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**THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE:
COMPLETING THE BALKAN
ENLARGEMENT**

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1. Introduction

At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the European Council declared that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”.¹ This political commitment taken by EU heads of state and government—together with those of the Western Balkans—was a clear promise. It provided for a strong incentive for the societies of the Balkans by the EU and seemed to entail the promise that the future of the region will be stable, prosperous, and within the EU. More than a decade later, the promise is still unfulfilled. Of the seven countries of the Western Balkans, only one, Croatia, succeeded in joining.

Three years later, in 2006, the *International Commission on the Balkans* established under the initiative of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, King Baudouin Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, published its report under the title *The Balkans in Europe’s Future*. The Commission was established a decade after the Dayton Agreement, and almost five years after the fall of the Milošević regime in Belgrade, and observed that the Western Balkans had become a relatively stable region with no military conflicts, no on-going ethnic cleansing, and free, if not always fair, elections. The same report recalls the words of Timothy Garton Ash who in 1995 reflected on the events from Sarajevo in the summer of 1995 to propose that it should be “in Sarajevo in the summer of 2014 that Europe should demonstrate that a new European century has arrived.”² 2014 has arrived, there is little indication that a new European century is imminent, and the European future of the Balkans remains just that, a future, not the present.

Bearing this in mind, we deem it is proper time to analyse the progress the Western Balkans have achieved towards European integration by trying to answer two critical questions:

- How best to reinvigorate the EU integration process in the Western Balkans and ensure its completion?
- How to spur the consolidation of liberal democracies in the Western Balkans?

Political Transformation

At this point, the Western Balkans has experienced more than a decade without armed conflict. The violence of the previous decade has taken its toll however, not only in terms of death and displacement, but also by delaying the region’s ability to catch up with the democratization process, which began a decade earlier in the rest of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, whilst controversies over the past continue to haunt political debates. As a result, out of the countries termed the “Western Balkans”, only Croatia managed to join in 2013 and this some 13 years after the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process. The rest of the region remains still distant from accession for the foreseeable future and some countries remain blocked altogether. In addition to the challenges of political and economic transformation, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia remain weak states with dysfunctional institutions, notwithstanding the considerable diversity among them.

With Croatia joining the EU, the opening of the accession negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, and the Kosovo-Serbia agreement, 2013 appears to have been a good year for the EU in the Western Balkans. Although the dynamics of the EU integration appear to have introduced a new phase of political relations in the region, debates about the wars of the 1990s remain highly contested and ethno-nationalist rhetoric remains potent in parts of the region. Statehood continues to be contested and a number of bi-lateral and internal problems remain unresolved. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, most reforms in recent years and conditions for closer ties

1 Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit, PRES/03/163, 21 June 2003. Thessaloniki: European Council.

2 Timothy Garton Ash, *Bosnia in Europe’s Future*, New York Review of Books, 21 December 1995, quoted in *The Balkans in Europe’s Future*, Report of the International Commission on the Balkans, Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, 2005.

with the EU remain unfulfilled due to uncompromising political elites. The survival of the state is regularly challenged by the political elite of the Republika Srpska and ethno-nationalist parties are unable or unwilling to strike compromise on most policies. In Macedonia, the Greek veto over accession negotiations provides a cover for the current government to delay reforms. Macedonia managed to avoid a full-scale war and to reduce inter-ethnic tensions through the largely successful implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (at least at first), and has been a candidate since 2005. The country's Euro-Atlantic integration and democracy reforms have been stalled. As a result, the name dispute has contributed to the rise of a destabilizing strand of populist politics in the domestic arena. In addition, the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement has not transformed relations between Macedonians and Albanians and some reforms resemble a Potemkin village. In Kosovo, the Brussels agreement of April 2013 has formally resolved the separate Serb administration, in particular in the North, and paved the way for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. However, implementation has been difficult and many Serbs in Kosovo remain opposed to the compromise, while Serbia still formally insists on sovereignty over Kosovo. Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo remain at least partially internationally administered and the formal and informal powers of external actors restrain the countries' sovereignty.

Serbia, after the dissolution of the common state with Montenegro in 2006 and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, is today governed by the parties that ruled during the Milošević era. While the current government has been more effective in tackling negotiations with Kosovo, its willingness and ability to conduct domestic reforms remains less clear. The situation is similar in Montenegro. Having gained independence in 2006, Montenegro has nearly completed its state-building processes. However, the country's newly achieved independence did not result in the swift resolution of key challenges, which Montenegro still faces today, in particular weak governance and the widely perceived corruption and clientelism. Albania did not have to cope with a violent state dissolution, as was the case with the Yugoslav successor states, and did not have to undergo a phase of reconstruction and reconciliation. Consequently, Albanian society has faced fewer challenges to a democratic consolidation process, but has nonetheless experienced very slow democratic and economic transition and is still hampered by a high level of internal political polarization between the ruling elites, the dominant influence of informal centres of power, and high levels of corruption throughout all branches of government.

Socio-economic Transformation

Despite rapid growth in the 2000s, effective economic reform has often been delayed so that the economies of the Western Balkans are not fully capable of withstanding the competitive pressures of the EU market. Throughout much of the region, economies remain undeveloped, dependent on aid, loans and remittances, and are prone to high levels of state intervention coupled with low levels of institutional complementarity with other EU markets. For years, consumption in the Western Balkans has been higher than production and has been financed primarily by foreign investment. Unemployment runs at very high levels, especially among the youth, and has further increased in the wake of the global and European finance and economic crises. The private sector remains underdeveloped, while the majority of the working population of most countries is still employed in state owned enterprises or in the state administration. The structural changes that have taken place have primarily favoured the expansion of services rather than production. Considering the role of the institutional framework developed during the transition, the 2008 global financial and economic crisis has only deepened existing economic problems in the region by adding two further external shocks: reduced capital inflow from abroad and the collapse of export demand. While the entire Western Balkans experienced a rather modest overall decline in GDP during the crisis, in most countries industrial production and exports fell more steeply, while the unemployment rate particularly increased in Bosnia and Herzegovina (27.2 %) and Serbia (19.2 %).³ Consequently, the crisis has also had a wide social impact, resulting in increased poverty and lower living standards of the citizens of the Western Balkans. This has led to growing social discontent, reflected in recent protests across the region, in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. Additionally, the Eurozone crisis

3 See in Statistical Bulletin No 3, 2011. Zagreb: Centre for Public Employment Services of South East European Countries.

has deprived the countries of the region with its most potent role models (Greece, Italy) for economic growth and political stability. At the same time the economic and political instability in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria reduce the appeal of EU integration.

