

The EU must keep its promise to the Western Balkans

By Tim Judah

- ★ The year 2006 is critical for the Western Balkans. Montenegro has voted in favour of independence, Kosovo negotiates its final status and Bosnia is struggling to push through radical reforms.
- ★ The objective of joining the EU helps these countries to find solutions to their many problems. But growing 'enlargement fatigue' in the EU could leave them disorientated and angry. If the perspective of EU accession receded, the risk of renewed instability would grow.
- ★ The EU has a good strategy for the Western Balkans. But EU leaders should not mix the question of Balkan accession with that of Turkey, or with economic concerns at home. They need to reconfirm their promise to bring these countries into the EU as quickly as reforms in the region allow.

Enlargement has been one of the EU's most successful policies. In the case of the Central and East European countries, the wish to join the Union has helped to foster stability, democratisation and economic reform. The Western Balkans emerged from terrible wars only a decade ago and has since seen bouts of instability and bloodshed. The region's countries need the 'EU anchor' even more than states such as Poland or Hungary did during their transition. Already, the EU has played a positive role in the Balkans. It has helped to broker and implement peace deals, it has sent soldiers and policemen, and it has given aid to rebuild the region's devastated economies. But most importantly, the EU has given the people of the Western Balkans hope – the hope that one day they too will become members of the club.

During 2005, the countries of the Western Balkans all made some progress on their path towards the EU. In 2006, however, the momentum seems to have stalled. EU politicians are openly questioning whether the Union's 'absorption capacity' has been exhausted. Some are already calling for a halt to enlargement once Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia have joined. However, such talk is dangerous at a time when the Western Balkans needs the European perspective to get through a very difficult year.

2006 – a key year for the Western Balkans

There are two main reasons why 2006 is critical. The first is that a question mark now hangs over the relationship between the European Union and the region referred to as the Western Balkans, namely Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Croatia and Albania. Over the last few years, strategic planning for the future of the region has relied on the assumption that it is moving slowly but surely towards EU membership. EU leaders accepted these countries as candidates in principle at the EU-Balkans summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. However, since then the EU has shown increasing signs of 'enlargement fatigue'. At another EU-Balkans meeting in Salzburg in March 2006, the EU reiterated its pledge of keeping the door open. However, this time it added a reference to the Union's 'absorption capacity' as a potential barrier to future accessions. Some prominent politicians in Germany and France have suggested the EU should offer the Balkan countries a 'privileged partnership' instead of full membership.

The EU has already shown that it intends to be tough on potential members. On May 3rd, the European Commission called off talks with Serbia and Montenegro on a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) because the Serbian government had failed to arrest and extradite General Ratko Mladić. The war crimes tribunal in The Hague has indicted Mladić, the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb army, for genocide, including his part in the murder of some 8,000 Bosnian Muslims following the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995.

The second reason for concern is that fears about the EU's commitment to further enlargement come at a time when the Western Balkan countries face highly sensitive decisions concerning their statehood and governance. Negotiations over the 'final status' of Kosovo – the overwhelmingly Albanian region that is formally part of Serbia – started earlier in 2006. On May 21st, Montenegrins voted in favour of ending their 'state union' with Serbia. The EU has been heavily involved in both processes. Radical reforms lie ahead in Bosnia, where the EU is expected to play a bigger role than in the past. Macedonia – now officially a candidate country – is hoping to start accession talks soon. Croatia, which is already in accession negotiations, is banking on rapid progress.

If the credibility of the accession process weakens – because EU leaders put short-term political decisions ahead of long-term strategic considerations – the EU's leverage over the weak states of the Western Balkans will diminish drastically. In this case, economic and administrative reforms would slow down, and the search for sustainable solutions to the outstanding political problems would become vastly more difficult. Instead of entering a new era in which the Western Balkans consolidates internally and focuses on getting ready for EU entry, the region could turn into an entrenched base for trafficking and organised crime and a haven for terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists. Such an outcome would be disastrous for the Western Balkans, and soon also for the rest of Europe.

Ever since the end of the Kosovo war in 1999, western governments have shown a growing sense of complacency about the Western Balkans. The Balkans problem, they seem to think, has been more or less dealt with. However, it is critical for EU policy-makers to understand just how important the possibility of membership is for motivating Balkan governments to keep modernising their countries and aligning their political systems with EU norms.

