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**Greece's EU Presidency and the Challenge of
Western Balkan Enlargement Policies in Light of
the Crisis**

Ritsa Panagiotou

Centre for Planning and Economic Research, Athens

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Summary

On January 1st, 2014, Greece assumed the Presidency of the European Council, at what was a critical juncture both for the country itself and the European Union as a whole. As far as policies towards the Western Balkans were concerned, the Greek Presidency was exposed to two contrasting dynamics: on the one hand, there were *high* expectations due to the positive legacy that had been established during its 2003 Presidency (where Greece was seen as a “promoter” of the Balkans accession prospects in Europe), and on the other hand, there were *low* expectations due to the deep crisis that had deprived the country of the prestige, strength and stature necessary to achieve important breakthroughs.

This paper will present an appraisal of the progress achieved in the EU accession process of the Western Balkans during the Greek Presidency, which will be analysed through the prism of these simultaneous expectations and limitations. The paper will begin by presenting the legacy of the 2003 Greek Presidency, which was by all accounts a landmark that also included major milestones in the Western Balkan states’ relations with the EU and in the enlargement process. It will then proceed with an analysis of the challenges confronting the 2014 Presidency in light of the extraordinarily difficult circumstances – both for the EU and for Greece – that have created a negative environment for enlargement. The third part of the paper will examine and evaluate the accomplishments and progress achieved during the Greek Presidency, while the final section will attempt to draw some conclusions concerning the enlargement process during this difficult period.

About the author

Ritsa Panagiotou is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre of Planning and Economic Research in Athens (KEPE). She holds a B.A. in Political Science and Russian from Wellesley College, and an M.Phil and a D.Phil in International Relations from Oxford University (St. Antony’s College). For several years she worked as a Research Associate at the European Business School (INSEAD) in Fontainebleau, France. She has been a Visiting Professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business and at the University of Athens Postgraduate Programme in Southeast European Studies. In 2011 she was a Visiting Research Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. She has published in many scholarly journals, including *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies*, the *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, and *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*.

Contact: ritsa.panagiotou@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

On January 1st, 2014, Greece assumed the Presidency of the European Council, at what was a critical juncture both for the country itself and the European Union as a whole. The European Union was in the midst of the deepest crisis since the launch of the common currency, and austere fiscal policies had greatly impacted social cohesion within the Union. At the same time Greece was still in the throes of an unprecedented crisis, whose repercussions were felt on economic, political and social levels. Consequently, the extent, intensity and impact of the ongoing economic crisis in the eurozone had undermined the trust of a significant number of European citizens in the ability of the European institutions to implement credible and effective policies to achieve economic recovery and growth.

In this context, Greece was called upon to prove that despite being in a deep and prolonged crisis, and despite the overall negative expectations concerning the odds of its success, its Presidency could actually respond to the urgent challenges and put forward an agenda of renewal and growth. As far as policies towards the Western Balkans are concerned, Greece brought with it an important legacy that had been established during its 2003 Presidency: that of being considered a “promoter” of the Balkans accession prospects in Europe, as well as a “bridge” between the Balkans and Brussels. This legacy bestowed the Greek Presidency with many expectations, such as carrying through a successful Presidency under difficult circumstances, as well as extra pressure to prove that not only had it not lost its vision for the European prospects of the Western Balkans, but also that it was still willing and able to play the role of “Ambassador” of the region. The Greek Presidency was therefore exposed to two contrasting dynamics as far as Western Balkan policies were concerned: on the one hand, there were *high* expectations due to its positive legacy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and their accession efforts, and on the other hand, there were *low* expectations due to the deep crisis that had deprived the country of the prestige, strength and stature necessary to achieve important breakthroughs. These contrasting expectations, as well as the existence of many objective limitations on the enlargement process, strongly informed the Greek Presidency’s policy options vis-à-vis the Western Balkans.

This paper will present an appraisal of the progress achieved in the EU accession process of the Western Balkans during the Greek Presidency, which will be analysed through the prism of the aforementioned simultaneous expectations and limitations. The paper will begin by presenting the legacy of the 2003 Greek Presidency, which has been the most significant one to date, during which groundbreaking progress was achieved in the Western Balkan states' relations with the EU. It will then proceed with an analysis of the challenges confronting the 2014 Presidency in light of the extraordinarily difficult circumstances – both for the EU and for Greece – that have created a negative environment for enlargement. The third part of the paper will examine and evaluate the accomplishments and progress achieved during the Greek Presidency, while the final section will attempt to draw some conclusions concerning the enlargement process during this difficult period.

2. The Legacy of 2003

Greece's EU Presidency in the first half of 2014 was the country's fifth time at the helm of the EU Council: past Greek Presidencies were in 1983, 1988, 1994 and 2003. While each Greek Presidency promoted its own agenda and was characterised by its own achievements, the 2003 Presidency was by all accounts a landmark that also included major milestones in the EU's enlargement process. The Accession Treaty for ten new members was signed in Athens in April 2003, marking the culmination of the largest wave of enlargement in the history of the European Union: the EU thus expanded to include Cyprus and Malta, as well as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – officially ending the division of Europe.

As the only Southeast European member of the European Union, Greece viewed the eventual accession of all Balkan countries to the EU as vital for the promotion of long-term peace, stability, democracy and prosperity in the region. In this context, Greece's 2003 Presidency broke new ground in the Union's relations with the Balkan countries by focusing on two main goals: the acceleration of the accession process of Bulgaria and Romania as both candidate countries had been excluded from the first

wave of Eastern enlargement and opening the EU door to the Western Balkans.¹ Concerning Bulgaria and Romania, by May 2002 Greece had already submitted a non-paper with specific proposals that supported the promotion of the accession process of the two countries. The non-paper essentially represented a new accession “roadmap” that requested a specific date for the finalisation of negotiations between the EU and the two countries, as well as an increase of their pre-accession financial assistance.² The accession negotiations with both countries accelerated during the Greek Presidency, with the completion and closure of several key chapters.

