

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots. Several dots are highlighted in red, indicating specific geographical locations: one in North America, one in Europe, one in the Middle East, one in East Africa, and one in East Asia.

## Are the EU and the Balkans drifting apart?

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February 2010

- Within the EU there is little consideration for and limited knowledge of the negative impact on South Eastern Europe of the EU integration perspective becoming less viable. On the other side, within South Eastern Europe there is little knowledge about the severity of the internal discourse in the EU.
- It is a clear case of communicating vessels – as soon as the perception that the enlargement perspective is becoming less viable takes hold in South Eastern Europe, the willingness to engage in crucial, but difficult reform processes fades away and so does the influence of the EU on developments in the region.
- It is in the self-interest of the EU to stabilise South Eastern Europe and the enlargement process should not be considered a charitable act of the Union. The discussion should not be about the cost of enlargement, but the costs of non-enlargement.
- The main bottleneck of enlargement is the limits of progress in the Western Balkans. But while the reduced pull-factor of the EU should not be neglected, this should not be used as an alibi for ignoring the failure of many South East European governments to engage in crucial reforms of their countries.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1.12.2009 was hailed as a milestone of the European Union, ending almost a decade of discussions and putting the Union on a firmer institutional basis. And also where the enlargement of the Union to South Eastern Europe is concerned significant decisions have been pushed through by the outgoing commission in its final months, which can bring a positive impetus to the process.

Nevertheless, we are increasingly seeing the discourse about enlargement within the EU and the expectations in South Eastern Europe going apart. Within the EU enlargement fatigue among both, the EU governments and the general population, was prevalent already before the current economic crisis, but is increasing today with a rising concern among the electorate in many EU member states resulting also in a general uneasiness about the European integration project as a whole. While on the other side, in South Eastern Europe, the impact of the financial and economic crisis is making a »light at the end of the tunnel« even more necessary to ensure that the reform process stays on track.

Both aspects are rarely linked: Within the EU there is little consideration for and limited knowledge of the negative impact on South Eastern Europe of the EU integration perspective becoming less viable. On the other side, within South Eastern Europe there is little knowledge about the severity of the internal discourse in the EU. Bringing the EU and South East European strands of the discourse together is of utmost importance, in particular considering the mismatch of expectations on the one side and obvious reluctance on the other. It is a clear case of communicating vessels – as soon as the perception that the enlargement perspective is becoming less viable takes hold in South Eastern Europe, the willingness to engage in crucial, but difficult reform processes fades away and so does the influence of the EU on developments in the region.

### EU internal debate

Even with the Lisbon Treaty in force, interpretation and implementation will take some time before there will be any real certainty about how the Union will look – and what kind of a Union the Western Balkan countries will join.

So where do we stand with enlargement? Does the so

called »renewed consensus on enlargement« of December 2006 still hold? Following the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands the EU agreed on the highest level to stick to enlargement process, while stressing conditionality and progress based on individual merits, but also on ability of EU to enlarge. While this »renewed consensus« was often criticised as not going far enough, it allowed the European Commission to continue with the process at a pace which has since depended more on the reform progress in South Eastern Europe than on EU decision-making. With the current state of progress the much talked about absorption capacity of the EU did not have to be tested so far and – apart from Croatia – will not be tested in the near future either.

The stress on conditionality has since changed the enlargement process significantly. Croatia being the first to experience this increased scrutiny: »no credit accepted, everything has to be paid in cash« i.e. laws have to be passed and implemented, before negotiations can continue on a certain chapter. Furthermore, benchmarking is applied as a condition for opening and closing of chapters. This has made the process much more transparent, but also provides for even more stages for blockages by individual EU member states or even simply procedural delays. But more importantly, this benchmarking system prevents a country from entering the EU before being ready for it. This needs to be publicised more to address the public concern about repeating the experience of Bulgaria and Romania joining the EU ahead of time.

