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Balkans in Europe: why, when and how?

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Background

When they met in Thessaloniki in 2003, EU leaders made a firm promise that "the future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union".

The EU's existing Member States have accepted these countries – namely Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic (FYR) of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo – as future members because:

- the Treaty says that any European state which respects its basic principles may apply for membership;
- the EU has a historical and moral obligation to help the countries of the region;
- politically and economically, the EU has an interest in the stability and prosperity of these countries.

However, since 2004, several EU Member States have succumbed to a bout of 'enlargement fatigue' and European leaders are failing to convince public opinion of the case for further enlargement. The Union's commitment to the Western Balkans needs to be restated and firmly upheld.

Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was a huge success. It demonstrated the transformative power of the EU, putting an end to a history of national antagonisms between these countries and driving their democratisation and economic modernisation. It also reaffirmed the fundamental value of European integration.

The 'why'

Today, the countries of the Western Balkans need the same transformative power to work for them, after the bloody conflicts of the 1990s that shocked European public opinion. The EU has a moral and political responsibility to keep the prospect of membership open and credible.

The Western Balkans are part of Europe and, with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in January 2007, are now wholly surrounded by EU Member States, forming a conspicuous 'hole' in the EU map.

However, only Croatia has shown convincing evidence of moving onto the self-sustaining trajectory of reform and EU integration pursued by the CEE countries in the 1990s.

Elsewhere, weak states struggle with distrust between ethnic groups, poor governance, corruption and criminality. Political passivity and dependence on external pressure are common characteristics. Political will – the capacity to generate *internal* drivers of reform – seems to be lacking. As a result, questions are being asked as to whether the promise of EU integration can really work for this deeply troubled region.

Understandably, many in the Western Balkans doubt the Union's political will to keep its promise. They remember how feeble it proved in stopping the wars of the 1990s, and how it failed to pay attention to the emerging crisis in Yugoslavia. They fear that the EU could fail them again. Talk of 'enlargement fatigue' keeps alive uncertainty as to whether the Union is serious about its commitment to the region.

Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe was recognised early as

a strategic gain: ending the Cold War division of Europe brought benefits that EU leaders could readily explain to public opinion. In comparison, the arguments for enlargement to the Western Balkans appear *negative*: if we don't let them in, we will be threatened by an impoverished neighbourhood, wracked by criminality and the ever-present threat of bloody conflicts, which means endless costs to the EU in security missions and financial aid.

Such arguments cement an unattractive image of the Western Balkans. Public opinion, especially in older EU Member States, tends to see further enlargement as being mainly in the interests of the aspirant countries. It is neglected too often that the promise of EU membership for the Balkans was not made out of altruism, but for reasons of practical self-interest.

People in the Western Balkans, moreover, are disappointed that so little notice is taken of what they *have* achieved in recent years – in very difficult circumstances.

The mood within the Union today is neither natural nor irreversible. EU citizens are capable of sympathy and generosity, as their responses to war and its miseries regularly show. What is needed is leadership – both in the EU and in the Western Balkans – to articulate a shared strategic vision and sustain popular commitment to mutual promises.

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is more challenging, and will take longer, than for the CEE countries: the limited capacity of the region's states means that the Union cannot just set conditions and provide incentives, but has to help *build* the states themselves.

The EU accession process, offering a 'template' for economic and administrative reform backed by financial and technical support, is the best available solution. There is no reason why it cannot work for the Balkans as it did for other parts of Europe.

State of play

Much is at stake for the EU. It is not just a matter of avoiding the costs and inconveniences of not enlarging (significant as these would be) but also of reaffirming the Union's confidence in its basic *raison d'être*, its values and its purpose in the contemporary world.

The 'when'

In its 2005 report, *The Balkans in Europe's Future*, the International Commission on the Balkans argued that the target date for accession should be set at 2014-2015 – symbolically, a century after war broke out in Sarajevo in the summer of 1914. But the EU is reluctant to decide such dates: the European Council in December 2006 stated that "target dates for accession will not be set until negotiations are close to completion".

