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**Europe and its 'midnight children'**

[Goran Fejic](http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/goran-fejic) 9 July 2013

**Croatia's accession to the European Union highlights both the union's continued appeal and its current malaise. This odd combination casts a shadow across the western Balkans and back to Brussels, says Goran Fejic.**

At the stroke of midnight on 30 June 2013, Croatia became the twenty-eighth member-state of the European Union. The country’s officials heralded the accession as a “historic event”, though the the continent's media outlets seemed to judge it less so, insofar as their 1 July editions gave precedence to other “breaking news”: the mass demonstrations in Egypt, Barack Obama’s visit to South Africa, and the indignation of Europeans (whether real or feigned) at the discovery that they too have long been the target of American electronic spying.

Even where the European media did highlight the latest [case](http://ec.europa.eu/news/eu_explained/130701_en.htm) of EU "enlargement", the tone favoured prudent analysis over celebration, with an emphasis on Croatia’s current recession, high unemployment and indebtedness - and gauging what new headaches these might cause to Zagreb's new EU partners. What a contrast with the earlier, euphoric, “end-of-history” atmosphere that accompanied EU accessions in the first post-cold-war decade!

Between the international media's radar-beams, a simultaneous event slipped through almost unnoticed: the European Council's announcement that [accession](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia/) talks with Serbia would [start](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2013/0629/Serbia-gets-green-light-to-negotiate-entry-to-European-Union) in January 2014. It was a hesitant and half-mumbled “yes” aimed at rewarding Serbia for its painstakingly negotiated (and EU-brokered) “normalisation” agreements with Kosovo, which will become more enthusiastic only when these agreements are fully implemented between now and the end of 2013.

Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo - the EU continues to influence these and several other political developments in the “western Balkans”, even as Europe remains stuck in a crisis of internal division, declining international competitiveness, and a disheartening lack of economic leadership and political imagination with regard to its own future. There is a puzzle here: how can an evidently infirm Europe still be so central to the future of the Balkans? Is this a matter of sheer inertia, of the resilience of a certain image of Europe in the region long after it has faded among Europe's existing citizens, or are more complex processes on both sides involved? Without pretending to solve this conundrum, here are six regional elements which are among its components.

**Croatia, a glimpse of light**

On the whole, Croats welcome their country's hard-won [membership](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/croatia/) of the EU, which symbolises the long journey they have travelled since the bitter wars that accompanied Yugoslavia's disintegration in the 1990s. But there are dissenting voices, from general warnings (for example, about the dangers of opening Croatia’s weak economy to much stronger EU competitors) to very specific ones (for example, invoking the threats posed by the EU fishing industry to the underequipped and dispersed Dalmatian and northern Adriatic fleets). The hardships currently endured by the countries of the union's southern fringe, such as Greece and Bulgaria, are also noted in Croatia.

A larger sense of [accomplishment](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23118035) and satisfaction does seem to prevail, however, and from a longer-term perspective I believe this is both justified and may be a good augury for the broader western Balkans region. Already, the long accession process has fuelled laborious and still ongoing domestic efforts to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law. Now, Croatia will be able to benefit from a range of development facilities reserved for weaker EU members. In addition, Croatia’s current social-democratic government has been keen on appropriating and translating into practice the EU’s insistence on the importance of “regional cooperation” across the western Balkans, which have contributed to the re-establishment of linkages among parts of the former Yugoslav space. The process, reinforced by sheer economic interests, has also been encouraged by the waning of political prejudices and the awakening of cultural curiosity, particularly among young people. All these trends have helped overcome the legacy of the 1990s war.

On the political stage, the EU accession [process](http://www.croatia-in-the-eu.eu/) has in many ways underpinned a positive evolution: namely, keeping extreme nationalists at bay and sustaining a outward looking and tolerant idea of what it means to be “European”. The kind of retrograde self-perceptions that once served to justify Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia (Croatia supposedly being the defender of Europe’s “Christian civilisation” against “Balkan barbarians”, myths about Croatia’s historical role as “antemurale christianitatis” and similar nonsense) seem to have given some way to a more modern image of Europe that epitomises economic dynamism, cultural openness and political liberalism.

