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STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS,
EASTERN EUROPE, CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Has An Impasse Been Reached?

Regional Co-operation and EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within the enlargement process, the European Union (EU) has long insisted on regional co-operation among post-communist candidate countries. In the 1990s, such co-operation materialised among the Visegrad Four and among the Baltic candidate countries. There are, however, significant differences between the Central European countries and the Baltic states and the Western Balkans region.

Unlike the group of countries from the big-bang enlargement, which enjoyed relatively smooth democratic transition and consolidation, the countries in the Western Balkans suffered in the 1990s due to the wars of succession of former Yugoslavia. Due to the ethnic conflicts, democratic transition and consolidation in the Western Balkans were delayed, and in some instances nationalist tendencies have not abated. As a result, the view from EU members is that the Balkans countries should resolve all outstanding issues before joining the Union.

Achieving regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations, however, is and will remain a key barrier to future enlargement of the EU to include Western Balkans countries. While for some of the countries this issue will be just a significant problem, for others it might become an insurmountable problem blocking EU integration. In both the Serbian and the Macedonian cases, regional co-operation has been conditioned in such a way that it amounts to a veto on further progress in the enlargement process of the two countries. When EU conditionality touches upon identity politics, the transformative power of the EU is very weak and ineffective.

Unlike in the case of Turkey, an impasse in the enlargement process for Serbia and Macedonia will have serious implications for regional stability. In addition, the EU runs the risk that its accession conditionality will undermine the credibility of the EU in the eyes of other governments in the region that have or might have problems when it comes to bilateral relations with their neighbours or regional co-operation.

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INTRODUCTION

Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that originally "Europa" is thought to have meant "Mainland"...as an appropriate designation of the broadening, extensive northerly lands that lay beyond, lands with characteristics but vaguely known... clearly different from those inherent in the concepts of Asia and Libya, both of which, relatively prosperous and civilised, were associated closely with the culture of the Greeks and their predecessors.

Today, among those lands that lie north of Greece are all of the countries of the so-called Western Balkans region. Labelled as "Europe" in the ancient past, all of these states have expressed a desire to join the modern notion of what is Europe, the European Union.

At the Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003, all of the EU's member states declared their "unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries" and also that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union" (EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki Declaration). The Thessaloniki declaration gave the concrete prospect of membership to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Yugoslavia (since succeeded by Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo).

With Croatia's accession to the EU forthcoming in 2013, there is little hope that any of the other Western Balkans countries will join in the near future. Although many reforms need to be completed before accession, one particular issue - regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations - is and will remain a key barrier for future enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans countries.

For some of the countries, this issue will certainly pose a significant problem, but for others - Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo - it might become an insurmountable problem blocking EU integration. There are fears in the Western Balkans that the reluctance of certain EU member states to continue the enlargement process is served well by the regional co-operation conditions imposed on the Western

Balkans countries. The impasse could have dangerous implications for regional stability.

EUROPEANISATION, CONDITIONALITY, AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

The EU is a major reform-driving factor for the countries of South-East Europe. It sets standards and a model for development that should be followed by countries in the region aspiring for EU membership. The attraction of future membership is seen as the main reason why countries actually accept to undertake dramatic domestic reform as required by the EU: "The greater the benefits of membership, the greater the potential political will in applicant countries to satisfy intrusive political and economic requirements" (Vachudova, 2005: 108). In the Western Balkans in general, the EU is perceived as a "referenced model for modernisation of the political, economic and social systems of the aspiring countries in transition" (Ioakimides in Demetropoulou, 2002: 89).

EU accession conditionality, that is, the credible perspective of becoming an EU member after thorough democratic reform, has been the most effective among the EU's foreign-policy instruments. In using political conditionality, the EU sets the adoption of democratic rules and practices as conditions that the target countries have to fulfil in order to receive rewards such as financial assistance, some kind of contractual association, or – ultimately – membership. Countries that fail to meet the criteria are simply denied assistance, association or membership. The EU conditionality approach is to regularly encourage the target governments that it is their own responsibility to introduce reforms that will be rewarded.

The political conditionality of the EU is often understood at its best when it is linked with the carrot of membership, when it is associated with a real and credible process of accession to the EU. The attractiveness of EU membership and the strict political conditionality attached to the accession process have been perceived as a highly effective means of influence. Conditionality is widely credited with "having

brought about an alignment of the ten post-communist countries' systems of governance, economies and legal structures with the West European member states and the EU's *acquis communautaire*" (Epstein and Sedelmeier, 2008:795).

