

In Search of the Lost European Perspective

Christophe Solioz

What if ... the Iron Curtain were still to exist? We may remember that Yugoslavia was the shining star of Eastern Europe in the early 1980s and by that time already had a cooperation agreement with the European Community. As Judy Batt recalls: well before Central and East European states embarked on the 'return to Europe', Yugoslavs felt that they were already 'part of Europe'.¹ Thus, at that time we could well have imagined Yugoslavia being both one country and a fully fledged European Union (EU) member state. And we could have discussed how to transform the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) into a 'membership lite' for the Central and East European countries, and how to win over the Soviet Union with a 'special partnership' and the promise not to extend NATO But 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the story looks different. No dreams, but just some questions.

What has happened to the European spirit of the 1980s, when countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community of democratic states — respectively in 1981 and 1986? What has happened to the enthusiasm of the end of the 1990s to unite Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the Central and East European states became fully fledged EU members in 2004–07? What has happened to the feeling that our generation was making history?

Political decisions taken then were far more risky than those currently at hand in the Balkans. The Greek, Iberian and Central European success stories demonstrate the wisdom of the courageous decisions taken at that time. Today, the EU accession of the Western Balkans countries is clearly more complex: this is, of course, because of the specificity of the post-conflict transition process² and the fact that accession policy has become increasingly technical and, above all, the conditionality stricter.³ 'Enlargement fatigue', 'absorption capacity' and the internal crisis over the EU constitution are additional factors explaining the EU's current indecisiveness.⁴

Already in 2003, the International Crisis Group stated: "Full EU membership is a long way off for most of the Balkan states."⁵ Two years later, the report of the International Commission of the Balkans observed: "A loss of hope and perspective is the political reality of the Western Balkans."⁶ Today, both statements unfortunately still apply. If it is possible to assess to a certain degree the 'Europeanisation of the Balkans', EU membership seems today — more than in 2003 — if not uncertain, then at least blocked for the time being. But for how long?

1 See Judy Batt, "Introduction: The Stabilisation/integration dilemma", in: Judy Batt (ed.), *The Western Balkans: moving on* (Paris: ISS, Chaillot Paper no. 70, October 2004), p.17.

2 See Judy Batt, "Introduction", pp.10-19.

3 See Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power. Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 14-18.

4 See Christophe Solioz, "The Balkans in Post-Referendum Europe," *Turning Points in Post-War* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), p. 144-52.

5 See *Thessaloniki and After I: The EU's Balkan Agenda* (Brussels: ICG, 20 June 2003), p. 5.

6 International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe's Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005), p. 11.

As a matter of fact, the EU today has the experience, the instruments, the appropriate strategic concepts and the means to ‘help’ the Western Balkans countries. But where is the political will? There is no explicit political commitment by the EU that promises eventual full membership. The Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003 stated: ‘The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.’ But this says nothing precise about the real meaning of this commitment.

To state the obvious, the Western Balkans countries are not yet part of the EU political space, and they are in a weak position vis-à-vis the Union. Of course, it should be not forgotten that it would be a mistake to think of the Balkans as one bloc. Firstly, the Yugoslav succession states are still marked by post-war tensions among the former Yugoslav republics (now independent states); secondly, the EU integration process — based on individuals merits — has contributed paradoxically to a broadening of the gap between EU member states (Slovenia, Greece), candidate countries (Croatia, Macedonia) and potential candidates countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia);⁷ and, thirdly, the recent infighting between Slovenia and Croatia⁸ — which similarly exists between Greece and Macedonia, and between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina — illustrates that one country can block a neighbouring country because of bilateral problems. Thus, it would be a mistake to think that the Balkans could duplicate the positive experience of the Visegrád Group, which was instrumental in speeding up the EU integration process of the Central and East European countries.⁹

Since the accession negotiations are, as such, open-ended and not necessarily ending in EU membership — which explains why it is impossible for the EU to issue an explicit commitment on the subject — we may ask if it is not time to seriously consider alternatives to the membership scenario. Against the background of the current global financial crisis, some EU member countries may well reconsider the ‘risk of failure’ and estimate that it would not be too expensive to stop or radically adapt the enlargement process. And why not? Here are some worst case options:

- A restricted model of EU membership or ‘membership lite’: the EU might (temporarily?) reserve some options and impose some restrictions related, for example, to access to direct farm subsidies or to the Schengen zone of passport-free travel; or limit free movement of labour.
- A ‘special partnership’ within the framework of the EU’s ENP, with ‘Action plans’ bringing some countries as close as possible to the EU: of course, this would be seen in the region merely as a thin political gesture to pacify the excluded.
- The ‘Swiss model’, which is time consuming, consisting of politically very frustrating bilateral agreements that must be permanently updated and thus renegotiated. This model would probably bring about, if not a black hole, than an enclave of decline in the (excluded) Western Balkans. But it has one merit: it is crystal clear: you are out, but you must comply with and adopt most of the EU

7 This is exemplified by the visa regime that builds walls between, on the one side, the EU member states and candidates countries, and, on the other side, potential candidates countries. Of course, this undermines regional cooperation which is also a EU conditionality; Christophe Solioz, “Thinking about and beyond South East Europe,” in: Wolfgang Petritsch and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and Beyond* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008) pp. 159-184.

