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A United or Partly United EUrope? Will the Western Balkans (and Turkey) Ever Join?

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- Abstract -

While political leaders and the people of Croatia are still celebrating the EU's decision to accept this post-Yugoslav state as its 28th member in 2013, the EU accession of other current officially recognised candidates and potential membership candidates looks more uncertain and distant than it has ever been since the EU offered them association with the prospect of accession in the early 2000s. Pressured by internal political stability problems and economic underperformance on one side and by the indifference and/or incapability of the EU and its political leaders to provide 'promised' adequate assistance on the other, an ever larger number of the political elite and wider public in the official and potential EU membership candidates from the Western Balkans and Turkey are giving up on the "EUrope idea". The continuing "pro-enlargement" rhetoric and occasionally repeated optimistic promises of the EU's and its member states' officials and politicians no longer seem to sound convincing even to those officials and politicians themselves.

Although the scholarly literature concerning enlargement (particularly from constructivist and functionalist schools) by and large focuses on 'non-materialist' motives inherent in the idea of the EU as a normative power (Sedelmeier, 2005; Schimmelfennig et al. 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2001 and 2002), a strong rationalist component has always been in the foreground of the very idea of European integration and EU enlargement policy (Litner, 1999; Nungent, 2004). Enlarging (through widening rather than deepening) the EU into erstwhile communist space was partly fuelled by Western Europeans desire to achieve some economic gains but more importantly extend and secure a 'zone of peace and political stability' further from their borders in the east (Zielonka 2006, Petrovic, 2004). Ultimately it can be argued that the EU's eastern enlargement has met the expectations of both sides of the former Iron Curtain; an unprecedented transformative power which is seen by many of the remaining non-

EU member Eastern European states as the ‘only’ viable path towards achieving full transition.¹

Despite the dual-benefits in pursuing EU enlargement (for the EU itself and recipient states), recent developments indicate that the EU’s extension of Europeanization beyond its borders (particularly the spread of peace, democracy and prosperity) to the remaining European continent via the strategy of enlargement is speedily approaching its limits. After Croatia’s accession in 2013, the prospects for further EU enlargements to states which already have a status of the official candidates or potential candidates for EU membership, seems to be shrouded in uncertainty and pessimism amongst EU member states (both amongst political elites and general public), even if the necessary reform is achieved.

This paper investigates the prospects and main obstacles for EU accession of the group of small countries from the Western Balkans that all have the current status of ‘candidate’ or ‘potential candidate’ for EU membership. Together with Iceland and Turkey, who have both already opened negotiations for accession and are seen as very different types of candidates for EU membership, the Western Balkan states are currently the only ones on the EU enlargement agenda. While Iceland as “a country with deep democratic roots” (European Commission, 2012) has already achieved a certain level of integration with the EU and is expected to successfully close its negotiations within the next year or two, the Turkish candidacy has been seen as ‘problematic’ by many in the EU and its member states since the very moment of its acceptance.² Leaving aside these two “extreme” cases, this paper looks at the objectives and scope of EU policy incentives launched towards the Western Balkan states since the early 1990s and identifies the main challenges which still remain for these states on the way to EU membership.

1. The EU and the post-communist Balkans in the 1990s

Although they have received considerably less EU and Western assistance for post-communist reform, the slower progress in developing closer relations with the EU and in post-communist transition in the Balkan states can be hardly explained by a less favourable assessment of the latter by the EU in comparison to Central European or Baltic post-communist states. In contrast to the non-Baltic successor states of the Soviet Union, who have never been seriously considered for developing closer political or economic ties with the

¹ The positive correlation between the EU’s enlargement and the political and economic transitions in recipient states is plain to see and has been extensively examined (Grabbe, 2005; Pridham, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2008).

