



Centre for Southeast European Studies
Zentrum für Südosteuropastudien

European Fund for the Balkans

Policy Brief
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Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

**COMPLETING ENLARGEMENT: A
USER'S MANUAL TO THE BALKANS
FOR THE NEW EU COMMISSION AND
PARLIAMENT**

Completing Enlargement: A User's Manual to the Balkans for the New EU Commission and Parliament

In 2003, in Thessaloniki, the countries of the Balkans were offered a clear perspective for membership when EU heads of state and government declared their “unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”

Eleven years later, only Croatia has joined the EU. Accession talks are on-going with Serbia and Montenegro, but neither will be able to accede before the end of the decade. Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia have a formal integration perspective, but remain blocked on their respective paths for different reasons. For Macedonia and Kosovo, the difficulty in moving forward towards full membership is largely to blame on EU member states. Kosovo lacks universal recognition by all the EU states and thus its membership perspective remains remote. Macedonia remains blocked primarily due to one member state, namely Greece. In Bosnia, domestic political elites are unable or unwilling to fulfil EU conditions that could help the country advance its membership bid. Albania finds itself somewhere in between, potentially catching up with Montenegro and Serbia, but for now outside a formal accession process.

Thus it seems unlikely that most of the Balkan countries will be in the position to enter the EU only twenty years after Thessaloniki and thirty years since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The process of accession has continued in recent years due to the persistence of the European Commission, nevertheless, the current pace throws the Thessaloniki promise into doubt.

The slow pace of integration is not only a result of some countries in the region lagging behind with reforms, but also due to lukewarm commitment to accession in the EU member states. Increasingly, individual member states have raised the bar, often with the claim to increase standards, but with the effect that the countries of the region are locked out for long periods of time.

Turkey and Ukraine highlight the risks of uncertainty. While Ukraine never had the prospect of full mem-

bership as the Balkans have, in Turkey formal commitment to accession has been jeopardized by the open rejection of membership by some member states: With no clear prospect of EU accession, the benefits of closer ties to the EU can mobilize some citizens, while other turn to alternatives. Outside powers can use this uncertainty and lack of firm political and security integration to promote instability and conflict. Although the countries of the Balkans have firmer foothold in the EU than Ukraine has, they are not yet members and thus the risk persists that an outside actor, such as Russia, might seek to foster instability, if only to distract the EU. Similarly, stagnation can lead to the impression among citizens and elites in the Balkans that the EU membership is too remote to be realistic.

Turkey's case highlights the authoritarian temptation if EU accession becomes make-believe. If EU membership becomes improbable, the incentives for playing by democratic rules, respecting the rule of law and human rights decrease. Turkey is a vivid reminder of this risk where the same government moved from being an energetic reformer in the first years in power to displaying strong authoritarian features in recent times. While the stalling accession process cannot be the sole cause, it has certainly contributed to the authoritarian drift. Similar tendencies are already apparent in the Balkans, in particular where accession remains remote, for instance in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Meanwhile, in some countries of the region, authoritarian elites have at times used the accession process to justify the reversal of reforms in key areas such as rule of law.

As EU accession has slowed to a crawl, there is the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Warnings of enlargement sceptics that the countries are not “ready” and that additional conditions and a longer accession process are necessary, might encourage outsiders to gain a foothold in the region and local elites to resort to populist and authoritarian practices. This alliance of convenience between enlargement-sceptics in the EU and semi-authoritarian elites in the Balkans can ruin EU enlargement.

The breakdown of EU enlargement would not just be a serious threat to stability and reform in the Balkans, but also a considerable failure for the EU. Its largest success story of the past decades has been its ability to enlarge and bring property and stability to Europe. It would also seriously challenge the EU ambition as a global player.

In times of the Ukraine crisis and increased tensions with Russia, the EU needs to be aware that Russia's capacity for disruption in the Balkans remains strong. A new, active approach based on accelerating the EU accession processes and underlining the EU core values of open society in times of crisis can strengthen the EU's stance in the region and send Russia the message that the Balkans are off limits for new conflicts.

The newly elected EU institutions need to ensure that enlargement is completed and the EU does good on its Thessaloniki promise. In order to re-energize enlargement, the EU should consider the following policies:

Policy Recommendations

Commissioner for Enlargement. The Commission needs a high-profile Commissioner for Enlargement. She or he has to be the spokesperson for enlargement and also be involved together with the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy in mediating outstanding disputes. Together with Turkey, there are six Balkan countries waiting to join the EU, they merit a Commission focused on completing accession. In spite of the fact that even in the best case scenario no enlargement is likely to occur during the mandate of the new Commission, it will have the crucial responsibility to keep the momentum going.