Kosovo seeks status

The single most difficult issue on the current agenda is Kosovo. Technically it remains a part of Serbia. But since the end of the 1999 war, Kosovo has come under the jurisdiction of the United Nations. Of its two million-odd people, well over 90 per cent are ethnic Albanians who have consistently demanded full independence. If they do not get it, or believe they are moving towards it, the hard-liners among them could return to violence.

About 100,000 Serbs remain in Kosovo, either in an area of the north abutting Serbia proper, or in enclaves across the province. In essence, two rights under international law clash in Kosovo: the Albanians' right to self-determination and Serbia's right to territorial integrity. Serbia's leaders have proposed giving Kosovo "more than autonomy but less than independence". Kosovo Albanian leaders reject this out of hand.

UN-mandated talks on the 'final status' of Kosovo began on February 20th 2006. Both the EU and the US are represented at the talks, which are led by Martti Ahtisaari, a former Finnish president. He is widely expected to recommend to the Security Council later this year that Kosovo should obtain independence, albeit with some, probably time-limited, conditions. Serbia will reject this, although it will not be in a position to do much about it. However, the Serbian leadership could encourage moves that would make any imposed settlement difficult to enforce. For example, it could encourage Serbs in the north of the province to declare independence from Kosovo and eject institutions such as the police, which are already weak in Serbian areas. Clashes could occur in and around the Serbian enclaves, triggering another exodus of Serbs from these areas. The EU is expected to play a major role in Kosovo once its status has been resolved. Assuming that Kosovo will become independent, the EU is planning to send a representative, establish a rule of law mission and help reform the state bureaucracy.

Radicals are gaining ground in Serbia

Independence for Kosovo would not trigger another Balkan war – 17,000 NATO-led troops in Kosovo and a 6,000 strong EU military force in Bosnia would see to that. But it could fuel support for the extreme nationalist Radical party in Serbia. Although the party's nominal leader, Vojislav Šešelj, sits behind bars in The Hague, the Radicals are already the biggest single party in the Serbian parliament, and the latest opinion polls give them support of around 36 per cent, albeit of a very disillusioned electorate of which only 48 per cent say they would be sure to vote.

A Radical-led government would be bad news, not only for Serbia but for the wider region. It could encourage the Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo to be more obstructive and stubborn. Serbia's talks with the EU (and NATO) on future membership would remain suspended. An isolated and angry Serbia could once again become Europe's pariah – and a drag on the westward move of the rest of the Balkans.

A Radical government in Serbia would also play into the hands of the opponents of further EU expansion. They would argue that the Western Balkans are replete with immature and corrupt politicians and that, rather than integrating the region, the EU should keep its existing tough visa requirements and use other barriers to fence it off.

Some policy-makers in the US are now arguing that the risk of a radicalisation of Serbian politics would be reduced if the process of making Kosovo independent was delayed. This would give the international community more time to help guide Serbia safely into the EU and NATO. It is no longer practicable to put the question of Kosovo on hold, though it is true that Serbia would find it easier to accept independence for Kosovo if the whole region kept moving towards the EU. The EU still holds the carrot of resuming talks for an SAA. An SAA – which covers trade and political co-operation – is an important step on the path to EU membership. Only after such an agreement has been signed can countries hope to gain official candidate status and then start accession talks. If General Mladić were arrested soon, Serbia and the EU could still hope to sign an SAA before the end of the year, bringing the EU process back on track.

Montenegrins vote on independence

Meanwhile, Serbs are also trying to come to terms with Montenegro's decision to become fully independent. Until 1997 Montenegro had stood steadfastly with Serbia. But after Milo Djukanović, the then president and now prime minister, fell out with Slobodan Milošević, he started pushing for independence. After Milošević's fall, Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, stepped in. He feared that if the 672,000 Montenegrins voted for independence, it would unsettle Kosovo again. In 2002 he persuaded Montenegro and Serbia to replace the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with a loose 'state union', but with the proviso that either republic could opt to leave after three years.

