

# TURKEY AND ITS BALKAN NEIGHBORS: PARTNERS OR COMPETITORS?

*Enlargement has been the most successful policy instrument of the European Union. The current debate on enlargement fatigue, this paper argues, carries high political costs and casts doubts on Europe's credibility as a foreign policy actor. It also undermines the efforts of reformers in applicant countries. The paper explores the myths surrounding enlargement fatigue, and calls on Turkey not to ignore its Balkan neighbors. Turkey and its Balkans neighbours share more than a common history. There are many concrete lessons that can be learned and there are also many shared interests that will require joint initiatives across the region.*

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Enlargement has been the most successful foreign policy instrument of the European Union. This was also recognized in the last European Council resolutions in June this year, where European Heads of State solemnly concluded that:

enlargement is a historic opportunity contributing to ensure peace, security, stability, democracy, the rule of law as well as growth and prosperity in the European Union as a whole. Enlargement is equally helping the EU to become a more competitive and dynamic economy and be better prepared to meet the challenges of a globalized and changing world.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, enlargement has been singled out as *the* scapegoat for Europe's constitutional crisis and a growing sense of dissatisfaction among European citizens. The 2004 enlargement had gone too fast, another round would make the EU unworkable and, so many national politicians argued, EU citizens are irrevocably opposed to enlargement. Judging by most European media and public debates, one could almost get the sense that this is the emerging conventional wisdom.

News of Europe's *enlargement blues* had an immediate negative effect on applicant countries. Media and opinion makers in Turkey have been quick to point out that public support for Turkey's EU membership has been falling since the historic start of negotiations on 3 October last year. In Fall 2004, 62 percent of the Turkish public believed that membership of the EU will be a 'good thing'<sup>2</sup>. In the past six months public support for EU membership in Turkey plunged to 43 percent.<sup>3</sup> Critics of Turkey's membership bid cite opinion polls in Austria, where 8 out of 10 Austrians are openly opposed to Turkish membership<sup>4</sup>. They quote the German CSU leader Edmund Stoiber who declared on 21 March 2006 that Turkish accession is 'out of the question.'<sup>5</sup> Even EU optimists in Turkey question whether the EU will indeed, as reaffirmed at the last Council meeting in June, honor all existing commitments. They discard the Union's promise to assess each country based on its own merits with reference to the French referendum and the raging debates on *enlargement fatigue* and *absorption capacity*.

This paper argues that the debate on *enlargement fatigue* carries high political costs. Public speculation on the future of enlargement casts doubt on the credibility of the European Union as a foreign policy actor. It damages the EU's interests and reduces the Union's leverage with applicant countries. Talk of *enlargement fatigue* also seriously undermines the efforts of reformers in the countries struggling to prepare their countries

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union, *Presidency Conclusions*, 15-16 June 2006, Article 51, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Eurobarometer 62 Public Opinion in the European Union, National Report Turkey*, Autumn 2004, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Turkish Daily News, *Support for EU plunges in Turkey*, 7 July 2006

<sup>4</sup> According to Eurobarometer 63.4 of spring 2005, 80 percent of Austrians were against Turkey's EU accession, compared to 52 percent in Europe. For more information please go to [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm).

<sup>5</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 March 2006.

for EU membership. The pro- EU constituencies in Turkey and in the Western Balkans have been hit hardest by *enlargement fatigue*, while their opponents, from the Radical Party in Serbia to the ultra nationalists in Turkey, have been on the rise since June 2005. This is clearly not in the EU's self-interest.

In order to turn the tide on enlargement gloom, this paper argues, member states must communicate the success story of enlargement more effectively and resist populist enlargement bashing. Applicant countries must also take the initiative and join forces to create a new enlargement consensus.

