

# European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation To European Future

Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic





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## Executive Summary

The dissolution of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s gave birth to seven independent states. After the wars that followed the initial proclamation of independence in several of these countries, a period of consolidation ensued, along with European integration as well as reconciliation efforts.

The principal goal of this paper is to explain the reasons that led to the wars in Western Balkans, the main issues that remained in the 2000s and the EU initiatives that were supposed to help in resolving these problematic issues and to facilitate the accession of the countries of the region to the European Union.

Despite the effort jointly performed by the EU as well as countries from the region, this article shows that a lot of work will still have to be done before all of the countries become sufficiently mature in a political, economic and societal sense to become members of the European Union.

### Keywords:

Western Balkans – European integration – Dialogue – Initiatives – Reconciliation

## Introduction

The roots of the European idea and the creation of the European community after the Second World War lie in the desire to prevent further war between European nations. One of the main goals of the original idea of European integration is defined as preserving peace in the Member States.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we argue that the same concept should be applied to the territory of Western Balkans, that is, that the European integration of the region could help to preserve peace in the region while also providing stability and, consequently, political and economic growth. Furthermore, we note the growing need for interdependence amongst all of the European nations and states on different political and societal levels.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as the main goal of the process of European integration is twofold—consisting of stabilisation as well as accession—we critically assess the relative value of the European Union applying either a regional or individual approach to the respective countries in the process of accession.

In order to stress the regional approach, in 1996 the European Union made a differentiation between the two terms ‘South-East (SE) Europe’ and ‘Western Balkans’. ‘SE Europe’ refers to all of the countries from the Gulf of Trieste to the Black Sea, while Western Balkans consists of all of the former Yugoslavian states except Slovenia, plus Albania. For the purpose of this study, we use the term ‘Western Balkans’ without referring to Albania. We make this exception because Albania was not a part of the former Yugoslavia, had no direct conflict with any of the former

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the Schuman Declaration of 1950.

<sup>2</sup> D. Trenchov, ‘The Future of the Western Balkans Integration within the EU’, *Analytical Journal* 4/2 (2012), 1–12.



Yugoslavian states and has relatively good relations with all of the other Western Balkans states (except Serbia because of the status of Kosovo). Albania is thus not relevant for this study.

Overall, it could be said that the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans countries are developing and that the European Union has adopted a good approach to the region because it has brought progress as well as cooperation between the conflicted countries. This is especially evident in the bilateral and multilateral meetings organised by or with the support of the European Union where presidents, ministers or members of parliaments gather and take common decisions that are valuable for the whole region. However, we notice that more should be done on the level of civil society, where efforts would have a direct impact on citizens. Another problem might be the often noticed difference in discourse chosen by politicians depending on whether they are addressing domestic or international audiences.

As we will further see, the main argument of this study is that the chosen EU method of imposing political dialogue in the region is correct and should be further developed. Saying this, we emphasise that the countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia are relatively small countries that need mutual support in many different policy areas as well as in the process of EU accession. Besides the value derived from cooperation at the official level, the citizens of these countries will accrue further benefits by working together, cooperating in the fields of culture, education and business. This is particularly pertinent given that the majority of the Western Balkans countries have similar languages and can understand each other without resorting to translating services or a common lingua franca.

## Historical Overview

The Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia was constituted after the Second World War as the successor of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Although it was a Communist country, it was different from other East European Communist states. In contrast to these countries, after Stalin's expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948, Yugoslavia tended to be both independent and socialist. It tried to strike a balance between East and West and maintained a policy of openness with regard to the two Cold War blocs. Within the United Nations, Yugoslavia led an independent political course enabling it to secure both Western and Soviet support on some issues. Beginning in the 1950s, it began the implementation of economic, political and cultural development and reforms and as of the 1960s opened its borders. This provided Yugoslavian citizens with the possibility to move freely and to go abroad to travel and even work and study, which was impossible in other Communist states. By the 1970s, over one million citizens had moved abroad.<sup>3</sup> The central idea in Yugoslav social policy was brotherhood and unity.

However, after Tito's death in 1980, movements of national revival emerged throughout the region. These developments helped bring Slobodan Milosevic to power in Serbia and later led to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. He mobilised masses and made credible threats against the governments in Slovenia and Croatia. He put his followers in power in three out of Yugoslavia's eight political units:

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<sup>3</sup> M. Baskin and P. Pickering, 'The Former Yugoslavia and Its Successors', in S. Wolchik and J. Curry (eds.), *Central and East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 281–313.

Kosovo, Vojvodina, Montenegro. He thus had half of the state in his hands. At the same time and in congruence with Milosevic's politics, in 1986 the Serbian Academy of Science published a Memorandum with a nationalist programme. In this way, nationalist views acquired legitimacy.

At the end of 1980s, Slovenian and Croatian elites were in favour of a looser federation between the Yugoslav states as well as political and economic reforms. Furthermore, neither Slovenia nor Croatia wanted to participate in Serbia's repression of troubled Kosovo. These and other differences led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, although in that period, after the initial economic crisis at the beginning of the 1980s, Yugoslavia was at its economic peak and was close to joining the European Community.

The beginning of the 1990s brought Slovenian and Croatian independence and also the transformation of reserve defence forces into armies (as the majority of members of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) consisted of Serbs). The JNA was expelled from Slovenia several days after the proclamation of independence with only 52 deaths in total. However, the situation was more complicated in Croatia, which had a huge Serbian minority. The international community in Europe and abroad failed to prevent war, first in Croatia and later in Bosnia and in Kosovo.

In Croatia, the most violent armed conflicts took place in 1991 in the city of Vukovar. Serbian forces from Serbia joined with the Serbian minority in Croatia that declared independence from the rest of Croatia. Serbian troops occupied a considerable part of Croatia during the war. In the following four years, the international community supported various negotiators and plans, for instance Cyrus Vance's plan, Lord Owen's and others. They were all

rejected. In 1995, the Croatian army (with US support) led two main offensives in order to regain control over the whole territory of Croatia. A large part of the Serbian population, fearing for its destiny, moved to Serbia. During the war, over 20,000 people died.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the armed conflict started in 1992, after the breakup of the coalition government that consisted of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, the three major constitutive ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Independence was declared on 1 March 1992. During the next three years, according to some estimations, between 200,000 and 300,000 people died in the conflict. The most violent episode was the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995. The war ended with the Dayton Peace Conference in November 1995. According to the final agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina remained one country with two separate entities: Republika Srpska, with its majority Serbian population, and Bosnian-Croat Federation, with its predominantly Muslim population and Croats. The conflict was also characterised by the late intervention of international bodies, especially in the case of Srebrenica, where UN forces failed to prevent the genocide.

