

With the end of the East-vs-West rivalry in early 1990s and in light of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) showed an interest in transforming the South-eastern Europe (SEE) into an area of political and social stability and economic prosperity. The high level of heterogeneity among SEE states-ethnically, politically, culturally, religiously, linguistically, demographically and economically-as well as their sharing of causes for potential conflict, including unresolved territorial and minority questions, economic backwardness, unstable and often undemocratic political systems, underdeveloped regional co-operation structures and reluctance to employ peaceful conflict settlement mechanisms and confidence-building measures, has made the European Union's task of addressing them as a block extremely difficult. Hence, the latter (EU) concentrated its efforts in establishing bilateral relations with all countries of the region.

EU's interest toward the SEE region includes the containment of violent ethnic conflict as a prerequisite for lasting stability throughout Europe; the reduction of migration motivated by poverty, war, persecution and civil strife; the strengthening of democracy, human and minority rights; the establishment of market economy structures with stable economic growth to close the gap with the rest of western Europe as well as the increase of their economic potential. Since the goals of the EU's policies coincided with the dreams of the people who reside in the region, 'Europeanization' -integration into modern Europe- became the reference, anchor and motivation for all of them. In light of the recent enlargement of the EU by ten more members, one of which is coming from the SEE region (Slovenia), and the high expectations of another three (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) for entering in before the end of the decade, it seems rather necessary to have a quick overview of what has happened and what has been achieved until this day.

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The European Community's (EC) approach to SEE countries during the Cold War days was naturally divided between its policy towards its western allies, Greece and Turkey, and that of its communist neighbours, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. In spite of the Soviet position for a "block to block" negotiations with the West, the EC appeared capable of treating some SEE countries in a more exclusive way compared to others. For example, taking advantage of Nicolae Ceausescu's and Josip Broz Tito's tendencies to embark on a more independent from the Soviet line foreign policy, EC succeeded in signing co-operation agreements with both Romania and Yugoslavia in the early 1980s. However, the increasing brutality of Ceausescu's regime in Romania and the re-emergence of ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia following Tito's death in the late 1980s forced the European Community to reconsider its policy towards them. The collapse of communist regimes in the region following the Fall of the Berlin Wall did not alter radically its strategy towards the SEE states.

In fact, EC's strategy towards the ex-communist SEE countries has been based upon three principles applied to all eastern European states, the principle of