The Enlargement Crisis

Moreover, enlargement is also under threat from the EU itself: opinion polls display growing scepticism among citizens in EU member states towards further enlargement. In spring 2013 more EU citizens (53% to 37%) opposed enlargement than supported it. The highest levels of scepticism can be found in Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, France and Germany, where three quarters of citizens oppose enlargement.⁴ While much of this rejection is directed towards Turkey, it reflects the member states' internal political debate which is increasingly tainted by recent experiences of high levels of immigration (or at least the perception) from those states that joined the Union in the 2004 enlargement wave, as well as immigration by asylum seekers from the Western Balkans. Despite temporary restrictions on the influx of workers from Romania and Bulgaria, the enthusiasm for future enlargement depends upon the perceived likelihood of large-scale immigration to the EU from future member states. Furthermore, reports of corruption and maladministration from Southeast Europe taint the perception in many EU countries. An additional factor is the domestic consideration over the effective cultural and religious integration of candidate countries, should they accede to the Union.

After the Croatian accession to the EU, the enlargement perspectives for the rest of the Western Balkans are remote and there is a real risk that EU enlargement may be stalled. It took Croatia six years to conclude formal negotiations after it started them back in 2005, and it took almost another two years for the final accession phase before the full membership. Even Montenegro and Serbia which commenced their formal negotiations in 2012 and 2014, respectively, are not likely to join before 2020. Citizens of the Western Balkans, with the exception of Croatia will thus have to wait for more than 20 years since the launch of the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 1999, and 30 years since the end of Communism, to join the EU — in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, it is likely to be closer to 40 years. At the same time the EU continues to play a strategic game of conditionality stretching. This suggestion, of course, plays into the hands of domestic “gatekeeper elites” who are not interested in quick EU membership, such as the new economic elites, who are content with a quick profit-maximizing logic against EU rules enforcing more competition, or political predatory elites, both in power and opposition, who will avoid rule adoption and implementation if they fear negative consequences for their support in the next elections. In conclusion, the momentum generated immediately following the democratic changes in the region in 2000 has stalled and the current situation can be best described as the consolidation of unconsolidated democracies. The latest edition of the Freedom House *Nations in Transit* report presents a record of stagnation and backsliding in all key governance indicators across the countries of the region. While governments seemingly identify themselves with the EU and their countries' accession, a large number of *formal* and *informal* economic and political elites continue to manipulate ethno-nationalist mobilization for their own private economic interests and the preservation of political power. Despite the initial steps that have been made, the reconciliation after the violent conflicts of the 1990s is far from complete and conversely elite-level political decision-making in some cases is still driven along the old ethno-national lines and these are also reflected in widespread public attitudes. In addition to the continuing enlargement fatigue in many member states, EU institutions are currently preoccupied with the economic and financial crises and the very survival of the Eurozone. Many EU member states only seem to pay lip service to enlargement and make use of their veto powers to delay the accession process thus shifting the decision making power from Brussels and the European Commission towards the capitals of EU member states. Furthermore, a major change inside EU institutions that is expected after the 2014 European elections possibly bringing about a much more EU-sceptic European Parliament. At the same time some governments in the Western Balkans seem to be only half-heartedly committed to joining the EU. Bearing this in mind, one of the

4 Standard Eurobarometer, No. 79, Spring 2013, T84. 2013 Available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_anx_en.pdf (Accessed 19 February 2014).

bigger challenges in the region in the years to come will be to keep elites and citizens motivated to continue the reforms process. While EU accession continues on autopilot amidst the crisis, it is not clear that it will be able to integrate the countries of the region fast enough or even if it does, whether it will be able to have a transformative effect as previous enlargements have had.

In this policy paper we outline four European futures of the Western Balkans: the continuation of the current enlargement dynamics of gradual but slow progress; two scenarios wherein the EU loses the Western Balkans either in never-ending negotiations or the enlargement process is abandoned altogether and other powers compete with the EU in the Western Balkans and the Balkan Big Bang that prioritizes rapid enlargement. We do not assign probabilities to these scenarios, but all are possibilities.

2. Scenario A: Business as Usual

Confidence in the recipe of integrating and enlarging the EU underpinned the EU's unequivocal support offered to the European perspective to the Balkans at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003: the best way to dispel the prospect of conflict in the region and guarantee Europe's security was to transform the war-torn Balkan countries into EU member states. Yet, over the past decade, this solemn commitment of Thessaloniki was traded in – under the influence of factors both internal to the EU and specific to the region – for a laboured enlargement strategy that is endlessly challenged to reap successes. The status quo, or 'business as usual' scenario is based on an evolving EU policy towards the Western Balkans that has increasingly sought to manage and overcome the particularities of enlargement to the region, while reflecting the increased scepticism towards enlargement in many EU member states.

The Contextual Malaise

Within the EU, enlargement became a scapegoat for the failure of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, although opinion polls at the time showed that the French 'no' and Dutch 'nee' could not be simply explained by reference to the Union's 2004 'big bang' expansion. 'Digestion' problems caused by Bulgaria and Romania's entry in 2007, primarily because of their poor showing on justice and anti-corruption reforms, but also by the democratic back-peddling of other 'newcomers' (like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) also fed into the (old) member states' uneasiness about the potential consequences of further EU widening. And then Europe's on-going economic woes clearly did not help to raise the profile of the dossier; if anything, enlargement became widely exposed to the vagaries of an increasingly polarized party politics and public opinion in the crisis-preoccupied member states.

To be sure, within the Balkan region itself, the legacy of the past dashed any hopes of steadying EU's enlargement 'nerves'. The region's multiple and chronic ills, such as state weakness, high political polarization, ethnic tensions, and unsettled border disputes, caught the Union short of effective strategies and fostered the impression that the Balkan countries are "difficult cases". Faced with persistent domestic and bilateral hurdles in the region, politicians from EU member states stopped from actively promoting Balkan enlargement and began to show cold feet on the policy, albeit without foregoing the promise made in Thessaloniki to the region. The EU institutions themselves remained committed to enlargement, however, and became the main driver of the process.

The 'New Approach'

This combination of anxieties related to institutional, political and economic pressures inside the Union, as well as to daunting regional and country specific issues in the Balkans, led to a more complex mosaic of EU demands on the Balkan countries, and to a more exacting method of applying the enhanced membership conditionality.

The criteria formulated by the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen remain the blueprint for accession and require any aspiring country to have stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy and the capacity to adopt and implement the ever-larger body of EU law (the *acquis communautaire*). However, these conditions have acquired a very precise meaning for the Balkans.

For one, the EU's overall approach to the region is based on a strong security dimension, with its own repertoire of action, including various peace and political agreements (UN Resolution 1244 and the Dayton, Kumanovo, Ohrid, and Belgrade agreements, and the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations); the Stabilization and Association Process; and the multilateral Stability Pact for Southern Europe – replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. These set additional and politically-sensitive conditions – the 'Copenhagen Plus' criteria – to be fulfilled by the countries of the region before accession, when the EU has learned that its leverage was most

robust. Chief among those: the requirement of full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), refugee return, regional cooperation and reconciliation, the resolution of bilateral standoffs (such as between Greece and Macedonia over the name issue) or of statehood dilemmas (most notably for Serbia and Kosovo).