Another conflict occurred in Kosovo, an autonomous region in Serbia (just like Vojvodina in the north of Serbia) whose status granted it almost equal membership in the Yugoslav federation. However, Serbia tried to limit Kosovo's autonomy (both political and cultural) at the end of 1980s. As a response, the Albanian movement for autonomy and independence, as well as the Kosovo Liberation Army, were born. Several actions against Serbian police forces in 1997 provoked a response from the Serbian side which was violent and led not only against the Kosovo Army but also against civilians. NATO forces subsequently reacted and launched their military bombing operation of Serbian military

positions throughout Serbia from the end of March until the beginning of June 1999. The operation ended with UN Security Council Resolution 1244. The Resolution authorised and established the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which led to Kosovo's proclamation of independence in 2008.

In total, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and resultant inter-ethnic conflicts caused at least 140,000 deaths (some authors estimate 200,000 to 300,000) and mass population transfers (voluntary or forced): over 300,000 displaced persons, 120,000 refugees and 14,000 still unaccounted for. It is estimated that 4.5 million people were displaced at some point during the wars.

## Disputed Issues

The transformation of political elites in Western Balkans during the 1990s presents an interesting phenomenon. Both former Communist leaders as well as former democratic dissidents became nationalists in the newly formed states. The wars were used by former Communist leaders in order to stay in power. They also delayed the political democratisation of the former Yugoslav states.<sup>4</sup> State building within the states of the former Yugoslavia coincided with the post-conflict transition as well as the transition to post-Communist rule, which made the situation difficult. The foundations of democracy, the rule of law, political dialogue and human rights are still being established in these countries. At the same time, these are all criteria posed

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<sup>4</sup>Baskin and Pickering, 'The Former Yugoslavia and Its Successors'.

by the European Union for countries seeking to become members, which is the goal of all Western Balkans countries.

Presently, they are all declaratively representative democracies showing higher or lower levels of applied democratisation. However, there are many bilateral issues between neighbouring countries within the region. The relations between these states are still burdened by the past wars. The major issues that these countries need to deal with in order to advance bilateral relations, but also in order to gain access to the European Union, are border issues between the respective countries and the problem of refugees and internally displaced people. Another issue related to the past wars is the problem of the residual emotional trauma still being confronted by the citizens of these states.

The problem with borders appeared in the context of the question of whether the post-Second World War borders should be kept or whether the situation was to be returned to the period before the Second or even the First World War, that is, before the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918. Countries are raising these issues because of potential profit to be gained from it in terms of, for instance, access to the open sea, roads, maritime roads, and so on.

The issue of refugees and displaced people emerged during the wars in Western Balkans and seems to have remained intractable, although countries now cooperate to a considerably greater extent than 10 or more years ago.

Table 1 shows the areas of dispute remaining between countries. Between Croatia and Serbia, the main problems are the disputed part of the border and missing persons, as well as refugees and displaced persons and mutual enmity. The improvement in the relations between the two states

is mainly due to the good relations between the Presidents of the respective countries, Ivo Josipovic and Boris Tadic. In 1999, Croatia filed a lawsuit for genocide against Serbia before the International Court of Justice based on the war crimes that took place in Vukovar in 1991. Belgrade answered with a countersuit in January 2010 based on the Croatian military operation 'Storm' in 1995. Many observers have suggested that if the two countries do not withdraw their lawsuits, the court will soon do so because there is no legal justification for the application of the term 'genocide' in either case. Recently, the Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Vesna Pusic, mentioned the possibility of withdrawing the suit should the Serbs and Croats resolve the problems between them concerning missing persons, stolen properties and war crimes. Problems also remain regarding the status of the Serbs that left Croatia in 1995 and their property in Croatia. Some of them returned, while others decided to stay in Serbia.

**Table 1 Disputed Bilateral Issues**

	B&H	Croatia	Kosovo	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Others
<b>B&amp;H</b>	-	DP	-	-	B, DP	B, MP, DP	-
<b>Croatia</b>	DP	-	-	-	B	B, MP, G, DP	-
<b>Kosovo</b>	-	-	-	-	-	B, R, DP	-
<b>The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	Name dispute with Greece
<b>Montenegro</b>	B, DP	B	-	-	-	B	-
<b>Serbia</b>	B, MP	B, MP, G, DP	B, R	-	B	-	-

B= border, DP= displaced persons, R= refugees, MP= missing persons, G= Genocide lawsuits

Another issue, which is less well known, is the border between Serbia and Croatia over the river Danube. This is neither a mountainous region with low stakes nor a coastal area where the definition of territorial waters can be significant in terms of access to the open sea. In this case, the dispute concerns control of navigation on the Danube. This is significant because the Danube functions as the economic lifeline of the countries through which it passes. Moreover, as the second largest river basin in Europe, it represents an important international waterway.<sup>5</sup> Serbia wants the border to extend down the middle of the river, while Croatia is asking for acknowledgment of the borders established by the cadastre of communities before the war that embraced both banks of the Danube.

The main issues between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are missing persons and a border dispute. The problematic border has been placed in the area of the northern and middle parts of the Drina River. Clear demarcation between the two states is still lacking.

There are still some unresolved issues regarding the property that belonged to Bosnia and Herzegovina's legal entities in Serbia before the escalation of conflict. The relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are difficult because Serbia participated in the war by supporting a local Serbian ethnic group. Serbia continues to favour only one part of the state, Republika Srpska, in its relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, citizens of other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina are discriminated against in Serbia. The problem of succession is still not progressing and the juridical treatment of cases of war crimes, which

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<sup>5</sup> G. Limantzakis, 'A New Page on Serbian-Croatian Bilateral Relations and the Danube Border Dispute', *Europe's World* (2010), accessed at [http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home\\_old/PartnerPosts/tabid/671/PostID/1548/language/en-US/Default.aspx](http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home_old/PartnerPosts/tabid/671/PostID/1548/language/en-US/Default.aspx) on 15 January 2010.



is not under the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, faces substantial problems.

The normalisation of relations between the two states still needs a lot of effort from both sides.

