



MIND – THINK – BRIDGE THE GAP

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Backgrounder to the seminar

Avoiding the “Turkey Game” in the Western Balkans

Vienna, 7-10 December 2010

THE BROADER PICTURE—SEE LEVELS

Europe—and this does not mean exclusively the European Union (EU)—is completely different from what it was some 20 years ago. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, unpredicted geopolitical changes gave the continent a new architecture.¹ Against the background of the 5th and biggest ever enlargement,² the question of “Where Does Europe End?” may be seen from a new perspective. What is at stake is the process for the accession of South Eastern European (SEE) countries and a new understanding of Greater Europe. In this respect, the EU is facing the challenges of a truly new European political project:

- a) The EU needs to reorient its relations with its neighbouring areas, i.e. the countries located between the EU and the Russian Federation.³ This issue is being addressed by the forthcoming enlargement process targeting the next group of potential EU Member States in SEE, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the East, and the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia. Existing pan-European instruments should be integrated into this framework.
- b) The EU has to envision a flexible architecture, taking into account the evolving nature of borders and the dynamism of interconnected subregions, such as SEE and the Black Sea area.
- c) The EU has to face a multidimensionality and fluidity which will also involve non-state actors that often join in mostly informal and flexible multi-actor coalitions. This does not imply post-sovereignty but rather “network power”.⁴

¹ See Michel Foucher, *L'Europe et l'avenir du monde* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009).

² On 1 May 2004 the EU welcomed ten more Member States: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. This was the fifth time that the EU accepted new members, bringing the total from 15 to 25 Member States. On 1 January 2007, the latest round of enlargement ended with the accession of two more countries, Bulgaria and Romania.

³ See Fyodor Lukyanov, “Building Greater Europe,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 25 October 2010.

⁴ See Janine Wedel, *Shadow Elite* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 23 and p. 26; and David Singh Grewal, *Network Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

These issues are crucial for the EU, and even more so for the SEE states as they may play a key role in a pan-European framework due to their geostrategic position—bridging the Danube region, Central and Eastern Europe, Western Asia and the Russian Federation. What should be borne in mind is that SEE is a “region of overlapping regions”;⁵ and therefore not a homogeneous region but rather a multifaceted network linked to other networks. The regional co-operation schemes are evolving inside but also outside the EU towards interpenetration between the interior and exterior of states, virtually producing a “de-borderisation” and, at the same time, a “nostalgia for roots and walls”.⁶

Only a flexible architecture and strategy may overcome what could be viewed as new dividing lines between EU Member States encompassing the latest enlargement, “would-be EU members” and countries explicitly precluded from EU accession—such as Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the Caucasian States. New strategic thinking is also needed in order to be able to cope with the greater complexity resulting from, first, the relations among SEE countries (sub-regional cooperation, multiple bilateral issues) and their respective partnership with the EU; and, second, the coexistence of numerous programmes—such as the pre-accession process, the ENP, the strategic partnership with the Russian Federation, numerous bilateral agreements, various action plans, and the wide range of EU and CoE cross-border, transitional and interregional programmes.⁷

FROM THESSALONIKI TO LISBON—THE LOST MOMENTUM

Following the 1997 EU Regional Approach for the Western Balkans, the Stabilisation and Association process (SAP)—as a tailor-made, country-by-country, progressive approach—has since May 1999 been the centrepiece of EU strategy towards this region.⁸ On 19 and 20 June 2000, at the Santa Maria de Feira European Council, all Western Balkan countries were considered as potential candidates for EU membership. On 24 November 2000, the prospect of possible accession to the EU was confirmed at the Zagreb Summit. Two years later, the European Commission (EC) expressed convincingly a major shift in the Union’s approach to the Western Balkans: “EU leaders decided that a policy of emergency reconstruction, containment and stabilisation was not, in itself, enough to bring lasting peace and stability to the Balkans: only the real prospect of integration into European structures would achieve that.”⁹

At the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the EU made the unequivocal promise that the Western Balkan countries could join the Union... provided that they bring themselves up to EU standards by fulfilling the four Copenhagen conditions for entry¹⁰ and by adopting the *acquis communautaire*.¹¹ While the Thessaloniki declaration gave the concrete prospect of membership, the Thes-

5 Vladimir Gligorov, “Trade and Investment in the Balkans,” in: Vladimir Gligorov and Hermine Vidovic (Eds.), *On the Way to Normality: The States on the Territory of Former Yugoslavia in the Postwar Period* (Vienna: wiiw paper, no. 250, 1998), p. 2.