Turkey and the countries of the Eastern and Western Balkans have more in common than a shared history. Turkey's road to Europe passes through the Balkans, geographically and politically. It would be a strategic mistake for Turkey to ignore the region that separates it from Central Europe. There are many concrete lessons that can be learned and there are also many shared interests, especially when it comes to visa liberalization or calling on the EU to honor past commitments. Joint initiatives could help both candidate and potential candidate countries to lobby more effectively for their interests in Brussels.

The protracted discussions last year ahead of the official start of negotiations on 3 October served as a reminder that aspiring candidate countries need strong supporters among member states – like Austria championing the cause of Croatia and Great Britain supporting Turkey. Applicant countries will need to identify key interest groups in individual member states supportive of enlargement and develop a substantive political communication strategy that addresses the real concerns in different EU countries. By building broad-based alliances, accession candidates can help each other and keep the EU's door open. *Enlargement fatigue*, if it really exists, is as much a challenge for Serbia and Macedonia as it is for Turkey.

### ***The myth of enlargement fatigue***

In the wake of the French “No” and the Dutch “Ne” in Spring 2005, spin doctors across Europe were quick to diagnose Europe's most current malaise. Within a few days, they seemed to discover a new disease brought by a highly contagious virus called *enlargement fatigue*. The virus and the disease spread quickly. The continental climate in France, Germany, and Austria seemed particularly prone and large parts of the public were quickly affected, including opinion makers across the political spectrum. The symptoms of *enlargement fatigue* can be summarized by an anti-Turkish position, public doubts on the European destination of the Western Balkans, and repeated calls for “deepening” instead of “widening.” While France and Germany seemed heavily affected, other parts of the European continent proved more resilient against the disease. *Enlargement fatigue* did not spread much in the political climate of Sweden, the UK, or Spain and the political immune system of Europe's new member states also proved resistant.

Alarmed by the growing anti-enlargement rhetoric, the Commission published an assessment of the economic impact of enlargement where it concluded that

The erosion of support for enlargement may have been principally a reflection of uncertainty associated with the economic slowdown in several key Member States.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of looking for ways to kick-start the stuttering economic motor, national politicians preferred to blame enlargement for “social dumping,” Polish plumbers and high unemployment. A recent EU poll confirmed that enlargement gloom is highest in countries generally afraid of globalization. In France, 72 percent of respondents fear that enlargement and globalization threatens their jobs.<sup>7</sup> The old member states most relaxed about enlargement are also those who view globalization as an opportunity.

The rushed diagnosis that enlargement was to blame for the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands was weak on two accounts: it misinterpreted the causes for the Dutch and French ‘no’ and it ignored the potential political costs of ‘non – enlargement.’ The alternative to enlargement in the Balkans is the continuation of costly protectorate-like administrations, political and economic instability, police and military missions. The choice for Europe in the Balkans is not really between enlargement or non-enlargement, but between running ‘protectorates’ or integrating the region. Renouncing Turkey’s membership perspective would not only be renegeing on a long-standing promises, it would also put at risk the privileged partnership and close relations between Turkey and the European Union. Backsliding on the promise of full membership could mean that Europe is losing Turkey as a partner and political ally. It could also mean a stop or even reversal of Turkey’s current democratisation process. This is neither in the interest of European elites nor is it what European citizens want.

A closer look at the results of the French and Dutch referendum reveals that their citizens did *not* vote against enlargement. According to numerous opinion polls, very few listed enlargement as a factor in their vote. The main reason why Dutch voters rejected the constitutional treaty was a perceived lack of information. More than one third cited the lack of information as their main concern, while only six percent apparently meant to oppose further EU enlargement. A solid 41 percent of the Dutch public actually supports Turkey’s EU accession. In sharp contrast to official rhetoric, between Spring and Fall 2005, the level of support for enlargement actually increased in the Netherlands from 45 percent to 48 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The picture in France is similar. The main reasons motivating French citizens to vote ‘no’ were economic: 31 percent of no-voters believed that the European Constitution would have negative effects on the employment situation, 26 percent voted no because of the already weak economic situation in France and 19 percent thought that the draft was

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement, two years after: an economic evaluation*, Occasional Papers, No. 24, May 2006, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> The Economist, *A case of enlargement fatigue*, 13 May 2006, p.34.

