

**Vladimir Pavicevic**\*

## The EU Enlargement Policy: Next Steps for Serbia

European integration should not be the only foreign policy goal of the Western Balkans. The most important domestic focus should be the reform of the political, economic and legal systems as well as the development of democratic institutions in accordance with European standards. It is clear that Serbia is not at the forefront of the European integration process. Serbia signed its SAA in 2008. Two years later the president of Serbia submitted an application for EU membership, which implied that Serbia could expect to get candidate status by the end of 2012 .

Despite having declared independence, UNMIK is in charge of Kosovo's European integration process. The largest obstacle for Kosovo's integration is the unsettled nature of relations with Serbia. Therefore, it would be logical to consider the most contentious issues in the Western Balkans – the status of Kosovo and Serbia's integration - as being intertwined.

How could these issues be resolved? To begin with, Serbia would need to view the international situation objectively and rationally and send a clear signal to the EU that it would accept the situation in Kosovo. Not being in any position to prevent the EU from recognising an independent Kosovo, the only rational option for Serbia would be to open and not close the gateway to Europe. Serbia should initiate an agreement with the EU and the Albanian representatives in Kosovo that would define the status of the remaining Serbs in Kosovo, their citizenship, free access to cultural monuments and free movement between Kosovo and Serbia. In return, the EU should grant Serbia candidate status and determine when negotiations could begin. In the context of regional cooperation, Serbia should establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo.

Such a policy toward resolving the status of Kosovo and speeding up Serbia's integration into the EU would help redefine relationships between the countries of a region that has endured 20 years of conflict and war. It would greatly benefit Serbia and it would establish stability and mutual trust in the Western Balkans.

### **Good-neighbourly relations**

During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Serbia held mostly irrational policies towards its new neighbours that had great consequences for relations. After Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro acknowledged the independence of Kosovo, diplomatic relations between Serbia and its three neighbours became extremely gloomy. In an irrationally harsh, emotional reaction, the Macedonian and Montenegrin ambassadors were expelled from Belgrade, a dramatic setback to diplomatic relations with the two states which provoked the concern of the European Union.

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The European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament should stress regional cooperation as one of the key indicators of Serbian progress toward the EU. All disputes in the region are to be solved either bilaterally or multilaterally. The obligation of Serbia to foster neighbourly relations in the region is emphasized in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

This means normalisation of relations with Macedonia and Montenegro is indispensable. Croatia has to be Serbia's main partner on its way to the EU. When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia as the guarantor of the Dayton Peace Treaty should support all of the international community's efforts to redefine and make Bosnia and Herzegovina more efficient by means of constitutional reforms.

### **Stabilisation and Association Agreement**

The SAA stipulates the gradual abolition of all customs and trade barriers between Serbia and the Member States. When the Transitional Trade Agreement came into force, the EU abolished all limitations on the import of goods from Serbia, whereas Serbia is going to do the same in phases over a six-year period. The Agreement foresees the possibility that Serbia may lower its duties faster should overall economic development allow it.

There is a consensus among Serbian economists advocating for a formidable liberalisation of trade with the EU that the SAA sets too long of a period of trade liberalisation, bearing in mind that its benefits would first be felt by consumers via the lowering of EU products' prices. In the process of negotiations on this chapter, EU representatives should bear in mind that any postponement of the abolition of customs barriers, actually sets back the final goal, which is Serbia's EU membership.

### **Constitutional changes**

The EU officials should make it clear to their Serbian counterparts that constitutional changes are necessary if Serbia sees itself as a full member of the EU. While doing this, Serbia should work more efficiently on crucial reforms of the constitutional system and the development of democratic institutions in accordance with European standards.



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