

HOW TO ENHANCE THE EU ENLARGEMENT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

Prof. Zhidas Daskalovski, PhD
University of St. Kliment Ohridski, Macedonia

Abstract:

The European Commission praises the accession policy “as one of the European Union's most effective foreign policy instruments”, but four main challenges pose obstacles to the accession of the Western Balkan countries: lack of popular will in EU Member States; flagging interest on the side of the EU; bilateral challenges thwarting implementation of regional cooperation; and indifference to the EU from the side of increasingly authoritarian regimes in some Western Balkan countries. Emerging regional powers, such as Turkey or Russia, are ready to step into a vacuum. Without a new impetus towards enlargement, the EU will risk losing strategic influence in a neighbouring region to other regional powers. This study examines how to recharge the enlargement process, which will require an enhanced reform drive and better communication by the governments in the region and involvement of the civil society. The EU should improve the evaluation process of the progress made, induce consensus on EU enlargement among parties in the region, as well as support enhanced regional cooperation mechanisms and bodies, in particular the Regional Cooperation Council and the South-East European Cooperation Process. EU needs to modify its “good neighbourly relations” approach by proactively intervening to overcome bilateral disputes blocking accession progress. The EU should launch a more intensive engagement with the Western Balkans, start the screening process and open accession negotiations with all of the countries as soon as possible, because the accession process is a powerful tool to drive reforms and institutional transformation.

Keywords: EU enlargement, Europeanisation, Western Balkans, state of affairs, how to invigorate the enlargement process

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Introduction

European Union (EU) enlargement is under threat. There is little enthusiasm among European Member States for further enlarging the Union. The slowing down of the EU integration process in the Western Balkans has been accompanied by a slowdown in investment in the region by EU Member States. European states face different problems of their own making. Citizens across the continent feel less connected with the European supranational

institutions and globalisation processes. Economic progress has been stagnating and populist leaders have exploited anti-elitist feelings. In the Balkans leaders imitate and improve populist strategies. New regional powers, such as Turkey, Russia, and China threaten to use the impasse in the EU enlargement process. It is in the interests of the EU to foster a secure and prosperous region, but it has to persuade the region's elites and public alike that the accession process will bring about sustainable reforms, stability and prosperity. This necessitates an enhanced reform drive and better communication by the governments in the region. The EU should work with governments and civil society to improve the evaluation process of progress made, induce consensus on EU enlargement among competing political parties and support enhanced regional cooperation mechanisms. The EU needs to overcome “good neighbourly relations” conditionality by proactively intervening to overcome bilateral disputes, to open accession negotiations with all countries as soon as possible and ensure that the accession process serves as a powerful motor to drive reforms and institutional transformation. This paper analyses the state of affairs and discusses the methods how best to invigorate the enlargement process.

EU supports dwindle as western Balkan problems grow

Among citizens in the EU there is little enthusiasm among for further enlarging the Union. Majority of citizens in the EU are against further enlargement. To the question in the Eurobarometer surveys “*What is your opinion on further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years*” 51% of EU citizens answered negatively in the fall of 2016, the latest available survey. Against were 51% of respondents of the survey completed in the spring of 2016, and the fall of 2015, a slight increase from the spring of 2015 when 49% of EU citizens opposed future enlargement. Opposition to enlargement is dominant in the original 15 Member States. Moreover, respondents in Euro Area countries, led by Germany, are largely opposed to the enlargement of the EU. Countries of former Socialist Block are more in favour of future enlargement. In any case, the Western Balkan governments have a momentous task to convince citizens and EU partner states in the worth of the future enlargement.

