



The Policy of the European Union toward the Yugoslav Successor States 1996–1999: Stabilization through Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

The policy of the European Union aimed at reconciling the stabilization dimension with the prospective integration of the states of the Western Balkans seems to have produced few results in recent years. In this paper the authors attempt to provide an account of the short historical period in which the EU developed a coherent regional policy towards the Balkans for the first time. This policy, called a 'Regional Approach', was designed by the EU's institutions for the region in late 1995 and was pursued until the Kosovo crisis of 1999. This policy placed a paramount emphasis on the stabilization of the region during a post-conflict period. The analysis in this paper is centered on the questions of the scope of states covered by the 'Regional Approach' policy, its objectives, the principle of conditionality it employed and the reasons for its limited success. The argument contributes to the wider debate about the features of the EU's policy designed for the stabilization and integration of the Western Balkans. The paper also attempts to identify the points in which the 'Regional Approach' departs from the usual features of the EU's regional policies. In particular, comparisons are made with the EU's policy toward the region of Eastern and Central Europe, developing at the same period of time as the 'Regional Approach'. In addition, the paper also contributes to the general discussion about the modalities of the EU's regional policies.

Key words: Regional Approach, European Union's regional policy, Western Balkans

Introduction

Almost fifteen years have passed since the European Council in Santa Maria de Feira famously declared that all the countries of the Western Balkans were “potential candidates for EU membership” (Presidency Conclusions, Santa Maria da Feira, 2000, para. 67) At the present time, however, few observers would claim that the EU’s Stabilization and Association Process and the policy of enlargement for the states of the Western Balkans launched in the wake of the Kosovo crisis in 1999 have been a success story (Blockmans 2007: 207–220; Phinnemore 2003: 77–103; Drouet 2007: 147–169; Ott and Inglis 2002: 165–174; Friis and Murphy 2000: 767–786). The reasons for the limited success of the EU’s bold visions for the stabilization and European integration of its neighbouring south-eastern region form a complex problematic. In this paper we will attempt to contribute to the wider debate about the features of the European Union’s policy designed for the stabilization and integration of the Western Balkans. More concretely, we focus on the ‘Regional Approach’ policy designed by the European Union’s Institutions toward the region of the Western Balkans in late 1995 and pursued until the Kosovo crisis of 1999. The analysis of the elements of the ‘Regional Approach’ facilitates evaluation of the subsequently developed policy of the Stabilization and Association Process, which actually preserved many of the features outlined in the pre-1999 period. The analysis also contributes to the wider discussion on the modalities of the EU’s regional policies, in particular with regard to the policy developed toward the states of Central and Eastern Europe in the same period.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section provides an overview of developments occurring before the ‘Regional Approach’ was designed in late 1995, in order to explain the emergence of this major shift in EU policy. In the second section, the ‘Regional Approach’ is analyzed, in particular with regard to the scope of states covered by this policy, its objectives, the principle of conditionality it outlined and the instruments it employed. The last section provides a few concluding remarks on the ‘Regional Approach’, the reasons for its limited success and its influence on subsequent developments in relations between the European Union and the states of the region.

The European Union's policy toward Yugoslavia and its successor states in the period until 1996

In order to evaluate the emergence of the 'Regional Approach' policy, in this section we will briefly consider two issues: firstly, we will overview the relations between Yugoslavia and the European Union in the decades before the dissolution of the former state. Secondly, we will outline the developments of relations between the European Union and the Yugoslav successor states.

The beginnings of the European Economic Community's policy toward Yugoslavia date back to the period of the Cold War. As is well known, at that time the political situation in divided Europe posed great challenges. The states of Eastern Europe were grouped in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) or COMECON (Gjurcilova 2005: 14–71) and, among the communist states, Yugoslavia was the only one not strictly tied to the Soviet Union, instead pursuing a specific 'non-aligned policy'. For geostrategic reasons it was important for the European Economic Community to maintain as good relations as possible with Yugoslavia. And Yugoslavia also had reasons to ensure its relations with the EEC were as good as possible. Namely, the fact that Yugoslavia shared borders with several communist states made its geographical position awkward. In addition, despite continuous reforms and efforts to develop its 'self-management economy', the economic development of Yugoslavia was rather weak. Thus the relationship with the European Union was important for this state both geostrategically and economically (Ramet and Adamovich 1995; Holmes 1990).