In reality, the interaction between the EU and South-East Europe is a one-way, didactic, and patronising process. As Grabbe notes, there are two major intervening variables specific to the process of Europeanisation of the Balkans: "one is the *asymmetry* of the relationship with the European Union, and the other is the *uncertainty* built into the accession process" (2002:13). The asymmetric relationship relies in the inability of the countries to influence the Europeanisation process due to the advantaged position of the EU that allows it "to set the rules of the game in the accession conditionality" (Grabbe 2002:13). The non-negotiable nature of the political conditionality provides little possibility for domestic actors to "exercise their veto" (Dimitrova, 2002:172).

Through conditionality, EU membership status is gate-kept until the compliance of the acceding countries with the three main Copenhagen conditions. These conditions, however, are very broad and open to considerable interpretation. The elaboration of what constitutes meeting them "has progressively widened the detailed criteria for membership, making the EU a moving target for applicants" (Grabbe, 1999:6).

Critics of the EU enlargement process have argued that the Copenhagen conditions use concepts that are highly debatable and slippery mainly because the EU has never provided a definition of these concepts (democracy, market economy, and capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces). However, the most specific requirements are set in the negotiation phase, and consequently it is of crucial importance to progress from the pre-negotiation to the negotiation phase: while in the former the criteria are rather vague and subject to broad interpretations, in the latter they are relatively clearly defined and much easier to monitor.

HISTORY OF THE NEED FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS FOR EU ENLARGEMENT

The principle of good neighbourliness is a universal concept, incorporated in the preamble of the Charter of United Nations and the founding document of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, originally CSCE). The EU introduced the concept in 1991 in the "Pact on Stability in Europe", also known as the "Balladur Plan," which focused on the countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

In the Central European enlargement process, the concept was used in a number of instances such as disputes between Austria and the Czech Republic over the Temelín power plant and the Beneš decrees, the dispute over property restitution between Italy and Slovenia, and the question concerning the German-speaking minority in Slovenia, as well as the status of Russian minorities in the Baltic countries.

The importance of good neighbourly relations was further emphasized in the "Agenda 2000" of the European Commission report in 1997, which reiterated the position of the EU that prior to accession the candidate countries should resolve outstanding bilateral issues with other countries.

In May 1999, during the Kosovo war, the European Commission published a document which coined the term Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), followed a month later by the establishment of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. In the Stabilisation and Association Agreements, through which the EU establishes contractual relations with each country in the region, a central place is given to regional co-operation to build closer ties among neighbouring countries.

The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 acknowledged that SAP remains the framework for the European course of the Western Balkan countries. At the summit, the EU resolved to bring in the Western Balkan countries as future

members. As in Central and Eastern Europe prior to the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the application of EU accession conditionality focuses on political and economic reform as well as harmonisation with the *acquis*.

Owing to the legacy of the wars of the 1990s, the Western Balkans has faced additional conditions related to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), good neighbourly relations, and regional co-operation. Therefore, the principle of regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations is mentioned in all the key documents with regard to EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. The requirement is, however, not part of the 'hard' conditionality such as the Copenhagen Criteria and the compulsory adoption of the *acquis*.

For the EU, regional co-operation is an essential element of stabilisation and association – the process guiding the Western Balkans countries towards EU membership – and progress in regional co-operation is monitored in annual progress reports.

The EU claims that regional cooperation in the western Balkans is:

- needed as a crucial ingredient of stability;
- a catalyst for reconciliation, good-neighbourliness and good political relations;
- about helping overcome nationalism and intolerance and promoting mutual understanding and political dialogue in the region. (EU: 2006)

Within the concept of regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations, the resolution of outstanding issues between countries has been promoted as a key precondition for the enlargement process. The need to solve bilateral issues among the Western Balkans countries was mentioned for the first time in the 2009 *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010*. There it was made clear that "bilateral issues should be resolved by the parties concerned and should not hold up the accession process.... Finding mutually acceptable solutions, and concluding agreements, on outstanding issues with neighbouring countries is also part of the Stabilisation and Association Process." (Enlargement Strategy 2009-2010:6)

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

EU enlargement policy has continued slowly - despite the on-going economic and political crisis in Europe. Croatia is set to become the 28th member state in July 2013. In Montenegro, the opening of accession negotiations in June 2012 reflected its continued progress on key reforms including the fight against corruption and organised crime.

