EU enlargement to the Balkans: the show must go on

Corina Stratulat

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This week’s publication by the European Commission of the annual Progress Reports for the Balkan countries aspiring to join the EU tops off a busy year for the enlargement dossier. Taking stock of the ups and downs in the EU-Balkans relationship since last autumn is instructive, but current times demand, above all, sustained and strategic action in order to see through the successful European integration of the region.

Is the glass half full…

Enlargement policy has persevered in spite of the on-going economic and political crisis in Europe. Croatia endorsed EU accession in a referendum back in January, and is set to become the 28th member state in July next year. Montenegro opened accession negotiations in June, after delivering good results in the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Serbia was rewarded candidate status in March for advancing towards the normalisation of ties with Pristina, but needs to further prove such commitments before getting a date for the start of accession negotiations. In turn, Kosovo – whose supervised independence came to an end this August – began visa-liberalisation talks with the Commission in January, received a roadmap for visa-free travel in March, and was just given a number of short-term priorities so that it can commence negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU.

Also in March, the Commission launched a High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) with Skopje in an ingenious effort to mitigate Greece’s block that has prevented the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) from opening accession negotiations since 2009. The latest Progress Report is resoundingly positive about FYR Macedonia’s achievements in the HLAD framework, and is emphatic about the urgent need to take the country’s membership application to the next level, which could also help to create the context in which to possibly resolve the name issue.

The remarkable efforts of rival Albanian political parties to cooperate in fulfilling key reform priorities have also persuaded the Commission this year to recommend Albania for a kind of conditional candidate status, until the country adopts pending laws in the areas of the judiciary, public administration and parliamentary rules of procedure.

Even Bosnia-Herzegovina has recently proven keener to catch up with its EU-hopeful neighbours by passing critical legislation on state aid and censuses. The entry into force of the SAA is now within Bosnia’s grasp, provided that the country modifies its Constitution to allow national minorities to run for political office. In doing so, Bosnia would also make headway on the roadmap for its EU membership application, handed out in June by the Commission.

All this hard work and commitment from the Balkan countries, the Commission and some enlargement-friendly member states is anything but trivial, especially given the present stubborn economic and political complexities. There is hope for the enlargement project, but will it suffice to keep the show on the road?

… or half empty?

In many respects, the cards are stacked against the future of enlargement. Most Balkan countries were hit hard by the economic woes in the EU – the region’s main trading and investment partner. With soaring youth unemployment and declining growth rates infecting the region, the goal of EU membership, with its often-costly prerequisites, can lose lustre among people, and breed populist – rather than pro-European or reformist – politicians in the Balkans (as seen recently in Serbia).
Moreover, as the Commission’s enlargement package indicates this week, questions of ‘good governance’ – the rule of law, an independent judiciary, administrative capacity, the fight against corruption and organised crime – but also of media freedom and parliament/civil society’s influence on policymaking, still loom large across the region.

These sorts of problem make it politically difficult to keep the Union’s door open to new Balkan entrants but, paradoxically, both new and old member states are also increasingly confronted with similar issues. In this sense, rather than undermining the convergence narrative between the EU and the Balkans, these developments challenge the model – not unequivocally exemplary – that the EU is exporting to the region.

Additionally, deep-seated political divisions and border disputes within/between Balkan countries (Montenegro aside) are sure to give member states cold feet on EU enlargement, as has happened all too often in the past. The Commission’s new tactic of focusing short-term attention on technicalities – away from the political elephants in the room – is yet to prove effective in solving the region’s sticky internal/bilateral points.

Last but not least, as the EU is caught up with its own economic, political and institutional uncertainties, enlargement and the Balkans are likely to struggle to remain at the heart of member states’ concerns in the years ahead.

So, all in all, is enlargement living on borrowed time?

**Making the case for EU enlargement to the Balkans**

There is too much at stake to put Balkan enlargement on hold or drop it from the EU’s political agenda. The integration of the region with the EU remains the best – if not the only – way to deal with outstanding problems. Nothing short of the genuine prospect of full membership – including for the difficult cases – will guarantee the economic and social modernisation, as well as the democratic consolidation, of the Balkan countries.

Leaving the Balkans in limbo or devising peripheral-type associations in a multi-speed Europe will erode hard-won achievements, particularly in terms of peace, stability and democracy, and will open up space for other ambitious actors (like Russia, Turkey or China) to compete with the EU’s influence and vision in the region.

The EU is not a novice in European integration. The hurdles might be considerable, both at home and in the Balkans, but the EU has experience, a full toolbox of diplomatic and political pressures, the ‘power of the purse’, and (still some) traction. Enlargement has grown over the years into a rigorous process, which is transforming the Balkans and pushing the EU to develop capacity for self-correction and renewal. This should assuage concerns on the part of those member states that fear a hasty expansion of the Union.

Most importantly, the successful completion of Balkan integration is for the EU a mark of “self-interest properly understood” (principle coined by Alexis de Tocqueville). This means that looking to anchor the Balkans in the EU is not just good for the soul – it is good for the EU’s own security, its democratic and economic peace of mind, as well as for its global foreign policy ambitions. Let’s hope that reticent European politicians will now take a much-needed dose of pragmatism and start to actively promote Balkan enlargement.

*Corina Stratulat is a Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre.*

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