

Future Perspectives of the EU Enlargement towards the Western Balkans

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Europe has always been a land of visions and opportunities, a true cradle of knowledge and prosperity which allows everyone equality and wellbeing. That is how it is functioning immaculately and with no impediment. All of us, as a part of this continent, are continuously striving to make it even better than it was. We continuously pave the path for the future generations to make it even more successful and prosperous. This is where the European integration comes into play, because it shows to be the most efficient way to unite all the countries into one. Truly, 'United in diversity', just as the motto says.

All of us which belong to the European continent are united in diversity, and as such, endeavour to connect through all of our cultural backgrounds and political and democratic aspirations. Also, through that, we can achieve a stronghold which will be the outbreak from our own visions and wishes. It is indisputably important for all of us to reach the next level. And we will do that only by uniting whole of Europe.

It is more than vital to remember that the region of the Western Balkans is more than important when it comes to integrating the whole community into one big family, into one entirety. That is how all of these visions will come into reality, all of these wishes will be fulfilled accordingly, and for the benefit of each citizen. We as human beings should be interconnected through our mutual understanding of the area, and should strive to make it a better land for all of us.

Ten years ago a promise was made to the Balkans for its European integration. This promise has served as an incentive for a remarkable transformation across the region. And as such, this transformation has brought about many

changes that can be seen as beneficial. The Balkan countries are reaching a level that is secured with stability and understanding. This also refers to the neighbourly relations among the countries.

The issue itself presents a new platform which will help us identify many points that are beneficial for each Balkan country. Accordingly, it is important to note that EU integration is on the highest point on each country's agenda. Through it, we shall achieve a new level of interconnectivity among the Western Balkans.

The regional cooperation is a principle of the highest importance for political stability, security and economic development of the whole western Balkan area: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia (which is now a successful member state), Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

Moreover, regional cooperation corresponds to a commitment made by the countries of the region at the EU - Western Balkans Summits of Zagreb (in 2000) and Thessaloniki (in 2003) as well as with the Stabilisation and Association Agreements. Many of the challenges facing the Western Balkan countries are not only common but also have a cross-border dimension, which involves their regional neighbours as well. The European Union granted all countries of the Western Balkans a clear perspective of EU membership, subject to fulfilment of the necessary conditions, in particular the Copenhagen criteria and the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

The Stabilisation and Association Process, which consists of Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA), EU financial assistance and autonomous trade measures, represents a long-term commitment. Political efforts, as well as financial and human resources must be invested in the process. The central part of the process is the conclusion of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It entails the establishment of a contractual relationship between the EU and a Western Balkans country, with mutual rights and obligations. The agreement has high political value and will lead to the establishment of a free trade area and to reforms for harmonising national standards with those of the EU. A signature on the agreement also means that a country has chosen to become a member of the EU.

Croatia is already an EU Member State, Montenegro is pursuing accession negotiations, Macedonia is a step from starting accession negotiations, and the agreement reached by Serbia and Kosovo enabled both of them to enter the next stages of EU integration processes.

The Western Balkan countries are fully committed regarding the EU integration process and following its agenda. After the ratification of the Accession Treaty by all Member States, the European Union welcomed Croatia as the 28th

Member State on 1 July 2013. Croatia is the first country to complete the Stabilisation and Association Process. Its accession is an example of the transformative power and stabilising effect of the enlargement process and the EU's soft power. As regard the rest of the Western Balkan countries: The decision of granting candidate status for Albania is expected this June 2014. The screening process for Montenegro was completed last June, and by now already 7 chapters has been opened for negotiation which gives clear perspective of the country's path towards the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina takes part in the **Stabilization and Association Process**, and the relative bilateral SAA agreement has been signed in 2008, and ratified in 2010. After completing of the SAA ratification process in September 2013, at the beginning of 2014, Serbia marked the formal start of Serbia's negotiations to join the EU.

Last October the negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Kosovo were formally launched with the goal of signing the Agreement by the summer 2014 which represents a significant new phase in the EU-Kosovo relations.

The region has advanced its European integration and contributes to addressing the new challenges of global security. The path of the Balkans must lead to a complete European integration and nowhere else, since there is no other credible and sustainable alternative.

It is more than acknowledged that enlargement comes with a price tag - a more political than a financial one. However, the marginal benefits, in terms of political stability, improved human rights, rule of law and improved socio-economic situation, largely surpass marginal costs. Every euro invested in the enlargement today is a euro well invested. This is something that should be learned from all of the candidate states, because although the road ahead is extremely difficult, it is worth treading upon. Only by doing that, a full satisfaction and happiness for each country and its citizens can be reached. And only through that, prosperity will follow.

It is also acknowledged that the support for further enlargement is diminishing. Public opinion in EU Member States is preoccupied with economic uncertainties and rising unemployment. Enlargement with Western Balkans countries may not bring instant cure to these problems. However, it will be a continuation of the most successful peace project in history. 2012 Nobel Peace Prize granted to the European Union is not only a reminder of this achievement but also a strong encouragement for the Union to continue along this path. It shows a new dimension of success which is more than visible; it is a daily routine that is enjoyed by many people. That is how united we can all contribute for the European Union we know and care, and will take it out of its problems. We can help.

Putting enlargement on hold now and pursuing a 'wait and see' approach for the Balkans would be wrong. That is why it should be acted upon really fast, and with an optimistic approach that will lead the way. Only by doing this, the citizens of the Western Balkans might clearly see the wellbeing brought by the EU and the accession processes.

Enlargement fatigue can easily be spilled over into 'reform fatigue'. Despite the current challenges, the fact is that EU remains central partner and driving force for the modernization and economic development of our countries.