In Macedonia, the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) with the Commission has contributed to substantial progress in a number of key policy areas. The HLAD focuses on five key areas: protecting freedom of expression in the media; strengthening the rule of law; reforming public administration; improving the election process; and developing the market economy. Three political-level meetings were held in 2012 while technical consultations on various topics continued throughout the year to review progress in reforms on the basis of agreed targets and actions and a government roadmap. The 2012 *EU Progress Report* deemed that there has been good overall progress.

Since political criteria continue to be sufficiently met, the Commission recommended for a fourth time that accession negotiations be opened. The Commission underlined that maintenance of good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution to the name issue, under the auspices of the UN, remains essential. However, at the European Council Summit on 11 December 2012, Greece - backed by Bulgaria and France - managed again to block the opening of accession talks with Macedonia.

The conclusions of the Summit note that "the Council will examine, on the basis of a report to be presented by the Commission in spring 2013, implementation of reforms in the context of the HLAD, as well as steps taken to promote good neighbourly relations and to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue under the auspices

of the UN". Provided that the assessment is positive, the Council will ask the Commission to make 'without delay' all preparations to start accession talks.

Serbia was rewarded candidate status in March 2012 for advancing towards the sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo, but needs to provide further proof of such commitments before it will be given a date for the start of accession negotiations. Many of the demands are related to the "normalisation" of relations between Pristina and Belgrade regarding Serbian areas in Northern Kosovo and the border crossings between the two countries.

This was confirmed at the European Council Summit where the ministers also noted that accession talks with Serbia might begin in spring 2013. A joint report by the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, on the state of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina will be presented to the Council, which will decide upon it during the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The Commission also recommended Albania for a kind of conditional candidate status until the country adopts pending laws in the areas of the judiciary, public administration, and parliamentary rules of procedure. Kosovo was just given a number of short-term priorities so that it can commence negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political compromises have moved the country closer to the entry into force of the SAA. The Constitution needs to be modified to allow national minorities to run for political office.

PROBLEMS WITH A REGIONAL APPROACH - (NOT) SOLVING THE GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS CONUNDRUM

The EU has insisted within the enlargement process on regional co-operation among post-communist candidate countries. In the 1990s, such co-operation materialised among the

Visegrad Four and among the Baltic candidate countries. There are, however, significant differences between the Central European countries and Baltic states compared with the Western Balkans region.

Unlike the group of countries from the big-bang enlargement, which enjoyed relatively smooth democratic transition and consolidation, the countries in the Western Balkans suffered in the 1990s due to the wars of succession of former Yugoslavia. Due to the ethnic conflicts, democratic transition and consolidation in the Western Balkans was delayed while in some instances nationalist tendencies have not abated. As a result, the view from EU members, even those most fervent supporters of Western Balkans enlargement (such as Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria and Germany to an extent), is that the Western Balkans countries should resolve all outstanding issues before joining the Union.

On the other hand, the demand for regional co-operation is an obvious slow-down strategy among enlargement-reluctant member states. Indeed, several observers have pointed out that "considerable tension exists between the wish for EU accession and the need for regional co-operation." (Uilenreef, 2010:12). As some countries progress faster towards the EU, this creates "asymmetries and tensions that threaten to undermine regional cohesion" (Uilenreef, 2010:12). Milica Delević states that "if the regional approach is to be promoted, ways have to be found to make the progress of each country a win-win situation for the others" (2007:2).

Examples from two countries from the region, Serbia and Macedonia, show that establishing co-operation and good relations with neighbours as a precondition for further integration is a problematic process for Western Balkans countries and might severely slow down further enlargement. Moreover, "deep-seated political divisions and border disputes within/between Balkan countries (Montenegro aside) are sure to give member states cold feet on EU enlargement, as has happened all too often in the past" (Stratalut, 2012:2).

The EU demands 'good neighbourly relations' and a visible and sustainable normalisation of the Serbia-Kosovo relationship. Huge emphasis is placed on the success of the bilateral talks aimed at easing technical co-operation and movement of people between Kosovo and Serbia. Those negotiations commenced during the administration of President Boris Tadić, and after several rounds of talks some progress was made on issues such as civil registry, car licence-plates, and recognition of university diplomas.

