

## **Troubled transition. The Western Balkans *en route* to the European Union**

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### **Abstract**

The Western Balkans are and not only for their geographical proximity an area of great strategic importance for Europe. The accession of the countries from this region to the European Union would significantly reduce risks of instability and will increase significantly Europe's security. Yet, the process of accession is proceeding with ups and downs and all in all rather slowly. And this despite the fact that the enlargement to this area does not seem to present significant economic problems.

Difficulties in integrating the Western Balkans derive more from the major institutional and governance problems affecting those countries. Weak, in some cases utterly complex state structures, political elites with very short vision and lack of statehood, corruption and organized crime represent the main obstacles to a smooth progress towards accession.

At the same time, the political proposal of the European Union based on the Stabilisation and Association Process elaborated at the beginning of 2000 has been unable to generate the positive dynamic we have seen in the past decade in Central and Eastern Europe. The paper argues that the European Union should revise its strategy *vis-à-vis* the Western Balkans offering a more concrete perspective of accession, paralleled by more adequate financial resources to support the process. The countries of the region should respond with a more ambitious effort to the point that the process of integration must become the overarching theme in the political agenda of each of the countries concerned. The solution of the Balkan 'problem' is not easy and probably requires a more significant engagement and thorough reflection that Europe can offer at the moment. However, if, as many European policy-makers keep saying, the Balkans is a European problem, Europe should take full responsibility for it.

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\* The content of the paper reflects purely personal opinion and in no way can be referred to as representing the stance of the European Commission.