

What western Balkan states can do to boost their EU bids

Political developments in Europe since the referendum results on the proposed European Constitution will most likely slow the process for European Union membership for the western Balkan countries. It is precisely at this point that the region's people and governments should stop asking what the EU can do for them and start asking what they can do for themselves.

Here are a few suggestions, the aim of which are to help, not patronize:

- Prepare for NATO membership and PFP agreements soon.

NATO's regional enlargement and the signing of Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreements can prove beneficial for the western Balkans. However, NATO membership has to be earned and requires the implementation of serious reforms; it is not tantamount to a political gift. Once achieved, though, it should allow for the modernization of the military sector of all newly acceded states, provide much needed psychological (and actual) security for the region's people, dissuade the operations of militant or terrorist groups, provide an institutionalized framework for regional cooperation and solidify political reforms (only democracies are permitted to join NATO). In effect, NATO membership will permit the western Balkans to remain steadfastly oriented toward Euro-Atlanticism and reform.

Fortunately, regional states have consistently worked hard during the past few years toward entering NATO. Croatia, Albania and FYROM (who ought to finally accept a meaningful compromise and resolve the name dispute with Greece) have all signed, together with the United States, the Adriatic Charter promoting military cooperation among them and effectively aims at operating as a NATO antechamber facilitating their eventual membership.

Serbia also finally seems willing and capable of carrying out the necessary actions leading to General Ratko Mladic's arrest and extradition to The Hague tribunal. Such a development

COMMENTARY

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would remove the major obstacle blocking Serbia's participation in PfP arrangements and the country's eventual joining of NATO.

Thus, at this point it seems likely that NATO membership might become a reality for Albania, Croatia and FYROM by 2007 (actual negotiations probably concluding by late 2006), while Serbia-Montenegro could sign a PfP agreement, assuming that they remain united. (Any decisions concerning Kosovo's security and military options would be predicated upon the exact parameters surrounding the forthcoming decisions on its final status).

- Liberalize visa regimes in the Western Balkans.

The EU's strict visa requirements have caused undue hardship and are often criticized with justification. However, western Balkan states can seize the initiative and implement policies that radically liberalize regional visa requirements. In effect, it should become possible for any western Balkan citizen to travel to any regional state without a visa. If such a scheme is successfully implemented, it will become more difficult, if not outright embarrassing, for the EU to maintain its current visa policies. It is encouraging that regional politicians are slowly signing on to this idea.

- Arrest all individuals wanted by The Hague tribunal.

On this issue the international community's policy has been principled and commendable. Pressure has been brought upon various western Balkan states on the basis of conditionality: Financial assistance and membership prospects to international organizations are in effect contingent upon the arrest of certain individuals.

This matter is not merely symbolic, nor is it only about rendering justice. Unless societies confront the crimes and atrocities of the past, their

integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, standards and values will inevitably be incomplete and perhaps impossible.

- Address the teaching of the region's historical legacy.

The novelist Said (H.H. Munro) is claimed to have pointed out that "the Balkans have always produced more history than they can consume locally." Writing in the early 1900's, the British journalist H.L. Brinsford presciently argued that, in this part of the world, "the centuries do not follow one another. They coexist." The dramatic and traumatic events associated with the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia have now been added to the region's troublesome historical record. It has thus become urgent that the region's recent history, and particularly how it is disseminated through school textbooks, be addressed. Key historical events as well as neighboring states and their people and minorities must be treated in an objective, tolerant and accurate manner.

A project to rewrite school textbooks should be undertaken officially by all regional governments in a serious and coordinated effort, and not merely left to well intentioned but underfunded and relatively powerless NGOs. (German and French efforts following the Second World War are a useful precedent).

The people and governments of the western Balkans must undertake initiatives and exploit all opportunities in order to guarantee the region's path towards Euro-Atlantic structures, at least until the EU emerges from a period of introspection and reflection. After all, it is the people of the western Balkans who stand to gain or lose the most.

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