On May 21st 2006, 55.5 per cent of Montenegrins opted for independence in a referendum. EU governments heaved a sigh of relief, not only because the vote went surprisingly smoothly, but also because the outcome did not fall within a grey zone between 50 per cent and 55 per cent voting. Pro-independence Montenegrins had argued that any vote above 50 per cent would be enough for independence but the EU had insisted that the threshold be raised to 55 per cent.

EU diplomacy was successful, thanks to the EU's two envoys, Miroslav Lajčák and Ľudovít Vít, both seasoned and Serbian-speaking diplomats from Slovakia, a country that had lived through its own 'velvet divorce' from the Czech Republic in 1993. Montenegro will now be allowed to continue SAA talks on its own, which may focus some minds in Belgrade.

Bosnia-Herzegovina – still growing together

The future of Bosnia is also intimately bound up with the EU. Without a doubt, the Dayton peace accord of 1995 was a success in terms of ending the war. However, its legacy is a complicated and dysfunctional state, which urgently needs reform. Today Bosnia, with around 3.5 million people, has two 'entities', a weak central government and one autonomous zone (the Brčko district). The Serb part of Bosnia is called the Republika Srpska and the Croat-Bosniak part is called the Federation (Bosniak is the name now used for Bosnian Muslims). The Federation is subdivided into ten cantons, each with a powerful local administration. In short, Bosnia is expensive and cumbersome to run.

Since 1997, Bosnia's administration has been overseen by a High Representative who has the power to remove politicians and officials if they refuse to accept reforms. The use of these 'Bonn powers', backed up by EU demands, has set Bosnia on a course towards modernisation and reform. For example, Bosnia had to plough through a list of 16 tough measures, such as energy sector restructuring, improvements in the customs and tax systems and streamlining the bureaucracy, before the EU gave the go-ahead for SAA talks in November 2005.¹

¹ For a contrary view of the EU's role in Bosnia, see Edward Joseph, 'A decade after Dayton: Lessons not to learn about democracy building from Bosnia', *Democracy at large*, IFES, Vol 2, No 2, 2006.

Clearly, a country cannot aspire to EU membership as long as the last word in its governance rests with an appointed outsider. Bosnia's new High Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, therefore aims to abolish the job by June 30th 2007. Like his predecessor, Lord Ashdown, he doubles as EU Special Representative in Bosnia. As the role of the High Representative weakens, the role of the EU Special Representative becomes

more important. In other words, Brussels conditionality will gradually replace the Bonn powers. However, the EU's influence will be a lot weaker if its governments keep sending mixed signals about membership. Already, some in Bosnia suspect that the Bosnian parliament's rejection of key constitutional reforms in April 2006 was related to the EU's dwindling credibility.

Similarly, police reform – another key EU demand – remains stuck. The EU would like new police districts to straddle the boundaries of the two entities so that local politicians can no longer use the police for their own ends (such as protecting rather than arresting indicted war criminals). If the Bonn powers were abolished at a time when EU accession prospects remained bleak, politics would become gridlocked again. Bosnian Serb leaders would retreat from working with the country's central institutions and Bosnia's Croats would clamour ever more loudly for a third Croat entity within Bosnia. Bosnia – an already enfeebled state – would wither. An embittered Muslim entity would be all that remained. Bosnia could become a failed state. By contrast it is noticeable that in the one area where Bosnia's two entities and three peoples all agree to aim for – European integration – Bosnians can work together in perfect and efficient harmony. This is clearly symbolised by the team brought together by Igor Davidovic, Bosnia's (Serb) chief negotiator and the director of the team in charge of preparations, (Bosniak) Osman Topcagic.

Croatia's fate matters

Croatia's EU accession is often seen as separate from that of the rest of the Western Balkans, but Croatia's fate matters for the whole region. Croatia is richer, more stable and more developed than its eastern neighbours. Even enlargement-sceptic member-states, such as Austria and France, strongly support Croatian accession. Nevertheless, the EU's decision in October 2005 to start accession talks with Zagreb was taken by the other Balkan countries as a sign that the EU is serious about further enlargement.

