

Comment: NATO and EU Align Balkan Agendas

Author: [Michael Sahlin](#)

Increasingly close cooperation in the region is driving the local reform process forward.

Until recently, the European Union could not have been described as a "security enhancing organisation". But recently, two things have changed, particularly in the Western Balkans.

The first is the EU's increasing engagement in the "hard" power issues of crisis management, including military engagement. Late in 2002, the EU's first military mission took over from NATO in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, FYROM. Recently, it has assumed leadership of the military mission in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

The EU is also increasingly involved in policing issues – a vital, but until recently neglected component of crisis management. Again, the Western Balkans provides two examples - Proxima, the EU police mission in Skopje, and EUPM, the EU police mission in Sarajevo.

The EU's "security enhancing" role goes beyond these relatively short-term approaches. In the Stabilisation and Association Process, SAP, the EU has set up a mechanism to bridge the gap between post-conflict management and longer-term political and economic development.

NATO might argue that its own Partnership for Peace program, PfP, developed earlier than the SAP and with a broader geographical application, has performed a similar job.

The point is that both the NATO and EU agendas are broadly aligned and that this is reflected in the broad thrust of both the SAP and the PfP.

This joint agenda is the second factor that has brought the two organisations closer in cooperation in the Western Balkans over the past two years.

Such cooperation has helped drive the reform process forward throughout the region, particularly in Skopje, Tirana and Zagreb that signed the Adriatic Charter in May 2003.

NATO and the EU have a joint agenda for the Western Balkans, which is to see the emergence of stable, prosperous and peaceful democracies.

To achieve this, the Alliance and the Union have merely employed different tools. The main one on the EU side is the SAP, and on the NATO side, the PfP.

In addition, both organisations have consciously decided to offer the Western Balkan states something beyond these - namely, membership.

NATO and the EU have made it clear that all countries in the region are eligible. No comparable offer has been made to the countries of the Caucasus, or to Ukraine, or Moldova. It is, therefore, significant and should not be underestimated as a stabilising factor in itself.

The time it takes them to achieve membership of both organisations will, of course, differ. Most Western Balkan countries will join NATO before they join the EU.

But this is essentially up to the countries themselves, for both NATO and the EU are clubs with similar conditions to be met before joining.

It means that in the Western Balkans our political agendas match one another to a high degree and that the two organisations can work very closely together in the region.

Aside from the technical aspects, the broad conditions for membership of both organisations can be broken down into three main areas – governance, judiciary and international cooperation.

Governance is perhaps the most obvious. NATO and the EU are democratic clubs that require members to exhibit high standards of governance. All Western Balkan states pass this essential test. The Adriatic Charter countries also pass the test of civilian control over the military.

When it comes to the efficiency, probity, transparency and diversity of public institutions, the picture is more mixed, however.

For membership of the EU to work for this country, for example, the EU needs to be sure that decisions by the government are going to be acted on within a reasonable time.

Probity is also vital. Again, for institutional and goodwill reasons, the EU and NATO insist on impeccable standards of personal conduct within the governing structures of member states.

Both organisations provide substantial financial transfers to prospective and actual members. The taxpayers of the existing member states have as much right to be sure their money is well spent as do the citizens of the Western Balkan states. Probity and efficiency go together – as do corruption and inefficiency.

Transparency might seem a curious thing for either a military alliance or a political and economic union to demand of its members.

Clearly, government should not be so transparent as to allow the reading of every document as soon as it is written. One should have an open mind – and an open government – but not so open that one's brain falls out, to paraphrase the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Linus Pauling.

But government institutions should be open to scrutiny and senior civil servants and ministers should be prepared to go if they are found to be below standard. That is accountability.

The final requirement of government structures in prospective member states is to reflect the diversity of the states they serve. Diversity can be a strength, not a weakness, as it is sometimes perceived in the region.

Both NATO and the EU are diverse in terms of language, culture, and political and legal systems. No one

would call either organisation weak.

Our interest in diversity and the advancement of minorities is not only a matter of human rights; it is also a call to the countries of the region to make a virtue of the necessity of fully incorporating their minority groups into mainstream political life.

As the government institutions of the Adriatic Charter countries have become increasingly efficient, transparent and representative, NATO and the EU are starting to focus more on their judiciaries.

In FYROM, which has a population of just over 2 million, about a million legal cases have built up in the courts. Even I can do the maths needed to work out the ratio of unresolved cases per head of the population. So can prospective investors.

Who will invest in a project if they cannot prove in court that they own the property that they are using? Croatia suffers from similar court "sclerosis" and property rights are similarly hard to enforce in Albania.

Any number of factors can be produced to explain this, ranging from inadequate funding, staffing, training and equipment to too many new laws, political interference and corruption.

Some, or all, may be true but rather than point fingers at the culprits, we need to point a collective finger at the problem and identify solutions.

The final element of our vision for the Western Balkans concerns international cooperation. For this, the Adriatic Charter is a model of regional cooperation.

Bilateral and multilateral cooperation between and within the three Adriatic Charter countries has increased significantly since the charter was signed.

Another aspect concerns international cooperation with organisations such as the international war crimes tribunal, ICTY.

Cooperation with the Hague is not only desirable in itself, but feeds into a broader agenda concerning the rule of law.

NATO and the EU do not only promote cooperation with the tribunal to hold individuals to account for actions that were contrary to the laws of war and humanity, they want to see the governments of the region demonstrate good faith in applying the rule of law impartially. No government should be in a position to second-guess an independent court.

All the Western Balkan states will in due course fulfil their destiny of joining the EU and NATO. It is only a question of time and effort.

NATO and the EU are here to provide advice, assistance and, occasionally, admonition. But the political effort, which includes making difficult and unpopular decisions, has to come from the Western Balkan countries themselves. We cannot make these choices for them.

Michael Sahlin is the EU`s special representative to Skopje.

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