

The Need for a New ‘Big Bang’ Western Balkans and Europe at Crossroads

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Christophe Solioz¹

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Europe today is completely different from what it was some fifteen years ago, as are the Balkan countries — obviously for different reasons. Let me start with a brief review of the situation of the Balkans’ countries not (yet) part of the EU. Contrary to what is often stated, the overall picture across the region is far more positive than negative. Of course, some crucial questions remain short of resolution: the status of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s truly reintegration and, above all, the — now blocked — enlargement process.

Regional overview

Croatia has successfully implemented many reforms in various spheres of social life and government. The country also met some ‘special conditions’ having to do with the return of displaced persons and refugees, and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Thus, as a candidate country, the Republic of Croatia is ‘out of the woods’ with the promise of full-fledged membership as soon as the enlargement process moves ahead.²

Albania and *Macedonia*, somehow still weak and fragile, have nevertheless made much progress and could follow soon.

*Bosnia and Herzegovina*³ is unrecognisable from twelve years ago. I would like to mention one point: while the country seems unfortunately not yet ready to take full responsibility for its future, it must move step-by-step from the ‘Bonn powers’ to the EU conditionality. A reframed and effective OHR — with a Bosnian Deputy High Representative to boost the partnership between ‘internationals’ and ‘locals’ — must now finish the job and make the country ready for membership. Bosnian politicians could be inspired by Slovakia’s successful sprint to catch up with the rest of Central Europe in the post-Meciar years, and welcome Miroslav Lajčák as the last High Representative.

Montenegro divorced successfully from Serbia; having realized the dream of independence, the country is moving toward the EU dream. It is noteworthy that the secession of Montenegro was peaceful and didn’t contribute to instability in Serbia.

Kosovo is of course the main source of instability in the Balkans. After being delayed and postponed, the Vienna-based status talks ended in March 2007. The UN Envoy was not able

¹ Christophe Solioz is Secretary-General of the Centre for European Integration Strategies (CEIS). He co-authored with Hannes Swoboda: *Conflict and Renewal: Europe Transformed. Essays in Honour of Wolfgang Petritsch* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007) and, with Srđan Dvornik: *Next Steps in Croatia’s Transition Process* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007).

² Srđan Dvornik and Christophe Solioz (eds.) *Next Steps in Croatia’s Transition Process* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007) presents a series of critical essays which complete this overview.

³ Throughout this contribution, the name Bosnia will refer to the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

to present any settlement package resulting from, or endorsed at, the Vienna talks. Nevertheless, he submitted a Final Comprehensive Proposal for a Kosovo Status Settlement, which advocates supervised and limited independence as the only viable option for Kosovo. A new Kosovo UNSC resolution was delayed, this time by the G8 summit (6-8 June 2007) — with the hope an agreement could be reached in this framework. But this was not the case, quite the contrary: The powers at the G8 summit agreed to delay a vote at the United Nations. Thus, the resolution could then be formally postponed — this in fact is the case at this writing.⁴

Serbia is of course mainly affected by Kosovo's fate. While the Serbian Radical Party was close to achieving power in the last elections, recent developments seem to suggest that Belgrade has no desire to return to the isolation of the Milošević years. The new reform-minded government clearly intends to restart the country's journey towards Europe. The political instability stemming from the still open Kosovo issue must not distract attention: the Serbian economy is on the up, and many government departments have moved ahead in an impressive way to prepare the country for finalizing the Stabilization and Association talks with Brussels.

Thus, each country is evolving apace, with a common need to keep the EU membership dream alive, to assure their continued individual progress, not as a false hope, but as a realistic development prospect, both as a stimulus for reform and to promote their survival as peaceful societies.