<sup>8</sup> European Stability Initiative, *Beyond Enlargement Fatigue? Part I The Dutch debate on Turkish Accession*, 24 April 2006, see p.21- 22, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

economically too liberal. Only 6 percent voted no because they do not want to see Turkey in the EU and a mere 3 percent opposed further enlargement.<sup>9</sup> In fact, public perception of enlargement was far more nuanced and favorable than the official rhetoric in *Quai d'Orsay*, the *Binnenhof* or the *Bundestag* would suggest. Today, a majority of Europeans are in favor of enlargement (55 percent), indeed more than the number of people who believe that the European Union is good for their countries (49 percent).<sup>10</sup> Enlargement fatigue is actually not about public opinion at all.

### ***The power of enlargement***

The transformative power of the European Union has been impressive. Across the European continent, the prospect of European integration has mobilized political energies and transformed countries from root to branch. The carrot of full membership has been the Union's most powerful tool to expand its sphere of stability and prosperity from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

According to the European Stability Initiative (ESI), the secret of success of the European integration process is what ESI calls the process of *member-state building* – involving institution-building techniques developed specifically for the enlargement process by the European Commission. The tools and methods applied differ sharply from those traditionally used for development, post-conflict reconstruction or the EU's own Neighborhood Policy. According to ESI, *member-state building*

...involved the creation of new institutions on a large scale, "screening," hard-hitting annual progress reports taking the European acquis as a benchmark, and National Development Planning to buttress multi-annual public investment strategies. It involved pre-accession assistance for rural development, agriculture and infrastructure, and for the institution building needed to develop absorption capacity.<sup>11</sup>

The process of *member-state building* has worked miracles in countries as diverse as Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Turkey. Bulgaria, for example, has experienced a miraculous transformation from financial collapse to economic stabilization. Bulgaria submitted its application for EU membership in December 1995. A succession of disastrous policy choices in Bulgaria led to a financial collapse in 1996–97, with a run on the banking system, falling industrial and agricultural production, and sharply negative growth, necessitating an IMF stabilization program.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, in 1999, the Commission presented its second regular report on Bulgaria's progress towards accession and recommended opening formal negotiations. In 2002, the European Commission

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, *The European Commission: Post-referendum survey in France*, June 2005, p.17

<sup>10</sup> The Economist, *A case of enlargement fatigue*, 13 May 2006, p.34

<sup>11</sup> European Stability Initiative, *The Helsinki Moment: European Member-State Building in the Balkans*, 1 February 2005, p.11, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

<sup>12</sup> European Stability Initiative (2005), p.5

considered Bulgaria a functioning market economy, with growth rates exceeding six percent and an average GDP per capita of about 6,300 euros.<sup>13</sup>

Another recent example of the EU's power to transform countries is Macedonia. A concerted effort involving an EU Military and Police Mission, the appointment of an EU Special Envoy, reconstruction assistance, and a credible promise of eventual EU accession, rescued Macedonia from the brink of civil war in 2001. Only four years later, in December 2005, Macedonia was granted candidate status in recognition of the successful implementation of the Ohrid Peace Agreement and the reform efforts of the government. Without doubt, Macedonia represents one of the European Union's most impressive foreign policy successes.

Turkey's own "miracle on the Bosphorus" has taken many opponents of Turkey's EU aspirations by surprise. The impressive speed of reforms undertaken in the run up to the December 2004 decision to open accession negotiations was nothing short of revolutionary. The abolition of the State Security Courts, the launch of Kurdish language broadcasting on state networks, and Turkey's constructive position on Cyprus would have been unthinkable without the EU perspective. The Turkish case also shows how the current debate on enlargement fatigue reduces the EU's leverage on the reform process in the applicant countries. As Turkey's membership perspective became more uncertain, the speed of reforms slowed down. Recent *reform fatigue* in Ankara mirrors the EU's own *enlargement fatigue*.