Yugoslavia recognized the international legal personality of the European Economic Community and diplomatic relations were established: both parties exchanged Permanent Missions as early as 1968, and Yugoslavia signed its first non-preferential three-year trade agreement with the European Economic Community in 1970 (JO 1970 L 58/2; OJ 1973 L 224/2). In 1980, a Cooperation Agreement was signed (OJ 1980 L130/2; OJ 1983 L41/2). Financial assistance to advance Yugoslavia's economic development was also envisaged. In later years, the conclusion of an Association Agreement was considered and, from 1990, Yugoslavia was included in the PHARE programme for assistance (OJ 1990 L 257; Gjurcilova 2005: 71–84). Regrettably, the violent events that later broke out in Yugoslavia led the Council to decide to

denounce the existing Cooperation Agreement and its other forms of economic cooperation with Yugoslavia (OJ 1991 L 325/23). The states emerging from former Yugoslavia were drawn into a series of military crises and, in spite of the advanced relationship that Yugoslavia had enjoyed with the EU in previous decades, these military developments caused a long-lasting deterioration in the relations between these states and the European Union. Therefore, the privileged status was lost. The standing of the newly-formed states that emerged from Yugoslavia in the negotiating of the contractual relations with the European Union was much lower.

With the rapid deterioration of the Soviet Union's power, the former member-states of COMECON found themselves in a completely new position. A rhetoric of "re-uniting Europe" began to emerge, leading to previously unthought-of geostrategic changes and a gradual but steady strengthening of relations between these former COMECON states and the European Union (Dinan 2006: 253–292) In this way, major discrepancies appeared in the attitudes adopted by the European Union towards each of these regions. While the former COMECON states were steadily sliding into accession to the European Union, the post-Yugoslav states were accorded a series of stabilization initiatives. Interestingly, not all post-Yugoslav states received the same treatment from the European Union. Slovenia was the only state among the Yugoslav successors that escaped the stabilization phase. First it concluded a Cooperation Agreement with the European Union and later a 'Europe' Agreement, therefore managing to slide into the EU accession process (OJ 1993 L 189; OJ 1999 L 51). The other successor states—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—underwent prolonged military conflicts. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was dissolved into the separate states of Montenegro and Serbia (2006), as well as Kosovo (which declared independence in 2008). Macedonia avoided military conflict before a brief violent episode broke out between government forces and ethnic Albanian rebels in 2001. Until that period, Macedonia had been peaceful, as had the neighbouring state of Albania which signed a cooperation agreement with the European Union in 1992 (OJ 1992 L 343/1).

From the beginning of the 1990s, therefore, it became a matter of great importance for the European Union to ensure stabilization of the conflicts emerging one after another in its neighbouring region. The stabilization initiatives employed with regard to the former Yugoslav states gained proportions that cannot be compared with anything happening in Central and

Eastern European countries in the same period of time. Namely, in the latter region, stabilization normally meant strengthening reforms leading to democratic and economic development (Tatham 2009: 71–116). In the Balkans, after the very beginning when the European Union had made efforts to preserve Yugoslavia, the policy turned toward incentives for solving military developments and, later on, reconstruction. In addition, the European Union’s policy toward the Western Balkans was directed, as Tatham puts it, “rather to State-building than State-consolidation”, even when compared to the European Union’s enlargement toward the East (Tatham 2009: 160).

The ‘Regional Approach’

We proceed in this section to an analysis of the European Union’s ‘Regional Approach’ policy, especially with regard to the historical context of its emergence, the scope of states it covered, its objectives, the principle of conditionality and the instruments it employed.

Only when the Dayton Agreement ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina did the European Union develop “a more coherent and comprehensive approach to its Balkan policy by adopting the ‘Regional Approach’ to co-operation with the states in the western Balkans...” (Kramer 2000: 3). Namely, during the latter part of 1995, several international actors, including the European Union, launched the ‘Royaumont Process for Stability and Good Neighbourliness in South-East Europe’ to ensure the implementation of the Dayton Agreement and democratization of the region (Bull. EU 1/2 -1996, point 1.4.108.). In parallel with this initiative, the European Union launched its own ‘Regional Approach’ policy.

At that period of time, the ‘Regional Approach’ was a step forward in the European Union’s policy toward the post-Yugoslav states. Firstly, during the military crisis in former Yugoslavia, there had been huge differences among the foreign policy objectives of different European Union Member States. Secondly, the European Union itself had also pursued the line of bilateral approach toward each of these states (Giansily 1999; Blockmans 2007: 111–175). Therefore the multilateralism ensured by the ‘Regional Approach’ was considered an important transformation that would, after many failures, finally lead to the stabilization of a turbulent region.