With its 2,000-strong team of negotiators, lawyers and lobbyists working at full speed on pre-accession preparations, the Croatian government hopes to join as early as 2009. Early Croatian accession would be welcome in the whole region, provided the EU signals that its door remains open. However, if Croatia slipped in while the other Balkan countries were left with dim prospects, its membership could even serve to destabilise the wider region.

The wealth gap between Croatia and Bosnia would widen further and emigration from Bosnia would accelerate. Many Bosnian Croats (plus those from mixed families) have already obtained Croatian citizenship, and many more could apply, not least because a Croatian passport allows them to travel to the EU without a visa. The number of Bosnian Croats has already halved from 800,000 before the war, and could fall further. The remaining ones would resent the Bosnian state thrust upon them against their will. They would reinforce their inflammatory demands for a Bosnian Croat entity, which would undermine attempts to build a stronger central state in Bosnia.

Macedonia: the EU's unsung success

Macedonia is the EU's big, unsung success story in the Balkans, but a continued EU perspective is crucial for this success to be sustained. At least a quarter of Macedonia's two million-odd people are ethnic Albanians. Just like Bosnia's Croats and Serbs, they were initially unenthusiastic about their new state, especially as it divided them from their ethnic kin in neighbouring Kosovo. In 2001 ethnic Albanian guerrillas, with support from Kosovo, started fighting for a separation from Macedonia.

The EU helped to dampen down the fires, before they could develop into a full-blown war. Diplomats from the EU played a key role in securing and then nurturing the peace agreement of 2001, known as the Ohrid accord. The peace deal came in the wake of the EU and Macedonia signing an SAA – a crucial although not official prelude to the overall deal. To secure the peace, the EU's first-ever military mission took over from the local NATO force in 2003 (this was later succeeded by an EU police mission).

Since then, the former adversaries have worked side by side, within the government and more broadly, towards a common aim: EU membership. To acknowledge the progress made with stabilisation and reform, the EU officially accepted Macedonia as a candidate in December 2005. The Commission has drawn up a list of measures that Macedonia has to implement, ranging from strengthening the rule of law to improving environmental protection.

Although Macedonia is now further on its way into the EU than most of its neighbours, its stability cannot be taken for granted. A weakening of the EU anchor could encourage Macedonia's Albanian minority to look for an alternative in the form of a 'greater Kosovo' or 'greater Albania'. If such demands flared up, the result could be violence, mass movements of people and even another redrawing of Balkan borders. Prolonged

delays in the accession process would provide ammunition to nationalists in both communities. It would also encourage more and more ethnic Macedonians to leave their country. Already, tens of thousands have used even the most tenuous links to claim Bulgarian passports. The motivation to do so will only become stronger once Bulgaria has joined the EU.

Albanians abroad

Albania can also claim close links with the EU – albeit of a very different nature. Some 35 per cent of Albania's labour force works abroad, either legally or illegally, of which an estimated 600,000 are in Greece and 200,000 in Italy.² A large part of the Albanian economy depends on remittances from EU countries. If Albania wants to join the EU one day, it needs to build a more sustainable basis for economic growth.

² Barjaba Kosta, 'Albania looking beyond borders', *Migration Information*, August 2004. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=239>.

Already, Albania has improved immeasurably since its economic and political meltdown in 1997. The government is stable, and the IMF is holding Albania's hand in trying to fix the economy. The authorities have clamped down on organised crime, in particular the trafficking of people, weapons and drugs across the Adriatic. Some big-name gangsters have been arrested and Albanians are no longer allowed to use speed boats for the purposes of illegal immigration.

Albanians are aware of the enormity of the tasks they face before they will be ready to join the EU. But after decades of communist isolation and 15 years of uncertainty, lawlessness and sometimes outright chaos, the Albanians are extremely willing EU partners. Following the 2005 elections, the new government was able to speed up negotiations on an SAA, which was concluded in early 2006.

Keep up the pace

The end of 2005 was good for the Western Balkans. Every country in the region advanced one step towards the EU, which created an overall sense of momentum: between October 2005 and February 2006, Croatia started accession talks; Serbia and Montenegro as well as Bosnia began negotiations on an SAA; Macedonia was accepted as an EU candidate; and Albania concluded its SAA with the EU.

