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# Bringing citizens into the fold – Making EU enlargement work in the (post) Covid-19 world

## Summary

The Western Balkans' pathway towards EU membership faces a major risk of lasting derailment owing to the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic has already deepened existing vulnerabilities and exposed the weakness of the system of checks and balances. If left unaddressed, these shortcomings will accelerate the region's democratic decline, reinforce state capture, and lead to profound and long-lasting economic and social hardship. The social crisis generated by the pandemic may end up fuelling identity politics, exacerbating populism and strengthening anti-European forces. The pandemic, in other words, runs the risk of transforming the Western Balkans into a region that is more authoritarian, more unstable and far less palatable to the EU than it is today, thereby disrupting the Union's project of continental integration in the long term.

However, as with every major crisis, the pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink priorities and design innovative solutions. One of these could be to recentre the EU's approach around strengthening societal support for a comprehensive reform of current state structures. The adoption of the revised EU enlargement methodology and the new Economic and Investment Plan provide a timely window of opportunity to inject fresh impetus into the EU's policies towards the region. To be up to the challenge, the Union needs to adopt a more cohesive stance with strict but fair conditionality at the forefront – both rewarding progress and sanctioning non-compliance – as well as interim incentives on the way to membership. More importantly, the EU needs to build new alliances with citizens-based initiatives and, in general, to expand citizens' engagement in the enlargement process. Given their vested interest in reforms, citizens, after all, are the EU's best allies in advancing the transformation of the region.

Already prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, the Western Balkans' movement towards the EU was navigating troubled waters. Despite having started 20 years ago, this process has still not yielded lasting results with respect to the political and economic transformation of the region. The six Western Balkans countries' formal aspiration to join the EU has regressed for the most part in terms of compliance with membership criteria in recent years. Uncertainty surrounding accession prospects has gone hand in hand with a declining will on the part of the Balkan elites to fulfil EU membership conditions. Instead, the governing parties have focused more on bolstering their position by strengthening their clientelistic and patronage networks as well as »state capture« practices.

The Covid-19 crisis will severely affect both the region and the EU's enlargement agenda. It has not only exacerbated the challenges that EU policy in the region is facing, but has also exposed enduring weaknesses in the Western Balkans – including poor health systems, corruption, protracted decision-making processes and non-accountable politicians. There is a serious risk that, in the absence of active EU engagement, the countries of the region will emerge from this crisis even less democratic, with poorer and disillusioned societies, and without any opportunities for a swift recovery or democratisation in the foreseeable future. In order to minimise these threats, there is a need for a renewed approach that is more coherent, rebuilds credibility and puts citizens at the centre of the accession process.

## Exacerbating existing vulnerabilities: the Covid-19 crisis

In March 2020, the governments in the Western Balkans followed the majority of EU countries and introduced very strict measures, including general lockdowns, weekend-long curfews and border closures. During the second wave of the pandemic in autumn 2020, the governments were, due to the social and economic burden, less keen on re-introducing such rigorous measures. The numbers of infections and mortality increased in the region in November and December 2020, and once again dramatically in March 2021, bringing some parts of the region such as Sarajevo Canton to the top of negative worldwide statistics in infections and deaths per 100,000 people. As of March 2021, the pandemic was out of control and new lockdowns were introduced. Given the slow progress of the vaccination rollout in all countries besides Serbia, the region faces an uncertain future. The Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly cast a long shadow over both the socio-economic and the political situation in the region and EU policy towards it.

### A devastating socio-economic toll

Although the governments in the Western Balkans introduced financial packages in 2020 to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis, growth in the region contracted by 4.5% in 2020, according to a World Bank estimate<sup>1</sup>. The recession for 2020 is projected to be particularly severe in Montenegro where tourism makes up an important share of GDP (-14.9%) as well as in Albania (-6.7%) and Kosovo (-8.8%) with their large service sector. Lower GDP decline was recorded in countries with a stronger industrial base such as North Macedonia (-5.1%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (-4%) and Serbia (-2%). Since the level of unemployment was high even before the crisis – it ranged from 9% in Serbia to 27.2% in Kosovo in 2020<sup>2</sup> – the situation of the labour market will be one of the most pressing challenges when the recovery takes hold. Due to the

fall in revenues and increased spending, all six countries recorded a drastic increase in their budget deficits – from 5.5% of GDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina to almost 12% in Montenegro.<sup>3</sup>