However, the emergence of the European Union's first regional policy toward this area obtained a somewhat confusing scope. As it was envisaged in 1995, this policy was supposed to bring about the stabilization of the states involved in military conflict (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the FRY of Serbia and Montenegro). Although Macedonia was not among these states, the fact that it was covered by the 'Regional Approach' was evidently due to the fact that it was one of the Yugoslav successor states. However, in early 1996, the Council noted that the 'Regional Approach' had been widened and that it "... should be directed primarily at those countries of the region for which the European Community has not adopted directives for the negotiation of association agreements. Neighbouring countries which so wish should be able to be associated in the cooperation by appropriate means" (Council Conclusions and Declaration on former Yugoslavia, Bull. EU 1/2 – 1996, point 1.4.108.). Therefore Albania was included in this group of post-Yugoslav states that became targets of the 'Regional Approach'. As mentioned before, another Yugoslav successor state, Slovenia, was already sliding toward accession to the European Union, joining the group of Central and Eastern European States, which was in a much more advantageous situation vis-à-vis the European Union. Romania and Bulgaria, two neighbouring Balkan states that had formerly belonged to COMECON and which had a very low level of economic development, were also involved in this privileged group of Central and Eastern European states. Namely, at the time of the emergence of the 'Regional Approach', these two states had already signed not only cooperation agreements but also 'Europe' Agreements with the European Union (OJ 1990 L 291; OJ 1994 L 358; OJ 1991 L 79; OJ 1994 L 357). The new approach covered neither the entire post-communist Balkans nor its entire western part, and it remained unclear which criteria were being followed when determining the scope of states covered by the 'Regional Approach'. Nevertheless, the 'Regional Approach', as introduced in late 1995 and early 1996, marked the emergence of the political construct later called the Western Balkans. In subsequent years, the European Union continued to pursue a separate regional policy towards the Western Balkans, albeit with a somewhat changed scope of covered states, since, after pursuing successful accession negotiations, Croatia managed to access the European Union in 2013.

The 'Regional Approach' (as was later the case with the Stabilization and Association Process) was conceptualized by the Commission (Bull EU 9-1995 point 1.4.40), and in late 1995

the Council Conclusions on guidelines for former Yugoslavia confirmed that they envisaged “...a long-term relationship with the countries of the region” (Bull EU 10-1995 point 2.2.1.) which “should take the form of agreements in the framework of a regional approach” (Bull EU 10-1995 point 2.2.1.). These agreements were to fulfil several objectives: the improvement and intensification of relations with the European Union, taking into account, as far as possible, the aspirations of the countries concerned; the fostering of reconciliation and the establishment of open and cooperative relations among these countries and their closest neighbours and an overall contribution of the European Union to peace and stability in the region (Bull EU 10-1995 point 2.2.1.). According to the General Affairs Council of 26 February 1996: “the agreements with each of the countries concerned must be designed as a substantial incentive to political stability and as an instrument for economic development and cooperation between them, between those countries and their neighbours, and with the European Union.” (Bull. EU 1/2 – 1996 point 1.4.108.)

The elements of this strategy mainly followed the usual foreign policy choices of the European Union. Karen Smith has pointed out that: “The EU prefers to deal with third countries collectively: it lays out regional strategies, sets up aid programmes on a regional basis, and concludes specific kinds of agreements with countries in a particular region.” (Smith 2008: 69) The same author explains that in order to achieve regional cooperation, the European Union relies on two practices: classifying neighbouring countries together under regional strategies and encouraging regional groupings (Smith 2008: 69). What was particular in the case of the ‘Regional Approach’, as we have seen above, was the huge emphasis on post-conflict stabilization.

As is usually the case with the European Union’s regional policies, the ‘Regional Approach’ involved multiple policy instruments, such as financial assistance, unilateral trade preferences and cooperation agreements (Bull. EU 1/2 – 1996 point 1.4.108.). At that time, cooperation agreements had already been concluded with numerous Central and Eastern European states and these are unofficially known as first-generation agreements. This designation points to the fact that the European Union gradually replaced these cooperation agreements, previously signed with each of the Central and Eastern European states, with

Association Agreements (or ‘Europe’ Agreements) which were considered to lead directly to accession to the European Union (Ott 2002: 349–368).

