

*CENTRE OF PLANNING AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH*

**No 143**

**Western Balkan Accession Policies:  
an Evaluation of the Greek 2014  
EU Presidency**

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June 2015

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**Πολιτικές για τα Δυτικά Βαλκάνια: αξιολόγηση του έργου της Ελληνικής Προεδρίας  
της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης**

**Ρίτσα Παναγιώτου**

**ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ**

Την 1η Ιανουαρίου του 2014, η Ελλάδα ανέλαβε την Προεδρία του Ευρωπαϊκού Συμβουλίου, σε μια ιδιαίτερα δύσκολη περίοδο τόσο για την ίδια όσο και για το σύνολο της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης (Ε.Ε.). Στο πλαίσιο αυτό, η Ελλάδα κλήθηκε να αποδείξει ότι παρότι η χώρα βιώνει μια βαθιά και παρατεταμένη κρίση, μπορούσε κατά τη διάρκεια της Προεδρίας της να προωθήσει την ατζέντα της ανανέωσης και της ανάπτυξης σε επίπεδο Ε.Ε. Σε ότι αφορά την ατζέντα της Ε.Ε. σε σχέση με τα Δυτικά Βαλκάνια, η Ελληνική Προεδρία είχε μια σημαντική κληρονομιά και πολλές προσδοκίες: ο παραδοσιακός ρόλος της Ελλάδας ως υποστηρικτής των Βαλκανίων στην Ευρώπη σήμαινε επιπλέον πίεση για να αποδείξει ότι παρά τις δύσκολες συνθήκες που περιέβαλλαν την Ελληνική Προεδρία, η χώρα δεν είχε χάσει το όραμά της για ένα Ευρωπαϊκό μέλλον για τα Βαλκάνια.

Το πρώτο μέρος της εργασίας παρουσιάζει την κληρονομιά της Ελληνικής Προεδρίας του 2003, η οποία, κατά γενική ομολογία, υπήρξε ορόσημο και περιλάμβανε σημαντικές αποφάσεις τόσο στις σχέσεις των κρατών των Δυτικών Βαλκανίων με την Ε.Ε. όσο και στη διαδικασία διεύρυνσης. Στη συνέχεια, ακολουθεί μια ανάλυση των προκλήσεων που αντιμετωπίζει η Ελληνική Προεδρία του 2014, οι οποίες έχουν οδηγήσει σε ένα αρνητικό περιβάλλον αναφορικά με τη διεύρυνση της ΕΕ. Το τρίτο μέρος της εργασίας εξετάζει και αξιολογεί τα επιτεύγματα και την πρόοδο που επιτεύχθηκε κατά τη διάρκεια της Ελληνικής Προεδρίας, ενώ η τελευταία ενότητα επιχειρεί την εξαγωγή κάποιων συμπερασμάτων για τη διαδικασία της διεύρυνσης κατά τη διάρκεια αυτής της δύσκολης περιόδου.

**Western Balkan Accession Policies: an Evaluation of the**

**Greek 2014 EU Presidency**

**Ritsa Panagiotou**

**ABSTRACT**

On January 1, 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. Greece was called upon to prove that despite being in an unprecedented deep and prolonged crisis, its Presidency could actually respond to the urgent challenges and help forward an agenda of renewal and growth. As far as EU policy towards the Western Balkans was concerned, Greece carried the important legacy of traditionally being seen as a promoter of the Balkans in Europe.

This paper will present an appraisal of the progress achieved in the EU accession process of the Western Balkans during the Greek Presidency. 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 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.

**Western Balkan Accession Policies: an Evaluation of the  
Greek 2014 EU Presidency**

**Ritsa Panagiotou**

On January 1, 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 extent, intensity and repercussions of the ongoing economic crisis in the eurozone have undermined the trust of a significant number of European citizens in the ability of the European institutions to implement credible and effective policies for a return to economic recovery and growth. In this context, Greece was called upon to prove that despite being in an unprecedented deep and prolonged crisis, its Presidency could actually respond to the urgent challenges and help forward an agenda of renewal and growth.