The challenge for the coming years is to continue to export the virtuous cycle of democratic consolidation and economic development already underway in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Turkey to the other countries of the Western Balkans. It is in Ankara, Sarajevo, Skopje, and Tirana where Europe's credibility is put to test most directly.

### ***Staying the course***

The European Commission and the European Council so far resisted the populist temptation of enlargement bashing and stayed their course. Over the past 12 months, a series of small breakthroughs reinforced the notion that the accession process was still moving forward. On 3 October 2005, the Union officially opened accession negotiations with Croatia and Turkey. Nine months later, EU foreign ministers closed the first chapter of negotiations with Croatia and Turkey (Science and Research), once opposition from the Greek Cypriot leadership was overcome in a last-minute diplomatic rescue mission. For many in Turkey the news came as a welcome surprise during the much-feared Austrian EU Presidency. Much to the relief of Chief EU Negotiator and Minister for Economy Ali Babacan, Turkey's EU accession process seemed on track.

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<sup>13</sup> European Commission on Bulgaria,  
<http://ec.europa.eu/comm/enlargement/bulgaria/index.htm>

On 17 December 2005, Macedonia was granted candidate status. The Commission hereby recognized the commitment of the Macedonian government to implement the Ohrid Peace Agreement, establish stable and democratic institutions, and cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.<sup>14</sup> The European Council subsequently presented a document, the *European Partnership*, identifying the main challenges and priorities that need to be addressed ahead of the opening of negotiations. The list of priorities includes reforms of the electoral process, in particular smooth elections in July, upgrading the fight against corruption, and curbing administrative red tape.

Under the aegis of the European Union, the countries of the region are also moving closer together. On 6 April, heads of state established a regional free-trade area in Bucharest and on 9 June they signed a final agreement on a European Common Aviation Area. Meanwhile, there has also been some progress in the ratification process of a joint Energy Community Treaty for South-East Europe.

In May, the European Commission presented another hard-hitting monitoring report assessing Bulgaria's and Romania's progress in priority areas. In the case of Bulgaria, the Commission singled out eight priority areas where Bulgaria must show substantial improvement ahead of January 2007 to avoid activation of the safeguard clause, which allows the Union to postpone Bulgaria's accession. These areas include public administration and judicial reform, the fight against corruption and human trafficking, as well as improved children and minority protection. Despite calls for postponing Bulgaria's and Romania's accession date, the Commission and Council expressed confidence that "both countries can overcome the deficits stated to reach the envisaged date of accession on 1 January 2007."<sup>15</sup> The granting of Bulgaria and Romania's membership depends, now, on the final assessment in the next monitoring report planned for early October.

On 12 June 2006, the European Union signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Albania. Even though SAA's are little more than trade agreements with few benefits for the accession country, they are the very first step on the road to full EU membership. After three years of protracted negotiations, this was an important political signal for Albania. Emerging from half a century of isolation and authoritarian rule under dictator Enver Hoxha, followed by a decade of political turmoil and instability coming to a head in street violence in 1997, it marks the first step on the path to *member state building*.

The month of June also saw another historic decision. The Peace Implementation Council (or PIC) made up of all signatory countries to the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war in Bosnia, decided at its last meeting in June of this year to close the Office of the

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission, *Commission Opinion on the application from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for membership of the European Union*, Communication from the Commission, Brussels, 9 November 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Council of the European Union, *Presidency Conclusions*, 15-16 June 2006

High Representative (OHR). This decision represents a milestone for Bosnia Herzegovina. It brings an end to Bosnia's post-war anomaly and sets in motion the transformation of the country from an internationally-administered "quasi colony" to a normal European state. Meanwhile, a dynamic team, led jointly by a Bosniak and Serb director, is overseeing Bosnia's negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union. The agreement is expected to be signed early next year, a few months ahead of the eventual closure of the Office of the High Representative.

