European Neighbourhood Watch

WHY THE EU SHOULD RE-ENGAGE WITH THE WESTERN BALKANS

Editorial | Erwan Fouéré

For years, the European Union has ignored signs of a dramatic decline in democratic standards across the Western Balkans. But this attitude appears to be changing; 2018 could, with some effort, be decisive in the EU’s support for the transformation of these countries into functioning democracies with accountable governments and viable economies. The Strategy Paper on Enlargement to be presented by the European Commission on February 6th could serve as an opportunity for the EU to restate its commitment to the region and to address the root causes of the current malaise in its neighbourhood.

From neglect....

Apart from the usual expressions of concern and exhortation to the region’s leaders to concentrate on much-needed reforms, the EU and its member states have given the impression of underestimating the situation in the region or of simply not wishing to get involved.

For the member states in which there is little public support for the EU’s enlargement policy, the less said on the future enlargement of the EU, the better. Paying lip service to the EU’s commitment to the region (formally expressed at the 2003 Thessaloniki summit) became the prevailing trend. The messages conveyed were of a technocratic nature, linked to the reform requirements set by the EU for the accession process. Important though they were to remind the countries of the region of their reform commitments, they did little to address the root causes of the political deterioration and increasing polarisation of society.

Even the ‘Berlin Process’ launched in 2014, which saw a succession of summit meetings with leaders of the region adopting welcome initiatives to increase regional cooperation, particularly through transport and energy connectivity, did not give the failing democratic standards and rule of law the attention they demanded. It was as if the EU considered that regional economic cooperation initiatives by themselves would instate the rule of law and democratic checks and balances.

More forceful and consistent political messages from the EU could have reversed, or at least stalled, the backsliding, but were largely absent. Political agreements brokered by the EU in crisis situations were rarely properly followed up because
of weak and/or lack of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Civil society organisations, which came forward with reform proposals and a bid to make governments more accountable (despite verbal attacks and physical threats from ruling parties) showed their huge potential to promote change but were not given clear public support by the EU when it could have made a difference in pushing back the worst excesses of the elites in power, not least by denting their sense of impunity. The prolonged crisis in Macedonia is a case in point: an impressive network of civil society organisations across the political and ethnic divide came together to call for greater government accountability, but they were not included in the EU-mediated dialogue. This was conducted exclusively with the main political party leaders.

When the EU faced the refugee and migrant crisis in 2015, the ‘frontline’ member states, such as Austria and Hungary, obtained support, with tacit approval from the EU institutions, to close the borders and prevent passage from countries such as Serbia and Macedonia, where most refugees were transiting from Greece. This was despite the fact that many were genuine refugees fleeing civil war in their own countries. The governments concerned were only too happy to oblige. It gave them a convenient excuse to ingratiate themselves with those EU member states that turned a blind eye to the serious degradation in democratic standards and the violations of rule of law. “Strong and stable governments” were the favoured buzzwords of the EU leaders at that time and have remained so. This was realpolitik at its worst in the EU’s nearest neighbourhood.

...to deeper engagement?

But the mood in the EU seems to be shifting now, and the Western Balkans is receiving a new level of attention in Brussels and the national capitals.

The initiatives and events planned for this year relating to the region are certainly welcome and could mark a qualitative change in the EU’s approach towards the region. They include the aforementioned Strategy Paper scheduled for presentation on 6th February; the European Commission’s Communication on Enlargement with individual Country Reports scheduled for April 17th; the EU/Western Balkan summit to be hosted by Bulgaria in Sofia on May 17th; the June European Council where decisions relating to the Western Balkans are expected; and finally, the next ‘Berlin Process’ summit, to be hosted by the UK government.

The Strategy Paper will set the tone for the EU’s intentions regarding its enlargement agenda for years to come. The Paper should put forward a strong and essentially political message. In the spirit of the Thessaloniki Agenda adopted in 2003, it will need to set out a vision for the long-term future aimed at transforming the countries of the region into functioning democracies with accountable governments and viable economies.