² Turkey is the only candidate state with whom the EU started negotiations for accession (in October 2005) with an ‘additional clause’ on a set duration of *at least nine years*. It has been stated that negotiations with Turkey cannot be concluded before 2014 due to the ‘substantial financial consequences’ of its potential accession when the new EU budget comes into effect (European Commission, 2005, point 13). Furthermore, in addition to strong opposition of an important part of the wide public and many conservative politicians and parties all around the current EU member states, the former French President Nicolas Sarkozy had repeatedly expressed his opposition to Turkish entry into the EU and promised that if it ‘became a serious issue while he was president he would call a referendum’ (*EUbusiness*, 2008), while German Chancellor Merkel has continued to prefer ‘privileged partnership’ rather than full EU membership for Turkey (Pop, 2009; Mara, 2011).

European Union - particularly not for getting the opportunity to apply for EU membership (Petrovic, 2004) - the three largest Balkan states of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Romania enjoyed an almost 'equally privileged' status to develop closer and contractual relations with the EU as did the East Central European and Baltic nations in the early 1990s. Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were included in the list of potential recipients of the PHARE assistance programme already in 1990 along with Czechoslovakia less than a year after its two originally designated recipients – Poland and Hungary.³ Similar was its opportunity to develop closer contractual relations with the EU. When the EU (until 1992 the European Community - EC) had started negotiating association treaties with three Central European post-communist countries and Romania and Bulgaria in early 1991,⁴ it also offered the leaders of Yugoslavia's politically and economically divided constitutive republics a huge financial aid package and credible prospects for a 'fast track' towards integration into Western European economic and political structures in a loose attempt to prevent the dissolution and destruction of their common state (Cohen, 1995, p. 219 and Woodward, 1995, p. 160).

Nevertheless, the progress of all the Balkan states in both the intensification of relations with the EU and the accomplishment of the tasks of post-communist political and socio-economic reforms has been considerably slower and more difficult than for their Central European and Baltic counterparts. The prime reason for this was mainly related to the effective rejections of EU (and other Western) assistance for reforms by the first post-communist governments in all the Balkan states (including the recent EU newcomers Romania and Bulgaria), which avoided meeting the required criteria for the reception of EU technical and financial assistance. In sharp contrast to all Central European and Baltic post-communist states, these governments were formed of either nominally reformed ex-communist or national-populist parties, which won in the first post-communist elections and were dominated by illiberally oriented members of the ex-communist *nomenklatura* who simply 'did not need' EU reform assistance because they did not 'want to rush' into reform or into establishing closer conditional relations with the EU.⁵ Once governmental power had been taken by 'real reformers', who were ready to introduce painful economic reforms and meet EU accession requirements, as the Romanian and Bulgarian governments have done since 1996 and 1997, the results came relatively quickly (compare the intensity of the improvement of transition indicators between 1999 and 2006 given in Table 1). However, Albania and the ever-increasing number of the successor states of former Yugoslavia had to wait even longer to begin their 'real' post-communist political and economic transformation. This was accompanied with a new and specially designed EU policy incentive for this group of post-communist states.

This policy incentive was launched only after the 'post-Yugoslav' wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina had finally ended and the EU had offered a new and 'coherent

³ Hence the name PHARE – Pologne, Hongrie, Assistance a la Restructuration Economique [Poland, Hungary, Assistance to the Restructuring of the Economy].

⁴ Association treaties, the so-called 'Europe Agreements' with Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were signed in December 1991 and those with Romania and Bulgaria were signed in February and March 1993 respectively.

⁵ This argument is discussed in more detail in Petrovic, 2008. See also Fish, 1998 and McFaul, 2002.

strategy' of 'conditionality and [a] gradual approach' in offering EU cooperation and assistance for 'peace and stability, economic renewal, democracy... and [mutual] cooperation' in the 'Western Balkans' (EU General Affairs Council, 1997). The expectation that this new EU strategy, which by 1999 was transformed into the 'Stabilisation and Association Process' (SAP), would boost post-communist reform and institutionally and socio-politically prepare the Western Balkan states for EU accession was especially strengthened by two positive developments in the year 2000 (Pippan, 2004, Petrovic, 2004).. Firstly, a positive example was set by the successful opening of accession negotiations between the EU and the other two Balkan post-communist late developers - Romania and Bulgaria; secondly, there was an almost simultaneous replacement of the post-communist authoritarian regimes in the two largest Western Balkan states - Croatia and Serbia (then with Montenegro) - by pro-reformist and pro-European governments in January and October of that year.

