

The Euro-Atlantic Integration of South-East Europe: Project Completion Prospects

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Where are we now and where we were some 20 years ago?

The European Union currently faces major challenges: over the last several years the EU has been confronted by a major financial and economic crisis, like many other parts of the world. Although far reaching decisions have been taken by the EU institutions and the EU Member States, the sovereign debt crisis is not yet behind us and a new recession and banking crisis are looming. Voices for stronger economic governance and coordination of fiscal policies are getting louder and louder. The EU has no choice, but to move on, in its own interests and in the interest of the rest of the world.

In its neighbourhood, the EU has witnessed unprecedented changes in a period of less than

12 months: I refer to the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU has ~~also~~ no choice, but to look for a stronger presence on the world scene. Internally, the EU is preparing its financial perspective, in other words its budget, for the years 2014-2020. In light of the challenges already referred to, this is not an easy task, but it needs to be done.

You may be surprised that I have been referring to these developments, but they determine the background against which future developments relating to the EU need to be seen. They certainly also determine the image of the EU in the world today.

Where does this leave the South-East of Europe? Taking into account these challenges and looking at developments in this region in a historic perspective, the perspective of EU membership of all countries of this region, constitutes another key challenge for the EU in its nearest neighbourhood.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the landscape in Europe changed drastically. Peace and

this opportunity to thank my Croatian friends for their hospitality.

✓ The ~~aim and the~~ task of a country of preparing itself for membership is massive. I have sometimes said publicly and I will repeat it here today again: it is like a silent revolution. The successful integration of 12 new Member States in 2004 and 2007 proves that it is worth the effort. It is of prime importance that, throughout the accession process, the leaders keep the population well informed of what is at stake and what is being achieved. Indeed, at the end of the day, it is up to the citizens of each country to decide whether or not they wish to be part of the EU. Croatia will hold a referendum on the Accession Treaty in the next few months. I am confident that the outcome will be positive, but one should not take the vote of the citizens for granted. We have witnessed unexpected and unpleasant surprises in the past.

The involvement of the EU in the South-East of Europe has been a long-term process. The EU has provided strong political support. It has provided and is providing substantial financial resources with the view to assisting the

populations of these countries to implement the changes required in their societies. The EU's budget, for the period 2011-2013, for the enlargement countries amounts to 5.5 billion euros. Other examples of the EU's commitment in the region are the military mission 'Althea' in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the civil mission 'EULEX' in Kosovo. Let me also refer to the lending capacity of the European Investment Bank, which has made available more than 4.5 billion euros since 2010. Clearly, the financial contributions from the EU and the EU member States by far outweigh contributions from other players in the region.

Preparing a better future also requires dealing with the past. Without reconciliation between the countries of the region, a harmonious integration in the region is not a realistic path. Croatia and other countries of the region gained independence only 20 years ago. The wounds of the war in the region in the 90s have not yet healed. We witness this every day. Efforts towards reconciliation need to be sustained. Continued cooperation with the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia remains a

and of the region in the EU

key requisite. The prosecution of war crimes by national courts needs to be stepped up. I thank the OSCE for its effective task of monitoring prosecutions and trials of war crimes. A sustainable solution for refugees in the region needs to be achieved among the countries of the region. If the latter find an adequate consensus, the international community stands ready to take part in a donors' conference. Hopefully, this objective can be reached, as soon as possible, in 2012.

It is in the interests of the EU and future Member States concerned that they are fully prepared and that, ultimately, all conditions are met. Enlargement will remain a strictly performance based process. It implies difficult decisions and a consistent performance from the aspirants. The most recent experience of the accession negotiations with Croatia will be very relevant for future negotiations with other candidate countries. The most relevant experience has been acquired with regard to the famous chapter 23 (the reform of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, the respect for fundamental rights). The European Commission had, in the

context of this chapter, established an impressive list of benchmarks and track records, which Croatia had to meet. The most challenging demand was not to adopt new legislation, but to demonstrate that the new legislation was effectively implemented, in other words that the situation on the ground was changing. It goes without saying that such reforms were not only undertaken with the aim of meeting EU demands, but in the interests of the citizens of Croatia. More generally, there cannot be any shortcuts in meeting the Copenhagen criteria.