On the other hand, candidate countries have become increasingly aware that the negotiations will take a long time. For example, for the 2004 enlargement negotiations began on 31st March 1998 with the six best-prepared countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia), and on 15th February 2000 with all the other candidate countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia). All except Bulgaria and Romania became members in 2004, which means the negotiations lasted six years. Sofia and Bucharest joined the EU in 2007, negotiating for seven years. Croatia negotiated from 2005 to 2013. It is highly unlikely that any of the Western Balkan countries will be able to join the EU in such periods of time. Indeed, at the hearing in the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) of Johannes Hahn, the current Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, “some MEPs feared that if too extended in time, the preparatory process could force some of the candidates to give up” (Marini, 2014). Moreover, the Greek debt crisis dealt “a serious blow to the enlargement narrative as one of sustained convergence, EU-driven modernisation, and increasing prosperity” (O'Brennan, 2013:40). The duration of the accession process and the declining level of foreign direct investment

in the region heighten the feeling of indifference to the EU and the whole enlargement project among the regional elites, influencing a political culture of outright hostility between government and opposition parties and authoritarian tendencies in domestic politics.

Some local elites are again turning to nationalism and the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans is increasingly losing its relevance. While governments seemingly align themselves with the EU agenda and work on their countries' accession, "a large number of formal and informal economic and political elites continue to manipulate ethno-nationalist mobilisation for their own private economic interests and the preservation of political power" (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2014). In contrast to Central Europe and as a result of the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s, nation-building remains a problem for the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbian and Croatian leaders fear efforts that aim to strengthen the unitary character of the state as primarily an attempt to revise the results of the war and turn the Bosniaks as the largest ethnic group into the position of titular nation. As a result, the country's institutions barely function. No matter if the Dayton Peace Agreement stopped the war in the country, the insistence of changes of its provisions make the functioning of this state highly problematic as ethnic politics dominates the policy agenda while substantial problems and EU enlargement are put aside.

The gap between the transposition and implementation of EU laws is substantial. Since the reward of full membership would come much later, there is not much to be gained by conforming to the entire spectrum of EU demands at this stage, especially if some of the issues are related to nation-state identity concerns. Moreover, for local elites looking at neighbours from the region, such as Greece, with high youth unemployment and indebtedness, or Bulgaria, which has made limited economic progress since joining the EU, it is apparent that EU membership does not guarantee quick progress to prosperity and stability. One of the leading regional analysts, Professor Zarko Puhoski, has argued that "next to Sweden, Croatia is the only country which is worse off after accession, not only economically but in every respect" (Bogdanić and Husić, 2014). Moreover, data revealed that "the minimum wage in Bulgaria in 2013 was about 30% less than in China and below the rate in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand" (O'Brennan, 2013:39). Even in the newest EU Member State there are fears that membership has not brought positive benefits (PASOS 2013, PASOS 2014). The economic problems of other EU economies, such as Spain or Portugal, also influence this line of thinking.

In the successor states of former Yugoslavia, in spite of Slovenia and Croatia now being EU members, the expected results of increased economic progress were likewise not achieved: unemployment has risen sharply; the living standards for vast sectors of the population are appalling to the extent that a mass exodus to richer EU member states has been attempted. A similar migration was seen in the case of Kosovar asylum-seekers crossing the border to Hungary in early 2015. Industrial production has collapsed in all the former Yugoslav countries since democratic changes in 1991 (Lux 2011) and there is a ubiquitous feeling of hopelessness among young people, which often leads them to resort to crime or attempt to emigrate. Levels of youth unemployment are high, from 41% in Montenegro and 46% in Serbia, to 54% in Macedonia, 57.5% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 71% in Croatia (Zeneli 2014: 55). According to Eurostat data, the gross minimum wage in Kosovo is 150 EUR, in Macedonia is 213 EUR, in Albania it is 157 EUR, in Serbia it is 235, while in Montenegro it is 288 EUR (Eurostat 2015).

The economic crises in the EU led to “less trade with Western Balkan countries, to the withdrawal of capital from the Western Balkan branches of EU banks, and a decline in diaspora remittances to the region” (Reljić, 2014). Although measuring the actual flows of remittances to the region remains a challenging exercise, existing data indicate that there is a declining trend.

For example, in Serbia, “by the end of November 2014 remittances amounted to EUR 1.7 billion, which is about EUR 500 million less than in 2013, according to the data of the National Bank of Serbia” (InSerbia Team, 2015). Declines in remittances have also been reported in Albania, Kosovo, and in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, since 2011, although not in Montenegro (World Bank 2014, Loxha, 2015). From Belgrade to Skopje, to Pristina and Podgorica, Banja Luka and Sarajevo, elites do not have very sound liberal credentials, and care most about remaining in power as long as possible. Using various methods, including sophisticated political marketing tools as well as brutal media spinning and control, Western Balkan leaders often win elections on populist agendas. Patronage is rampant among governing parties, and nationalistic ways of thinking dominate, posing a stumbling block to political and economic reform.