As far as EU policy towards the Western Balkans was concerned, Greece has traditionally been seen as a promoter of the Balkans in Europe, a bridge between the Balkans and Brussels. This legacy bestowed the Greek presidency with many expectations as well as extra pressure to prove that not only could it carry through a successful presidency under difficult circumstances and to enhance its European credentials, but also that it has not lost its vision for the European prospects of the Western Balkans, and that it is still willing and able to play the role of “Ambassador” of the region.

**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, by all accounts the Presidency of 2003 was a landmark presidency that included major milestones in the EU’s enlargement process. The Accession Treaty for the 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 as well as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – officially ending the division of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The countries that joined the EU in 2004 were Cyprus, Malta, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia.

As the only Southeastern 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 also broke new ground in the Union's relations with the Balkan region by focusing on two main goals: first, the acceleration of the accession process of Bulgaria and Romania – both candidate countries excluded from the first wave of Eastern enlargement – and second, opening the EU's door for the Western Balkans. Concerning Bulgaria and Romania, by May 2002 Greece had already submitted a non-paper with specific proposals in support of the promotion of the two countries' accession process. The non-paper essentially represented a new accession "roadmap", requesting 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. The accession negotiations with the two countries accelerated during the Greek Presidency, with the completion and closure of several key chapters.

Crucially, the Greek Presidency gave a new impetus to the EU's relations with the Western Balkans, culminating in the Summit of Thessaloniki, which has been considered the pinnacle of Greece's Presidency and a watershed in the region's relations to the EU (European Commission, 2003). On 21 June 2003, the Heads of State and Government of the EU, together with 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" (Thessaloniki Declaration, 2003). Despite other pressing issues occupying the European agenda at the time – such as discussions concerning the EU Constitution and the United States' intervention in Iraq – the Greek Presidency maintained the Western Balkans 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 (Prifti, 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 to join the Union through a set of concrete steps and measures and significant financial assistance. The Thessaloniki Agenda also enhanced the Stabilisation and



Association Process (SAP)<sup>2</sup> 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 (Phinnemore, 2013). The European Partnerships provided a framework covering each partner's specific situation and priorities, the 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 established, 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" (Council of the EU, 2003). 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" (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). The Thessaloniki Summit can therefore be seen as a pivotal moment whereby the EU's approach towards the region shifted from post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction (security) to democratic consolidation and European integration (enlargement) (Prifti, 2013). The Thessaloniki Summit was considered "the apogee of Greek diplomacy in Europe... the Greek government impressed Europe with a productive summit that crowned a successful presidency" (Grabbe, 2013).

The years following the Greek presidency were to witness 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. Crucially, spurred on by increased interaction with the EU – and especially Greece – for most countries in the region the period 2003-2007 was one of the strongest in more than a decade: annual real GDP

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<sup>2</sup> The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was launched in June 1999 and represents the framework regulating the EU's relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. It has three aims: stabilizing the countries and encouraging their swift transition to a market economy, promoting regional cooperation and eventual membership of all the Western Balkan countries in the EU. It is based on the gradual implementation of a free trade area and reforms designed to achieve the adoption of EU standards with the aim of moving closer to the EU.

growth averaged about 6 percent, while the region also received large inflows of FDI (Uvalic, 2013). This newfound stability, coupled with positive economic trends, allowed the Western Balkan countries to proceed – at a varying pace - with the implementation of the necessary reforms, and thus 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 (Panagiotou, 2014a).

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 under several programmes: Tempus (higher education), Erasmus Mundus (scholarships for students), Youth, the Research Framework programme and Joint Research Centre (JRC) activities, as well as through the work of European Training Foundation (ETF). Moreover, on 25 October 2005, the EU and eight 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 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 over the next few years. Implementation of these plans actually started in 2008, with the creation of a roadmap including crucial reforms such as enhancing border controls, replacing old passports with biometric ones, fighting illegal migration, organised crime and corruption as well as improving cooperation with the EU member states and EU agencies. Eventually, 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 (Stiglmayer, 2013).

