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**RETHINKING THE PROCESS OF EU INTEGRATION
IN THE BALKANS**

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Abstract

This contribution reviews the relations between the European Union and the “Yugoslav space” since the mid 1960s, focusing on the main trends and political processes, highlighting their ups and downs, and looking for some lessons (not) learnt.

It calls for a renewed commitment by the EU to enlargement into the Western Balkans and a corresponding commitment by the countries of the region to continue political, social and economic reform. The best venue for such a reciprocal commitment would be an international conference on the model of the Thessaloniki summit.

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1. A Golden Age and missed opportunities: the Cold War years (1948–1989)

Following the split with Moscow in 1948, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) pursued a policy of neutrality by maintaining a balance between the blocks in Europe, as illustrated by its pivotal role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)¹ founded in 1955. At the same time, it established very good relations with the European Community. In the framework of our discussion, it makes sense to briefly recall the later.

On 2 December 1967, the Declaration on relations between SFRY and the European Economic Community (EEC—the predecessor of the European Union) set the framework for bilateral relations, primarily in the economic field. A few months later, the SFRY established full diplomatic relations with the EEC's member states.² Two trade agreements followed in 1970 and 1973, granting the SFRY “preferential status” with reciprocal concessions. The next significant step was the Agreement on cooperation between SFRY and the EEC signed on 2 April 1980 and ratified in 1983. This agreement on cooperation and trade was part of the so-called EEC's Mediterranean Agreement.³ Separate documents established the rights of Yugoslav citizens to reside and work in the EEC's member countries. Thus, while since January 1967 the SFRY was the first communist country to have opened its borders to all foreign visitors and abolished visa requirements, in the 1980s, most Yugoslavs were free to travel—and work—in most European countries.⁴

It is worth mentioning that the SFRY was in these post-war years also among the founders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, an active member of the then General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and had observer status in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—other former European socialist countries would join these international institutions only after 1989. Last but not least, at the end of the 1980s, the SFRY and the European Community initiated exploratory talks concerning the signing of an Association agreement.

Thus, by the time the iron curtain came down, Yugoslavia was successfully balancing between the blocks; it was the “shining star” of Eastern Europe, quite well networked with the rest of Europe. Of course, this corresponded to the economic necessities of the SFRY and the geo-strategic interests of the “West”. Nevertheless, the citizens of Yugoslavia felt that they were already “part of Europe” well before Central and East European states embarked on the “return to Europe”. At that time it would not have been difficult to imagine Yugoslavia remaining as one country and becoming a full European Union (EU) member state—it would have been much easier to then integrate one country than six countries plus Kosovo now.

¹ The purpose of the organisation is to ensure the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries. The Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito took the initiative to form the NAM while Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt were visiting Yugoslavia in July 1956. The first Conference of Non-Aligned Heads of State, at which 25 countries were represented, was convened at Belgrade in September 1961. Josip Broz Tito was the NAM's first Secretary-General (1961-64), Stjepan Mesić was the last Secretary-General representing the SFRY when Yugoslavia de facto dissolved (1991). NAM is still active; its most recent Summit was organised in Sharm El Sheikh in July 2009, and the next one will be held in Tehran (2012)—in spite of the invitation (in August 2009) by Vuk Jeremić, Serbia's foreign minister, to his counterparts from the former Yugoslav republics to agree to jointly hold a summit of the non-aligned countries in 2011. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia have observer status. See the NAM's homepage: <http://www.cubanoal.cu/ingles/index.html>.

² At the time the EEC—also referred to as simply the European Community—had nine member states: the six founding countries (France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg) and three former members of the EFTA (Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark) which were admitted to membership in 1973. The EC is the first of the three pillars of the EU created under the Maastricht Treaty in 1992—the other two being the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Police and Judicial Co-operation in Criminal Matters (PJCC).

³ See Stojan Andov, “The Politics of Negotiating with the EU,” *Crossroads – The Macedonian Foreign Policy Journal*, (2007) 2, pp. 205-11.

⁴ In 1967, some 300,000 Yugoslavs (out of 20 million) were employed outside the country; see “Yugoslavia: Beyond Dictatorship”, *Time*, 20 January 1967. See also Slavenka Drakulic, “The generation that failed,” *International Herald Tribune*, 7-8 November 2009, p. 8.