Last, but not least, the map of the Balkans has also been redrawn. On 21 May, tiny Montenegro, home to just over half a million people, voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence from Serbia. Relations between the two republics had been strained to the extent that Serbia and Montenegro was even expelled from this year's Eurovision Song Contest for failure to agree on a joint candidate. The independence vote ended years of bickering and political stalemate. Montenegro's independence was swiftly recognized in the region and by the European Union, leaving only neighboring Kosovo as the last disputed break-away province of former Yugoslavia.

### ***Unfinished business***

As the countries of the Western Balkans have been making slow progress on the road to Brussels, Kosovo and Serbia have been falling further behind. The legacy of Milosevic still hangs over contemporary Serbian politics. In the coming months, Serbia faces two main obstacles on the path to integration: a looming decision on the future status of Kosovo and the capture of fugitive war criminal Ratko Mladic.

In April of this year, negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Serbia were suspended by the EU due to the government's failure to hand over Ratko Mladic. Wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, General Mladic is considered the master mind behind the Srebrenica massacre, killing more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys. As long as he remains at large, Serbia risks further international isolation.

Nominally still part of Serbia, Kosovo has been governed by a UN administration put in place in summer 1999 after NATO's bombing campaign successfully drove out Milosevic's army and paramilitary troops. After six long years of political uncertainty, the international community finally agreed in November 2005 to initiate a process to define Kosovo's final status. Given the diametrically opposed views held in Belgrade and Prishtina, it was clear from the start that this would be a tough process.

Serbia's political class continues to uphold the claim that Kosovo – once home to a medieval Serb kingdom and a number of important Serb Orthodox churches and monasteries – must remain an integral part of Serbia. Considered the cradle of Serbian national identity, Belgrade's leadership uses the Kosovo card to invoke populist support.

In his latest speech on 28 June, Serb Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica repeated “what every Serb should know: Kosovo has always been and will always be part of Serbia”.<sup>16</sup>

Serbia’s political stance makes it hard for the remaining Serb minority of 130,000, who live scattered across mixed rural communities, to engage constructively with their Albanian neighbours. Kosovo Albanians who make up more than 90 percent of the population want nothing but independence.

Through the course of the year, a consensus emerged among leading countries, including the U.S. and Britain, that independence, albeit limited by the continued military presence of NATO and an EU-staffed international justice and police mission, is the most likely outcome of the ongoing talks. Kosovo’s independence would seal the long and painful process of Yugoslavia’s dissolution that started with Slovenia’s breakaway in 1991 and ended in the disastrous wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

### ***Learning from your neighbours: Turkey and the Balkans***

A few months from now, the political constellation in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood will look very different. It is likely that by early 2007, Bulgaria and Romania will be full members of the European Union and Kosovo will be an independent state. Croatia and Turkey will continue their accession negotiations, – as long as the “train crash” over Cyprus can be avoided – prepare National Development Plans, and face harsh criticism from the Commission in the form of regular monitoring reports.. Hopefully, General Mladic will face trial in the Hague, and Serbia will have restarted its SAA negotiations. Macedonia will probably be given a date to start accession negotiations. Bosnia Herzegovina will have concluded its SAA agreement and domestic institutions will prepare for the day after the closure of the Office of the High Representative. A few months from now, Bosnia Herzegovina and Albania might test the EU’s Thessaloniki promise and submit their own membership application.

It is in Turkey’s own national interest that its Balkan neighbors succeed on their path to join the European Union. Far from being competitors, applicant countries must treat each other as partners and allies. The more diverse the collection of countries that apply, the more differentiated the debate on enlargement will be. As there is no pan-European debate on enlargement, the more national interests rally behind the accession process of individual applicant countries, the stronger the pro-enlargement camp in the EU will become.