6 See Pierre Hassner, “Fixed Borders or Moving Borderlands?: A New Type of Border for a New Type of Entity,” in: Jan Zielonka (Ed.), *Europe Unbound. Enlarging and Reshaping the Boundaries of the European Union* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 38-50.

7 See Christophe Solioz, “Thinking About and Beyond South East Europe,” in: Wolfgang Petritsch and Christophe Solioz (Eds.), *Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and Beyond* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008), p. 24 and p. 168.

8 The SAP was officially launched at the Zagreb Summit on 24 November 2000. The summit’s final declaration mentions the SAP as a “Stabilisation and Association Process on an Individualised Basis”.

9 Commission of the European Communities, *The Stabilisation and Association Process for South East Europe, First Annual Report* (Brussels: COM (2002) 163 final, 4 April 2002), p. 4.

10 The four “Copenhagen conditions”—democracy and the rule of law, a market economy, the obligations of membership and the EU’s capacity to absorb new members—were set at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and went beyond those for any previous applicant.

11 The term *acquis communautaire*—corresponding to the third Copenhagen conditions—first refers to the legal

saloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans emphasised the need to upgrade regional cooperation, to strengthen the SAP, and to intensify the relations between the Western Balkans and the EU through the introduction of European Partnerships—following the successful experiment of the national programmes for adoption of the *acquis* in the accession process of the Central and East European countries.

The Thessaloniki summit was greeted with satisfaction, if not euphoria, by many commentators. This renewal of European strategies and perspectives for the Western Balkans, combined with a number of coherent practical and symbolic measures, eventually marked the end of clientelistic bilateral manoeuvrings between EU member states and individual states of the region.¹²

At the time of the Thessaloniki Summit, some major think tanks were lobbying for a strengthened accession process. The European Stability Initiative suggested applying strategies—cohesion policy or structural policy—based on the European regional development policy.¹³ The International Crisis Group also focused on a more vigorous approach, suggesting a set of technical means ranging from increased financial assistance to effective twinning arrangements and regional integration.¹⁴ Two years later, the more comprehensive report of the International Commission on the Balkans recommended a “member-state-building” strategy focusing on the necessity to include institution- and thus capacity-building into the negotiating framework.¹⁵ These were all outstanding—and still relevant—proposals, very unfortunately they could not revitalize the EU integration process nor counteract the “enlargement fatigue” which was about to obstruct the accession prospect.

Where do we stand eight years later? From the Balkan area, only Slovenia (since May 2004), Bulgaria and Romania (since January 2007) are fully-fledged EU members. All other countries—meanwhile granted visa-free travel to the EU—are still knocking at the door: Croatia and Macedonia as candidate countries; Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia as potential candidate countries. The first enlargement package of the new Commission working under the Lisbon Treaty, presented on 9 November 2010, proposes candidate status for Montenegro and recommends that accession negotiations with Montenegro and Albania should be opened... “once these countries have met a number of key priorities set out in the opinions”. As for now, all countries are in the slow lane in a state of strategic uncertainty. How come?

As a matter of fact, the Thessaloniki enthusiasm quickly vanished. First, mixed signals came already in 2004, when the EU—in its draft of an Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)—assumed that countries from the region could eventually achieve candidate status around 2010 and membership around 2020.¹⁶ Indeed, the SAP should definitively not be perceived as a fast integration track, but as a gradual process.

Some key factors provoked “enlargement fatigue” and called for a “pause for reflection”:

embodiment of existing and settled EU policies and, second, encompasses EU values and policy objectives. Thus, the term refers in a broader sense to “all real and *potential* rights and obligations of the EU system and its institutional framework” (*Uniting Europe*, no. 9, 13 April 1998; emphasis added).

