



Unfinished business in the Balkans

by Eva Gross

The in-tray of the new leadership team in Brussels is full of urgent files that reflect the challenges posed by a rapidly changing global environment. But as several recent developments have shown, Europe's 'unfinished business' in the Western Balkans is no less pressing.

The 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration promised EU integration – and eventual membership – to all countries in the region. Yet over a decade later, only two states have attained this goal: Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013. All other countries in the Western Balkans have either gained candidate status or count as potential candidates, and some have begun accession negotiations.

But, today, progress is largely stalled – particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – for reasons which range from sovereignty and border disputes to electoral deadlock.

The negative repercussions of the financial crisis for the region also suggest that the original offer made by the EU and its partners – membership of transatlantic organisations and European integration, coupled with economic reforms modelled on the so-called 'Washington consensus' – is no longer as appealing as it once was. This, in turn, has led some to question the attractiveness of the EU model or at least the ability of the prospect of EU membership alone to act as a conflict resolution tool.

The recent announcement of Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker that the next five years will not see any additional accession should be read in this light. While it does not mean that the integration process itself is to be put on hold, it does reveal concerns over admitting new members while the Union is still grappling with the challenges to internal cohesion generated by the financial crisis and its aftermath.

Moreover, none of the current candidate countries are likely to finalise accession within that time frame. As a result, emphasis has been placed on *negotiations* rather than *integration* (even in the title of the portfolio assigned to Commissioner Johannes Hahn), something which suggests a broader reappraisal of the EU's mode of engagement.

Votes and matches

The remaining 'difficult' cases, in particular, will require a greater focus on the strategic dimension of the EU's relations with individual countries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the elections held on 12 October reflected the political gridlock still paralysing the country. They also served as a reminder that the constitutional structures created at Dayton almost 20 years ago render it, even today, a far from viable state. What is more, none of the candidates in the recent polls addressed the prospect of European integration, confirming the

existence of a persistent mismatch between long-term perspectives and current realities.

The June 2014 elections in Kosovo have, so far, not resulted in the formation of a government, and a re-run remains on the cards. This political limbo is also affecting progress on the normalisation of relations with Serbia. Although technical working groups (on issues ranging from integrated border management to energy and free movement) continue to meet, the absence of an elected government in Kosovo means that there is little pressure on Belgrade to open dialogues on new areas which would move the two sides closer to a lasting agreement.

Beyond these governance (and governmental) challenges, regional cooperation is also beset by ethnic tensions at all levels – as illustrated by the football match between Serbia and Albania on 14 October, which was abandoned following a fight between players on both sides over a remote-controlled drone carrying a flag depicting ‘Greater Albania’. A dispute over Kosovo then also marred what should have been a historic occasion: the first visit to Serbia by an Albanian leader in 68 years, which took place on 10 November.

Building (and stumbling) blocks

Financial pledges made during the Western Balkans conference in Berlin last August prove that EU member states take the current impasse seriously. This willingness presents an opportunity also for the EU to better coordinate its approach, reinvigorate the instruments at its disposal, and build on past achievements in its future engagement with the region.

Perhaps the most obvious recent success has been the significant progress made through the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Facilitated by former HR/VP Catherine Ashton, this cleared a major hurdle towards candidate status for Serbia, set in motion work on technical cooperation, and led to regular meetings and talks at the highest political level between Serbia and Kosovo.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU’s approach of political and economic conditionality is in need of invigoration, possibly through firm promises (rather than preliminary evidence) of institutional reforms on the part of the Bosnian leadership in exchange for EU funds and member states’ support for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), as recently suggested by the UK and Germany.

Finally, two CSDP missions – EULEX Kosovo and EUFOR Althea – continue to build capacity and flank the EU’s political and economic engagement with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both cases, however, highlight the tension between local ownership and EU oversight. Recent allegations of corruption against EULEX risk undermining public faith in the Union’s procedures – and show the extent to which the EU’s biggest mission, tasked with institutional reform, operates in a highly politicised environment.

As for EUFOR Althea, whose mandate has just been extended for one year by the UN Security Council (with Russia’s abstention), its diminished size reflects the stabilisation of the security environment; but unresolved political disputes reinforce the impression of continued instability that, for some, would have made the operation’s planned closure premature.

Destination Brussels

Finally, the crisis in and around Ukraine continues to cast a long shadow over the EU’s relations with its eastern neighbours. To the southeast, geopolitical rivalries and disputes over spheres of influence appear to be less relevant, although allegiances in some Western Balkan countries – namely Montenegro and, more importantly, Serbia – have lately been put into question. President Putin’s recent visit to Belgrade, for example, reinforced the notion of Russia’s influence and historic ties in the region. In any case, it would certainly appear that Moscow is tempting selected regional elites to turn to their Slavic ‘big brother’, and utilise pan-Slavism as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the EU.

Nevertheless, EU membership remains an attractive and strategic goal for all countries in the region: also because there is no realistic alternative. Over the past decade, the Union has built structures and focused on cooperation – a role, and a model, it needs to reinvest in.

Addressing this unfinished business will require the new team in Brussels to make use of various methods and bodies – including the Commission’s Working Group on External Relations. If it is true that foreign policy begins at home, it is appropriate that the EU’s first test be in its immediate neighbourhood.

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