Applicant countries must identify their allies among EU member states and build strong alliances in favour of the accession process. In order to do so, they must carefully study the different debates in EU member states and develop multi-layered communication strategies targeting individual national debates. The Netherlands, for example, while

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<sup>16</sup> Koha Ditore, speech made by Serb Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica during his visit to Kosovo on 28 June 2006

being strict on Turkey fulfilling all EU criteria, have been supportive of Turkish accession.<sup>17</sup> Austria, Germany, and Slovenia, while arguing strongly in favor of the Western Balkans' EU accession, provide only lukewarm support for Turkey's EU membership bid. Greece pursues business interests in Albania and Macedonia *and* has a strategic interest in Turkey's EU membership. Italy enjoys close historical and economic ties with Albania and has a keen interest in Albania's economic recovery. France has suffered the largest number of peace-keeping casualties in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s and played a key role in supporting the EU engagement in Macedonia.<sup>18</sup> Serbia is seen by most European member states as *the* strategic market in the Balkans. Investors are hopeful that – once Serbia is back on the EU track – it will experience an equally miraculous economic transformation similar to Bulgaria and Romania. The successful *Europeanization* of Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo is, fundamentally, a question of credibility for the European Union. Europe's entire foreign policy and development model is put to the test in Sarajevo, Mostar, Prishtina, and Mitrovica. If Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo fail, Europe has failed.

There are several lessons that can be learned by Turkey and the Western Balkans from previous EU candidates.

First, concerning the region's "image problem." The Western Balkans are generally portrayed as havens of organised crime, with weak and corrupt governments, while Turkey is often labelled as fundamentally "un-European," backward, and Muslim. It is important for applicant countries to keep in mind that previous candidates faced similar image problems. But, an image change requires more than blunt public-relations. The best way to deal with clichés is to provide substantive information and empirical analysis explaining changes and developments in the respective country.

Turkey is not the first candidate country, whose "European-ness" has been challenged. Not long ago, former French President Giscard D'Estaing and former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt declared that neither Bulgaria nor Romania should join the Union, arguing that they belonged to a different civilization - the Orthodox and Byzantine tradition.<sup>19</sup> Today nobody questions whether Bulgaria or Romania are indeed "European." Turkey is, also, no longer the only Muslim country knocking on the EU's door. Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo all have substantial Muslim populations. "European Islam" practiced in Bosnia and Kosovo coexists comfortably with Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. Some of the opponents of Turkey, who argue that Islam is

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<sup>17</sup> The European Stability Initiative has published an analysis on the Turkish debate in the Netherlands, titled '*Beyond Enlargement Fatigue? Part I The Dutch debate on Turkish Accession*', [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org).

<sup>18</sup> European Stability Initiative, *Moment of Truth: Macedonia, the EU Budget and the destabilisation of the Balkans*, 14 December 2005, p. 3, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

<sup>19</sup> European Stability Initiative, *The Helsinki Moment: European Member-State Building in the Balkans*, 1 February 2005, p.5, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

incompatible with EU membership, inconsistently support the membership of the Western Balkans.

There are numerous examples of countries that have successfully re-branded their image. In the past, even countries as uncontroversial as Slovenia struggled to overcome prejudice and a negative image. According to public opinion polls conducted in 1994 there was considerable opposition to the prospect of Slovenia's entry in the EU: some 33 percent of respondents did not favor Slovenia's entry.<sup>20</sup> Today, Slovenia is seen as a shining star among the new member states. The last European Council congratulated Slovenia, as the first new member state, on meeting all convergence criteria to adopt the Euro on 1 January 2007.<sup>21</sup>

The lesson for Turkey and the Western Balkans is that real and visible progress on the reform agenda combined with a targeted and clever public relations campaign can realistically change the minds of Europeans. Sometimes humor helps to overcome negative images held by some EU member states of prospective member states, as in the case of Poland. The Polish response to the French debate portraying Polish plumbers as symbols of all evils associated with social dumping and globalization showed maturity and a good sense of humor. The Polish Tourist board launched an ad campaign with posters of good looking Polish plumbers inviting French tourists with the following words: "Je reste en Pologne, venez nombreux!"<sup>22</sup>.

