

NAI

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**Introduction: The new Balkan paradox**

If the nineties were a period of turbulence and intervention for the Western Balkans, the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be developing into a promising era of change. But in order for the Balkans to become more safely anchored to our institutions, we need a strategy. We need a step-by-step plan and we need to work together to make it happen.

A series of factors, culminating to the aftermath of the September 11 horror and the creation of a new international environment, indicates rapid and comprehensive change is difficult to bring about; whereas new positive developments took place, such as the overthrow of the Milošević regime, the elections in Kosovo and the new Constitution in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), the countries of the Western Balkans still carry a heavy burden of uncertainty. At the time, when the European Union and NATO are about to proceed to historic enlargement processes, the peoples of the region feel there is no future for themselves. At the time, when countries such as Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania have a set roadmap in their European Union and NATO accession aspirations, other nations in the Southeast European region feel continuously distrustful over accession promises.

Understandably, a new paradox has emerged: the Western Balkans need an entry strategy to our institutions, at the same time when we need an exit strategy from the present deadlock in the Western Balkans.

However, one cannot simply walk away from the region and wait for it to travel the distance on autopilot. The danger of destabilization and havoc is ever-present; terrorist groups may have chosen to base their activities in the region's less policed and mountainous areas; many conflicts are still open and border disputes continue; human and minority rights are still much below European standards.

It becomes more and more evident that the continuation of the wait-and-see approach by the international community will further endanger the political solutions which must be given to longstanding issues. The necessity for re-evaluating the international community's policy in the Western Balkans in order to achieve the establishment of a self-sustaining political order becomes increasingly a priority. The IDU should not therefore miss this important opportunity to contribute to a new approach vis-à-vis this conflict-ridden region.



## **1. The need for a new approach**

After more than half a century of totalitarianism, the international community faced an unprecedented challenge in the Balkans. To assist to the process of nation-building and democratization where there was for centuries a culture of dependency and political backwardness. This was indeed a Herculean task. For its fulfilment, it required knowledge, leadership and a common vision; elements, which were at times, undermined by the European Union's inward-looking Balkan policy, at the beginning of the past decade. The commitment of the United States compensated for many of these deficiencies.

In the course of the following years, it became all-too-obvious that policies of division and ethnic hatred were to face a decisive response by the international community. At the same time, the role played by SFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina and KFOR in Kosovo have contributed to deter further violence and contribute to a step-by-step stabilization process.

But more is needed by many more. What is needed is a leap to overcome the Western Balkans' historic trend to seek foreign miracle-makers and financial assistance; we also need a leap to overcome the international community's current hesitance as a whole to come up with a unified, comprehensive and longer-term approach for effectively remedying the ills which trouble this region.

### **1.1 The aftermath of 9/11**

The horrendous attacks on the United States were attacks on the entirety of our civilized world and its institutions. The necessary response and the war on terrorism proclaimed by the International Alliance shifted the world's attention and focus on Asia – a battleground in a new type of engagement. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the war required for the marginalization and utterly, for the destruction of terrorism, has withdrawn valuable political resources from the Balkans.

At the same time, the European Union seems more willing and self-confident to assume its responsibilities over the region's future. Such an undertaking has essential benefits for all. It is in the interest of the United States for Europe to undertake such a role; she will guarantee stability and save valuable US resources which can be best utilized over the grand struggle of all against determined terrorist cells in places Europe cannot reach. It is in the interest of the European Union to be firmly engaged in the Balkans; it will exhibit to the world it can finally assume responsibility over its own neighborhood and gain much-needed self-respect in international affairs, after a period of too-little-too-late policies which has consistently failed to promise hope to the war-torn peoples of its southeastern corner.

More importantly, it would be in the interest of the countries of the Western Balkan region to allow for more EU involvement. The European Union is today not only a resounding success, ambitiously wanting to



share much more than a common currency and ready to be enlarged by up to twelve new members; it is also the biggest financial donor for the reconstruction of the region. During the past decade, it provided some €4.5 billion for the five states in that region; Various other assistance programs and the continuing burden of our military presence in Bosnia, Kosovo and FYROM prove the EU 's commitment is unwavering and its resolve, solid.