The Greek Presidency gave a new impetus to the EU’s relations with the Western Balkans which culminated in the Summit of Thessaloniki and has been considered the pinnacle of Greece’s Presidency as well as a watershed in the region’s relations with the EU.³ On June 21st 2003, the Heads of State and Government of the EU and the leaders of the Western Balkan countries met in Thessaloniki and reached a consensus on a joint statement, known as the Thessaloniki Declaration. Through this declaration the EU stated its “unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans” and clearly declared that “the future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union.”⁴ Despite other pressing domestic and international issues - such as discussions concerning the EU Constitution and the United States’ intervention in Iraq - occupying the European agenda at the time, the Greek Presidency ensured that the Western Balkans remained at the top of the agenda, and therefore played a leading role in bringing the region into the mainstream of the European Union’s political priorities.⁵

¹ Greek Presidency, *The Priorities of the Greek Presidency 2003. Our Europe. Sharing the Future in a Community of Values.* at: <http://www.eu2003.gr/en/articles/2002/12/24/1310>

² G. Pagoulatos and S. Blavoukos), *The Last Greek Presidency: Greece in European Integration and the Four Greek Presidencies of the EU*, (in Greek) Papazisis, Athens, 2004.

³ European Commission, *The Thessaloniki Summit: a milestone in the European Union’s relations with the Western Balkans*, IP/03/860, Brussels, 18 June, 2003.

⁴ Thessaloniki Declaration, *EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration*, 10229/03 (presse 163), Thessaloniki, 21 June. 2003.

⁵ E. Prifti, “From stabilisation to integration”, in E. Prifti (ed.), *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013.

The Thessaloniki Summit also adopted the "Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European Integration" which gave the countries of the region a clear perspective of how to join the Union through a set of concrete steps and measures in addition to significant financial assistance. The Thessaloniki Agenda also enhanced the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) by promoting policies such as twinning, allowing participation in selected European programmes, strengthening of political dialogue, cooperation in the area of common foreign and security policy, and the establishment of European Partnerships.⁶ The European Partnerships provided a framework covering each partner's specific situation and priorities, preparations for further integration into the EU, and the progress made in implementing the SAP, including the signing of Stabilisation and Association Agreements. Moreover, a high level multilateral political forum between the EU and the Western Balkans was established, which would bring together the heads of states or governments of the region and their EU counterparts. A system of enhanced political dialogue at ministerial level was also set up, with annual meetings of foreign ministers and the ministers responsible for justice and home affairs. The enhanced Stabilisation and Association Process would "constitute the overall framework for the European course of the Western Balkan countries, all the way to their future accession".⁷ Ultimately, attachment to the EU was meant to ensure that the path of reforms would become irreversible and that conflict, extreme nationalism, ethnic strife and war in the region would be "inconceivable".⁸ The Thessaloniki Summit can therefore be seen as a pivotal moment, which saw the EU's approach towards the region shift from post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction (security) to democratic consolidation and European integration (enlargement).⁹ The Thessaloniki Summit was considered "the apogee of Greek diplomacy in Europe... the Greek

⁶ D. Phinnemore, "The Stabilisation and Association Process: A Framework for European Union Enlargement?" in A. Elbasani (ed.) *European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans*, Routledge, London, 2013.

⁷ Council of the European Union, *The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration*, Council Conclusions, General Affairs and External Relations, 10369/03 (Presse 166), 16 June, 2003.

⁸ European Commission, "The Western Balkans on the Road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity", *Communication from the Commission of the European Communities*, Brussels, 27 January, 2006.

government impressed Europe with a productive summit that crowned a successful Presidency".¹⁰

The years following the Greek Presidency witnessed a slow but steady momentum in the accession process of the Western Balkans and in their convergence towards the EU. The region as a whole was gradually associated with key European policies such as trade, justice, freedom and security, transport, energy and cross-border cooperation. The 2003-2007 period was one of the strongest in more than a decade for most countries in the region as a result of the increased economic interaction with the EU, and especially Greece. Consequently, the annual real GDP growth in the region averaged about 6 percent while the region also received large inflows of FDI.¹¹ This newfound stability, coupled with positive economic trends, allowed the Western Balkan countries to proceed, at varying paces, with the implementation of the necessary reforms and make progress on their accession path. During this period Greece also consolidated its position as a significant regional player, an important and active partner for the Balkan countries, and a point of reference for the region's economic development. Building on the momentum of its successful EU Presidency, Greece enhanced and strengthened the role it had cultivated since the mid-1990s, deepening its presence in the areas of trade, investment, banking and financial assistance.¹²

Cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries in the areas of education, research and energy policy also expanded, with a substantial Commission contribution to the following programmes: Tempus (higher education), Erasmus Mundus (scholarships for students), Youth, the Research Framework programme and Joint Research Centre (JRC) activities, and also through the work of European Training Foundation (ETF). Furthermore, on October 25th 2005, the EU and eight

⁹ Prifti, 2013.

¹⁰ H. Grabbe, "Conclusions", in E. Prifti (ed.), *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013.

¹¹ M. Uvalic, "The economic development of the Western Balkans since Thessaloniki", in E. Prifti (ed.), *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013.

¹² R. Panagiotou and A. Valvis, *How is the sovereign debt crisis affecting Greece's relations with the Balkan countries and Greece's standing in the region? An initial impact assessment*, SE Europe Programme, ELIAMEP (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy), Athens, March, 2014.

Balkan countries signed the Energy Community Treaty in order to create the legal framework for an integrated energy market.

Another crucial accomplishment that stemmed from the Greek Presidency and was implemented a few years later was the granting of visa-free travel to the Schengen area for the citizens of the region. During the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, EU leaders had decided to explore the possibility of lifting visa requirements for the Western Balkan countries. Implementation of these plans began in 2008, with the creation of a roadmap that included crucial reforms such as enhancing border controls, fighting illegal migration, organised crime and corruption, replacing old passports with biometric ones, as well as improving cooperation with the EU member states and EU agencies. The citizens of FYROM, Montenegro and Serbia were granted visa free travel in December 2009; while the citizens of Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina were granted the same status a year later.¹³

During this period, Greece continued to promote the rapprochement of the Western Balkans with the EU, as well as their European prospects. In October 2009, Prime Minister George Papandreou announced a proposal for "Agenda 2014", an initiative that aimed to reinvigorate and create a new dynamic for the accession process within both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. The difficulties involved in the "big bang" enlargements of 2004 and 2007 had led to a growing "enlargement fatigue" in the EU, which in combination with the economic crisis, had led to reduced interest in further expansion into the region. Agenda 2014 therefore aimed at providing fresh momentum to the European course of the Western Balkans by presenting a new "accession roadmap", whereby all Western Balkan countries would receive an EU accession date by 2014 – the year that would mark 100 years since the start of World War I, as well as the next Greek Presidency.¹⁴ Ultimately, engaging the Western Balkans closer to the EU was presented as a political necessity and an investment in European stability as the implementation of the principles of good

¹³ A. Stiglmyer, "Tearing down the Schengen Wall", in E. Prifti (ed.), *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013.

