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**Research Report**

## The Western Balkans without a plan for the future: The EU expansion debate threatens the stability of Europe's weakest region

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# The Western Balkans without a Plan for the Future

The EU Expansion Debate Threatens the Stability of Europe's Weakest Region

*Dušan Reljić*

The recent debacle surrounding the EU's draft constitution and the subsequent calls by some member states for either a delay or even a halt altogether of future EU expansion could well undermine the precarious stability of the Western Balkans. The fading perspective of EU membership has already had consequences: nationalist voices are growing louder again and in foreign relations a distinct turn toward the US is evident. In Croatia, which is the closest in the region to attaining EU membership, it is only now every third citizen that backs the country's membership in the EU. In order to avert rekindling ethno-political conflicts, and to retain the credibility of Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy as well, the EU should lay out a clear roadmap and the conditions for the next round of expansion.

The verbal jousting in the EU after the failed June 16–17 summit in Brussels hits the potential candidate countries where they are most vulnerable. The one and only guiding model for their political futures has until now been the membership in the EU. Although the final declaration of the Brussels summit states that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union, members of the EU Commission and leading politicians of some of the member countries have nevertheless voiced contrary opinions. The Vice President of the European Commission, Günter Verheugen, said for instance that “above and beyond the existing commitments no further promises can be made.” He added, without explain-

ing further, that there were possibilities other than full membership in the EU that could also foster political and economic stability for all of Europe. In a similar vein, the chancellor candidate for the German CDU/CSU, Angela Merkel, proposed that the “European perspective” for the Balkans must be explored with “more creativity” and that possibilities for the countries of the region shouldn't “always be thought about exclusively in terms of full membership.” The governments in Berlin and Vienna, the EU representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, and the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Jean Lemierre, were among those

who, in contrast, noted that the ongoing political and economic reforms in the candidate countries could be broken off or become derailed as a result of uncertainty over the requirements for EU entry.

Meanwhile, the future of further EU expansion was made much more difficult by the so-called “Turkey Article” in the French constitution. According to it, every new candidate for EU membership must be approved by a popular referendum in France. This new constitutional Article 88-7, however, doesn't apply to Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, which are already part of the entry process.

### **Incentive to Democratize**

Over the past years, the long-term stabilization of the Balkans has been among the top priorities of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The standing offer to the Western Balkan countries, namely that—after successful political and economic consolidation—they would be welcome to join the EU, was an essential part of the EU policy. From the side of the Western Balkan countries, it was this possibility of one day being part of the EU that had proven the most important stimulus for domestic political reforms and the processes of democratization. In practice, the adoption of “European values” also meant a willingness to compromise with ethnic minorities and, in general, to promote more open, tolerant societies. This couldn't have happened without a clear distancing of the current officeholders from the nationalistic and populist forces that had set the tone since the beginning of the collapse of the south Slavic federation 15 years ago.

In recent years, governing leaderships everywhere in the region had been able to keep nationalist critics (those who, for example, resist the reestablishment of relations with their former battlefield foes) at bay by justifying their political courses as part of the necessary preconditions set by the EU and the West for candidacy. And, in the name of entering the EU club with a

“clean slate,” public officials in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo also took measures to accelerate the adjudication of the war crimes and other human rights violations that happened between 1991–1999. Before that, this process had barely been started anywhere. However, since it became public that EU candidacy for some of the Western Balkan countries has retreated further into the distance than previously assumed, the willingness of these countries to please Brussels by conforming to “European values” has ebbed substantially.

### **Strategy without Punch**

The risk of a recurrence of the kind of chaotic developments that led to the armed conflicts in the Western Balkans during the 1990s grows larger as the credibility of the EU's stabilization strategy diminishes. For example, Montenegro is threatening to hold a referendum on independence by March 2006 at the latest, although Brussels has clearly expressed its wish for a continuation of the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, which it decisively helped bring to life in 2003. In Montenegro, the roughly equal forces of supporters and opponents of independence are already at one another's throats in a way that hardly sets the stage for civil compromises between them in the future. The political forces in Kosovo show even less willingness to compromise.

In early July of this year, a series of bomb attacks in Pristina were directed against UN and OSCE facilities. This was the first time that underground organizations directly attacked the international peacekeepers. Kosovo's president, Ibrahim Rugova, outrightly refuses to participate in negotiations over the province's future status. He demands that the US and the EU recognize Kosovo's independence immediately. Belgrade's reaction to these aspirations is increasingly tougher. Recently, Serbia's Foreign Minister, Vuk Drašković, said that no Serbian hand will sign away Kosovo; if the province becomes independent, then the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzego-

vina should be allowed to go its own way, he said. (See Franz-Lothar Altmann's *Kosovo 2005/06: Phased Independence?* SWP-Comments 28/05, June 2005).

On 18 May 2005, in a Washington speech about the future status of Kosovo, US Undersecretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns expressly called upon the EU to come up with a "courageous and creative" deal which would give Serbia requisite incentive to engage constructively in the upcoming negotiations over Kosovo. The effectiveness of the strategy, which the West also pursues to manage ethno-political conflicts in the Republic of Macedonia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, will be significantly undermined by the present tenor of the EU expansion debate.