The second leg of the conditionality for the Balkans includes an increased focus on ‘good governance’ criteria – maintenance of the rule of law, independent judiciary, efficient public administration, the fight against corruption and organized crime, civil society development, and media freedom. In this novel approach, proposed in 2011 by the European Commission⁵ and endorsed by the Council, the Balkan countries are expected to get a head start on rule of law reforms, develop a solid track record of results and adopt inclusive processes (accommodating parliaments, civil society and other relevant stakeholders) in support of their national European integration effort.

Croatia was already held to such higher political standards but the new strategy was for the first time reflected in a formal manner in the framework adopted in June 2012 for negotiations with Montenegro, wherein Chapter 23 (on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (on Justice, Freedom and Security) are opened in the early stages of the talks and closed only at the very end of the process. The same approach was then fully integrated in the EU’s negotiations with Serbia, which started in January 2014, and will continue to be observed in all future accession talks with the remaining countries in the Balkans. Moreover, rule of law issues are now salient also in the pre-accession phases, as demonstrated, for example, by the priorities in past years in regard to allowing Montenegro and Albania to advance on their respective EU tracks or in the high level dialogues on accession that the EU initiated with Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶

Equally important, the Union has tightened its oversight and refined its ‘enforcement toolkit’, becoming more rigorous in the way it applies its improved conditionality. New mechanisms were introduced, for instance: opening, intermediary, equilibrium, and closing benchmarks; safeguard clauses to extend monitoring; more routing procedures to suspend negotiations; early screening processes and the strict requirement for the Balkan countries to demonstrate that they are able to implement the policies adopted. In addition, the European Commission has devised ingenious tactics to keep the reform process going in situations of domestic/bilateral impasses in the region, including, for example, the aforementioned High Level Accession Dialogue with Macedonia (FYROM) or the Structured Dialogue on Justice with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Last but not least, improvements to the tools and methods of EU enlargement to the Balkans have gone hand in hand with what Hillion called a “creeping nationalization” of the process, whereby member states favour a more hands-on approach than in previous rounds. Some countries, such as France, have announced a referendum on any further enlargement of the European Union. By including other actors (Parliaments, Constitutional Courts, media, etc.) in domestic decision-making on these issues, the candidate countries might find themselves in a difficult situation. Compared to the past, the frequency of instances in which member states block or delay decisions on enlargement in the Council appears to have increased, including in relation to early milestones on the EU path, (for instance, granting candidate status to a country). Such incursions are often motivated by domestic politics in the member states at a time of crisis, rather than by assessments of the situation in the region according to Brussels-based institutions. Together with existing bilateral issues between EU members and aspiring member states (for instance, Slovenia-Croatia; Greece/Bulgaria- Macedonia; Romania-Serbia), these are significant obstacles for the new aspirants.

5 Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2011-2011, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM(2011) 666 final, Brussels, 12 October 2011.

6 For example, in December 2011, the European Council indicated that Montenegro will receive the green light to open action talks with the EU if it produces results in the fight against corruption and organized crime. In a similar vein, in October 2011, the Commission recommended that Albania be granted candidate status if it adopts key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration, and if it revises its parliamentary rules of procedure.

Implications

So far, the EU's new approach has succeeded in bringing into the spotlight important political issues that are meant to assist the herculean effort of the Balkan countries moving from one state to many, reconstructing post-war institutions and societies, building and consolidating democracy, and becoming "good" future member states. The region has undoubtedly made progress over the years and this has indeed been helped by the prospect of European integration. Equally important, the Union's enlargement strategy has managed to keep the process rolling, even if only on a step-by-step basis rather than through grand initiatives. Given the very difficult economic and political climate both inside the Union and the region, this achievement is not insignificant.

However, the drawbacks to the current tactic are neither few nor minor. The development of an ever-larger universe of detailed and strict conditions, coupled with a more haphazard commitment of the member states to enlargement, have led to a frontloading of conditionality (giving it teeth already in the early, pre-accession phases of the process). In addition, it has boosted the priority status of certain countries (like Serbia), rather than of the region as a whole, and increased strategic attention to specific political issues (such as the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue), often at the expense of structural reforms and core EU conditions, including the Copenhagen criteria. In addition, political intervention of member states led to a tinkering with EU decisions according to country specific concerns. Furthermore, it weakened conditionality by allowing all sorts of considerations on behalf of national politicians in the member states, (from the freedom of movement of people and minorities to economic prospects, stability and security, or good governance practices), to influence the enlargement agenda in unpredictable ways and with uncertain outcomes.

This trend of retreating from agreed standards and procedures in the name of changeable priorities has reduced the speed and traction of the process, undermining its credibility in the region. The more the goal of EU accession resembles a moving and elusive target, the more likely it is to hinder the commitment of Balkan political leaders to Brussels-demanded reforms, as well as the support of the Balkan people for European integration. And this dynamic is only compounded by the fact that, against the backdrop of the crisis, the prospect of a bright future inside the Union is no longer taken at face value in the region but filtered through increasingly more realistic lenses.

Country-specific Consequences

At present, perhaps the most obvious test to the EU's transformative leverage is posed by the cases of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The former has been in limbo since receiving candidate status in 2005 due to the acrimonious name dispute with Greece and, as a result, has experienced a deterioration of inter-ethnic relations, a rise of nationalism and a marked relapse in democratic and media freedoms. For the past six years, the member states have ignored the Commission's recommendation to start accession negotiations with Skopje, and the tools deployed by the Union do not seem to have any bearing on the UN-mediated talks between Macedonia and Greece. This highlights the limits of the EU's strategy but also latent risks on the horizon, as the potential for bi-lateral issues within the Balkans, and between countries in the region and existing or future member states, to stall enlargement remains high. The "regatta approach" to the EU enlargement to the Balkans, whereby each country joins the EU at a different point in time, is especially conducive to such blockages as it allows, at least in principle, every new member state to obstruct the accession of its neighbour(s).

As regards Bosnia and Herzegovina, the efforts of the EU to stabilize the country and hand over responsibility for integration-related reforms to domestic political elites has failed: the country is at a complete standstill on its path towards the Union and in the midst of the deepest crisis of political and state institutions since the end of the war. Here again, the EU is at a loss and unable to move Bosnia forward with the "new approach". At the same time, the member states' political will to intervene in the country's domestic affairs is also fizzling out. This spells bad news across the board.

In Kosovo, similarly, the lack of recognition by five EU member states severely curtails its prospects for membership. While negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement are under way, Kosovo risks being

blocked, despite the recent agreements with Serbia. The fact that individual member states have blocked recognition of Kosovo for domestic reasons might make at least some reluctant to recognize Kosovo, even if relations with Serbia improve further.

There are also other aspects in which the EU's approach to the Balkan enlargement is fraught with challenges. These refer to its inability to deliver adequately on set objectives, such as regional cooperation and reconciliation in the Balkans, but also to its incapacity to assist the aspirant countries with problematic policy reform areas – for example, education or minorities – which are not covered by the *acquis* or the EU's scope of competences. All these issues are crucial to guarantee the sustainability of the region's transformation, and to demonstrate the added value of the European integration project to an increasingly cynical public in the Balkan countries.

