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The real cost of corruption

Discussions about graft and corruption in Greece typically revolve around the size of the "gifts" surreptitiously handed to a section of state officials and political cadres.

Unfortunately, the cost of corruption to the national economy is not limited to the money that is secretly passed from the private to the public sector in the form of bribes.

Sure, a sum of around 400 billion euros is spent each year to make sure that state contracts end up in the hands of specific businessmen.

However, this is only the visible cost of corruption.

The invisible damage is far greater.

In an economy where decisions are made according to the gifts made by private individuals (or, in some cases, demanded by state functionaries), state contracts are not awarded according to the criteria of project effectiveness or the country's needs.

We know that many infrastructure projects have in the past been signed on the basis of personal gain without paying any heed to the country's actual concerns.

As a result, Greece has come to own aircraft produced by rival makers, army tanks we are not quite sure how to use, and rocket missiles we do not know how to deploy.

Calls for transparency are not just about curbing some people's illicit profit-making, but about finally taking care of the country's infrastructure problems.

The lack of transparency in the assignment of public projects creates artificial needs that tend to absorb huge chunks of the state budget.

This is where the conservative administration of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis must concentrate its efforts.

The government must do a check-the objectives of all expenditures and make sure that state checks go where they are needed and not into the pockets of some cunning few.

A bleak insight into higher education

The recent announcement of the results of examinations taken by high school students hoping to secure a place in a university course caused a real stir and shattered any preconceptions about our higher education system.

These painful revelations were provoked by the announcement that a large proportion of examinees will not be accepted at higher educational institutions because they did not manage to achieve the minimum pass mark.

In total, 38,982 examinees, 41.7 percent of the total, failed to secure the mini-

The risks, gains of letting Balkan states into the EU

COMMENTARY

BY ARISTOTELE TRIAMIRIS *

A potentially perilous paradox is being witnessed in the Western Balkans. Almost all serious experts, academics and decision makers concur that the region's eventual European accession will prove beneficial for both the Western Balkans and the European Union. At the same time, the emerging obstacles threatening to block such an outcome are numerous and formidable.

Consider the institutions. Hardly first, France has legislated a constitutional amendment requiring a referendum for every prospective EU member (and America has expressed a similar intent but based on political statements and not on changes in law). The chances of a positive vote on Turkey are probably minimal and one justifiably wonders how the French and Austrian citizens might react to the bid of new Union members such as Albania or the tiny Montenegro.

The prospect of sharing political decision-making with six or seven new Balkan states (assuming Kosovo becomes independent) is also sometimes viewed in a skeptical manner. In such a scenario, many small and weak countries will have veto power and there might effectively be two Albanian votes in the European Council. Reading opposition in the Council will thus inevitably become more cumbersome.

The European Council has also been stressing recently the Union's absorption capacity. This is not a new

concern, since it is actually part of the Copenhagen criteria. However, singling it out is significant, not just because it emphasizes an ill-defined and highly subjective element in the enlargement process.

Furthermore, important regional problems persist, complicating an enlargement effort. Serbia has been unable to arrest Ratko Mladic and the prospect of a Radical Party administration is not merely theoretical. Kosovo's final status is yet to be decided, and both the potential for violence and other risks, perhaps more importantly, though, throughout the entire region (crime, corruption, high unemployment and weak states) are prevalent, complicating (and in some cases delaying) reform efforts.

Domestic politics and international involvement in various Balkan states are also somewhat discouraging. Weak political leadership is evident in key states, while the French-German axis lacks agreement on a clear agenda regarding Europe's future. Populist parties and politicians raise the claim about new Union enlargements, unjustly, but often resonating with parts of the electorate. In addition, fears about the social and economic effects of globalization (not always irrational) are sometimes unfairly linked to the Union's enlargement, thus threatening to derail the entire process. Elites are also becoming much more skeptical about the Union's expanded borders, while so-called enlargement fatigue seems to



An elderly Albanian woman cries outside her uncle's burning home in Shterica, 30 km northeast of Pristina, after shelling by Serbian troops in February 1999. Kosovo's status must be decided before it can join the EU.

have primarily infected both peoples and decision makers.

Finally, the specter of Turkey's accession complicates everything. The more the Western Balkans' European perspective declines (Turkey's, the worse the results will be for the region) and the expected referendum that were precisely designed to block Turkey but will affect all Western Balkan states with the exception of Croatia. Although there are undeniable advantages to Turkey's Euro-Asian path, in the final analysis, Turkey can survive and thrive without the European Union while the Western Balkans cannot.

Given these rather bleak prospects, it is fair to wonder about what is to be done. Clearly, there is not much room for mistakes, with the Western Balkan states having to exhibit consistent and parallel reform efforts. Advocates of regional enlargement will have to realize that the "one size

fits all" rhetoric is sufficient and that they will now have to present different arguments to different national constituencies. Hopes that an agreement will proceed because the EU has internalized a more imperative are false. Nor will the Union be blockaded by arguments to the effect that unless the accession process is completed the region will turn to war and crime. Such a line of thought, unless the prospect that the Union will incorporate unwanted levels of instability and uncertainty, which will, in effect, block enlargement.

Within this overall problematic context, it is imperative that small, incremental steps can be taken, in a tight sequence and with the proper timing. Stabilization and association agreements can eventually be offered in all regional states and candidate status given, when appropriate, while accession negotiations should begin when possible.

However, it is a mistake to believe that the Western Balkans will be "smuggled" into the European Union.

Ultimately, the Union's "comparing" of integration will be required first, and the Union will have to be redesigned on a more federal model or on the basis of a "variable geometry" that could eventually even incorporate most nations for partial membership.

The Western Balkans should and probably will join the EU, but in all likelihood, the EU that they will join will be different from today's, perhaps even radically so.

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FYROM ready to vote after

BRIEFS

Turkey extends support to reconciliation plan in Iraq