¹⁴ A. Marini, "In 2014 the Western Balkans to receive EU accession date", at: <http://www.euinside.eu/en/news/in-2014-the-western-balkans-to-receive-an-eu-accession-date>, 14 December, 2010.

neighbourliness, regional cooperation, reconciliation and democratic consolidation would avert the possibility of creating a “black hole” of isolated, potentially volatile countries within Europe.¹⁵

In a speech at the European Policy Centre in Brussels on November 22nd 2010, Greek Foreign Minister Droutsas announced Greece’s plan to convene an EU-Western Balkans Summit Meeting during its EU Presidency in the first half of 2014. The ultimate goal of this Summit would be the adoption of “a political declaration setting a specific, ambitious – yet realistic – target date for the completion of the accession processes of the Western Balkans”.¹⁶ Within this framework, the “Thessaloniki II” initiative would provide for: a) the creation of a “Group 2014” that would consist of member states that would form “preparation coalitions” with candidate countries, b) the enhancement of close cooperation ties among candidates on a regional level, and c) the conclusion of an agreement giving a specific date for the full accession of Western Balkan countries to join the EU.¹⁷ Determining a target accession date would not only function as a catalyst for change and progress, an incentive for reform and a benchmark for assessing progress, but it would also underscore the EU’s commitment to welcoming the Western Balkans into the EU community. 2018 was considered an appropriate target date for the accession of the Western Balkans into the EU; it was also a date with a highly symbolic value, as it marked 100 years since the end of WWI and would also be Bulgaria’s first time holding the EU Presidency.

¹⁵ European Fund for the Balkans, “Keeping Reforms on Track: Policy Brief for the Countries of the Balkans”, *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, European Fund for the Balkans, Policy Brief, May, 2014.

¹⁶ Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Western Balkans, European Perspective*, at <http://www.mfa.gr/en/foreign-policy/greece-in-the-eu/external-relations-enlargement.html>, 2010.

¹⁷ Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010.

3. The 2014 Presidency

Greece's 2003 Presidency had taken place during what could be considered a period of optimism within the European Union. The confidence during this period had been spurred by the achievement of major milestones in the integration process which included: the consolidation of Economic and Monetary Union, the launch of the new currency, negotiations for the establishment of an EU Constitution, the "Big Bang" enlargement which ended the division of Europe, and the prospect of further enlargement towards Southeast Europe¹⁸. It was a period that witnessed a dynamism that encompassed both deepening and widening of the European integration project.

For Greece, the period leading to the 2003 EU Presidency had also been one of optimism and confidence as not only had the country "fulfilled" the convergence criteria for joining the eurozone and adopting the common currency but it was also enjoying high rates of GDP growth (which reached a peak of 5.9 percent in 2003 - the highest in the eurozone for that year)¹⁹ while thriving on the dynamism and anticipation relating to the organisation and hosting of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. In retrospect, it has become clear that much of this confidence in Greece's abilities and its potential for growth and convergence with the more advanced economies of the eurozone was largely misplaced and based on erroneous evaluations. However, at the time this optimism was crucial in providing Greece with the necessary clout and prestige to promote its vision for the Balkan region. Thus, riding the wave of this positive domestic and international environment, Greece was able to capitalise on the international recognition and the favourable status that it enjoyed in order to push forward its Balkan agenda and to play the coveted role of "Ambassador" of the Balkans in Europe.

The circumstances under which Greece undertook its fifth EU Presidency eleven years later were entirely different than those of 2003: Greece assumed the helm of the EU at what was a particularly difficult time both for the country itself and the

¹⁸ Pagoulatos and Blavoukos, 2004.

¹⁹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October, 2014.

European Union as a whole. The EU was reeling under the prolonged impact of the eurozone crisis, the repercussions of which were felt on economic, political and social levels. Austere fiscal policies had greatly impacted social cohesion, especially in countries directly affected by the crisis, which had received bailouts and were under IMF supervision.²⁰ At the same time, the immense social costs of the economic crisis in the eurozone had undermined the trust of many Europeans in the ability of the European institutions to deal with the crisis successfully. Greece's Presidency took place at a time of intense euroscepticism and growing anger against Brussels throughout the Union, especially – but not only – in the countries most affected by the crisis. Recession, high unemployment, popular fatigue, loss of faith in European leaders and a perceived lack of solidarity between nations, had all strained the foundations of the European Union.

In this crucial period, the EU Council Presidency faced the challenge of responding to the economic crisis, safeguarding the common currency through deepening of the EMU, while promoting direct policies for confronting the recession and employment by stimulating growth.²¹ The EU also could not shy away from addressing crucial social issues such as growing disillusionment with the European integration project, the rise of extremism in Europe, and growing polarisation between North and South. Other decisive factors that would define the Greek Presidency were the major institutional changes that were underway: European Parliament elections in May, appointment of the new EU Commission and its new President, as well as the appointment of the next President of the European Council. Lastly, due to the European Parliament elections, the Greek Presidency was effectively shorter than the usual six months making it potentially weaker as all legislative work stopped in April 2014.²²

²⁰ European Commission, *European Economic Forecast*, European Economy, Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 7/2013, Autumn 2013.

²¹ R. Thillaye, "Coordination in place of integration? Economic governance in a non-federal EU", Policy Network, *Working Paper no. 32*, July 2013.

²² F. Chatzistavrou, "Defying the Oracle? The 2014 Greek Presidency of the EU Council", European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) *Working Paper no. 36*, February 2014.

