contradictions of the European Integration: Deepening versus Widening”) and Three (“New Axes of Integration and the Constitution of the European Polity and Society”) focus on European integration processes, in particular on the enlargements of 2004 and 2007. Chapters Three to Five make up the main part of the analysis. In Chapter Four (“European Integration on the Field: Framing the Western Balkans”), the research approach and grid are explained exhaustively, and the choice of methods is justified. Chapter Five (“Framing the Field within the Text: Analysis of the European Commission Reports on the Western Balkan Countries in a Longitudinal Perspective 2008–2019”) offers a valuable lesson in how to draw intelligently from source materials with a long *durée* perspective. Chapter Six (“Narrating the Process of Enlargement and Accession: European Union versus Western Balkans”), finally, broadens and complements the previous considerations, giving a voice to the EU administration in Brussels and the Western Balkan states themselves. The last, seventh chapter (“Conclusions: The Paradox of the European Integration”) not only summarizes the reflections made so far, but is also a kind of analytical “test” of the eponymous paradox of enlargement.

Sekulić's book takes an innovative approach through its longitudinal perspective of the analysis of the European Commission reports on the Western Balkan states, covering the years 2008–2019, and through its focus on the reports of the European Commission, responsible for the accession process. The author analysed the reports in order to structure their content in terms of the strategies they use: strategies of objectivization, relativization, defusing, omitting inconvenient truths, and also producing "convenient" truths. In addition, Sekulić conducted structured interviews in 2009–2011 and 2018–2019, which also provide valuable and longitudinal insights. The interview participants include representatives of the European Commission, representatives of central institutions of the Western Balkan states, members of non-governmental organizations, and intellectuals. Sekulić critically analyses their discourse.

What is more, she presents the experiences of Slovenia and Croatia and provides guidance on what the process of European integration looks like, with particular emphasis on the "pitfalls" faced not only by enlargement negotiators, but above all by the governments and societies of the respective candidate states. In doing so, she places the discussion on the enlargement of the European Union by the states of the Western Balkans in a broad context.

What is more, the prognostic value of the book deserves attention. Sekulić outlines a possible scenario of the accession of the Western Balkan states, which is based on a far-reaching change in the current paradigm of the functioning of the entire European Union. In this context, the paradox of enlargement, mentioned in the book's title, takes on particular significance. It can be treated as a symbol of the activity of EU bodies and institutions, primarily the European Commission. Sekulić presents the conditions for the enlargement of the European Union, taking into account, on the one hand, the official accession criteria, and, on the other hand, political, economic, and social determinants. I concur with her assessment that the declaration and assurance about the aspiration to accession are not enough: "Enlargement as merely a principled perspective without accession, or with accession as its permanently delayed end result, does not make enough sense" (x). Concluding, Sekulić argues that the accession of the Western Balkan states to the European Union is possible, but requires efforts on both sides.

To sum up, the book stands out among other publications devoted to the issues of the accession of the Western Balkan states to the European Union. The research goals set by the author are fully achieved, which is not an easy task with such a complex and multifaceted subject of analysis. The book will appeal not only to researchers, students, and commentators of political life, but also to practitioners who decide on the dynamics of integration of the "old continent", Europe.