

## THE EU AND THE BALKANS: IS THERE A WEDDING IN SIGHT?

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The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) in cooperation with the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) and the European Policy Center (EPC), organised a panel discussion on EU and Western Balkan relations on Thursday, 28 June 2012.

The Declaration made at the 2003 summit in Thessaloniki states that the EU “*reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.*” Nine years later, CDRSEE Executive Director Nenad Sebek metaphorically said, “the Balkan states are tired of the long-term engagement. They are disappointed, their illusions are fading and they are turning towards populism and nationalism again. The EU, however, believes that the bride hasn’t prepared her dowry properly, so she doesn’t deserve to be wed. On the other hand, the bride thinks that the groom is too petty, demanding and indecisive.” Sebek concluded by saying that “both the bride and groom are right”.

Roza Balfur, political analyst at the EPC, believes that Western Balkan states, despite their proclamations, have yet to fundamentally deal with the ghosts of their past, take responsibility for their destiny and find a right leader with a pro-European vision.

A journalist from a prominent London weekly paper “The Economist” and a connoisseur of the situation in Southeast Europe, Tim Juda, praised the Western Balkans for its stable democracies, especially in comparison with that of Greece. “Greece is a country which was an example of democracy until recently”, he said, adding that “whether we like stable democracies or not is another question” Currently, the region is at a crossroads; “the road we will be taking towards the EU depends not only on us, but on the EU itself”. As for the chance of joining the EU, Juda believes that it is possible, but that the question now is what the European family will look like in the next eight years.

Executive Director of the EFB Hedvig Morvai, gave a similar opinion on the noticeable progress of the region on the path towards democracy. In a short political analysis of the Western Balkans, Morvai emphasized that we could, more or less, be satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of progress already made, but that we cannot deny the fact that the road will lead us towards democracy and European integration.

When talking about the challenges the rest of the Balkan countries are facing after Croatia will join the EU next year, Romana Vlahutin, Deputy of Croatian President Josipovic for Southeast Europe, gave a pledge to support her country. Regarding obstacles related to European integration, Vlahutin underlined unresolved issues such as identity and statehood which burden and destabilize countries in the region; uncertainties related to the future with the EU as well as changing perceptions. “Nobody owes us anything; we have to deserve the things we desire.”

Director General of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Stefano Sanino, repeated the well-known attitude of the EU: “Membership is a goal for all, but there are no shortcuts and privileges. The decision process has become more complicated, the nature of the future community of nations is uncertain and no matter how difficult it is, patience is essential”. Sanino refused to give the order of the future members and the dates, but other panellists agreed that the next member of the EU, after Croatia, will most probably be Montenegro, but not before 2020.

During the panel discussion, the common project of the CDRSEE and the EFB, the TV project *Vicinities*-as well as its accompanying book, were presented. This is the first ever news programme broadcast in five countries in the region on eight private and public TV stations. The series of five TV programmes which was broadcast in April and May 2012 will be continued by the end of the year. Producers of *Vicinities* said that the new topics would be more ambitious and painful, but that the ‘sunny side’ of the Balkans would be presented as well.