As far as Greece was concerned, when it assumed the EU Presidency, the country was in the sixth year of an unprecedented crisis that had profoundly impacted its economic, political and social structures. After living beyond its means for years, the country was paying the price of over-borrowing, over-spending, over-consuming, while confronting the consequences of poor fiscal discipline and weak institutions. After the bubble burst in October 2009 the country experienced an unprecedented economic meltdown, the disintegration of its infrastructure, degeneration of its political system and the unraveling of its social fabric. Between 2008 and 2013, Greece's GDP had dropped by 26 percent and official unemployment stood at 28 percent in 2013, with youth unemployment at almost 57 percent.²³ The rise of extremism, symbolised by the election of the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn to Parliament in June 2012, was another symptom of the deterioration of social structures and illustrated the depth of social and political unrest. The austerity packages that were a prerequisite for receiving the bailout packages and voted for by the Greek parliament since 2010 represented the most aggressive fiscal and social adjustment in a democratic country during times of peace in post-war Europe.

Within this negative climate, Greece was called upon to prove that despite being in an unprecedentedly deep and prolonged crisis, its Presidency could help forward the broad and demanding agenda of responding to the economic crisis, safeguarding the common currency, and promoting employment and growth. Hence, the Greek Presidency (much like Ireland in the first half of 2013) faced the real challenge of combining leadership at the EU level with a very demanding domestic economic and structural reform programme. It is indicative that the Greek Presidency was conducted in parallel with the ongoing and often strained discussions between the government and the Troika of its international creditors (comprised of the Eurogroup, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). Moreover, as a country that had been greatly discredited since the eruption of the crisis and was still under Troika supervision, Greece had to fight even harder to gain international trust and compensate for a perceived lack of credibility as a leader.

²³ ELSTAT (Greek Statistical Service), February 2013.

As far as the promotion of policies concerning the Western Balkans was concerned, the Greek Presidency faced several crucial challenges that were directly linked to the economic crisis that was underway in Greece and Europe and the subsequent negative environment surrounding the prospect of EU enlargement. In this context, the desire of the Greek Presidency to revisit its role of key promoter of the Western Balkans in Europe was constrained by several objective limitations. The first challenge that would inform the Greek Presidency's Western Balkan agenda was the European Union's "enlargement fatigue". This enlargement fatigue set in after the unprecedented rounds of enlargement during the 2004-2007 period and had been exacerbated by the economic crisis that was threatening the very foundations of the Economic and Monetary Union as well as the common currency. Over the past few years the eurozone crisis in general, the Greek crisis in particular, and the ensuing widespread sense of insecurity throughout the Union had inevitably pushed EU policymakers to focus more on domestic political and economic issues, with enlargement moving down as a priority on the agenda.²⁴

This wariness and fatigue was evident not only at the level of policymaking but within the European population as well: according to Eurobarometer, in the autumn of 2013 only 37 percent of the surveyed population of the EU-28 supported the idea of further enlargement, while more than half (52 percent) were opposed. Support for enlargement has fallen significantly since its peak in the autumn of 2004, when it had reached 53 percent, and even since the summer of 2009 – before the full brunt of the crisis was felt throughout Europe –when it reached 46 percent.²⁵ As the report shows, opinion on further enlargement varies markedly across member states: in the autumn of 2013 support was strongest in the newer members (from the 2004, 2007 and 2008 enlargements), with Croatia leading with a 71 percent approval rate, followed by Lithuania (64 percent), Romania (64 percent) and Poland (61 percent),

²⁴ R. Panagiotou, "The Greek Crisis as a Crisis of EU Enlargement: how will the Western Balkans be affected?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 13 (1) February 2013; R. Balfour, "Risky tactics and bad examples: EU enlargement decisions postponed", European Policy Centre, *Policy Brief*, 17 December, 2012; C. Stratulat, "EU enlargement to the Balkans: shaken, not stirred", European Policy Centre, *Policy Brief*, 4 November, 2013.

²⁵ Eurobarometer, *40 Years Eurobarometer*, European Commission, 2014.

while it was weakest in Germany (23 percent), France (23 percent) and Austria (17 percent).²⁶

It is clear that both on the policymaker and population levels there is more skepticism, caution, introversion and fear of the implications of further expansion during this critical period.²⁷ Clearly the shock of the Greek crisis and the subsequent contagion to other South European states made most EU member states even more wary of embracing states from a region that has acquired a reputation for opaque economic practices, unreliability, corruption and stagnation. The enthusiasm of the Thessaloniki Agenda has worn off in light of the crisis, and the “unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans” appears to have lost steam.²⁸ Clearly “in the crisis-ridden Union, obsessed with saving the euro, the sense of historical duty to reunite Europe and overcome the legacies of war has been overtaken by a rush to *sauve qui peut*”.²⁹ This reality placed a *de facto* constraint on the capacity of the Greek Presidency to make major breakthroughs regarding Western Balkan enlargement during its six-month rotation.³⁰

Another challenge that impacted the Greek Presidency’s Western Balkans agenda was the fact that the ongoing crisis had dealt a serious blow to Greece’s *ability* to play the role of the Western Balkans’ “enlargement Ambassador” to the EU. As discussed above, since its 2003 Presidency, Greece had made enlargement towards the Balkans a cornerstone of its foreign policy and had promoted it actively within the EU institutions. Now, hugely indebted, discredited and facing years of austerity, the capacity of Greece to play the role of the champion of Balkan enlargement, or to be a bridge between Brussels and the Balkans, is dubious at best. In an unprecedented initiative that illustrates how damaged Greece’s reputation had become, in September 2013 two German MPs called for Greece’s resignation from the upcoming EU Presidency, arguing

²⁶ Eurobarometer, 2014.

²⁷ J. O’ Brennan, “On the Slow Train to nowhere? The European Union, ‘Enlargement fatigue’ and the Western Balkans”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 19 (2) 2014; R. Balfour, and C. Stratulat, “The enlargement of the European Union”, European Policy Centre, *Discussion Paper*, 10 December, 2012.

²⁸ R. Balfour, and C. Stratulat, *Between engagement and cold feet: ten years of the EU in the Western Balkans*, in E. Prifti (ed.), *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2013.

²⁹ Grabbe, 2013.

³⁰ EurActiv, *Appetite for Enlargement hits all time low*, 17 October, 2013.

that the six-month Presidency would cost about 100 million euros and may precipitate the need for another assistance package.³¹

In the same vein, the increasingly provocative and aggressive behavior of the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn and the state's inability to react decisively to it raised questions concerning Greece's capability to provide leadership and vision during its Presidency of the EU Council. On September 18th 2013, in response to the murder of an anti-fascist activist by a member of Golden Dawn, the head of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, Hans Svoboda, declared that if the Greek government and the Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras, "do not stop the hateful behavior of Golden Dawn and other fascist groups, this will be an unacceptable EU Presidency and will not bring any progress in Europe or Greece".³² The reality of Greece's damaged international prestige cast a shadow on the Greek Presidency and any expectations of repeating the success of the 2003 Presidency.

