

## **Obstacles to Accession**

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Western Balkan states knocking on EU's door have a lot of problems to overcome before they're invited in.

The accession of ten new members to the European Union on May 1 this year, with Bulgaria and Romania due to follow suit in 2007, is turning the spotlight on those next in line for membership.

Chris Patten, EU Commissioner for External Relations, said in May last year that the map of the EU will not be complete until the countries of the western Balkans are included, a sentiment reaffirmed at the EU summit in Thessaloniki the following month.

But while it was made clear that EU policy is to support the western Balkan states in "their preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership", a positive outcome is far from inevitable.

All of the aspiring Balkan states have significant obstacles to overcome. The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s earned the former republics, with the exception of Slovenia, a reputation for promoting an aggressive brand of nationalism that fuels conflict and instability. The economic and political legacies of those wars are still keenly felt in the region.

Croatia is the most ambitious of the aspiring candidates, with an optimistic government hoping to join alongside Romania and Bulgaria as early as 2007. It was also the first to lodge an official application for membership in February last year.

After the European Commission issued a positive report earlier this month, Croatia this week got the all important green light, known as an "avis", from Brussels, which has opened the door to formal membership negotiations.

Earlier, its accession bid was frustrated by the issue of war crimes. The international community had made it clear that unless all suspected war criminals were surrendered to the Hague tribunal, Croatia had little hope of EU membership.

Britain and the Netherlands long held up ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, SAA, which Croatia had signed in 2001, until the country's main war crimes suspect, General Ante Gotovina, was handed over to the Hague court.

Although Gotovina remains at large, the court has now expressed satisfaction with Zagreb's level of cooperation, thus removing the principal obstacle to Croatia's membership.

The "avis" is a considerable coup for the centre-right government, headed by the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, the party led formerly by Croatia's nationalist independence leader, Franjo Tudjman. Its return to power last year was initially greeted cautiously by the international community, in spite of claims by the party that it had reformed itself.

What does make Croatia different from several other countries in the western Balkans is the widely-held

belief in Croatia itself that the country must conform to EU standards. Suzana Jasic, head of Gong, an NGO concerned with citizenship and democracy, is convinced that Croatians want to live in a democracy and are ready to change.

Macedonia, like Croatia, has been working hard on the EU diplomatic front and submitted an application on March 22 this year, a huge step for a country that almost collapsed into civil war in 2001, when NATO intervened to halt a conflict between the country's large ethnic Albanian minority and the army. Public support for EU membership is high, at about 87 per cent, according to a recent poll. Unlike Croatia, the country has no outstanding issues with the tribunal.

The main challenges facing the government in Skopje will be economic and few expect these to be resolved quickly. As Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski warned when submitting the application, the country still faces a "long and difficult road" before joining, "but we know that this road has no alternative".

The case in both Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina is more complex. Not only is there a higher level of antipathy towards the EU, but both countries have been saddled with convoluted political and organisational structures which present significant obstacles to achieving the reforms required before negotiations on an SAA can start.

When Serbian prime minister Vojislav Kostunica recently declared that relations with the Hague tribunal are not a priority, he instantly raised new doubts about Serbia's commitment to Europe as well. Whereas in Croatia and Macedonia both governments and electorates are keen to see their international standing improved, Belgrade seems less willing to abandon an isolationist nationalist ideology.

Constitutional problems are equally fundamental. Serbia remains yoked to Montenegro in an unstable arrangement known as a State Union. At the same time, uncertainty over the final status of Kosovo - nominally part of Serbia but in practice an international protectorate - is likely to prevent any further progress toward signing an SAA in the near future.

Although there is more political will to create closer ties to Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where optimistic officials are putting forward 2009 as a possible accession date, a recent poll has shown that membership is not a priority for any of the country's three ethnic groups.

As in the case of Serbia, many observers see the country's elaborate constitutional structure, dividing competencies between two virtually independent entities, as a complicating factor in implementing necessary reforms. The EU's recent feasibility study set out 16 areas in which changes have to be made before an SAA can be implemented.

In theory, the expansion of the EU stands to benefit member states and candidates alike. The process of political and economic integration has already helped the peoples of the EU achieve some of the highest living standards in the world.

But the Balkan countries need to realise that the future enlargement of the EU will not be handed to them on a plate. The prize of membership will have to be won. It is clear that the countries involved in the next phase of enlargement will have to work hard to persuade the EU that the expansion of its borders to the south-east represents a worthwhile investment for Europe's future.

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**Location:** Balkans

Macedonia  
Albania  
Serbia

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