But the European Union still needs a roadmap; The vague and long-term prospect of joining the EU cannot alone bring peace and stability in the region, as it did not work in the case of the FYROM, where the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement did not prevent the break-up of full scale conflict. A long-term vision and the preventive policies with which we need to approach unresolved conflicts are still, as needed as ever.

## **1.2 The Stability Pact for S.E. Europe and its discontents**

Certainly, the EU is in much better position to positively answer on the region 's prospects, than it has ever been. The experiences accumulated throughout all these long years have made possible to form a clearer and undisputed consensus over what to do next. But, recognizing misjudgments, dropping all prejudice on what the word "Balkan" connotes to some minds, accepting responsibility for hasty initiatives of the past – all these would be extremely helpful. Recognizing past failures is indispensable in preparing for future successes.

The performance of the Stability Pact for South-East Europe, our main policy vehicle in the region, has been correctly criticized. Problems in coordination bred questions on efficiency which in turn, made the international community 's involvement in restructuring the region the equivalent of raising a Babel Tower, in the midst of chaos. The multitude of national envoys and international coordinators with overlapping activities further enhanced the disappointment felt by the communities they were supposed to serve. The past lack of leadership and clear focus, as well as the failure to establish a more centralized locus of decision-making bred problems in both coordination and program implementation.

Early this year, Mr. Busek 's appointment to the post of Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact has provided all with the vision of a new beginning. But a general reassessment of the progress made by the international community is urgently needed, along with a clearer set of goals over what must be achieved politically.

## **1.3 Current political challenges**

The developments, both positive and negative, in the countries of the region signify the difficulties on implementing a stable and self-sustaining order.



In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the effectiveness of international intervention has been sidestepped by the ineffectiveness of the country to keep itself going. Bosnia remains extremely dependent on foreign help. One should necessarily add to that cost, the cost of the current uncertainty in the country's political structures to the long-term stability in the region. The economic and social life in Bosnia-Herzegovina has fallen victim to unsustainable expectations over what the international community has on offer.

Kosovo's elections, the maturity shown by the largest party of the region and the recent formation of a government were important steps. However, we all need to see how the new political balances translate to everyday political reality. For the communities in Kosovo, the road ahead will still be filled with uncertainty, unless the international community can contribute to the region's prosperity and enhance the feeling of security for all.

The situation in Montenegro has taken a new turn, in view of the international stand against any hasty initiatives. At the same time, a past of misunderstandings may raise new challenges for the much-needed cooperation, both with and within Montenegro. We need to continue to stand resolute on stability, dialogue and integration in the region and effectively discourage further disintegration and the creation of new states which may continue popping up like Russian dolls, further balkanizing the Balkans.

The approval of the new constitutional changes by the Parliament at the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia may be a strong promise for a new era. However, the situation in Tetovo and elsewhere still remains fragile; granting amnesty to those who have renounced violence is a necessary step; all refugees must return to their homes. Although much can be expected by the moderate political leaders of the Albanian community, the deep psychological split between ethnic Albanians and Slavs is a factor for longer-term instability. Moreover, the full extent over which certain ethnic groups which are committed to violence and instability are controlled by their political elite, has not yet become adequately clear. All of which imply that the practical implementation of what was agreed last year at Ohrid remains still, a difficult task at hand. The resolution of the issue of the country's international name will further facilitate Greece's -already intense- rapprochement with this country.

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At the same time, a climate of political instability has prevailed in Albania in the last months. The crisis faced by the socialists can possibly have explosive results and further destabilize the region. However, the opposition's courageous return to Parliament has been positive.

## **2. Building a consensus for a self-sustaining order**

In 1991 the international community tried to find a compromise between the principle of self-determination and the principle of inviolability of borders, by recognising the administrative borders of the former Yugoslav



Federation as international ones. The stability of borders, and hence the stability of the regional order still remains Problem Number One in the region. Hopes that increased economic help would neutralise the forces of instability and revisionism have remained unfulfilled, as exhibited by the case of the Stability Pact and Bosnia. The existence of weak and unstable states and regions without clear legal status, have created a vicious circle, where the citizens' feeling of insecurity does not allow the development of confidence on the state they live in, further undermining the stability and effectiveness of state institutions.