After the beginning of the wars and the separation of the different former Yugoslav states, Serbia and Montenegro stayed together under the name Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, because Montenegro's government was offering strong support to Milosevic's regime. However, Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, who first supported Milosevic's regime, was strongly opposed to the signing in 1996 of the Dayton Treaty—seen as an anti-Serb treaty—and consequently withdrew his support for Milosevic. He won the presidential elections in 1998 over his former ally and party colleague Miomir Bulatovic. Although initially opposed to the idea, after the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, Djukanovic started to advocate openly for an independent state. In 2003, the federation changed to a more decentralised union with the name changed to Serbia and Montenegro. Montenegro proclaimed its independence in 2006; since then, relations between Serbia and Montenegro have stagnated. The first Serbian ambassador to Montenegro arrived in 2008. After Montenegro recognised Kosovo's independence, relations between the two states declined again.

Other problems include the disputed part of the border between Serbia and Montenegro in the Sandzak region, dual citizenship issues, and the regulation of the ethnic minority status of Serbs in Montenegro, as they represent almost one third of the total Montenegrin population.

Serbia and Kosovo have still not normalised relations between them. The European Union insists on dialogue, but all of the talks have been temporary and have not led to

any final solution or decision. The major problem is Serbian unwillingness to recognise the independence of Kosovo. There is a need for dialogue regarding the Serbian minority in the north of Kosovo, the resolution of technical issues, the freedom of movement deal that collapsed in 2011, border control, and so on. An almost constant air of tension and instability remains, especially in the northern part of Kosovo, where Serbs have received promises of protection from Serbian authorities in Serbia. Serbian propaganda among citizens living in the north of the country is still considerable, preventing them from participating in the life of the state of Kosovo. The security issues are the most significant for the stabilisation of the region.

After the independence proclaimed in 1991, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia kept good bilateral relations with all of the other former Yugoslavian states. However, there are often minor disputes with Serbia over the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is not recognised by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Relations between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are constantly progressing. However, there is a dispute over the coastal border. Although both countries signed an agreement regarding the border, it was not ratified by the Croatian parliament because Croatia disputes possession of two cliffs that now belong to Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is also a problem concerning a bridge that the Croats plan to build between Komarne and Peljesac, which would block Bosnia and Herzegovina's access to the open sea.

A similar sea border dispute exists between Croatia and Montenegro over Prevlaka peninsula, at the mouth of Kotor Bay. The leaders of both countries agreed to solve the dispute by allowing the International Court of Justice to act as an intermediary. Otherwise, relations between Croatia and Montenegro are stable and continually improving.

From a general point of view, the major problem effecting relations between the countries remains the public discourse on wars, which is still segregated according to partisan perspectives. Every party has its own 'truth' concerning interpretation of the conflict, which makes the establishment of good relations between neighbours difficult. Instead, it provides the source of hatred and conflict. The relativity of 'truth' has already been discussed in the work of many scholars (e.g., Bush and Fogler,<sup>6</sup> Cloke,<sup>7</sup> Connolly<sup>8</sup>) who compare it to the systems of morality and value held by all individuals. In the face of everyday insecurities, identities need to consolidate themselves by recognising the existence of different surrounding identities. The difference that cannot be accepted turns into an 'otherness' that can be perceived as a threat and must therefore be eliminated to re-establish a sense of harmony and security.<sup>9</sup>

Although the situation is much better than 10 to 15 years ago and negative feelings are slowly being overcome, public opinion surveys show that national populations still consider neighbouring nations their biggest enemies. The major hatreds exist between Serbs and Croats, Serbs and Kosovo Albanians and Serbs and Muslims. Encouraging news is to be seen in the establishment of Croatian businesses in Serbia and vice versa, Croatian artists performing in Serbia, Serbs holidaying in Croatia, and so on. Ethnic reconciliation should be the first indicator of the increasing democratic maturity of Western Balkans societies. Nonetheless, there

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<sup>6</sup> R. Bush and J. Fogler, *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> K. Cloke, *Mediating Dangerously: The Frontiers of Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> W. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> O. Weinberg, 'Transformative Approach To Mediation: Radical Insight Or Pie In The Sky?' Canadian Forum on Civil Justice (2003), accessed at <http://cfcj-fcj.org/clearinghouse/drpapers/2003-dra/weinberg.pdf> on 15 February 2012

is still negative news, as witnessed by extremist sport fans whose racial, nationalist and religious hatred finds full expression. The hate speech often heard during sports matches (most recently during the European handball championship at the beginning of 2012) reinforces a sense of fear and mutual mistrust among a large part of the population. The results of opinion polls document the reality of inter-ethnic relations and the extent to which the different initiatives to promote reconciliation do not reach citizens, but remain on the level of political elites in every country. Consequently, the relationship with the past is still the key topic and a remaining obstacle on the road to good relations.

## The EU Approach to Western Balkans

Today, the majority of the Western Balkans states waiting to be integrated into the EU could be referred to as contested or 'unfinished'. This term has been used by Veton Surroi<sup>10</sup> in order to show the problems these countries still face: problems such as Kosovo waiting to be recognised by Serbia and five remaining EU Member States; Bosnia and Herzegovina waiting for a constitution; Serbia trying to establish internationally acceptable borders (Kosovo, Republika Srpska); the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia waiting for recognition of its national identity and name.

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<sup>10</sup> V. Surroi, 'The Unfinished State(s) in the Balkans and the EU: The Next Wave', in J. Rupnik (ed.), *The Western Balkans and the EU: 'The Hour of Europe'*, Chaillot Papers (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2011), 111–20.

The European Union opted for a regional approach in this part of Europe in order to achieve greater stability among the conflicted states and a normalisation of relations between them. Its role is predominantly stabilising, as each country has applied for, or expressed interest in, acceptance into the EU. Expressing the desire to avoid further possible conflicts and promote regional cooperation, former Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, said that 'the region needs a clear European perspective'.<sup>11</sup>

Multi lateral political dialogue within the region is usually organised at a high level, through the organisation of common meetings with heads of state or at a ministerial level. Although the agenda for the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU is clear, there are still numerous challenges and dilemmas facing the region.