The EU integration process

As we all remember on 21 June 2003 — at the EU Thessaloniki summit — the EU made the promise, that the 'Western Balkans' could join the Union provided they could bring themselves up to EU standards. Where do we stand 4 years later? Slovenia — since May 2004 —, Bulgaria and Rumania — since January 2007 — are full-fledged EU members. But the other countries remain knocking at a now closed door. Indeed, the Balkans' EU prospects in 'post referendum Europe'⁵ appear bleak: since 2005 the long lasting 'pause for reflection', the limited 'absorption capacities' and the bizarre 'enlargement fatigue' (or is it the 'Europe fatigue'?) are mainly influencing — actually blocking — the enlargement process more than the speed and achievements of the *acquis*-oriented reform-process in the various Western Balkans countries. The three basic principles of the European Commission's approach to enlargement⁶ — consolidation, conditionality and communication — may well prove insufficient to EU's own homework and the situation in the field.

This — partly unexpected — situation has created new lines of division in the region: between the countries that are in the club and those not (yet) members, and between countries running the integration process at variable strengths and speeds. This fragmentation partly undermines the potential for regional cooperation. These lines of division benefit the transnational forces opposed to the stabilisation of the region, and, therefore, ought to be countered by effective and appropriate policy. In addition to the internal political obstacles to effective regional cooperation, the regional cooperation is often perceived and conducted only because it is a requirement from outside — an EU conditionality. Thus, 'regional cooperation'

⁴ See Christophe Solioz, "Kosovo: The Moment of Truth," in Hannes Swoboda and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Conflict and Renewal: Europe Transformed. Essays in Honour of Wolfgang Petritsch* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), pp. 296-304.

⁵ See Christophe Solioz, "The Balkans in Post-Referendum Europe," *Turning Points in Post-War Bosnia* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007 [2005]), pp. 144-52.

⁶ See Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission. 2005 Enlargement Strategy Paper* (Brussels: COM (2005) 561, 9 November 2005), pp. 2-4.

rhetoric is too often just “another sign of dependency — because it is not owned or promoted primarily by the region itself”.⁷

As expected, the ‘pause for reflection’ has had negative consequences in the region. As the pull factor is — if not vanishing, at least — less convincing, the stimulus for reform is gone and the reform and implementation processes remain blocked. Worse, aggressive nationalism receives a new opening and affects the domestic divide in various countries. This might well affect stability and moves us into potentially dangerous and unpredictable territory. But this is not the entire story. The ‘EU soft power’ — conditionality built on attraction — worked pretty well in countries whose chances of accession were tangible and where the transformation process was already under way. But when it comes to political problems — as in Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo — the attraction of membership shows its limits. A more coercive approach based on conditionality and built on compulsion is obviously needed. Of course, the integration process must stimulate the shift from conditionality toward ownership.

While local political forces — especially in Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo — are unable to agree about their own future, the limits of the technocratic and *acquis*-focused approach — successfully applied by the European Commission to the 2004 entrants, as well as to Romania and Bulgaria — are obvious. This is best illustrated by Bosnia: the technical negotiations with the European Commission on the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) were successfully completed on 14 December 2006 with an agreement on the text of the Agreement. But, as political issues continue to hinder the adoption and implementation of 4 reforms (on police, broadcasting, progress in functional state-building, and cooperation with the ICTY), the signing has been indefinitely postponed.

The political future of the Balkans

Given the politicized nature of the accession debate on Croatia and Turkey, considering also the political and security issues presented by Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia, the EU needs to rethink the European project in the Western Balkans and, above all, to embrace politics in order to make the Balkans work.⁸ Indeed, it should be not forgotten, that the EU enlargement project in the Balkans is very much also a peace project.

Thus, careful, long-term strategic thinking is again needed, both for the region and for the sake of Europe as a whole. In order to move beyond the notion that “the international community has failed to offer a convincing perspective to the societies in the region”⁹ and to really foster an agreement based on permanent solutions providing a solid political future to the Balkans — as the only able to resolve the still open wounds, and secure long lasting stability, consolidate democracy, grant significant economic growth and prosperity — an EU conference on the future of the Balkans, an initiative suggested by Milan Kučan, should be organized during 2008 — with Slovenia’s EU presidency playing an instrumental leadership role.¹⁰

The countries of the region, particularly the ones formerly part of the Socialist Federal

⁷ Gregor W. Kössler, “Regional Cooperation in South East Europe,” in Hannes Swoboda and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Conflict and Renewal: Europe Transformed. Essays in Honour of Wolfgang Petritsch* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), p. 225.