³ European Commission, '2005 enlargement strategy paper', November 9th 2005. For a summary of the strategy and the Commission communication, see Institute of European Affairs, 'Balkans update', No 10, March 2006.

In November 2005, the European Commission reconfirmed its commitment to enlargement in an updated strategy. With regard to the Western Balkans, the Commission argued that "a convincing political perspective for eventual integration into the EU is crucial to keep their reforms on track".³ In January 2006, the Commission followed up with a communication that laid out a series of practical measures for the Western Balkans and encouraged the countries concerned to form a regional free trade area.⁴ At present, the Western Balkan states are linked through a complex web of bilateral trade

deals. Most of them are more restrictive than the deals that the Western Balkan countries have concluded with the EU. The result is that it is easier to sell, say, Bosnian wine in Germany than in Serbia. Moreover, the paperwork needed to move goods across the region can be prohibitive. The EU wants to see bilateral rules replaced with a region-wide system to encourage economic integration.

⁴ European Commission, 'The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: Consolidating stability and raising prosperity', January 2006.

The EU has also made available a chunk of money to help the Western Balkans prepare for accession. During the 2007-2013 budget, the EU will deliver aid through a new instrument of pre-accession assistance (IPA), which consolidates monies in EU programmes such as PHARE and CARDS, currently delivered through the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR). Although the final details of future funding for the Western Balkans have not yet been agreed, the Commission has pledged that the sums will not be smaller than the €679 million earmarked in the 2006 budget, and could hopefully be larger.

Since the end of the Balkan wars, the EU has spent much of its aid to the region on physical reconstruction, such as rebuilding houses in Bosnia and Kosovo, bridges destroyed by NATO in Serbia and roads across the region. Infrastructure improvements have been key for the region's economic revival and the re-establishment of economic links between the different countries.

More recently, the EU has shifted its focus towards strengthening state administrations and public institutions, to enable them to understand, implement and enforce EU rules and regulations. The EU has extended its successful 'twinning' programme to the Western Balkans. For example, the EU will bring French and Slovene experts together with Serbian and Montenegrin officials responsible for EU

integration to share expertise and experience. These kinds of exchanges have already helped some of the Balkan countries. Thus in 2004-05 Macedonian officials managed to answer in record time the 3,000 questions that the Commission had posed to prepare its 'opinion' on the country's membership application. During this exercise they received a lot of help from Croatian colleagues who had only recently undergone the same exercise.

Unemployment remains a problem

EU money and advice are also crucial for addressing two of the more serious problems shared by all the Western Balkan countries, namely economic weakness and organised crime.

Growth has returned to the region and people's incomes are rising gradually. The size of Serbia's economy has more than doubled in the last five years (in dollar terms), and Bosnia's economy has been growing by more than 5 per cent a year. Macedonia's growth is more subdued but the country boasts low inflation, a sound budget and very little public debt.

Nevertheless, the region's economies remain weak. Unemployment remains a major problem, although official statistics tend to overstate jobless numbers. For example, Bosnia's official unemployment rate is 43 per cent and Serbia's 32 per cent. Once those people working in the grey economy are taken into account, real unemployment is probably closer to 16-20 per cent in both countries – though still a worryingly high number. Poverty is widespread and social security systems remain extremely weak. Almost a fifth of Bosnians live below the poverty line, and another 30 per cent hover just above it.

Political stability and the prospect of getting closer to the EU have encouraged economic reform across the Western Balkans. Foreign companies, from French supermarket chains to Italian car-makers, are moving into the region in the belief that in a decade or so it will join the EU. The experience of other Central and East European applicant countries suggests that the real rush of foreign investors only starts once accession has become a certainty, and economic and legal preparations have speeded up accordingly. Conversely, diminishing accession prospects could lead to a slackening in reform efforts and a loss of confidence among investors. Slower output growth, rising unemployment and a return to economic instability would trigger new waves of illegal migration to the richer EU countries.

Another area that has seen much progress in recent years is the fight against organised crime. Again, the EU has been instrumental. First, it has told the governments in the region that progress towards EU accession will depend on reinforced efforts to clamp down on smuggling and organised crime (although some think that the EU could be a lot tougher in its conditionality). Second, gradual EU integration entails closer police co-operation, including help with modern technology and policing methods, culminating in better relations between interior ministries.