After the accession of Slovenia into the EU in 2007 as the first former Yugoslav state, Croatia expects the same in July 2013. It has already concluded the negotiations and signed the EU Accession Treaty, which is now being ratified by the Member States. As can be seen in Table 2, other countries are also on a good path towards the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the way to reforming its electoral system and needs to implement three pieces of legislation that will clear the way for entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (for the explanation of the Agreement, see below). The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been an EU candidate country since 2005, but because of a dispute over its name, Greece is blocking the beginning of the accession negotiation process.

After beginning negotiations with Kosovo under EU pressure, at the end of February 2012 Serbia succeeded

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, 'Enlargement Newsletter' (2011), accessed at [ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press\\_corner/newsletter/081120\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/newsletter/081120_en.htm) on 15 February 2012.

in obtaining candidacy status and can expect to begin the negotiation process by the end of the year. However, tensions with Kosovo remain a major challenge, as does the demonstration of strong neighbourly relations, which are conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). For the moment, the EU has acknowledged Kosovo's clear EU perspective; however, the process towards candidature cannot start because of a lack of recognition of Kosovo's independence by five EU Member States.

**Table 2 Accession of Western Balkans Countries to the EU**

Association/ac- cession to the EU	Country					
	Bosnia & Herzego- vina	Croatia	Kosovo	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Montene- gro	Serbia
Feasibility study	18/11/2003	24/5/2000	(forthco- ming)	16/6/1999	25/4/2005	25/4/2005
Beginning of negotiations with EC	25/11/2005	24/11/2000		5/3/2000	10/10/2005	10/10/2005
SAA signature	4/12/2007	14/5/2001		24/11/2000	15/3/2007	7/11/2007
Application for candidate status		21/2/2003		22/3/2005	15/12/2008	22/12/2009
Council gives candidate status		18/6/2004		17/12/2005	17/12/2010	1/3/2012
SAA comes into force		1/2/2005		1/4/2004	1/5/2010	
Beginning of negotiations for accession		3/10/2005		(EC re- commends opening of negotiation in 10/2009)	6/2012	
Signing the accession treaty		9/12/2011				

## Europeanisation: Definition and Application to the Western Balkans Region

As we have already seen, the 1990s were especially difficult for the Western Balkans region and gave birth to a polarised 'patchwork' of nation states, as expressed by Demetropolou.<sup>12</sup> According to many experts in the region,<sup>13</sup> the Balkans represents the least integrated and the most unstable region in Europe. In this context, the intention of the European Union to integrate the region as soon as possible, and to make this a priority, is quite understandable and warranted. Many agree that political elites in the region of Western Balkans have appeared ineffective, corrupt or illegitimate. Another problem is seen in the limited reserves of human capital, especially because the phenomenon of brain drain continues even after the change of the parties in power in the majority of Western Balkans states. Public administrations are still very large and inept and civil society continues to fail to react properly to the changes that have been generated from abroad.<sup>14</sup> This is why integration is needed.

Europeanisation is a broad notion; it embraces the application of EU policy and politics and the repercussions this policy has on national systems. It represents the penetration of a European dimension into national arenas of

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<sup>12</sup> O. Anastasakis, 'The Europeanization of the Balkans', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 12/1 (2005), 77–88.

<sup>13</sup> L. Demetropolou, 'Europe and the Balkans: Membership Aspirations, EU Involvement and Europeanization Capacity in South East Europe', *Southeast European Politics* 3/2–3 (2002), 87–106.

<sup>14</sup> Anastasakis, 'The Europeanization of the Balkans', 84.

politics and policy<sup>15</sup> in every country. As such, the process of Europeanisation is much broader than the formation and integration of EU policy, although this is an integral part.

According to Radaelli, Europeanisation represents ‘a process of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) implementation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things”, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies’.<sup>16</sup> It explains and helps to incorporate EU political, social, economic and cultural systems into a country’s domestic discourse, identity and political structures. It embraces the formation of new identities and European public policy. Europeanisation further leads to cultural change, the formation of new identities, policy change, the transformation and modernisation of economies, polities and societies. It also affects national systems through EU decisions. Policy change and its Europeanisation are very important for countries applying for EU membership. Therefore, before a country becomes an EU member, it needs to go through a systematic Europeanisation process.

Similarly, Papadimitriou and Gateva argue that the concept of Europeanisation can have different meanings. It can be seen as the following: (1) dynamics, (2) the nature of interactivity between European and national levels, (3) the mechanisms of impact on domestic politics, (4) the impact of the EU beyond its geographical borders—enlargement eastwards.<sup>17</sup> In this study, we concentrate on the last

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<sup>15</sup> C. Radaelli, ‘Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change’, *European Integration Online Papers* 4/8 (2000), accessed at <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2000-008a.htm> on 15 February 2012.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> D. Papadimitriou and E. Gateva, ‘Between Enlargement-led Europeanisation and Balkan Exceptionalism: An Appraisal of Bulgaria’s and Romania’s Entry into the European Union’, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 10/2 (2010), 152–66.



two meanings, especially on the last one, the process of EU enlargement. Therefore, the European Union should represent a reference model for modernisation which would embrace such processes as democratisation, marketisation and stabilisation with the final goal of inclusion in the EU institutional edifice.

Although the Balkan region has always been a part of Europe, the situation in the region is often described as complicated and controversial. Thus, the process of Europeanisation in the Balkans would mean the structural transformation, modernisation and adjustment to the advanced European models in the areas mentioned above as well as higher levels of security and prosperity.<sup>18</sup> It also represents desirable modernising changes for the region.<sup>19</sup>

For the moment, accession to the EU is at the top of the agenda in all Western Balkans countries. That means that the governments of these respective states are in principle ready to accept the EU conditions, objectives and criteria. However, there are still many issues that need to be dealt with. Also, we have seen that the legacy of the Yugoslav wars, manifested above all in extreme nationalism, is still present in some countries if not all. The level of Europeanisation is different in different countries, which speaks in favour of the suggestion that they will not all be able to access the European Union at once. Although the process of joining the EU needs to be transparent and stimulating, as well as relevant to the Western Balkans political elites, attention should be paid to the way integration is presented in the Member States because of the negative attitudes regarding the further enlargement of the EU.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Anastasakis, 'The Europeanization of the Balkans', 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 77–88.

<sup>20</sup> J. Rupnik, 'The Balkans as a European Question', in J. Rupnik (ed), *The Western Balkans and the EU: 'The Hour of Europe'*, 17–30.

