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Proposals for a S&D position towards the Western Balkans and their ‘European perspective’

At its June 2003 summit in Thessaloniki the EU Heads of State and Government promised a ‘European perspective’ to the countries of the Western Balkans and clearly stated that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”.

The EU needs an active enlargement strategy that keeps the enlargement countries firmly engaged and promotes and strengthens the accession process in the Western Balkans, particularly if it wants to maintain its influence over the democratisation and stabilisation process. Russia and Turkey already play a certain role in the region, a concern that is regularly underlined by S&D counterparts in the Western Balkan countries, especially in Serbia, BiH and Kosovo. However, this requires measures that convince Western Balkans’ governments and societies of the political and economic benefit of European integration. At the same time, and as highlighted in former S&D MEP Maria Eleni Koppa’s 2012 report on enlargement, these measures will have to contribute towards creating not only the political but also the economic and social conditions for EU accession.

Jean-Claude Juncker's recent statement according to which "no further enlargement will take place over the next five years" was problematic so far as it caused unease to the public opinion in the Western Balkan, despite the reassuring statements of both High Representative Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn. The reasons for Juncker's statements are to be found in the much-quoted general 'enlargement fatigue' and in the current populist mood that associates enlargement with increasing migration and insecurity. Although Juncker's public interventions are clearly directed to EU citizens, it has undeniable external repercussions too: Politics, especially European reform-oriented political forces, and society in the Western Balkans are alarmed about the effects of such a statement on the EU's hitherto committed enlargement policy.

Both Commissioner Hahn and High Representative Mogherini tried to adopt a reassuring tone, with Mogherini suggesting that the five years ahead could be used in order to make the Western Balkan countries ready for a next step in 2020. However, in his hearing in the EP on 30 August Commissioner-designate Hahn failed to answer the question by the S&D Group about what would happen to those countries like Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo that have not even yet started accession negotiations. According to Juncker’s statement, and under condition that they fulfil the required criteria, would the European Commission be ready to open accession negotiations with them before 2020 or has this been excluded from the outset?

Continuing on-going accession negotiations without opening additional negotiations during the next five years entails a clear risk of dividing the Western Balkans even further. The countries would be divided into those that have already started accession negotiations and those that are relegated behind and that, independently from their reform efforts, would have to wait for at least five more years before reaching the same stage of the EU accession process.

Over the past decade, the European Commission has reacted to the increasingly sceptical stance of EU Member States and their citizens towards further enlargement by making the accession process less coherent and clear. As a consequence, the more detailed the accession criteria became (benchmarking, key priorities, etc.), the more the EU's commitment towards Western Balkans' EU accession was put into question in the countries themselves.

However, it is equally crucial that the countries of the Western Balkans fully implement the reforms as agreed in the pre-accession and accession process, do their "homework" in order to progress towards EU accession and are ready to act and perform adequately at the moment of accession.

The EU's enlargement policy finds itself caught in a permanent balancing act between a comprehensive technical process and political considerations about the degree to which the accession process can and should be instrumentalised in order to support European reforms and reform-oriented political forces in the candidate and potential candidate countries.

The EU's long-time efforts for lasting stability in the Western Balkans should not be put at stake. The fight against corruption and organised crime require an independent and effective judiciary as well as well-functioning mechanisms for regional cooperation. Despite pressing economic and social challenges, e.g. high levels of unemployment, consolidation of public finances, the promotion of democracy and rule of law and the strengthening of democratic institutions must continue likewise, including in the area of media freedom and transparency. Political stability is at stake. This is illustrated by the enduring political stalemate in Bosnia-Herzegovina that led to social unrest in February 2014, by mounting ethnic tensions in FYROM and by growing nationalist tendencies in several Western Balkan countries.

1. How to ensure that the EU maintains an active enlargement policy despite Juncker's dismissive statement?

If the European Commission moves away from promoting enlargement in general, this can be interpreted as a populist concession to large parts of public opinion in EU Member States. However, if the Commission's focus is confined to already on-going accession negotiations, then S&D must make sure that candidate and potential candidate countries that have not started their negotiations yet, are not left behind.