I do believe that Croatia, as a future Member State, can act as a bridge-builder by sharing the experiences acquired in the accession negotiation process with other countries of the region. It has already transmitted the 'acquis communautaire' converted in the Croatian legal system and language to neighbouring countries.

The EU also appreciates the Unilateral Declaration adopted by the Government of Croatia and transmitted to the Croatian Parliament on 'promoting European values in South-East Europe'. In this document, it is

stated that 'Croatia firmly believes that open issues between states of a bilateral nature, such as border issues, must not obstruct the accession of candidate countries to the EU from the beginning of the accession process until the Accession Treaty comes into effect.' In this perspective, 'Croatia will continue to provide support to all the countries of South-East Europe in implementing reforms, by following a policy of strict and fair assessment of the progress of each candidate country in achieving their European and Euro-Atlantic aspiration.'

On the basis of the experience in Croatia, where almost all political parties have been in favour of EU accession, I would like to say to representatives of other countries of the region: the more united the parties are, above ideological differences, in pursuing the conclusion of the accession negotiations, the better you will be placed in gaining the necessary trust from the EU Institutions and EU Member States.

The Croatian language will be the 24th official language of the EU.

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Relations between the EU and South-East Europe

Relations between the EU and Croatia as well as the other countries in the region have steadily intensified and there have been positive developments. The accession negotiations with Croatia were concluded on 30th June 2011, the Accession Treaty is expected to be signed later on in December. A referendum will be held early in 2012 and all Member States are expected to ratify the Accession Treaty in order to allow Croatia to become the 28th Member State on 1st July 2013. Meanwhile, Croatia is expected to continue to align its legislation to new developments of the EU 'acquis' and to complete reforms, in particular in the field of the judiciary. Before the closure of the accession negotiations, the Member States decided to set up a special monitoring mechanism, on the basis of which the European Commission will closely monitor this process until the date of accession, particularly in the field of Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), Chapter 8 (competition – restructuring of the shipyards) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security).

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The EU considers Croatia to be a key factor for stability in the region and an example to the others showing that a painful reform process pays off. As already indicated, Croatia can assist its neighbouring countries on the path towards EU membership.

With regard to the other countries in the region, I do not wish to prejudge what the European Commission will decide on 12th October 2012, when it will adopt Progress Reports with regard to each of these countries.

However, we can note the following:

-Serbia has made considerable progress with regard to its cooperation with the ICTY by having arrested and then transferred Ratko Mladić and Goran Hadžić to The Hague. There have also been improvements in Serbia's relations with Kosovo, which recently came to a halt or, at least, suspension. Further progress is expected.

-The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been urged by several political leaders to solve the name issue with Greece.

-In Bosnia - Herzegovina, it is important that the basic principles of Dayton are consistently applied and reforms are adequately tackled. The Constitution needs to be urgently brought into compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights.

-With regard to Albania, political forces have to overcome the political stalemate following the local elections in May 2012 and return to a level of political dialogue allowing the proper functioning of key democratic institutions, notably the Parliament.

-Montenegro seems to have made good progress on a number of key priorities the European Commission set last autumn. Now it is essential to make sure that all actions undertaken are solid, coherent and sustainable.

-The relations between Kosovo and Serbia remain sensitive. But it is also true that stability in the South-East of Europe is a key EU

objective and that the state of Belgrade-Priština relations is a cause for concern. This will be one factor in the minds of Member States, when future decisions are to be taken. But there have been positive results, such as the recent agreements on the customs stamp and cadastre. We look forward to seeing these implemented in good faith and to see the remaining issues speedily resolved. Particularly important among these is the need to preserve and strengthen regional cooperation in a way that includes everyone. The absence of either Belgrade or Priština from diplomatic fora damages their effectiveness.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I said, all countries of this region have a clear perspective for EU membership if they prepare themselves adequately. Indeed, the countries of this region are truly European and their future lies in the European Union.