Up to 1999, the European Union was not very involved in the promotion of Europeanisation in the Balkans. It was then realised that integration could be a good solution for the instability of the region. Since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU agenda is clearly focused on providing the Western Balkans countries with the possibility of entering the EU. Despite the obstacles that Croatia, as the Western Balkans country closest to accession, faced,<sup>21</sup> which slowed its accession down considerably, the European Commission set the framework for reconsidering and accelerating the enlargement process in 2010. Intensification of the enlargement process is necessary to increase EU credibility in the region, stability and security. This in turn is of relevance to the European Union, given that the Western Balkans region is in its neighbourhood.

Today, the EU accession process in the majority of Western Balkans states is in the hands of moderate nationalists.<sup>22</sup> It is important to stress, moreover, that their perspective is clearly European. Experts hope that every new country from the region that enters the EU will act as a force of regional stability and advocate their neighbour's accession. Nevertheless, we saw that Croatia had problems with Slovenia, slowing down the accession process because of the border dispute, even though these countries were never in a real conflict. The question then becomes whether, for example, Croatia will do the same to Serbia. The EU should create a mechanism to avoid these kinds of obstructions in the accession process. According to Carl Bildt, this mechanism should ensue automatically from the negotiation framework, as was previously the case, because

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<sup>21</sup> First the lack of cooperation with the Hague tribunal and later the border dispute with Slovenia.

<sup>22</sup> Rupnik, 'The Balkans as a European Question'.

bilateral issues should be separated from the accession process and not misused for blocking a multilateral process.<sup>23</sup>

## The Balkan Turn Towards Europe: the EU's Imposition of Dialogue in the Region

As noted above regarding the Western Balkans region, the European Union emphasises the importance of regional cooperation. Cooperation has been stressed in numerous European Commission and European Council documents as it was in the most recent Enlargement Strategy, published by the European Commission DG Enlargement and General Affairs Council at the end of 2011. Progress regarding regional cooperation is assessed in the annual progress report of every (potential) candidate country.

Drawing upon the European Council conclusions on the former Yugoslavia made in February 1996, the European Union established a Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for those countries that did not conclude the association agreement with the EU prior to 1996. Slovenia was the only country from the region that succeeded in catching the European Association Agreement 'train' before the establishment of SAP, and subsequently became a candidate for EU membership.

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<sup>23</sup> HINA News Agency, 'Bildt: EU gubi strpljenje zbog slovenske blokade hrvatskih pregovora', *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 7 March 2009.

The Stabilisation and Association Process represents a comprehensive policy framework that was proposed by the European Commission in 1999. It draws upon the regional approach of the EU towards six countries of Western Balkans, namely: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. Despite this broad approach, the speed and rate of success on the road to the European Union depends on every country individually. The EU maintains direct contact with each country and monitors the progress made in the area of political stability, economic development and cooperation between the countries in the region, with neighbouring countries and with the EU. Consequently, the EU proceeds with an individual approach to each country based on the situation in each of them. One important aspect for improving the conditions of a specific country is the willingness of every country to work towards consolidating peace, respecting human rights, the rights of minorities and democratic principles. Because of the legacy of past wars, the EU places particular emphasis on cooperation with neighbours. It consists of the free movements of goods and persons and the provision of services and the development of cross-border projects of common interest. However, it is important to emphasise that this project should not be seen as an attempt to reconstitute the former Yugoslavia.<sup>24</sup>

The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) is comprised of three aims which represent the framework for the negotiations between the European Union and the Western Balkans countries. These are

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<sup>24</sup> European Council, 'Council Conclusions on the Former Yugoslavia' (1996), accessed at [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/gena/028a0001.htm](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/gena/028a0001.htm) on 10 February 2012.

1. stabilisation of the region and transition to a market economy,
2. promotion of regional cooperation, and
3. possible membership in the EU.<sup>25</sup>

The Stabilisation and Association Process, which consists of stabilisation and association agreements, EU financial assistance and autonomous trade measures represents a long-term commitment. Political effort as well as financial and human resources must be invested in the process. The central part of the process is the conclusion of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It entails the establishment of a contractual relationship between the EU and a Western Balkans country, with mutual rights and obligations. The agreement has high political value and will lead to the establishment of a free trade area and to reforms for harmonising national standards with those of the EU. A signature on the agreement also means that a country has chosen to become a member of the EU.

Before the country is offered to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, there is a preparation period. Formal mechanisms and agreed upon benchmarks from the SAA allow individual countries to implement the reforms and thus comply with EU standards. The reforms are shaped according to EU models. Its key parts are connected to the democratic principles and the EU single market. Through the SAA, the EU guides and monitors the progress of a country towards the EU. The SAA is not a simple bilateral process between the EU and an individual country, but promotes good neighbourly relations and the active development of regional cooperation as a part of the contract as well. The

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<sup>25</sup> European Commission, 'Stabilization and Association Process', accessed at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement\\_process/accesion\\_process/how\\_does\\_a\\_country\\_join\\_the\\_eu/sap/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accesion_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/sap/index_en.htm) on 15 January 2012.

regional component is accentuated also through CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation), a financial assistance program for Western Balkans.

This regional approach advises Western Balkans countries on how to work well with each other, in a manner similar to the approach adopted by EU Member States among themselves.<sup>26</sup> It also helps in the establishment of a network of bilateral free trade agreements and in reintegration into infrastructure networks (TENS). One of the areas where cooperation is essential is in combating common threats in connection to organised crime, illegal immigration and human trafficking. Connections between states contribute to political stability and economic prosperity.

During the wars of the 1990s, the European Union preferred not to take sides too openly within Western Balkans, especially because of the difficulties in reaching unanimity with regard to the region. When it came to the three most powerful EU states at the time, Germany traditionally supported Slovenian and Croatian independence, while both the UK and France saw Serbia as an ally in the Balkans, reasoning that it would have obtained hegemony over the other former Yugoslav states and thus offered a single country to deal with. Consequently, they decided not to get involved in the conflicts.<sup>27</sup> The European Community pledged to support the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and decided at first not to recognise Slovenia and Croatia. However, after several months and the first military attack on Slovenia by the Yugoslav People's Army

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<sup>26</sup> D. Lopandić, 'Reforma Evropske Unije, Zapadni Balkan i Srbija- zakasnela integracija' (Reform of the European Union, Western Balkans and Serbia—Belated Integration), (Beograd: Evropski centar za mir i razvoj, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> D. Marolov, 'The EU Policy Towards the Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Special Emphasis on the EU Policy towards the Republic of Macedonia', *Analytical Journal* 4/2 (2012), 1–22.