On the other hand, it is in the self-interest of the EU to stabilise South Eastern Europe and the enlargement process should not be considered a charitable act of the Union. The discussion should not be about the cost of enlargement, but the costs of non-enlargement. The EU simply cannot afford to take a sabbatical from the enlargement process. The conflicts of the 1990s resulting in large numbers of refugees and the need to send military forces to the region have shown the impact of instability in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU. Since then, stability in South Eastern Europe has been a key EU interest, resulting in the founding of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe as well as the launching of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

The European perspective – the perspective to become an EU member state once the preconditions are fulfilled – has since been the instrument to achieve this. Withdrawing

this perspective – or even just pushing it off into a distant future without engaging the countries in the meantime – will lead to frustration of pro-EU forces in the region and has the potential to revive bilateral disputes, destabilise a potentially fragile region and affect the credibility of the EU as an international actor. A simple cost-benefit analysis would therefore lead to the result that a sabbatical from enlargement would quickly become more »expensive« than continuing on a path of enlargement, in particular considering the existing timelines. And even under the circumstances of the current financial crisis continuing enlargement is the path of lower risk. Keeping countries which are already largely linked to the EU out will not stop them from possibly collapsing and the impact will be on the EU as well. The enlargement process therefore is a powerful instrument to keep reform processes on track, also to the benefit of the EU.

The problem is that for the EU the enlargement process is only one of many burning issues needing to be addressed ranging from financial regulation, energy policy, and climate change to institutional questions, etc. These issues are also of crucial importance for the South East European countries and addressing them will hopefully strengthen the EU as a whole and would thus also be in the interest of any country joining the EU in the future.

But in comparison to the immediate aftermath of the conflicts which saw the launching of the Stability Pact and the Stabilisation and Association Process in 1999 and the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the political attention and accordingly the commitment have faded away. Since Thessaloniki 2003 disappointment on both sides has grown with mutual trust continuously decreasing. EU policies are not any more as effective in enticing reforms, which have subsequently lost momentum throughout the region. Roadmaps at times seem to be rather virtual than corresponding to the realities on the ground. Frequent calls for a Thessaloniki II Summit should therefore be viewed cautiously. Considering the current political climate, it is unrealistic to expect more than a lukewarm confirmation of the commitments of 2003.

The reasons for this can be found in the political process, but also in the public perception of South Eastern Europe within EU member states and the perception of these countries joining the EU. Convincing the broad public in EU member states of the necessity of upholding the enlargement perspective for South Eastern Europe is of

key importance here but runs up against well entrenched stereotypes. Furthermore, the impact of the financial and economic crisis has further reduced the acceptance of enlargement within many EU member states. It is all the more surprising then, that positive messages about enlargement, such as the report of the European Commission of January 2009 on the positive impact of the 2004 enlargement on the economic climate of the EU, are rarely publicised. But more often than not, the result is growing protectionism and nationalism in many EU member states and limited commitment to the European project as a whole, rather than aiming to convince the electorate of the self-interest of the EU to uphold the enlargement perspective.

### South East European developments

Serbia has shown in May 2008 that elections can be won on an EU ticket, resulting in a government, which is more prone to interact in a positive fashion with the EU than a more nationalistic government. While this has not necessarily resulted in a Serbian government, which is willing to simply follow the international lead on sensitive issues such as Kosovo, it can be safely assumed that interaction with a more nationalistic government would be far more difficult.

On the other hand, elections in Macedonia in 2008 following the decision of NATO not to accept Macedonia as a member jointly with Albania and Croatia, have seen an election campaign focused on national issues and have been won by the incumbent government based on a rather nationalistic ticket. The perception being that Macedonia has nothing to expect from the international side.

In such a context, EU and NATO lose their attraction quickly in the eyes of South East European politicians if they cannot be used as a positive factor in winning the next election. In regions where EU enlargement is not a perspective in the near or mid-term future, two »colour revolutions« have already been rolled back or at least got into trouble in Ukraine and Georgia. Should the enlargement perspective fade in South Eastern Europe – or at least become too distant – this might well be the development in South Eastern Europe also. The result would be that the EU would lose its leverage at a time when the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo are still not fully settled.

The stand-off between Slovenia and Croatia, which seems to have found a mutually agreed resolution for the time being, is only the first of a multitude of conflicts which will rock the enlargement process of the Western Balkans in the years to come. While it is important that the EU does not become a party in these disputes, it will have to define its role if it does not want to continue to lose credibility and leverage.

The EU has to ask itself, why conditionality is not working anymore the same way as it used to in the past rounds of enlargement as well as in the Western Balkans in most of the last 10 years. Today the incentives often seem to not be strong enough to get the governments to make difficult reform choices. Reforms run out of steam and lacking administrative capacities to address core issues related to reconciliation, multi-ethnicity, rule of law etc. result in stalling reform processes. The result is that the main bottleneck of enlargement is the limits of progress in the Western Balkans. But while the reduced pull-factor of the EU outlined above should not be neglected, this should not be used as an alibi for ignoring the failure of many South East European governments to engage in crucial reforms of their countries.