Keeping the Caravan Moving. There is a risk that the Balkans might split into two, the countries on the train to membership, and the "Restern Balkans", the countries that have no prospect of joining soon (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia). If the laggards are not helped to stay on track, the gap will grow and positive dynamics in Montenegro and Serbia (as well as possibly Albania) will not encourage the others, but rather unfold negative, destabilizing dynamics, i.e. secessionist movements in the laggards.

Re-energizing the Enlargement Process. The 2004 enlargement process was successful because it included a large number of countries all competing

with each other to join the EU. The current gradualist process lacks this dynamic and countries are not in direct competition. Such dynamics could be created by starting accession talks with all the countries of the region. Short of opening accession negotiations with all the aspirant Balkan countries, tools could be developed to identify progress in different areas that would allow for such a competition to develop.

Ending Early Additional Conditionality. In addition to the conditions set out by the accession process itself, the Commission has added additional specific conditions for individual countries. While these have occasionally been successful, they carry high risks and should be abandoned. For example, in the past the police reform conditionality and more recently over the Sejdić-Finci case of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has resulted in a deadlock in Bosnia, where the EU integration process is delayed for years.

Resolving Outstanding International and Bilateral Problems through Mediation. The successful EU engagement in Kosovo and Serbia was an example of the EU not using conditionality, but rather the combination of a window of opportunity and incentives to resolve a bilateral dispute. The EU should build on this success to address other such political problems in the region that hinder the completion of EU enlargement. **Acting as fast as possible to find a creative and workable solution for the deep crisis in Bosnia and Macedonia should be a top priority for the EU.**

Removing Bilateral Disputes from the Accession Agenda. The Commission should lobby for member states to not pursue bilateral disputes with candidates during the accession talks. Such disputes should instead be resolved either through arbitration and mediation mechanisms or in the absence of effective tools at the EU level, by a number of EU member states with potential support by other third parties mediating these disputes.

Monitoring the State of Democracy. The EU needs to pay greater attention to the state of democracy. Serious backsliding of democracy and freedom of the media can be observed and needs to be vigorously pursued by the EU. Noting shortfalls reminds citizens of the core reason for joining the EU: stable and prosperous democracy governed by the rule of law. For example, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights could expand its scope of work to all the candidate and potential candidate countries.

Breathe Fresh Life Into Regional Cooperation. There is a need to revitalize the concept of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. While stronger support for the Regional Cooperation Council and its 2020 Southeast Europe Strategy has to be one way to go, the EU also needs to explore possibilities for elevating regional dialogue to a higher political level. Annual high level summits with heads of government and foreign ministers from the region, for example, could help addressing open disputes, problems and set a common policy agenda more efficiently.

About the Report

This Report was written by members of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and its contents were discussed at several meetings of the group in Graz (October 2013), Brussels (November 2013), Zagreb (January 2014) and Belgrade (February 2014). The primary contributors to this report are Florian Bieber, Marko Kmezić and for Scenario 1: Corina Stratulat; Scenario 2: Leon Malazogu; Scenario 3: Dimitar Bechev and Vedran Džihčić; Scenario 4: Dejan Jović.

About the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a co-operation project of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by young researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Florian Bieber, Arolda Elbasani, Dimitar Bechev, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Nermin Oruč, Leon Malazogu, Corina Stratulat, Milan Nič, Marija Risteska, Nenad Koprivica, Nebojša Lazarević and Vedran Džihčić.

About the European Fund for the Balkans

The European Fund for the Balkans is a multi-year joint initiative of European Foundations including the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the King Baudouin Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo and the ERSTE Foundation. It is designed to undertake and support initiatives aimed at bringing the Western Balkans closer to the European Union through grant-giving and operational programmes. The Fund's objectives are: to encourage broader and stronger commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkan countries and societies; to strengthen the efforts undertaken by a range of stakeholders in this process also with a view to developing effective policies and practices in the region and in the EU; and to support the process of member state building as envisaged by the International Commission on the Balkans, in particular by building constituencies in the societies of Southeast Europe who will be offered an opportunity to experience and learn about Europe.

Communicating with Citizens. A very elite centred approach of the EU in its communication with future member states has often empowered gatekeeper political leaders with limited genuine interest in accession. Communicating with citizens directly will be essential in ensuring that the performance of governments comes under greater public scrutiny. Such a new approach to public outreach and communication should also include grassroots social movements as they might become a crucial partner in EU reforms.

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About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, established with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Since its establishment, the centre also aimed to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and the public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists working at the Centre has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through numerous articles, monographs and other publications. In addition, the centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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