12 See Haralambos Kondonis, “Greek presidency: what lies behind the euphoria,” in: David A. Stone and Despina Syrri (Eds.), *Integrating the Western Balkans into Europe: the Aftermath of the Greek EU Presidency* (Thessaloniki: South-East European Research Center, 2005), pp. 47-52.

13 See European Stability Initiative, *The Road to Thessaloniki: Cohesion and the Western Balkans* (Berlin: ESI, 12 March 2003).

14 See International Crisis Group, *Thessaloniki and After I: The EU’s Balkan Agenda* (Brussels: ICG, 20 June 2003), pp. 5-7.

15 See International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe’s Future* (Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005).

16 See Commission of the European Communities, *Proposal for a Council Regulation Establishing an Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance* (Brussels: COM (2004) 627 final, 29 September 2004).

- a) The previous enlargements of 2004 and 2007 had some shortcomings: The problematic case of Cyprus (which joined the EU as a still divided country on the mistaken assumption that accession would hinge on overcoming the partition of the island in accordance with the UN plan); Bulgaria's and Romania's serious deficits in their political and moral economies; and the Slovak–Hungarian bilateral problems. As a consequence, bilateral tensions in the Balkans and contentious issues will be closely monitored, the corruption and rule of law indexes will be scrupulously vetted; and there will be no enlargement without having resolved partitions or problematic statehood: EU integration requires strong and functioning states.
- b) The EU's limited "absorption capacities":¹⁷ above all, the recent lack of an institutional framework for resuming the enlargement process after the rejection of the draft EU constitution by France and the Netherlands in May 2005. Nothing new: already during the Central and Eastern European countries' accession process in the late 1990s, the focus on the applicants' conformity with the EU had been used as a smoke screen to cover the unwillingness of the EU to reform itself to fit new members.
- c) The slow progress in SEE often described as "reform fatigue": The Balkans are indeed still in a long process of yet unfinished transition—with some countries combining problems of transition with challenges of development.¹⁸ On the other hand, there are the "pull factor" and the stimulus for a reform of the implementation processes in SEE, which, although they have not completely vanished, are less convincing today and this partly explains the current slow progress as assessed by the enlargement strategy and progress reports published on 9 November 2010.
- d) Turkey's multifaceted role: While its accession process remains blocked and its public opinion shows strong reluctance to Turkish enlargement, the new Turkish assertiveness as an international player, active to great effect in the SEE, must be taken into consideration. The question remains unanswered: Should the EU, for the sake of political feasibility, decouple the accession process for SEE from that of Turkey?

More and more serious doubts are being openly formulated on the future of European enlargement. Timothy Garton Ash, director of the European Studies Centre at St. Antony's College, Oxford, expressed the rationale behind the gloomy mood: "Thus far, enlargement has strengthened, not weakened the EU. But at some point, continuous extension must end up weakening the Union (...) If the Union were to include all the remains of the Ottoman Empire, it might end up sharing the fate of the Ottoman Empire."¹⁹ This viewpoint and similar stances indicate that the prospect of EU enlargement to include the Western Balkans is increasingly viewed with alarm and convey the impression that the EU is about to pull away from its commitment made at Thessaloniki in 2003.

The SEE countries were thus confronted with the fact that after the planned accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, enlargement might slow down, be frozen or even—as the worst case scenario—cease altogether, unless the then 25-member EU proved able to cope with more members. Nevertheless, the EU repeatedly reiterated its readiness to carry its "responsibility" to support stability and progress in the region and to "help" the countries there to pass through the portal towards candidacy for membership. But it equally insisted on the importance of "carefully managing their accession and how much the integration process required hard work and difficult decisions".

17 The EU's capacity to absorb is the fourth "Copenhagen condition" set at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. Various authors have suggested correctly that the "absorption capacity" is better deconstructed into more precise and objective components, such as the capacity of the EU's internal market, labour market, budget, eurozone and institutional system to absorb new Member States; society's capacity to absorb immigration; and the EU's capacity for assuring its strategic security. See Michael Emerson, Michael Senem Aydin, Julia De Clerck-Sachsse and Gergana Noutcheva, *Just What Is this "Absorption Capacity" of the European Union?* (Brussels: CEPS, September 2006).

