



EU enlargement and civil society in the Western Balkans. From mobilisation to empowerment

Francesco Trupia

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BOOK REVIEW

EU enlargement and civil society in the Western Balkans. From mobilisation to empowerment, by Natasha Wunsch, Zurich, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 171 pp., €74,89 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-91844-0

Wunsch's book is an analytically nuanced and empirically grounded contribution that investigates the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) in the Western Balkans during the European Union neighbourhood policy and enlargement negotiations. Focussing on the regional case studies of Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia, Wunsch's bottom-up approach investigates grassroots strategies of domestic mobilisation and empowerment within the new venue that the European Union provided through its enlargement plan.

In general, this different angle of investigation enables a better comprehension of the so-called Europeanisation across the region. In particular, Wunsch's cross-country analysis contrasts the constant increase of scepticism towards a continued EU enlargement to the Western Balkans by not only unravelling a yet another, perhaps brighter, perspective on EU enlargement strategy. It also sheds light on differential strategies of mobilisation and further empowerment that CSOs have adopted in order to both frame their demands and expand their mobilisation repertoire through monitoring activities. In this regard, this book unpacks different stages that civil society actors have gone through and their contribution to the EU membership accession in accordance with the Article 23, which has provided a roadmap for fighting corruption, creating stability for democratic institutions and protecting the rule of law.

What Wunsch largely investigates, is how the EU policy of enlargement has paved the way for CSOs to a new horizon of opportunities and development within the civil societies they actively contribute to. In this, Wunsch outlines how such horizontal driver of change (129) meant nothing but an extremely important aspect across the former Yugoslavian countries. According to the three chosen case studies, the author pays attention to how previously adopted models (e.g. Slovak case) have passed the mantle of learnt lessons, previous experiences and repertoire to Croatia's CSOs at first, and to Montenegro's and Serbia's afterwards. While such transnational aspect of the EU enlargement across the Western Balkan has been properly addressed as a fundamental factor along the "Brussels route", Wunsch's methodological framework deserves to be taken into account as it may lay the foundations for a potentially standardised template for further research and grassroots projects within those countries which are currently negotiating their EU accession (e.g. Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Hence, if transnational exchanges and learnings have sent a concrete signal for high politics-level actors in the region, Wunsch's perspective highlights "from below" how (trans-)national cooperation among CSOs was first and foremost fundamental to boost domestic embeddedness with other civil society actors and citizens. The success of pulling tens of CSOs together in Croatia, or Montenegrin CSOs' attempts to revitalise embeddedness with those citizens who mistrusted them due to their closeness to State actors, or engagements with rural organisations in Serbia, are just instructive. Because of this, Wunsch's three-fold methodological framework ((a) opportunities; (b) mobilisation; (c) empowerment) interlinked from within ((a/b) professionalisation, institutionalisation, learning; (b/c) uploading, reproduction, framing), facilitates to better understand accession-related similarities and potential pitfalls to avoid in the advanced membership negotiations.

Of particular interest is the perspective that Wunsch uses to analyse the rule of law conditionality in Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, and how CSOs dealt with it. In fact, Bulgaria and

Romania post-accession Cooperation and Verification Mechanism prompted the EU to introduce a new approach to EU membership accession. From this viewpoint, Wunsch's angle of investigation is anchored on the so-called logic of consequences (March and Olsen 1998, cited by Wunsch, 7) in the attempt to reveal to what extent, and particularly how, CSOs have been able to use the EU accession process to empower themselves at the domestic level (4). Within this, Wunsch touches upon a vast array of issues found on the ground: from the "hurry-up moment" to obstacles related to lack of transparency in the navigation process; from EU attempts to emphasise success stories in order to tackle scepticism, to the ambiguous phenomena of empowerment among CSOs. Particularly important is the analysis of the binary between professionalisation of CSOs and their (partial) institutionalisation in the EU accession process. In the first part, Wunsch points out how EU accession process meant for CSOs nothing but an enabling time to juggle multiple projects simultaneously which in tandem with follow-up institutionalisation strengthened CSOs' position in domestic arena, on the one hand, but created dependency on EU funding and grants, on the other hand.