In addition to the issues relating to the country's loss of credibility and stature on the European political-diplomatic level, the crisis in Greece also had a major impact on its economic clout and influence in the region and hence its ability to make an important impact during its Presidency. The deterioration of the economic environment has had a deep and resonating impact not only on the Greek economy but practically on every dimension of Greece's relations with the countries of the region.³³ Contracting trade flows, decreasing Greek investments and funds from the banking sectors of the region, and freezing of economic assistance that was provided through the Hellenic Plan for the Economic Reconstruction of the Balkans (HPERB), all led to a shrinking of Greek economic presence in the region that inevitably translated into a decline of Greece's political impact.³⁴ Much of the soft power Greece had regionally has dissipated as it no longer has the relative regional economic muscle that it once had in the Balkans, which was seen as a great asset in the pursuit of regional economic and political goals. In summary, the fact that Greece no longer had the clout, prestige or capacity to play the role of the champion of Balkan enlargement, or to be a bridge between Brussels and

³¹ R. Panagiotou, "The new environment of EU enlargement", *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 1 (1), May 2014.

³² Published in e-kathimerini (<http://www.ekathimerini>), 19 September, 2013

³³ Panagiotou, 2014.

³⁴ Panagiotou and Valvis, 2014.

the Balkans was another important constraint on the Western Balkan agenda of the Greek Presidency.

As far as specific policy priorities were concerned, the Greek Presidency planned to adopt an agenda based on the 18-month programme of the Trio Presidency³⁵ without investing in enriching the agenda.³⁶ The Trio Presidency emphasized the necessity of prioritizing the strengthening of the Union's capacity to respond to the current economic, financial and social challenges, and ensuring stability of the Euro-area. It thus promoted a programme aimed at stimulating growth, creating jobs and boosting EU competitiveness, while preserving Europe's global presence and ensuring continued momentum of the enlargement agenda. Enlargement was acknowledged as one of the Trio's key policy priorities, with particular attention given to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. In its programme presented in December 2012, the Irish-Lithuanian-Greek Trio acknowledged that enlargement remained a key policy and expressed its determination to pursue the established enlargement agenda "which serves the strategic interests of the European Union, and continues to reinforce peace, democracy and stability in Europe".³⁷ According to the priorities of the Trio Presidency, the Stabilisation and Association Process, in line with the Thessaloniki Agenda, would continue to provide the relevant framework for this goal. Furthermore, the Trio Presidency committed to pursue the objectives of the "Agenda 2014", with the key principles of this initiative being good neighbourly relations, regional cooperation and reconciliation, as well as inclusiveness, in order to avoid the creation of 'black holes' in the region. To mark the political commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans the Trio Presidency proposed that

³⁵ The idea behind the concept of a "Trio Presidency" was that a group of three successive presidencies can cooperate to ensure a more coherent approach to the Council's work over a longer term - an eighteen month period - rather than just the six months of each Presidency. Thus, each Trio Presidency sets out an 18-month common programme, which outlines the key objectives to drive forward the EU agenda. This was implemented in 2007 and formally laid down in the EU Treaties in 2009 by the Treaty of Lisbon. Greece's Trio Presidency partners were Ireland (January-June 2013) and Lithuania (July-December 2013).

³⁶ F. Chatzistavrou, "Les Etats de l'Union europeenne, moteurs d'une forme de gouvernance inedite: le Trio de Presidences", *Revue du marche commun et de l'Union europeenne*, no. 585, May 2013.

³⁷ Council of the European Union, *18-month Programme of the Council (1 January 2013-30 June 2014)*, Brussels, 7 December, at: <http://eu2013.ie/media/euPresidency/content/documents/Trio-Programme.pdf>, 2012.

an EU-Western Balkans Summit ("Thessaloniki II") would take place during the Greek Presidency in the first half of 2014.³⁸

The following priorities of the Greek Presidency were presented in August 2013: a) growth-jobs-cohesion, b) further integration of the EU/eurozone, c) migration-borders-mobility, and d) maritime policy (a horizontal thematic that would run through all priorities).³⁹ Despite its past role as a promoter of Western Balkan accession to the Union, and despite a commitment by Athens under the Joint Programme of the Trio Presidency, further enlargement towards the Western Balkan region was not listed as one of the top priorities of the Greek Presidency. This omission was interpreted as an indication that the priorities of Greece had shifted away from promoting the European prospects of its Balkan neighbours and were instead focused on issues affecting the core of the eurozone. It was assumed that this was due to the fact that Greece had barely managed to avoid bankruptcy and a catastrophic exit from the eurozone, and the country was still struggling to redefine its role within the EU as well as to regain a modicum of respect within EU institutions.

This omission however did not go unnoticed by Greece's Balkan neighbours who expressed their disappointment and concern over this perceived lack of commitment on Greece's behalf, and the implications of this exclusion. The expectation, in light of the impact of Greece's 2003 Presidency, was that despite the overall negative climate concerning enlargement and despite its precarious position Greece would continue to play a strong role as a promoter of the region and would put enlargement and regional solidarity high on its Presidency priority list.⁴⁰ There was a strong belief within the region that Greece should accelerate the Western Balkan accession timeframe, allowing for important milestones to be achieved during its Presidency. The belief also held that a firm commitment by the Greek Presidency would send the message that despite the economic hardship that country had been facing in recent

³⁸ Council of the European Union, 2012.

³⁹ GR2014, Greek EU Presidency website, at <http://www.gr2014.eu/eu-Presidency/the-greek-Presidency/programmes-and-priorities>.

⁴⁰ EurActiv, *Greece drops enlargement from its EU Presidency priorities*, 23 August, 2013.

years, Greece was determined to resume its role as a key player in the region and to engage in an active promotion of Balkan enlargement policy.