The ill-informed or innocent foreigner will still be reminded that Croatia is located in "central Europe", not in the "Balkans". Yet the name of the historically troubled peninsula is less of a curse today as Croatia’s leaders proudly announce their willingness to share their accession experience and lessons learned with Serbia and other aspiring EU candidates from the region.

At the same time, this is still only the beginning of a building process. Sinister events repeatedly occur that tend to cast a shadow over each achievement. They include the mass welcome-home rallies organised in honour of General Ante Gotovina, who was acquitted of war-crimes charges by the Hague tribunal, though is hardly "acquittable" with regard to his political role and responsibilities in the mass expulsions and other violations perpetrated against the Serb [minority](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2013&mm=07&dd=08&nav_id=86877)); expressions of violent nationalism at football stadiums and rock-music rallies; and mobilisations by the right-wing nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which seeks to exploit popular discontent caused by economic recession and unemployment, as evidenced by the results of the recent municipal elections.

Croatia has come far and is still on a good path, but is not out of the wood yet. The EU, in spite of its own handicaps, has been supportive in showing the way. But will it still be able to do so, and for how long? Before reflecting on these questions, let's take a quick look at the state of play in the other [countries](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11283616) of the western Balkans.

**Serbia, a hall of mirrors**

Serbia is in a more fluid political situation than its western neighbour. With a degree of simplification, the country remains [divided](http://www.opendemocracy.net/eric-gordy/serbias-election-more-defeat-than-victory) between pro-European liberals and anti-western defenders of a myth-attached form of national pride. The latter remain offended by the secession of Kosovo (“the cradle of serbitude”), are unwilling to admit Serbia’s heavy responsibility in the wars of the 1990s, depict Russia as the Serbs' only true friend and protector against Serbia’s eternal enemies, and continue to feed on all sorts of conspiracy theories about Nato and its puppets (including the EU, and Germany in particular), the Vatican, and the Turks (allegedly plotting to reconquer the Balkans through their Muslim proxies in Bosnia).

Serbia's more complex political reality does unfortunately draw on these clichés, as do populist politicians when they seek to explain Serbia’s tardiness in keeping pace with globalisation and European integration. However, it is important to point out that the two main political constituencies – the pro-EU and the pro-Russian - are neither homogeneous nor static. Indeed, the current government - a weird [coalition](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=07&dd=08&nav_id=86873) of former nationalist warmongers turned populist anti-corruption fighters, and former apparatchiks of Slobodan Milošević’s turned pro-EU pragmatists - [appears](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=07&dd=08&nav_id=86868) to be preaching both worldviews at the same time, oscillating between one and the other as if they were mutually compatible.

The country’s economic condition is marked by poverty, high unemployment, persistent corruption and desperate need of foreign investments. In that context, Serbia’s demand to join the EU seems to be motivated by the stark need for development aid and funding. EU membership is also regarded as a kind of reimbursement of a long [overdue](http://www.dw.de/brussels-summit-greenlights-eu-accession-talks-for-serbia/a-16912901) western debt to Serbia, after years of “discrimination, grabbing of parts of its territory, and bombing” (as many proponents of this view see things). Where affections have any place, they still fly towards Russia, the “unfaltering friend”.

This seems to be a key element distinguishing Serbia’s EU accession philosophy and rationale from that of most other past and current candidates. Far from being the expression of any transcendent aspiration or longing (think of the Czechs and Poles in 2004), far from any ambition to participate in a continent-wide multicultural project, in Serbia it all seems to boil down to economic emergency. Over time and during the long accession process [ahead](http://www.rferl.org/content/serbia-join-eu/25029051.html) this will hopefully evolve. But today, the strange gap between emotions and perceived interests remains wide.

It is obvious too that the obstacle of Serbia’s pending and [potentially](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/kosovo-one-year-on) explosive feud with Kosovo needs to be removed before the opening of any accession talks. This will have to extend and deepen the framework agreement between Serbia and Kosovo to “normalise” mutual relations, finalised under heavy EU pressure and the hands-on brokerage of Catherine Ashton, who holds the EU's foreign-affairs brief. Under the agreement, the northern, Serb-majority part of Kosovo will fall within the realm of Kosovo’s constitution and laws, while retaining high levels of local autonomy in cultural, developmental and security spheres (inter alia through the setting up of a union of Serb-majority municipalities). Germany in particular has been insistent that important general provisions of the agreement must be elaborated and implemented in detail before accession talks with Serbia can start in January 2014.