Conclusion

The EU's "new approach" has been an effort to overcome the specific nature of enlargement in the Western Balkans. While some features have proven to be useful, such as the focus on rule of law and creative forms of keeping countries not yet in accession negotiations engaged, this approach has also brought additional problems. Instead of accelerating enlargement, it appears to have slowed it down further, and neither the EU member states nor large parts of the elites in the Western Balkans are enthusiastic supporters of enlargement. The enlargement remains incomplete and the EU remains preoccupied with "unfinished business" that holds off enlargement but has for the most part (except Serbia-Kosovo) not moved closer to a resolution in recent years. This will certainly not bode well for the EU's ambitions as a global actor (an issue recently brought to the fore by the Ukrainian crisis). Thus, EU enlargement to the Balkans is in dire need of a new lease of life.

3. Scenario B: Following Turkey's Path: Alienation from the EU

The Western Balkans or some of its countries could experience serious logjams preventing its accession to the EU, similar to Turkey's experience. This scenario only applies to countries fully engaged in the EU integration process and not distracted by other possible "clubs" or powers, which will be the subject of the next scenario. The countries most likely to be affected by such a scenario are Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and potentially Albania or Serbia.

As EU integration gets bogged down in endless accession talks and is put on the back burner, the status quo will increasingly resemble stagnation. Individual countries block each other's progress and eventually elites and citizens in some countries lose confidence and interest in EU membership. The lack of progress is likely to halt democratization leading to semi-authoritarian regimes that control the media, change the constitution, and checks-and-balances lose the battle vis-à-vis enhanced powers for the executive branch. This scenario draws on the experience of Turkey, where the formal accession process remains on track, with interruptions, but key EU member states signalled their opposition to Turkey joining the EU. Within Turkey itself, support for joining the EU in opinion polls and among the government has declined over the years, throwing Turkey's accession into question.

The EU as an Unreachable Goal

As the EU evolves, in response to the multiple economic crises and crises of confidence it experienced in recent years, accession countries will see it as a moving target, elusive and impossible to catch up with. Any club that evolves changes criteria for its membership, and it is not surprising that it is more challenging for new members to meet conditions to accede a growingly complex club. The citizens and elites of the Western Balkans, however, see this change of accession criteria as unfair, seen by some as specially designed to keep newcomers at bay. Considering that the EU itself faces profound challenges, the Western Balkans feel that the club they are about to join will undergo momentous changes, making their accession even more unpredictable and also less desirable. By the time the Western Balkan countries are at Europe's doorstep, the EU may look very different, perhaps a two-tier Europe with a fully or semi-detached Britain. Given the economic crisis and the Ukraine developments, EU's focus has already shifted primarily to its south and east, neglecting the Balkans.

The EU that the Western Balkans have aspired to is disappearing even faster. The European social model is gone as is its pension system. The decline of Europe's economic growth has reduced its appeal, especially for countries that saw the EU as a tool to effortless prosperity. The excessively high expectations that the Western Balkans placed on Brussels are eroding as the EU is no longer seen as a universal panacea. Some disillusionment is desirable in order to instigate accession countries to do their bit more vigorously.

Before the crisis, some countries in the Balkans might have seen Greece as a potential model for an EU member state, and it is only natural that European voters would only agree to accession if the Balkans would change their role-model to Estonia or Slovakia. Short of the strong will to pursue a different role model, there are fears that Europe may lose its appeal as the inevitable destination for some of the countries of the Western Balkans, which was previously taken for granted.

Given the crisis and the negative mood in the EU, the Balkans are no longer given the type of promises vocalized in Thessaloniki in 2003. There are growing fears that this status quo might transform itself into lasting stagnation for much longer than the Western Balkan countries were prepared for. The promise of membership, (in terms of inevitability of the destination), has been unambiguous for the Balkans, unlike that of Turkey. While the European destination of the Western Balkans is not contested, it is fraught with complications and the current slow speed of the process might decrease even further.

The scepticism of EU member states towards enlargement, not just towards Turkey, is likely to further undermine the plausibility of EU membership in the foreseeable future. If this gives further rise to authoritarian practices, as in Turkey and already some Western Balkan countries, this will only enhance scepticism among EU member states about the readiness of the countries for membership. Thus a vicious circle can lead to a “Turkey scenario” where all sides pretend that accession is continuing, but for all intents and purpose it has stopped.

Two-tier Balkans

If the Balkan Big Bang scenario, the fourth scenario to be discussed, is best reflected by the caravan approach to enlargement, and first scenarios of business-as-usual represent the regatta approach, the ‘Turkish’ scenario suggest a two-tier approach.

While one group of countries moves forward (2-4 countries), sticking to the gradual accession process, the prospects of the slower group are seriously threatened (3-5 countries), for several reasons. They either: (a) cannot resolve bilateral or internal disputes and get stuck or (b) resolving these disputes takes too long or (c) people lose faith in the EU integration or (d) public opinion in the EU loses appetite, and the EU carrot ceases to be sufficient for the political elite to swallow the bitter pill of compromise to address contested statehood issues, expressed through internal or bilateral disputes. Every small step towards the EU is widely portrayed as historic, but if too many “historic” breakthroughs fall short of improving people’s lives, citizens might lose trust in EU accession and support political elites less committed to accession. Furthermore, even if citizens remain supportive of EU membership, elites might abandon the goal, some explicitly, most silently through the back door.

Already today indices of democratization have showed stagnation in the region and as the countries fail to catch up with largely more consolidated liberal democracies elsewhere in Europe, and we witness the gradual consolidation of clientelist regimes. The conjecture of weak states, with unresolved internal or external problems that block EU progress and strong clientelist parties that draw on authoritarian and populist repertoires can pose a serious threat for a number of countries being held back and heading for a “Turkish scenario.”

All seven countries of the Western Balkans exhibit features belonging to all scenarios. All are making progress as usual, but each of them, perhaps except Montenegro, have serious obstacles to overcome, which may put them on a slower path or halt their integration altogether. Serbia has the most significant capacity of administration but its risk derives from its difficult relations with Kosovo. Serbia will face Kosovo as it negotiates many of the chapters with the EU and will most likely have to recognize Kosovo at the end of the process. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains mired in political deadlock, and Kosovo may soon face similar disputes. Macedonia’s return to nationalistic rhetoric will test the patience of its Albanian minority, who may increasingly rebel due to the country’s lack of progress. All of the countries can be blocked for various reasons by individual EU member states and if this blockages seems to be constituent and repeated, as the Greek blockage of Macedonia, this might increase the risk of a “Turkish scenario” as membership prospects remain remote. The countries most at risk to fall into this category are Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, all three already laggards in the accession process and blocked for different reasons from making rapid progress.

