

The EU must speed-up its Western Balkans enlargement



The EU is dragging its feet over the Western Balkans, warns **Wolfgang Petritsch**, the EU's former Special Envoy to Kosovo. He urges the Union to draw on its experience with Bulgaria and Romania to accommodate the special needs of the Balkan states

When some politicians talk about the Balkan states joining the European Union, they seem preoccupied by the spectre of "over-enlargement". It is high time to take a look at the Western Balkans as a whole – and not solely at the problem of Kosovo's desire for independence. For a start, the EU needs to use the Commission's monitoring tools on this volatile region – such as the recent Progress Reports – together with various other studies to produce a document with a comprehensive regional approach focusing on the remaining steps leading each country towards membership.

The Western Balkans – a term used only since 1999 – consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

Taken together they have roughly 22m inhabitants – about the size of one of the most recent EU arrivals Romania. Economic developments there are promising, with almost all economies of the region posting high growth, increasing industrial production and expanding exports. Inward investment is steadily increasing as business seems to believe that remaining political and security challenges – the possible negative effects of post-status Kosovo and the Bosnia malaise – will be overcome sooner rather than later.

With these generally reassuring prospects for the Western Balkans, what then are the reasons for the Union's lingering "enlargement fatigue"?

Much work has already been done to re-establish and then improve regional contacts. The EU-led Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe has since 1999 successfully coordinated regional cross-border cooperation, for the first time since the breakdown of

Yugoslavia. Energy, transport infrastructure – roads, railways and waterways – and crime prevention are among the diverse sectors that benefited. The Stability Pact has now been successfully transferred to local ownership and has re-emerged as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, ready to build up regional and multilateral standards for its members.

The recently revived Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is meant to be the main regional engine for trade and business generally. Remarkably, it will be in line with the WTO rules and with the parties' obligations towards the EU.

The South-East European Cooperation Process is the first genuine policy forum of the wider Balkans region, where countries from the region, both EU members and candidates, participate. This is one of the relatively new regional organisations that undoubtedly contribute to preparatory work in the candidate and potential candidate countries of the Western Balkans. But they must not be seen as substitutes for the far more comprehensive accession process.

With these generally reassuring prospects for the Western Balkans, and considering the relatively small size of the region, what then are the reasons for the Union's lingering "enlargement fatigue"?

Accession is clearly impeded as long as the states in the region continue to experience fallout from Kosovo's status; and as long as nationalists – almost two decades after the implosion of Yugoslavia – continue to raise territorial questions; and as

COMMENTARY

By Marie-Janine Calic

And that means that we need a proper roadmap for the region

The uncertainties over the Kosovo status decision underline the fact that it is high time for the EU to reconsider a long-term strategy towards the region. Wolfgang Petritsch's proposal on a customised accession strategy for the countries of the western Balkans is timely and well-conceived: it would give countries a better sense of direction and would simultaneously mitigate regional fall-out from the Kosovo solution.

Enlargement of the EU from 15 to 27 states has been a spectacular success, pointing to the enormous transformational power of European integration. In this process of on-going unification, the western Balkans represent a major piece of unfinished business. Only Croatia and Macedonia hold the status of accession candidates, while potential candidates like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo do not have anything more than the vague promise of joining the European Union sometime in the future.

It is true that through the Stability Pact's creation in mid-1999 the EU has granted all the countries of the western Balkans a "European perspective". The Thessalonica summit of 2003 then reinforced the prospect of association with, and potential membership of, the Union. But

long as heirs to men like Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić still hope to settle ethnic scores by violent means.

Certainly, the pace at which individual candidate countries move closer to the Union continues to depend on the speed of their reforms, and the support for them. Europe, with the vital support of the United States, has taken great strides to stop the carnage of the 1990s and subsequently to

help rebuild the Balkan countries. But the European Union has so far failed to prepare in a comprehensive way the Western Balkans for accession, and to follow through on its own in line with the Thessaloniki promise of 2003. At their summit meeting in Greece's second largest city, EU leaders said that they would be ready to admit the states of Western Balkans when they came up to the Union's standards. This was not a matter of charity; the Balkans would bring value to the EU. But the EU's work with the

MATTERS OF OPINION

Corruption may yet torpedo Balkan candidates for EU membership

Corruption is so widespread in Balkan countries that the European Commission considers it to be a major obstacle to their EU membership. Measures to tackle corruption in these countries are, according to a Commission report last November, "not commensurate with the magnitude of the problem". Along with organised crime and ethnic tensions, corruption is impeding progress towards the accession of candidate and potential EU members (other than Croatia), said the Commission.

