

## ***The Western Balkans, democracy and EU accession***

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Democracy always projects a horizon of both hope and dissatisfaction. It has been convincingly argued that democracy looks towards a better future, expected and demanded by citizens who recognize themselves as holders of inalienable rights that the political sphere should respect and foster.<sup>1</sup> Just as it is associated with the enjoyment of rights, freedoms, peace and prosperity, the inherently undefined, promising future that is projected by democracy, unavoidably raises dissatisfaction and disappointment. It can be all too easily and simplistically criticised as a pending, forever on-going agenda, calling for the redress of social ills. Indeed, it is not until recent decades that democracy, this 'quintessentially contested concept', has been so widely embraced. The result: a proliferation of democratically governed states and regimes claiming to be democratic.

Many similarities may be drawn with what EU accession projects. Over the past decade in particular, EU accession has projected and nurtured promises and expectations for a better, more prosperous, safer future among citizens in the Western Balkans. These citizens recognize themselves as holders of inalienable rights; rights that have so far been restricted, first by communist regimes and then by multiple and deeply painful transitions. As tends to often be the case, however, hope and great expectations raise equal levels of dissatisfaction, fatigue and frustration. And in the case of the Western Balkans and their hope for EU accession, this side of the coin appears to be felt by all sides.

It is felt first and foremost by the countries of the Western Balkans. Transition fatigue and numerous challenges of pursuing market liberalization, democratization, and rule of law unavoidably raise dissatisfaction, fatigue, frustration and disappointment towards the EU and often also towards their own governing political elites. Regular assessments by the EU and international financial institutions may tilt the balance between hope and dissatisfaction either way depending on how progress on the conditionality criteria is evaluated, and on whether or not they bring the distant goalpost of EU accession closer. Herein lays the strength and vulnerability of the EU's conditionality approach. While it has successfully encouraged and managed transitions to liberal democratic states across Europe, it has also been susceptible to simple and sometimes even simplistic criticism for its on-going multilateralism and its insistence on gradualism and negotiation which underpin its soft-power and the community method. When it comes to the Western Balkans, the EU is often criticized of applying double standards. It is criticized for alternating and differentially prioritising between political and technical conditionality criteria, and for sometimes using conditionality as a diplomatic tool, while other times presenting it as a principled policy. In all fairness, the balancing act is not an easy one particularly when the EU and its member states have to manage the accession process in parallel to other, equally significant foreign policy and regional security objectives.

Dissatisfaction is also felt within the EU. The rather significant political and economic hurdles within the Western Balkans that have still not been overcome trigger some degree of frustration among European political elites. European politicians and policy-makers have become deadlocked in a repetitive discourse of enlargement fatigue. Add to this a noticeable reality of a diluted sense of community among the EU27 and the picture

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<sup>1</sup> See Guillermo O' Donnell, "The Perpetual Crisis of Democracy," in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.18:1 (2007).

appears rather stagnant and unpromising. EU elites underline the importance of conditionality and the need to proceed in small, well-measured, incremental steps as regard the EU's next enlargement in the region. This makes perfect sense in terms of successfully managing the widening-deepening challenges that the EU is facing internally. However, the EU's role and presence in the Western Balkans is of equal significance for the European project and for the future of the European security community.

Lastly, dissatisfaction comes from the US that is overstretched in other parts of the world and wants to see the Western Balkans quickly integrated into EU and NATO structures. US dissatisfaction tends to be expressed as impatience towards both the Europeans and the actors in the region for dragging their feet. Washington would prefer to neatly close pending matters in the Western Balkans and move on, as it were. But moving too fast without necessary preconditions being substantially met is risky and bound to complicate matters further.

Yet all is not bleak. It is indeed encouraging that almost all parties concerned remain in agreement that EU accession is the only viable strategy for the Western Balkan countries and that in most cases, this ought to be accompanied with NATO accession. So, what can be done to move matters forward and move beyond current dissatisfaction? A group of policy-makers and academics came together in a conference organised by the Woodrow Wilson Center in Thessaloniki, Greece, in late November 2007 to discuss precisely this question.

Policy makers in the EU and the Western Balkans seem to be struggling with three sets of challenges. The first entails translating the commitment to EU accession that has been made, and repeatedly reiterated, into a process that offers substantial and meaningful intermediate rewards for the Western Balkan states. This must be done while reassuring the EU member states that conditionality criteria have been met on the part of the candidate states, that progress has indeed been accomplished, and that the accession pace and the rewards are 'digestible' domestically, by their public. The second challenge involves finding ways to promote consequential intra-regional cooperation while at the same time further integrating the region into the wider European economic realm. Neither involves reinventing the wheel yet both remain compound with difficulties not yet overcome. Regardless of the numerous difficulties, both are indispensable to facilitate the consolidation of democracy in the countries of Southeast Europe, and gradually move towards their accession to the EU. The third challenge is more intangible and involves perceptions and expectations. It involves understanding that EU accession is a process leading to membership in a Union that has an undefined *finalité politique* and a dynamic, on-going agenda that aims to tackle the redress of social and other challenges. As such, economic and political conditionality criteria ought not to be viewed as targets but as minimum standards.

Regarding intermediate rewards the EU can offer, these may range from access to financial instruments, to visa facilitation matters and student mobility programmes. Rather straight-forward it would appear. However, these require significant political will and even more institutional capacity on the part of the Western Balkan states to comply with the necessary conditions required for the rewards to be granted. A number of questions are unavoidably raised. Will intermediate rewards encourage further progress or might they lead to a degree of complacency once certain satisfactory thresholds are achieved? Particularly since the next enlargement round is apparently not feasible for a few more years. Moreover, can conditionality be used in a tactical manner without discrediting the

essential principles of conditionality? Further still, should the EU continue to focus on institution-building and strengthening institutional capacity in order to support these countries in their efforts to meet the conditionality requirements, or are there limits to top-down transformational diplomacy?

As far as integration is concerned, it continues to be pursued in functionalist terms. Economic inter-dependence and intensified cooperation on technical issues, trade and infrastructure are the tried and tested paths to economic development and democratic peace. The EU project testifies to the political value of increasing and improving cross-border interaction of all forms. A closer look at trade, energy, people and policies is appropriate here. First, given that the region's economies are of a very limited size and most of their trade is with the EU, the qualitative dimension of trade is of relevance. Increasing intra-industry trade across Southeast Europe is thus a priority. Second, the development of a regional approach to energy supply does not only aim to overcome the current fragmentation of energy supply through physical (re)connections of the network, improving the utilization of existing supply and production capacities and optimizing future investments. It is constructed around the premise that enhanced cooperation among the various entities within the Western Balkans and with the EU will lead to improved energy security for all concerned parties. It will also contribute to the extension of the European security community across the entire region. Thus, the Energy Community Treaty is a major pillar in this field. Third, increased integration in specific policy areas between the countries of Southeast Europe and the EU ought to be pursued more enthusiastically. For instance, increased cooperation with border control and police agencies as well as cooperation on other non-security related aspects of visa, asylum and immigration policies may facilitate pre-accession preparation in matters of Justice and Home Affairs. The EU's 'Blue Card' scheme is a constructive step in this direction.

Practical steps such as these are necessary, but alone, are insufficient. A strong dose of pragmatic optimism is just as necessary for things to move forward in the Western Balkans. Pragmatic in terms of realizing that EU accession is far from offering an easy fix; optimistic in terms of constructively engaging in efforts aimed at enhancing the *capacity* of all sides and clearly indicating the *will* to comply, to accede and also, to enlarge.

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