Increasingly, the governments of the region are recognizing that by cozying up to the US, they implicitly put pressure on the EU, discouraging Brussels from dropping the Balkan expansion plans. In doing so, they have as an example Washington's engagement on behalf of Turkey's EU aspirations. In addition, all of the peace accords for the ethno-political conflicts that took place on the territory of former Yugoslavia in the last 15 years were significantly influenced by the US.

In the meantime, the voices that demand a coalition with the US are becoming louder. In Croatia, for example, it is being remembered how important the country's closeness to Washington was in order to achieve the country's war aims during the 1990s. Croatia's alliance with the EU, in contrast, didn't bring much. Nevertheless, Croatia, at Brussels request, last year rejected Washington's wish for a bilateral agreement that ruled out any US citizen being brought before the International Criminal Court (ICC). For this, so it is seen in Zagreb, Brussels not only not compensated Croatia, but instead it froze the candidate negotiations without any real reason.

## Steps Backward in Croatia

The EU made the onset of candidate talks with Croatia dependent on a positive evaluation of its cooperation with the International Tribunal for Crimes in the former Yugoslavia by Carla Del Ponte, the Chief Prosecutor in The Hague. Del Ponte charges that the Croatian government has not done enough to apprehend and deliver the on-for-run, indicted war criminal Ante Gotovina. Moreover the government tolerates a particularly active network of the Croatian security services that helped the former general to flee Croatia and continues to support him in exile. In July the EU will again consider the prospects for the beginning of talks with Croatia.

The inability of the Croatian Prime Minister, Ivo Sanader, to bring about the sought-after start of EU negotiations for his country coincides with what the Croatian Helsinki Committee called a "significant deterioration" of the human rights situation in the country. Frustration over the failure of Croatia to move forward in the EU process is something felt acutely by the biggest ethnic minority in the country, Croatia's Serbs. Now that the "EU euphoria" has abated, says the moderate speaker of the Serbian minority in Croatia, Milorad Pupovac, the irrational hatred against Serbs is on the rise again. In fact, the Croatian Helsinki Committee pointed out the return of the anti-Serb rhetoric in the media, above all in state-run television. After a long period free of violence, there have been of late renewed attacks against minority individuals. Croatian President Stjepan Mesić acknowledged that there were political motives behind the gruesome murder of Dušan Vidić, an 84-year-old Serb from Karin in the Dalmatian hinterland. In late May, three bomb attacks shook Croatia's multiethnic border region to Serbia. So far, there have been no arrests for either of these crimes.

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## Minority as Scapegoat

Since Croatia's movement toward the EU drew to a halt, Sanader's ruling Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) has swerved to the right. Since he came to office at the beginning of 2004, Sanader, in the context of preparing his country for the EU, has pursued policies of cooperation with the representatives of the Serbian minority in Croatia as well as making bold openings to Serbia itself. Before the municipal elections in mid-May, the far-right wing of the HDZ, led by the local kingpin in Slavonia Branimir Glavaš, broke away from the party. Apparently, in order to avoid further such losses, Sanader decided after the elections to form local coalitions between his party and the extreme right wing Croatian Party of Law (HSP). In the city assemblies in Knin and Vukovar, Croatian "blocs" were formed and prevented the Serbian party, the SDSS, which won the most votes to participate in the municipal governments. Both cities, which are in multiethnic regions, are among those in which fighting raged at its worst 1991-1995. The authorities still do not support the return of refugees in a satisfactory way, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). With the affront to the Serbian minority party in its own stronghold, Sanader runs the risk of losing the support of the three Serbian MPs in the Sabor who are necessary for his minority government to survive. A collapse of the HDZ government, which could then be blamed on the Serbian minority, would offer Croatian nationalists additional ammunition for their political campaigns.

Should it come to early elections in Croatia, which the media there has been speculating about, the approval of Croatia's EU candidacy will in no way, as it had before the November 2003 parliamentary elections, count as an unbeatable trump card. According to a survey conducted by Zagreb University's Department of Political Science, around 50% of the voters that backed Sanader in 2003 think that full state sovereignty is more important than EU

membership. In total, the share of those in Croatia who stand behind EU bid has sunk to 36%, while just a year ago three quarters of those asked supported Croatia's drive for EU membership.

## A Piece of "Non-Europe"

It seems that the EU member countries don't want to acknowledge the increasingly shrill sounds coming from the Western Balkans today. However, the EU can't pretend, as the Luxembourg Premier Jean-Claude Juncker said, as if there is "somehow a piece of non-Europe in the middle of Europe." Should there emerge a consensus that the countries of the Western Balkans, possibly in the same way as Turkey, can no longer count on full membership in the EU, even in the long term, the likelihood of renewed regional tensions will grow. But it would also prove that the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy itself, which in the Balkans until very recently took the form of the EU expansion process. It can't simply be reformulated in mid-stream without substantially discrediting the institution that had embodied it.