The Greek leadership maintained that while enlargement was not listed as one of the top priorities of the Greek Presidency this did not mean that there were no concrete plans for the Western Balkans. This commitment was expressed at the diplomatic level on many occasions: Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Evangelos Venizelos stressed that Greece not only intended to play a dynamic role in promoting the Euro-Atlantic perspective of all Western Balkan countries, but also to play a constructive role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Kourkoulas, enlargement has always been and would continue to be a top priority for Greece, and that Greece would “use its role as Presidency of the EU Council to contribute, in concrete terms, to the European integration of the region... In this context, the Greek Presidency will be committed to promote the enlargement priorities of the Union and deal effectively with the challenges each enlargement country is facing in this specific juncture”.⁴¹ The Deputy Foreign Minister also emphasized that the Greek Presidency would work towards promoting the “connectivity” of the Western Balkans. More specifically, to foster the closer connections of the region both internally and with the EU, primarily in the areas of transport and energy, with the aim of contributing to growth, competitiveness and employment in the region⁴² Finally, the determination to promote the European prospects of the Western Balkans, despite not listing it as a main priority, was reiterated by other diplomatic officials. When presenting the Greek Presidency’s priorities and programme before the Parliament’s Committee on European Affairs, Greece’s Ambassador to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) Theoharis Lalakos declared “we support enlargement with Western Balkan countries because we believe it is the best way to protect our stability and our prosperity, which cannot be separated from the stability and prosperity of our neighbours”.⁴³

⁴¹ EurActiv, *Greek Presidency pledges to “connect” the Western Balkans*, 22 November, 2013.

⁴² EurActiv, *ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

4. Achievements of the 2014 Presidency

An evaluation of the progress achieved in the Western Balkan accession process during the Greek Presidency indicates that despite the difficult circumstances in which the Presidency was conducted, and despite not having enlargement as one of its key priorities, the Greek Presidency managed to push forward significant steps that confirmed its commitment to the continuing rapprochement of the Western Balkans and the EU.⁴⁴ This progress was evident on the level of both multilateral and bilateral initiatives where important milestones were achieved.

Concerning the multilateral initiatives, several important meetings aimed at forwarding cohesion and cooperation in the region were held during the Greek Presidency. As part of an effort to revive the union of Mediterranean basin states, a conference was held on January 27th on the promotion of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Representatives from all EU countries as well as from Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina took part in the conference proceedings. Moreover, a conference on a more integrated Adriatic-Ionian Strategy was held in Athens on the 6th and 7th of February and brought together the Foreign Ministers of all eight member states of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, namely Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The conference set the foundation for building an action plan on joint innovation and growth in the maritime and fisheries fields, shared infrastructure, especially in the transport and energy sectors, the environment, and tourism.

Within the context of “promoting connectivity” between the EU and the Western Balkans, in February 2014 the Greek Foreign Minister conducted a tour of the region’s capitals: Belgrade, Podgorica, Tirana, Pristina, Skopje and Sarajevo, where issues such as the need for continued cooperation, commitment to reforms, and strategic relations between Greece and all the countries of the region were discussed. The only exception to the otherwise positive environment of all these

⁴⁴ GR2014, Results of the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 1 January - 30 June 2014, Greek EU Presidency website, at: <http://www.gr2014.eu/eu-Presidency/the-greek-Presidency>.

meetings was in Skopje, where the Greek Foreign Minister's visit triggered negative reactions by FYROM's media and political circles, due to the unresolved name dispute. As a follow-up to the Balkan capital visits, on April 5th Athens hosted an informal meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers and their counterparts from the Western Balkans countries, where a wide range of important issues were discussed; including most recent developments in the region, relations with the EU, the progress of reforms and the continuing challenges involved in the accession process.

Finally, the highlight of the Greek Presidency as far as the Balkan agenda was concerned was the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Conference, which took place in Thessaloniki on May 8th 2014 and included Ministers from all of the EU member states and the six Western Balkan states. The "Thessaloniki II" Conference was highly symbolic, with the Greek organisers attempting to recapture the spirit of the original Thessaloniki Conference and reaffirming the EU's commitment to the European perspective of the region. In this spirit, Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Füle declared once more that "the future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union".⁴⁵ The Conference was separated into two thematic sessions. The first session, entitled "2004-2014: Ten Years of Enlargement and the European Integration of the Western Balkans", provided the opportunity to review and evaluate the accession process in light of the 10th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement, and look ahead at the challenges and perspectives of further enlargement to the Western Balkans. In this context, EU participants reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement agenda for the whole region within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association process and on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria, the 2006 renewed consensus on enlargement, and the relevant European Council and Council Conclusions. The continuing challenges within the region were also highlighted, with the participants from the Western Balkans recognizing the need for further efforts in order to secure and accelerate the successful EU integration process. These efforts were particularly relevant in the areas of the rule of law, protection of human rights, regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations, as well as structural reforms of the

⁴⁵ GR2014, "EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Conference", Greek EU Presidency website, at <http://www.gr2014.eu/eu-Presidency/the-greek-Presidency>, 8 May, 2014.

economy - notably in consolidating macroeconomic stability and enhancing growth and jobs.

The second session, entitled "Beyond the Thessaloniki Agenda: Transport and Energy Connectivity", proposed a framework for the promotion of key infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors, with the intention to encourage competitiveness and growth in the region, as well as the connectivity of the entire European continent. Particular emphasis was placed on the synergies and cooperation at the EU, regional and international level. The Conference also focused on ways and means of attracting new investment to the region, on strengthening the coordination of economic reforms, and on promoting the new approach to economic governance that was launched at the EBRD Headquarters in February 2014. Commissioner Füle referred to the November 2013 agreement between European and International Financial Institutions to intensify their cooperation on key infrastructure investments in the six West Balkan countries, including priority transport and energy projects; this would be pursued through the Western Balkans Investment Framework to ensure that resources flow through a single pipeline.⁴⁶ The Commissioner confirmed the EU's intention to use up to €1 billion from the new Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) for infrastructure investment in the six beneficiaries in the Western Balkan region for the 2014-2020 programming period. Combined with funds from the International Financial Institutions, the EU funds aimed at attracting private capital could finance at least €10 billion of investment in the West Balkans through targeting key priorities of the recipient countries. Major regional projects could include: the motorway and rail Corridor X from Zagreb to Athens, the rail Corridor VIII from the Black Sea ports of Bourgas and Varna in Bulgaria to the Adriatic Sea ports of Vlore and Durres in Albania, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline connecting Greece to Italy, and the Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline running along the Adriatic coast from Albania to Croatia.⁴⁷

On the eve of the Conference, the Greek Foreign Minister had a trilateral meeting with Bulgarian Foreign Minister Kristian Vigenin and Romanian Foreign Minister Titus

⁴⁶ European Commission, *In Thessaloniki about EU perspective for Western Balkans*, at: http://www.ec.europa.eu/commission_20102014/fule/headlines/news/2014/05/20140508_en.htm

⁴⁷ GR2014, "EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Conference".

