A Response to the Interview with Michael Leigh, Director-General for Enlargement of the European Commission

Joseph Marko
European Academy Bolzano and Graz University

The interview with the responsible Director General for Enlargement addresses the two most important issues: first, what are the main achievements of enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007 with ten of the former communist countries in Central, East, and South East Europe, and, secondly, what is the present enlargement agenda for the ‘left-overs,’ that is, the countries of the so-called Western Balkans? From the interview questions and responses it becomes clear that various levels of analysis are addressed with regard to these two major topics of enlargement, namely, conceptual issues, the instruments developed and used by the EU institutions, and also their strategies and methodologies.

Mr. Leigh assesses the so-called ‘Eastern enlargement’ with the ten former communist countries in a very positive way, as a win-win situation for both the old and new member states. He is right, of course, with regard to the political and economic development. It indeed is a major success that the process of accession to the EU has obviously contributed to the consolidation of democracy and rule of law in all of those countries which became members in 2004, whereas the two ‘Eastern’ Balkan countries, despite delayed membership, still face difficulties with corruption, organized crime, and judicial reform. These struggles raise justified concerns for the EU Commission with regard to the entrenchment of rule of law. As far as the economy is concerned, the assessment could even be more mixed: it is true that a market with approximately one hundred million consumers with rising incomes obviously stimulates economic growth, and thereby employment, in the old member states. However, an article on the economic situation of these ‘transition economies,’ appearing in a special issue of The Economist on the prospects of “the World in 2009,” bears the headline: “[t]wenty years of capitalism: was it
worth it?” Assessment of the answer depends on whether you see the glass half full or half empty when you read that the region at last regained its 1989 level of output in 2006 and that growth since 2000, with EU instruments fully deployed and the prospect of membership in the near future, has led to a fast catch-up. However, by 2009, the average income per head relative to the former EU 15 average will be slightly below what it was in 1989, not to mention the fact of great regional disparities within the new member states. Moreover, whereas the record of Central European and Baltic States in their catch-up process is impressive, both in relative and comparative perspectives, the record of the Balkan states is rather depressing. The Central European and Baltic states have reached, respectively, 61% and 57% of the GDP per head (at PPP) of the average EU 15 with a relative increase of about 10% since 1989, whereas the Balkan countries, now with 35.2% of the EU 15 average index, have not yet reached the 37.6% of 1989, despite all the financial support of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) that began in 1999.

This brings me to the issue of comparing the conceptualization and strategies of the EU in the Eastern enlargement process with the SAP for the Western Balkan countries. First of all, the learning curve of the EU in the CFSP and the ESDP is impressive, when compared to 1991. Despite strong engagement in conflict prevention efforts in the process of dissolution of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991 and early 1992, the EU was militarily non-existent and too politically fragmented along the lines of member states’ interests to be able to prevent the wars in the Balkans. As a result, only the leadership of the American administration in and through NATO could enforce a pax Americana for the entire region, not only in Dayton in 1995, but also with regard to the violent conflict in Kosovo in 1999. The initial division of labour between the US and EU established in Dayton—with NATO under US leadership being responsible for peace enforcement and the EU for economic reconstruction under a UN umbrella—has been replaced with a strong engagement of the EU in the field of security, for which Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is now a prime example. The initial UN-led International Police Task Force has been replaced with an EU Police Mission and the UN-mandated multi-national military presence SFOR, by the EU military mission “Althea,” better known now as EUFOR. In addition, the High Representative, established under the Dayton Peace Agreement but endorsed by the UN Security Council as a quasi-protector to oversee the civilian implementation in BiH and from the very beginning recruited from the ranks of diplomats or politicians of EU member states, is double-hatted.