(JNA), the governments of Germany and Italy raised the question again, with the support of Austria and Hungary, at the time countries outside of the EU. Greece, Spain and the Netherlands decided to support the Franco-British position, while Ireland and Denmark came closer to the German stand point. While the Germans claimed that the Serbs were responsible for the conflict, the French and British thought that the guilt was to be apportioned equally. Because of these unequal voices, the European Community, later European Union, was unable to react in the Western Balkans.

At that time, the European perspective was not particularly accentuated. However, after the conflicts over Kosovo at the end of 1990s, European Union policies regarding the Western Balkans changed in a positive direction. The EU leaders finally reached the consensus that for more stability in the region and consequently in Europe, there was a need for faster integration, which is why support for the region started to grow. As Romano Prodi, at that time the President of the European Commission, said in 2003: 'It is time to build bridges in the Western Balkans, not to destroy them. To open borders, not to close them. To restore relations and trade links, not to sever them'.<sup>28</sup> So far, the SAA has been signed with Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still waiting for ratification of the agreement.

One of the conditions for a country to sign the SAA is strong neighbourly relations with other countries in the region. Through conditioned political dialogue, the EU supports democratic processes and their further

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<sup>28</sup> European Commission, The European Union and the Western Balkans (2004), accessed at [ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial.../cards/.../brochure\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/financial.../cards/.../brochure_en.pdf) on 15 February 2012.

development as well as EU values and principles. The European Commission has affirmed in many documents that 'regional cooperation in Western Balkans is needed as a crucial ingredient of stability; a catalyst for reconciliation, good-neighbourliness and good political relations; about helping to overcome nationalism and intolerance and promoting mutual understanding and political dialogue in the region'.<sup>29</sup>

The value of the Stabilisation and Association Process is especially seen in enhancing political dialogue and establishing bilateral agreements. Consequently, a positive new atmosphere of neighbourliness and cooperation among the former Yugoslavian states is being fostered. In addition to the political stability and security issues that can be better dealt with together, regional cooperation contributes to the economic development of the region. Although according to some politicians and political advisors, this should be distinguished from neo-Yugoslav discourses. Tim Judah, the *Economist* reporter for the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s wars, states: 'From Slovenia to the Macedonian border with Greece, most people in the region still have a lot in common, even if they do not talk about it too much. Every day the bonds between them, snapped in 1990, are being quietly restored. Yugoslavia is long gone; in its place a Yugosphere is emerging'.<sup>30</sup> The similar culture and customs visible within the region is also apparent outside of it, particularly in various European countries where people with Balkan origins organise culture clubs and joint events. However, we should keep in mind that the people who gather and spend time together are not the average Western

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<sup>29</sup> European Commission, *Regional Cooperation in Western Balkans: A Policy Priority for the European Union* (2005), 4, accessed at [ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/nf5703249enc\\_web\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/nf5703249enc_web_en.pdf) on 15 February 2012.

<sup>30</sup> T. Judah, 'Entering the Yugosphere' *The Economist*, 20 August 2009.



Balkans citizens, but typically the intellectual elites that left their countries during the period of the wars.

As we can see below, through the SAP and other initiatives whose overview is given in Table 3, the European Union is attempting to connect countries in the region. The intention is to force them to talk to each other, to reconcile their difference and to cooperate, as well as to raise mutual trust. Nevertheless, these declarations and high level meetings are only the starting point and some of them are not yet being applied in national legislation or in practical initiatives. That slows down the process of accession to the European Union as well as cooperation on a bilateral level.

**Table 3 Overview of Initiatives**

Name of the initiative	Year	Purpose
Thessaloniki Agenda	2003	Development of SAP
Sarajevo Declaration	2005	Refugees/displaced people
RECOM	2006	War crimes facts
MAARI regional forum	2007	Migration and trafficking
Brdo process	2010	Mutual support, bilateral issues
Istanbul declaration	2010	Common future through political dialogue
others		Advancement of bilateral cooperation

Upon conclusion of NATO's intervention in 1999, the first initiative was created. The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe was introduced as a long-term conflict prevention strategy on the territory of SE Europe.<sup>31</sup> It was created at the initiative of the EU, with some other countries as supporting partners. The Stability Pact partners included the Western Balkans as well as some other neighbouring countries:

<sup>31</sup> D. Đukanović, 'Zapadni Balkan: od sukoba do evrointegracija' (Western Balkans: From Conflict to Eurointegration), *FPN Godišnjak* (2009), 495–506.

Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It was a strategy with the goal of stabilising the region and helping its progress in the fields of democratisation, human rights, economic reconstruction, cooperation and development as well as security issues. It had a complementary role to the stabilisation and association process. Several summits, conferences, declarations and processes have been organised since this first initiative. Although we can see their goals and purpose below, their effectiveness is quite low. Everything remains on the level of the signatures of high state officials who are not responsible for implementing the policies into national political systems. Another problematic issue when it comes to effectiveness is the fact that political elites tend to leave public opinion out of their considerations of these processes.

The Zagreb Summit was organised at the end of 2000. Its success is seen in obtaining regional agreement to a clear set of objectives and conditions. During the summit, it was said that accession was to be made on the basis of the Treaty on European Union and Copenhagen criteria. The Stabilisation and Accession Agreement should be used as a starting point for a perspective on accession to the European Union.

The Thessaloniki Agenda<sup>32</sup> for Western Balkans emerged from the European Summit held in Thessaloniki in 2003. Its role was to develop the Stabilisation and Association Process that contributed to the promotion of stability from 1998 onwards. That is why the major issues and solutions offered in it are very important for the Western Balkans region.

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<sup>32</sup> European Commission. 'The Thessaloniki Agenda for Western Balkans', accessed at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement\\_process/accesion\\_process/how\\_does\\_a\\_country\\_join\\_the\\_eu/sap/thessaloniki\\_agenda\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accesion_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/sap/thessaloniki_agenda_en.htm) on 23 February 2012.

At the Copenhagen European Council held in 2002, the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries as potential member countries was accentuated; it was stated that the region was moving closer to the EU. During the same meeting, the European Council pledged to consolidate democracy, stability and to promote economic dialogue in the region.