2. The emergence of an EU perspective in the early 2000s

The death of the Croatian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of his Serbian counterpart Milosević in October the following year were of paramount importance in this regard. The replacement of these two post-communist dictators by pro-reformist and pro-European governments in the two key states in the region was a real boost for opening a much more realistic EU perspective for all the Western Balkan states. The 'EU membership perspective' for the Western Balkan states, announced in 1999, had evolved into the Feira European Council statement that 'all the countries concerned are *potential candidates* for EU membership' [emphasis added] (European Council, 2000, Art. 67). This has been continuously reconfirmed at subsequent European Council meetings and especially by the adoption of the 'Thessaloniki Agenda' in June 2003,⁶ which introduced the so-called 'European Partnership' for the SAP countries (essentially similar to the previously established Accession Partnership for the countries of the 2004/07 enlargement) and clearly stressed:

The Western Balkans and support for preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU. The Balkans will be an integral part of a united Europe.⁷

Such an activist approach accompanied by corresponding (and conditioned) EU technical and financial assistance for reforms has produced strong and rapid positive effects in the Western Balkan states as did earlier the EU association and accession process in the countries of the 2004/07 enlargement. Apart from FYR Macedonia's stagnation in political democratisation (which will be referred to in more detail below), the Western Balkan states markedly improved their performance in both main streams of post-communist reforms during the period from 1999 to 2005 (Table 1). As a result, they have succeeded in coming closer to both

⁶ *The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration*, adopted by the conclusions of the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council of 16 June 2003 and endorsed in the conclusions (Art. 41) of the European Thessaloniki Council of 19-20 June 2003.

⁷ *The Thessaloniki agenda*, paragraph 2.

the achieved progress in post-communist transition of the ex-communist countries of the 2004/2007 EU enlargement and to signing their own pre-accession treaties, i.e. SAAs, with

Table 1

Progress in post-communist reform and SAP

Country	Democracy*			Economic Transition*			SA Agreement	Application for EU Membership	Official Candidate Status
	1999	2005	2010	1999	2005	2010			
Albania	4.75	4.04	3.93	2.6	2.9	3.1	YES (12/06/2006, in force since 1/04/09)	YES (28/04/2009)	NO
Bosnia-Herzegovina	5.42	4.18	4.25	2.0	2.6	2.8	YES (16/06/08)	NO	NO
Croatia	4.46	3.75	3.71	3.0	3.4	3.5	YES (29/10/2001, in force since 1/02/05)	YES (20/02/2003)	YES (18/06/2004, Acc. Negotiat.: Oct 2005 to June 2011)
FYR Macedonia	3.83	3.89	3.79	2.7	3.0	3.3	YES (9/04/2001, in force since 1/04/04)	YES (22/03/2004)	YES (16/12/2005)**
Montenegro	5.50	3.79	3.79	1.6	2.6	2.9	YES (15/10/2007, in force since 1/05/10)	YES (15/12/2008)	YES (17/12/2010, Acc. Negotiations opened on 29/06/12)
Serbia	5.50	3.75	3.71	1.4	2.6	2.9	YES (29/04/2008)***	YES (22/12/2009)	YES** (1/03/2012)
Romania	3.54	3.39	3.46	2.8	3.2	3.5	1993 (Eu Agr)	1995	Member (1/01/07)
Bulgaria	3.58	3.18	3.04	2.8	3.4	3.6	1993 (Eu Agr)	1995	Member (1/01/07)

* Freedom House Nations in Transit “Democratisation score” (1 being the highest; 7 being the lowest), and the simple average of EBRD transition indicators (4+ or 4.3 denotes a standard and performance comparable to advanced industrial economies; 1 denotes little or no change from a “rigid centrally planned economy”).

** Accession negotiations are still waiting to be opened

*** frozen pending Serbian cooperation with the ICTY from 29/04/2008 to 7/12/2009

the EU. While Croatia and Macedonia had already signed their Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU in 2001, the other four joined them with a considerable delay. Albania and Montenegro signed their SAAs during 2007 and Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina joined them in April and June 2008 respectively.