The Commission underlines that the steps leading to the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina should address the problems in northern Kosovo. For the EU, respect for the territorial integrity of Kosovo and the particular needs of the local population is essential. The normalisation of relations is to be addressed in the context of the framework for the conduct of future accession negotiations with Serbia.

The Serbian parliamentary and presidential elections in May 2012 brought to power forces that are more ambivalent towards the EU. President Tomislav Nikolić, for example, stated at the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) congress on 29 September 2012 stated that Serbia will not be "rushing" to join the Union or immediately pushing for the release of an accession date from Brussels.

If Kosovo is a major problem for further integration of Serbia, the so-called name issue represents a similar burden for Macedonia. On 22 March 2004, Macedonia submitted an application for EU membership and the Commission published its opinion on 9 November 2005. Greece lobbied against the Macedonian integration process and its EU candidacy (Mavromatidis, 2010: 52; Pond, 2006; Heaney, 2007), but the Commission recommended to the EU Council that candidate status be granted to Macedonia.

The Council confirmed the candidate status, but has failed to initiate negotiations for membership. EU conditionality towards Macedonia is being compromised by Greece's influence in the Union around its position regarding the 'name dispute'. Since 2006,

the gate-keeping mechanism of the EU has been significantly intensified as the country progresses towards starting negotiations with the EU. Namely, the list of accession conditions has slowly been extended with an exceptional condition: successful resolution of the name issue with Greece by reaching 'a mutually acceptable solution' (Commission's Progress Report 2009:24). The discrepancy between this stand and the view of the Commission that "bilateral issues should not hold up the accession process" is obvious (European Commission, 2009: 6, 2010:11, 2011: 9, 2012: 8).

The first time Greece used this type of conditionality was at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008. Then NATO leaders refused Macedonia an invitation to join the alliance after Greece de facto vetoed the decision in a dispute over the former Yugoslav republic's name. NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told a news conference: "We have agreed that an invitation to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will be issued as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached" (NATO Press Release, 2008: 049).

It is worth reiterating that in the history of Macedonia's relations with NATO prior to the meetings leading up to the Bucharest summit, resolution of the difference over the name was never raised as a condition for its membership of the Alliance.

Furthermore, at the EU summit on 19-20 June 2008, Greece succeeded, against the objections of some other member states led by the Slovene presidency, in inserting a statement into the European Council Conclusions that "maintaining good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution on the name issue, remains essential" (Conclusions of the Brussels European Council, 2008). Some EU members naively argued that the inserted text amounted to nothing more than an exhortation to good neighbourly relations (Balkan Insight, web).

In 2009, an EU Council conclusion to postpone the decision for the opening of accession negotiations with Macedonia was made due

to the Greek position, backed by several member states (Council of the European Union, 2009). Since then Greece continues to use its position as an EU member state with the power of veto as a tool of its diplomacy, while the EU is in silent solidarity with Greece on the 'no solution, no membership' position (as was the case with the NATO candidacy of Macedonia) (Mavromatidis, 2010:58).

REGIONAL CO-OPERATION AS A TOOL TO SLOW DOWN THE PROMISED ENLARGEMENT?

While support for EU enlargement was still high in the Western Balkans at the beginning of 2013, it was decreasing among EU member states. The economic and financial crises have instead forced EU member states to reflect on internal issues. While candidate and potential candidate countries of the region have to "meet harder conditionality requirements than the former candidates of Central and Eastern Europe, commitment of the EU to further enlargement has been wavering in the face of harder than expected institutional reform and the deepening world economic crisis" (Huszka 2010: 5).

In recent years, even Germany has not been enthusiastic about further enlargement. Spending more of Brussels' structural and cohesion funds on new members from the Western Balkans at times when the southern euro periphery states need to be bailed out or implement austerity measures does not look viable to citizens and policymakers across the Union.

While Germany supports strict conditionality in order to persuade powerful but increasingly enlargement-skeptical member states such as the Netherlands, "France remains as ambivalent as ever over enlargement and does not seem to hesitate to take advantage of bilateral disputes or issues to delay the overall process" (Balfour 2012). Under these circumstances, the accession of Croatia in 2013 might mark the end of an era for the EU – ushering in dangerous ramifications for the Western Balkans.

