

Thessaloniki ten years on: Injecting momentum into the enlargement process for the Western Balkans

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For a region that has produced more history than it can absorb, ten years is not a long time in the Western Balkans.

Yet, in the ten years that have passed since the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki in June 2003, major developments have led to a turning point in the fortunes of the region. These developments would not have been possible without the process known as the Thessaloniki Agenda adopted at that summit, which confirmed the EU accession perspective for the countries of the region. The language adopted was very clear: "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union."

The Agenda set out in considerable detail the EU approach in preparing the countries of the region for EU accession, confirming the stabilisation and association process launched at the previous EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in November 2000 as the framework for the "European course of the Western Balkan countries, all the way to their future accession".

Following the lead of Macedonia, which was the first to sign a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) in 2001, most of the other countries embarked on the same process in subsequent years; Kosovo being the likely latest addition with the expected green light from the June European Council to start negotiations.

Meanwhile, Croatia, which was the second country to sign an SAA in late 2001, is about to become the 28th member of the EU, while accession negotiations have already started with Montenegro and are expected to start with Serbia soon, following the landmark agreement reached in the EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade.

These developments are further proof of the positive momentum generated by the Thessaloniki Agenda and of the continued attraction of EU accession, despite the current adverse economic climate in the EU.

What probably had the greatest impact in terms of tangible benefits for the citizens of the region, as well as giving them a sense of belonging to the EU family, was the granting of visa-free travel to the Schengen area. Citizens of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were granted visa-free travel in December 2009 and the citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted the same status a year later.

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This was by no means an automatic process. It involved a detailed roadmap of institutional and administrative reforms relating to strengthening the rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, as well as strengthening border control and guaranteeing security of identity and travel documents. The success of this exercise demonstrates that the countries of the region do have the administrative capacity to deliver if they focus their minds on the job and are given clear and detailed conditions to fulfil in return for the granting of the agreed benefits.

On the more political front, the recent agreement between Kosovo and Serbia demonstrates the continued strength of the EU integration perspective. This agreement represents a defining moment in High Representative Catherine Ashton's legacy and a well-deserved outcome for the many hours she devoted to mediating between two leaders who, only a few years back, were sworn enemies.

It also shows the effectiveness of the EU's 'soft power' if it is used in a consistent manner. There is no reason why similar progress cannot be made elsewhere in the Balkans, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which demands particular attention but where the EU's presence is not as effective as it could be.

Herein lies the dilemma facing the EU in its current enlargement strategy towards the Balkans, ten years after Thessaloniki.

Out of necessity the EU initially focused on security issues with the successful deployment of some of its newly established foreign policy tools (the EU military mission in Macedonia in 2003 and EU police missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and subsequently in Macedonia).

Attention gradually shifted from stabilisation to association and the present day emphasis on all the institution building, rule of law, economic and other reforms required for EU integration. The current priority on judiciary and fundamental rights, justice, freedom and security places rule of law issues, including the fight against corruption and organised crime, at the centre of the EU's enlargement policy.

At the same time, however, recent developments in some of the countries of the region highlight fundamental weaknesses, such as the lack of a culture of political dialogue and consensus building, which continue to undermine prospects for long-term stability and cannot be ignored. This is certainly the case in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. Unresolved constitutional issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina also affect the overall climate.

Inter-ethnic tensions, exacerbated in some cases by the deep-rooted nationalist policies of the governing parties and issues relating to the rights of persons belonging to minorities remain prevalent. Sadly, some EU member states don't set a good example here.

Bilateral disputes such as the one between Greece and Macedonia also impact negatively on the enlargement process, deflecting attention from the real reform deficiencies and consuming far too much energy that could be more usefully deployed elsewhere. Indeed, the failure so far to resolve these bilateral disputes has fuelled public resentment in those affected countries, often encouraged by the government concerned, against what is rightly or wrongly perceived as the lack of fairness and double standards of the EU and some of its member states.

These are reminders of how heavily the legacy of the Balkans' turbulent history continues to weigh in the region, and how easy it is for positive trends to be reversed. They should not be underestimated by the EU.

A positive narrative one day can become a nightmare scenario the next. In 2005, Macedonia was regarded as a success story in overcoming inter-ethnic tensions and promoting courageous reforms; an effort the EU rewarded by granting candidate status for EU accession. Today it is a country marked by political instability, the lack of any political dialogue, deep mistrust among the ethnic communities and a deeply divided society. All this puts its EU accession prospects at risk – the only objective that unites the entire country.

The response to this dilemma requires a more determined and consistent policy from the EU. Political stability and security, as well as resolving outstanding constitutional issues, should remain at the forefront of the EU's attention.

At the same time, the EU should realise that excessive delays in allowing accession negotiations to start, or holding the process hostage to bilateral complaints of some member states, thereby undermining the element of fairness in the conditionality principle, will fuel nationalist agendas and make the reform process more difficult. It also diminishes the usefulness of the stabilisation and association process itself.

EU member states would be the first to agree that the intrusive nature of the accession process and the stringent requirements for opening and closing chapters gives the EU greater leverage to keep the negotiating country on track, to rein in nationalist tendencies and ensure the best results from the reform agenda.

The European Commission, meanwhile, needs to preserve the rigorous objectivity in the annual assessments contained in its progress reports for each country. Failure to uphold that rigorous approach by attempting to minimise reform weaknesses will only undermine whatever leverage it has.

The best way for the European Council to mark the tenth anniversary of the Thessaloniki Agenda in June would be to take bold decisions that could inject new momentum into the enlargement process, such as:

- Setting a date for opening accession negotiations with Serbia, as well as for opening SAA negotiations with Kosovo. This would be a recognition of the efforts of both Pristina and Belgrade in reaching agreement over power-sharing in the Serb majority communities in Kosovo, as well as an encouragement to continue with reforms and the further normalisation of relations.
- Setting a date for opening accession negotiations with Macedonia, this being the only way to keep the EU's aspirations of the country on track and prevent it from sinking further into instability. Commissioner Štefan Füle's recent statements of concern belie the frustration with a political leadership oblivious to the harm it is causing to the country's image.
- Allowing the formal screening process to start for both Macedonia and Albania. Although it is essentially a very technical exercise, the "analytical examination of the *acquis communautaire*" (commonly referred to as 'screening') is traditionally the first step once negotiations have formally started; it examines in minute detail every aspect of a country's level of preparedness in fulfilling accession requirements, and is an excellent way of locking a country into the tough discipline of the accession process.
- Encouraging more intensive engagement of the EU institutions with the political leaders and institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using all the leverage at the EU's disposal, in order to resolve outstanding constitutional issues and promote a spirit of consensus.
- Engaging more systematically with civil society, ensuring direct access to EU funding under simplified procedures. An enhanced role for civil society should be a core task of the EU out in the field throughout the Balkan region. This is an investment for the future,

ensuring a critical mass to guard against governments with autocratic tendencies, as well as a greater buy-in for society in general in the EU accession process. Civil society also plays a critical role in fostering reconciliation and helping to come to terms with the region's turbulent past.

- Enhancing interaction with organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, whose proven expertise in media freedom and minority issues – lacking in the EU – would bring an added value to the EU's effectiveness out in the field and ensure a more concerted effort.

Next year's 100th anniversary of the dramatic events in Sarajevo will bring endless debate and much soul-searching about the place of the Balkan region in Europe's history. Injecting new momentum now into the European perspective for the Western Balkan countries will help to shape that debate in a positive manner. The conclusion of the 2005 International Commission on the Balkans is as valid today as it was then: "...the logic for a further enlargement is compelling: without the Balkans in the EU, the process of unification will remain incomplete."