2. A black hole in Europe: SFRY's deconstruction versus EU's construction (1990s)

Relations between the European Community and the SFRY entered in a complete different phase in the early 1990s. This period was characterised, first, by the establishment of European Union (EU) under the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and, second, by the brutal break-up of the SFRY⁵—what Marina Glamocak analysed with the concept of *transition guerrière*.⁶

While Portugal, Spain and Greece—all having emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest—were welcomed into the European community (the first two in 1986 and Greece in 1981), the EU failed to facilitate peaceful changes in the “Western Balkans”⁷ and to oppose the break-up of the SFRY.

In the early 1990s, the European Balkans policy was essentially characterised by bilateralism and a diversity of approaches. There was no common foreign and security policy, no coherent regional approach, no long-term strategy, and, finally, no plan for an adequate intervention and post-war management. As a consequence, the EU developed new instruments within its common foreign and security policy.

During the same period, the EU's enlargement progressed significantly, ending up in 2004 with the “big bang”: vast chunks of the former communist bloc of Central and Eastern Europe—including Slovenia—became fully-fledged members of the EU.

Today, we might expect that the EU accession for the Western Balkan countries will be more complicated due to the specifics and the pitfalls of a triple transition, to a free market, to liberal democracy and from war to peace.⁸ But we also have to acknowledge another aspect related to the process of enlargement: it has become both increasingly technical and increasingly complex and at the same time more politicised. The bar is being raised ever higher, in part because of the lessons learnt from the compromises made in the case of Cyprus—as a still divided country, only part of which joined—and Bulgaria and Romania, with serious deficits in their political and moral economies.

As it was already the case with the accession of the Central and East European countries,⁹ conditionalities—going beyond the basic package of the Copenhagen Criteria plus the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*¹⁰—are now much stricter than they were for the first EU candidates countries. The European Commission created unprecedented post-accession monitoring tools before admitting Bulgaria and Romania to chart progress still to be made in the fields of judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

New and future candidate countries now have to meet opening and closing benchmarks for each and every chapter. As a result, the negotiations are subject to much more stringent tests and become much more technical and more drawn out as a result, with the applicant country drafting endless “action” and “implementation plans” on every conceivable topic.

This has a number of consequences, above all for those involved in the integration of the Western Balkans. Considerable technical and administrative capacities will now be required. This should not, however, overshadow the “EU narrative”—the EU as a political project.

⁵ See Jasna Dragović-Soso, “Why did Yugoslavia Disintegrate? An Overview of Contending Explanations,” in: Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso (Eds.), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), pp. 1-39.

⁶ Marina Glamocak, *La transition guerrière yougoslave* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

⁷ The Western Balkans consists of Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244).

⁸ See Žarko Papić, “International Support Policies in South-East Europe – towards a new approach,” in: Žarko Papić (Ed), *International Support Policies to South-East European Countries. Lessons (Not) Learned in B-H* (Sarajevo: Open Society Foundation, 2001), pp. 245-50.

⁹ See Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power. Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 14-18.

¹⁰ See the comprehensive overview by Othon Anastasakis, “The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 8 (2008) 4, 2008, pp. 367-68.

3. Attempt to reload the process: from Zagreb (2000) to Thessaloniki (2003)

The first attempts to correct the above-mentioned absence of an EU strategy adapted to the Balkans were made in 1996 with the introduction of the Regional Approach. This was the EU's first regional policy focusing on the successor countries of the former Yugoslavia (minus Slovenia, plus Albania). But it remained vague, provided limited financial backing and offered no incentives to the countries concerned. It was only at the end of the 1990s, i.e. after the war in Kosovo, that the EU developed its foreign-policy capacities in a significant way, with a specific focus on Central and Southeastern Europe.

The EU's post-1999 approach is characterised by the reorganisation of its regional policies, the offer of a more committed and long-term bilateral framework of relations with the EU and the streamlining of financial assistance to the Western Balkans. Together with the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe—transformed in 2008 into the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)—the Stabilisation and Association process (SAP) has since 26 May 1999 been the centrepiece of the EU's long-term strategy towards the Western Balkans.