However, the reasons for such a delay in progress in EU association (and consequently accession) of the latter Western Balkan states were not exclusively related to their lack of success in political and economic transition. Based on the above-mentioned ‘comprehensive strategy’ defined in 1997 and later incorporated in the Stabilisation and Association Process, all the Western Balkan states have been required to meet another set of accession criteria in addition to the ones defined by the Copenhagen European Council of 1993 (Art. 7a). While the Copenhagen conclusions define general requirements (addressed to all ex-communist European states) for the establishment of a political democracy, market economy and the respect of human and minority rights the SAP criteria required *only* the Western Balkan states to comply with their international obligations defined by the Dayton Peace Accords⁸ and the EU ‘coherent strategy’. The latter particularly insists on the need for cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague,⁹ the return of refugees and a considerable improvement in bilateral political relations between the countries of the region. Hence, while comparing the different levels of success in association with and accession to the EU among the Western Balkan states, both sets of the accession criteria should be taken into consideration. The cases of FYR Macedonia and Serbia are probably the most indicative and contrasting in this regard. The early signing of the SAA with Macedonia was not a finalisation or reflection of this country’s success in post-communist reform (especially regarding the consolidation of democracy) but was rather a stimulus for maintaining an internal ethnic peace negotiated with many difficulties and with the strong involvement of the EU and finalised by the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001 (see e. g.. Brunnbauer, 2002; Pangiotu, 2008 and Vankovska, 2007). Serbia, on the other hand, could have signed its SAA at least two to three years earlier regarding most EU conditions and requirements except cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague, which the government of Prime Minister Kostunica was reluctant to completely fulfil in the period from 2004 to 2007 (Clark, 2008; Konjukusic, 2004)

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The enthusiasm regarding the offered prospects of EU membership and the initiated acceleration of democratic and market reforms during the early 2000s in Western Balkan states was from the very beginning challenged by the existence of two specific sources (in comparison to the post-communist countries of the 2004/07 enlargement) of the prolonged internal political instability of most of these states. The first one considered the country’s obligation to fulfil the above requirements incorporated into the EU’s ‘comprehensive strategy’ and SAP, especially cooperation with the ICTY, which has often disturbed the socio-political climate in the three Balkan signatories of the Dayton agreement. The second, more serious source of political instability is related to the unresolved statehood status of

⁸ The Accords which terminated was in Bosnia and Herzegovina were initiated and agreed to in the US military base in Dayton, Ohio in November and formally signed as ‘The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina’ by the leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia in Paris on 14 December 1995. The highest representatives of the so-called Contact Group nations (USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) and the European Union Special Negotiator also signed this agreement as witnesses.

⁹ ‘International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia’, established by UN Security Council resolution 827 of 25 May 1993.

most countries in the region. While the additional SAP conditions for the Western Balkan states ‘do not constitute normative inconsistency’ (Schimmelfennig, 2008, pp. 918-937, p. 927) and as such they cannot be considered to be unjust within the EU approach towards the accession ambitions of these states in comparison to EU accession policy towards the countries of the 2004/07 enlargement,¹⁰ the lack of viable EU incentives or assistance for resolving the prolonged statehood disputes (and consequently political instability) during the whole previous decade in *democratic* and ‘*pro-European*’ post-Yugoslav Western Balkan states has been less ‘normative consistent’ and just in the above regard. Together with the later increased toughness of the ‘general’, i.e. Copenhagen accession criteria for new candidates due to the emergence of so-called *enlargement fatigue* in the core (Western) members of the EU after completion of the 2004/07 enlargement round, it has become a major reason for both slower progress in EU association/accession and stagnation in post-communist reform, especially the democratisation of all the countries in the region after 2005 (Table 1).

The following section provides a closer look at the objectives and effects of these two groups of more recent EU policy incentives towards the countries of the Western Balkans and their EU ambitions....