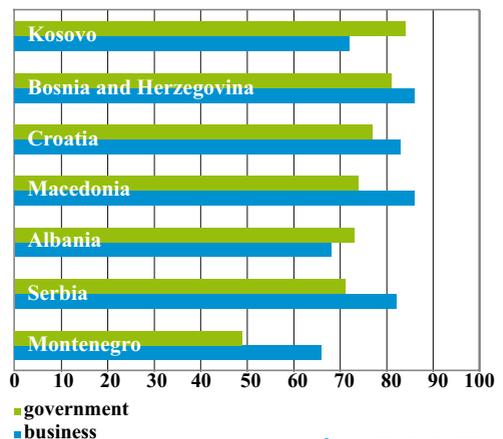
Citizens of Balkan states seem to agree that corruption is endemic in their country, according to 2006/2007 Gallup surveys in the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) are the countries where most people think corruption is widespread in business (both 86%); while most people in Kosovo say corruption is common in government (84%). Even in Montenegro, where the perception of corruption is least felt, it is still thought to be widespread in business (66%) and among government officials (49%).

Except for Montenegro, a majority of those questioned in each Balkan state surveyed – Albania, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, FYROM and Serbia – said that using gifts, payments or personal contacts to influence officials does more harm than good. Despite this, over seven out of 10 people who reported paying a bribe to an official or civil servant in the previous year said that promises made to them were honoured.

HOW WIDESPREAD IS CORRUPTION?

WHAT BALKANS CITIZENS BELIEVE



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Balkan states to prepare for accession has been piecemeal. And its lengthy internal crisis over the proposed constitution also damaged its reputation in the Balkans. Let us hope that the Reform Treaty, given its blessing by European Union leaders in Lisbon last December, will help to reassure the critics and pave the way for a new – and more robust – phase of Balkans integration.

If not, one would indeed have to ask what had happened to the European spirit of the 1970s and 80s, when countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community of democratic states. Political decisions taken then were far more risky than those at hand in the Balkans. During the Cold War period Western Europe had realised that it had to include those countries following the continent's historic decision to integrate. The Greek and Iberian success stories demonstrate the wisdom of the courageous decisions taken at that time.

What about today? The most recent EU-members, Bulgaria and Romania, both Balkan countries, are examples of countries with special needs. While Brussels, it seems to me, at first took the accession negotiations a bit too casually, it subsequently took a more responsible line and decided to continue monitoring the two countries even after their accession. It wants Bulgaria and Romania to develop the effective administrative and judicial systems that are an obligation of membership of the Union, as well as enjoying its benefits.

The EU could learn from this experience to develop an accession strategy for the

COMMENTARY

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now new foreign political priorities are on the EU's agenda, support for the western Balkans is decreasing. Enlargement "fatigue" risks becoming translated into policy paralysis, postponing further accessions to a distant future.

This ambiguity over the future of Balkan accessions comes at a critical moment as the EU now faces serious challenges in the region, notably the uncertainties surrounding Kosovo's future status, as well as the constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The region still suffers from such structural problems as weak institutions, a poor business environment, high unemployment and poverty. Against this background, the region sees conditionality more as an obstacle than an incentive to developing closer relations with the EU. Much-needed reforms now risk being delayed.

Enlargement fatigue is already endangering the efforts of the EU in Balkans stabilisation. It risks discouraging EU oriented transition, discrediting the reform-oriented political and business elites and further widening the gap between the Balkans' accession countries and the "left outs". What is now needed is an explicit political commitment by the EU that promises eventual full membership and excludes any form of "membership lite".

Western Balkan countries need both the political perspective of EU accession and concrete measures to aid the reform process. The vague and remote prospect of "potential candidature" simply won't yield the sort of institutional and economic improvements that are needed.

A more effective EU policy towards the region therefore has to be based on a much

countries of the Western Balkans, whose development has been delayed by a complex post-conflict transition process. Their special needs should be taken aboard in any new EU approach. This would inject new hope into countries seeking membership and at the same time mitigate the fallout from Kosovo. Progress-guided accession negotiations would help build the much needed national consensus in those divided societies.

It is in the interest of Europe as much as it is in the interest of this region to speed up the much delayed integration of the Western Balkans into a dynamic Union. Unless the EU acts quickly, the whole region might slide backwards again, affecting its delicate security and with dire social and economic consequences.

After the Lisbon agreement on streamlining the EU's institutional architecture, a reinvigorated accession process will undoubtedly contribute to the Union's consolidation, both territorially and politically. It will also strengthen the role of the Union in the wider neighbourhood of Europe, in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and around the Black Sea. □

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COMMENTARY

Marie-Janine Calic

more pro-active approach, including a pre-accession roadmap with concrete target dates, clear conditions and benchmarks to measure progress. A parallel effort to build trust within EU member states should also get more attention. This should be a shared task for both EU and western Balkan states. Countries in the region need to show their determination to implement of reforms and comply with EU conditionality, while the EU must make it crystal clear that such efforts will be rewarded in just the same way as previous accession rounds.

The western Balkans countries still have a long way to go before they can realistically expect to be full members, yet there is no reason that an intelligent combination of political incentives and re-focused assistance would not help break down this last division in Europe. □

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