

# Don't lower the bar on enlargement

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■ **While the EU has made enlargement technical criteria and processes more stringent, it is softening how it advocates and applies them.**

Your editorial "The rise and fall of enlargement" (11-17 October) was on the mark about the need for the European Union to become more engaged politically if the enlargement process is to succeed. While you were also correct that the EU has made technical criteria and processes more stringent, at least in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is softening how it advocates and applies them. It appears that, in its desperation to show some progress, Brussels is willing to lower the bar. This is counterproductive. The EU's standards will only be met if the EU targets its pressure. Doing so would be good for the EU's citizens, as well as for Bosnians.

The latest progress report on Bosnia may indeed be negative, but it also includes many "silly assertions" – including that the special parallel relations established by the Republika Srpska constitute implementation of the Dayton agreement. Most importantly, a strange disconnect is evident throughout the document: it says that Bosnian authorities have failed to perform, but it gives no names. For example, "some political representatives" are questioning the survival of the state and "are calling for an entity-level EU agenda separate" from the state. Clearly, this is a reference to Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska. Such examples are legion.

Furthermore, there is a consistent tendency to accentuate the positive, including the performance of the Commission's own processes, such as the "structured dialogue" on the judiciary. The Commission's own admonition that the Republika Srpska should not adopt a law on courts that infringed on state competences has been treated with utter contempt by Banja Luka for the past year, yet the report refers to this only obliquely, via a note that the law is "not yet harmonised" with state-level legislation. This is hardly laying down the law – or promoting the political accountability that the Commission claims it wants to foster. Quite the opposite.

The fundamental failing of the EU's integration process in Bosnia derives from a mismatch between the enlargement approach, which has succeeded elsewhere, and Bosnia's structural features. Bosnian politicians operate a de facto oligarchy. For them, the current system is far better than anything the EU can offer. The latest local election results indicate that voters across the country are (finally) losing their patience. But the EU's 'partners' are the political elites. The EU therefore pulls its punches and views civic initiatives that challenge the current order as an unwelcome irritant. The failure of Bosnia's political leaders to serve the public interest means that Bosnian agricultural goods cannot enter the EU market. That failure will become all the more evident, and painful, when Croatia joins the EU next year. That may well force the EU to decide, finally, on whose side it is – its false 'partners' in the political elite, or Bosnia's citizens.

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