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New Impetus Matters for the Western Balkans EU Accession

This Policy Brief reflects the work of the international seminar — Avoiding the 'Turkey Game' in the Western Balkans — organised on 7-10 December 2010 in Vienna by the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue and the Center for Liberal Strategies, in co-operation with the Renner Institute and the Robert Bosch Stiftung, and with substantial input by CEIS.

After two decades of extraordinary successes in terms of integration and enlargement, Europe experiences an unprecedented order of peace and security and an improved institutional architecture. The EU is currently at a turning point in its history: While it is facing new challenges — mostly related to the global economic crisis and increasing energy dependence —, past achievements must be consolidated and arranged for the future. Against this background, the Western Balkans' EU accession means completing and securing the integration process. This brief reflects the seminar's discussion with a focus on selected priorities and highlights the necessity of a proactive and "political" approach thus providing a new impetus for the Western Balkans EU accession.

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In contrast to previous enlargement rounds, the Western Balkans integration process takes place in a vastly different and crucial historical context than previous enlargement rounds. At present, the European Union faces a quadruple crisis: Firstly, the real economy is still affected by the fall-out from the financial crisis, resulting in pressures on the labour market potentially leading to a populist backlash against any further enlargement. Secondly, the crisis of the Euro, which puts into question the very architecture of the European Union project as it was conceived after the end of the Cold War. The billions of Euros being used to safeguard the European banking system and the fall of the Euro itself are taking a considerable political toll on all pro-European forces. The outcome of these interventions is by no means certain, the end of the Euro as we know it might be one possibility, a quantum leap of integration with a political union another. Thirdly, the rise of the extreme right in many member states, opposed to the very essence of the European project. And fourthly, a looming constitutional crisis: It took the EU far too long to agree on new ground rules. And while the Lisbon Treaty spells institutional progress by removing obstacles to further enlargement, Europeans came to realise that it does not have efficient provisions to deal with the deepening financial crisis.

Against this background, it is not difficult to understand why EU policy makers are not very keen to focus on the neighbourhood, but narrowly concentrate on their domestic duties instead. Nevertheless, in spite of the current EU's difficulties and weaknesses, the EU has still significant leverage and has not lost its attractiveness. Recent positive signals sent by Brussels should also be acknowledged: The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs succeeded in bringing back Serbia and Kosovo to the negotiating table; Croatia comes closer to the concluding EU membership talks and expects to finalise negotiations by mid 2011; Montenegro became a formal EU candidate; last but not least, since December 2011 the visa wall — except for Kosovo — has now been down. Provided that the ongoing Macedonian naming dispute finally ends in a compromise, and here the EU should push for a breakthrough in early 2011, Macedonia could start the accession talks during 2011. By the same token Albania's so far unsuccessful accession bid could meet a positive turn during 2011. All in all, these positive trends open a new perspective for a region that has changed for the better.

For good reasons the Western Balkans' accession process has become more demanding than the earlier rounds: negotiations are subjected to much more stringent tests and have become more technical. As seen from Brussels, the increased technicality intends to facilitate the process for countries facing the specifics and the pitfalls of a triple transition to a free market, to a liberal democracy and from conflict to peace. But the consequence in this region is that the time span to full accession becomes inevitably too long for many politicians who have a strong incentive to work for this goal. Incremental progress together with tangible results for the voters in the Western Balkans must be integrated into the highly technical accession process in order to close the time gap.



The EU, if it wants to assert its role as a trendsetter and agent of change has to market its presence on the ground more convincingly and to introduce some tangible measures during 2011. In the current environment, the mere promise of EU accession will not do the trick. Political barriers to naming some states as candidates mean that the usual path to membership may be blocked, and in any event improvements in governance will be needed to assure current EU members that the states of the region may be ready for membership. The citizens of the region must see concrete benefits from the reforms required by accession, or too many of them may be swayed by entrenched elites who, for too long, have benefitted from weak or fragmented governing structures. In short, a European perspective that does not visibly change the situation on the ground, and whose timelines appear to the citizens as moving targets, will not work. We propose two significant shifts in the approach now being shaped:

Pre-screening: The *avis* and *acquis* together are tremendously effective tools for building effective states. The EU should bring those tools to bear as soon as possible, even before states of the region formally become candidates for membership. A continuous, technical process of reform can highlight and eventually defeat political obstruction in the Western Balkans. It is self-defeating for the EU to require stronger governance in the region while not applying its most effective tools to address it.