Apart from the emphasis on stabilization as its paramount objective, the feature in which the ‘Regional Approach’ departs from the usual pattern of the European Union’s regional policies is the profile of the principle of conditionality it employed. Thus it has been noted that, compared to the European Union’s other regional policies, this conditionality differed because it was “elaborated, concrete and contained a list of conditions whose fulfilment would bring certain results” (Beshirevic and Cujzek 2013: 161).

Already in late 1995 it was stated that “(t)he agreements (...) should have an element of clear political and economic conditionality” (Bull EU 10-1995, point 2.2.1.) and that regional cooperation was to be observed in particular. Other envisaged conditions included respect for human rights, minority rights, the right to return of displaced persons and refugees, democratic institutions, political and economic reforms, readiness to establish open and cooperative relations between these countries, full compliance with the terms of the peace agreement, and, with regard to the FRY (Serbia and Montenegro), the granting of a large degree of autonomy within it to Kosovo (Bull EU 10-1995, point 2.2.1.). In its Conclusions, the General Affairs Council of 26 February 1996 outlined further requirements for the concerned states, such as adopting reciprocal measures, particularly regarding the free movement of goods and persons, and the provision of services and development of projects of common interest. Through this regional approach, financial aid from the European Union could be oriented towards jointly defined and cross-border projects (Bull EU 1/2 – 1996, point 1.4.108.). In addition, non-compliance was to be sanctioned by ‘specific measures’ (Bull. EU 1/2 – 1996, point 1.4.108.).

The emphasis on regional cooperation has always been at the core of the European Union’s regional policies. In the last enlargement round, the requirement for regional cooperation was included in the EU’s policy toward the ‘Visegrad’ states. In 1994, the Essen European Council promoted good-neighbourly relations and “intra-regional cooperation between the associated countries themselves and their immediate neighbours” as an important element of the principle of conditionality. However, in the case of the ‘Regional Approach’ this objective gained the form of a legal condition introduced in the concluded agreements, as can be seen, for example, in the Cooperation Agreement signed with Macedonia (Lopardic 1998: 326.).

The emphasis placed in the ‘Regional Approach’ on different aspects of human rights is also evident. Namely, the observance of human rights has, for a long time, been an important feature of the European Union’s external relations, even in cases when they were centered on purely economic issues (Bartels 2005: 5–78). The conditions connected to human rights in the case of the ‘Regional Approach’ had a much more elaborated content, which is not surprising given the overall objective of the stabilization of this region.

The document named ‘Conclusions on the principle of conditionality governing the development of the European Union’s relations with certain countries of south-east Europe’, produced by the Council on April 29, 1997, was the document that largely clarified the conditionality principle applied to the Western Balkans. According to the General Affairs Council: “... the EU has agreed to establish, in the framework of the regional approach, political and economic conditions as the basis for a coherent and transparent policy towards the development of bilateral relations in the fields of trade, of financial assistance and economic cooperation as well as of contractual relations, allowing for the necessary degree of flexibility. The EU strategy should serve as an incentive, and not an obstacle, to the countries concerned to fulfil these conditions.” (General Affairs Council. See: Bull. EU 4-1997, point 2.2.1.)

The document contains an introduction and subheadings such as ‘EU strategy on conditionality’, ‘Graduated Approach’, ‘Schedule for the application of conditions to different levels of relations and cooperation’ (including Autonomous Trade Preferences, PHARE: implementation of the programme, Contractual Relations, and an Annex listing the elements for assessing compliance) (Bull. EU 4-1997, point 2.2.1.). The listed elements were as follows:

1. Democratic principles (Representative government, accountable executive; Government and public authorities to act in a manner consistent with the constitution and the law; Separation of powers (government, administration, judiciary); Free and fair elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot).

2. Human rights, rule of law (Freedom of expression, including independent media; Right of assembly and demonstration; Right of association; Right to privacy, family, home and correspondence; Right to property; Effective means of redress against administrative decisions; Access to courts and right to fair trial; Equality before the law and equal protection by the law; Freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment and arbitrary arrest).

3. Respect for and protection of minorities (Right to establish and maintain their own educational, cultural and religious institutions, organisations or associations; Adequate opportunities for these minorities to use their own language before courts and public authorities; Adequate protection of refugees and displaced persons returning to areas where they represent an ethnic minority).

4. Market economy reform (Macroeconomic institutions and policies necessary to ensure a stable economic environment; Comprehensive liberalisation of prices, trade and current payments; Setting up of a transparent and stable legal and regulatory framework; Demonopolisation and privatisation of state-owned or socially owned enterprises; Establishment of a competitive and prudently managed banking sector) (Bull. EU 4-1997, point 2.2.1.).