Nevertheless, the above observation must be coupled with the fact that the peoples in the region will not accept any solution imposed from the outside, especially when this solution is based on assumptions which do not take into account the particularities of Balkan historic development. We must finally come to acknowledge that the Balkans are not backward but different. General calls in favour of an ill-defined and hazy "multiculturalism" may still be misunderstood and provoke more reactions than intended in societies that have just acquired their hard - fought independence. It is therefore imperative to show patience and adopt step-by-step approaches.

Of course, there are basic principles that should be accepted by all actors involved. There must be an effective protection of minority rights together with the rights of the individual, without neglecting the actual, as well as psychological importance of borders, both for new and older states. Tolerance and peaceful coexistence need to be introduced with due respect to historic experience, notions and anxieties that continue to influence perceptions in the region itself.

## **2.1 Rationalization of Balkan policies**

The ethnic conflicts and the surrounding suspicion, the lack of state consolidation, the weakness and instability of the political systems, the deficits surrounding the development of civil societies and the mismanagement of the economic transformation constitute the current "cocktail of disappointment" in the Western Balkans.

At the same time, as it has correctly been pointed out, the result of the different -and oftentimes- diverging institutional and contractual relations between the Western countries and institutions and every partner in the region collides in practice with any effort to promote regional cooperation. The multitude of policy actors in the wider area has contributed to the ineffectiveness of their planning. The list of the initiatives, strategies and programmes is mind-boggling: Stability Pact, Stability and Association Process, SECI, Balkan Conference for Stability and Co-operation in Southeastern Europe, Black Sea Cooperation and a myriad of non-governmental organizations have turned the Western Balkans to a donor's heaven and a cemetery of efficiency.

In order to optimize the benefits from a medium-term approach to the region, it is appropriate to only look forward. It is now imperative to give



Southeast Europe a clear European perspective. Integration into the European Union is a strategic goal for practically all Southeast European peoples. It is obvious that no talk of moderation and no talk of permanent stability can achieve its aims better than the step-by-step process and screening of a rather lengthy but basically generous and understanding accession process. Moreover, there needs to be a grassroots realization of the kind of solutions which must come from within.

The EU certainly *does* have a central role to play. The international community has made tremendous progress on peace-making but often, its self-congratulatory effects hamper any discussion or effort for lasting solutions. It cannot however, escape for long the need to set clearer criteria for the EU accession path of the countries of the Western Balkans; the transition from an addictive crisis-management to a self-sustaining order must be made shorter by the eventuality of EU membership; and, the dangers of a transgression to older schemes, the dangers of stepping back must be eliminated.

The weaknesses in regional security and order not only threaten stability but also undermine any efforts to accommodate the issues of economic transformation and the development of civil societies – as is notoriously evident in the case of the Stability Pact. At the same time, the absence of deadlines as to the expected results of any international involvement has created a climate of suspicion and resignation. A time schedule which will step-by-step hint at the general goal of stabilization, reconstruction and the setting of an EU accession process would certainly lift some nations' impression of being currently covered by a veil of unfairness, which continuously entails the danger of degenerating once again into another ethnic conflict.

The stabilisation - association process is now at the core of European policy towards the Western Balkans. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Croatia are already on board and others will undoubtedly follow later on. For Bulgaria and Romania the year 2007 is a year often quoted for their accession. In the years after 2004, the pressure will hopefully mount on many of the nations in the region to share the prospect of a European Union of more than 25 members and 500 million citizens. We must find the courage to face the realities in the Western Balkans and turn this pressure to the benefit of cooperation, stability and progress.

The process of EU accession would also require some reviewing and adaptation of the Copenhagen criteria. Adopted ten years ago, in view of an enlargement to countries with strong democratic and market economy credentials, they need to embody new concerns over stability and security that have surfaced since then. The inclusion of a review of the external regional behaviour by the applicant states towards their neighbours in the decision-making process, could be a catalyst towards securing the functionality of a Western Balkan cooperation mechanism, as well as another pressure mechanism to secure the marginalization of the extremists and border stability.



It is essential therefore, to deal with the hardcore issues of regional stability and order, as well as to face the current instability of state structures and borders head-on. The question over how can peoples which do not see themselves as having fully completed their national integration process be included in the long-term to a supranational integration, cannot be answered unless the disintegration process which started in the early 1990 's is finally stopped.