Another area where Turkey and the Western Balkans can learn from previous candidate countries concerns economic development, in particular rural development and administrative reform. The countries of former Yugoslavia experienced decades of industrial decline, conflict-related destruction and large-scale population displacement, leaving their economies in shatters. Across the region, out-dated infrastructure and weak public administrations translate into low levels of investment and stagnant growth. Large parts of Turkey, in particular the Black Sea region and Southeast Anatolia, face a similar development challenge. Across the region, economic development is impeded by high levels of illiteracy, low participation rates of women and a lack of infrastructure in remote areas. Given its size, Turkey also faces a particular challenge when it comes to regional disparities.

Rural development is one of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans and Turkey. Large parts of the population depend on subsistence farming, unable to compete in a European market. Trapped behind visa barriers and no prospect of finding employment, many young Albanians, Bosnians, Serbs, Turks, and Kurds face a stark choice between a life of subsistence farming or migration. The earlier these countries are required to comply with the EU's funding requirements in order to gain access to EU rural development assistance, the better for the region and for Europe.

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<sup>20</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement, two years after: an economic evaluation*, Occasional Papers No 24, p.16, May 2006

<sup>21</sup> Council of the European Union, *Presidency Conclusions*, 15-16 June 2006

<sup>22</sup> 'I will stay in Poland, please come (visit) in large numbers!'

Rural and regional development has always been one of the principal goals of the EU. The Treaty of Rome already outlined the need to overcome disparities in regional development within the Union. In response, the EU created the structural and cohesion funds in order to help poorer regions on the EU's periphery to catch up. Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain all benefited greatly from these funds in the past. The more recent experience of Bulgaria is particularly relevant for Turkey and the Western Balkans.

The impact of EU-inspired reforms in Bulgaria was most visible in the area of rural and agricultural policy. At the time, nearly half of the Bulgarian population lived in rural areas, and 25 percent of total employment was in agriculture.<sup>23</sup> With one of the weakest administrations among applicant countries, Bulgaria was completely unprepared for the accession process. Similar to Turkey, Bulgaria lacked the structures and capacities required for the accession process, from rural development policies to regional policies or regional statistics. The EU requirements for analysis, planning, and budgeting triggered an administrative revolution. For Antoinette Primaterova, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in charge of European integration, it was the process of negotiations that led to the development of administrative capacity.<sup>24</sup>

In 1998, Bulgaria set up two task forces to prepare a "National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan" for SAPARD (EU programme for Rural Development) and a national transport and environmental strategy for ISPA (EU programme for Transport and Environment). These strategies had to be compatible with a "National Economic Development Plan 2000-2006" that also served as the basic programming document for most EU assistance.<sup>25</sup> For the first time in Bulgaria, strategies and proposed measures had to be based on a careful analysis of the status quo and plans and strategies of different ministries had to be coordinated and integrated. The EU also introduced performance indicators, against which progress could be measured, as well as monitoring and audit mechanisms. None of the five year plans prepared by Turkey's State Planning Organisation today or the numerous strategy papers churned out by international consultants in Bosnia and Serbia would stand the EU test.

The credible membership perspective and the realistic prospect of considerable EU assistance proved an extremely strong incentive for administrative reform. There was a clear linkage between improving governmental structures, or establishing new ones, and increased aid. The National Agricultural and Rural Development Plan included a budget of 849 million euros in investments from 2002 to 2006, of which the EU would contribute 385 million euros. *Europeanization* literally paid off.