Of all the countries, Montenegro has the best chances of avoiding this scenario. Nevertheless, even without significant obstacles, Montenegro faces a serious problem of the lack of administrative capacities for EU integration. Touted as one of the success stories in inter-ethnic relations, there is a growing challenge of the ghettoization of ethnic communities in Montenegro. The lack of significant opposition and the rule by the same coterie of individuals for decades has consolidated an authoritarian class that is likely to constitute a challenge down the road in accession talks. Thus, even Montenegro might find itself moving from the first to the second scenario if dynamics in the EU change or the risks to Montenegro’s EU integration remain unresolved.

Implications

The gradual alienation from the EU will trigger a possible vicious circle wherein the elites’ behaviour further drives the countries and the EU apart. The most important consequence is the stalling of democratic reforms. While

countries can and do pursue democratic reforms without EU accession, the removal of the realistic prospect of EU accession eliminates a key incentive for elites that are only partly committed to democratic governance. In particular the dominance of the executive over the legislature and the judiciary is a likely consequence.

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of semi-democracies that lack the more authoritarian features of the regimes in Serbia and Croatia during the 1990s, but that severely restrain the freedom of speech and political competition. Together with strong clientelist control over the state, this could lead to a further consolidation of semi-democracies that procedurally might be democratic, but are illiberal in content.

Finally, closing in EU borders on some countries might compound the sense of isolation and will raise a number of logistical questions in the mid-term future over whether these new borders can become Schengen borders of the EU and how to manage relations with countries of the Western Balkans that are in the EU and share close ties. Unlike Turkey, which has been able to develop a successful economic development model over the past decades, the “Turkish scenario” does not provide for an economic alternative to EU accession. While this might be an incentive to not disengage from the EU, it is also a risk that if countries find themselves unable to continue with accession in earnest, they will suffer economic consequences as well, especially if their economic competitors in the region move towards membership.

Country-specific Consequences

As noted earlier, the risks of the “Turkish scenario” are greatest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo, but all countries can be affected. In these three countries, such a scenario can also seriously undermine the states themselves as they remain partly contested by sub-state actors and/or neighbours. As neighbours move towards EU membership more rapidly and are generally more successful, contested states might be further deprived of their legitimacy. The consequence would be the ability of political parties to mobilize around secessionist claims and use the delayed EU accession as evidence of the inability of the state to satisfy the group’s demands.

The country particularly at risk is Bosnia and Herzegovina, as EU integration remains the only widely shared political project in the country. Furthermore, the contested nature of the state and the open secessionist demands of Republika Srpska have meant that the state and all reforms can be easily blocked, and lacking elite commitment to EU membership (over respective ethno-nationalist goals). Stagnation has already characterized relations between the EU and Bosnia for the past 8 years.

Kosovo is most likely to be held back by the non-recognition of five EU member states, which makes accession implausible, at least until the countries decide to recognize Kosovo. While a comprehensive and final settlement of relations with Serbia—including Serbian recognition of Kosovo—might lead to a breakthrough, the largely domestic reasons for non-recognition have been rather receiving additional fuel with border change by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the referendum on independence in Scotland.

Conclusions

This scenario highlights the risk of the European integration process losing its momentum and credibility. Once the public and formal commitment to possible accession is questioned by member states and the process delayed either due to (seemingly) insurmountable domestic or bilateral disputes, EU accession might cease to be a realistic and attainable goal. Abandoning the EU membership goal in all but name has considerable consequence for democracy, interethnic relations and long-term economic investments. Although not all countries are equally likely to be drawn into such a scenario, it remains realistic, as long as individual member states use their power to block progress on issues not related to EU conditionality, and as serious stateness issues cannot be overcome. The irony here lies in the fact that the countries that might need the stabilizing effect of EU accession most are also the most probable candidates to fall into this scenario.

4. Scenario C: Abandoning Enlargement and New Unpredictability in the Western Balkans

Following the crisis in Ukraine, the attention of the Western world shifted to the countries in the Eastern neighbourhood, which means – further away from the Western Balkans. But the job in the Balkans is not yet finished. The Western Balkans too might be a collateral victim of the new geopolitical competition between the West and Russia. In Serbia, as well as in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), some have always seen Russia as an alternative to the Western liberal-democratic model. The perception of Russia strengthening and signals of concessions coming from the West might in fact produce a new wave of Euroscepticism. In a new strategic competition, the EU might lose some of its significance and alternatives might gain in attractiveness. At the European periphery, new actors are emerging. If the remaining countries of the Western Balkans remain for long – or even permanently – outside the EU, they will be tempted to turn towards them.

While in the 1990s it seemed that the EU had no alternative, recent development means that the US, Russia and Turkey are competitors in the struggle for influence and power in the countries on the outskirts of Europe.

Under this scenario, the EU is not able (or willing) to offer a clear prospect of accession and is losing its ability to provide any incentives to move towards the final goal of the membership. It leads to a *de facto* abandonment of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and the rise of political, economic and security alternatives. The EU integration in the Western Balkans loses support as citizens start realising that there is a life beyond enlargement. The economic crisis in the EU, in particular in the countries close to the Western Balkans (especially Greece and Slovenia) suggest that EU membership neither guarantees economic prosperity nor does it protect from painful reforms. Thus, EU membership already has lost one key incentive. If the economic crisis in the EU were to continue, EU membership would likely continue losing its attractiveness. Other outside actors, Russia, Turkey, the US, China, have started using this uncertainty to promote their own interests in the region, and also to distract the EU. All this may come as a result of the Eurozone crisis entering into another acute phase to unleash centrifugal tendencies within the EU itself. Member states might leave (or be forced to exit) the Eurozone, with Greece being the first candidate to leave. A banking crisis and weak response by the European Stability Mechanism and the nascent Banking Union could prompt the departure of Slovenia too. Turmoil in the EU triggers the imposition of capital controls and, sometime down the road, it might lead to the unravelling of the Schengen Agreement and return to national borders.

Abandoning Enlargement

Fragmentation and crisis in the EU would not only reduce its attraction in the Western Balkans, but it would also come hand in hand with increased introspection in both Brussels and member state capitals. Accession would be put on hold with no political support to promote countries in the accession process. Albania might thus not gain candidate status. Bosnia and Herzegovina would remain stuck in the habitual limbo, with the lack of progress in meeting EU-set benchmarks providing the perfect cover for neglect. This would further encourage Republika Srpska to strive for independence, leading to new and very dangerous internal conflicts. In such a scenario, the European Commission might stop recommending that member states start membership negotiations with Macedonia. Montenegro and Serbia would be frustrated as no new chapters would be opened. In the meantime Croatia might hijack the negotiations with both countries and link progress to concessions with regards to existing (or potential) bilateral issues, such as border demarcation and the status of Croat communities in Vojvodina and the Bay of Kotor. It draws behind-the-scenes support from a growing anti-enlargement lobby in the EU. In such a context, Belgrade and Podgorica might halt negotiations until

further notice. Kosovo might sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), but is told directly that it is not eligible to apply for a candidate status as long as the five non-recognizers veto such a move. The bleak enlargement picture in the Western Balkans brings about a new dose of unpredictability to the region.