During this period, Greece continued to be in the forefront of promoting the rapprochement of the Western Balkans with the EU, as well as their European prospects: in October 2009, the Greek Prime Minister announced a proposal for “Agenda 2014”, an initiative whose aim was to reinvigorate and create a new dynamic for the accession process, both within the EU

and within 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 global economic crisis, had led to reduced interest in further expansion into the region. Agenda 2014 therefore aimed at imparting 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 (Marini, 2010). Ultimately, engaging the Western Balkans closer to the EU was presented as a political necessity and an investment in European stability, since the implementation of the principles of good neighbourliness, regional cooperation, reconciliation and democratic consolidation would avert the possibility of creating a “black hole” of isolated, potentially volatile countries within Europe (European Fund for the Balkans, 2014a).

In a speech at the European Policy Centre in Brussels on 22 November 2010, the Greek Foreign Minister 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” (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). 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 (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). 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 would also underscore the EU’s commitment to welcoming the Western Balkans into the EU community. The year 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 at the EU Presidency.

### **Greece's 2014 Presidency**

Greece's 2003 presidency had taken place in what could be considered a period of optimism within the European Union: this confidence had been spurred by the achievement of major milestones in the integration process, including the consolidation of Economic and Monetary Union and the launching of the new currency, negotiations for the creation of an EU Constitution, the "Big Bang" enlargement ending the division of Europe, as well as the prospect of further enlargement towards Southeast Europe (Pagoulatos and Blavoukos, 2004). It was a period that witnessed a dynamism that encompassed both deepening and widening of the Union.

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 European Union as a whole. The immense social costs of the ongoing 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. At the same time, austere fiscal policies had greatly impacted social cohesion, especially in countries directly affected by the crisis. Greece's presidency took place at a time of intense euroscepticism and growing criticism 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, have 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 (Thillaye, 2013). 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 defined 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. Moreover, due to the European Parliament elections, the Greek Presidency was effectively shorter than the usual six months - and thus potentially weaker - as all legislative work stopped in April 2014 (Chatzistavrou, 2014).

Within this negative climate, Greece was called upon to prove that despite being in an unprecedented deep and prolonged crisis, its presidency could actually help forward such a broad and demanding agenda. Thus, 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 economic and structural reform programme domestically. 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 (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). Moreover, as a country that has been greatly discredited over the past years, has not yet emerged from the deep crisis, and is still under Troika supervision, Greece had to fight even harder to gain international trust and to compensate for a perceived lack of credibility as a leader. A great deal of Greece’s presidency was about trying to disprove any skepticism, cynicism, and negativity surrounding Greece’s ability to push forward an agenda on growth, employment and a vision for the future.

As far as promoting the policies concerning the Western Balkans were concerned, the Greek presidency faced several crucial challenges that were linked to the economic crisis that was underway in Greece and Europe, and the subsequent negative environment surrounding the prospect of enlarging the EU. In this context, the Greek presidency’s desire to revisit its role of key promoter of the Western Balkans in Europe was constrained by several objective limitations. The first challenge that would influence the Greek presidency’s Western Balkan agenda was the European Union’s “enlargement fatigue”. This enlargement fatigue – which set in after the unprecedented rounds of enlargement during the period 2004-2007 – has been further exacerbated by the economic crisis in the eurozone in general, and in Greece in particular. The ensuing widespread sense of insecurity throughout the Union had inevitably pushed EU policymakers over the past few years to focus more on domestic political and economic issues, with enlargement moving down as a priority on the agenda (Panagiotou, 2013; Balfour, 2012; Stratulat, 2013).