18 See Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Wim van Meurs and Vladimir Gligorov (Eds.), *Plan B – B for Balkans: State Building and Democratic Institutions in Southeastern Europe* (Vienna, Berlin, Nijmegen: October 2007), p. 55.

19 Timothy Garton Ash, "For a Pax Europeana," *The Guardian*, 14 April 2005.

From one enlargement process to the next, accession conditionality has become stricter, negotiations have been subjected to much more stringent tests and have become much more technical.²⁰ Additionally, in contrast to what happened in the previous enlargement rounds, the EU is now more directly involved in the institutional development and decision-making processes of the next group of potential EU member countries. Of course, the SEE countries' accession process is more complex, also due to the specifics and the pitfalls of a triple transition to a free market, to a liberal democracy and from war to peace. The EU cannot simply duplicate the pattern successfully implemented in Central Europe. Therefore, it needs to rethink the mostly standardised strategies and instruments of enlargement and adapt some of the instruments already deployed in SEE.²¹

We also have to take into account the overall trend toward an increasingly technical accession policy. This is partly due to the fact that, from the early 1990s onwards, the European Commission has become responsible for managing the enlargement process. More fundamentally, as pointed out by Grabbe: "There was a lack of strategy and coherence in the EU's approach, largely because of the dearth of political leadership in the EU on how to deal with the aftermath of 1989".²² Indeed, we may ask: What happened to the European spirit of the 1970s and 80s, when countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community; Where is the political will and enthusiasm for unifying Europe after several decades of division through the accession of Central and Eastern European countries?

The academics leading the Captive States, Divided Societies research project highlighted that SEE accession must be considered as a new—much more protracted and arduous—process "despite enhanced transformative power, reform assistance and political guidance provided by Brussels".²³ Thus, "the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union in the next decade will be much more of an uphill battle than East-Central Europe's 'return to Europe' ever was".²⁴ Similarly Marie-Janine Calic's assessment from 2005 remains alas up-to-date: "The Western Balkans still have a long way to go before they can realistically expect to be accepted as full members of the EU"; her recommendations are equally valid: "There is no reason to believe that an intelligent combination of political incentives (integration framework) and an adequate and refocused assistance package could not contribute to overcoming the last division within Europe".²⁵

For the time being, there is no breakthrough. Also, previous enlargement waves had to cope with the discourse of an enlarged Union that was already by then more complex and difficult to govern than before. What is missing is a high degree of consensus—on the accession of the SEE countries—among EU Member States, as was the case for the 5th enlargement. Political will and leadership make the difference. The EU enlargement in SEE is very much a political project. Given the politicised nature of the accession debate, considering also the political and security issues at stake, the EU needs to rethink its strategy in SEE and, above all, embrace politics in order to make the region work.²⁶ A renewed "EU narrative" could "reload" the accession process

20 See Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 14-18.

21 A fine-tuned analysis of the patterns of transition reveals that while some former Yugoslavia republics, as Croatia and Slovenia, are closer to the Central European model, other are closer to the Eastern Balkans one. Nevertheless, in more general terms, SEE is presently coping with largely the same problems as Bulgaria and Romania. Thus, what worked in Romania and Bulgaria stands a good chance of working in SEE as well concludes the report published by Mungiu-Pippidi, van Meurs and Gligorov (Eds.), *Plan B – B for Balkans*, pp. 46-50, and pp. 58-59.

22 Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power*, p. 28.

23 Mungiu-Pippidi, van Meurs and Gligorov (Eds.), *Plan B–B for Balkans*, p. 5.

24 *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

25 Marie-Janine Calic, *The Western Balkans on the Road Towards European Integration* (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2005), p. 14.

26 See T. K. Vogel, "Why the EU needs to embrace politics if it wants to make the Balkans work," in: Denisa Kostovicova and Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović (Eds.), *Austrian Presidency of EU: Regional Approaches to the*

and overcome the current negative consequences of the evident enlargement and accession fatigue.