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<sup>23</sup> Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture, *Bulgaria National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan*, p. 12, [www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/external/enlarge/countries/bulgaria/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/external/enlarge/countries/bulgaria/index_en.htm)

<sup>24</sup> ESI interview with Antoinette Primaterova, Sofia, 2005

<sup>25</sup> Bulgarian Ministry of Finance, *Bulgarian National Economic Development Plan*, [www.aeaf.minfin.bg/en/publications.php](http://www.aeaf.minfin.bg/en/publications.php)

There is more to learn from the experience of Bulgaria's accession process. In 2001, several years ahead of accession, the Union lifted all visa restrictions for Bulgarians. This came as a result of a successful campaign coupled with concrete reforms in the area of border management, ID cards, and readmission agreements. Whereas the average Bulgarian probably did not take much notice of the intricate process of administrative reform, visa-free travel was like a dream come true.

Visa free travel is also a priority for EU reformers in Turkey and the Western Balkans. This would be an ideal opportunity to take the initiative and build a coalition around this shared interest. National politicians should not be satisfied with the vague promises of visa facilitation offered by the European Union. Facilitation will only make travel easier for a limited group of people, but not for the average voter. As a first step, the applicant countries should study the Bulgarian example and develop a roadmap of measurable institutional and legal reforms required by the Union. In addition, widespread fears and populist concerns related to mass migration in several member states should be taken seriously. A successful campaign for visa free travel would not only be highly popular in the applicant countries, it would also be a "test run" for applicant countries to develop an effective communication strategy that combines "concrete reforms" with "effective communication."

An effective communication strategy takes differences and sensitivities of individual EU member states into account. To do so, it must be based on a careful analysis of different national debates and it must consist of tailored messages targeting different interest groups in the respective countries. While public opinion polls matter, a substantive communication strategy must focus on key interest groups, including policy makers, members of parliament, political parties, editors-in-chief and influential think-tanks. There can be no one-size-fits-all communication strategy for all member states. And, there can be no effective communication strategy without measurable progress on reforms.

### *A wake-up call*

However unsettling the calls for a "freeze" or "slow down" of enlargement might seem for applicant states, it is important to remember that the phenomenon of *enlargement fatigue* is almost as old as the European Union itself. In 1977, Francois Mitterand warned that "Neither Greece nor Spain are in a position to join the Community. Accession is neither in their interest nor is it in our interest."<sup>26</sup> Soon after, however, Greece, Spain, and Portugal joined the Union.

The most fundamental and worrying difference between previous enlargement gloom and the situation faced by contemporary applicant states are the responses of some member states, in particular France. The French decision to subject future enlargement to approval per popular referendum destroyed a long-held European consensus that each accession

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<sup>26</sup> European Stability Initiative, *Beyond Enlargement Fatigue? Part I The Dutch debate on Turkish accession*, 24 April 2006, Introduction, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

country will be assessed on its own merits. The merit based approach to the accession process had won the EU considerable credit in the past. But, the Damocles Sword of rejection by public referendum now hangs over governments, steering their countries through the arduous process of trying to meet all necessary criteria, from Copenhagen to Rome, Maastricht, and Schengen. In the future, a country's popular perception in one member state might matter more than meeting the Copenhagen criteria.

This is an issue of real concern and it requires a robust response from the European Union that goes beyond rhetorical promises to "honour past commitments." EU member states must openly warn of the populist temptation to call for a referendum on future enlargement. Continued *enlargement bashing* undermines Europe's credibility as a foreign policy player and drastically reduces Europe's leverage in the region. From compliance with the Hague Tribunal to institutional reforms, from a peaceful solution to Cyprus to a resolution of the Kosovo status, from breakthroughs in the protection of human rights to judicial reform, the promise of EU membership is the basis for all EU conditionality. If political elites in Serbia, Bosnia, Turkey, Macedonia, or Albania cease to believe that EU membership is a credible perspective, there will be little incentive to undertake difficult reforms.

It is time for Europe to wake up from *enlargement fatigue* and do what Europe is best at doing: promoting stability and prosperity to its neighbors. This is not only in the European Union's self-interest; it is in fact what the European public wants: a majority of Europeans are in favor of enlargement. Communicating the success story of enlargement to the European public will be the challenge for national politicians in the coming years.