

The Western Balkans in the European Union: New perspectives on integration?

Reflection Forum

Paris, 30-31 May 2016

A contribution to the Paris Western Balkans Conference in July 2016

More than 80 researchers and policy analysts from think tanks and academia met in Paris at the Austrian Embassy and the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI). Participants from all EU member states and the six Western Balkans countries were invited.

The Reflection Forum was organised in an innovative manner allowing for an open and direct exchange around four key thematic areas related to the priorities of the process launched in Berlin 2014 and EU integration. It provided a platform fostering the exchange of perspectives in order to broaden the reflection about the regional developments among the policy community, the media and the general public.

Links have also been created to the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum also organised in view of the intergovernmental Conference of Paris on 4 July 2016. As follow-on, in view of the next intergovernmental Conference hosted by Italy, outreach events will be held with partners in the Western Balkans region during autumn/winter 2016/17. It is planned to convene another reflection forum during 2017 in Italy.

Four thematic sets of questions were discussed in relation to the “Berlin-Vienna-Paris” and the accession processes: (i) social-economic convergence of the region with the EU, (ii) mobility, migration and border security, (iii) democracy and good governance, and (iv) future of the EU and Western Balkans in it. The General Rapporteur of the Forum was Sabina Lange of the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris.

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Main Findings of the Reflection Forum

Paris, 30-31 May 2016

A need for (re-)new(ed) approaches from four intertwined perspectives

Sabina Lange, EU ISS (General Rapporteur)

1. A renewed vision for the membership in the EU and a political will to create an impetus for accelerating the accession process is needed. A central question tackled was: Why are leaders who do not pursue the democratisation and EU accession path still in power? The EU is faced with two key challenges in this respect: First, how to craft a clear and feasible prioritisation agenda. Primary focus should be on improving the lives of the citizens and on employment prospects in general and for young generations in particular. The EU's main instruments in this respect are its own successful policies, such as cohesion policy and the free movement of labour. An extension of these instruments to the candidate and potential candidate countries should be considered. The second challenge is how to identify change-makers to partner with in the respective countries but also globally. EU needs to invest more in finding and supporting legitimate and credible partners in the region. It should also work jointly with actors from outside the region to increase its leverage. The United States of America remain indispensable in this respect.
2. Clarity is needed regarding the nature of the Union to which the Western Balkan countries are seeking to accede. A stronger message on the core values and principles of the EU should be delivered, too. Economic and financial crisis, the rise of political right, controversies about *Grexit* and *Brexit* alongside the weak responses to the situation in Ukraine, in southern Mediterranean and the migration flow of 2015/2016 present the Union to the candidates and potential candidates as a moving target without a straightforward appeal. Will the political conditionality for the accession still be valid and interpreted in the same way in three, five, seven years' time? Will they be allowed to join once they fulfil the criteria - or will universal referenda in member states undercut the results of negotiations? Will they eventually join as equal members of the club? The open-ended nature of these questions allows domestic elites (in the candidate and potential candidate countries) to divert from the pursuit of the accession agenda and to present alternatives (perceived from the EU perspective as lack of progress or even backsliding in terms of good governance, rule of law and democratisation) to their electorates as safer options for their future and the future of their children. The European Commission possesses the best mechanisms and instruments to communicate to the candidate and potential candidate countries with clarity and to oversee coherence of the EU and the Member States' approaches to the region. The accession agenda, the pursuit of foreign and security policy as well as economic integration, investments and bilateral relations in the region and with the countries of the region need to be coordinated to reinforce each other. The prospects of the whole regions will gain as a result.

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3. With regard to the socio-economic situation in the region a more tangible perspective for a better life for the citizens of the candidate and potential candidate countries is needed. Hence there is a need to develop a vision of an accession process as essential to the progress towards more prosperity in a generation. A vicious circle of bad governance, including ineffective administration, state-capture, demographic trends, (youth) unemployment, increasing costs of debt-servicing, increasing economic disparity and decline to pre-1990 levels etc. require a set of concerted efforts to be broken. Regional, functional and sectoral dimension of cooperation need to be promoted. Building on the model of the European Energy Community, other EU common policies could be extended to fully include the candidate and potential candidate countries, including the distributive policies ('front loading'). The bleak economic situation of the region 25 years after the countries embarked on the processes of transition, suggests that IPA is not enough. Proactive approach to a gradual inclusion of all countries of the Western Balkan into the EU's free movement of labour should be considered, starting with facilitation of seasonal and temporary legal labour migration, circular models of migration to facilitate mutual brain gain, and focusing on the young. In addition, scholarship programmes (for academic and vocational training; extending the Erasmus and Leonardo programmes, but also with a regional-exchange only dimension), would boost skills and employment opportunities, while also helping the reconciliation processes. Rule of law is crucial for improving the diaspora investments as well as for boosting the much lacking entrepreneurial spirit in the countries of the region and should therefore be prioritised in the accession talks.

4. The geopolitical context requires assessment, analysis and adaptation of the mix of enlargement, home affairs, foreign and security policies. There is no alternative to that of the Western Balkans in the EU. However, a number of externally induced societal and socio-economic, economic (investment) and political processes and relations lead to situations in which necessary reforms and along them the accession progress are threatened. The EU needs to confront that it is portrayed increasingly as importer of instability and problems to the regions, such in the case of the economic and the migration crisis. A concerted effort is needed in assessing, understanding, and designing policy responses to various forms, including but not limited to religious radicalisation in the region. Acting in line with the new global strategy, the EU should champion its efforts in boosting societal and states' resilience to external shocks and internal instabilities in the region and partner with global, regional and local actors to ensure that economic and political activities in the region do not set it off the EU integration path.