But why is conditionality losing its edge? Conflicting messages from EU and EU member states are not conducive for a climate where conditionality will work. If the EU is seen as raising the bar of enlargement, just to delay the enlargement process, the credibility of the EU will be jeopardised. The credibility of the EU is also damaged if individual member states use the process to promote national issues. And when requesting countries of the Western Balkans to resolve their bilateral disputes, one has to keep in mind that many of these do indeed involve EU member states as well. Focusing exclusively on EU solidarity can easily damage the standing of the EU internationally.

### How to fill the gap?

Montenegro has applied for membership and the bid has been forwarded by the European Council to the Commission for Scrutiny as most recently has Albania's request; Serbia has put in its application for EU membership in December 2009; Macedonia has received the green light to start negotiations from the commission, but is now being blocked from moving on by Greece, while in BiH the discussion about closing

down OHR is considered a first step to »normality« before EU membership can be discussed.


With this »avalanche« of requests, can the EU react in a »business as usual« fashion? Does the current situation not require a strengthened approach by the EU? Or does a »business as usual« approach actually have the better chances of success, as it keeps the process on the usual track instead of raising it to the political level where the willingness to take decisions on enlargement is limited at the moment?

Accession to the European Union is a lengthy process in the best of cases. Where the majority of countries of South Eastern Europe is concerned, this process will still take at least 5-10 years, with Croatia being the sole exception. On the one hand, this means that the EU still has some time to get ready for this next round of enlargement. On the other hand, the perspective has to remain real in order to keep up the reform momentum in the region and to strengthen the credibility and leverage of the EU. The governments of South Eastern Europe need something to show when the next round of elections comes up.

The best examples of this are the roadmaps for visa liberalisation. With the offer of free travel to the EU up for grabs, the necessary reforms were implemented in a relatively short time frame in several countries, Macedonia being in the lead with Serbia and Montenegro following, while Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina still have some work on their hands. This is a case where benchmarking and conditionality have worked extremely well.

While it is probably difficult to find many other areas that have as direct an impact on the everyday lives of the people as visa liberalisation, it is worthwhile trying to define other areas where this approach could work. Considering the fact that the goalpost of EU membership is rather distant for many, steps in between need to be offered, providing sufficient incentives with a view to four-year election cycles.

From the perspective of the EU it is important to ensure that it is differentiated between public fatigue with the EU and the European project in general – the low level of participation in the European Parliament elections in summer are a clear indication – and enlargement fatigue. If public perception disagrees continuously with



EU policies, this is a matter of serious concern. With respect to enlargement, it is necessary to address the concern that it is the cause of all the challenges posed by globalisation. The scepticism reflects a deeper malaise of the project of European integration as a whole. It is of course also a public relations issue, but public opinion is a two way process and governments and the political elite have a role to play in forming public opinion. The frequent instrumentalisation of the EU and »Brussels« as the scapegoat for difficult decisions damages the European project as a whole.

On a more general level, enlargement to the Western Balkans is not a debate about the borders of the EU and is not a real issue for the enlargement capacity or a major burden for EU. Two issues could pose a challenge: the public fear that the Western Balkans could join without effectively meeting the criteria, which is why upholding conditionality is of great importance to ensure public support within EU member states; and the institutional dimension: taking in 6-7 new member states with a seat in the European Council, a Commissioner in the European Commission and several members in the European Parliament, would significantly alter the balance of power within the EU (to the detriment of larger EU member states) as well as further hamper the decision-making capacities of the Union – even under a Lisbon regime. Furthermore, larger regional entities in EU member states, e.g. Bavaria or Lombardy, will be the losers at the EU level, because they do not have a representation at EU level, but much smaller countries such as Montenegro would. While there always was a misbalance, this will be further increased by taking in more and more small countries.

Anyone dealing with EU enlargement policy towards South Eastern Europe in the past decade will have heard the running joke about the EU pretending to want South Eastern Europe to join the Union and the South East Europeans pretending to reform in order to meet the criteria. This has changed. Today one hears more about the loss of trust in the process on both sides, which should be an issue of concern.



### About the Author

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