It is evident that the content of the conditionality principle strongly resembles the famous Copenhagen criteria designed to guide the pre-accession strategy for Central and Eastern European countries. However, it is also evident that the above conditionality framework actually broadens the content of the Copenhagen criteria. In addition, despite this similarity, the principle of conditionality, as envisaged in the framework of the 'Regional Approach', is not designed to promote the full European integration of the states in the region.

Interestingly, the above document includes both the conditions applicable for the entire region and those applicable only for a certain state. The coherence of the approach was essential for the development of a truly regional strategy. This was even more important given the differences between individual Member States with regard to the Yugoslav conflict in the early 1990s. Further, the multilateral approach was to be reconciled with the establishment of bilateral relations with each of the concerned states, including separate conditions for each of them (Beshirevic and Cujzek 2013: 162). Some observers, however, point out that the regional approach and the principle of conditionality are incompatible because they rival each other (Wichmann 2004). We may recall that the European Union's experience in this sense was equally discouraging during the eastern enlargement. Namely, in that case, the European Union tried to balance the bilateral approach in relations to Central and Eastern European countries with the multilateral approach ('structured relationship'). However, this strategy was soon to be abandoned and the European Union proceeded with bilateral negotiations with each of the concerned states, leading toward accession.

Another feature of the European Union's strategy of conditionality is its reliance on a gradual approach: trade preferences, financial assistance and the establishment of contractual relations would be assured for states that fulfilled certain conditions. The beginning of the negotiations was supposed to require a lower level of compliance than that required for the conclusion of an agreement (Bull. EU 4-1997, point 2.2.1.). Besides rewarding states with more intense bilateral relations in return for fulfilling the conditions, any refusal to fulfil the conditions might result in the withdrawal of advantages and suspension of the agreement (Pippan 2004: 219–245; Blockmans 2007: 241–307; Tatham 2009: 159–173). Importantly, the criteria set by the 1997 Conclusions of the General Affairs Council were supposed to be used by the Commission in evaluations of compliance with the economic and political conditionality of the concerned states. In that way the 'Regional Approach' 'mirrored' the 'Pre-Accession Process', developed at the same time for official candidates from Eastern Europe for membership in the European Union (Vachudova 2003: 147).

The instruments employed by the 'Regional Approach', as Lopardic points out (Lopardic 1998: 327–328), might take a unilateral, bilateral and multilateral form. Typical unilateral instruments were the autonomous commercial measures like those applied for post-Yugoslav states (Regulation (EC) 70/97, OJ 1997 L 16; Regulation (EC) 825/97, OJ 1997 L 119). Most of the financial aid belonged to this group, such as that for the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Renauld 1997: 445–9) and the aid channelled through the PHARE programme. For example, on 25 July, 1996, the Council adopted Regulation (EC) No. 1628/96 (named 'OBNOVA') on financial assistance for the former-Yugoslav states of Croatia, the FRY, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia (OJ 1996 L 204). Interestingly, unlike in the case of PHARE, this Regulation envisaged conditionality. According to Article 2: "This Regulation is based on respect for democratic principles and the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are an essential aspect. The specific conditions laid down by the Council for the implementation of cooperation with former Yugoslavia are also an essential part of this Regulation." (OJ 1996 L 204/1). Therefore, financial assistance to the recipient states was linked to the observance of strict conditionality, including "an essential element clause". The bilateral form of instruments was typical for the cooperation agreements that included both a political dialogue and a financial protocol, also permitting crediting from the BEI. Multilateral

cooperation was a novelty introduced by the ‘Regional Approach’ (Lopardic 1998: 328). In that sense, the Commission has placed a particular emphasis on regional political dialogue as a result of linking bilateral and multilateral cooperation. As the Commission explained, political dialogue was considered “an appropriate instrument” for promoting human and minority rights and democratic principles (COM (96) 476 final: 7.).

It should be recalled, however, that there were already at the time several multilateral initiatives designed for the region, a circumstance which is believed to have contributed to their limited success. As mentioned before, the Process for Stability and Good Neighbourliness in South-East Europe was a multilateral project aimed to support the implementation of the Dayton Agreement. In addition, according to the Council Conclusions, this process aimed toward improving dialogue and confidence, regional cooperation and economic reconstruction (Bull. EU ½-1996, point 1.4.108; Meurs 2001: 72-91; Unal 1998: 2). Apart from this major initiative, there were others, such as the US-led ‘South-East European Cooperation Initiative’, ‘The Central European Initiative’, ‘The Process on Stability and Good-Neighbourliness in South-East Europe’ and ‘The South-East European Cooperation Process’.