In the eyes of the European Commission (EC), this was the signal for a major change in the EU's approach to the Western Balkans: "EU leaders decided that a policy of emergency reconstruction, containment and stabilisation was not, in itself, enough to bring lasting peace and stability to the Balkans: only the real prospect of integration into European structures would achieve that."¹¹ The SAP, officially launched at the Zagreb Summit in November 2000,¹² is a tailor-made, country-by-country, progressive approach for Western Balkan countries considered to be potential members of the EU.

The SAP involves various steps, ranging from the establishment of a Consultative Taskforce to the conclusion and ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). The latter opens the way to application for membership, launching a process aimed at accession to the EU. It might be appropriate to remember one aspect of the SAA procedure: only once the member states share the view of the EC will it invite the concerned country to submit negotiating directives for the SAA. Negotiations are open-ended and will not necessarily end in EU membership.

In order to reassure the Western Balkans, the Thessaloniki Summit stated on 16 June 2003: "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union". The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans emphasised the need to strengthen the SAP and to intensify the relations between the Western Balkans and the EU through the introduction of European Partnerships inspired by the national programmes for adoption of the *acquis* in the accession process of the Central and East European countries.

The summit—only seven and a half years after the signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and less than three years after democratic changes in Serbia—was greeted with satisfaction if not euphoria by many commentators, seeing the end of clientelistic bilateral manoeuvrings between EU member states and individual states of the region. Rethinking was linked with a renewal of European strategies and perspectives for the Western Balkans, combined with a number of practical and symbolic measures.¹³ The process was to be governed by the "regatta" principle in which each country would strive to achieve membership at its own pace, but no time lines were provided for any.

¹¹ Commission of the European Communities, *The Stabilisation and Association Process for South East Europe, First Annual Report* (Brussels: COM (2002) 163 final, 4 April 2002), p. 4.

¹² See the Final Declaration and its Annex (Zagreb, 27 November 2000); available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accesion_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/sap/zagreb_summit_en.htm.

¹³ See Haralambos Kondonis, "Greek presidency: what lies behind the euphoria," in: David A. Stone / Despina Syrri (Eds), *Integrating the Western Balkans into Europe: the aftermath of the Greek EU Presidency* (Thessaloniki: South-East European Research Center, 2005), pp. 47-52.

There was a certain contradiction between the regional cooperation conditionality and the “regatta” approach, however. Indeed, the EU integration process—based on individual merits—has paradoxically contributed to a broadening of the gap between EU member states (Slovenia, Greece), candidate countries (Croatia, Macedonia) and potential candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia). The status of Kosovo adds a fourth category.¹⁴

Worse, the recent infighting between Slovenia and Croatia illustrates that bilateral problems can lead one country to block a neighbour. Slovenia was, in fact, abusing its veto right in the EU to blackmail Croatia, motivated by fear that its influence in South East Europe could disappear with Croatia’s accession. This conflict endangered not only Croatia’s prospects of EU accession, but also reform in other Balkan states that are slowly losing all hope of the promised European perspective.

Similar bilateral problems exist between Greece and Macedonia, and Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia is hardly likely to recognise Kosovo as an independent state in any near or medium future. There are also constant musings about the wish of the *Republika Srpska* to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thus, it would be wrong to think that the Balkans could easily duplicate the positive experience of the Visegrád Group,¹⁵ which was instrumental in speeding up the EU integration process of the Central and East European countries.

At the time of the Thessaloniki Summit, some major think tanks were lobbying for a stronger EU integration process. The European Stability Initiative suggested applying strategies—cohesion policy or structural policy—based on the European regional development policy.¹⁶ The International Crisis Group also focused on a more vigorous approach, suggesting a set of technical means ranging from increased financial assistance to effective twinning arrangements and regional integration.¹⁷ Two years later, the more comprehensive report of the International Commission on the Balkans recommended a “member-state-building” strategy focusing on the necessity to include institution- and thus capacity-building into the negotiating framework.¹⁸

These were all outstanding proposals, but in isolation they could not invigorate the EU integration process nor oppose the “enlargement fatigue” which was about to obstruct the EU membership prospect.