The Search for Alternatives

Coupled with the economic turmoil within the EU, the enlargement's full blockage takes a heavy toll on the public support for membership in the Western Balkans. As Euroscepticism become more fashionable, commentators in the region talk about multi-polarity and Western decline. Governing elites speak at length about the opportunities to attract investment and political support from powers such as Russia, Turkey as well as China, the Gulf, Iran and even the booming economies of Southeast Asia. Anti-Western sentiments are further boosted by the rise of populist leaders within the "core EU" blaming economic difficulties on the influx of migrants from the Western Balkans.

In such a context, Russia might offer Serbia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina financial assistance in exchange for signing preferential trade agreements with the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union. While the prospect of full membership is floated, a strong Russia, with Putin leading its authoritarian way, becomes an increasingly attractive role model for the region. Russia might also use gas and oil to provide both incentives for closer ties and pressure on countries.

Such a hypothetical rise of Russia's profile in the Western Balkans would unleash anxieties in equal measure. Bosniak-dominated parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina might respond by seeking even closer ties with Turkey, including in areas such as defence, formally falling within the competences of the central state. Emboldened, Ankara might step up diplomatic presence in the region, including Kosovo and Albania. Macedonia might be torn or try, the best it can, to juggle between Russia and Turkey in an effort to extract more benefits from each of those two power centres. Commitment to EU membership remains on paper, but as governments embark on multi-polar foreign policies it is gradually hollowed out. The juggling for influence and power by different, competing outside powers might also lead to increased tensions in the region as countries pick new allies.

Implications

The precipitous weakening of the EU anchor wipes out the positive effects of democracy and rule-of-law conditionality. Parts of the political elites are only too happy to break out from the straitjacket imposed by Brussels and use competition between rival foreign powers to entrench their authority by balancing, not unlike Tito's during the Cold War. State and economic capture risk becoming pervasive, and ideological divisions are blurred as politics is colonized by parties representing business interests and oligarchic networks. Democracy is reduced to recurrent elections sanctioning the turnover in power, (and potential shifts between external patrons), though the quality of the process deteriorates. In some countries, faces change constantly but not the policies or the tycoons pulling the strings from behind. In most cases, however, the outcome is the rise to prominence of strongmen with an authoritarian bent who, in addition, draw on populism to secure backing as reflected by their performance at elections.

Thus, the executive branch subdues the judiciary across the region. Populist parties emerge on a regular basis with promises to empower "the people" against the omnipotent elites only to undermine trust in representative institutions. As a result, national parliaments would have a subordinate role in political decision. Such populism might be easily blended with nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

With the rise of such political systems, media freedom would also decline further and governments gain more influence over shaping the content and message aired by TV stations and circulated in the printed media. Critical journalism migrates to the internet, despite recurrent efforts by the authorities to establish or strengthen control over social media and limit dissent. Yet the web-based media reach only a segment of the population that still subscribes to the pro-European, pro-Western consensus of days gone by. Its electoral strength however is limited and

fails to empower a political alternative capable of mounting a credible challenge to the depressing status quo. Exit, emigration to Western Europe and beyond, trumps voice, that is, political engagement, as the dominant response.

The economic repercussion would be equally dire, as the region would likely be exposed to the enduring economic recession in the EU, which would also see GDPs in the region either shrink or grow negligibly. Unemployment would remain high, while remittances from Western Europe would decline, with limited FDI, except for a few high profile investments or privatizations to the benefit of new external powers. In such an environment, governments would be forced to embark on belt-tightening measures to reduce budgetary deficits and curb debt. Such policies would only drive living standards further down and feeds into growing social discontent with periodic outbursts. The lack of growth and development underscores the overwhelming importance of the public sector, where the pay is on average better than in the struggling private businesses. Political actors use power to distribute jobs in the state administration as rewards for their clientele. Partisans of the opposition are typically excluded. To maintain this equilibrium and keep the wheels of the clientelist machine well oiled, the governments need steady flow of funds, which is an incentive to solicit support from outside patrons such as Russia, Turkey, China, The Gulf etc. Balkan governments reciprocate by occasionally aligning foreign policy with external sponsors, granting lucrative deals for businesses backed by the states in question, co-opting their leadership in all manner of joint ventures coming along with a hefty corruption dividend. The bleak economic situation deepens societal inequalities. The majority of the citizens would live in poverty, disappointment and frustration.

Country-specific consequences

This scenario is not equally probable in all countries of the region. While all might find external actors potentially willing to become more economically and politically engaged, the destructive nature of the engagement would vary. However, as noted above, if one external actor, such as Russia, would forcefully emerge in the region, others might be encouraged or sought. With closer ties to Russia than the rest of the region, Serbia and the Republika Srpska are the most likely to fall under this scenario.

Renewed competition by powers over the Balkans strains interethnic relations in the region. Actors such as Russia and Turkey employ a foreign policy rhetoric laden with references to culture, religion and history that polarize societies and countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina suffers the most with Republika Srpska's push for secession, which stirs trouble with the Croats in the Federation demanding an upgrade of their status as within the common state. A future Croatia might fall back on the attitudes of the Tadjman era, and instead of reining in its kinsfolk across the border push hard for constitutional change leading directly into a new fragmentation of Bosnia. Similarly, Serbia might shift towards a more destructive role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, openly supporting the demands of Republika Srpska.

Kosovo would also not be spared from the turbulence. With the slowdown or virtual freezing of Serbia's accession negotiations, the incentives for Serbia to keep the agreement with Kosovo would decline. Russia, for its part, would sense an opportunity to exercise its power of a spoiler and score a major point against the EU and the US. In such a context, the North of Kosovo might seek to formally join Serbia, following the Crimean model.

Although Macedonia lacks a clear external patron, it would be affected by such a regional dynamic. In particular, as EU integration becomes more remote, the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement might be effectively abandoned and polarization between Macedonians and Albanians would increase. Furthermore, additional new tensions might emerge across the region in places such as Sandžak, where competing ethno-nationalist parties, supported by external powers might clash.

Conclusions

This scenario extends the risks of the previous scenario with enlargement grinding to a standstill. With alternative actors becoming engaged in the Western Balkans, the incentive for close ties with the EU, even if

enlargement itself remains far off, decreases. These external actors bring with them different incentives that focus less on democratic and economic reform and might in fact explicitly seek to reverse them.

While Russia's ability to create instability in the Western Balkans remains incomparable to Ukraine or other former Soviet states, it is well regarded in parts of region and maintains good relations, especially with Serbia, and the Republika Srpska. Creating trouble for the EU in the Western Balkans might be attractive for Russia, even if it is unable to offer a coherent alternative form of economic or political integration. Although such a dire scenario remains less likely than others sketched out in this policy paper, the risks are real, even if not equally for all countries of the region. The key triggers of such a scenario lie outside the region, in the ability of the EU to reform itself and overcome the economic and political crisis, the trajectory of the conflict in the Ukraine and the ability of Russia to gain in clout over its confrontation with the West, as well as the credibility of Turkey to project its political and economic influence beyond its borders. Despite these external triggers, many of the consequences for the region of such a scenario are home-grown.

