

The Western Balkans tinderbox

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Mine clearance advisory advert, Pristina. [Antti. T. Nissinen/Flickr]

The EU urgently needs to re-commit to the Western Balkans in 2016, as profound social discontent may trigger new regional crises, writes John O'Brennan.

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2016 may well prove a watershed year for the European Union. While the eurozone crisis threw into doubt the very survival of the euro and preoccupied EU leaders for many years before apparently abating in recent months, in 2015 the refugee crisis convulsed Europe and produced such fissures in the European Council that some commentators thought it would be a breaking point for European integration.

The sense of pessimism is pervasive and now applies even to hitherto successful policy domains like enlargement. The eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004, followed by the accessions of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, brought the number of member states to 27. This increased to 28 when Croatia became the first country from the Western Balkans region to accede to the Union, when it joined on 1 July 2013. Croatia's accession means that the EU is now not just a direct neighbour of the Western Balkans, but is geographically embedded in the region.

The EU's role as the anchor power in the region evolved partly out of the Dayton Agreement, which ended the bloody war in Bosnia in 1995. But it gained significant traction via the landmark EU-Western Balkans summit at Thessaloniki in June 2003, where the European Council proclaimed "its unequivocal support" to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union" was how the summit communique emphatically put it. This 'European Perspective' is thus intended to lead to membership and full incorporation in the institutional and policy regimes of the European Union.

That promise of membership to the Western Balkans now sits very uneasily beside recent developments. The EU's preoccupation with the refugee crisis, along with a distinct mood of enlargement fatigue, has meant that the Western Balkans have disappeared under the radar of EU policy-making. Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, began his term in office last year by stating firmly that "no further enlargement will take place in the next five years". The message to Western Balkans states could not have been clearer: "You are not a priority for the European Union". In delivering this stark dispatch, Juncker managed, at one and the same time, to deplete the Commission's negotiating authority and destroy the EU's credibility as a trusted partner across the region.

Enlargement fatigue is a current that manifests itself at both the national level (in the fading appetite of member states to accept further enlargement) and on the EU level, where it now plays a determining role in enlargement politics, as Juncker's declaration so clearly demonstrated. This perspective holds that the EU needed time to absorb the addition of 13 new member states over the past decade and should not take in any new members until real and demonstrable consolidation has been achieved inside the EU. It is a view now widely shared across the member states.

It is hardly surprising that the EU's negative signalling has had a pronouncedly detrimental impact on the progress of enlargement-related reform in the Western Balkans. An excess of enlargement fatigue in the EU has led to an excess of accession fatigue in the Western Balkans: the transposition and implementation of EU laws in the region has slowed to a standstill.

The recent history of enlargement demonstrates conclusively the importance of EU credibility and of setting dates for accession. The costs of approximating to EU legislation (amounting to 170,000 pages of EU laws) are very significant and almost the entire burden of adjustment falls on candidate states. Local elites can more assertively and confidently argue for difficult policy changes if the accession train they are on has a definite destination and timeframe for arrival. Without a concrete date candidate states have vastly less incentive to pursue the reforms the EU demands. The evidence from candidate states overwhelmingly suggests that the enlargement process is now on 'life support' and 'flat lining' along a trajectory of 'frozen negotiating chapters' and mutual distrust towards an increasingly uncertain destination.

Twenty years ago, the Dayton Agreement was meant to definitively settle the 'Balkan Question', but today the region remains politically explosive, an economic basket-case and a substantial security risk for the European Union. In short the 'Balkan Question' remains categorically a 'European Question'.

Mass protests recently in Albania were just the latest manifestation of that combustibility. In Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro we have also witnessed increasing political polarisation, including tear gas being set off in the Kosovan parliament and the arrest of opposition leaders. The 2013 Peace Agreement signed by Kosovo and Serbia now also looks increasingly precarious. But it is in Bosnia where we see the greatest danger of a recurrence of violence and the EU seems to be sleepwalking toward another major crisis.

Twenty years on from Dayton, Bosnia's political landscape remains dominated by old enmities; the ethnic divisions seem more entrenched than ever and state institutions remain far from consolidated. The Bosnian Serbs in particular assert implacable opposition to Dayton and question the very existence of the Bosnian State itself. A political system characterised by multiple and confusing levels of authority and mutually antagonistic nationalisms has utterly failed its citizens.

Endemic corruption and organised crime blight Bosnia and much of the Western Balkans, eroding confidence in the economy, discouraging much-needed inward investment and encouraging mass outward migration of its citizens. This is a world in which powerful oligarchic networks have succeeded in 'capturing the state'. They suborn political parties, and ruthlessly pursue their own interests, remaining hidden from any kind of public scrutiny.

The widespread protests of 2014 provided evidence of deep social discontent, enduring poverty, and dramatic levels of inequality. Bosnia's unemployment rate is 43 per cent, a shocking testimony to the failures of governance which have characterised the Dayton settlement (by way of comparison, the Greek unemployment rate is just under 25 per cent). With youth unemployment running above 60 per cent it is little wonder that 70,000 Bosnians have emigrated this year. Of the 200,000 people who had filed an initial application for asylum in Germany by 31 July 2015, 42% were from the Western Balkans. Dayton has thus become synonymous with collective stasis and personal despair.

Back in 1991, as violence in the Balkans escalated, Jacques Poos, the Luxembourg foreign minister, famously declared "This is the hour of Europe." In the end, however, the EU experienced a dismal collective failure, one that culminated in the massacre of 8,000 Bosniak men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995. Twenty years on, the European Union urgently needs to renew its commitment to the Western Balkans' European future. A failure to do so may well see 2016 throw up a new Balkan crisis which could become the final nail in the coffin of the European integration project.

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