Visa walls

One area where the EU has made little progress in recent years is in making it easier for the people of the Western Balkans to travel.⁵ EU embassies require stacks of documents for visa applications, and some of their requirements do not appear necessary. A well-known Serbian science-fiction writer in his late fifties recounts how one EU embassy asked him for a certificate to prove he was not pregnant. Since many of the required

⁵ *International Crisis Group*, 'EU visas and the Western Balkans', November 29th 2005. documents need to be translated and notarised, the application process can become very expensive. Obtaining a visa to the EU can cost the equivalent of two weeks' wages, and frequently more. Moreover, the various restrictions encourage corruption in the visa process.

The EU's highly restrictive visa regime harms business and makes the people in the region feel unwanted and isolated. The vast majority of young people in the Western Balkans have never left the region. Some 70 per cent of students at Belgrade University, for example, have never travelled across the border. If the young had greater opportunity to visit West European countries and see what modernisation and reform can deliver, they could become less amenable to radical and nationalist political options. Businesspeople complain that they are missing out on lucrative deals in the EU since they are still queuing at the embassy while their competitors are already signing the contracts.

EU interior ministers regularly cite the threat of organised crime as a reason for not making the visa process easier and quicker. This is nonsense. Organised criminals run rackets in stolen passports and forged visas, and they seldom have a problem in getting where they want. The EU needs to progressively phase out visa restrictions, as it did in the case of Croatia. It should also make funds available to give as large a number of students as possible the chance to spend some time studying in EU countries.

Hostage to enlargement fatigue

Overall, the EU has a sensible strategy for the Western Balkans, and the Commission and the Council are committed to working together to implement it. However, this strategy is not sufficiently backed by political will in the EU's capitals and more and more people in the current EU are becoming sceptical about future enlargement. According to the Eurobarometer polls conducted in the spring of 2006, only 45 per cent of the people in the EU-25 would support further enlargement. In Germany, France and Austria, support is 30 per cent or less. This matters because France has changed its constitution to insist on referendums on all future accessions after Croatia.

Faced with growing public scepticism, only a small handful of European politicians now make a strong case for further enlargement of the Union. In the words of the International Commission on the Balkans, which included Giuliano Amato and Carl Bildt, former prime ministers of Italy and Sweden, respectively: "Alarmed by the results of the referenda in France and the Netherlands on the ratification of the EU constitution, the leaders of the EU have retreated into policies that, instead of transforming the Balkans, propose merely to manage the status quo".⁶

⁶ *International Commission on the Balkans*, <http://www.balkan-commission.org/>.

It is important to disentangle the arguments used against Western Balkan membership. Some people doubt whether countries such as Bosnia or Albania are capable of making the reforms necessary for membership, and many worry about the risk of resurgent nationalism and political instability across the region. These challenges are real but solvable, especially if the EU anchor remains firm. But there are also obstacles that have little to do with the Western Balkans. Many EU leaders are concerned that unless the EU manages to thoroughly reform its institutions and decision-making procedures, the addition of more countries could bring the Union to a standstill. In short, they fear that further widening of the EU would come at the expense of its ability to drive European integration forward.⁷

⁷ Katinka Barysch, 'Widening, deepening and the prospects for Turkish membership', paper for the 6th Turkey-EU Membership Observatory, May 2006.

interior minister and presidential hopeful, is one of those who have called for a freeze on enlargement until the EU has re-organised its institutions. Instead, Sarkozy has suggested that those still queuing for accession should be offered 'strategic partnerships'. Similarly, Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has suggested that a 'privileged partnership' should be an option for Turkey.

Absorption capacity as an excuse

These concerns also came to the fore in March 2006, when EU foreign ministers met their counterparts from the Western Balkans in Salzburg. Although EU ministers declared that "the EU confirms that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union", they added that "the EU also notes that its absorption capacity must be taken into account".⁸ Although the ability of the EU to cope with a large membership is already part of the Copenhagen criteria for membership, observers in the Western Balkans took the statement as a reflection of the EU's growing timidity about further expansion.