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Background of the Reflection Forum

In August 2014, in the wake of the centenary of First World War, the Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel initiated an intergovernmental process with the countries of the Western Balkans. Its aim has been to improve their cooperation, put “fundamentals first” and thereby reinvigorate their European integration. The first conference in Berlin was followed by a second one in Vienna in 2015. A third one will take place in Paris in 2016, marking the middle of the process. The process should end in 2018, at the occasion of the centenary of the end of the First World War.

The reflection forum, entitled “The Western Balkans in the European Union: new perspectives on integration?”, aims to discuss the relevance of a European dialogue of research and policy institutions on issues related to the Western Balkans and their European integration in the run-up to the Conference of Heads of State and Government from the Western Balkans countries hosted by President François Hollande on 4 July 2016. The discussion was organised along four thematic sets of questions.

1) European and regional convergence, interconnectivity and social-economic reforms. Integration without transformation?

Fifteen years of enlargement policy have produced mixed results. On the economic front, the EU’s approach has been based on a policy-mix, including aimed at creating an investment-friendly regulatory environment to attract FDI. Structural reforms in socio-economic governance as well as externally- and assistance-driven investments in infrastructure and skills and qualifications are meant to prepare South Eastern European market economies to withstand the competitive pressure stemming from the European Union and boost their economic development. Why has this model not delivered so far?

What are the key obstacles to its functioning? On the political front, the EU’s approach has long underlined the need for regional cooperation on a series of issues, while dealing mostly bilaterally with Western Balkan states. Sub-regional integration remains limited, despite the work of the RCC. How to strengthen this logic? How to resolve the remaining “big questions” blocking or threatening to block the accession process of some Western Balkan states? What is the added value of the process initiated in Berlin in this respect? And more generally, what assessment can we make of the EU’s enlargement model towards the Western Balkans? Has this model fostered Western Balkan states’ convergence in light of the Copenhagen criteria?

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2) Migration, mobility, transnational and border security. A challenge for the Western Balkans with wider implications?

The European integration of the Western Balkans into the area of security, freedom and justice has been premised on the adoption and transposition of the EU's *acquis* in that field. This in turn supposes that bilateral disputes should be resolved; that systems of integrated border management should be built up; that countries in the region integrate into the EU's security mainstream and that they cooperate with agencies like FRONTEX. The framing of this approach has been provided by the post-visa liberalisation monitoring process and the new approach put in place by the European Commission in 2011, which brought chapters 23 and 24 into the centre of the EU accession process. However, with the emigration hike from the region in winter 2014/2015, the transit of more than one million migrants more recently, the outbreak of the border crisis in the summer of 2015 and the suspension of the Dublin procedures, new challenges arise in that specific area. For one, how shall the securitisation of European migration policies impact the European integration of Western Balkan states? Additionally, the issue of Islamic radicalisation has re-emerged as a phenomenon that is either home-grown or rather exogenous. What assessment can we make of regional cooperation in those areas and of the EU's attempt to deal with these issues in the Western Balkans?

3) Democratisation, participation and good governance. How can regional cooperation and the EU promote (again) effective democratisation in the Western Balkans?

The enlargement policy has long been considered as the EU's most successful tool for democratising transition countries. The experience of Central and Eastern European countries in the 2000s certainly backed this belief, while comforting the EU's legitimacy in its role of transformative power. However, the state of Western Balkan democracies has not improved over the past decade. On the contrary, it has eroded in several cases. Populism and authoritarian temptations have put Western Balkans' civil society under greater pressure; they have weakened key institutions guaranteeing the rule of law and harmed political pluralism and electoral processes. Young people, in particular, seem estranged both from the political systems as well as increasingly from the idea of European integration making a contribution to their lives. The abridgement of freedom of the media, the degradation of parliamentary democracy, the rise of political radicalisation, clientelism and voter abstention have become markers in many Western Balkan democracies. Why has progress been so limited in this field? What factors, e.g. within the EU's enlargement process, have contributed to the partial backsliding of Western Balkan states' democracies? Can the link between EU accession and democratic progress be re-established?

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4) Imagining the Western Balkans and a (dis)integrating European Union

The EU's narrative of European integration is increasingly contested by competing regional, structural powers in the region, e.g. Russia or Turkey. The attractiveness of the enlargement process and the legitimacy of the EU as normative power, meanwhile, have been undermined by the multiple crises the EU has undergone lately (in particular, but not only, on the economic level). The enlargement process suffers from the advent of new scepticism regarding the European project in general and, more specifically, from the gradual replacement of the will to establish an ever-closer Union by EU member states' rising focus on defending their national interests. Is a new impetus for integration possible in European public opinions? Are there realistic options for alternative economic models applicable in the region? Could bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans be settled without European perspectives? What should be the relationship between European integration and Euro-Atlantic integration in the region? What would be the consequences of the pursuit of European disintegration tendencies on peace and stability in the region?

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The members of the Reflection Forum's organising committee - Dominique David (CFA/ÖFZ & IFRI), Tobias Flessenkemper (CIFE), Sabina Lange (EU ISS), Florent Marciacq (CFA/ÖFZ & Université du Luxembourg), Aline Palige (CIFE), Vivien Pertusot (IFRI), Dušan Reljić (SWP), Florian Trauner (EU ISS) and Sarah Veit (CFA/ÖFZ) – would like to thank on behalf of all participants and organisers for the generous support provided by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development of France, the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria, the Austrian Embassy in Paris, the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe sponsored by Germany and the ERSTE Foundation.



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