Similar socio-economic challenges exist in the EU member states. However, there is a serious risk that, in the context of a fragile democracy and weak market economy – both specific to the Western Balkans – the crisis will only accelerate democratic decline, consolidate current structures of power and lead to profound economic and social hardship. During the pandemic, the already weak system of checks and balances was further diminished as parliaments were sidelined, extraordinary powers were handed to governments, formal procedures were disregarded and the judiciary was not able to effectively control executive powers. The restrictions concerning not only democratic mechanisms but also civil liberties can become permanent. Since the crisis hit the private sector hardest, dependence on the public payroll and the importance of clientelistic networks will increase. Due to the weak social protection systems in place, the social impact of the crisis in the region will probably be more severe, last longer and lead to a great burden for the vulnerable parts of the population (such as single parents, women and members of socially marginalised minorities such as the Roma). The large share of informal employment and the grey economy will make the socio-economic impact of the pandemic even more severe. According to a World Bank estimate from autumn 2020, 300,000 people in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia have been pushed into poverty already<sup>4</sup>.

### A boost to anti-European forces

The social crisis generated by the ongoing pandemic could be reproduced as an identity crisis. It might strengthen anti-European forces, notably far-right groups, even more as many governments in the region are using identity and populist rhetoric to obfuscate their failure to deal with the pandemic. As we observe a strong trend towards conspiracy theories in the region accompanied by the post-factual politics of some governments and leaders, the space for evidence-based

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, January 2021, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *EU Candidate Countries' & Potential Candidates' Economic Quarterly*, Technical Paper 46, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2020.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, *Macro Poverty Outlook – Europe and Central Asia*, April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, *An Uncertain Recovery*, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, No. 18, Fall 2020, p. 2.

policies and reforms is shrinking. As found by a study conducted by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) from December 2020<sup>5</sup>, around 75% of citizens in the Western Balkans strongly believed in or gave credence at least to some degree to one of the most common conspiracy theories. These numbers put the Western Balkans first place in Europe in terms of the spread of conspiracy theories. Against this backdrop, the further design and implementation of EU enlargement policy might face a changed public realm, partly more inspired by Russian or Chinese influence than by the EU's power of facts and rationality.

Although both these countries provided only symbolic pandemic-related support to the Western Balkans in 2020, local politicians and the media attracted the greatest possible attention to their aid. Thus the lion's share of their societies, particularly in Serbia, believes that they were the biggest donor<sup>6</sup>. Both countries – China more than Russia – only strengthened their positive image since they were the ones to deliver the biggest numbers of vaccines to the region, mostly Serbia, since January 2021. At the same time, the COVAX mechanism, via which the countries of the region are to receive vaccines for the most vulnerable groups, has faced serious delays. Although the EU has included the Western Balkans countries in the joint procurement mechanisms for vaccines, they were not considered in the distribution quotas. As a result, no vaccines were delivered to the region via EU-supported mechanisms until early March. Disappointed by the lack of solidarity from the EU, countries in the region are turning to Russia and China to order vaccines via bilateral agreements.

Western Balkans. The economic hardship caused by the current pandemic is likely to deepen divisions in the EU and increase contradicting interests on the part of individual member states in the region. This, in turn, would further hamper the EU's ability to pursue a coherent policy. A decrease in the willingness to finance the transformation of the Western Balkans is reflected by the slashing of funds during negotiations for the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. Responding to the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe in spring 2020, the EU mobilised a financial package worth over three billion euro to support the Western Balkans. However, there is a risk that, for the sake of swift allocation of the funds, the monitoring of whether spending is compliant with EU norms and regulations might be rather neglected. The same applies to the Economic and Investment Plan presented by the European Commission in October 2020. Without proper checks and balances and regulations in place (e.g. on public procurement), these financial resources might end up only serving the interest of the governing elites and strengthening their own power positions within the country.

There is also a risk that the Covid-19 crisis will further decrease the EU's capacity for active engagement in the

<sup>5</sup> Florian Bieber/Tena Prelec/Dejan Jović/Zoran Nechev, [The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans](#), Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> According to an opinion poll conducted in March 2020, 39.9% of Serbian citizens consider China to be the biggest donor, 17.6% the EU and 14.6% Russia. Institute for European Affairs, [Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji](#), Research no. 21, March 2020.

