

Europe's Balkan gamble / The Financial Times

By Daniel Dombey in Brussels

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It's time to say a big hello to the European Union's most controversial prospective members yet: the war-battered states of the western Balkans.

Turkey may have grabbed all the attention over the last week but the likes of Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia are also heading for the EU's entrance and are much more likely to join in the end.

The EU's move to get things going with the ex-Yugoslav states is particularly controversial because of problems with alleged Balkan war criminals, as well as uneasy European public opinion. The EU's stance is also in clear contrast with the US's more confrontational attitude to this part of the world.

Once again, it's the same old story: the EU thinks it can get its way by engagement - that is, by being nice - while Washington's impulse is to hang tough.

First some context. Forget Turkey, at least for the time being. As the document launching Ankara's EU membership talks makes all too clear, the EU's big neighbour to the south is by no means assured of ever joining the club. European and Turkish diplomats also acknowledge that if Turkey doesn't join, the country won't collapse; in fact it will still probably keep looking west.

But there's a general consensus, at least in Europe's capitals, that the western Balkans need to join the EU or face continued isolation from the rest of the world.

Hence the events of the last ten days. In the early hours of October 4, Croatia began membership negotiations with the EU. This Monday, Serbia began its own talks on an EU association agreement, widely seen as a waystation to membership. In between the two events, Bosnia's ethnic Serb statelet effectively ended the impasse that has held up the start of Bosnia's own association negotiations. (EU types say the Bosnians were afraid of being left out in the cold after Serbia began its talks.) During the next few months, the European Commission will also come up with a response to Macedonia's request for membership negotiations. Brussels' answer is likely to be grudging, cautious and conditional, but it's all but certain to be a Yes.

And why is this all happening? You can name any one of a thousand reasons, but at heart the idea is that the EU offers the western Balkans their only chance at stability.

The present time is particularly sensitive because Serbia, the key state in the region, faces the prospect of being detached from both its partner state of Montenegro and its province of Kosovo. Hence the perceived need to make Serbia feel more at home in the arms of the EU.

But these are not popular prospective new members with the EU electorate. While a European Commission poll this year said 78 per cent of EU voters favour the entry of Switzerland (not a country that has much interest in joining), only 52 per cent supported Croatia, 43 per cent Macedonia, 42 per cent Bosnia and 40 per cent Serbia. For the last two countries, opponents across the EU outnumbered supporters, while in individual member states feelings can be still more pronounced.

Then there is the US. While officially Washington says it “respects” the EU's decisions on Croatia and Serbia, it has given every sign that it thinks the bloc is being too hasty.

Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb general, is still on the loose, as is Ante Gotovina, a war criminal indicted from Croatia. As long as that is the case, the US is defying the majority of its Nato fellow members in insisting that Croatia cannot begin Nato membership negotiations and that Serbia cannot start talks on the preparatory process known as Partnership for Peace. Contrast that with the EU's more accommodating line.

“Nato has to hold this line on these war criminals,” Nicholas Burns, the state department's head of policy, said in Brussels on Tuesday. “We can't forget and we cannot let these war criminals off the hook.”

He added that this summer he had been assured in Belgrade that the arrest of Mladic was imminent, but the rogue general remains undetained. But although the US insists that Nato membership is a big source of leverage, American officials privately concede that EU “perspective” for the Balkans is much more important.

The Americans' fear is that, with the beginning of EU talks, Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia may feel less pressure to act against war crimes suspects.

The Europeans' hope is that the start of those negotiations will give the region's leaders the political capital to do more and will provide stability at a dangerous time.

The next year or so should show who is right. If all goes smoothly and Gotovina, Mladic et al end up in the United Nations court in the Hague, the EU will be proved right.

But it's a big if. And even then Europe's public needs to be reconciled to life with the ex-Yugoslav states as EU members. Europe's big Balkan gamble has only just begun.

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