

JUMPING THROUGH THE WINDOW?

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By: Francisco Jose Garcia Martinez

The recent strategy on enlargement for the Western Balkans marked an interesting shift on the EU's position on the topic. It tentatively set a timeframe for accession of some of the remaining Western Balkan countries (Montenegro and Serbia) for the first time after Croatia joined the club in 2013, overcoming the reluctance that has marked most of this term.¹ This is by no means a small feat, even though the document adds much less detail in regard to the other four countries. In that line, the text talks about an "historic window of opportunity" that now the Western Balkan countries must seize.²

In the case of Kosovo, however, the strategy has been received with what can only be charitably described as disappointment. The document only recognizes an "opportunity for sustainable progress" in implementing the SAA, leaving an eventual accession to a later stage. To some, this has been read as a slap in the face; the Government swiftly moved to criticize the final wording, complaining that some past successes of Kosovo were being disregarded, and the country was being treated "asymmetrically".³

That position, however, is both shortsighted and narrow-minded, and may be pointing towards a lack of vision that can seriously harm the short-term perspectives of Kosovo. It is shortsighted because, focused only in the explicit mentions of Kosovo in the strategy, it completely misses the point of the document. And it is narrow-minded because it pointedly presents a dialectic of *us* against *them*, directly attacking what the document represents barely a few hours after its publication.

Let us review this one step at a time. As said before, this new document establishes for the first time a reasonable, albeit overtly ambitious, timeframe for the accession of some countries, while being far vaguer with the rest. Kosovo falls in this second category, and in some circles of the government that has not been well received. They have failed to consider the implications and opportunities that have been opened. For a change, the Commission has opted for being unusually blunt in the language it has used; the idea that no country is ready to access the EU is already spelled in the third line. As such, the text is packed with a number of not-so-veiled messages to Serbia that are directly relevant for Kosovo.

In particular, the EU has been quite straightforward in requesting more seriousness in the implementation of the Brussels Agreements ("the EU cannot and will not import disputes"), less ambiguity regarding its stance towards the EU and Russia ("speed up the alignment with all EU foreign policy positions"), as well as showing clear commitment and good faith in the next phase ("joining the EU is a choice [that] needs political and societal consensus"). It comes with a warning, too ("countries may catch up or overtake each other depending on progress").

¹ European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018, p. 2, retrieved 9 February 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

² *Ibid*

³ Office of the Prime Minister, *Kosovo has made a series of accomplishments that should be recognized and accepted by the European Union*, Pristina, 6 February 2018, retrieved 9 February 2018, <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/?page=2,9,7560>

This message and the continuous references to conditionality mean that the EU is ready to become serious with enlargement, but it expects Serbia, as well as other regional governments, to do the same. The EU may be ready to talk businesses, but it learned its lesson about letting unprepared countries join the club. The Government should consider that point very carefully. Furthermore, it should pay close attention to the other countries' progress, since whatever happens with Serbia and Montenegro in the next 7 years will define the pattern for enlargement in the region, and that will eventually mean Kosovo.

In relation to that is where the official reaction can be defined as narrow-minded. Simply put, expecting anything else from the EU at this stage was unrealistic. Kosovo has barely started implementing the SAA that entered into force in April 2016. According to our latest estimations, based on an extensive monitoring, barely 30 to 35% of the commitments agreed upon therein are yet applied in practice. Similarly, just 1 out of 22 priorities included in the European Reform Agenda has been fulfilled as of today, according to the Ministry of European Integration.⁴ Under these conditions, arguing that the time has come for further advancement is just moot.

Let us not forget here that the EU is based on mutual trust between its Members. The best way to create that trust is to prove trustworthy. No one is denying the progresses made by Kosovo in recent years, they simply are not sufficient. The Government feels disappointed that the strategy does not account for its decisions in the last few months, but it forgets that sending a draft law to the Assembly does not equate to fulfilling a condition; in most cases, these draft laws are still going through parliamentary process, and even those already in force are often misapplied due to insufficient resources. Approaching European Integration as a list of chores to tick off is not sufficient, and pretending otherwise is disingenuous, both to the citizenship and to oneself.

Kosovo is lagging far behind other Balkan countries. At best, it is currently on par with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it can even be argued that the new strategy places it even farther behind the latter, at the rear of the entire region regarding accession to the EU. The strategy may not be an intended rap on the knuckles specifically directed to Kosovo, but it is certainly a warning cry for the region. Failing to act upon it would be a costly mistake.

⁴ Koha Ditore, *Ministrja Hoxha thotë se Kosova plotësoi vetëm 30 % të MSA-së* [Minister Hoxha acknowledges that Kosovo has only applied 30% of the SAA], 7 February 2018, retrieved 9 February 2018, <http://www.koha.net/arberi/74139/ministrja-hoxha-thote-se-kosova-plotesoi-vetem-30-te-msa-se/>

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