Serious corruption allegations against EULEX (the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo) have fuelled the popular belief that the EU is using double standards in dealing with the Balkans even though investigations are underway. This has aided local elites in their argumentation as to why the accession process has stalled, placing the blame on mismanagement in the European Commission. The disappointment of people who never expected the path to EU membership to be so long and so difficult is “also playing a major role because an atmosphere of frustration, resignation, and suppressed anger now prevails while anti-EU sentiment is becoming more widespread” (Spaskovska, 2014). Part of the fault lies with the regional elites who often give overoptimistic forecasts as to when their countries can expect to join the EU.

Some twenty-five years after the democratic changes citizens have grown tired of electoral promises of a better life in the future. To remain in power, Western Balkan leaders also need to tackle the fundamental problem of the region: unemployment and lack of economic development. Public finances are under duress as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia face high levels of public debt, sizeable budget deficits and large current account deficits (Shera et al, 2015). Citizens from the region are in dire economic straits with a shortage of employment opportunities. They thrive on promises of new investment and project development even when their completion seems quite unrealistic (such as Belgrade on Water, or the Ljubanishta Lake Project on the Macedonian shore of Lake Ohrid). Therefore, it is little surprise that most governments in the region “are actively courting assistance and investment from different regional players such as the Gulf States, China, Russia, and Turkey, often with surprising success, as the growing ties between Serbia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) testify” (Van Ham, 2014:18).

Politicians in the Western Balkans have for a sustained period of time disagreed about the proper functioning of government institutions. Once a party wins elections, it “captures the state”, (mis)using public institutions and media to maximise its own influence and power (Hellman et al, 2000). Fully aware of this, opposition parties attempt to win power at all costs even if their behaviour damages the national interest. A negative EU progress report is interpreted as a media coup for the opposition. As a result, on the one hand there is minimal

cooperation between government and opposition parties towards passing certain laws and regulations with a view to approximation to EU standards. On the other hand, support for EU reforms is often conditional on securing demands that serve short-term party interests. Threats and boycotts of parliament or elections or state institutions have been common in the region, most notably in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro has in effect seen no alternation of power, while in Serbia a concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić has become increasingly evident since the last election victory of the Serbian Progressive Party.

Moving forward

Forging a consensus among elites to promote reforms

Politicians in the region must comprehend that the consolidation of democracy depends on elite consensus and cooperation. A critical step for successful democratisation is the transformation of divided elites into consensually unified ones through an elite settlement of basic disputes among elites. An elite pact, settlement or political settlement is a “relatively rare event in which warring national elite factions suddenly and deliberately reorganise their relations by negotiating compromises on their most basic disagreements” (Burton and Higley, 1987:295). Alternatively put, formal and informal pacts between contending political actors can move relations from a stage of disruptive confrontation to one of respectful, consensus-based political competition between elite groups. This is needed in the Western Balkans as soon as possible.

The EU should apply pressure on political parties in the Western Balkans to defuse the “winner takes all” mentality of political elites. Party dialogue and a culture of consensus-building over policy issues and institutions should be further promoted. To safeguard against the appropriation of the EU enlargement progress for the furtherance of party political interests, the EU should formally insist that candidates for key positions leading the respective country’s accession process – Chief Negotiator, Minister and Deputy Minister of European Integration, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee for EU Enlargement and similar positions – are elected or appointed by a consensus among the political parties in the respective national parliaments. The more the ruling and opposition parties are formally engaged in the enlargement process, the less they will be inclined to take a confrontational stand against the necessary reforms. Consensual policymaking will decrease inter-party bickering and defuse the tensions that contribute to the “winner takes all” mentality.

Although it might look as if the EU were trying to interfere in the internal affairs of the countries in the region, this move would signal to the elites and to citizens in the region that political settlement and consensus over EU enlargement is a crucial issue for the democratisation and socio-economic development of the Western Balkans.