1. From statehood status challenges to enlargement fatigue and vice versa

Similarly as in other post-communist applicants and entrants to the EU, the functioning of recently established democratic institutions in the countries of the Western Balkans is heavily burdened by administrative inefficiency and especially by weak judicial systems which are not able to eliminate the strong influence and involvement of organised crime and corruption in the work of these institutions.¹¹ In post-Yugoslav Western Balkan states the destabilising impact of these political system weaknesses is even more strengthened and prolonged by the continuing existence of internal political dilemmas and conflicts regarding the very statehood status of most of these states.

In spite of the nationalistic/ethnic motivated wars of the 1990s, all the post-Yugoslav states (with the exception of Slovenia and partially Croatia), remain largely multiethnic societies with basically problematic and contradictory relations among their major national ethnic groups regarding the political organization of the country they live in, starting from its

¹⁰ The problems of post-Dayton reconciliation, (the re-establishment of) regional cooperation and cooperation with the ICTY did not exist in the countries which joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Furthermore, the EU requirement to the Western Balkan states to meet this group of accession criteria can be also considered not as ‘additional’ but rather as a complementary or necessary step that these states, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, should make (despite related potentially high domestic political costs) in order to satisfy one of the basic Copenhagen conditions for accession - democratisation of their political systems (compare Schimmelfennig, 2008).

¹¹ As is more or less regularly repeated in EU Commission and Freedom House individual country annual reports these problems remain a serious obstacle for the further consolidation of democracy in most post-communist countries of the 2004/2007 EU enlargement, particularly in Romania and Bulgaria (see e.g. Reports of the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council (COM 400 [and 401]) of 20 July 2010 ‘On Progress in Bulgaria [and Romania] under the Co-operation and Verification Mechanism’).

very constitutional definition. Six years after re-gaining its full independence in 2006, Montenegro - the smallest and most recent UN-recognised Balkan state - remains still divided between 'unitarists' and 'separatists' (see e.g. Dzankic, 2007; Djuranovic 2010 and EurActive Network' 2010) and is still waiting for the first electoral change of its post-communist government.¹² The ethnic peace established between the Slavic majority and Albanian minority in Macedonia by the Ohrid Agreement is as above-mentioned fragile and everyday political tensions and problems are clearly reflected in this country's inability to improve its 'democracy score' over the last ten years (Table 2). Furthermore, this country's dispute with neighbouring EU member Greece over its official name is still waiting to be resolved, despite numerous attempts and negotiations for finding a compromise solution.¹³ The political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding its constitutional status and in Serbia regarding the status of Kosovo may be even more threatening, especially due to their potentially large impacts on the stability of the region as a whole (for more details see Petrovic, 2009).

While often overshadowed (or excused) by the role of domestic factors, the EU's responsibility for the prolonged political instability of the post-Yugoslav Western Balkan states due to the continued disputes over their very statehood status can hardly be neglected.¹⁴ This responsibility is grounded on at least two strong reasons. The first one is related to the EU's ability to largely force the implementation of a particular statehood solution by the use of its conditionality criteria for association and accession, while the second is rooted in the very origins of the Balkan statehood problems, which have mostly resulted from the inability of disputing national and ethnic groups to find a peaceful solution to their contrasting positions without foreign assistance. Furthermore, some of these states have been functioning more or less as semi-protectorates of the UN and/or EU for a number of years and the involvement of the latter in finding a solution to the 'final' statehood status of these states is simply unavoidable. However, the incentives and attempts that the EU and the so-called 'international community' (most importantly the USA, UN, OSCE and some NGOs) launched to help conflicting parties find a mutually acceptable solution since the time when all the countries in the region (in the early 2000s) elected pro-reformist and pro-European governments remain futile and are primarily grounded on political perceptions of some (leading) EU member states rather than on the well-established EU or international norms and rules (compare Noutcheva, 2009). In many aspects they have continued to be confusing

¹² The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its president, the current Prime Minister and ex-President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic, have been in power throughout the whole period of the post-communist history of this country.

¹³ Due to its potential expansionistic connotation regarding the northern Greek province with the same name, Greece strongly opposes the domestically preferred 'Macedonia'. Therefore the awkward FYR Macedonia is still in use.