⁸ See T.K. Vogel, “Why the EU Need to Embrace Politics if it Wants to Make the Balkans Work,” in Denisa Kostovicova and Vesna Bojičić-Dželić (eds.), *Austrian Presidency of EU: Regional Approaches to the Balkans* (Vienna: Centre for the Study of Global Governance & Center for European Integration Strategies, 2006), pp. 62-70.

⁹ International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe’s Future* (Sofia, 2005), p. 7.

¹⁰ See Milan Kučan, “A New View for the Balkans,” in Hannes Swoboda and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Conflict and Renewal: Europe Transformed. Essays in Honour of Wolfgang Petritsch* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), pp. 217-23.

Republic of Yugoslavia, are inextricably bound up with each other by historical, cultural, political, social and economic ties. It is time to acknowledge that the Balkan conflicts have common historical roots warranting their being examined comprehensively, taking account of their interconnectedness and mutual influences. It is also highly time the belated nation-state building process is addressed, given that it has considerably slowed down the integration process, producing the irony that “in the Balkans as a whole, today (...) there are more democracies than sovereign states” — as Ivan Krastev put it.¹¹

Not all challenges the Balkan countries face today can be tackled by good-neighborhood relations however. As in other fields — climate change, migration pressure, international terrorism etc. — also in the Balkans national and bilateral solutions are not enough. A truly European vision, confirming the ‘Thessaloniki promise’, would definitely boost the regional dimension, promoting economic, politic and cultural cooperation in a coherent framework. Above all, it would clearly indicate that the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)¹² — the successor organization of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe — would not relegate the Western Balkans to the status of countries targeted by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) from those in line for prospective EU membership. The EU must promote the issue of regional cooperation as a cornerstone of its Western Balkans strategy. Consequently, the RCC — addressing in a specific way the many multilateral challenges — should be upgraded to a complementary strategy to the country-by-country EU integration process as well as to the traditional bilateral relations among countries in the region.

Thus, the previous regional approach needs careful recalibration and innovative thinking. Firstly, pan-European organizations must better coordinate among themselves, especially when it comes to initiatives implemented in the region. The other way round, in order to enhance its capacities, the RCC should continue to focus on achievable goals and professional expertise, relying upon and involving the already available (and in the region active) pan-European institutions as the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the UNECE. Secondly, the Balkans countries must encompass the wider regional cooperation, including non-EU Eastern European countries, notably in the Caucasus, Russia, Central Asia and the Mediterranean countries — thus, the countries concerned by the ENP. Such a broad regional network would be of interest at political, economic and cultural levels.

Thus, as stated by Paolo Garonna: “The process of EU construction with its successive rounds of enlargement and its efforts at consolidating and deepening the political and institutional infrastructure can, and should, be seen as part of a wider process of pan-European and Trans-Atlantic economic cooperation and integration. The two processes are obviously different and distinct, but should be seen as mutually consistent and reinforcing, rather than interfering with each another”.¹³ In this framework, the Eastern and South-Eastern countries could play a leading role in promoting a broad dialogue at the pan-Euro-Atlantic level.

Thus, it is time to move Europe beyond conventional policies and the ‘Old Europe’ model, and to integrate what the ‘Other Europe’ has to say, and what it has experienced in the past decade. Such a truly innovative vision would shape a new and open Europe, contributing to Europe’s regeneration and renaissance. The first step on this long journey is for the EU to keep its ‘Thessaloniki promise’.

¹¹ Ivan Krastev, “The Balkans: Democracy Without Choices,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2002) 3, p. 39.

¹² All regional countries, regardless of their status vis-à-vis the EU or NATO, will be members of the RCC and its Board: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia (FYROM), Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and UNMIK/Kosovo.

¹³ Paolo Garonna, “Is There a ‘New Europe View’ on the Future of Europe?” in Hannes Swoboda and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Conflict and Renewal: Europe Transformed. Essays in Honour of Wolfgang Petritsch* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), p. 360.