## Towards a more cohesive and citizens-oriented approach

Despite all these shortcomings, enlargement policy remains the most effective instrument at the EU's disposal for influencing its neighbouring countries. However, the EU's approach has, to date, largely served non-reformed political elites, which got used to exploiting the EU for their internal political purposes. The EU is also usually silent when Balkan leaders breach its norms and values, attack journalists, members of civil society and academia or violently suppress protest movements. Consequently, there is an impression among the general public that the EU is keener to appease Balkan strongmen than to push for genuine democratic transformation in the region.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of well-governed states and effective institutions and increased societal support for comprehensive reforms to strengthen health and public infrastructure. Moreover, various kinds of citizens' initiatives and grassroots movements have emerged in the past decade and have become an integral part of the democratic toolbox<sup>7</sup>. They are directed against both growing authoritarian tendencies and the phenomenon of captured states and geared to improving living conditions as well as fighting major problems (such as corruption) at the local level. All these initiatives exhibit citizens' willingness to participate, to engage in political, economic and social debates and processes, as well as to support the common goals embedded in European values and EU integration. This is accompanied by a strong public commitment to join the Union. According to figures published by BiEPAG<sup>8</sup>, 95% of citizens of Kosovo, 90% of Albania, 82% of Montenegro, 81% of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 80% of North Macedonia and 64% in Serbia support their countries' integration into the EU. Even though it will become more difficult to maintain such a level of support the EU's leverage still remains considerable.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance: Gazela Pudar Draško/Vedran Džihčić/Marko Kmezić, (Unheard) calls for democracy from below: Social and Protest Movements and Potentials for Democratic Renewal, FES Study, December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Corina Stratulat/Marko Kmezić/Nikolaos Tzifakis/Matteo Bonomi/Zoran Nechev, Between a rock and a hard place: Public opinion and integration in the Western Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, December 2020.

### The Weimar Triangle and EU enlargement

The Weimar Triangle can be the driving force behind a more active and cohesive approach towards the Western Balkans. Germany is a major player in the region, economically and politically, and a strong supporter of the accession process. Poland continues to be one of the most outspoken advocates of the Union's enlargement – an idea that is backed up by traditionally high public support. France, in turn, as a proponent of Europe's strategic autonomy and initiator of a new EU enlargement strategy, should endorse a more pro-active stance towards the region.

1. The Weimar Triangle can be seen as a political link between the Western and Eastern parts of the Union. It can be used to formulate ideas and to set the direction for EU policy towards the Western Balkans. This platform can provide food for thought as regards specific sectoral policy areas in which the Western Balkans could be involved as an interim step and incentive to continue down the path towards EU accession – and which specific conditions should be fulfilled by candidate countries to this end.
2. The Weimar Triangle can serve as a platform for developing a common stance on condemning activities of Western Balkans' governments that contradict EU rules and values since achieving unanimity in the EU concerning these issues is almost impossible. A common statement by the three could help to restore the credibility of the accession process and be a first step towards increasing coherence in the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans.
3. The Weimar Triangle countries can also use the Berlin Process to develop new instruments aimed at speeding up the transformation of the region. Since the 2021 summit of the Berlin Process will be hosted by Germany, it could be a good opportunity to present new ideas in areas such as energy and the digital transformation, as well as infrastructural development and the security of the Western Balkans, even more so since the three Weimar countries share a similar stance in these areas. Cooperation could further benefit from the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, which is scheduled to commence in 2022.

For a more detailed analysis, see: Florent Marciacq/Tomasz Zornaczuk, [Towards more cohesion in EU enlargement policy – tapping the potential of the Weimar Triangle](#), Genshagener Papier No 27, March 2021.

### Increasing pressure from above

Ever since the beginning of the enlargement process for the Western Balkans, it has taken two to tango. Domestic ownership and deliberate action by local governing elites is central to any potential reform progress. At the same time, it is of utmost importance to make enlargement policy more effective on the EU side and to provide proper guidance and incentives for candidate countries. The credibility of enlargement policy therefore needs, first and foremost, to be rebuilt by adopting a more cohesive approach and more coherent actions on the part of member states and EU institutions towards the region.