The Strategy Paper should reiterate that reform efforts will be recognised and rewarded: it should set out the path for the European Council in June to take significant decisions, such as on opening accession negotiations with Macedonia and with Albania, should the ongoing reform efforts proceed as planned. Ideally, it should also point the way for the EU to start a process of engaging, whether through screening or actual negotiations, with the remaining countries in the region on the areas covered by chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)
and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) of the EU accession process. This would lock the applicant countries into an intensive and intrusive interaction with the EU institutions that would help to keep the reform process on track.

But above all, the Paper should address the root causes of the deep malaise facing the region and speak directly to its people, many of whom continue to suffer from the entrenched elites and authoritarian tendencies of the new breed of ‘Balkan strongmen’ who personalise power and ignore, or worse, suppress criticism. The Paper should point to the tangible and real benefits of being part of the EU family. It should offer a reassuring message on the irreversibility of the accession process leading to a reunification of the European continent. This could make 2018 the year in which the EU’s relations with the Western Balkans change into a deeper and more meaningful relationship.

The author is Associate Senior Research Fellow in the Europe and the World research unit at CEPS.

General news

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini upon arrival to the Foreign Affairs Council, 11 December 2017. Link

Foreign Affairs Council, 11 December 2017. Link

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, 11 December 2017. Link

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on European Foreign Security and Defence Policy, 12 December 2017. Link

Visa liberalisation: Commission reports on implementation of benchmarks for Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, 20 December 2017. Link

Eastern Neighbourhood

Azerbaijan

EU report: Azerbaijan renews engagement and dialogue, 20 December 2017. Link

Belarus

EU-Belarus Coordination Group met for the fourth time, 20 December 2017. Link
Statement on two upheld death sentences in Belarus, 21 December 2017. [Link](#)

EU supports Belarus’ Central Bank via 1st twinning project in the country, 22 December 2017. [Link](#)

**Georgia**

EU and Partners – International Parliamentary Conference opens in Tbilisi, 04 December 2017. [Link](#)

Georgia: new Head of EU monitoring mission (EUMM Georgia) appointed, 19 December 2017. [Link](#)

EU and Government of Georgia review four years of EU support to agriculture, 19 December 2017. [Link](#)

EU and KfW sign agreement for "Extension of the Georgian Transmission Network" project, 21 December 2017. [Link](#)

EU transfers GEL 140 million (EUR 48.1 million) to Georgia in support of reforms, 29 December 2017. [Link](#)

**Moldova**

Republic of Moldova: EU supports job creation and better public administration, 21 December 2017. [Link](#)

**Russia**

Russia: EU prolongs economic sanctions by six months, 21 December 2017. [Link](#)

Decision of the Russian Central Election Commission to bar Alexei Navalny from running in the 2018 Presidential election, 26 December 2017. [Link](#)

**Ukraine**

Statement of the spokesperson on recent developments in the fight against corruption in Ukraine, 05 December 2017. [Link](#)

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini after the 4th Association Council between the European Union and Ukraine, 08 December 2017. [Link](#)

EU-Ukraine Association Council, 08 December 2017. [Link](#)

The EU non-recognition policy for Crimea and Sevastopol: Fact Sheet, 12 December 2017. [Link](#)

Statement by the Spokesperson on the deterioration of the humanitarian and security situations in eastern Ukraine, 20 December 2017. [Link](#)
Southern Neighbourhood

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Rome 2017 Mediterranean Dialogues, 01 December 2017. Link

Egypt

1st Session of the EU-Egypt Migration Dialogue, 16 December 2017. Link

Israel

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini with Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, 11 December 2017. Link

The real story of the EU-Israel friendship, Op-Ed by Ambassador Emanuele Giaufret, Head of the EU Delegation to Israel, published in the Jerusalem Post, 28 December 2017. Link

Jordan

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini speaks to Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi, 04 December 2017. Link

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following her meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Jordan, Ayman Al Safadi, 08 December 2017. Link

Lebanon

Ministerial meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon, 08 December 2017. Link

New assistance package for Lebanon: EU strongly committed to supporting the country’s development and stability, Brussels, 19 December 2017. Link

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the joint press conference with Saad Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon, 20 December 2017. Link

Libya

Speech by Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on the situation of migrants in Libya, 13 December 2017. Link

Meeting of the Joint AU-EU-UN Taskforce to Address the Migrant Situation in Libya, 14 December 2017. Link