¹⁴ Among the rare works which address this issue, albeit rather narrowly and mostly with regards to the cases of the EU's support for the statehood of two Western Balkan confederations: Bosnia-Herzegovina and (at the time of writing) the already five years nonexistent Serbia and Montenegro are worth noting: Noutcheva 2009, Fakiolas, and Tzifakis 2008, Tzifakis 2007 and Massari 2005.

and remarkably similar to those from the early 1990s in sending mixed signals to the divided Balkan parties.

The most indicative in the above regard was the EU's approach towards the former 'state union'¹⁵ of Serbia and Montenegro when it went full circle: from assistance in signing the agreement which kept these two constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia together to assisting and supervising the Montenegrin referendum for independence just four years later. On the other hand, the EU has strongly and persistently supported strengthening the central government institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the last several years, despite the strong opposition of the leadership and wider public of Republika Srpska to any further centralisation of the country (Hyden, 2005; Noutcheva, 2009; Petrovic, 2009). Curiously, the EU did not express any similar ambition to persuade related parties (especially the Montenegrin government) to strengthen the role of the central institutions of Serbia and Montenegro although it could have counted on relatively strong support for this in Serbia and not very strong public resistance (definitely not the consensual opposition as shown above) in Montenegro (see e.g. Massari, 2005; Petrovic, 2009). Moreover, by deciding to introduce the 'twin track' policy for the separate negotiations of a SAA feasibility study with the two constituencies of the state-union in September 2004, the EU effectively gave up on the state whose constitutive order had been created under its direct guidance only two years earlier and much earlier than it officially ceased to exist in 2006, as opposed to what is claimed by some authors (see e.g. Noutcheva 2009).

While this inconsistency in the EU's approach towards the solution of the statehood status of Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina could have been partly explained by the 'confusion' over the existing differences between these two confederations regarding the implementation of the principles of the exclusive right of the federal units to secede from the ex-communist federations and the non-alteration of their internal borders,¹⁶ the recent incentives of the leading members of the EU and the USA regarding the recognition of Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence can hardly fit in with any previously adopted international rule or practice (Sahin, 2009). It is no wonder that the recommendation to legally treat it as a *sui generis* case that cannot be used as a precedent for other breakaway regions in the world (later adopted by the European Council - 2007, point 69) was unconvincing not only for the majority of UN member states, but also for five EU members which still reject recognising the independence of this territory.¹⁷ This incentive has not only

¹⁵ According to the definition of the common state given in the agreement signed under the presence and supervision of the European Union High Representative for CFSP Javier Solana on 14 March 2002; subsequently adopted by the parliaments of both republics and the federal parliament on 4 February 2003 as 'The Constitutional Charter of the State Community of Serbia and Montenegro.'

¹⁶ Introduced by the Arbitration Committee of the Conference on Yugoslavia, the so-called Badinter Committee's decisions regarding the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and later followed in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia (See e.g. Roeder, 2004 and Radan, 2000).

¹⁷ Four years after its unilateral declaration on 17 February 2008, Kosovo's independence has been recognised only by 91 out of 193 member states of the UN. Five members of the EU – Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Cyprus and Greece – have declared that they will not recognise Kosovo's independence without Serbia's consent, i.e. consensual agreement of the two parties.

further worsened the already extremely difficult relations between Serbia's and Kosovo's governments, but has seriously endangered the political status of pro-reformist and pro-European (ruling) parties in Serbia. While the reformist and pro-EU leader of the Democratic Party, Tadić barely succeeded in defeating his ultra-nationalist opponent in the national presidential elections in February 2008 (literally a few days before the Kosovo government declared its independence) with a majority of only 100,000 votes, a reformist government was formed only in July, after long negotiations with (and concessions to) former Milošević's Socialist Party and the adopted motto: 'Serbia will never recognise Kosovo's independence'.¹⁸ However, four years later in May 2012 Tadić lost the presidential elections to the same opponent (who in the meantime had downsized his nationalistic rhetoric and expressed more moderate pro-EU views), and his party even more convincingly lost the parliamentary elections.