This wariness and fatigue has been evident not only at the level of policymaking but within the European population as well: it is indicative that the Eurobarometer 76 (published in December 2011) showed that only 36 percent of the surveyed population of the EU-27

supported the idea of further enlargement (down from 47 percent in May 2009, before the full brunt of the crisis was felt throughout Europe) (Eurobarometer, 2011). The numbers vary from country to country: the newer members (from the 2004 and 2007 enlargements) were more in favour of further enlargement (with Poland leading with a 69 percent approval rate, followed by Lithuania with 60 percent), while in the older members such as Germany, France, and Belgium supporting rates were mostly between 30-35 percent. Austria and France were the most vehemently opposed, with 70 and 71 percent of the population opposing further enlargement (EurActiv, 2013b). It is clear that on both levels – policymakers and population – there is more skepticism, caution, introversion and fear of the implications of further expansion during this critical period (O’ Brennan, 2014; Balfour and Stratulat, 2012). 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 (Balfour and Stratulat, 2013). Apparently, “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*” (Grabbe, 2013). 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.

Another challenge that would impact 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. In addition to the issues relating to the country’s loss of credibility and prestige on the European political-diplomatic level, the crisis in Greece also had a major impact on its economic clout and influence in the region. The implosion of the sovereign debt crisis in Greece has shaken the foundations of the dynamic bilateral relations in the sectors of trade, foreign direct investment and banking, as well as its role as a provider of economic assistance through the Hellenic Plan for the Economic Reconstruction of the Balkans (HPERB) (Panagiotou and Valvis, 2014a). The deterioration of the economic environment has had a deep and resonating impact not only on the Greek economy *per se*, but on practically all dimensions of Greece’s relations with the countries of the region. The crisis has created new dynamics, has shifted previous balances and ultimately has ushered in a new phase of relations between Greece and its Balkan neighbours (Panagiotou, 2014). Contracting Greek exports and declining Greek investment in the region, freezing of

HPERB projects, all led to a shrinking of Greek economic presence in the region that inevitably translated into a decline in Greece's political impact. Much of the soft power Greece had regionally has dissipated: it no longer has the relative regional economic muscle it once had in the Balkans, which was seen as a great asset in the pursuit of regional economic and political goals.

As far as the policy priorities were concerned, the Greek Presidency planned to adopt an agenda based on the 18-month programme of the Trio Presidency, without really investing in enriching the agenda (Chatzistavrou, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The Trio Presidency emphasized the priority need for strengthening 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. Crucially, 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" (Council, 2012). 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", 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 an EU-Western Balkans Summit ("Thessaloniki II") would take place during the Greek Presidency in the first half of 2014 (Council, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

In line with the Trio Presidency's programme, the priorities of the Greek Presidency as presented in August 2013 were: 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) (Greek EU Presidency, 2013). Crucially, despite its past role as champion 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 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 the country would continue to play a strong role as an Ambassador of the region and would put enlargement and regional solidarity high on its Presidency priority list (EurActiv, 2013). 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, including the finalizing of Kosovo's Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the launch of Serbia's EU accession and the granting of EU candidate status to Albania. Moreover, a firm commitment by the Greek Presidency would send a message that despite the economic hardship the country had been facing in recent 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.

However, the Greek leadership maintained that the fact that enlargement was not listed as one of the top priorities of the Greek presidency 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 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” (EurActiv, 2013). The Deputy Foreign Minister also emphasized that the Greek Presidency would work towards promoting the “connectivity” of the Western Balkans, i.e. to foster the closer connection of the region both internally and with the EU, primarily in the areas of transport and energy, aiming to contribute to growth, competitiveness and employment in the region (EurActiv, 2013a). 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 FYROM 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” (EurActiv, 2013).

### **Achievements of the 2014 Presidency**

An evaluation of the progress achieved in the Western Balkan accession process during the Greek Presidency indicates that despite not having enlargement as one of its key priorities, and despite the difficult circumstances in which the presidency was conducted, the Greek presidency managed to push forward significant steps that confirmed its commitment to the continuing rapprochement of the Western Balkans and the EU (GR2014, 2014). 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 throughout the Greek Presidency. As part of an effort to revive the union of Mediterranean basin states, a conference was held on 27 January 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 proceeding. Moreover, a conference on a more integrated Adriatic-Ionian Strategy was held in Athens on 6-7 February, bringing 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 foundations 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, strategic relations between Greece and all the countries of the region were discussed.<sup>4</sup> As a follow-up to these visits to the Balkan capitals, on 5 April 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 8 May 2014 and included Ministers from the 28 EU member states and the six Western Balkan states. The “Thessaloniki II” Conference was highly symbolic, representing *inter alia* the reaffirmation of the EU's commitment to the European perspective of the region, with Commissioner for Enlargement Fuele declaring once more that “the future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union” (GR2014, 2014a). 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> The only exception to the otherwise positive ambiance of all these 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.