Problems related to corruption and party political influence on the independence of public institutions, the media, and electoral processes are prevalent throughout the Western Balkans, a point repeatedly made in the European Commission progress reports. To address these barriers to the EU integration of the region, the EU should use IPA II to further support reforms in the “enlargement countries”. In particular, under the public

administration reform and rule of law components of IPA II, the EU should increase the focus on strengthening the independence and the competencies of following types of public institutions:

- the state/national/supreme Audit Office;
- commissioner on freedom of information;
- the Broadcasting Council/media regulatory body;
- the Ombudsman Office;
- anti-monopoly Commission;
- special anti-corruption bodies; and
- the Electoral Commission.

Building consensus is a key issue here. The emergence of a system of election/appointment of officials heading these bodies through a consensual vote in national parliaments would increase the likelihood of the confirmation of highly qualified candidates by a strong majority. Among other things, the strengthening of the efficacy and the role of the above-mentioned institutions will in the short run influence the fairness of elections. Free and fair elections, where the results of the voting are not disputed by any party, should be an urgent priority.

Engaging public opinion in the EU

Enlargement without supportive constituencies in both places, among the candidate (and potential candidate) countries and EU Member States, and enlargement regarded as a purely technical, elite-driven process that few people understand, will not survive the current erosion of trust. The situation today does not differ much from circumstances and public opinion in the EU five or ten years ago. The risk is that a failure to step up the enlargement process during the tenure of the Juncker Commission would result in weaker, more authoritarian Western Balkan states. However, elucidation of the potential drawbacks of non-EU action regarding enlargement will not suffice to convince the citizens of EU Member States who oppose further expansion. More openness, transparency, clarity, and precise communication and data are needed. If significant progress is made in the reform process in the Western Balkan countries, and a successful *EU communication strategy* is implemented to communicate the evaluation of that progress, then it would become easier to convince the EU public, in particular in the more sceptical EU countries, to support the enlargement process. In other words, the dissemination to ordinary citizens of *more easily accessible and comprehensible analysis* in addition to the resources and materials produced by the European Parliament Information Offices (EPIOs), EC representations/delegations, Europe Direct network will serve in better presenting the results of the Western Balkan reforms to the European public and could become a crucial tool for the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as for the national governments of Member States to promote and explain the benefits of further enlargement. In the next section we will discuss how to prepare such kind of an analysis.

Transform Commission progress reports into accessible, results-oriented evaluations

EU progress reports assess the respective countries' progress in complying with the Copenhagen accession criteria and the conditionality of the Stabilisation and Association

Process. Progress is measured on the basis of decisions taken, legislation adopted and measures implemented in a yearly time frame, from October in the previous year to September in the current year. The reports are not sufficiently clear, to ordinary citizens at least, in the assessment of the progress made. In the reports on many occasions, the word 'progress' is used in tandem with specific adjectives (some further, further, limited, very limited, patchy, hampered, little, good, slow, very slowly) to indicate the level of improvement in specific chapters. It is far from clear, however, what is the difference between “limited” and “very limited”, “slow” and “very slow”, or how “further” progress being made in certain policy areas has been evaluated.

Moreover, progress in some areas is easily defended by the ruling elites as general progress of the country and a good performance of the government as far as EU accession is concerned. With constrained media spectrum it is easy for government to ignore the “limited” or lack of progress in certain other areas. On the other hand, opposition parties can easily focus and warn the public about the policy areas where the country has made little or no progress, blaming the government for not doing enough in the EU accession process. Civil society organisations that specialise in certain problematic area, say environmental protection, will have a completely different view on the progress made of the country, than say, a NGO working in the area of consumer rights, where the Report has found strong progress being made in the adoption and implementation of the relevant *acquis*. Very few think tanks and civil society organisations in the Western Balkans have capacities and analytical skills to assess the overall progress made. Given the polarised political scene in the Western Balkans, where media and civil society organisations are considered closer to the ruling parties or the opposition, the Reports can serve as PR tools to praise or criticise the government work on EU accession in the past year. The reports should be more specific and concrete with easily comprehensible and quantifiable indicators. To make the progress reports mobilising factors for civil society actors, politicians and public administrators across the region, ESI suggests doing for each chapter – and for each country – what the EU did in the visa liberalisation process for the region: produce one document (“roadmap”) that clearly sums up what the core requirements are under each policy area (or chapter) that every accession candidate should meet (European Stability Initiative, 2014). The Reports would then also serve as a tool to compare progress made within a country throughout time, as well as in comparison with the other Western Balkan countries.