Serbia's 'key role in [the stabilisation of] the region' (European Commission, 2008, p. 6) has not been challenged only by the declining support for reformist and pro-European political parties and programmes in the domestic political arena. The 'Kosovo independence incentive' has also caused a serious setback to Serbia's relations with its Western Balkan neighbours who all (except Bosnia and Herzegovina) decided to follow the USA and leading EU member states' example and recognised Kosovo's independence by the second half of 2008. Although the Serbian government has gradually restored diplomatic and political relations with all these countries since they were suspended in 2008 and continued to strongly express its commitment to its accession ('with Kosovo') to the EU, the recognition of Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence without the consent of (a democratic and pro-European) Serbia and a wider EU and international consensus remains a huge burden not only to the realisation of Serbia's (and Kosovo's) EU membership ambitions, but also to intra-regional relations and consequently the *Europeisation* of the Balkan region as a whole.

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In addition to the above discussed omission to provide more viable incentives which could have helped close the open statehood disputes among and within the post-Yugoslav states on normative consistent grounds which would have been difficult to reject by either of the disputed Balkan parties, the EU has in recent years further (and more directly) discouraged the EU ambitions of this group of countries by introducing a new element of accession conditionality which the previous candidates did not need to fulfil. This is related to the adoption of a tougher and more demanding approach for future accession negotiations as a direct consequence of the emergence of the so-called *enlargement fatigue* in the 'old' EU member states in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement.

Sometime between the completion of the 2004 enlargement and the admission of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, especially after the failed referenda on the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands in May and June 2005 and the EU Council's decision to open

¹⁸ For more details on Serbia's official position on Kosovo and its desire to accede to the EU, see e.g. B. Tadić, 2008 and *The Washington Times*, 2010.

negotiations for accession with Turkey in October 2005, the wider intellectual public, some political circles and media in the old EU member states started to question the rationale for rapid EU enlargement (from 15 members before 2004 to 27 in 2007) and began to loudly oppose any further EU enlargement to the east (Phinnemore, 2006; Emerson et al., 2006). Grounding their fears partly in some ‘traditional’ Western media stereotypes (Todorova, 1997, Hatzopoulos, 2003) and structural theories on deep and longstanding socio-political, economic, cultural and even ‘civilisational’ differences between the European West and East (Huntington, 1996/1993) and partly on the legitimate question of whether the EU institutions will be able to continue to effectively function with such a rapid increase of its membership rather than in the post-2004 enlargement development trends,¹⁹ they argued that for the sake of its future progress and internal stability the EU simply could not afford the accession of any more ‘weak’ ex-communist states. Fairly ‘Westernised’ and economically-advanced Croatia is considered to be the ‘only possible exception’ in this regard (Seroka, 2008).

Finding themselves between such pressures and the uncertainty of waiting for the adoption of its new constitutional treaty, which will enable ‘its institutions and decision-making processes [to] remain effective...in a Union of more than 27 Member States’ (European Commission, 2006, pp. 20-21) EU (member states’) leaders decided to discourage any further applications for accession. The European Council meeting of June 2006 requested the EU Commission re-assess the importance of the EU’s so-called *absorption capacity* as an accession criterion²⁰ and submit a detailed report.²¹ In its response, the Commission had formulated a more rigorous tool for negotiating the adoption and implementation of *acquis* chapters by the end of the year in order to ‘ensur[e] that the candidate countries are ready to take on the obligations of membership when they join by fulfilling the rigorous conditions set’ and hence become more *easily absorbable* for the EU (European Commission, 2006, pp. 15). This new (i.e. tougher) approach to the negotiations together with the already increased number of chapters for negotiations (35 instead of the 31 for the 12 countries of the 2004/07 enlargement) has of course affected not only Croatia and Turkey, but also all potential EU candidates from the Western Balkans which are still waiting to open their negotiations.