The involvement of the international community in the process should leave no doubts as to its impartiality and good-will. Moreover, it should be made clear from the start that the stabilization of the region and its inclusion at the mainstream of developments in the rest of the Continent is not a process of separate and subsequent phases, but rather a parallel procedure.

## **2.2 A new approach for a Balkan cooperation scheme**

In this respect, the international community must set in motion a dialogue process for the solution of each problem separately, but must also ensure that the solutions should not undermine each other, in essence or in principle. Therefore we should examine the possibility of separate points of departure (negotiations on each issue with the parts involved) that will end to a general agreement in an overall context that will be initiated, monitored and sealed by an International Conference for the Western Balkans, with the participation of all the countries in the region, the United States, the European Union and Russia.

This Conference would have a three-fold purpose:

- i) the reaffirmation of the stabilization of the borders of the former Yugoslav Republics and of the commitment by all countries to the basic principles on the protection of individual and minority rights,
- ii) the creation of a regional organization aiming at forging links of cross-border cooperation and the rationalization of existing regional mechanisms, and finally,
- iii) the symbolic registration of the international commitment to a mid- or even, long-term process of normalization.

Such a proposal attempts to combine different aspects of the future of the Western Balkans. On the one hand it addresses particular issues that result to the general instability of the regional order, and on the other it attempts to reverse the disintegration process by setting the institutions of regional co-operation and European integration. To a different level, it connects the financial and political contribution of the international community with specific results on the ground.

The incentive for the political leadership in the Western Balkans to address and solve the open issues will be a clear signal of commitment to the EU for bringing them closer to its confines. The fatigue of the population from everlasting conflicts and everyday problems is a second incentive. Equally important, the political elite seem to have realized that the continuance of



the present status-quo further undermines their fragile legitimacy. Dealing with unemployment, the current economic instability, organized crime, infrastructure deficiencies and the low living standards is essentially dependent on the region's EU future. The expectations of the large majority of the population for a speedy resolution of its economic problems, once the political issues are resolved, is an encouraging impetus towards achieving a general consensus which would allow compromise.

Since no solution can be imposed on the local communities from outside, there should be clear communication schemes which would allow the population to understand that the EU accession process is a hard, long but realistic task.

This is the very reason why any attempt to solve the problems must be accompanied by the creation of mechanisms of regional co-operation. An International Conference can enhance the scope and rationalize the involvement of conflicting international actors in the Western Balkans and of course, boost under a new mandate the prospects of a new regional cooperation scheme.

The latter can possibly follow the example of similar initiatives in other parts of Europe. The Baltic Sea Council is an example of an artful and beneficial structure which have created links of cooperation and solidarity, strengthened the EU commitment, boosted economic relations and trade and dealt appropriately with challenges over security. The local actors will certainly maintain the first say on political issues; on the issue of financial support and in case that no common policy can be set by the states themselves, the EU Commission will be there to act as a catalyst for progress.

Such an organization cannot by any means be perceived as antagonistic to the process of EU accession, neither a prerequisite for accession. As its central aim it entails the prospect of making the region more responsible on its development. It can define common interests and prove that the nations of the Western Balkans are indeed capable of working together for new solutions. Moreover, it can evolve to a useful tool for the promotion of the common interests of all the countries of the region in a future enlarged EU. It is not too early to underline this aspect, at least for those who sincerely believe that the future of Southeast Europe cannot but be inside a common European family.

### **3. Summary**

The opportunity is great for the IDU to contribute to a general re-evaluation of the international community's policy in the Western Balkans. The political developments in the region still entail many dangers but also, opportunities. The European Union in conjunction with all involved must provide a clear roadmap for EU accession for all the countries in the Western Balkans. An International Conference on the future of the Western Balkans, with the participation of all the countries in



the region, the United States, the European Union and Russia should reaffirm the stabilization of the borders of the former Yugoslav Republics and the commitment to the protection of individual and minority rights; it could be a forum of opportunity for the rationalization of existing mechanisms and the creation of a regional organization which could follow the steps of such mechanisms as the Baltic Sea Council. It will be finally be a much-needed symbol of the international commitment to a process of normalization.

In an era of change and opportunity, the Western Balkan countries must finally have an undisputed share in stable peace, security and the promise of continuous prosperity.