8 Slovenia is in fact abusing its veto right in the EU to blackmail Croatia. Behind this attitude lies the fear that Slovenia’s influence in South East Europe could disappear with Croatia’s accession. However the conflict endangers not only Croatia’s prospects of EU accession, but also the reforms in other Balkans states that are slowly losing all hope of the promised European perspective.

9 See Martin Dangerfield, “The Impact of the European Union Membership on Central European Subregional Cooperation,” in: Wolfgang Petritsch and Christophe Solioz (eds.), *Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and Beyond* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008) pp. 129-45.

standards without having a say in how these standards are drawn up. The question here is: have the Western Balkans countries the financial means to afford the costs of such an option?

It is high time to frankly discuss these options. This could at least convince both the EU and the Balkans that there is a clear choice to be made: to be part of the EU or to be part of a marginalised ghetto.¹⁰

As the EU and South East Europe seem more and more to be drifting apart, the EU looks unable, on the one hand, to do its homework and, on the other hand, to offer a convincing political perspective to the Balkans — despite the magnitude of the assistance effort and notwithstanding the manifold array of offices and agencies ‘in the field’. Thus, if the EU really would like to extend the enlargement to the Western Balkans countries, it has to solve the question of its capacity to absorb new members, to shift in policy thinking towards the region, and to offer a new — more adapted and convincing — strategy. NGO projectisation or think tank engineering will not do it — they may help, but no more; political mobilisation is required in order to reload the European perspective and the enlargement process.

Let us recall some of the — by the way, very good — reports written by some major think tanks at the time of the Thessaloniki Summit. The European Stability Initiative suggested applying strategies — cohesion policy or structural policy — based on the European regional development policy.¹¹ The International Crisis Group also focused the more vigorous approach it suggested on a set of technical means — ranging from increased financial assistance to effective twinning arrangements and regional integration.¹² The more comprehensive report of the International Commission on the Balkans recommended a ‘member-state-building’ strategy focusing on the necessity to include institution building and thus capacity building into the negotiating framework.¹³

These were all outstanding proposals, but alone they did not contribute to the revitalisation of the political process. A new wave of enlargement needs to put politics back in the game. Three EU initiatives could send the right signal that the Union is back on track. Firstly, based on a technical report of the Commission to be issued by the end of May 2009, the EU could consider upgrading the status of the now potential candidates countries — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia — and accelerate the entry in force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. This would give a clear signal to the countries concerned that the integration process is moving forward and that regional cooperation must improve because the EU favours a block entry.

Secondly, the political dialogue between the EU and the applicants states must be given a new dimension: a Thessaloniki II conference should be organised under the Swedish EU presidency. Such a regional conference should be organised in close partnership with the countries from the region. In this framework, open bilateral issues should be negotiated, a common action plan to face the current financial crisis must be agreed upon and a

10 This was already clearly stated by the International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe's Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005), p. 28.

11 See *The Road to Thessaloniki: Cohesion and the Western Balkans* (Berlin: ESI, 12 March 2003).

12 See *Thessaloniki and After I: The EU's Balkan Agenda* (Brussels: ICG, 20 June 2003), pp. 5-7.

13 See *The Balkans in Europe's Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005), p. 14, and pp. 29-31.

pragmatic EU integration road map must be announced.

Thirdly, a quick-start package in advance of membership must be implemented during 2009. In selected key areas, the EU should give the (potential) candidate countries membership prerogatives. This should apply to the visa issue: while the Commission report — to be ready by the end of May 2009 — could pave the way for a process of visa liberalisation to enter into force by the end of 2009 or early 2010, the Commission should implement an urgent plan to provide visas to students for summer 2009. Equally, the EU should consider similar concrete initiatives that would demonstrate that the Balkans are indeed part of Europe.

Presented in the framework of the 'EU Enlargement and South East European Integration' expert workshop organised by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 27 April 2009

Bridging the Gaps: Are the European Union and South-East-Europe drifting apart?

Workshop organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation,
Hiroshimastr. 28, Tel.: ++ 49 (0) 30 26935 7725

Berlin, 27 April 2009

11:00 – 11:15 Welcome Address by Michael Weichert, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin

11:15 – 12:45 Session I: What Union are we talking about – How can the EU continue to enlarge, if it doesn't know where it is heading itself?

- What prospects does the Lisbon treaty have with a pending referendum in Ireland and uncertainty about ratification in Prague and Warsaw? What is the alternative?
- What impact does this have for enlargement? Are we reliving the debate about 'widening versus deepening' the EU of the 1990s?
- What impact does the economic crisis have on the already mostly negative perception of enlargement in the general public and consequently on governments of EU member states?

12:45 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 15:30 Session II: The Balkan ghetto – what impact does it have to keep the countries of the Western Balkans in limbo?

- What is the impact of the perspective of joining the EU slipping further and further into the future?
- How does this slippage and the current economic crisis impact on the political climate in the Balkans?

15:30 – 15:45 Coffee break

15:45 – 17:00 Session III: Marriage counselling – bridging the gap between a growing reluctance and increasingly frustrated expectations.

- The EU doesn't only have its foreign policy credentials to lose if it fails in the Balkans, the possible price a stagnating Western Balkans could be much higher and directly affect EU member states.
- How can the EU react to the already deposited and expected membership bids? What reaction could be expected in the Balkans?
- How can the understandable frustrations about the uncertainty in the Balkans as well as the equally understandable reluctance within the EU be bridged?