Experience shows that uncertainty about the precise date of accession is an important part of the conditionality of the accession process: even an 'indicative' date may lead the authorities of an applicant country to relax, rather than reinforce, their preparatory efforts. We saw in the recent expansion to include Bulgaria and Romania how the near-certainty of joining in 2007 reduced the leverage for reforms.

But EU candidates do need to set target dates for themselves for the purposes of government planning, for setting priorities and sequencing reforms. A target date is also an important means of mobilising the broad national effort needed and can be used to hold governments to account for progress.

Croatia has declared that its target for accession is 2009, in time for its people to vote in the next European Parliament elections. For the other Balkan countries, which have not yet opened accession negotiations, it is harder to make any predictions. Yet people feel the need for a firmer timetable in order to believe that accession will happen.

The EU's refusal to give target dates needs to be complemented by credible reassurances of its readiness to move candidates along the path to membership as soon as they are ready. The principle of 'differentiation' – that each country advances to membership at its own pace – must be upheld. There is good evidence that countries lagging behind are motivated to catch up when those advancing with reform more rapidly are duly rewarded by the EU.

Setting a target is, of course, no guarantee of actually hitting it. What now has to be done? The nuts-and-bolts of the process are already clearly laid out in the Stabilisation and Association Process, which draws on the successful experience with the CEE countries' accession.

The key challenge lies elsewhere – strengthening the political relationship between the EU and the aspirant Member States in the Western Balkans. Successful enlargement depends on both sides; it is a *partnership* in which both must show political

will and sustain mutual confidence. It is here that each side must do better.

The 'how' – on the EU's side...

First of all, the EU has to resolve its constitutional impasse. Clearly, expansion beyond the EU-27, even to include Croatia, will require agreement on institutional reform. The EU, in its own interest, cannot afford further drift: surely a solution can be found within the next two years that will avoid a situation where the Union is not ready to admit Croatia when the country is ready.

None of the other Western Balkan countries will be ready for accession for some years more. Thus the EU has the time to digest the recent enlargements and renew itself for those to come.

The EU has not, in fact, failed to reward the progress made in the Western Balkans. Since 2005, it has opened accession negotiations with Croatia, and accepted FYR Macedonia as a candidate. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Albania has been concluded, and SAA negotiations opened with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. But these positive messages have been weakened in various ways.

The visibility and impact of the EU on the ground in Western Balkan countries needs to be enhanced so that it becomes a more effective communicator. The formation of the European External Action Service, which would have improved its effectiveness, is now on hold. Even so, it would help to increase resources and staffing on the ground. The new CEE Member States have valuable experience of transition and EU integration, as well as linguistic skills that enhance effective communication. These assets should be more extensively exploited.

The EU's 2007-2014 budget disappointed those who expected generous funding for the Western Balkans. If the Union wants to send a more encouraging signal to the region, some additional funds should be found in the budgetary review planned for 2008.

The European Council of December 2006 rightly emphasised the need to foster people-to-people contacts. The visa regime has long been a major source of Western Balkans' mistrust of the EU. How can the 'European perspective' arouse enthusiasm in people who are held at arm's length by the EU?

Visa facilitation is now in preparation. Will this go far enough to make a significant difference to ordinary people, especially students, scholars, and businessmen? The Council of Ministers now needs to deliver.

Enlargement to the Western Balkans should be kept separate from the question of Turkey's accession. With a population three times greater than the whole of the Western Balkans put together, and a geographic location at Europe's outer limits, Turkey poses quite different challenges. For the Western Balkans, joining the EU is imperative – without the European perspective, they cannot hope to achieve stability and prosperity.

The problem of 'enlargement fatigue' should not be exaggerated. Much of the EU's malaise arises from social and economic problems at home, rather than enlargement. The Union, and especially its Member States, must do better in explaining how recent enlargements have benefited the EU and why we are committed to the Western Balkans. Stabilisation of the region is an agreed strategic priority for the EU: it should not get 'tired' of such a priority.