Nevertheless, the states from the region did not accept the carrot provided by the ‘Regional Approach’. For example, Albania and Macedonia considered the ‘Regional Approach’ to be a step backwards in their relations with the European Union (Fakiola and Tzifakis 2008: 381), probably based on the fact that they had not participated in the military conflicts of the 1990s. The other states covered by the ‘Regional Approach’, such as Croatia, also had grievances about the European Union’s insistence on regional cooperation and they felt it was a policy which kept them away from Europe (Mileta 1997: 24–30). It has also been pointed out that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia suspected that the European Union was attempting to reconstitute former Yugoslavia in some way. Therefore, it was only Macedonia which managed to conclude a cooperation agreement with the European Union (OJ 1997 L348/2). The other state which had a cooperation agreement with the European Union was Albania, but this agreement dated from before 1996, having been concluded in 1992 (OJ 1992 L343/1).

Although it has been noted that initiatives leading to regional cooperation have “the best potential of reducing the inclusion-exclusion problem” (Cremona 2003: 125) arising from enlargement, it seems that the carrot of regional cooperation has been, in both Eastern Europe

and in the Balkans, strictly centered around the European Union. It is this lack of a clear vision of integration which produced the failure of the ‘Regional Approach’. Therefore, unsurprisingly, in 1999 the Commission proposed a policy shift: “The multiplicity of initiatives in the Western Balkans has created confusion. It has also diluted the influence of the EU in the region. As a first step the EU should work, through the Stability Pact, to streamline and focus the maximum international effort.”(EU Commission, Composite Paper, Reports on progress towards accession by each of the candidate countries, 1999: 37) This meant that the ‘Regional Approach’ was deemed insufficient and, soon afterwards, the Council began to issue a series of proclamations on the European integration of the states of the Western Balkans (Common Position 1999/345/CFSP, preamble, recital 7. OJ 1999 L 133/1; Presidency Conclusions, European Council, Lisbon, 23–24 March 2000, paragraph. 47; Presidency Conclusions, European Council, Santa Maria da Feira, 19–20 June, 2000, paragraph 67; Annex A to Council Conclusions of June 16 2003, Press Release No 10369/03 (Presse 166)).

Conclusion

Analysis of the profile of the ‘Regional Approach’ reveals that many of its features do not depart from the regular patterns of the European Union’s regional policies. In many points, this policy built on recent experience with regard to Central and Eastern Europe. Its main original element was its objective of stabilization, to be achieved through emphasized regional cooperation. Yet it is evident that, despite all efforts and initiatives, regional cooperation among the states of the Western Balkans was limited throughout the period 1996–1999, revealing the inefficiency of the multilateral dimension of the ‘Regional Approach’. On the other hand, the bilateral dimension—i.e. the relations between each of the concerned states and the European Union—resulted in the conclusion of only one cooperation agreement. The ‘Regional Approach’ failed because the states from the region did not accept the European Union’s initiative to assemble them within a single institutional framework “on a geographical - grouping basis” but without a commitment to their full integration (Fakiolas and Tzifakis 2008: 381). Therefore the results of the ‘Regional Approach’, which targeted the stabilization of the region as its

paramount objective, remained limited. It was only the EU's promise of future full integration, given after the dramatic crisis in Kosovo in 1999, that appeared to provide the carrot needed.

Nevertheless, despite the limited success of the 'Regional Approach' and the fact that it was primarily directed toward upholding the peace agreements of Dayton and Paris, the concept outlined is essential for analysis of the European Union's latter policy toward the states of the region, since a surprising number of its components remained as blueprints. Most importantly, the political construct 'Western Balkans', as outlined in early 1996, remained largely intact as a target of the European Union's separate regional policy. As its name makes obvious, the Stabilization and Association Process launched in 1999 also retained the stabilization of the region as one of its main objectives. In subsequent years, the elements of the principle of conditionality as envisaged in 1996 and 1997 were frequently cited by the European Union's Institutions' documents as still being relevant. Some features of the policy instruments outlined for the first time by the 'Regional Approach' still figure today. Although all of these elements have been reshaped since 1999 to fit the new 'integration prospective', more or less following the developed patterns of the European Union's enlargement law, it seems that many original features of the 'Regional Approach' still play their role in the European Union's policy toward the region.

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