rule of law, protection of human rights, regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations, as well as structural reforms of the 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 a view to promoting 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 Fuele 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 (European Commission, 2014). 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 to attract private capital could finance at least €10 billion of investment in the West Balkans, 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 (GR2014, 2014a).

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 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 and address common challenges in the fields of economy, commerce, trans-

border cooperation, energy, tourism, regional infrastructure projects, transport, telecommunications, illegal migration and combating corruption, organized crime and trafficking of persons (GR2014, 2014a).

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 21 January 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 (European Fund for the Balkans, 2014). 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" (European Fund for the Balkans, 2014). 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 – and primarily Chapter 32 – by July or latest by October 2014 (Balkan Insight, 2014).

Montenegro's accession course was intensified during the six months of the Greek Presidency.<sup>5</sup> The second meeting of the Accession Conference at Deputy level was held in Brussels on 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 24 June, 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Montenegro opened accession talks in June 2012.

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. Already 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 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 24 June 2014.

As far as the EU's relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina are concerned, Greek Foreign Ministry officials expressed their opposition to the imposition of punitive measures against the country – that have included the indefinite freezing of Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance funds and of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations – as they were seen as going against the established standards and frameworks of negotiations between the EU and candidate/potential candidate countries.<sup>6</sup> At the European Parliament plenary for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of WWI in April 2014, 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 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 25 July 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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. Finally, 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 the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (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 vetoed FYROM's NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 and has also kept FYROM in the "waiting room" of the EU.<sup>7</sup> The Greek stand has consistently been that Greece's objections to the launch of FYROM's accession talks are also linked to broader issues of conditionality: the Foreign Minister thus 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 did not refer only to relations with Greece (regarding the name issue), but also bilateral relations with Bulgaria (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). The Foreign Minister also stressed the importance of the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, the question of the status of the Albanian community as well as the implementation of the March 2013 agreement among political parties in the country.

### **Some concluding remarks**

Despite initial concerns that the Greek EU Presidency would not be willing or even able 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

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<sup>7</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia obtained candidate status in December 2005.

its accession negotiations, Serbia launched its accession talks, Albania was granted candidate status and negotiations for Kosovo's Stabilisation and Association Agreement were finalized. 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 would not permit a reenactment of the level of success and achievement of the 2003 presidency, the accomplishment of these milestones during the Greek EU Presidency gave Greece the opportunity to reestablish itself as a serious player in the region, and as an important and enthusiastic promoter of the Western Balkan accession process. As the Commissioner for Enlargement declared in Thessaloniki, "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" (European Commission, 2014).

Italy took over the helm of the EU Presidency from Greece on 1 July 2014. At the annual meeting of 18 Central European Initiative Foreign Ministers in Vienna in June, Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini<sup>8</sup> had declared that the "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" (ANSAmEd, 2014). The importance of integration was echoed by EU Enlargement Commissioner Fuele: "I understand that it is not the main issue for Europeans. For many, it is employment, for others it's growth, and for other 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" (ANSAmEd, 2014).

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<sup>8</sup> Federica Mogherini assumed the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 1 November, 2014.

The Italian Foreign Minister reiterated these thoughts at the opening of the Western Balkans Integration Forum in Dubrovnik, Croatia on 10 July, 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 in the interests of the region’s countries but also of the EU and the international community”. Finally, “enlargement is an instrument for promoting peace, stability and growth for everyone. It is not a challenge but a political investment” (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). 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.



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