For the Serbian side, its “normalisation” with Kosovo should in no [way](http://www.rferl.org/content/serbs-kosovo-parliament-boycott/25036867.html) be interpreted as diplomatic recognition. The president, the prime minister, the foreign minister and the entire official choir keep insisting that Serbia shall “never ever recognise the independence of the so-called state of Kosovo”. In the meantime, Serbia’s “strategic partnership” with Russia is given the highest public profile; high-level official visits are frequently exchanged with Belarus, Ukraine and states of similar ideological bent; while intense (though only moderately successful) lobbying campaigns are carried out against further international recognition of Kosovo.

**Bosnia-Herzegovina, in limbo**

Bosnia-Herzegovina, which suffered most atrociously from the wars of the 1990s, remains [stuck](http://eeas.europa.eu/bosnia_and_herzegovina/index_en.htm) in the institutional impasse of the Dayton [accords](http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/icty/dayton/daytonaccord.html) of 1995 and has not moved beyond “potential candidate” status - the lowest step in the EU accession process. The recent peaceful demonstrations that spread across its internal, ethnic-entity borders are something of a political novelty in a static political landscape. They were triggered by the [death](http://inserbia.info/news/2013/06/berina-hamidovic-baby-without-an-identification-number-died/) of Bernina Hamidović, a 3-year-old girl who died for want of a passport to access urgent medical help abroad - which in turn was the responsibility of nationalistic politicians who had failed to pass joint legislation on social-security numbers.

As an expression of popular [outrage](http://news.sky.com/story/1104561/bosnia-id-law-protests-after-baby-death) over the tragic consequence of ethnic partitioning of absolutely everything in the country, including basic public services, the demonstrations may (and hopefully will) signal an overdue [challenge](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/06/2013611152720320390.html) to entrenched ethnic politics. But how long will it take to bring about change? Will Bosnia’s politicians be prompted by the progress registered by their neighbours to [move](http://www.france24.com/en/20121130-reporters-bosnia-bosniak-serb-ethnic-croat-segregation) more resolutely towards constitutional and other reforms demanded by the EU in order to accelerate Bosnia’s application? Will Belgrade, as it refocuses its attention on Serbia’s own accession process, drop its "remote control" over the Republika Srpska and lift its systematic support for the latter's vetoing of every move likely to enhance Bosnia-Herzegovina's viability as a modern state? And will the EU find a more effective way to [push](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22837900) for political change in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in particular not penalising equally those who prevent reforms and those who demand them? Tough questions, too early for answers.

**Macedonia, beyond the name**

Macedonia, the southernmost republic of the former Yugoslavia, is a European Union membership [candidate](http://www.dw.de/montenegros-peculiar-path-to-eu-membership/a-16583842) since 2005. Macedonia seems to have moved somewhat closer to an understanding with its southern EU neighbour, Greece, over the obstacle - the country’s [name](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/fuele-urges-macedonia-on-name), officially “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” [FYROM])  - that has led Greece to veto Macedonia’s accession.

It is telling of Europe's current malaise that Greece, itself today a victim of the hugely unequal distribution of power and wealth within the EU, continues to veto the membership of an even smaller, weaker and poorer country to a club established with the aim of pursuing the ideals of joint prosperity and peace. After all, across the southern tip of the Balkans - Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania - the most dangerous catalysts of nationalistic populism and right-wing extremism are high rates of poverty and social exclusion: an explosive mix that the EU has so far proved unable to tackle effectively within its own borders.

**Montenegro, a surreal issue**

Montenegro, the smallest republic of the former Yugoslavia, started its EU accession talks in 2012. On the agenda are serious ecological, judicial and crime-related problems; but beyond these a somewhat [surreal](http://www.dw.de/montenegros-peculiar-path-to-eu-membership/a-16583842) issue has emerged - Montenegro’s unilateral decision to use the euro as its national currency. Apparently, if [eurozone](http://www.eurozone.europa.eu/euro-area/euro-area-member-states/) rules were to be rigorously applied,

Montenegro would have first to reintroduce a national currency, and would then be allowed officially to [join](http://www.ecb.int/euro/intro/html/map.en.html) the eurozone only after its admission to the EU (and, moreover, on the basis of an assessed compliance with certain agreed standards regarding its budget deficit, inflation rate and debt-to-GDP ratio). It is possible that Montenegro will be be accorded some flexibility here, on the grounds that its economy is too small to affect the eurozone (Vatican, Andorra, San Marino, Monaco and Kosovo also use the euro on a similar rationale).