The "enlargement fatigue" currently afflicting the EU is a source of strategic insecurity in the region. Since promises made at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit that the EU would enlarge to include the Western Balkans, there has been a noticeable backsliding on the part of many EU officials. Indeed, EU conditionality in the Western Balkans is more demanding than ever before, and allows the EU "to drag out the process, potentially holding it hostage to considerations which might be of little relevance to the Balkans, such as domestic opinion in one member state on a particular issue" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011:9).

While many of the elements that characterised the accession of the Central European countries (economic, political, institutional transformation) shape the reform process in the Western Balkans "for the Balkan states additional conditionalities such as the 'good neighbourliness' clause are being imposed by the EU" (Hoppe and Stoeva, 2011:67).

Conditioning the further enlargement of Western Balkans states upon achievement of regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations as defined by concerned EU member states serves well the enlargement-reluctant member states. It slows down the integration process as some of the disputes in the region cannot be solved even if the main carrot for doing so is EU membership. The Greek-Macedonia and the Serbia-Kosovo disputes look most difficult to solve.

In both the Serbian and the Macedonian cases, regional co-operation has been conditioned in such a way that it amounts to a veto for further progress of the two countries in the enlargement process. In contrast to Central Europe, and as a result of the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s, state building remains a problem for the Western Balkans.

An additional problem for the further enlargement of the Western Balkans has emerged from the negative perception in the EU of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria. This experience has led EU member states to the conclusion that strict conditionality on the regional co-operation principle is an absolutely necessary criterion

even if it amounts to a de facto veto against some candidate countries. Thereby, Greece can play the role of a veto player in the case of Macedonia, and Germany and Austria can do the same in the case of Serbia. As Rosa Balfour writes, the most preoccupying element that emerged from the negotiations that led to the European Council conclusions in December 2012 "is how easily member states fall into the trap of making the whole enlargement process hostage to parochial bilateral disputes and bullying, macho politics" (Balfour 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

When EU conditionality touches upon identity politics, the transformative power of the EU is very weak and ineffective. Freyburg and Richter rightly pinpoint the problem that arises when "a state's national identity contradicts the conditions linked to the benefit of an external incentive, the state will not or only inconsistently comply with these conditions independently of expected costs of adaptation", and that "national identity plays a crucial role as filter by sorting out whether governmental action is to be based on cost-benefit-calculations ('logic of expected consequences') or in accordance with socially constructed and accepted identities, rules, and practices" (2008:14).

In other words, if the conditionality criteria pertain to an issue area perceived as problematic for national identity, a different line of reasoning will be triggered than in cases where the criteria are considered unproblematic. National identity "determines the logic of social action that governments will follow when responding to the Union's conditionality criteria" (Freyburg and Richter, 2010:266).

There is too much at stake to effectively put the Western Balkans enlargement on pause. If the pace does decelerate, overshadowed by the economic and political crises within the EU, "Europe might 'lose' the Balkans once more to nationalism, violence and further breakdowns of agreed states and borders, or it might lose its leverage to other actors who may not share similar views and values with the EU" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011:2).

The Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, has warned that if the EU's doors should be closed to the remaining Western Balkans states it would "take away the guiding beacon which has guided the reform policies of the region for the past few years. Instead of the magnet of European integration, we might well go back to seeing the policies of the region driven by the fears and prejudices of nationalism" (Bildt 2006: 27).

Leaving the Western Balkans in a state of vacuum or "devising peripheral-type associations in a multi-speed Europe will erode hard-won achievements, particularly in terms of peace, stability and democracy, and will open up space for other ambitious actors (like Russia, Turkey, or China) to compete with the EU's influence and vision in the region" (Stratulat, 2012:3).

For Macedonia, the very future of the republic is dependent on the success of the EU integration effort as the local Albanians might become restive watching the state of Albania, already a member of NATO, move forward with the EU enlargement process. The EU condition for Macedonia to reach a "negotiated and mutually acceptable solution on the name issue" is effectively hidden under the 'good neighbourly relations' criteria. This prerequisite deviates from the original conditionality based on the Copenhagen criteria and "overshadows the pre-accession reform process in Macedonia" (Risteska, 2011).

The EU actively interferes in the domestic politics of the Western Balkans states, putting pressure on local elites to comply with certain designated criteria (Anastasakis, 2008:365). The name issue is not part of the Copenhagen criteria for membership to the EU. Moreover, "mutually acceptable solution [...] violates the principle of good neighbourly relations, especially the elements such as: non-interference in the domestic matters of states, the principle of sovereign equality and self-determination" (Lozanoska, 2010).