Engaging civil society in the analytical phase with focus on monitoring and evaluation

Transformation of the progress reports into a more accessible and readable format can be supplemented by an analytical report commissioned from a consortium of think-tanks, both from accession countries and from EU Member States, on the state of play and “a yearly estimate of when, at present pace, a country would likely enter the Union” (Adebahr, 2014). A key aspect is to improve monitoring and evaluation of the enlargement process and public policymaking in general. Improvement of the currently low capacities of the region's governments in monitoring and evaluation can be bridged by the inclusion of independent experts and civil society actors. Similarly to the making of the yearly analytical reports, using IPA II mechanisms, the EU can also commission local high-quality *monitoring and evaluation reports* on the implementation of the *acquis* to generate knowledge of what

works, what does not, and why. The consistent inclusion of civil society input will increase the provision of timely, credible, and reliable information to track progress of outcomes of the negotiations process. These monitoring and evaluation reports by local think-tanks and monitoring and evaluation specialists will well serve the making of the yearly analytical reports commissioned from a consortium of think-tanks, both from accession countries and from EU Member States, on the state of play in the accession drive of the Western Balkan countries. The improved progress reports by the Commission and the think-tank analysis would facilitate a more comprehensible assessment of the state of affairs concerning progress on the path to enlargement in the Western Balkans. If the think-tank analyses were to indicate that “the estimated date for accession was 2022 in a given year, a move forward or backward by the next year would be a clear indication of progress (or lack thereof)” (Adebahr, 2014). These reforms would provide a new way to engage with an active civil society in accession countries.

Engaging public opinion in the region

The European Commission and the European Parliament should urge the governments in the region to reshape their communication strategies regarding enlargement with specific and timely delivery of information on the reforms made. Western Balkan governments must be obliged to prepare and implement annual communication strategies on the benefits and challenges of the EU accession process and the progress made in a given year. Within the annual communication strategies, accountability concerning the adoption and implementation of the *acquis* would be increased by the dissemination to the public by Western Balkan ministries of quarterly reports. These communication strategies would be evaluated in the EU Progress Reports, both in terms of the clarity and appropriateness of the objectives set initially and the evaluation of the implementation of the strategies. If evaluated by the Commission, governments in the region will devote necessary resources to improved communication with its citizens on the EU accession process. The annual analytical think tank reports can support this evaluation through providing independent verified updates on the communication strategies of the Western Balkan countries.

More openness and information from a variety of sources, both governmental and non-governmental, would serve to mobilise public opinion in the Western Balkan countries to support further reforms. To enhance the overall process the European Parliament and the European Commission should also insist that governments in the Western Balkan countries provide open, accurate data to local policy research institutes so that they can produce informative reports based on up-to-date data. No good analysis can be produced on the effectiveness of a communication strategy on the progress in the EU accession process of a given Western Balkan country if reliable data is not provided to analysts, for example. In that respect, the EU delegations in the region should closely monitor the implementation of the Access to Information laws which typically aid researchers in situations where data is not easily available. IPA II projects on Western Balkan states achieving Open Government Partnerships should also aid the process.

Regional cooperation must improve

Notwithstanding a number of open bilateral issues, regional cooperation among the Western Balkan states should be further enhanced with the proactive support of the EU and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). In particular, the EU should urge an enhanced role for the RCC in stimulating regional cooperation in a variety of fields, including soft ones such as education, science and culture. The RCC should continue to serve as a platform for the region's governments to evaluate the future of regional cooperation, specifically based on careful examination of the actual needs of states in the region. The EU should enhance the implementation of the RCC's SEE 2020 Strategy and monitor the convergence of its goals with those of the EU since SEE 2020 is closely following the vision of the EU strategy Europe 2020. Continuous EU support is necessary as key elements of the Strategy such as "transport, energy, competitiveness and integrated growth have secured support from the Prime Ministers of Western Balkans economies and several EU Member States through the Berlin Process" (RCC press release 2015).