We may now ask to what extent the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on December 1, 2009 has addressed these problems. The new treaty indeed removes the technical obstacles to further enlargement and creates the opportunity for the joint implementation of all affairs tools (CFSP and community tools). In spite of this, while the institutional and financial capacities to proceed with the integration process are now finally available, new obstacles are emerging. For a while, Brussels was busy with the establishment of the second Barroso Commission and the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS). The new dynamics between the Council, the Commission and the Parliament have still to play out. After all, along with the global financial crisis hitting some of its Member States, the Union has to deal with its first disintegrating state (Belgium), and new priorities have influenced the EU's foreign policy during 2010. As for now, the new treaty does not create the impression at all that it would promote the deepening and widening of European integration and enhance the EU's capabilities. Meanwhile in SEE, bilateral problems have been painfully overcome, Greece continues to prevent opening negotiations with Macedonia, and a group led by Spain still blocks Kosovo on its European path.

While the current financial crisis—targeting Greece, Ireland, Portugal and other Member States—obviously has a negative impact on the perception of SEE, the overall economic situation in the region deserves specific attention.²⁷ Despite remarkable rates of growth in GDP until 2009, GDP growth is still lagging behind and labour markets have not shown significant improvement, greenfield investments are scarce and FDIs are still limited, and, finally, the globally poor business environment is having a negative impact on job creation. Substantial economic growth is necessary for underpinning the reform process required for EU accession. Whereas the prospect of EU membership could act as a short-term incentive, the lack of this perspective is affecting the pace of reforms and the reforms themselves.

The SEE countries should become more pro-active, introduce and implement substantial reforms and make faster progress, notably in the fields of economic liberalisation and public administration reform. The re-branding of Central European Free Trade (CEFTA)²⁸ as a truly South East European Free Trade Association (SEFTA)—thus as a regional free trade and visa-free movement area on the model of EFTA created in 1960—could boost regional cooperation and pave the way for the SEE countries' future accession while consolidating and developing their economic potential—bringing it progressively up to European standards. The goal would be not to postpone but, on the contrary, to keep the candidate countries on track in their progress towards Europe and eventually facilitate their membership following the examples of Austria and the Nordic states. This would give the SEE states the opportunity to illustrate that they opted for changes rather than the *status quo* and raise the level of mutual trust within the region and between the SEE countries and the EU.

Balkans (Vienna: Centre for the Study of Global Governance and CEIS, 2006), pp. 62-70.

27 For a detailed analysis, see Qerim Qerimi and Bruno Sergi, "The Global Financial Crisis and the Post-Lisbon Prospects of Enlargement," *South East Europe Review*, 12 (2009) 4, pp. 439-60.

28 Since 2004 and 2007 CEE countries and Slovenia left CEFTA when they joined the EU. At time of writing, the parties of CEFTA are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

	Croatia	Macedonia	Montenegro	Albania	Serbia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo
<i>Feasibility Study</i>	2000	1999	2005	2002	2005	2003	
<i>SAA signature</i>	Oct 2001	Apr 2001	Oct 2007	Jun 2006	Apr 2008	Jun 2008	
<i>SAA entry in force</i>	Feb 2005	Apr 2004	May 2010	Apr 2009			
<i>Accession application submitted</i>	Feb 2003	Mar 2004	Dec 2008	Apr 2009	Dec 2009		
<i>Council requests an opinion</i>	Apr 2003	May 2004	Apr 2009	Nov 2009	Oct 2010		
<i>Country receives questionnaire</i>	Jul 2003	Oct 2004	Jul 2009	Dec 2009	Oct 2010		
<i>Country returns questionnaire</i>	Oct 2003	Feb 2005	Dec 2009	Apr 2010			
<i>Commission published avis</i>	Apr 2004	Nov 2005	Nov 2010	Nov 2010			
<i>Council gives candidate status</i>	Jun 2004	Dec 2005					
<i>Commission recommends start of talks</i>	Dec 2004	Oct 2009					
<i>Accession start</i>	Oct 2005						
<i>Accession talks conclude</i>							
<i>Accession</i>							

Sources: ec.europa/enlargement and ecfr.eu—updated by the author.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NEED NOT WAIT—QUALITY, NOT SPEED, MATTERS

Against this background, it is highly problematic to think about alternatives out of the box. Whereas a pro-active approach is pretty much needed, an overly optimistic view of the integration process must be avoided. Today, most of the past proposals seem outdated. It is illusory to suggest softening the conditionality (through junior membership) or speeding-up the process (be it through shortcuts or a kick-start package). Despite the fact that candidate countries rarely entered the EU individually but rather as part of a “convoy”, there is an overall consensus—in the EU and in the region—in favour of the “regatta approach” whereby all (potential) candidate countries start together but reach the finishing line at their own speed—as opposed to a simultaneous accession scheme (“convoy”).²⁹ Last but not least, the option of an international conference on the model of the Thessaloniki Summit (Thessaloniki II) never generated support.