While a successful EU enlargement policy requires strict accession criteria and easily verifiable benchmarks for progress, it also requires the European Commission to play an active role in shaping the accession process.

S&D should therefore:

- Request clarification of the next Commission's stance on enlargement, especially with regard to countries like Albania (obtained candidate status in June 2014) and FYROM (Commission has been recommending the opening of negotiations annually since 2009)

but also with regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina (SAA not in force due to non-implementation of ECHR ruling in Sejdic-Finci case) and Kosovo (SAA initialled in May 2014, only Western Balkan country without visa liberalisation);

- Reinterpret Juncker's statement in the sense of High Representative Mogherini's understanding, i.e. ensure that during the next five years Western Balkan countries get ready for the next big step in 2020 and stress that the European Commission should actively encourage them to adopt and implement the necessary reforms;
- Request the new Commission to continue Commissioner Füle's past initiatives for creating fora for dialogue and reform (e.g. the Structured Dialogue on Justice in Bosnia-Herzegovina launched in June 2011, the High Level Accession Dialogue in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) launched in 2012, the Structured Dialogue on the Rule of Law in Kosovo since May 2012, the High Level Dialogue on the Key Priorities with Albania launched in November 2013 etc.)
- Insist that progress must be measured in a fair manner and through transparent procedures;
- Advocate a continuation of the approach to open chapters 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (justice, freedom and security) at an early stage of the accession process and to close them last; make the opening of certain other chapters conditional on benchmarks in the areas of chapter 23 and 24;
- Communicate better and urge communication by other institutions of the benefits of enlargement in the enlargement countries and the existing member states.

2. How to sustain the reform momentum in the Western Balkans?

The economic and financial crisis in the EU badly affected the Western Balkan countries too, given that their economies are closely tied to the economies of the EU Member States. Indeed, the EU is the largest trading partner for the Western Balkan countries and accounts for over two-thirds of their total trade.

Economic prosperity is essential to long term stability and democracy in the region. However, the difficult economic situation in the Western Balkans has visibly reduced these countries' capacity to implement ambitious economic and also political reforms. In turn, economic recession and waning eagerness to conduct political reforms make it more difficult to fulfil the EU's accession criteria. It is therefore important to avoid a serious backslide in the reform momentum and to counter what Commissioner Füle during his presentation of the 2014 progress reports on 8 October described as "accession fatigue".

The Western Balkans will need additional support in order to maintain the reform momentum over the forthcoming five years. It is not EU accession criteria that help alter a political culture where political compromises are seen as negative, where leadership of strongmen is favoured and where parliamentary boycotts are a popular move of opposition parties. The new Commissioner for Enlargement will have to define benchmarks in the (pre-) accession process that will motivate governments to continue pursuing their ambitious reform packages and not to lose track of their objective - EU membership.

The less EU enlargement policy is driven by tangible and imminent accession, the more it must invest into actively supporting reform processes on the way towards accession in order not to lose momentum. The European integration of the Western Balkan countries will only be successful if EU accession and the related political and economic reforms will be perceived as political, economic and social progress by the citizens and will thus meet their support.

S&D should therefore:

- Call on the Council to clearly reconfirm that the accession perspective is real and possible, as long as the candidates deliver on their own commitments;
- Call on the Commission to define milestones in the pre-accession and accession process that increase visibility of the enlargement process for the citizens of the countries concerned (cf. the positive effect of visa liberalisation 2009-2010 on the reform momentum);
- Suggest to the Commission to indicate fewer priorities/ key priorities and lend more focused support to these key priorities of the moment which should be determined together with the national governments and civil society in order to increase their ownership of the reform process;
- Counter the widespread perception in the Western Balkans that the threshold for EU accession is getting ever higher because of the EU's unacknowledged unwillingness to accept new members;
- Emphasise the fact that a country is in a position to benefit fully from EU accession only if it is truly prepared for being a member of the EU's increasingly complex political and economic system (cf. the EU's recent progress on economic integration and the focus of the 2013 enlargement strategy on economic governance in the accession process);
- Insist on the social dimension of enlargement and reassure that the group will continue to work for higher social standards and decent work in the candidate countries;
- Insist on the sustainability of reforms at the legislative level and ask for continuous monitoring of their implementation.