Corlatean. The Ministers jointly declared their intention to examine the expansion of their trilateral cooperation into the Western Balkan region in order to exploit emerging opportunities in the fields of economy, commerce, trans-border cooperation, energy, tourism, regional infrastructure projects, transport, telecommunications and address the common challenges of illegal migration and combating corruption, organized crime and trafficking of persons.⁴⁸

Significant progress was also achieved on the level of bilateral relations during the Greek Presidency. Specifically, the first Intergovernmental Conference with Serbia took place on January 21st 2014, thus launching the country's accession negotiations. During his visit to Serbia in February 2014 the Greek Foreign Minister stressed that the official opening of accession talks between Serbia and the EU was a very important historic moment, not only for Serbia but for the entire Western Balkan region, as well as for the Greek Presidency over the EU Council of Ministers.⁴⁹ He also declared that the Greek Presidency's goal regarding Serbia's EU path would be "to maintain the pace, to ensure the opening of as many chapters as possible, as soon as possible, in order to achieve the legitimate goal set by the Serbian government of the completion of Serbia's accession by 2020".⁵⁰ Officials from Serbia's negotiation team with the EU confirmed that the new government, appointed after the parliamentary elections in March 2014, would be holding sessions on the country's path towards EU accession every two weeks. A goal of these sessions would be to speed up the integration process and achieve the objective of opening the first negotiation chapters, primarily Chapter 32, by either July or at the latest October 2014.⁵¹

Montenegro's accession course also progressed during the Greek Presidency. The second meeting of the Accession Conference at Deputy level was held in Brussels on

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ European Fund for the Balkans, "EU's 'new approach', democratization and the problem of stateness in the Western Balkans", *Balkans in Europe Policy Blog*, European Fund for the Balkans, 17 June, 2014 at <http://www.balkanfund.org>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Balkan Insight, "Serbia set for first EU Accession talks", 16 January, 2014.

31 March, where Montenegro opened two more chapters in its accession negotiations with the EU, namely Chapter 7 (Intellectual Property Rights) and Chapter 10 (Information Society and Media). The fourth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro at the Ministerial level was held in Luxembourg on June 24th, where negotiations for three more chapters were opened, namely Chapter 4 (Free movement of capital), Chapter 31 (foreign security and defense policy) and 32 (financial control). Montenegro expressed its commitment to proceeding with necessary reforms, fighting organized crime and corruption, and improving the quality of its public administration.

The Greek Presidency also expressed a strong interest in supporting Albania's EU accession prospects. A central focus was placed on energy cooperation over the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline project which would drastically boost development in the two countries. In December 2013 Foreign Minister Venizelos met with Prime Minister Edi Rama and declared that granting candidate status to Albania would be a "key priority" of the Greek Presidency and offered support for cooperation at the technical level with Greek experts to accelerate the process of Albania's EU accession. Indeed, the consensus achieved during the Greek Presidency resulted in Albania being granted EU candidate status on June 24th 2014.

As for the EU's relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greek Foreign Ministry officials expressed their opposition to the imposition of punitive measures, that have included the indefinite freezing of Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance funds and of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations, against the country as they were seen to be going against the established standards and frameworks of negotiations between the EU and candidate/potential candidate countries.⁵² In April 2014, at the European Parliament plenary for the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WWI the Greek Foreign Minister emphasized the importance of Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU integration as a crucial determinant of security, peace and stability in Europe. Moreover, considering that Greece, Bosnia, and other countries in the

⁵² Bosnia-Herzegovina signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2008, which was ratified by all the EU member states; the SAA has been frozen since 2012 due to a stalling in the country's political and economic reforms.

region have signed a memorandum of cooperation on the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline allowing connection onto the pipelines of a large number of countries, Greece considers Bosnia an important geostrategic partner in energy policy in the wider region. During his visit to Sarajevo in February, the Greek Foreign Minister declared that the fundamental interests of the EU regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina were stability, territorial integrity, citizens' prosperity and the European perspective of the country. Finally, referring to growing euro-skepticism in Bosnia, he declared that Bosnia "needs more Europe, not less".

EU relations with Kosovo also moved forward during the Greek Presidency with the conclusion of the negotiations for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 6 May and its initialing on July 25th 2014. During his visit to Pristina as part of his tour of Western Balkan capitals, the Greek Foreign Minister stressed that Kosovo has "a clear European perspective" and that the strengthening of the EU-Kosovo relationship is crucial for the whole region. At the same time, he emphasized that Kosovo must continue implementing economic reforms, good neighbourly relations and the strengthening of the rule of law in order to pave the way to Europe. Despite Greece's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, the Foreign Minister declared that Greece is prepared to deepen relations with Kosovo and to welcome the inauguration of a Kosovo liaison office in Athens. Greece also decided to accept Schengen visas in passports of Kosovar citizens, and this measure entered into force in March 2014. Lastly, it was declared that talks between Serbia and Kosovo would be crucial for the furthering of the integration process, economic development and the stability of the region.

Finally, the continuing impasse between Greece and FYROM concerning the "name issue" impeded productive sessions and any breakthrough in the country's accession process during the Greek Presidency. The dispute over the name issue and its political and diplomatic repercussions remains one of the most complex problems in the region for over two decades. Pending resolution of the name dispute, Greece not only vetoed FYROM's NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 but has

also kept FYROM in the “waiting room” of the EU.⁵³ Despite the Commission’s successive positive recommendations to begin accession talks, Greece has blocked the start of the negotiations, successfully lobbying its position in the European Council. The Greek position has consistently been that the objections of Greece to the launch of FYROM’s accession talks are also linked to broader issues of conditionality. As a result, the Foreign Minister emphasized the need for FYROM’s full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, including respect for democracy, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, respect for promotion of regional stability and good neighbourly relations. On the issue of good neighbourly relations, he declared that this not only refers to relations with Greece (regarding the name issue) but also to bilateral relations with Bulgaria.⁵⁴ The Foreign Minister also stressed the importance of the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, the question of the status of the Albanian community, and the implementation of the March 2013 agreement among political parties in the country.