Palestine
Federica Mogherini speaks to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas about the expected announcement by President Trump on the status of Jerusalem, 06 December 2017. Link

Statement by HR/VP Federica Mogherini on the announcement by US President Trump on Jerusalem, 06 December 2017. Link

Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini on the announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump on Jerusalem, 07 December 2017. Link

Speech by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on US President Trump's announcement to recognise Jerusalem as capital of Israel, 12 December 2017. Link

The House debated Trump’s decision on Jerusalem, European Parliament, 13 December 2017. Link

Syria

EU strengthens its support to the Geneva peace process to end the conflict in Syria, 09 December 2017. Link

Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Syria, 21 December 2017. Link

Tunisia

L'UE octroie 25 millions € à la Tunisie pour la réforme de son administration, 14 December 2017. Link

Enlargement/Other

Federica Mogherini hosted a working dinner with the Prime Ministers of the Western Balkans, 18 December 2017. Link

Albania

Remarks by Federica Mogherini ahead of meeting with Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, 05 December 2017. Link

EU steps up emergency assistance to people in need in Albania, 15 December 2017. Link

EU Delegation statement, 19 December 2017. Link

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Commissioner Hahn visits Bosnia and Herzegovina, 04 December 2017. Link

Press Statement on the 2nd Meeting of the EU-BiH SAA Subcommittee on Transport, Energy, Environment and Regional Development, 04 December 2017. Link

Statement by HR/VP Federica Mogherini and Commissioner
Johannes Hahn on the adoption of excise law reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 December 2017. Link

Kosovo

Meeting of the Joint Rule of law Coordination Board held in Pristina, 12 December 2017. Link

European Union officials visit Kosovo; discuss security, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism with top Kosovo officials, 15 December 2017. Link

Macedonia

Federica Mogherini met with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, 06 December 2017. Link

Strengthening the operational and institutional capacities of the Customs Administration, 18 December 2017. Link

European Union releases new 72.3 EUR million for supporting the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 18 December 2017. Link

Montenegro

Tenth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro at Ministerial level Brussels, 11 December 2017. Link

HRVP Mogherini met with the Prime Minister of Montenegro Marković, 18 December 2017. Link

Serbia

Seventh meeting of the Accession Conference with Serbia at Ministerial level Brussels, 11 December 2017. Link

Serbia opens chapters 6, 30 within EU accession talks, 11 December 2017. Link

European Commission reviews Serbia’s progress in civil aviation, 13 December 2017. Link

Advance in the EU integration requires reforms, 21 December 2017. Link

Kukan: Overall positive impression, chapters 23, 24 essential for success, 21 December 2017. Link

EU door is open to Serbia, 25 December 2017. Link

Turkey

Second High-level Economic Dialogue between the EU and Turkey, 08 December 2017. Link

€700 million to support refugees in Turkey through flagship
Save the date: Peacetech: Exploring the potential of technologies for conflict prevention and peacebuilding

Monday, 15 January 2018, 15:00-17:00, CEPS, Brussels

How can technology, ICT and big data help reduce the likelihood of conflict and contribute to building sustainable peace? New technologies and big data can potentially make an important contribution in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, especially in the spheres of early warning and rapid response, imagery analysis, training and so forth. Similarly, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have a much broader utility in peace than might be presently assumed.

Just as businesses and non-governmental organisations alike are finding novel ways of collaborating in teams using software and communicating their messages using social media, so too are local-level peace actors, who use such technologies to collaborate with others, to project their message to otherwise unreachable audiences, and to productively contribute to debates in peacebuilding.

This event, a collaborative effort run by the two Horizon 2020 programmes EU-CIVCAP and PeaceTraining.eu, will address these themes the contribution of technologies to conflict prevention and peacebuilding for local and international actors alike.

Read more »

Back issues of European Neighbourhood Watch

All 143 previous editions of our newsletter are available on the website of the CEPS foreign policy unit. To keep up with our research and events, find us on Twitter @CEPS_fp.

Read more »
Connect with Us:

Facebook
Twitter
Visit our website

Contact CEPS:

Centre for European Policy Studies
1 Place du Congres, 1000 Brussels
Phone: +32 (0) 2 229 39 11
Email: foreignpolicy@ceps.eu