3. How to explain to our voters why to continue the enlargement policy?

In 2012 Eurobarometer for the first time indicated that a majority of EU citizens were against further EU enlargement. Germany (20% in favour) is taking the lead of those countries with a majority of citizens against further enlargement whereas Poland (62% in favour) is the frontrunner among those with a majority of citizens in favour of further enlargement.

In many EU Member States the reasons commonly cited for the so-called enlargement fatigue are the following: The accession of Bulgaria and Romania had been not sufficiently prepared. There is a perception of growing difficulties inside the EU to continue the political and economic integration.

The widespread 'enlargement fatigue' can however not be understood properly without taking into account the effects of the economic and financial crisis and the growing trend of renationalisation in several EU Member States.

In contrast, Croatia's EU accession on 1 July 2013 gave a positive and encouraging signal to its Western Balkan neighbours. Croatia and Slovenia continue to promote both a further EU enlargement to the region and further European reforms in their neighbouring countries. The prospect of EU accession remains the most effective incentive for comprehensive political and economic reforms. These reforms are necessary in order to achieve the EU's foreign policy objective to firmly anchor peace, security, stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans.

Given the importance of the Western Balkans for the very foundation of the EU's foreign policy, disengagement by the EU from the enlargement perspective for the remaining Western Balkan countries is therefore simply not an option. The EU cannot opt out from its responsibilities for its immediate European neighbours. Its enlargement policy has to take into account the Western

Balkans's history of ethnic tensions and the on-going efforts to strengthen good neighbourly relations in the region.

S&D should therefore:

- Put an emphasis on the concrete benefits of an EU accession perspective for the Western Balkans in the future (e.g. security and stability in the EU's neighbourhood, perspectives for economic cooperation, rule of law and the fight against organised crime, corruption, illegal migration) and not only ritually reminding of a given accession promise back in 2003 at the Thessaloniki summit;
- Raise awareness among largely sceptical EU citizens about the detailed and complex accession process that is based on fixed criteria (Copenhagen criteria), a detailed methodology, meticulous screening of legislation in force and constant monitoring and evaluation of reform efforts;
- Engage regularly in public discussions and round tables about enlargement - enlargement policy, enlargement prospects, enlargement process - in order to steer more actively the debate about enlargement today (and not only later on occasion of the actual EU accession of Western Balkan countries).

4. How to strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans?

Juncker's policy entails a clear risk of dividing the Western Balkan countries into two groups: those that have already embarked on accession negotiations and those that might have to wait even longer for starting their accession negotiations due to Juncker's restrictive stance on enlargement policy.

However, it is not enough to prepare the Western Balkan countries individually for EU accession. As future EU Members they will have to cooperate together on a daily basis inside and outside the EU institutions. Good neighbourly relations are the cornerstone of European integration. The EU's enlargement policy as well as the candidate and potential candidate countries can therefore only benefit from an even stronger focus on regional cooperation.

S&D should therefore:

- Call for a more active role of the EU in mediating conflicts among candidates or between a candidate country and an existing member state; if this is not possible, encourage the conflicting parties to solve their disputes through a mediation or arbitration method of their choice;
- Support the new High Representative in re-establishing the Belgrade-Pristina talks on the highest political level in order to hold politicians of both countries to account for progress on the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo;
- Call for maximum EU support to regional initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Council etc.;
- Support initiatives like the Western Balkans Conference that took place in Berlin on 28 August 2014 and that inter alia discussed regional integration (Austria will host the next Western Balkans Conference while the new Commission for Enlargement will be from Austria);
- Make active use of the PES (and S&D) Balkan Leaders' Conference in order to highlight the need of more and better regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.
- Support and promote support for NGO's that promote reconciliation and dialogue between people from conflicting regions or countries.

