The European Union and the Balkans: in Need of Couple Therapy?

Corina Stratulat
Senior Policy Analyst
European Policy Centre (EPC), Brussels

A Promising Engagement

To be sure, the perspective of European integration has paid important peace dividends in the region. In 2006 Serbia and Montenegro went through a ‘velvet’ split. In 2008 Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, and despite their still unresolved statehood, Pristina and Belgrade clinched a landmark deal in spring 2013 to normalise relations, under the auspices of EU facilitation. Moreover, the ‘Copenhagen Plus’ criteria set for the aspirant countries in the Balkans – including demands for the implementation of peace treaties, regional cooperation and reconciliation and full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) – have allowed real progress on certain bilateral relationships, such as between Serbia and Croatia.

By the same token, the sweeping reforms already undertaken by the Balkan countries moving from one state to many, reconstructing post-war institutions and societies, building democracies and transforming them into functioning market economies, have undoubtedly been helped by the weight of EU leverage in the region. Thanks to their herculean efforts, the EU-hopeful countries of the Balkans have managed to steadily press forward: in 2013, Croatia joined as the 28th Member State, in 2012, Montenegro began negotiations and Kosovo started to institutionalise relations with the EU.
in 2014, Serbia embarked on its accession talks and Albania became a candidate country, while the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has had candidate status since 2005 and Bosnia-Herzegovina signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008.

Yet for all these vital successes, much work remains to be done in the region at a time when the passion seems to be running out of the EU-Balkan relation.

**Relationship on the Rocks**

*On the Balkans’ Side…*

Inside the Balkans, status problems were long drawn out after Thessaloniki. It took until the Brussels agreement of April 2013 – heralded as historic – for Pristina to seize effective control of the whole of Kosovo’s territory and the implementation of that deal is proving difficult. In part, the 2014 elections in Serbia, the EU and Kosovo have drained some momentum from the dialogue but it is also the case that many Serbs in Kosovo continue to oppose the compromise, and Belgrade is still formally adamant about sovereignty over Kosovo. Indeed, both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain at least to a certain extent internationally administered and thus only to a certain extent autonomous.

Existing bilateral issues between the EU and Balkan countries have also complicated the process. As a result of the acrimonious name dispute between Greece and FYROM, for the past seven years the Member States have ignored the European Commission’s recommendation to start accession negotiations with Skopje. In limbo since 2005, FYROM has experienced a deterioration of inter-ethnic relations and a rise in authoritarian tendencies, to the detriment of European integration-related reforms and democratic credentials. Here, the tools deployed by the Union do not seem to have any bearing on the (mis)behaviour of Gruèvski’s regime – the latest, ongoing spy scandal bears testimony in this regard – nor on the positions of Greece and FYROM in the EU-mediated talks.

Given the ethnic mosaic of the region, which does not match with its internal borders, and other lingering consequences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the potential for relations to turn sour within the Balkans, and between countries in the region and existing or future Member States, is not negligent. Take, for instance, the recent unfortunate dynamics between Albania and Serbia or Croatia and Serbia. Moreover, the ‘regatta approach’ to the EU enlargement to the Balkans, whereby each country joins in its own time, means that any new Member State can in principle obstruct the accession of its aspiring neighbour(s). With the nationalists now making inroads into power in Croatian politics, the possibility that Zagreb might at some point decide to block Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is no longer far-fetched.

As a result of the acrimonious name dispute between Greece and FYROM, for the past seven years the Member States have ignored the European Commission’s recommendation to start accession negotiations with Skopje

In addition, weak states and dysfunctional institutions are at the heart of the problem throughout the region. The concentration of power in a few hands has allowed political elites in countries like Montenegro (where the Democratic Party of Socialists has held office uninterrupted since 1991, albeit occasionally in coalition with smaller allies) and increasingly also in Serbia (by virtue of the Serbian Progressive Party, under the leadership of Aleksandar Vucic) to repress any viable opposition forces, subvert the media and foster a system of corruption and clientelism. Moreover, a high degree of polarisation among uncompromising and self-interested politicians has undermined Albania’s progress and – most worrisome – has effectively brought Bosnia and Herzegovina to a standstill in its EU integration process, threatening economic development and, following the outbreak of last year’s violent protests that spread from Tuzla to Sarajevo and beyond, also social peace. A lot is hanging on the British-German initiative announced in November 2014 and aimed at getting Bosnia-Herzegovina out of its deep crisis and on the EU path. Finally, to date, none of the aspiring countries in the Balkans is yet a functioning market economy and
their economic woes have only been compounded by the cold winds blowing from the EU – the region’s main trading and investment partner. Whether the newfound focus of the Commission’s most recent enlargement strategy on economic governance will help the broken Balkan economies fix their budget deficits, create jobs, boost growth and improve competitiveness is for now an open question, but the social impact and instability generated by economic hardship – made obvious, for instance, by the protests and mass migration from Kosovo during the first months of 2015 – underscores the urgency of the situation.