Accountability: The people of the Western Balkans should be shown clear benefits from European integration, i.e. in ways that affect their every day lives. Their leaders should be held accountable for winning those benefits. We propose attention to two issues:

First, educational benefits: (Post-secondary) students from the Western Balkans should have the opportunity to study at universities in the EU, just as do students from EU members.¹ The program should be introduced and financially supported by all the EU Member States. In order to promote such student mobility, the Western Balkans countries should meet requirements governing return, payment, expenses, etc. This could promote a European sensibility among the new generation — a large number of whom have little travel experience — and assure older generations that the pain of past decades can produce opportunities for their children.

Second, visa liberalisation: Kosovo, should have a roadmap to visa liberalization. Failure to meet the benchmarks should be identified clearly and publicly, so that people can judge their elected officials.

These proposals and similar initiatives — permitting an almost immediate access to some EU programmes and resources — would keep the momentum introduced by the visa liberalisation and convince Western Balkans' citizens and politicians that the reform road toward Brussels pays off. A differentiated approach of catch-up facilities and tailor-made strategies, including early screening, should be offered to countries lagging behind such as Bosnia and Kosovo.



Several of the Western Balkan aspirant countries do not only have to meet the accession's requirements, they also have to face internal constraints (Bosnia and Herzegovina, possibly Macedonia) or bilateral issues (especially true for Kosovo) — that are not strictly related to the EU accession conditionality. For these states, the usual EU practice of dialogue and pre-conditions will not remove the obstacles. The choice is simple: face failure or adapt the process. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as for Kosovo, the EU thus needs to think about alternative scenarios for a full-scale membership in the medium term. Both countries must not be allowed to become islands of instability just because they cannot overcome the domestic (Bosnia) and international (Kosovo) legacy of their wartime past. Bosnia is now lost in a trap of self-perpetuating nationalism on all sides of its three ethnic communities. The once well functioning conditionality bargain is failing under present circumstances. The population is penalized for the failing policies of its political elite, since Europe's response to the missing reforms does not allow Bosnia further progress towards Brussels. That Bosnia was lagging behind Serbia in getting Visa freedom towards Schengen countries epitomized the often paradox results of this situation. This is a threat looming in the whole region: The more corrupt and nationalist elites in the countries of the Western Balkans are capable to control their territories without the EU's resources, the less conditionality will work. A scenario of full-scale economic integration without all-out political accession, akin to membership in the European Economic Area, might be the answer to this paradoxon.

A seemingly endless accession process is not a solution for the ongoing reforms in the Western Balkans. Therefore, it is important to keep the candidate countries on track in their respective progress towards Europe with an adapted, proactive and resolutely innovative strategy. The EU has, first, to view the enlargement to the Western Balkans as a consolidation of the previous enlargement step and, second, to open a real political dialogue with the countries in the region. Accordingly, the Western Balkans countries must play a full part in ongoing debates about the meaning of the common European Union project.

Vienna, 7 January 2011

i “Student mobility for the Western Balkans” intends creating the opportunity for students from this region to study in the EU as if they were EU citizens, paying the same fees and benefiting from the same scholarship and exchange programs as EU students. The idea is to set a timeline for student mobility to be achieved before actual membership of the WB countries, much like visa liberalization. From an EU perspective, the creation of a dynamic and open study area would entail the development of human capital that could be easily integrated into the labour market. From a WB's perspective it would a) create hopes for several generations, students themselves as well as their parents; b) foster social integration and the creation of links between students from WB countries and EU students c) empower students from Western Balkans countries by equipping them with better knowledge, making them more able to contribute in their own countries.



The core mission of the Center for European Integration Strategies (CEIS) is to monitor, analyze, and advise on processes of state-building, democratization, regional cooperation, and European integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the countries of the Western Balkans. In its work CEIS will rely on a network of academics, analysts, and journalists established and fostered in past years by its predecessor organization. Their professional expertise is reflected and further developed through the future activities of the CEIS.

CEIS activities include, but are not limited to:

- **Publishing** analytical and investigative briefings on political, economic, social, human rights and other trend-setting issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region;
- **Fostering** public dialogue through round tables, conferences, and other public debates on important developments in the society;
- **Training** political analysts, especially those involved in local government and on European integration issues;
- **Supporting** the work of emerging voices in the region in CEIS areas of interest;
- **Promoting** local ownership in policy processes and policy research in the region.

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