**The EU, that sinking feeling**

For its part, the [process](http://eeas.europa.eu/western_balkans/index_en.htm) of European Union enlargement in the western Balkans can be regarded - typically of complex and extended processes of this kind - as a mix of successes and failures.

Failures, if it is seen against the backdrop of missed historic opportunities since Europe's  erratic, clumsy and half-hearted attempts first to prevent, then to stop the Balkan wars of the early 1990s; and against that of its subsequent inability to find and apply the right combination of incentives and sanctions that would induce proper constitutional and governance reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina, negotiate a breakthrough between Greece and Macedonia, and ensure progress elsewhere.

Successes, if the process is seen through the prism of the reforms the EU has managed to [encourage](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/enlargement/western_balkans/) in internal legislation in several states (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and perhaps other aspirant states) and in a number of sectors (justice in particular). The EU is a big and very heavy machine. For obvious reasons, it has always been better at offering advice and help in very specific areas than in political and strategic thinking and planning. Once the new post-1990s map of the western Balkans was drawn, the EU started applying its general principles, criteria and procedures to each of the region's constituent states - though separately, as it focused on extending its own borders to encompass first Slovenia, then Croatia, while paying insufficient attention to broader regional dynamics. The EU learned some lessons on the way, which then helped it to fine-tune its support of some regional cooperation projects. But again, even these myriad initiatives seem to have been launched piecemeal, giving the impression that a coherent strategic policy frame is still lacking.

In the sphere of culture and intellectual creativity, the EU has long been blindfolded by the nationalist constituencies still in place, which resulted in its failure to grasp the potential of trans-border cooperation within the entire space of the former Yugoslavia. That potential goes far wider than what is today commonly called “Yugo-nostalgia”, for it is increasingly embraced by a young urban generation keen to explore broader cultural horizons and naturally sceptical about their parents' narrow “patriotic” narratives. But how could the EU ever have grasped that potential? Its politicians and citizens are themselves becoming increasingly concerned with their own national issues, imprisoned in their national narratives, and losing faith in the idea of European citizenship. While nationalism may (hopefully) have exhausted its energy in the ex-Yugoslav space, it looks to be on the rise in the rest of Europe. In that sense it could be suggested that while the western Balkans are becoming more European, Europe is slowly slipping towards "Balkanisation".

Indeed, the state of play within the EU gives even more reasons for concern. The prevailing single-minded obsession of its member-states with their individual financial competitiveness (a “beggar-my-neighbour” principle), the dire situation the EU has allowed its southern member-states to sink into, the bleak horizons for the youth of Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy (to name only these) - all make it even more remarkable that the governments of Croatia, Serbia and other [aspiring](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11283616) EU members in the region have managed to sustain a decent (though declining) level of domestic support for their EU accession objectives.

The EU’s ideological self-subjugation to the forces of the global financial market is also a bad sign for the future. The EU proudly (and with some evidence) claims to have been a catalyst of democratic change in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. But today, it is demonstrating increasingly - as in the case of Hungary - that it is much weaker where underpinning democracy in its own member-states is concerned. Does it have any coherent, joint political will - not to speak of the political tools - to prevent the growing army of its unemployed youth helping to fuel the ranks of violent nationalist desperadoes such as those of Greece's "Golden Dawn” - and other groups at the core of Europe?

This is not just a question of updating EU’s enlargement policy: it is one of strategy and leadership, which seem to be in extremely short supply across the union. A greater Europe-wide focus on the issue of youth employment, including a [summit](http://www.dw.de/youth-unemployment-takes-centerstage-at-summit-in-berlin/a-16925533) hosted in Berlin by Angela Merkel, is at least a positive sign of concern. But the condition of Europe in 2013 recalls the perestroika-era Soviet joke that socialism is good at addressing problems it has itself created. Everyone knows what happened there. Will capitalism do any better?