

EU enlargement to the Balkans: will the leopard change its spots?

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As the leadership of the European Union hands over the baton to a new management this autumn, will the winds of change blow also through the cobwebs of the EU's enlargement agenda?

Jean-Claude Juncker – the incoming President of the European Commission – has already promised to put the gearbox of further EU widening in neutral for the next five years of his mandate, and has designated the Austrian Johannes Hahn as Commissioner for the re-baptised portfolio of now European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, instructing him to focus on the Union's political and economic ties with Southern and Eastern Europe, and in particular with the Balkans.

Such an approach in the field of enlargement – once crowned the jewel of EU foreign policy – has all the appeal of a damp rag but does not necessarily depart from the *festina lente* strategy of the recent past. Inside the Union, political appetite and public support for expansion have been fizzling since Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, and were then severely curbed in the context of the on-going crisis by growing fears of importing organised crime and migrants from the Balkans. Juncker's logic of consolidation sounds depressingly similar to what it supposedly replaces and incidentally, it also fits neatly with the unambitious and inward-looking mantra favoured at present in discussions at all levels on the future of European integration, more generally.

With the 28-member block determined to catch its breath in the immediate time period, and given that even the forerunner countries in the Balkans – that is, Montenegro and Serbia – will realistically need more than five years to complete their accession talks, what priorities should guide Commissioner Hahn, soon to be Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations – when they get down to business on 1 November?

The red flags on the to-do list

A three-fold plan of action could potentially turn this envisioned pause in enlargement into an active respite that can help to build on hard-earned achievements and to encourage much-needed progress on reforms in the region.

First, the situation of the Balkan aspirants at the back of the EU membership queue screams out for attention. This concerns most directly Bosnia-Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where the prospect of accession and the tools deployed by the Union do not seem to have any bearing on these countries' will to reform and progress. A deep crisis of politics and state institutions has effectively brought the process of EU integration to a complete halt in Bosnia-Herzegovina, threatening its socio-economic development but also domestic stability. The name dispute with Greece has prevented Skopje from starting accession negotiations with the EU but the real problem has become the incapacity of its political elites to resist backsliding, especially in democratic terms. It is imperative that the Union finds ways to engage with these two 'laggards' while they are stuck in the waiting room, least of all to dispel any latent security risks. The EU might have to learn new tricks and start looking for inspiration in its successful mediation of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, putting the diplomatic skills of the new European external affairs chief – the Italian, Federica Mogherini – to a first test in her own country's 'neck of the woods'.

Second, the ground lost on structural reforms in throughout the Balkans sets off alarm bells. The priority given to stability and political conditions should be balanced with an increased emphasis on placing the broken Balkan economies on a healthy footing. Economic policies should enjoy full parity with good governance issues, with social aspects of the transformation not forgotten. Reducing budget deficits, creating jobs, boosting growth, and improving competitiveness are not just vital goals for the European Union but also urgent objectives for the Balkan region. Economic and social investments remain key, along with greater cooperation between the EU, the Balkans, and countries in the region. Fostering common energy, transport, trade, business, educational, and cultural projects are both part of a win-win scenario

for the Union and the Balkans, as well as a rational course of action in light of our shared challenges and destiny. Individual member states have a role to play in intensifying links and contacts with the Balkans and so does the Commission, such as via its Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II). Helping Kosovo secure soon visa-free travel is another way of bringing the European family closer together. Making good on the promise of prosperity affixed to the EU membership perspective is the best means to keep the credibility of the integration process and to demonstrate that the orange speck currently visible on the horizon is in fact still a real carrot.

Third, the waning political attention to enlargement in the EU capitals is a big thorn in the enlargement's and the Commission's side. The firm commitment voiced this August in Berlin by Germany and Austria to the European future of the Balkans is a welcome development, especially if it manages to rally more and more supporters among the other member states. However, it is equally important that initiatives of the Merkel type complement the Commission's work on the dossier and do not end up in a duplication of efforts to assess and assist with progress in the Balkan countries. Distrust in the EU *vis-à-vis* the Commission, and the latest tendency of the Member States in the Council to rely on national evaluations – rather than on the opinion of the Brussels' executive about the region is counterproductive. Instead of stepping on each other's toes, Member States and the Commission should stick to the division of labour specified by the Treaties so as to preserve the integrity and leverage of the integration process. Moreover, the Commission and the advocates of enlargement in the Member States should endeavour to expose the false choice between dealing first with concerns on the home front and then with hurdles in the Balkans. The case against sequencing the crisis and enlargement should be resolutely uttered: the striking similarity of political and socio-economic problems in the EU and the region begs for joint solutions in an era when Europe's global influence is shrinking.

These three main dimensions of action speak to the EU and cannot of course, substitute for the huge responsibility that the Balkans have in diligently doing their piling 'homework' if they wish to advance towards membership. But if the European Union is to go 'step-by-step' on enlargement, tackling these three difficult areas could ensure that each step taken is one in front and not in the same place or back.

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