⁸ *Council of the EU, 'Salzburg EU-Western Balkans joint press statement', March 11th 2006.*

Clearly, without reforming its institutions the EU cannot absorb new members. However, the question of further enlargement should remain marginal to the broader debates about the future of the EU and its institutions; it should not be used as ammunition by those who dislike the way the EU is developing. With the exception of Bulgaria and Romania (which are already taken into account in the Nice treaty) as well as Croatia, no Balkan country is set to join the Union before 2014 at the very earliest. Irrespective of the fate of the EU constitutional treaty, the EU should have found a way to function effectively with a larger membership by then. It would be a mistake to end or slow moves towards Western Balkan enlargement until the EU has sorted out institutional questions. Such a pause would run the risk of the Balkan countries wasting years deprived of external pressures to reform. The work of preparing the Western Balkans for membership must go on in parallel with the EU's institutional reforms so that the countries of the Balkans can be ready for the EU when the EU is ready for them.

Perhaps the real reason for EU leaders' apparent ambiguity about further enlargement has little to do with the Western Balkans and more to do with Turkey.

Wolfgang Schüssel, the Austrian Chancellor, has led the calls for the EU to make 'absorption capacity' a key consideration in further enlargement. Like many of his Austrian colleagues, Schüssel openly supports membership for the Western Balkans but opposes Turkish accession. However, not all European politicians have the courage to make this distinction openly. They believe it is politically incorrect to say that they would support Western Balkan accession but not the membership of a large, poor and predominantly Muslim country. Thus the Western Balkans risks becoming collateral damage in the EU's wider debate on whether Turkish membership is a good idea.

Turkey's membership has its own merits. But supporters of Western Balkan membership should have the courage to highlight the differences between the two accession processes. For example, Turkey's territory is only partly in Europe. But the Western Balkans will be entirely surrounded by EU countries once Bulgaria and Romania have joined the EU. To exclude the Western Balkans risks creating a zone of instability in the middle of the Union. All the Western Balkan countries together have only 22 million people, which would add only 4 per cent to the population of the EU-25. Turkey has a fast-growing population of 70 million. By the time it is ready for membership it is likely to be bigger than any other EU country.

What the EU needs to do now

The International Commission on the Balkans warned in May 2006 that a failure to integrate the Balkans could have severe consequences for the EU's ability to act in a wider Europe, adding that "unless the EU adopts a bold accession strategy which integrates all Balkan countries into the Union within the next decade, it will remain mired as a reluctant colonial power at enormous cost in places like Kosovo, Bosnia and even Macedonia".

EU politicians need to understand how important a factor accession is in stabilising the Western Balkans. If that attraction fades, the progress made in the region over the last few years could be lost. The Union could then be faced with an embittered region in its midst, in which sectarianism and organised crime thrive, and from which ever more people will flee, either as economic migrants or as refugees.

It is therefore critically important that the EU stands by its commitment of Thessaloniki eventually to allow the Western Balkan countries to join. The people in the Western Balkans know that many difficult reforms will be necessary to prepare their countries for membership. But EU politicians need to understand that the demands they are making on these countries – from fighting organised crime to privatising industries – will only be credible if they are backed by the EU's continued commitment to Western Balkan membership.

The accession of the Western Balkans is a long-term prospect. But there are various steps the EU could undertake in the meantime to help to sustain the reform momentum in the region.

Most urgently, the EU should signal to Serbia, the key state in the region, that Kosovo independence is inevitable. At the same time, it needs to reassure Belgrade that it can move quickly back to the European mainstream if it is prepared to co-operate on finding a sustainable solution for the Kosovo Serbs, and to work for a mutual and profitable relationship between Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro. The EU must also make it clear that it is committed to playing a full and stabilising role in Kosovo and in Bosnia, where it will need to use its weight to help consolidate both states.

Moreover, the EU needs to move faster to ease the tight visa restrictions that currently apply for these countries. The ability to travel, do business and study in EU countries will help to alleviate the sense of alienation and exclusion that is felt by many in the Western Balkans today.

At the Thessaloniki summit in June 2003, EU leaders reassured their counterparts from the Western Balkans that they would "not regard the map of the Union as complete until you have joined us". This is a promise that must be held to for the sake of all concerned.



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