Beyond the RCC, the role of other regional bodies, such as the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA), should be strengthened to aid the enlargement process. ReSPA should serve as a hub for supporting leading civil servants engaged in the EU negotiations. EU negotiations by individual countries should be open for monitoring by civil servants of other Western Balkan countries. Apart from discussions and negotiations over strategic issues civil servants from the region should be able to monitor the negotiations and acquire practical knowledge of the process to be replicated in their own countries. This kind of regional cooperation should be enhanced by the EU and ReSPA. Regional initiatives should also be supported by the EU, especially if the region is to focus on cooperation in solving a number of common problems such as corruption and political party influence on the independence of public institutions, the media, and electoral processes.

Revisit "good neighbourly relations" conditionality

When EU conditionality touches upon identity politics, the transformative power of the EU is weak and ineffective. A problem arises when "a state's national identity contradicts the conditions linked to the benefit of an external incentive, the state will not or only inconsistently comply with these conditions independently of the expected costs of adaptation", and that "national identity plays a crucial role as filter by sorting out whether governmental action is to be based on cost-benefit calculations ("logic of expected consequences") or in accordance with socially constructed and accepted identities, rules, and practices" (Freyburg and Richter, 2008:14). In other words, if the conditionality criteria pertain to an issue area perceived as problematic for national identity, a different line of reasoning will be triggered than in cases where the criteria are considered unproblematic. National identity "determines the logic of social action that governments will follow when responding to the Union's conditionality criteria" (Freyburg and Richter, 2010:266).

The EU condition for the Macedonia to reach a "negotiated and mutually acceptable solution on the name issue" is effectively hidden under the "good neighbourly relations" criteria (European Commission, 2009:6). Failing to achieve good neighbourly relations is, in fact, pushing Macedonia to negotiate on its name and identity. This amounts to posing

additional unprecedented criteria for membership of the EU and NATO, a policy that delegitimises the principle of “conditionality”, one of the main instruments of the EU in the enlargement process. The blocking of Macedonia’s EU accession drive removes the major incentive for the country’s political elites to work towards membership. Moreover, there is a high risk that Macedonian public opinion will turn against accession. More importantly, the possibilities for further soft mediation of Macedonian-Albanian political disputes will diminish at a time when there is a danger that nationalism and ethnocentrism will rise again.

Serbia has been trying to keep its policy on Kosovo separate from its aspiration to join the EU. However, since the EU has made clear that Serbia’s progress towards accession depends on improving its relations with Kosovo, it might lead the country to take another look at the integration process. Despite the change of government in Serbia, the policy and discourse on Kosovo remains the same. It seems that no government in Belgrade in the near future will recognise Kosovo’s independence. As it is very unlikely that the EU will have Serbia as a member if it does not establish good neighbourly relations with an independent Kosovo, the danger is that Belgrade will abandon EU enlargement, further complicating Balkan affairs. Serbia should be allowed to tackle this issue at the very end of the negotiations process. It would not be prudent to push Serbia on recognition of Kosovo when five Member States do not recognise Prishtina. While negotiations last and normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina progresses, the status of the Serbian minority in Kosovo must be upheld with a special attention to the Serbian municipalities in the North. If in due time the situation of Serbs in Kosovo is well accepted by the public in Serbia there might be a window of opportunity that Belgrade recognises the independence of Prishtina at the time when the country would be acceding to the EU. EU conditionality runs the risk that it will not be taken seriously by other governments in the region that have or might have problems in bilateral relations with their neighbours or in regional cooperation. If the upper hand in bilateral disputes within the regional cooperation conditionality lies in the hands of one or more EU Member States, laggards in the process of EU enlargement such as Kosovo might worry that they will suffer insurmountable obstacles in the accession process once Serbia joins the EU. If and when Serbia accedes to the EU special controlling mechanism should be put in place in order to secure that Belgrade would not be able to block progress of Kosovo’s accession. Although such mechanism would be an unorthodox measure, given the experience with the Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania, it would not be a completely unorthodox measure. The credibility of the enlargement process “remains in doubt so long as individual Member States continue to make the accession process hostage to bilateral complaints, thereby undermining the element of fairness in the conditionality principle” (Fouéré, 2014:8).

