

The International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. **Hannes Swoboda**, Member of the European Parliament, member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the EP, the Vice-President of the S&D Group and as well as the rapporteur of the European Parliament for Croatia, in his article “**The Western Balkans in 2010: One step forward, two steps back?**” presents an overview of the current situation in the Western Balkans in 2010 as well as in the region concerned, with an emphasis on the role of Croatia. His article is published in its entirety.



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THE WESTERN BALKANS IN 2010: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK?

On many occasions since the beginning of this year, the EU Spanish Presidency has reaffirmed its will to make the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries one of its top priorities. The end of the year 2009 and the beginning of 2010 have brought some successes for the integration prospects of the region, but also important setbacks. At the moment, Croatia is the only country with which accession

negotiations are actually taking place. All involved parties are deploying a significant amount of energy to conclude all negotiation chapters this year. However, as we know, it is not the first time that we express such a hope and, already in 2008, expectations to finalize negotiations with Croatia were high. It seems that in the region, every success is accompanied by a significant amount of disappointments.

Important successes of the last months include of course the visa liberalization implemented on December 19th 2009. Citizens of Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro are now entitled to visa-free travelling to the countries of the European Union. The population of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, two countries that did not access the white Schengen list because of a lack of fulfilment of a number of technical requirements, perceived the situation very negatively. It backfired into a growing lack of confidence into the European institutions and disenchantment with their potential European future. Moreover, the implementation of the visa-free regime was accompanied by a wave of abuse by scruple less individuals who have shimmered better life and job opportunities in EU-countries to their desperate fellow citizens. These incidents were very badly perceived by the European public opinion and must also be taken seriously by political leaders in the Western Balkans. Fortunately, the problem was rapidly solved.

The election of a pro-European President in Croatia a few weeks later should also be interpreted as a success. Already, during the first month of his mandate, President Ivo Josipović has shown that he is dedicated to making the whole Western Balkans a peaceful region, where conflicts are resolved by means of negotiation and discussion. In this sense, many efforts have been deployed towards more regional integration, however with some unsuccessful experiences. The failure of the conference in Brdo, Slovenia, in March was an important setback. Initiated by Croatia and Slovenia in the aim of finding common ways for the region's way to EU integration, the conference was overshadowed by the absence of Serbia and representatives of the Spanish EU-Presidency. Fortunately, the Sarajevo conference of June 2nd, which brought together foreign ministers from the region and from EU member states as well as representatives from the US, Turkey, Russia and the OSCE, could be successfully concluded. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to EU membership of all countries of the region.

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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SERBIA AND KOSOVO REMAINS A MAIN CHALLENGE FOR 2010

The conflict between Serbia and Kosovo remains a main challenge for 2010. Whereas Serbia has shown a significant level of political maturity in the way it has treated the issue in the last two years of Kosovo's independence, its national and international political discourse is too much revolving around the conflict, preventing the country and the region from coming forward with their regional integration. Both the Serbian and Kosovan political leadership are deploying and wasting large diplomatic efforts

and resources on the question of (non)recognition, while they should be working on more urgent national and regional socio-economical problems affecting the everyday lives of citizens. This conflict should not longer be used as a pretext not to deal with important problems, which, if they remain unresolved, will further postpone these two countries' integration into the EU.

The opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence is soon to be expected. I would hope that on the basis of the specific arguments of that ruling, a new dialogue can be established between Serbia and Kosovo, in order to determine their future relationship and more specifically to clear out the role Serbia is to play in Kosovo. Here, the EU should assist both sides in developing a strategy, which is in the clear interest of all citizens of Kosovo. It should include acknowledgement of Serbia's justified interest in the well being of Kosovo citizens who belong to the Serb community and their inclusion in the different levels of government.

On a more positive note, we must consider the last Kosovo municipal elections as a success, with considerable participation of the Serbian minority in the process, demonstrating a will to take their political faith into their own hands by electing their own representatives. It must also be acknowledged that the Kosovan leadership has managed to establish good neighborly relations with all the governments of the region that were ready to respond, and especially good relations with Croatia. This presents itself as another opportunity for Croatia to play a leading role in the region by acting as a bridge, for example between Kosovo and Serbia.

As expressed already by the European Commission, Croatia has now entered the final phase of the EU-accession negotiation process. The last months of 2009 have brought many important steps forward: the chapters on Financial Services, Consumer Protection and Health are now closed and in December, the Committee for Stabilization and Association of the EU and Croatia were meeting for the fifth time. Shortly before Christmas, more chapters were closed. Of the remaining chapters to be opened, the chapter on Justice remains the most crucial. It implies the deliverance by Croatia of a number of documents requested by ICTY-Prosecutor Serge Brammertz, regarding the case of Croatian Army General Ante Gotovina. So far, Croatia has not been fully cooperative on providing the documents linked to military orders issued during Operation Storm, or at least did not undertake a maximum of efforts to find these documents.

THE SOLUTION OF THE BORDER CONFLICT BETWEEN CROATIA AND SLOVENIA

The solution of the border conflict between Croatia and Slovenia still has to pass some hurdles. A referendum was held in Slovenia on June 6th on the law aiming at solving the border issue between these two neighbours. Slovenians backed an

agreement to send a border dispute to international arbitration which was signed by Croatian and Slovenian Prime Ministers Jadranka Kosor and Borut Pahor and ratified by both parliaments, clearing the path for their neighbour's accession to the European Union.

Croatia is also facing other challenges that could potentially deteriorate the global favourable image it has acquired in the EU. The country has to step up its engagement in resolving the issue of tenancy rights deprivations that occurred on its territory between 1991 and 1995, thereby contributing to solving the very important regional problem of refugees and international displaced persons. Whereas this problem must be tackled regionally and by means of intergovernmental cooperation, Croatia could take on a more active stance and act as example for its neighbours.

CURRENT POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

In fact, it is clear that the most important issues and conflicts of the region can only be solved through a regional approach, by including all parties involved but also by encouraging the involvement of regional third parties to act as mediators and, as mentioned earlier, bridges. For example, the current political challenges in Bosnia-Herzegovina caused by the complexity of the State can be resolved more easily if their neighbours, Croatia and Serbia, plan more constructive and soothing role. This goes as well for other regional issues that rarely know borders, such as organized crime and trafficking or corruption. The question of the Roma population and the particular challenges they are facing in the Western Balkans is also an issue that should definitely be dealt with at the regional level, with the responsible involvement of all government leaders and of course, not without the concrete engagement of EU leaders and governments of EU countries.

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THE MACEDONIAN NAME ISSUE AND THE ALBANIAN PARLIAMENT CRISIS

When drawing the 2010 Western Balkan balance sheet, two important crises cannot remain unnamed: The Macedonian name issue and the Albanian parliament crisis. Here, we must unfortunately deplore the lack of political maturity of the parties involved to reach acceptable face-saving compromises. As I proposed for the soon-to-come resolution of the European Parliament on the integration process of Albania, a solution to the conflict concerning the election procedures should be found by both sides. We expect respective compromise proposals from all parties. At this stage, government and opposition have agreed to have members of the European Parliament to act as mediators in the crisis.

If 2010 cannot bring solutions to all problems that the Western Balkan countries must deal with in order to make their European future become a reality, let us make sure that significant actors, such as Croatia, will act as a driving force and set example

for the whole region, proving that cooperative actions bring concrete, and European, results.

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