

The Balkans remains the EU's litmus test

By **Olli Rehn**

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The EU must continue the 'political de-mining' of the Balkans and use lessons learnt there to develop its foreign-policy role.

For two decades, the western Balkans has been a real-life testing ground of the foreign policy of the European Union. While nobody wanted it that way, the EU's common foreign and security policy was born in the context of the Balkan wars in the 1990s. Since then, the Balkans has been the frontier for the EU's evolving foreign policy.

It was a difficult birth, and we learned hard lessons. As a result, we are today more capable of working for peace and stability.

In recent years, the European perspective has helped stabilise the western Balkans. The prospect of and conditions for joining the EU have driven democratic and economic reforms forward.

Croatia is nearing the finishing line, after four years of negotiations. We have free-trade arrangements in place with the rest of the western Balkans – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. We are also working to extend visa-free travel next January to the countries that have met the EU's conditions, especially the issuing of biometric passports.

Still, this progress remains fragile. Despite relative political stability in the region, there is no 'end of history' in sight. We cannot afford to lull ourselves into complacency when facing dangerous political minefields in the western Balkans, either in the form of bilateral problems between certain countries, or domestic stalemates in others.

Therefore, we must continue what I would call a policy of political de-mining in the western Balkans. That means tackling these problems one by one, by combining the EU's soft power and classical tools of diplomacy.

We have seen some successes, such as the recent agreement on arbitration to solve the border dispute between Croatia and Slovenia, which was signed in Stockholm on 4 November. This enabled us to unblock and resume Croatia's accession talks after a long break.

Next, we want to see progress on the name issue of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The country is a positive example of the EU's gravitational pull and has performed impressively in EU-related reforms after years of stagnation. This enabled the European Commission last month to recommend opening accession negotiations with the country.



JOINING IN EU and Macedonian flags are displayed in Skopje to celebrate the European Commission's declaration that the country is ready to start membership talks. REUTERS

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The governments in both Skopje and Athens have a fresh and strong mandate and have started to engage in serious talks. There should now be a real chance to settle this difficult bilateral issue, which has hampered progress in that corner of the region for 18 years.

Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains in a self-inflicted political stalemate that has dragged it backwards recently. In October, together with Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, I met the leaders of the country on two occasions in Camp Butmir in Sarajevo to try to unblock the stalemate.

Bosnia and Herzegovina risks being left permanently behind the other countries of the region in EU and NATO integration. We offered its leaders a package of measures – including constitutional changes – that would jump-start the country's EU and NATO integration.

I hope, for the sake of their citizens and the western Balkans as a whole, that the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina will commit themselves to a compromise that will help the country move forward. This is the last chance for the present generation of political leaders to bring the country into the European mainstream, which is deeply wanted by its citizens.

Our policy of stabilisation – sometimes also called enlargement – in the western Balkans has wider implications for the EU's foreign policy and its global role. We must learn from our experience there and apply these lessons when developing a more robust and effective foreign policy.

With the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty soon, we stand before a historic opportunity to move the EU's foreign policy and global role to a new level.

The EU's credibility as a global actor continues to rest on our ability to shape our own immediate neighbourhood. In south-eastern Europe we can make a real difference. This is where the EU's common foreign and security policy has proven its value.

Olli Rehn is the European commissioner for enlargement.