5. Scenario D: The Balkans Big Bang

Next year will mark the 25th anniversary of the break-up of former Yugoslavia. So far, only two of its former constituent units have managed to achieve EU membership: Slovenia and Croatia. The slow pace of EU integration in the Western Balkans cannot be attributed only to enlargement fatigue in the EU and pre-occupation with the challenges of the economic crises and the very survival of the Eurozone, but also to the multiple political and economic transformations the countries of the region continue to undergo. With the experience of early rounds of enlargement and increased integration, the scope of the conditions has expanded, as has the volume of the *acquis*. This presents a paradox. The countries not yet in the EU have had a more difficult transformation due to the wars of the 1990s, semi-authoritarian regimes and at times contested statehood. At the same time, these countries have to overcome higher hurdles in joining the EU than countries from earlier enlargements.

According to the big bang scenario, the EU would accelerate the integration process, rather than slow down its pace like in the earlier scenarios. All countries of the region would be offered accession talks and they would negotiate simultaneously for membership similar to the countries of the 2004 enlargement. For this to be achieved, the EU would need to invest considerable resources to resolve crucial obstacles, such as Greek-Macedonian dispute and the non-recognition of Kosovo by five EU members. In addition, the EU would not set any additional conditions (or abandon existing ones) that countries need to meet in order to begin accession talks.

The candidate countries should at the same time coordinate their efforts and actions in order to remove obstacles in their bilateral relations. So far, the EU insisted only on resolution of bilateral disputes between member states and candidate countries, sometimes successfully and in other cases not. Little effort has been put in place to resolve outstanding issues between candidate countries. Coordination between all countries in the region is needed in order to avoid further attempts of blocking each other.

Once all countries negotiate, a competitive dynamic will unfold in which no country wants to be left behind. This will encourage faster reforms among laggards to avoid falling behind. While the EU would seek to integrate all countries simultaneously, it will make it clear that if some countries lag behind, they might join in a second round (as was the case in 2004/7). By abandoning additional conditionality, the EU would focus rather on the implementation of *acquis* and provide extensive assistance on how complex states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina can implement EU legislation effectively, rather than on resolving additional issues not directly related to the *acquis*.

The question remains, why would the EU be interested in pursuing this scenario as on numerous occasions various EU officials claimed that there will be no “shortcuts” towards the membership. The on-going crisis in Ukraine, partially caused by the countries approximation to the EU, should come as a sobering reminder that the old geo-political paradigms no longer hold, and consequently business in the Balkans is still far from finished. Namely, leaving the Western Balkans outside of the EU more than another decade would effectively mean keeping another potential crisis area with far greater spill-over eventuality within the EU frontiers.

Furthermore, the relatively small size of the Western Balkans in terms of population facilitates its integration and reduces the risk that a permanent (Schengen) border between the region or some countries and the rest of the EU might be the source of unwanted problems. Integration is also potentially a more effective and efficient tool to resolve conflicts and provide security to the region than the remaining international presence in parts of the region and the risks of renewed tensions.

This scenario is only plausible if member states are willing to give up their reluctance towards enlargement. Such a shift is unlikely without a change in EU public opinion and a change in the general perception of the EU. While the end of the economic crisis will not automatically end enlargement fatigue in the EU, it seems improbable without a change in the economic outlook and in the EU’s ability to reform itself.

Implications

The relationship between the EU and candidate countries is one of obvious asymmetry. On one side the EU has the benefits of trade, aid and finally accession to offer, while by contrast, given their tiny economic size, candidate countries have little to offer to the EU. Also, the candidate countries, or at least (some of) their political elites, show a strong desire to join the EU, which decreases their bargaining power. In sum, this allows the EU to set the rules that through the process of Europeanization shape the public policy making in the candidate countries. The prevalence of this asymmetric relationship can best be observed from the fact that during the accession process candidates may even accept an outcome that is blatantly contrary to their interests. By accelerating the accession of the remaining Western Balkans candidate countries the EU would be more successful in resolving the outstanding security and stateness issues. This inevitably presumes more extensive EU engagement in resolving obstacles to EU membership as well as "living with" other aspects that make the countries more like "conventional member states".

The accession process generates unique, broad-based and long-term support for the democratic transformation in the candidate states. However, only the credible promise of full EU membership is an effective mechanism in persuading national governments to adopt rules and establish institutions they would otherwise resist. On the other hand, where the credibility of the EU promise is either weak or distant – as could be observed in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina – or where the process is blocked by a third party – like in Macedonia – the achievement of formal compliance with the EU rules has proven to be less complete. Accelerating the accession process would increase the leverage of the EU over the democratization of the remaining candidate countries from the Western Balkans, thus avoiding fake compliance with proposed reforms. In this regard, it would be desirable that the EU's new approach to the Western Balkans – consider country specific post-accession monitoring systems that ensure the continuation of reforms after full accession, rather than shift structural reform requirements and conditions to the pre-negotiations conditions.

Within the existing negotiating framework, domestic "gatekeeper elites" can delay accession. These groups, such as economic elites, are not interested in quick EU membership, but are content with quick profit-maximizing without having to follow EU rules. Similarly, political elites, both ruling and in opposition, will avoid rule adoption and implementation if they fear negative consequences for their support in the next elections. The *acquis* on the other hand is a strategic instrument that remains exclusively in the hands of the EU institutions, and this allows "strategic content adjustment" with regard to the scope, determinacy, and flexibility of the *acquis*. This results in the perception in candidate countries that the EU practices a strategic game of conditionality, stretching or "moving the goal posts", as Kochenov has argued. By employing the Balkan Big Bang scenario, elites will be less able to play to the domestic audience the claim that they are willing to join the EU while not genuinely pursuing this policy as the progress will be on the one hand more visible and on the other more comparable with the reforms in neighbouring countries. Finally, such a scenario would lead towards a regional competition in reforming and not wanting to be left behind on the negative side, similarly as the Western Balkans countries have experienced with the reforms related to the visa liberalization policy.

The Big Bang scenario highlights a fundamental dilemma of EU enlargement: If conditions are too difficult, imposed at an early stage, and perceived as unfair, the credibility and transformative capacity of the EU is limited. If on the other hand, conditions are lowered and the process is sped up too much, domestic reforms might be rushed through or remain purely on paper, missing out on the transformative capacity of the accession process. Thus, the implications of the Big Bang scenario will vary, depending on whether the EU will still uphold the reforms required through the implementation of the *acquis* and the monitoring of the real reforms, rather than just the legal one, or whether greater speed and momentum will also lead to ignoring key reforms.