4. From Paris (2005) to Lisbon (2009)—roadblocks for the Western Balkans

Mixed signals came first in 2004, when the EC—in its draft of an Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)—assumed that countries from the region could eventually achieve candidate status around 2010 and membership around 2020.¹⁹ Thus, the SAP should not be perceived as a fast integration track, but as a gradualist process.

¹⁴ 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 candidate countries. Of course, this undermines regional cooperation which is also a EU conditionality; see Christophe Solioz, “Thinking about and beyond South East Europe,” in: Wolfgang Petritsch / Christophe Solioz (Eds.), *Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and Beyond* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008) pp. 159-84.

¹⁵ See Martin Dangerfield, “The Impact of the European Union Membership on Central European Subregional Cooperation,” in: W. Petritsch / Ch. Solioz (Eds.), *Regional Cooperation...*, pp. 129-45.

¹⁶ See European Stability Initiative, *The Road to Thessaloniki: Cohesion and the Western Balkans* (Berlin: ESI, 12 March 2003).

¹⁷ See International Crisis Group, *Thessaloniki and After I: The EU’s Balkan Agenda* (Brussels: ICG, 20 June 2003), pp. 5-7.

¹⁸ International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe’s Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005).

¹⁹ See Commission of the European Communities, *Proposal for a Council Regulation Establishing an Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance* (Brussels: COM (2004) 627 final, 29 September 2004).



It might be excessive to state that the rejection of the European Constitution through the referenda in France and the Netherlands (on 29 May and 1 June 2005, respectively) sent shock waves through the Balkans, by putting in question all countries' hope of membership. More reasonably, they made it clear that the EU would unlikely proceed as quickly as in the past and would almost certainly press the then next countries to enter, Bulgaria and Romania, to stick to the criteria of accession to the letter—which was indeed the case. Not only had the momentum gained from the Thessaloniki conference been lost, the membership perspective seemed to vanish. Except Macedonia—who was aware of the situation and became proactive—most countries failed to grasp the new mood in the EU. The Western Balkan countries are in a very weak position vis-à-vis the Union.

In his first detailed remarks on enlargement after the French and Dutch “Nos”, the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, said that the EU could not ignore “the signal that was sent by the electorate”.²⁰ He was referring to Turkey's membership ambitions, but this might also apply to some other countries. Indeed, serious doubts on the future of European enlargement, “enlargement fatigue”, were more and more openly expressed. Timothy Garton Ash, director of the European Studies Centre at St. Antony's College, Oxford, expressed this rationale behind the gloomy mood: “Thus far, enlargement has strengthened not weakened the EU. But at some point, continuous extension must end up weakening the Union (...) If the Union were to include all the remains of the Ottoman Empire, it might end up sharing the fate of the Ottoman Empire.”²¹

Similar arguments gave the impression that the EU was to pull away from its commitment made at Thessaloniki in June 2003. The Western Balkan countries were thus confronted with the fact that after the planned accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, enlargement might slow down, be frozen or even cease altogether, unless the 25-member EU proved to be able to cope with more members.

Nevertheless, the EU repeatedly reiterated its readiness to carry its “responsibility” to support stability and progress in the region and to “help” the countries there to pass through the gateway towards candidacy for membership. But it equally insisted on the importance of carefully managing the accession and how much the integration process required hard work and difficult decisions—undermining the EU's internal homework.

Aware of the risk that this could reverse the ongoing reform process and destabilise the Western Balkans, Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn—addressing the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee on 21 June 2005—explained the “Plan C for Enlargement”: consolidation, conditionality and communication. This new plan insists, firstly, on the need to consolidate the existing enlargement agenda; secondly, on the fact that the European perspective will become reality only if the concerned countries “fulfil the conditions of accession to the letter”; and, thirdly, on the necessity not only of bringing the EU closer to its citizens, but also of improving communication on enlargement and facilitating a civil society dialogue between the citizens of EU member states and of the candidate countries.

