

Kosovo under the EU umbrella

by Margreet Strijbosch, 22 April 2005

The European Commission has recently proposed strengthening ties with Serbia and Montenegro. The envisaged stabilisation and association agreement with the country would be an initial step towards membership of the European Union. Almost simultaneously, an international research institute launched a more far-reaching plan to offer Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo the same prospect of EU membership.

The European Stability Initiative (ESI) is a group of academics and European former prime ministers and presidents. It has been looking into and recently reported on the future of south-east Europe. One of the report's most significant conclusions calls for the abolition of current protectorates in the Balkans, and for the states in question to be offered the prospect of possibly joining the EU.

As a result of the wars in the 1990s, Bosnia and Kosovo currently have the status of protectorates, and are administered by representatives of the international community. The ESI report proposes a plan of action for the west Balkans, which envisages that Bosnia and Kosovo will, in time, join the European Union as independent, sovereign states.

Only solution?

While these recommendations undoubtedly go too far for many in the EU, ESI executive director Ivan Krastev views them as the only solution for Europe's unstable 'black hole', where the potential for new conflicts remains large:

"Till now, the EU has basically been integrating poor, but functioning states. We are pushing for slightly changing the logic of negotiations with the EU. Our idea is to use the negotiation process when the EU has really strong leverage over the countries, as a period in which this member-state building is going to take place."

There are many limitations in the case of Bosnia, but all agree that this country must become an independent and functioning nation. However, the ESI plan also envisages that Kosovo should begin accession negotiations with the EU, independent from Serbia, but without being a fully sovereign nation in its own right.

Future of Kosovo

This plan comes just as the question of Kosovo's status is growing more and more urgent. Serbia lost control of its 'rebellious' province in June 1999, after the Serbian army forced hundreds of thousands of the region's ethnic Albanian inhabitants to flee. The international community responded by bombing Serbia. After the Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo, the ethnic Albanian population returned, but tens of thousands of Serbian civilians fled in fear of reprisals.

Now, almost six years on, there's a need for clarity as to the future status of this province that still belongs - formally - to Serbia. As far as the ESI committee is concerned, that future would take the shape of a form of independence under the umbrella of the EU.

Other priorities

Ivan Krastev expects that, in the long term, this solution will prove acceptable to Serbia, too. It already has no say whatsoever over the province, and - in view of past events - it's not likely that Kosovo's Albanians will ever accept Serbia having any power over the region. Moreover, according to Mr Krastev at least, Serbia has other priorities right now:

"In my view, for Serbia, the most important is that this status quo [the international protectorate] is not working. They are becoming a hostage of it. The EU could give real guarantees for the Serbian minority in Kosovo. The most important thing for Serbia now is a fast track for its own integration into the EU. While looking at Kosovo, Serbia is facing huge economical and social problems on the domestic front."

In a certain sense, the proposal seems inevitable. Serbians and Kosovo Albanians will never agree on a shared future. Serbia and Montenegro's Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic only recently ruled out the possibility of negotiations with Kosovo in 2005, and Kosovo's President Ibrahim Rugova has totally refused to talk to Belgrade about the future.

More than autonomy

The only person to make any positive comments at all has been Serbian President Boris Tadic, although he has also set limits. He says that, as far as he is concerned, Kosovo may be granted more than just 'autonomy', but not full independence.

This view may, indeed, come closest to what the authors of the ESI report have in mind. They see a future for Kosovo within the framework of the EU, but the path to achieving that goal will have to be followed step by step and with the EU closely monitoring each and every one of those steps.

Former Yugoslavia - moving towards the EU

The EU could again demonstrate its role as a guarantor of peace (Europe's many conflicts was one of the prime reasons for its creation) towards the republics of former Yugoslavia by incorporating those states.

Slovenia, which became an EU member on 1 May 2004, has paved the way. The next candidate is Croatia, although its accession has been put on the backburner due to insufficient cooperation with the Yugoslavia Tribunal. Nonetheless, it is only one step away from starting talks with Brussels.

Macedonia - a country where some three-quarters of the population lives in fear of a rekindling of the recent conflict between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians - is not far off from the beginning the same process. Meanwhile, Serbia and Montenegro has just been offered the prospect of a stabilisation and association agreement; the first move on the way to membership.

That leaves Bosnia and Kosovo at the very back of the queue. The ESI believes it could be between 15 and 20 years before they are truly ready to join the European Union.