The upcoming accession of the Balkan countries into the EU is of historical significance. It is a clear evidence of the EU enlargement policy success and for revitalizing the process of EU integration of the countries in the region, on the basis of the agreed principals and clearly defined conditions. The Balkan membership in the EU will provide important contribution for further promotion of the regional stability and prosperity. There is too much history into the area which connects all countries. The sole existence of a musical tune can connect all countries of the area in a circle of friendship and understanding. That will be only strengthened by the successful accession of each country. We are becoming united through our cultures and diversities and living in a zone which allows free movement. That is how a future can be built.

The opening of the accession negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia would also be a crucial element in completing the 'Balkans' European puzzle'. Republic of Macedonia is fully prepared, more than any other candidate country, to enter the decisive stage of the journey to EU membership. Macedonia received the fifth assessment of the Commission that accession negotiations should be started without any further delay.

That doesn't mean Republic of Macedonia is perfect - undoubtedly challenges still lay ahead on the path to the European Union - further enhancing effectiveness of judiciary and public administration, raising economic growth and employment, fight against organized crime and corruption and rule of law. Starting accession negotiations can only facilitate addressing these challenges and help the Republic of Macedonia to advance in the fulfilment of all necessary criteria.

There is a solid progress made and many positive win-win arguments for a Council decision in June. From acceleration of internal reforms, to positive impact on the regional stability and socio-economic development, over to favourable influence on the process for overcoming the name difference with Greece. There are many success stories behind that just give us inspiration and strength to make it all happen.

As a landlocked country with an open market economy, the Republic of Macedonia has an essential interest to have good relations with all its neighbours.

Its economic development depends on the quality of our links and networks. Macedonia's multi-ethnic society is reflected in the cultural links with its neighbours. This is how the region is more than important.

The Macedonian authorities attach great importance to their relations with neighbouring Greece. There is a wish to walk the road to EU membership in cooperation with and using the experiences of Greece. The macedonian side have initiated in good faith a series of specific activities aimed at both intensifying bilateral cooperation with Greece and strengthening mutual trust.

As regards the Greek-Macedonian difference over the name of the Republic of Macedonia, on many occasions the macedonian side reiterated the wish to see this difference resolved sooner rather than later, in accordance with democratic principles, international law and as set out in the framework provided by the UN resolutions on the matter, the Interim Accord and the Judgment of the International Court of Justice. Opening EU accession negotiations can only positively influence the efforts to resolve the name issue, not vice versa. Postponing the start of negotiations proved to be an unproductive approach. We base our views on past experiences, and we believe that being in the European Union will give us a sense of closeness and strengthened friendship, which will then allow for a more successful dialogue. That is how problems are solved.

Macedonia remains committed to building a common European future with all neighbours, based on European principles and by respecting mutual sensitivities. All open issues and differences can be resolved through dialogue pursued with mutual respect and confidence, by honouring European values, democratic principles and human rights.

Bilateral relations between the Republic of Macedonia and other Western Balkans countries are continuously at a high level. Incessant, constructive and friendly dialogues on a number of issues of mutual interest are established. They have a common interest in the maintenance and promotion of good neighbourly relations, in order to ensure security, stability and prosperity in the region. There are many ways to attain this kind of relations, but the most important ones are the neighbourly relations.

The Republic of Macedonia has no alternative but to follow the path towards EU membership. It is the path that has been paved for the last 20 years and the one that has the consensual support of all political subjects, as well as the unwavering support of all citizens. We are resolute to persist on this journey until we reach the final destination. The start of the EU accession negotiations with Macedonia cannot be postponed indefinitely. It is an undeniable fact showing that Macedonia's place is in the European Union.

During this period, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia proved to be committed to deliver concrete results and to meet not only the targets set in the these five priorities agreed within the High Level Accession Dialog, but also in all areas under the Copenhagen criteria, and especially the political criteria. The start of negotiations with Macedonia will have a positive influence on the reform momentum and will be cohesive when it comes to the Macedonian multiethnic society, which will then encourage reform efforts in the region, and will strengthen the credibility of the EU.

The relations between the EU and the Western Balkans countries are developing and the European Union has adopted a good approach to the region because it has brought progress as well as cooperation between the conflicted countries. This is especially evident in the bilateral and multilateral meetings organised by or with the support of the European Union where presidents, ministers or members of parliaments gather and take common decisions that are valuable for the whole region.

The bilateral disputes are one specific area where the integration of the Balkans into the EU can be endangered. Namely, several cases of vetoing the accession of a candidate country by a Member State have put into question the integrity of the EU enlargement and the Union as a whole. Croatia's accession was blocked by Slovenia due to a territorial dispute; Macedonia's accession is still blocked by Greece due to the 'name issue'; while Turkey has been blocked by Greece and Cyprus due to the dispute over the 'Cyprus issue'. The inability of the EU to put pressure on its members to lift the veto has created these blockades, and encourages other members to abuse the right of veto in the accession of new members.

Having the experience with a blockade in their own accession, some countries may use the veto in similar situations once they are inside the club. We can expect usage of the veto right in certain forthcoming accession: Croatia may block Serbia; Serbia may block Montenegro (or vice versa), Albania, Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina; Macedonia may block Albania or Kosovo; etc. This significantly increases the need for the EU to find a way to solve the bilateral disputes in order to protect the common interest. After all, protection of national interests has never been a goal of the European unification project.

In conclusion, we can see how all the countries from the Western Balkans show a devout ambition when it comes to the European integration. It is a mere fact that there will be a better functioning with all of these countries for Europe as a whole. All of us are a part of a big family which aims to create better internal and external changes which will bring about great wellbeing, prosperity and success. We, as citizens of the European continent, should never forget that.