The view of the Commission that “bilateral issues should not hold up the accession process which should be based on established conditionality” (Enlargement Strategy 2014: 17) should be given more political weight. In principle, a way must be found to prevent the postponement of enlargement to certain Balkan countries as a result of veto-wielding powers by Member States around the principle of “good neighbourly relations” conditionality. A blockade of the enlargement for Serbia and Macedonia could have serious implications for regional stability and innovative solutions such as those proposed above should be found. The EU should consider devising mechanisms/informal bodies to help solve specific bilateral disputes between Member States and candidate countries. At some instances the EU can rely on the most active Member States. While not all bilateral disputes merit such an effort, it

is necessary in particularly difficult cases that revolve around the questions of statehood or identity. The experience of the resolution of the Slovenia-Croatia sea border dispute should be considered, and an enhanced role and powers for the European Commission in this process might be an option.

Conclusions and recommendations

In recent decades, the EU has invested so much in the Western Balkan region that the region is now strongly integrated economically with the EU, which accounts for more than two-thirds of the region's total trade. Therefore, an exit strategy should not be under consideration. On the contrary, closer integration should be moving further ahead. A deceleration of the accession process would seriously undermine the credibility of the EU and its self-proclaimed "soft power", leaving the door open for the stronger influence of rising regional powers such as Russia. The increasingly indifferent feelings towards the EU from the side of elites in the Western Balkans have begun to usher in a return to authoritarian tendencies. Nationalism could easily rise in the region. New conflicts could develop, especially in the Macedonia, Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina. The decline of influence by the EU could be exploited by regional powers such as Russia or Turkey. Given the visa-free travel to the EU Schengen countries for the Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo), there is a danger that radicalised Islamic youth from the Balkans would move in and become active in Europe. Organised crime, corruption and immigration could also emerge as potential threats to Europe-wide security and stability if the Western Balkan countries' accession is postponed indefinitely. The Western Balkans and the EU need to recharge the EU enlargement process through a reinvigorated accession process and strategy.

To do so an important target audience should be the EU public. The Western Balkans are not a priority for ordinary EU citizens. The countries do not have a good reputation – following years of negative media reports from the region and stereotyping within the EU resulting from reports of criminality caused by migrants from the Western Balkans. As the EU is undergoing an internal crisis, and its Member States are less likely to be supportive of enlargement, the European Commission should take greater initiative by using clear language explaining to citizens of the EU and the Western Balkans the benefits of the accession process and the reforms required to join the EU. The public in the Western Balkans should also become more aware of the intricacies of the accession process and know better where their respective countries stand, and why some have not progressed further. Hence, better produced EU progress reports and reports by independent think-tanks in the Western Balkans are needed together with more precise and timely communication from the governments in the region.

Transparency and accountability are needed in the reforms, hence more accent should be placed on improving institutions and agencies that monitor and evaluate public policy-making. Elites in the Western Balkans must be induced to drop the prevalent confrontational mentality and move from disunity to unity in working together to further the enlargement process and democratic rule in general. Regional cooperation should be enhanced and the EU should assist this through the various forms of multilateral institutions currently in place. There is no point in working on EU accession if the region does not improve and does not coordinate better its own activities and projects aiming to help the life of ordinary citizens. Brussels should accept

that some of the regional problems, especially those involving bilateral issues and concerning “good neighbourly” relations, will remain unresolved without the EU’s direct involvement. Overall, devoid of EU accession prospects, the Western Balkan countries face the risk of a social-economic implosion and authoritarian consolidation. The Western Balkan countries need more assistance and attention from the EU than the Central European candidates that acceded to the EU in and since 2004. A set of concrete measures were suggested in the paper in order to revitalise the enlargement process.

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