



## **Brussels should step up its involvement in Balkan disputes because it works**

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European Union officials responsible for foreign and enlargement matters have recently reaped some small yet visible successes in the Balkans. They have mediated between political sides in Macedonia and in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue and have assisted Slovenia and Croatia in solving a bilateral dispute to assure smooth progress in the usually agitated realm of Balkan politics. Certainly, the EU's most precious instrument in the process has been the membership perspective it offers and the still luring power Europe has on Balkan nations. The EU should deepen this kind of involvement in order to guarantee stability in times of both economic and political turmoil in the larger region of Southeast Europe.

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, Štefan Füle, the EU's Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, arrived in the Macedonian capital Skopje with mixed feelings: The country had been in political crisis since December 2012, when a brawl over the 2013 budget sent opposition MPs out of Parliament in boycott and supporters of the opposition and the government on to the streets confronting each other. This was Füle's second move to visit Skopje: he had been openly upset about the lack of progress and Macedonia's jeopardised EU perspective just a couple of weeks before, which even made him cancel his planned trip in frustration. But his March mediation mission turned out to be successful: the opposition SDSM party and the ruling VMRO-DPMNE agreed to end the row and hold the March 24<sup>th</sup> local elections as planned (the latter won the vote assertively). This opened the way for a positive formal progress assessment by the European Commission and a restarted EU integration process of Macedonia.

In a similar vein but with much more consistency and political capital invested, Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, has been brokering the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue for normalization of relations. Kosovo, formerly a province of Serbia, declared independence in 2008, and Serbia has said it will never recognise it. The dialogue was launched two years ago with varying success, amid sporadic violence in Kosovo and controversial popular support both for Belgrade and Pristina. But progress did happen, and a year ago Serbia obtained an EU candidate status as a reward, while Kosovo obtained a perspective for visa liberalisation. Talks have been going on through March and April. The last round of talks, ended on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, did not produce an agreement. But it is a fact that former foes Ivica Dačić of Serbia and Hashim Thaçi of Kosovo have been sitting on one table and shaking hands regularly. A third lingering Balkan dispute that was resolved thanks to EU soft pressure was a bilateral banking dispute between EU member

Slovenia and its neighbour Croatia, due to join the bloc on July 1<sup>st</sup>. The disagreement about old Croatian deposits in Slovenia's Ljubljanska Banka, dating back to Yugoslav times, was threatening to put off the Croatian entry because of the Slovenian parliament's reluctance to ratify the accession treaty until the issue was settled. It was settled officially on March 11<sup>th</sup> when the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding, and the Slovenian legislature ratified the treaty on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Much of the negotiations and meetings had taken place in Brussels.

This positive momentum in helping solve small but recurring problems in the Balkans should not be wasted. The tension in Macedonia is far from down: just a week after Füle's visit, a serious ethnic unrest erupted after the appointment of a former Albanian guerrilla for defence minister. Mass numbers of Macedonians and Albanians took turns over the weekend to publicly demonstrate their feelings on the issue, and violence occurred, while the election losers SDSM are thinking of boycotting the second round of the local election on April 7<sup>th</sup>. What is even more important regarding Macedonia's EU prospects is the still unresolved name dispute with Greece, blocking the opening of accession talks and going on for decades, officially mediated by the United Nations. Füle did try to be more active on the issue late last year by suggesting that Macedonia could start talks even before a name solution. But the Commission should step up its leverage in a more concerted manner, given one of the sides is a member state; Greece did give some signals of goodwill last year.

And Europe and the Balkans have most to gain from a progress in the most controversial regional relationship – the one between Serbia and Kosovo. The success of the ongoing dialogue is important for all three sides: Serbia's pragmatic-looking government hopes it will obtain a date for EU accession talks in June; Kosovo will raise its chances for a Stabilization and Association Agreement, the first rung on the ladder of formal relations with the EU; and the EU will demonstrate, again, that its soft power is working and that closer ties are a real perspective for Balkan countries, particularly in light of existing drawbacks elsewhere (think Bosnia). Despite the failure to reach a formal agreement in the Brussels talks of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, there is still time until the Commission progress report comes out on April 16<sup>th</sup> and, indeed, until the Council makes its decision in June whether to grant Serbia and Kosovo closer ties.

The entire region of Southeast Europe is not an idyllic place right now, with Cyprus the new source of frustration. Greece is still in a very difficult financial situation, blocked by recurring strikes and protests. Bulgaria's government resigned in February in response to mass protests fueled by consistently low standards of living and calling for a restart of the entire political system, with early election due on May 12<sup>th</sup>. Radical far-right and far-left ideas have circulated, with trust in the EU not at its highest levels all across the Balkans. In this context, with the risk of getting banal but highlighting a reality often forgotten in these times of hardship, it should be repeated that enlargement is the EU's and the Balkans' destiny and at the same time the EU's most powerful tool to induct positive change in its immediate neighbourhood.