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The role of EU accession prospects in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans: New Challenges for the European Union
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One of the immediate effects that the failure of the EU constitution has had is that the prospects for continued EU enlargement have come under fire. The most common argument against further expansion is that the EU has yet to consolidate and properly integrate after last year's major expansion, which included 10 new members. While there seems to be a consensus that Bulgaria and Romania should proceed towards full EU membership according to the previously set schedule, all other bets appear to be off, with Turkey provoking perhaps the most controversy. Croatia and the other countries of the Western Balkans have fallen by the wayside, at least for the moment, with a general skepticism directed towards their EU membership prospects.

That the EU needs a period of internal consolidation and integration, not to mention reflection, is beyond doubt. But whether should this exclude what we might term the active maintenance of a "European perspective" for the countries of the Western Balkans is another question. The answer to the latter needs to be negative. Despite its current troubles, it is in the union's best interest, and not just that of the countries in the region, to keep the Western Balkans on an EU track – while the EU also tackles the question of its own internal organization and future, of course.

After all what has really changed that ostensibly requires that the prospect of eventual EU membership for the countries of the Western Balkans should be discouraged or delayed? Apart from aggregate EU perceptions, which in any case are malleable and subject to suggestion and modification, very little in concrete terms. While it's true that when it comes to defining the constitutional relations of prospective new members new arrangements would have to be put in place within the EU, the existing legal frame is sufficient for a continuation of (pre)accession processes. The rejected EU constitution actually didn't envisage a change in accession procedure, but maintained the one set out in current treaties. The accession criteria stipulated by the putative constitution was also basically the same – albeit with the inclusion of some additional values to be respected.

It should also be pointed out that contrary to some recent perceptions, full EU membership of the countries of the Western Balkans was never something that could have been accomplished in the short-term – with Croatia perhaps the only exception to this rule. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe that joined the EU last May needed an average of close to a decade from their application to their accession, and they were arguably better qualified at the outset than many of the prospective candidates today. And if Romania and Bulgaria are admitted as scheduled, they will have been in the accession process for 12 years or so. Given the difficult legacy of ethnic conflict that Western Balkan societies have had to deal with over the last

decade or so, it would be unrealistic to expect that their accession would take less time. So while the countries of the Western Balkans are given encouragement to continue with the reform processes leading to further "Europeanization," the EU will have ample time to rethink, consolidate and further integrate.

This is not some abstract moral imperative but is actually in the best interests of the EU. The disastrous conflicts of the 1990's have led to a prevailing conviction within the EU that the best way to secure stability and peace in the Balkans – and thus in the wider European region – is to help these countries along the path towards democracy and a market economy. Numerous reform programs were put in place, a European perspective was offered to these countries, and different levels of cooperation were initiated with the EU, which encouraged cooperation and some economic revival within the region. The consequent investment of the EU in the region has been anything but small. Peace and consolidation in the Western Balkans is required for the stability of the EU – and despite the surface calm of the region, this has not changed.

The rationale behind the active role of the EU in the region is best described with the "democratic peace thesis" that holds that democratic states perform relatively peacefully abroad, and are characterized by nonviolent methods at home. Consequently in order to widen the zone of peace democratic values have to be spread. As the thesis justifiably holds, powerful political unions – such as the EU undoubtedly is despite its current setback – can use their institutional leverage as means of embedding states in the democratic world order. Such states have to show democratic credentials, such as respect for human rights, before being integrated into democratic international institutions. Furthermore an important tool that can be employed to spread democratic values and thus this zone of peace is conditionality: the policies countries must pursue in return for economic benefits. The underlying assumption is their future integration into international institutions.

The EU has been using conditionality and the "European perspective" to great avail in the Balkans. The most indicative example was its successful employment in the Macedonian crisis of 2001. The EU repeatedly conditioned its financial support to the country during the ethnic conflict upon cooperative behavior: both de-escalating in the struggle and enhancing minority rights. While this financial support and its conditional employment played significant role in averting a looming civil war, the "European perspective" for Macedonia was equally important for achieving a peaceful solution. Only two months after the armed conflict broke out a Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed. Macedonia had long sought to sign the agreement and was the first country of the region to sign it – providing an important encouragement for the pro-democratic and pro-European forces in the country. Throughout the process of first negotiating and then implementing the peace agreement the prospect of EU integration embedded in the agreement played an important role. It was the decisive lever that helped made the compromise possible.

In other words, while it has led to some encouraging and continuing positive developments in the region in the last years, the prospect of EU membership is still very much needed to encourage economic and political reforms and to develop self-

sustaining and equitable ethnic arrangements. The "European perspective" has been the EU's most important lever during these processes. With some difficult projects still ahead of us, such as solving the status of Kosovo and Montenegro, there certainly are plenty of reasons for retaining if not enhancing such a lever and thus the ability of the EU to exert a positive influence on the region. Even setting aside the EU investment, keeping reforms on track in the Western Balkans and the challenges of dealing with unresolved status issues are very strong reasons for keeping a realistic European perspective for the countries in the region alive.

What has changed in light of recent EU developments, of course, is that it has become more politically difficult to argue for further expansion in a time of internal crisis. It seems only natural that the EU should pause before moving further; to suggest otherwise seems counter-intuitive. But for profoundly pragmatic reasons the processes of "Europeanization" in the Western Balkans should take place in parallel with the EU's internal soul-searching and reorganization. The main risks to the region and to its future within Europe really don't come from any legal or objective constraints but from the potentially destructive effects of a perception that such an enlargement could be stalled, or even removed as a realistic prospect. As we have seen, those risks don't stop conveniently at the EU's current borders. To permit or even encourage such a perception is therefore to court potentially serious setback.