According to the author, however, each negative or positive aspect of the EU enlargement policy reveals something much deeper, particularly in the domestic arena. For instance, professionalisation may represent a welcome, and perhaps a necessary adaptation, for CSOs within the new space of action provided by the process of Europeisation. In the case of Montenegro (Chapter 4), Wunsch points out how the issue of lack of transparency and advocacy skills did not (un-)surprisingly impede CSOs to overestimate themselves due to the close and favourable relations they held with the State organs. Paradoxically, such overestimation happened prior to the process of professionalisation and, unlike the Croatian scenario, meant the failure for implementing a common strategy for civil action and the creating of a monitoring coalition. Within this vacuum, Wunsch notes that CSOs in Montenegro were not only unable to cooperate between each other, but they also could not manage to gain legitimacy among citizens, the majority of whom were reluctant to give them the right to speak on behalf of people. Among others, a high level of competitiveness among CSOs was in Montenegro one of the barrier to better perform and matter in policy-making. All of these became one of the key priorities for the European Commission (71) and, Wunsch's paradigm of "mobilisation-and-empowerment" revealed an "ambiguous" usage of CSOs of the new EU venue. The EU positive documentations on CSOs' actions and their multiple forms of participation during the EU membership negotiations, which yet failed to adopt an Action Plan for the country, confirms such ambiguity.

The section devoted to Croatia's CSOs mobilisation and empowerment (Chapter 3), unpacks the best case study among the chosen three in terms of civic contribution, political engagement and successfully completed accession. As Wunsch notes, this may be the result of the new EU approach whose positive outcomes came from having created an ad hoc model for Croatia (79). With this, Wunsch identifies a timeline along which CSOs passed by. While lack of public interest and weak advocacy skills in policy-making processes affected the first decade of the EU membership accession (2000–2010), the second, and final stage the role played by CSOs gained great relevancy. The latter was possible thanks to a strategic improvement of mobilisation which took form in the Platform 112, the Croatian monitoring coalition which managed to pull 70 CSOs together. With the aim to best coordinate grassroots activities and be thereby more engaged with EU-level actors, Platform 112 monitored the rule of law and voiced concerns over the irreversibility of its positive changes (53). In followed that, the monitoring coalition's action went even far from the EU affairs. Active engagement on domestic level gave credit to the Platform 112 to criticise government officials (55), who were forced to listen, and to participate in public campaigns over much-debated controversial issues (e.g. ban of same-sex marriages, inclusion of Serb minority and recognition of Cyrillic alphabet).

As Wunsch also notices, while Montenegrin CSOs preferred a narrower and more State-oriented model of cooperation, Croatian CSOs managed to impose themselves as a dissonant voice. Platform 112 was recognised as a liberal and tolerant actor in the Croatian political life indeed, revitalising the whole civil society from within. A yet another aspect of Platform 112 was the relevant contribution given to PrEUgovor, Serbia's monitoring coalition.

The third case study (Chapter 5) focussed on PrEUgovor platform, which is composed of Serbian CSOs whose majority spent lot of time in asking and sharing with the Croatian colleagues potential strategies to tackle initial lack of professionalisation. According to the Serbian case, Wunsch points immediately out how the space of action of CSOs was much weaker and looser than that of Croatia and Montenegro alike. Since March 2012, while CSOs began to seek out a secure space to intervene and have a say in between domestic and EU-level actors (95), suspicion among government preventatives and institutions arose against. In Serbia, as the author correctly notices, such suspicion emerged from CSOs' historical legacy rooted in the anti-war movements during the Milosevic's era in the '1990s. In general, Serbian CSOs found the "Brussels route" an extremely useful momentum to actively contribute to, attempting to strengthen and improve national mechanism for protection of human rights and other liberties (103). In fact, Serbian CSOs were particularly devoted to the issues of transparency and inclusiveness following Chapters 23 and 24. In this, CSOs have dedicated a special monitor over those Serbian government representatives in charge of discussing Serbia's EU membership accession and working very closely to the European Commission. This double-edged facet was particularly important for ProEUgovor after having studied and shared the experiences of CSOs in Croatia and Montenegro.

Among the three EU monitoring coalitions, Wunsch does not doubt that the Serbian case study shows how results and achievements went far beyond the earlier expectations. After a first moment of adaptation to the new venue and organisation, Serbia's CSOs managed to better position themselves thanks to the knowhow acquired from transnational experiences of sharing with Platform 112 in Croatia. In the meantime, their constantly maintained openness for those civil society actors which wanted to join the coalition monitoring, resulted in an extremely positive aspect in terms of public visibility and legitimacy gained. The latter, indeed, gave credits to CSOs in Serbia and its civil society despite national issues that remain still under discussion.

At the very end, this contribution is generally a cornerstone for further analysis of different perspectives and possibilities of EU accession in advance, throughout, and after the EU enlargement, but in particular it is not only a must-read for scholars, but particularly for civil society actors, NGO activists and practitioners in the Western Balkans and beyond.

Francesco Trupia

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria

 trupia.francesco90@gmail.com  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8984-7886>

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