5. How to make our commitment towards enlargement inside the PES family more unified and thus more credible?

In his presentation of the 2014 progress reports to the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs Commissioner Füle announced that this year's focus of the EU enlargement policy would be on the strengthening of democratic institutions. He also referred to the importance of creating and maintaining a "constructive and sustainable dialogue across the political spectrum".

When looking at the difficult relations between parties in power and opposition parties in several countries in the region, it is evident that a veritable change in political climate is needed. Both in FYROM and in Albania the opposition boycotted the parliament in 2014. In FYROM it is S&D sister party SDSM that blocks the parliament, whereas in Albania it is the Democratic Party (PD).

EU accession cannot be seen as a purely technical process that is conducted by the European Commission together with relevant state authorities alone. As a matter of fact, accession to the EU is the realisation of a long-term political objective. It is the final point of a comprehensive political process and at the same time it is the starting point of a much more complex process in which the Western Balkans will contribute to the yet continuing integration project between 28 and more EU Member States.

European integration of the Western Balkan countries is about firmly anchoring these countries among the European countries that adhere to the values and common objectives expressed in articles 2, 3 and 4 TEU. European integration should lead to political, economic and social progress and should be expressed through the will of those in government to cooperate in advancing the EU's political integration project, to share economic prosperity and solidarity with neighbouring countries and to speak together with one voice on the international scene.

These are important tasks for all political parties committed to European reforms, EU accession and continuing European integration. The integration of the Western Balkans into the EU can only be successful if the at times painful reforms will be perceived by the citizens as being necessary and as bringing political, economic and social progress. It is the duty of political parties to act as intermediaries between the people and the state. It is therefore their responsibility to explain the reforms and to anchor the idea and values of the EU among political leaders, in the country's administration as well as in broader society. The reforms, the modernisation of these countries and societies should be first assumed as a purpose *per se* at national level - while it stays with the normal progress. The accession to the EU is just a catalyser, providing incentives, know-how, etc.

S&D should therefore:

- Show increased presence, inter alia through actively participating in conferences, public and party events in the Western Balkans in order to visibly support reform-oriented political forces;
- Contribute, in these countries and as well in dialogue with partners from other political families at European level, to building up the political consensus at national level on the issue of EU accession. That will lead to sustainable measures internally, in these countries, on the path towards accession, irrespective of the governmental changes and developments.

- Engage more closely with existing sister parties in the Western Balkans, identify potential new partner parties in those countries where S&D has not established formal partnerships yet¹ and, in countries where there is more than one sister party (Montenegro and Serbia), encourage them to cooperate more closely;
- Support all efforts which aim for a better coordination between the PES Western Balkans Task Force and the S&D Willy Brandt Steering Committee;
- Give thematic expert support wherever necessary and, through joint initiatives with sister parties, establish and enhance contacts between experts from the Western Balkan countries and various EU Member States;
- Seek cooperation with civil society, especially in those countries where S&D does not have a sister party (Kosovo), as civil society plays an important role in monitoring European and accession-related reform processes;
- Continue holding the PES Balkan Leaders' Conference and ensure that the dates coincide with PES or other party conventions or important summits at EU level (e.g. European Council meetings dedicated to economic governance, to enlargement etc.);
- Initiate a second Balkan Leaders' Conference per year in order to bring together the presidents of the political groups in the national parliaments as well as key parliamentarians.

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¹ S&D sister parties are the following: Socialist Party of Albania (PS), Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH), Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in Montenegro, Democratic Party (DS) in Serbia. There is no sister party in Kosovo. All of these parties are PES associate members and full members of the Socialist International, with the exception of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) which has SI observer status. SDP Montenegro, DPS Montenegro and DS Serbia have also participated in the Progressive Alliance conference in Leipzig in May 2013; SDSM Macedonia is a Progressive Alliance Board Member. In Serbia, the S&D Group has also had contacts with the governmental Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and Social Democratic Party of Serbia which is part of the governing SNS-led election alliance. In September 2014 the New Democratic Party (NDS) in Serbia has applied for PES membership and announced to change its name into Social Democratic Party.