Given the ethnic mosaic of the region, which does not match with its internal borders, and other lingering consequences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the potential for relations to turn sour within the Balkans, and in the region, is not negligent

...And on the EU’s Side

The news from the EU is not exactly heartening either: enlargement seems to be the dossier that the bloc must deliver on due to the promise made in Thessaloniki. From the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty to the cold feet following the 2007 expansion and then today’s economic crisis, political appetite and support for expansion has been fizzling out inside the Union. But waning political attention to enlargement in the EU capitals has not precluded assertiveness. The universe of detailed and strict benchmarks and conditions has become ever larger, and the frequency of incursions and opportunities for the Member States to interfere in and derail the process has increased compared to previous rounds.

The upgrading of the Union’s tools, methods and approaches to enlargement on the basis of lessons learned has transformed the exercise from box ticking to results tracking. Likewise, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decisive intervention, for instance, has persuaded Belgrade to take the normalisation of relations with Pristina seriously. Yet, this laboured enlargement strategy and haphazard commitment of the Member States – retreating from agreed standards and procedures and allowing all sorts of changeable priorities on behalf of national politicians (from the freedom of movement of people and minorities to security and good governance practices) to influence the enlargement agenda in unpredictable ways and with uncertain outcomes – has slowed down the process and dented its credibility in the region.

The Member States appear to favour now a more hands-on approach to enlargement and they almost seem to distrust the Commission when they rely, at key decision-making moments in the Council, on national evaluations, rather than on the opinion of the Brussels’ executive about progress in the Balkans. In fact, accession negotiations and neighbourhood policy have now been fused together in the same Directorate General in the new Commission, and President Juncker has already announced a break in EU widening for the next five years of his mandate. At the same time as enlargement seems to have become of dwindling importance for the new Commission, Germany and Austria voiced last year in Berlin their sustained commitment to the European future of the Balkans in a high-level summit with the leaders of the region. The Austrian government now plans to continue the ‘Berlin process’ with a similar event to be held in Vienna in August this year. While in itself the support of the Member States is a positive development, in the grander scheme of things, these initiatives give a sense that the Commission has lost its position as driver of enlargement policy, and risk a blurring of competences and a duplication of efforts between the two tiers of European politics in assisting with progress in the Balkans.

The Red Flags and the Silver Lining

The dynamics between the EU and the Balkans at present serve as a prime example of politics getting in the way of progress. Even if the accession track remains opened to the countries of the region and in spite of the avowed commitment to European integration voiced by Balkan politicians, those in power and responsible for delivering on both sides still need to match their actions to their words. Fail-
ure to complete the Balkan enlargement is mutually harmful: for the EU’s shrinking global influence and for the Balkans’ aspiration to a brighter future. But, above all, the current labours of the process to reap successes as a result of the half-hearted engagement of the two partners is driving an edge between people and leaders, undermining public trust in politicians and support for the European integration project. Disappointment with politics in the Member States and the Balkan countries – and a perceived incapacity of people to exert change – can lead to disappointment with democracy and can make way for mobilisation along radical and destabilising lines.

Failure to complete the Balkan enlargement is mutually harmful: for the EU’s shrinking global influence and for the Balkans’ aspiration to a brighter future.

As in many long-term relationships, after more than ten years, the EU and the Balkans resemble now an old couple, in which the two sides take each other for granted and occasionally even flirt around. The EU’s eye has been wondering eastwards after the Ukrainian crisis, diverting attention away from the Balkan enlargement and towards security concerns in the neighbourhood. This has made it easier for other actors – most notably Russia – to meddle in the Balkans and cosy up with countries like Serbia (which refused to join EU sanctions against Moscow and organised a hero-welcoming parade for Putin in Belgrade) but also Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While pragmatism rather than a search for alternatives has motivated these experiences, they are also a reminder that the ‘job’ is not done in the Balkans and any delaying tactics can be counterproductive.

In strategic, political and economic terms, the EU and the region share common interests and problems. This interdependence begs for joint action and makes a powerful case in favour of including the Balkans in the EU family sooner rather than later. To a large extent, in this uncertain and complex world, the two sides are in fact as strong as they are united and as weak as they are divided.

References