At the end, the “Plan C” proved to be no match for the EU's internal challenges. The question is not only if and how to pursue enlargement, but, more generally, how to develop a convincing common EU foreign policy in order to avoid a weak foreign policy based on small alliances *à la carte*—as shown with the Iraq crisis and Kosovo's independence. Other questions will also have to be resolved, including how to introduce economic and social reforms without creating a new divide between old and new members; thus, how to reaffirm and improve solidarity in order to avoid a weakening of the EU. Both dimensions will certainly affect the future enlargement process.

²⁰ International Herald Tribune, 23 June 2005, p. 1.

²¹ Timothy Garton Ash, “For a Pax Europeana,” *The Guardian*, 14 April 2005.

Basically, between 2005 and 2009—while the SAp process was still underway (see annexed box)—the ultimate goal, EU membership, was made almost impossible (except for Croatia) due to the absence of a new EU constitutional framework. Despite the rhetoric about the parallel deepening and widening of the EU, the priorities are clearly established: “Even the fastest scenario for the next accession of a new member state, likely to be Croatia, is clearly slower than the slowest envisaged scenario for the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty”.²² Thus, there was no legal space for the next group of applicant countries— except, as mentioned, for Croatia—until the full ratification of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty, which happened only on 3 November 2009.

During these years, the EU of course repeatedly complained about the lack of constitutional reforms in the Western Balkans—especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that was supposed to do in a short time period what the EU was unable to do over more than five years.

Worse, at a more global level, the EU seems to have lost its vision and its story, and somehow forgotten what the Union is all about:²³ too much “enlargement fatigue”, too little “absorption capacity” are but the most visible factors explaining the EU’s current indecisiveness concerning the integration of the Western Balkan countries. In a sense, the elephant in the room here is not Croatia but Turkey—with key EU member states looking to deny Turkey membership at all costs. Hence, it rather suits to block all candidate countries in the same way or, at best, to allow only Croatia to join whilst holding fast on any expansion which includes states with significant Muslim populations.

The doom and gloom mood is, however, not new. Already in 2003, the International Crisis Group stated: “Full EU membership is a long way off for most of the Balkan states.”²⁴ Two years later, the report of the International Commission on the Balkans observed: “A loss of hope and perspective is the political reality of the Western Balkans.”²⁵ They also argued that the European Union only has the capacity to absorb “reasonably functioning and legitimate states”, adding that “after Croatia, there are no more of these left in the region”.

Yet, today, Albania is a NATO member state, Macedonia ought to be, blocked by Greek objections to the name; and Montenegro also fulfils the criteria. After two elections in which the prospect of EU membership was the deciding factor, Serbia could also meet the test, providing that the impasse over Kosovo could be resolved. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina has partly moved backwards during this time.

Thus, attempting to assess the “Europeanisation” or, rather, “EU-isation” of the Balkans, we would have to conclude that today—even more than in 2003—EU membership should be more possible than previously but that it is called into question, mainly for reasons which are to do with the EU itself. In any case, EU membership is at the very least blocked for the time being.

This seems strange when, as a matter of undoubted fact, the EU today has the experience, the instruments, the appropriate strategic concepts and the means to “help” the Western Balkan countries gain entry to the Union. But where is the political will? There is no explicit political commitment by the EU promising eventual full membership.

²² Olli Rehn, “Five years of an enlarged EU”, speech delivered in Berlin, 28 April 2009; accessed at <http://ec.europa.eu>.

²³ See Ivan Krastev, “Dangerous Analogies,” in: Wolfgang Petritsch / Goran Svilanović / Christophe Solioz (Eds.), *Serbia Matters: Domestic Reforms and European Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009), p. 117.

²⁴ International Crisis Group, *Thessaloniki and After I: The EU’s Balkan Agenda* (Brussels: ICG, 20 June 2003), p. 5.

²⁵ International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe’s Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005), p. 11.



5. The new EU under the ratified Lisbon Treaty—need for a wake-up call

The Balkans are not going to top the EU's agenda any time soon. For a while, Brussels will be busy with the establishment of the second Barroso Commission and the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS); with the designation of its next foreign-policy chief and the president of the European Council, the two major new positions created by the Lisbon treaty. This treaty strengthens the Union, establishes a new dynamic between the Council, the Commission and the parliament, reshape its foreign policy and eliminates the structural obstacles to further EU enlargement. New EU initiatives are now needed to convince the region that the Union is back on track. A number of very clear signals that the EU has not forgotten the region should be provided in the immediate future.

