

# 41 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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For more than a decade the answer to the question of how the EU can influence developments in its most immediate neighbourhood – and in particular in the Balkans and Turkey – seemed so obvious that there was no need to put it at the forefront of any discussion of Global Strategy: stability and influence was guaranteed through a credible policy of European enlargement.

This vision remains present today in all EU documents and speeches. It underlies EU mediation between Kosovo and Serbia, underpins the way in which the EU approaches Turkey, and forms the background for EU efforts to calm tensions in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. But is this policy still credible in light of developments in the region and within the EU?

### Lessons from the Western Balkans

Few questions are more important for the future of European foreign policy in the next decade. None raise more fundamental issues about what constitutes failure, success, appropriate ambition and strategic foresight in EU foreign policy thinking.

The EU's most dramatic foreign policy failures have taken place in the Balkans in the 1990s, when millions of people were displaced and genocide took place in the heart of Europe – with open fighting in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, south Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia between 1991 and 2001.

However, since then the EU's most important success stories in conflict prevention have also taken place in this region. Significant progress was made in reconciling former enemies and in demilitarising the whole region. In 1999 in Helsinki the EU granted candidate status to Turkey. In 2000 in Zagreb and, even more explicitly, in 2003 in Thessaloniki the EU held out the promise of accession to all Western Balkan states.

Since then the EU has been engaged in one of the most ambitious geopolitical transformation projects ever launched, one that is putting its ability to inspire far-reaching change to its most demanding test yet. Applicant countries have to turn their economies around, transform their political cultures and overhaul their administrations.

The logic behind this vision seemed so strong that to some it no longer even appears to be a ‘foreign policy’ at all: enlargement came to be seen as a technocratic process, on bureaucratic auto-pilot, only occasionally in need of minor adjustments.

The EU’s stated ambition remains to make future wars unthinkable through regional and European integration. Peace through integration is an old vision, which guided US policy in creating the ‘West’ after the Second World War.

The outstanding success of US foreign policy in the twentieth century has been a source of inspiration for the European External Action Service (EEAS) in the Balkans. Therefore, the success or failure of efforts to pacify an integrated south eastern European is what will determine whether the EU will be a credible foreign policy actor elsewhere. For this reason, this region has to be at the heart of any EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS).

And yet, even those who have celebrated the transformative power of the EU in the past wonder whether it can pull off this feat and bring a post-crisis Western Balkans and Turkey into the European mainstream. If the EU honours its commitments to integrate the countries of the Western Balkans (and Turkey) into the Union, this would bring the number of EU members to 36 and its total population to 600 million people; some 100 million of these would be European Muslims.

## A make or break moment

As the domestic context for foreign policy shifts across the EU, it is obvious that this vision is anything but ‘technocratic’. And the obvious question then arises: how many European governments, and

publics, will still believe that a transformative enlargement to south east Europe will actually happen in the planning timeframe relevant for the EUGS? And if this vision is losing credibility, what does this mean for stability in the immediate European neighbourhood? If the EU is unable to influence even its most immediate neighbours after decades of efforts,

then the scale for its global ambitions necessarily also shrinks, dramatically.

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And yet, enlargement has found no successor as a strategy to overcome

conflicts on the European continent. It has stabilised the continent like no other policy after 2000. There is still demand for it. And yet, for now, there is little supply.

Today across the EU some policymakers question whether the Union has already over-expanded. An air of fragility and doubt reigns, and doubt undermines trust. This easily translates into a sense of betrayal, most visibly in Turkey after 2005, but also in some Balkan countries.

Historically it was the Balkan experience in the 1990s that led to the emergence of a European foreign policy. It was a foreign policy born from humiliations in the Balkans. South east Europe remains, even today, the one region where an EU with global ambitions must not stumble if it wants to remain credible. For the EUGS, the lessons, opportunities and perils of policy towards this region must necessarily be central.