Other EU candidates have also been given additional conditions: Bulgaria and Romania in the last round of enlargement were told to

fulfil extra conditions to start negotiations for membership; Bulgaria to set a date for closing down the Kozloduy nuclear power plant; while Romania had to reform its state child-care institutions and improve its macroeconomic situation. However, in these cases “the EU did use its conditionality to pressure the two candidates to make specific changes to remedy the most pressing problems that had kept them outside [emphasis added]” (Grabbe, 2006:18).

Even though the EU perceives its role in the Europeanisation process of Macedonia as consistent, from Macedonia’s perspective, “the accession process seems more about responding to the concerns raised in EU members’ capitals than about fulfilling the membership criteria” (FRIDE Activity brief, 2009). In particular, the focus has been on concerns raised in Athens.

The blocking of Macedonia’s EU accession drive has created an immense credibility problem for the EU as it removes a major instrument for securing compliance with the EU’s toolbox and it negates the major incentive for Macedonia’s political elites to comply. Moreover, if the EU continues to side with the Greek position it will amount to declaring that it is not the Copenhagen Criteria that are most important for the accession of Macedonia to the EU, but that the most important factor is an additional criterion that has nothing to do with democracy or the rule of law.

Serbia has been trying to keep its policy on Kosovo separate from its aspiration to join the EU. However, since the EU has made clear that Serbia’s progress toward accession depends on improving its relations with Kosovo it might lead the country to take another look at the integration process. Just in October, Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić said he was “seriously disturbed” by the new European Commission Enlargement Strategy, which has told Belgrade it must respect Kosovo’s territorial integrity if it wishes to progress towards EU membership.

While Serbia has vowed never to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, it is open to deals that improve daily lives on both sides of the [from Serbia’s point of view unrecognised]

border (B92 2013, Balkan Insight 2013, Blic 2013). The new Serbian government is signalling that “the influence of Brussels over decision-making in Belgrade has waned: the Serbian political class knows that Brussels cannot offer any imminent progress towards accession” (Cunliffe, 2012:1) .

Leaving Serbia in the cold, the EU should take into consideration the fact that the current Serbian Prime Minister, Ivica Dačić is closely associated with the idea of (re)partition and/or territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo as a solution to the stand-off. The situation in northern Kosovo is tense, and the region north of the Ibar River remains in the hands of “parallel structures”. Radical solutions for Kosovo will surely have an impact on Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Despite the change of government in Serbia, the policy and discourse on Kosovo remains the same. Change of this policy was “difficult even for the far more democratic and pro-EU Boris Tadić, and seems virtually impossible now that Nikolić and the SNS are in power” (Obradovic-Wochnik and Alexander Wochnik, 2012:1). As it is very unlikely that the EU will have Serbia as a member if it does not establish good neighbourly relations with Kosovo, the danger is that Belgrade will abandon EU enlargement, further complicating Balkan affairs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU cannot further postpone the enlargement process of the Western Balkans countries as a result of veto-wielding powers by member states around the principle of regional co-operation conditionality. Unlike Turkey, a blockade of the enlargement process of Serbia and Macedonia will have serious implications for regional stability. The EU must not repeat the mistakes of the early 1990s when its belated and unco-ordinated policy towards former Yugoslavia had to be supplemented by United States leadership in order to stop the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- The EU runs the risk that its accession conditionality will undermine its credibility

in the eyes of governments in the region that have or might have problems when it comes to bilateral relations with their neighbours or regional co-operation. If the absolute power in bilateral disputes within the regional co-operation conditionality lays in the hands of a member state, laggards in the process of EU enlargement such as Kosovo might worry that they will suffer insurmountable obstacles in the accession process once Serbia joins the EU. Therefore, the view of the European Commission that "bilateral issues should not hold up the accession process" should be given more political weight.

- While the opening of membership negotiations with Belgrade and Skopje is vital for these two countries, it still leaves plenty of possibilities for concerned EU member states such as Greece to influence the resolution of outstanding issues using the regional co-operation conditionality.
- The EU should consider devising mechanisms or informal bodies to help solve specific bilateral disputes between member states and candidate countries. While not all bilateral disputes merit such an effort, some, particularly difficult to solve, cases do so. Experiences in the resolution of the Slovenia-Croatia border dispute should be considered. Enhancing the role and the power of the European Commission in this process might be an option.

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