One important element of the Thessaloniki Agenda and the progress towards European integration concerns political and economic dialogue. It states that Western Balkans and its preparation for future integration is a high priority for the EU. In order to further advance progress in the region, the EU should help in consolidating peace, promoting stability, democracy and the rule of law. Respect for human and minority rights, the peaceful resolution of conflicts as well as regional cooperation should be supported, while terrorism, violence and extremism need to be clearly condemned. In that context, the EU should promote political dialogue and cooperation in the area of a Common Foreign and Security Policy. It also needs to encourage social cohesion, ethnic and religious tolerance, multiculturalism and the return of refugees to their home countries.

As a big source of concern to the EU, organised crime and corruption are seen as the major obstacles to democratic stability as well as to the establishment of accountable institutions, rule of law and economic development. The policies and instruments used in Western Balkans countries to eradicate these phenomena should incorporate the Justice and Home Affairs objectives of the European Union.

During the Thessaloniki Summit, a high-level multilateral political forum was launched. The idea is to establish a forum between the EU and Western Balkans, that is, SAP

countries. The forum should periodically bring together the heads of states or governments of the region and their EU counterparts. In addition, annual meetings of foreign ministers and the ministers responsible for justice and home affairs should be held as appropriate. The aim of creating such a forum is to signal the existence of a privileged and inclusive relationship between the EU and SAP countries. Through its existence, the objectives of SAP could be achieved faster through support of the political framework, regional cooperation could be enriched and the understandings of the process of rapprochement and accession could be deepened. The forum should also provide a European framework for discussions of the key issues.

According to the Thessaloniki Agenda, bilateral political dialogue at the ministerial level was to have been organised between the EU and Albania, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as well as Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia before the conclusion of the respective Stabilisation and Association agreements.<sup>33</sup> Besides contact at the ministerial level, the European affairs committees of national parliaments were to be in contact with the parliaments of the member states.

Another area discussed in the Thessaloniki Agenda is the efficiency of administration in the Western Balkans countries. According to the terms of the Thessaloniki Agenda, the instrument of twinning, a process that helps countries to develop modern and efficient administrations, is extended to all SAP countries.

The issue of refugees and internally displaced persons is also mentioned in the Thessaloniki Agenda in terms of

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<sup>33</sup> In the Thessaloniki Agenda, Kosovo was not mentioned because the relevant conference was held before Kosovo's proclamation of independence.

supporting their further return to their home countries and support for such regional activities as the Migration, Asylum and Refugee Regional Initiative.

The Thessaloniki Agenda also deals with the reconciliation of Western Balkans countries in conflict. This goal is to be promoted through education, social development and culture, because these social forces are crucial in overcoming the negative legacies of the past, changing mentalities and shaping modern democratic societies.

The Regional Ministerial Conference on Refugee Returns was held in Sarajevo at the beginning of 2005 and resulted in the Sarajevo Declaration.<sup>34</sup> It concerns the internally displaced people and refugees that remained after the end of the war in Bosnia in 1995. The conference gathered ministers responsible for refugees and internally displaced persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro in order to establish a road map for solving this issue. The declaration stated that it would resolve the problem of the remaining displaced population by the end of 2006 and facilitate the return of refugees and displaced persons. It also affirmed that those people, as well as the ones that had decided not to return, would be integrated into the local communities without discrimination on the basis of national legislation. It was also agreed that those citizens should have the same rights and responsibilities as others and that each country should develop its own action plan to this end.

A subsequent gathering of regional leaders took place in Sarajevo as well in 2007. The Migration, Asylum, Refugees

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<sup>34</sup> Regional Ministerial Conference of Refugee Returns, 'Declaration', Sarajevo (January 2005), accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,EUROPE,,,451a5acc4,0.html> on 23 February 2012.

Regional Initiative (MAARI)<sup>35</sup> Forum included ministers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Its goal was to enhance regional cooperation and ownership as well as state capacities to develop migration management. It deals with initiatives for combating irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling in human beings and visa facilitation. In that context, the cooperation between governmental institutions and agencies is very relevant. The forum discussed the readmission agreements, which are important for approaching the EU and harmonising visa policies and consular cooperation with the EU *acquis communautaire* and EU standards.

The Brdo Process<sup>36</sup> was held in 2010 in Slovenia and represents one of the most important initiatives in the region. The former Yugoslavian states gathered to bring mutual support to each other and resolve bilateral issues. The gathering was based on the successful experience of solving the border dispute between Slovenia and Croatia. For that occasion, the Slovenian prime minister stated that the EU should back the resolution of all outstanding political, economic and security issues between the countries of the region before they join the EU.

The meeting made a link to the 2000 Zagreb Summit as well as the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda and agreed on the regional perspective for EU membership as well as European Union determination to support it. Consensus on enlargement was already achieved in 2006 during a meeting of the European Council. Besides the commitment

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<sup>35</sup> MAARI Regional Forum, 'Declaration', accessed at <http://www.marri-rc.org/upload/Documents/MARRI%20Main%20Documents/Sarajevo%20Declaration%2026%20April%202007.pdf> on 23 February 2012.

<sup>36</sup> 'Together for the European Union: Contribution of the Western Balkans to the European Future', accessed at [http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Novinarsko\\_sredisce/Sporocila\\_za\\_javnost/1003/Brdo\\_-\\_deklaracija\\_last\\_18.3.2010.pdf](http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Novinarsko_sredisce/Sporocila_za_javnost/1003/Brdo_-_deklaracija_last_18.3.2010.pdf) on 23 February 2012.

to join the EU, the countries of Western Balkans were to make further efforts to meet the necessary requirements and conditions by implementing the required reforms based on EU standards, principles and values. In order to give support to the region, the EU was to keep the enlargement process high on the agenda. As a way of helping, it needs to promote regional cooperation and its mechanisms as well as to strengthen the process of integration. The countries themselves should promote good neighbourly relations through projects of common interest and by resolving bilateral issues in the tolerant manner of 'the European spirit'. The Brdo Process concluded that the enhancement of regional cooperation was of extreme importance for the future development of the region. Finally, the meeting concluded that according to the model of the Brdo Process, regular meetings should be established where mutual support could be given and experience shared.

