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*Balkan Perspectives.*  
*Adapting the partnership and integration paths*

*Policy Background Paper*

**Matteo Tacconi**

When the European leaders made the solemn commitment of enlarging the Union towards the Western Balkans at the Thessaloniki EU Council in 2003, the general mood about the region was rather positive. Politicians, diplomats and analysts thought that the Western Balkans would have joined NATO and the EU within 15 years, following the same path of Central Europe and the Baltics which at that time had closed almost all the negotiating chapters and were waiting for joining formally the Union on the 1st of May 2004.

After the fall of Communism in Central Europe in 1989 and of the USSR in 1991, the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries embarked a long process of reforms in order to achieve first NATO membership and then the accession to the EU. Conditionality was key to make the process work. The EU spurred candidates to boost reforms, sometimes hard to swallow, offering incentives in exchange. Until few years ago, this scheme was seen as the benchmark for the Western Balkans.

Sixteen years after the Thessaloniki Council, only Croatia has joined the EU. Confidence about the future of the Western Balkans is not so bright anymore. Democratisation and economic growth have not spread across the peninsula at the required pace.

There was a surplus of enthusiasm in the script written in Greece in 2003. Some chapters must be re- thought. Not those concerning security, anyway. Croatia, Albania and Montenegro have joined NATO, allowing the Alliance to reach the goal of closing the Adriatic coastline. The peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, now run by the EU, secured peace and transfer of expertise to achieve the goal of unifying the then three ethnic armies of the country, a legacy of the 1992-1995 war. In Kosovo, KFOR represents a fundamental guarantee for stability, in a land still full of uncertainties and with a high circulation of illegal weapons.

Fostering economic stability and democracy, two themes closely linked, is far from being an accomplished mission. The Balkan Six lag behind. The global crisis depressed the region and revealed structural problems and social inequalities that the pre-crisis growth rate somehow hid. Experts and regional leaders thought that growth, one way or another, would have delivered benefits to everyone and everywhere and this was an illusion. Today the Balkans' picture shows that common features are: unsustainable economies and unemployment, too low wages, infrastructural weaknesses and a growing migration trend among talented and educated young people.

There is a regression also on the sphere of rule of law, press freedom and other relevant democratic standards. It is given by the combination between the local way to illiberal democracy, social frustration due to the crisis and disappointment for the unfulfilled promises made by the EU.

The scenario is not encouraging, but saying that the Balkan Six are becoming a failed region or Europe's black hole would be a mistake. The region needs objectively longer time, compared to that needed by Central Europe and the Baltics, or Romania and Bulgaria. In addition to the legacy of the Cold War, the Western Balkans suffered a hot conflict too in the last part of the 20th century. Albania did not, but it had the toughest Communist regime ever seen in Europe on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain.

However, time must not become an excuse. Local leaderships must be more responsible and accountable to their own publics. They should find a balance between short-term consensus building and enact reforms that can create conditions to attract more investments, provide jobs, secure workers' rights, strengthen democracy and pluralism.

The EU stimulus is still crucial to achieve such outcomes. However, Brussels must change approach because conditionality no longer works as it used to. An example is the issue of Kosovo. The EU mediation led to the so-called "Normalisation Agreements" in 2013. Serbia partly dismantled its parallel structures in northern Kosovo, while Kosovo promised self-government for the Serbian minority. In exchange, the EU opened accession talks with Serbia and signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo. It should have been the beginning of a wide dialogue aimed at finding a comprehensive solution about the Kosovo status. Unfortunately, while progress has been achieved in 2017 on a wide range of technical issues with some political content, both elites still balk at making substantial steps. Serbia has a path for accession, but is wary to start the more difficult chapters of the EU acquis. The Haradinaj government is near a very much needed visa liberalisation, but still does not accomplish its indispensable fight against corruption. Belgrade is not ready to recognise Kosovo, but wants to normalise; Pristina wants unfettered control over its territory, but does not want to give the Kosovo-Serbs a large autonomy.

As a result, the two countries are entangled again on the hypothesis of land swap, so far rejected by the EU, which could have very negative repercussions for the entire Balkan area.

Despite being a successful story for the EU conditionality strategy, the historic deal on the naming dispute between Greece and Macedonia, now North Macedonia, shows a critical weakness. Athens

and Skopje struck a reasonable agreement, but they were unable to explain to their civil societies its historic importance. People look tired, as the last elections turnout shows. In North Macedonia, the path towards Euro-Atlantic integration, finally unlocked, seems not to ignite a new wave of enthusiasm in the country. This can depend on the fact that the EU conditionality is based too much on deals with governments and too little on the necessity of involving the civil society in integration processes. Brussels should take this into account, when and if it will re-formulate conditionality.

A stronger civil society could effectively pressure political elites to adopt reforms and keep the Euro- Atlantic horizon close. After all, NATO is still the main desired security provider in the region, while the EU largely remains the main investor. Yet, old and new actors, with new political offers, are gaining influence. The West must find a way to re-energise its action in the peninsula to win the battle in the Western Balkans.



**Matteo Tacconi** is Chief Analyst of the Balkan region at the NATO Defense College Foundation. Journalist and researcher, he covers the Balkans for a wide range of media networks. He worked as electoral observer for the OSCE/ODIHR in Albania, North Macedonia, Russia, Georgia and Ukraine.



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