As the May 2010 European Council Foreign Relation (ECFR) policy brief suggests, some lessons might be learnt from the recent visa liberalisation process: clear policy aims, achievable short-term goals and a transparent process may “transform a technocratic process into a political imperative, leaving little space for local leaders to make excuses or blame the EU bias for their lack of progress”.³⁰ But it seems highly improbable that—as the ECFR brief suggests—the questionnaire will be handed out simultaneously to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Almost certainly, all six countries concerned will not begin the screening exercises together—instead, each country will be requested as a prerequisite to complete the accession negotiations.

29 It is worth noting that initially enlargement proceeded in “waves”, negotiations on different chapters were thus opened simultaneously with countries in a given group. In 1999, the EU abandoned the “waves” for the “regatta principle” as a more flexible, multi-speed accession process. However, this largely failed, because by then strong pressure was exerted on the Commission to admit certain countries as a group.

30 Heather Grabbe, Gerald Knaus and Daniel Korski, *Beyond Wait-And-See: The Way Forward for EU Balkans Policy* (London: ERF, May 2010), p. 3.

What might happen is that some countries will become part of the same convoy—and the box on the previous page suggests which countries might belong to a first, second and third convoy respectively.

To focus less on the speed of accession, and more on the quality of the reform achievements could certainly be more effective and convince those affected by “enlargement fatigue”. As suggested by the Captive States’ project team: time spent on the accession process should be well spent. It is important to capitalise—as mentioned above—on positive trends and to diversify the strategic repertoire, giving more weight to the endogenous potential: genuine and factual changes in the field will make the difference.

Four gaps

Against the background of the war period, each SEE country made huge progress, but—to various degrees—each of these is still far from becoming a fully-fledged EU Member State. Time is running out on the approach initiated in Thessaloniki back in 2003. Bridging the widening time gap between candidacy status and membership—this means some eight years from the start of accession talks—constitutes the first challenge. While a first convoy may be a realistic option for some SEE countries, “catch-up” facilities should be offered to those lagging behind.

A wake-up call both to the EU and to the region that a stark choice must be made is pretty much needed. In this respect, there is a gap between symbolic politics and *realpolitik*: thus a renewed explicit formal political promise—sustaining the momentum and the pace of reform with specific instruments—should formulate a tangible commitment to a strengthened relationship between the EU and SEE and, at the same time, acknowledge the legal and administrative necessities in a flexible way combining policies of transition and development.

The new foreign policy priorities, the diminishing international involvement in the SEE countries, and the current financial crisis contribute to deepening the development gap separating the SEE countries from EU Member States. A more promising prospect of EU membership accompanied by specific strategies addressing issues of development and growth, in the framework of a regional cohesion programme favouring social inclusion, could contribute to bringing the SEE countries closer to European standards.

The further the EU expands, the more diversity it will have to embrace and the more flexibility will be required of it. The gap in terms of democracy and culture needs to be considered: it cannot be bridged through ticking boxes during a mostly technical accession procedure. The very idea of partnership has to be reviewed as well: the SEE countries must play a full part in ongoing debates about the meaning of the common European Union project.

Acknowledging the various gaps with their specificities could help formulate a new strategy avoiding the mistakes made in the previous enlargement round. Compared to initially overoptimistic expectations, the introduced delay should be used constructively: in the EU to review and up-date some instruments, and to market its presence on the ground more strongly; in SEE to proceed more seriously with the accession process and to set up a truly South East European Free Trade Association which would permit an almost immediate access to some EU programmes and resources. Such an approach would combine state-building and member-capacities development within the framework of a truly “member-state-building” strategy.