5. Some concluding remarks

Greece’s EU Presidency took place in what was and continues to be an extraordinarily critical juncture for the European Union. Under these difficult circumstances, enlargement has become less of a priority for the EU and its members states, with the emphasis having shifted towards ensuring the survival of Economic and Monetary Union and the common currency, as well as returning to growth. However, despite these objective limitations and constraints on the enlargement process, as well as the initial concerns that the Greek EU Presidency would not be able or even willing to forward an agenda promoting the Western Balkan EU accession process, several important milestones were in fact achieved. Specifically: Montenegro closed several more chapters in its accession negotiations, Serbia launched its accession talks, Albania was granted candidate status and negotiations for Kosovo’s Stabilisation and Association Agreement were finalized.

⁵³ The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia obtained candidate status in December 2005.

⁵⁴ Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos response to current question on FYROM*, <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/deputy-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-venizelos-response-to-current-question-on-fyrom.html>, 30 January, 2014.

Moreover, the Greek Foreign Minister's tour of the Western Balkan capitals promoted the "connectivity" of the Presidency with the region, while the highly symbolic "Thessaloniki II" Summit allowed the EU to reiterate its commitment to the European prospects of the Western Balkan countries. At a time when "enlargement fatigue" had moved Western Balkan accession down the list of EU policy priorities, these actions managed to increase visibility of the enlargement process and to keep it on track. Although external and internal constraints created many obstacles to all forms of Balkan policy and would not permit a repetition of the level of success achieved during the 2003 Presidency, the accomplishment of these milestones during the Greek EU Presidency gave Greece the opportunity to reestablish itself as an important and enthusiastic promoter of the Western Balkan accession process. Accordingly, the Commissioner for Enlargement declared in Thessaloniki that "despite its current economic difficulties Greece still has a major and constructive role to play in the region, and is continuing to make a positive impact in the furthering of the European agenda of the Western Balkan countries".⁵⁵

One could of course argue that the enlargement process is on "automatic pilot" (albeit a slow one) in the sense that its progress depends far less on which country holds the Presidency and far more on whether the convergence criteria are fulfilled, milestones are met, and boxes are checked. In this context, the EU Council Presidency is less a trailblazer and more an administrator, providing a framework for discussions and a forum for negotiations. Moreover, as discussed above, the pace of the enlargement process also depends on factors that are beyond the control of the country holding the EU Presidency, such as the current overall negative climate concerning enlargement and the crisis within the eurozone.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the EU Council Presidency sets the policy agenda for six months, and therefore has the ability to steer the direction and focus according to its priorities. In this context, one could note that the fears of enlargement being largely ignored which came as a result of it not being listed as an official priority and with Greece trying to forward its European credentials and place a

⁵⁵ European Commission, "In Thessaloniki about EU perspective for Western Balkans".

greater focus on issues such as growth, employment, stability of the common currency – all of which were deemed more important to the Union – did not, in fact, materialize. Indeed, Greece proved that despite the extremely negative domestic and international circumstances, it is still committed to the promotion of Western Balkan integration, and that it wants to reclaim a positive and constructive role in the region. Finally, one should not underestimate the symbolic value of the Greek Presidency due to the expectations created by the legacy of 2003 Presidency.

Italy took over the helm of the EU Presidency from Greece on July 1st 2014. In June, at the annual meeting of 18 Central European Initiative Foreign Ministers in Vienna the Italian Foreign Minister, Federica Mogherini⁵⁶ declared that “the EU integration process for the Western Balkans is a priority both for Europe’s present and for its future... It is important to reiterate that the EU integration of the Western Balkans is of mutual interest - both to the region and to the EU overall... Italy realizes that it is an issue of mutual interest to have stability, economic growth and security in the Western Balkans, so very close to us. And we intend to make it one of the priority issues of Italy’s six-month EU Presidency”.⁵⁷ The importance of integration was echoed by EU Enlargement Commissioner Füle: “I understand that it is not the main issue for Europeans. For many, it is employment, for others it’s growth, and for others it might be the environment. However, Europe is not a single issue, it’s many. What is important to understand is that enlargement was never a problem, that the European Union has become stronger, not weaker”.⁵⁸

The Italian Foreign Minister reiterated these thoughts at the opening of the Western Balkans Integration Forum in Dubrovnik, Croatia on July 10th, where she declared: “this is a perfect occasion on which to confirm Italy’s deep commitment to the Western Balkans’ integration. We intend to see to it that real progress is made over the next six months... It could still take time, but we must go forward, and not only

⁵⁶ Federica Mogherini assumed the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 1 November, 2014.

⁵⁷ ANSAMED (2014): *EU: Western Balkans Integration a Priority, says Italian FM*, Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, 3 June, at: http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/nations/europe/2014/06/03/eu-western-balkans-integration-a-priority-says-italian-fm_3d6eb269-bd6d-40f3-a0fd-382129ded33b.html

⁵⁸ Ibid.

in the interests of the region's countries but also of the EU and the international community". Lastly, "enlargement is an instrument for promoting peace, stability and growth for everyone. It is not a challenge but a political investment".⁵⁹ It remains to be seen whether the positive rhetoric of the Italian Presidency and the EU's declarations of its commitment to the region will be transformed into actions that can accelerate the Western Balkan enlargement process, and create a momentum that can be carried through the following presidencies as well.

⁵⁹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Balkans: Mogherini, EU integration an investment policy*, 10 July, 2014, at: http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Sala_stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Comunicati/2014/07/20140710_balcmogint.htm

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Mehrere Identitäten, aber nur eine Mannschaft - Österreich oder Balkanstaaten? Wenn Fußballspieler mit multinationalem Hintergrund zwischen zwei verschiedenen Nationalmannschaften entscheiden müssen

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Contact: ritsa.panagiotou@gmail.com

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University of Graz
Liebiggasse 9
8010 Graz, Austria
Tel: +43-316-380-6697
e-mail: suedosteuropa@uni-graz.at

<http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/en/working-papers>