While Croatia (until recently) and Turkey have had longer accession negotiations with the EU (since October 2005) than any accessory state of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements,²² the insistence on a tougher pre-accession approach in recent years has further slowed down already delayed progress in EU accession for the remaining ‘late post-communist reformers’ from the Western Balkans. Furthermore, pressured by the extending duration of the global economic crisis and the serious threat of the financial collapse of at least half a dozen (old)

¹⁹ The general socio-economic conditions and basic macroeconomic trends, most notably real economic growth, unemployment and inflation rates, remained positive and even improved in both the new and old EU member states in the years between the 2004 enlargement and the eruption of the world economic crisis in 2008 (see Eurostat and also B. Boetcher, 2009).

²⁰ Although it was included in the original Copenhagen accession criteria, this criterion did not play any significant role in the timing of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement processes.

²¹ For more details see Emerson et al., op. cit.

²² The accessory states who joined the EU in 2004 negotiated their accession from 1998 (Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia only from 2000 to December 2002, while Bulgaria and Romania did this during the period 2000-2004.

EU member states, EU leaders have continued with enlargement ‘policy’ based on the combination of the above listed, pre-Lisbon introduced set of restrictive policy measures with an optimistic ‘pro-enlargement’ rhetoric. As a direct consequence, the ‘done deal’ of the inclusion of all the (Western) Balkan states into the Union after ten years of negotiations and the gradual fulfilment of the imposed conditions for EU (pre-)accession seems today to be a very long way off despite some encouraging steps undertaken immediately after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in late 2009²³ and the repeated reassurances of EU leaders.

Although their ‘European perspective’ and ‘EU future’ were promised by the EU, as earlier mentioned on several occasions almost a decade ago (see Section 2) and reassured many times since, (see e.g. Rehn, 2006; European Council 2006a and European Council 2008)²⁴ none of them has yet set a date for opening accession negotiations with the EU (excluding Montenegro, which did so just a few weeks ago – see Table). This means that following the experience of Croatia’s progress in association and accession and the objectively required time for the completion of other necessary steps in the EU accession process (Grabbe et al., 2010) none of the remaining Western Balkan states can hope to join the European Union before 2018 at the earliest. That would be 14 years after the first post-communist states joined the EU in 2004 and 11 years later than neighbouring Bulgaria and Romania were able to do so.

Conclusion

The EU enlargement leverage started to produce positive impacts on the post-communist states in the Western Balkans only after the EU had adopted a ‘coherent strategy’ and Stabilisation and Association Process for the Western Balkan states following the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and after pro-reformist governments strongly committed to accession into the EU had finally been elected to power in all of these states by the early 2000s. However, while significantly contributing to the speeding-up of economic reforms and the initial consolidation of democratic institutions in all of the countries in the region, the ‘coherent strategy’ and SAP conditional approach have not been able to completely eliminate political instability in the multi-national states in the region.

²³ The introduction of a visa-free regime between the EU and Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania as well as the granting of official candidate status to Montenegro and Serbia, and the beginning of accession negotiations with Montenegro in June 2012.

²⁴ However, it is interesting that these reassurances have not been repeated at the highest level (i.e. in the form of the European Council’s Presidency Conclusions) between June 2008 and June 2011. When it was finally expressed again in June 2011, when accompanying the Council’s decision on the accession of Croatia, the EU’s commitment to the accession of the remaining Western Balkan states sounded less optimistic and convincing than previous expressions. While in its meeting in June 2008 the European Council has stated that “[It] reaffirms its full support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans...[which states] should achieve candidate status, according to their own merits, with EU membership as the ultimate goal” in June 2011 it stated *only that* [The conclusion of the accession negotiations with Croatia] “bring[s] a new momentum to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, provided these countries continue on the path of reform” (European Council, June 2008, point 52 and European Council, June 2011, point 32).

In addition to ‘avoiding’ the provision of more resolute and constructive assistance to the current and potential candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans to overcome their problems and fulfil the related accession conditions regarding their national-ethnic conflicts and disputes, the EU has imposed on these states a tougher set of general (Copenhagen) accession criteria than their ex-communist counterparts from Central Europe, the Baltics and the ‘Eastern Balkans’ were required to fulfil. Under these circumstances, the repeated promises and some encouraging steps undertaken immediately after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in late 2009 can barely help in removing the impression that the promised ‘EU future’ of the Western Balkan states now looks more problematic and uncertain than it was ten years ago.

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