...and on the Balkans' side

The Balkan countries should not be deterred by the EU's current attitudes. Ambivalence and indecision on the part of Member States have always accompanied enlargement, as the CEE countries witnessed in the early 1990s. But they did not waver in their resolve; they got on with reform and presented a case that could not be rejected.

In the Western Balkans, people ask 'why should we make these painful reforms if the EU is not going to let us in anyway?' But even posing this question sends the message that their societies have not yet fully 'bought into' reform as a strategic imperative, necessary *for themselves*. People in the region need to drop the passive stance of 'takers' of externally-imposed conditions and see that they can become 'makers' of their own future – as partners, not subjects, of the EU.

Nowhere is this truer than in relation to compliance with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. EU citizens find it unacceptable that would-be Member States are unable or unwilling to meet their international obligations concerning indicted war criminals.

The EU's conditionality is more stringently applied today, with more emphasis on implementation. There is no point in complaining that this is 'unfair' to the Western Balkans. The conditions are designed to prepare applicants for membership, and rigorous monitoring should be regarded as offering more support and guidance on how to succeed. These countries should not want to join the EU as 'second class' members.

Regional cooperation is an area where progress has been made. An Energy Community has been formed and a regional free trade

agreement, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), was signed in December 2006. The Stability Pact is about to be transferred fully into Western Balkan hands.

It is now vital for leaders to show that they really want to make regional cooperation work, and to overcome political and practical obstacles. More support must be given to civil society initiatives and cross-border cooperation among local authorities. Showing that 'local ownership' of regional cooperation works will provide convincing proof that the Western Balkans are capable of integration.

Prospects

2007 will be a decisive year for the future of the Western Balkans. It should see the settlement of Kosovo's status: unresolved statehood and minority questions pose serious threats to democratisation and reform, but if the Kosovo process is managed swiftly and resolutely, the result should be durable stabilisation of the region, allowing energies to be refocused on EU integration.

But there are inherent risks. The settlement is likely to disappoint both the Kosovar Albanians and the Serbs. There is the potential for violent reactions, whipped up by extremists but also reflecting social frustrations, grievances and a sense of humiliation.

The EU is about to assume responsibility for overseeing implementation of the settlement. This places a premium on EU unity and political will in the coming months.

For several years, the Kosovo mission will absorb EU resources and manpower. But attention must also be paid to Serbia, striking a balance between principled consistency and generous flexibility. Serbia needs the opportunity to recover its self-respect and redefine its interests as a decisive contributor to the region's economic and political recovery and integration in the EU.

The Union is also preparing to take over key responsibilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina as the Office of the High Representative is phased out and replaced by the EU Special Representative, who is already in charge of the military and police missions on the ground.

Serious questions remain about the maturity of the political elites and their commitment to the reforms that EU integration demands. There are no 'quick fixes' for the conundrum of Bosnian statehood. The Union's commitment will need to be sustained with consistency and patience.

FYR Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro have made some progress towards the EU over the past year, but not as much as might have been hoped. This is due largely to political polarisation, which diverts energies and weakens the drive to reform.

This is worrying in the current regional context: FYR Macedonia, in particular, is vulnerable to fall-out from a poorly managed Kosovo settlement, but so too, potentially, are Albania and Montenegro. Yet in each case, the perspective of EU membership has shown its power to change political behaviour, when the Union has been an attentive, supportive and fully committed partner.

Croatia needs to be reassured that the EU will admit it as soon as it has fully met the criteria. Its accession should not be difficult for the Union: public opinion is favourable towards Croatia and, given its small size, it will not be expensive. If Croatia is able to join in 2009 or soon after, this will show EU citizens that enlargement can work in the Western Balkans, bringing benefits all round.

The challenges ahead have to be confronted by both sides. The EU and the countries of the Western Balkans need to work together better in mustering leadership and political will, strengthening mutual confidence and sustaining the momentum of enlargement. Successful EU enlargement is a joint partnership in managing the dynamic interplay of politics within and between the EU and the aspirant members. It takes both sides to make it work.

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