Country-specific consequences

Pursuing the "business as usual" accession scenario will in the near future lead to emergence of a two-tier Western Balkans, as the distant prospect of membership has proven to be incapable of mobilization the civil

sector politics proposed by the EU and local NGO activists for the past two decades in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. This democratic deficit keeps the gatekeeper elites in power in these countries, effectively blocking democratic reforms. The lack of commitment on the EU side, reflected in the achievable membership perspective for some countries of the Western Balkans, can thus be seen as part of the problem instead of the solution in the region. At this point we recall that the promise of EU integration actually holds the Western Balkans together, and alternatively, postponing the accession into the indefinite future undermines hard-won peace and stability in the region. Consequently, joining simultaneously will avoid new borders between countries of the region that risk aggravating tensions rather than resolving them. In addition, this approach would eliminate the risk/ability to block integration of neighbouring countries based on bilateral dispute issues once a member.

The impact of the Big Bang scenario will vary between the countries to the degree that the countries would be able to achieve membership even with the “business as usual” scenario. Montenegro and Serbia, as the two countries already in accession talks, are the least likely to benefit immediately and there might be concerns in both countries that a Big Bang approach might hold them back, especially if the EU would aim for the simultaneous accession of a number of countries. However, as noted earlier, neither one of the two countries is free from serious structural problems that might cause delays in the accession process down the road. As a result, frontrunners can become laggards.

The impact of the Big Bang will be most tangible for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, which are not only furthest away from EU membership (even if formally at different levels), and are confronted with the most complex membership challenges, both internal and external. The key question remains whether the Big Bang approach can generate sufficient momentum for these obstacles to be removed, i.e. for a minimum of compromise in Bosnia and Herzegovina to be reached to pass legislation and set up institutions for Bosnia to operate as a future member state.

Conclusions

The Balkan Big Bang reverts to some of the earlier waves of enlargement when several countries joined together a less complex EU (or EEC/EC), with a less complex set of conditions future members had to fulfil. Even the 2004 enlargement followed the “Big Bang” approach to Central Europe.

The remaining Western Balkans consists of only about 18.5 million people in six (or five, depending on whether one recognizes Kosovo as an independent state or not) countries, which in terms of population is less than Turkey, and even Ukraine, and it clearly does not pose a threat to the EU’s absorption capacity. The gains, on the other hand, would be significant: symbolically, inclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country that went through a violent conflict in the 1990s would show that the EU is capable of being a significant independent actor in the process of long-term stabilization. Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro are three multi-ethnic states in the remaining Western Balkans. With their inclusion, the EU would show its commitment to the principle of diversity. With Albania and Kosovo, the EU would accept the first predominantly Muslim countries, thus showing that it remained open for all Europeans irrespective of their faith.

It could also prevent certain risks, such as that of creating – in the middle of the Western Balkans – an invisible “wall” between countries that are members of the EU and those that are not. The outer borders of Europe would likely to become “tougher” – not only due to the Ukrainian-Russian crisis, but also because of migrations that are not popular within some member states. If this happens, the Western Balkans will remain divided by the EU and its border. This would *de facto* stop some positive processes of reconciliation that started in all former Yugoslav states in the 2000s. Instead, the return of nationalism and possibly also militarism and extremism is to be a likely consequence of the new divisive line in the middle of the Western Balkans. With some countries inevitably turning to other global and regional players, the situation in this region might in that case become only more complex than today – and with more risks for European security too.

The main risk this scenario highlights is that rapid accession to the EU might compromise the rigour of monitoring reforms and that the enthusiasm for pursuing reforms might decline after membership. Thus, the opportunities of this scenario have to be balanced with the risk that the transformative moment of EU accession will be missed if the “Big Bang” comes too soon. However, judging by the overall successful 2004 enlargement, speedy (but not hasty) enlargement is not incompatible with a genuine reform process.

6. Conclusions

More than a decade after the summit in Thessaloniki and nearly twenty years since the end of the Bosnian war, the promise of EU membership remains unfulfilled in the Western Balkans. Although the promise of membership still stands unchallenged for the countries of the region, the scenarios in this policy paper suggest that EU membership is not a “done deal.”

The longer the process is protracted, the greater the risks that elites and citizens in the Western Balkans consider the process either as hopeless or of little effect for their lives. A young Kosovar born in the immediate aftermath of NATO intervention 1999 will turn 15 this year, she will be over 25 by the time Kosovo’s membership in the EU is even conceivable. A Croat born the year of the first democratic elections in 1990 turned 23 when Croatia joined the EU.

The different scenarios highlight the opportunities and risks for the enlargement process. The *status quo* keeps moving ahead, but risks not resolving the hard cases of unfinished business and leaving some countries behind. These might become susceptible to the second and third scenario. Either open-ended negotiations with no membership in sight or the appeal or threat of a third party might put the relationship of some countries with the EU on ice. This in itself is not so much a problem as the close link between democratic reform and rule of law and EU accession. Turning away from the EU bears risks of abandoning reforms and is likely to bring benefits for just a few. A quick and comprehensive enlargement towards the Western Balkans might be against the appetite of the EU at the moment, but highlights both risks and opportunities. Risks include the danger of missing the opportunity for countries to reform themselves prior to accession, as the incentives decline afterwards. Opportunities lie in creating a new regional dynamic in joining, and reducing the instability a prolonged waiting period might entail.

What emerges from these scenarios is that the current approach is not enough. The risks are too great and the transformative potential of the EU too slow to fully mitigate the risks of keeping some countries of the Western Balkans out for another one or two decades.

Completing the enlargement promise made by the EU in Thessaloniki will mean drawing lessons from the scenarios and the experience of the past decade and changing the approach.

While the countries of the Western Balkans will have to adhere to the conditions set out in the Copenhagen Criteria, the EU should stop front-loading conditions prior to accession negotiations. Countries will need to fulfil these criteria prior to membership, not prior to talks. Additional political conditions need to be used sparingly and again required at the end of the accession process, not at its beginning. The sooner all remaining six countries of the Western Balkans begin negotiating with the EU, the better. Negotiations with multiple countries create healthy competition. Such a step would also reinvigorate the process and create new constituencies for reform and EU accession. Short of such a step, the countries can be offered symbolic and real participation in EU structures (such as non-voting MEPs or full inclusion into the Erasmus Plus programme).

In the region itself, the populist and authoritarian temptation has been the counterpart to enlargement at an arm’s length on the side of the EU. Without more vigorous political and economic and political reforms, EU accession will remain remote. Several countries have been backsliding in terms of democracy and freedom of the press. If the dynamic of stagnation is not interrupted by the EU, its member states and the countries of the Western Balkans, the danger will increase that the promise of Thessaloniki will remain unfulfilled.

7. 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 Džihic; Scenario 4: Dejan Jovic.

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 Jovic, Marko Kmezić, Nermin Oruc, Leon Malazogu, Corina Stratulat, Milan Nic, Marija Risteska, Nenad Koprivica, Nebojsa Lazarevic and Vedran Džihic.

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.

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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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