The last twelve months have been difficult for the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans. Slovenia held up Croatia's membership talks for ten months, Greece continued preventing the opening of negotiations with Macedonia, and a group led by Spain blocked Kosovo on its European path. Across the region, the receding prospect of accession has weakened the momentum for political, economic and social reform, most dramatically in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU now needs to recommit to the region and reassure all its countries that they are welcome in the EU once they meet its conditions for membership. This is critical at a time of heightened economic anxiety. In turn, the governments, political elites and civil societies of the countries of the Western Balkans need to renew their commitment to peaceful transition and to European values. In order to give meaning to this renewed commitment, the EU also needs to rethink the instruments that it deploys in support of enlargement in the Balkans.

These twin goals are best achieved if the High representative for foreign affairs and security policy—who also holds the position of vice-president of the European Commission in charge of external relations—convened a summit on the model of the Thessaloniki conference of June 2003. *Thessaloniki II* could serve as a venue for the members and would-be members of the EU to discuss pending bilateral issues and ensure that they do not interfere with the accession process; negotiate a joint action plan to respond to the global financial crisis; and agree a pragmatic road map for EU integration, all in the framework of stronger regional co-operation.

As immediate signals that the process of enlargement to the Western Balkans is still on track, the summit should offer candidate status to the two countries that have submitted membership applications—Albania and Montenegro—and the start of membership talks to Macedonia, a candidate since 2005. Enactment and implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia should be accelerated. Kosovo needs an unambiguous promise that the EU will consider its membership application once it has reformed sufficiently, without prejudice for those member states that have not yet recognized its independence. After all, the EU is negotiating Turkey's accession even though several member states have made it clear that they oppose the country's entry.

Such a summit should also offer the Western Balkans a quick-start package to support membership preparations by giving the countries of the region access to select membership benefits starting in 2010. This would underscore that they are indeed part of Europe. The summit should decide on the immediate scrapping of visa requirements for all students and accelerate visa-free travel for all citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The summit also needs to adopt measures to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. This includes the possibility to re-direct pre-accession funding to budget support; a requirement that loan agreements with international financial institutions be in line with accession and pre-accession priorities; and ensure high-level EU representation in missions by these institutions. Regional co-operation, including on financial and economic matters, should also be given a high priority.

A tangible commitment to a strengthened relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans would serve as a wake-up call both to the EU and the region that a stark choice is to be made: to be part of the EU or remain on its fringes. After the ratification of the Lisbon treaty by all 27 member states, which is only a formality following the signing of the treaty by Vacláv Klaus, the president of the Czech Republic, on 3 November, the EU is now in a position to offer a reasonable political perspective to the Balkans.

The countries of the region must take reform seriously for the sake of their populations and not just in order to tick boxes during a technical accession process. At the same time, the blocking of negotiations as a result of bilateral disputes should be ended. Instead, a more flexible commitment to the integration of the region needs to be put in place, in which the countries of the Western Balkans play a full part in ongoing debates about the meanings of the common European Union project.²⁶

Box: Steps of the EU Stabilisation and Association Process (SAp)

	Feasibility Study	SAA		Accession application	Actual status	Begin of negotiation
		Signature	Entry in force			
Albania	2002	12 June 2006	1 April 2009	28 April 2009	Potential candidate	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2003	16 June 2008	<i>Not yet</i>		Potential candidate	
Croatia	2000	29 October 2001	1 February 2005	21 February 2003	Candidate country since 18 June 2004	3 October 2005
Macedonia	1999	9 April 2001	1 April 2004	22 March 2004	Candidate country since 16 December 2005	
Montenegro	2005	15 October 2007	<i>Not yet</i>	21 December 2008	Potential candidate	
Serbia	2005	29 April 2008	<i>Not yet</i>		Potential candidate	

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²⁶ Part of this section was written together with Paul Stubbs as a conference backgrounder for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, published as "A new Thessaloniki," *Osservatorio Balcani* on 6 November 2009 (<http://www.osservatorioalcani.org>).

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