

There's no enlargement standstill – just a springboard

Although Brussels' announcement of "a break in the enlargement process" came as a shock, it will enable Balkan candidates for EU accession to strengthen their preparedness, says **Goran Svilanović**

The human tide of refugees and migrants finding their way north via the Western Balkans, primarily to Germany, showed how ill-equipped and underfunded to cope with them the Balkans countries are. It also underlined the fact that the refugee crisis may well deepen in months and years to come. In any case, it has come almost exactly a year after European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker's declaration that the time has come for the EU to "take a break from enlargement", so that no new members will join over the next four and a half years.

Juncker was just stating the obvious; none of the aspiring members will be able to tick all the boxes on their pre-accession "to-do" lists during the mandate of this Commission. True, accession country leaders would have preferred Juncker to state the obvious more gently, as that would have made their lives back home easier, not least by quietening their local eurosceptics. Juncker has, however, a duty to keep his finger on the pulse of opinion in EU member states, and for some time now that opinion has definitely not been in an enlargement mode.

The refugee/migrant crisis, the eurozone crisis, Greece, Ukraine, foreign fighters in the Middle East and the UK threat of a Brexit all weigh on the minds of EU citizens. There is simply no interest in enlarging a European Union that already has enough problems of its own. But although Juncker needs to bear this kind of public sentiment in mind, he should do so only up to a point. He could also try to shape public opinion and lead it in the direction that is best for the EU. And embracing the Western Balkans is good not just for the region but for the EU as a whole.

It isn't just a question of rounding off the geography of Europe and avoiding a black hole in its south-eastern corner. Nor it is a



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question of honouring promises made by EU leaders at the 2003 Thessaloniki summit and repeated several times since. It certainly isn't a question of making the EU stronger by boosting its numbers – the six Western Balkan candidates would represent little more than a glitch in the EU's demographic and economic statistics. It is all of these things and more, and it is a move that makes perfect sense.

The EU is above all a system of values – even though the EU itself sometimes seems to forget that. Insisting on a thorough and comprehensive adherence to the accession criteria of democracy, human rights and market economy by the Balkan candidates would be a timely reminder for all EU members of the values enshrined in the Union.

At its inception, the EU was primarily a peace and reconciliation project, and as such has become the most successful in history. Yet 16 years after the end of wars in the Western Balkans, it is disappointing we in the region have still to find common ground for a genuine and successful reconciliation. Most of the initiatives we have seen have come from outside the region, primarily from the EU.

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Continuation of the accession process is vital to maintaining the momentum of reconciliation efforts, and Brussels is clearly aware of that and will continue to encourage, cajole and push forward reconciliation. We in the Regional Cooperation Council take a proactive approach based on our mission statement, which tells us to focus “on promotion and enhancement of regional co-operation in South East Europe” and on supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of aspiring countries.

Like many others who are now part of the EU, we in the Balkans come from societies that have little in the way of democratic tradition. We went from feudal monarchies to autocratic dictatorships, fascism and communism. Then came a long and painful transition from socialist societies and centralised economies

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into the world of democracy and market forces. Democracy, we all know, is more than just rules, principles and multiparty elections; it is primarily a state of mind that takes time and careful nurturing to establish its roots and to flourish. The purpose of the RCC is to help that process. In 1999, after the final battles in the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Stability Pact for South East Europe was established by the international community to assist the region in overcoming the wounds of war and speed up Euro-Atlantic integration. Less than a decade later, it was felt that the Balkans had become stable enough to take ownership of the process, so the RCC came into being.

Seven years on, huge progress has been made in bi-lateral and multi-lateral relations, on reconciliation, administrative reform and freedom of the media. One Balkan country – Croatia – has “left” the region and put an EU star on its shoulders. Everybody involved in that accomplishment deserves kudos. Most of the other Balkan countries now have candidate status, but it has to be admitted that the road to EU membership is still long and full of potholes. For each and every success, there is a problem left unsolved. That is the RCC’s focus – to help in overcoming the problems and to try to fill the potholes and ensure a smoother and faster ride to membership.

A lot of our work is political, as the RCC is the focal point of efforts not only to benefit individual members but also to create a climate for regional co-operation. The RCC engages with the wider region and with overseas friends who want to help us overcome the burdens of the past and to take our place in the EU.

An indication of the path towards that membership is the Berlin Process initiated in 2014 by Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel. This explicitly endorses regional co-operation as the main engine of EU accession for the Western Balkans, and identifies the RCC as the main platform for it. In the economic field, the RCC’s chief tool is the SEE2020 strategy, which details ways and means for spreading economic growth. Connectivity is one of the crucial elements for this and this sector got a boost last August at the Western Balkans Vienna Summit, which cemented agreements and EU investments via infrastructure projects to the tune of €600m.

To return to Jean-Claude Juncker and the so-called “enlargement standstill”, I myself do not believe there is a standstill, even if I do acknowledge the general lack of enthusiasm for further enlargement. I genuinely do not think we are talking about enlargement fatigue, or that the EU citizens have suddenly been

bitten by a strange bug called "Scepticus Balkanicus". It is simply that we are living in an era when the EU is going through yet another re-examination of its role and purpose in a world burdened with problems. In such a climate, the region needs to work extra hard to smooth its road to accession.

Beyond the political and reconciliation potholes, there are economic, unemployment and poverty problems. The region has been suffering from the global economic downturn, made worse by our own domestic troubles – endemic corruption, organised crime, shoddy privatisations, and political and familial nepotism. The list goes on, and much of the job remains undone.

Unless we sort out these problems we cannot hope for a change in the climate of opinion when it comes to our EU accession prospects. To be accepted, we have to be recognised – if not yet as equals, then at least as peoples and nations who share the same values, aim for the same goals and accept the same principles. The RCC is committed to smoothing out these potholes, so that when the next European Commission and Parliament take office, Balkan candidate countries will be ready to move towards membership. ■



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