Another regional initiative was initiated by Turkey in 2010. The Istanbul Declaration<sup>37</sup> was signed between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010 with the goal of overcoming historic differences and building a common future based on tolerance and mutual understanding that would be accomplished through political dialogue. The declaration envisions a strategic approach to the region which would maintain lasting peace and good neighbourly relations and the sustainable return of refugees and displaced people. It relies on a common vision of security issues, high level political dialogue, economic interdependence as well as mutual support for integration within the EU and international organisations. In addition to cross-border cooperation, the focus was put on the mutual protection of human rights as well as on the cultural heritage of the two states.

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<sup>37</sup> South East European Cooperation Process, 'Istanbul Declaration', accessed at <http://www.seecp-turkey.org/icerik.php?no=60> on 23 February 2012.

Besides the official initiatives and projects, among which we mentioned only the most important ones, different initiatives on the level of civil society have also been proposed. One of the most important is RECOM<sup>38</sup> (Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about the War Crimes in the former Yugoslavia), which was founded as a network for acknowledging war crimes. It represents a coalition of NGOs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia whose goal is to document all of the crimes and acknowledge all of the victims in the former Yugoslavia. An inter-state commission for establishing facts about the victims and the major violations resulting from the conflicts in the region in the period 1991–2001 has been established. It tries to determine the truth about war crimes and human rights violation in order to promote broader public debate about war crimes, as this is needed for the faster restoration of good neighbourly relations. As the civil sector in the Balkans is neither supported by the state nor by the majority of citizens in the region, these initiatives have unfortunately tended to remain on a superficial level. In addition to this committee, there are several other reconciliation committees as well as civil society cross-border initiatives, although their output and impact on society in general is small.

It is often said that the last several years have signalled a transition to a new stage in the development of Western Balkans that will lead the region into the European Union. Some countries are closer to that goal, others are further away, but ultimately they are all on the same road. However, in order to complete the process of accession, these countries need to cooperate among themselves and establish good relations. In order to achieve that, besides

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<sup>38</sup> Documentia, 'RECOM as Rescue for Post-Yugoslav Countries', HRH Sarajevo (15 October 2009), accessed at <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/12082.html> on 23 February 2012.



the aforementioned initiatives and processes, countries are also organising bilateral meetings, sometimes with the EU as facilitator (as in the case of direct talks between Serbia and Kosovo as of March 2011). The presidents of Croatia and Serbia have already met several times during the last couple of years; the Croatian prime minister went to Bosnia and Herzegovina for his first official visit abroad in 2012; and the Bosnian prime minister travelled to Serbia for his first official visit abroad. This contributes to better cooperation between the respective countries. High level politicians have officially apologised for war crimes committed in their nations' names; they have commemorated the victims of past wars and tried to solve border disputes. For example, in 2000 Milo Djukanovic, President of Montenegro at that time, apologised to Croatian President Stipe Mesic for the siege of Dubrovnik by Montenegrin forces during the war in Croatia. President Boris Tadic of Serbia apologised for the Vukovar massacre during his visit to the memorial in 2010. The Serbian parliament formally apologised for the Srebrenica genocide in 2010. Croatian President Ivo Josipovic apologised to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010 for Croatia's devastating policies during the war as well as for the Serbian victims during the war in Croatia.

However, ethnically segregated public discourse on the war is still present in almost all of these countries on a different level. The Council of Europe drafted a recommendation in 2010 stating that the CoE needs to provide assistance to schools of political studies to enable political and other elites to engage in dialogue and to intensify their efforts to foster multi-ethnic cooperation. A joint history project of the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe should also encourage debate on this subject.

## Conclusions and Possible Orientations for EU Policies

Despite the fact that war in the Western Balkans region ended over 10 years ago, there are still tensions and unsolved issues between countries in the region. These are the primary reasons why the region has not progressed at the pace it should. However, a certain amount of progress can be seen, at least on the level of political elites.

Problems in the region emerged from a common history, as all of the Western Balkans countries were member states of one country. The shared transition from Communism and the process of overcoming the conflicts of the 1990s are often considered in conjunction with external difficulties. As we have seen above, the main issues remain border disputes, refugees and displaced persons as well as the war crimes. All these issues are a part of the broader concept of maintaining good neighbourly relations and ensuring the stability that is still missing in the Western Balkans region.

Good relations among states should also be achieved at the level of citizens. Despite their participation in diverse conferences and the promising statements they make during such conventions, the rhetoric of politicians often changes in their home countries before their domestic audiences. It usually does not contain a very positive opinion of other countries from the region. In the best case, these countries are presented as the main competitors in the region. The media, both public and private, of these countries also play a significant role in choosing to represent neighbouring countries in a more negative than positive light.

While it is easier and more feasible for the European Union to have an influence on political elites, it is more difficult to influence the media and citizens. Nevertheless, we think that the European Union should continue to assist and to facilitate the relevant regional initiatives, both in the governmental and the non-governmental sector. Through these initiatives, the EU can put pressure on the countries to develop and promote bilateral talks which could only be beneficial for Western Balkans.

Despite the positive things that the regional approach used by the EU brings, we oppose abandoning the individual approach when it comes to the accession process of individual countries to the European Union. In this way, countries that are ahead in the process will not be required to wait for those that are considerably behind. That would cause unnecessary delays and the feeling that further efforts are not required.

As there are still lots of problems linked to the past wars, through the use of different instruments the EU should attempt to foster shared views on past events. In this way, a multiple perspective and segregated approach to the public discourse on wars could become more integrated. Programmes which promote dialogue on wars should be promoted not only on the level of civil society but also within the contexts of government and education. If conflicts were considered from the same perspective at schools (as is the case in teaching the Holocaust), future generations could profit by acknowledging the events of the past and learning to leave them behind. Citizens still need to feel closer to each other. This is especially true of the young generations that grew up during the war period learning xenophobia and hatred of neighbouring nations. Education, both formal and informal, is key to overcoming these problems.

Apart from promoting dialogue, especially regarding issues from the past, helping citizens ‘to climb out of the dark hole of ethno-nationalism’<sup>39</sup> could be done by supporting different grassroots movements and civil society initiatives by making them more visible and more influential. It is important for the EU to sustain further cross-border projects. These initiatives should not be limited to dialogue between political elites such as the inter-ministerial or inter-parliamentary dialogue—something that is already being undertaken to a certain extent—but also include those related to ‘ordinary’ citizens, especially the young ones.

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<sup>39</sup> Council of Europe, ‘The Political Situation in the Balkans’ (2011), accessed at <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc11/EDOC12747.pdf> on 15 January 2012.

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