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The Western Balkans Past and Future: Critical Questions

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Looking at the Region

Before we can contemplate solutions for the Western Balkans, we must begin by looking at what the region's problems are. When we try to define the problems of the Western Balkans at large, and consequently design solutions, too often our approach is focused on individual countries. I continuously see that we try to design solutions for Bosnia and Herzegovina or for Kosovo, and we miss the forest for the trees. We should not lose sight of the fact that some problems – and in my opinion, a good many of the problems – are shared. Some problems are closely interlinked if not common to multiple countries or to the whole region. That is why we should observe the region in its entirety.

When we try to assess the current situation and look at what is in the Western Balkans' future, we need to put the region into a broader picture. Too often we fly between two extremes: either we're being too critical, or being too complacent. What I mean by the broader picture is that we cannot forget that for centuries, the Western Balkans was a region of wars and violence of all kinds. It has only been 70 years since the establishment of the common state, the former Yugoslavia, only 21 years since this entity dissolved, and only 17 years since the Dayton Agreement. So let's take 70 years. I think that we have to emphasize that this is a short period of time, and given the history of wars in the region, we should avoid being too critical. After all, the European Union (EU) has only 65 years of history since the end of World War II, and the United States is only 150 years away from the Civil War, but in both cases you are still facing the remnants of those conflicts. In the Western Balkans, these are the circumstances we are dealing with. It should be part of our job to deal with these circumstances.

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The Critical Questions of the Past

Reconciliation: This is something that each country must do in its own way, but it's even better if it can be accomplished through regional cooperation, through a net of bilateral and regional agreements. The countries of the Western Balkans have to address this themselves. However, it is more important that all countries that pursue the goal of reconciliation are embraced by the European Union (EU) and NATO. That is the best possible framework to facilitate the process of reconciliation.

Borders: The 1975 Helsinki document should be fully recognized. There should be no changes to borders in the region.

Succession issues: We should remember that a number of issues in the region result from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, they are not bilateral but regional and multilateral issues. In 2001, an agreement was signed by all five successor states, under the auspices of the international community, including the United States, and it has been in effect since 2004. This is the only multilateral agreement of all successor states and represents a legal basis to address open issues amongst them. This agreement has broad regional significance and is an important part of good neighborly relations and of reconciliation in the region. For this same reason, the EU General Affairs Council referenced succession issues in its December 2011 conclusions. Thus, succession is a key element of the EU Stabilization and Association process.

Other open issues: These are issues that are not in the succession agreement and should be taken only on a case by case basis. However, they should also be observed as a set of issues that have resulted from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The most important of these are the issues between Serbia and Kosovo, and their influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina/Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania. Also, there are issues like border demarcation, refugees and their property, displaced and missing persons, minority questions, and the status of churches, just to name a few.

When dealing with these issues of the past, there are two principles that we should keep in mind, but which are not currently the virtue in the Balkans. The first is compromise. When you address these issues, you have to be able to compromise to avoid a sense of failure and defeat. Additionally, *Pacta sunt servanda* should be a guiding principle. The region has a history of breaking promises.

The Critical Questions for the Future

Regarding the future, there are two critical issues, and the strategy of the international community should be to support both as strongly as possible.

Regional cooperation and good neighborly relations: This is a principle of highest importance when it comes to political stability, security, and economic development. First, regional cooperation could be used to reintroduce the benefits of a common market, like that which existed 21 years ago. This does not mean reintroducing any political idea of bringing countries together but generating support for a common market. When it comes to energy and infrastructure, we are dealing on a daily basis with the

economic impact of the borders that have been established with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Building a common market could be a strong part of any regional cooperation in the Balkans.

Second, regional cooperation could help deal with the consequences of the sense of separation that is created by gradual EU enlargement. This sense was strong when Slovenia joined the EU and will be strong again when Croatia joins. Regional cooperation can ease the tension of the growing sense of separation along new EU borders. Finally, regional cooperation is an instrument of reconciliation.

EU and NATO perspective: There are seven key points related to Euro-Atlantic integration. First, this perspective should be open and granted to all. Second, the process is more important than the speed. The process will ultimately lead countries to normalization of their relations. Third, we should strive to embrace these countries even before formal negotiations of EU accession start. To start accession is a bold political decision and obviously it is extremely difficult to conduct. We should pursue a “soft approach” where countries begin to integrate the EU acquis into their legal frameworks even before formal negotiations start. Being able to begin these processes is the instrument of change that is needed at the end of the road. Fourth, conditionality only works once the process of accession is actually launched, as was the case in Croatia. It would be better to talk about meeting “requirements,” not “conditions.” Fifth, when we do talk about these requirements, we should remember and emphasize that there is no substitute for what countries themselves have to do. Sixth, policy towards the region is always pursued in the way of rewards. Not every step needs to be rewarded. Recognized and appreciated, yes, but not rewarded. You don’t need to reward someone for doing what needs to be done anyway, for doing what he needs to do for his own benefit. Offering rewards is not a viable and sustainable strategy, let alone a policy. It’s not an issue of semantics but of how we approach the process of integration. Last, both the EU and NATO’s perspectives are important. There has been no EU enlargement without prior NATO enlargement. However, the EU enlargement process has much stronger transformative power.

Key Points

- Europe is not yet whole, free, and at peace. We still have work to do.
- Security, stability, and prosperity of the Western Balkans are in the interest of the United States and the European Union. To continue to pursue a common approach is of critical importance.
- Euro-Atlantic perspectives need to be open to all and strongly supported by the United States and the EU at all stages.
- The United States needs to continue to focus on the Western Balkans. The region needs to be actively engaged, not only to ensure the future, but also to secure stability, which cannot yet be taken for granted.
- The “wait and see” approach is not good. A proactive approach is needed with sticks and carrots, but again, not rewards at every stage of the process.

- The countries concerned should work hard to meet the necessary requirements. EU and US support should go in the direction of helping countries to meet these requirements.
- There should be no change to the borders in the Balkans. This point cannot be emphasized enough. All open issues amongst countries of the region need to be addressed and solved in the spirit of good neighborly relations and respect of existing treaties.