- **Enhancing the conditionality principle.** For this purpose, clear benchmarking as well as transparent and achievable conditions should be combined with attractive incentives. Recommendations by the European Commission and other institutions such as the Energy Community and Transport Community should be accompanied by strong political backing from the EU member states, clear deadlines to implement changes and consequences for non-compliance. To start with, the Economic and Investment Plan should be made contingent upon respect for democracy, the rule of law as well as benchmarks in priority areas.
  - **Enforcing negative conditionality more strictly** in the event of regression in the reform process. Although the mechanisms to suspend accession negotiations have already been in place for many years, there has been no real ambition on the part of the EU to use them or other forms of negative conditionality in order to avoid demotivating the elites. However, this merely reinforced the notion of impunity among the governing parties since the cost of non-compliance is very low. The EU must re-establish itself as a credible actor by drawing red lines for elites and politicians who violate EU rules, principles and values and be strict in communicating that enlargement is about playing by the rules of democracy.
  - **Broadening the areas in which qualified majority voting could apply.** There is a need within the EU to avoid further bilateral disruptions by individual
- member states. The recent case of Bulgaria's blockade against North Macedonia illustrates the necessity of these reforms. Qualified majority voting in all intermediary stages of EU accession negotiations would limit the scope for individual countries to block the process owing to internal political considerations and improve the EU's effectivity. Qualified majority voting would apply both to cases of validating progress and to backsliding of candidate countries<sup>9</sup>.
- **Clearly communicating their governments' performance on EU integration to citizens in the Western Balkans.** The EU's lack of communication to the wider public and its unwillingness to directly point to deficiencies and deteriorations in the region is used by governing elites to blame the EU side for delays in the enlargement process. To change that, EU institutions should provide a transparent public track record on government performance and the general fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria in the European Commission's annual reports in a way that can easily be compared to the performance of other (potential) accession candidates and over time. These assessments should also be made available in local languages. EU institutions and member states should also openly call out any backsliding on reforms as well as negative conduct. They should be more vocal about attempts by governments to control and put pressure on independent media. Free and independent media are the precondition for getting the message across to the wider public.
  - **Devising a step-by-step integration model.** This gradual integration can apply to granting access to different EU programmes and funds, the progressive introduction of the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons, etc., which can be seen by the local population as attractive incentives. As EU membership prospects seem too distant to motivate the elites to implement reforms, a step-by-step approach will make conditionality more effective and will allow the EU to engage society to push for reform as citizens would be aware of the benefits of introducing them.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance: Srdjan Cvijic/Adnan Cerimagic, [Rebuilding Our House of Cards: With More Glue](#), IDSCS, Policy Paper No. 53, November 2020.

### Empowering bottom-up change and encouraging societal participation

The societies of the Western Balkans are the EU's best allies in terms of pushing for democratic transformation and strengthening of the rule of law, acting as an internal check upon governing elites. In recent years, there have been a number of examples of bottom-up citizens' mobilisations, from the Colourful Revolution in North Macedonia, plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a series of protests in Serbia (Protests against Dictatorship, Ne Davimo Beograd, 1 of 5 Million) to a wide variety of civic initiatives at the level of local governments and municipalities in all countries of the region. This societal mobilisation can become a vehicle for pushing for reforms oriented to EU integration and could be used by the EU to build new pro-democratic and pro-European alliances with citizens.

- **Going beyond the »reform/elite/capital bubble«.** Focusing more on citizens and their needs would facilitate the process of the EU's opening up towards new alliances at the local level. Citizens share common positions and engage in similar struggles for fundamental European issues – such as fresh air, clean water, free public spheres, an accountable and non-corrupt public administration, human rights and justice. These initiatives and successful cases should be embraced more openly by EU officials – including DG NEAR, EU ambassadors and delegations in the respective countries – and their profile raised within the framework of EU enlargement.
- **Including citizens' forums in the broader framework of enlargement politics and policies.** One of the models of democratic innovations in the Western Balkans are mini publics or »citizens' forums« (plenums) in which citizens deliberate on a specific issue, most often with the opportunity to interact with both experts and external actors. Including this model in the broader framework of enlargement politics and policies has a huge potential for challenging the formal institutional realm, which is often captured by political elites to maximise their own advantage. The model of an EU Citizens Dialogue can be used to present the Union's policies in the region to the general public, and also for public consultations on the programming of EU assistance

to the Western Balkans. Moreover, the Conference on the Future of Europe and the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, organised by the European Economic and Social Committee, would be suitable for organising and promoting such innovative approaches. A Citizens' Dialogue could also be set up around the time that the annual EU Reports are presented.

- **Consulting civil society on specific sectoral topics and in the early stages of planning.** To date, NGOs and civil society representatives have had limited involvement in decision-making and setting reform priorities. Local Partners are not sufficiently involved in the preparation of EU programmes for the Western Balkans (e.g. the Economic and Investment Plan and the Green Agenda). As a consequence, they are not always best tailored to the needs of local communities. While relying on existing platforms of cooperation with civil society – such as the Civil Society Forum and Business Forum within the framework of the Berlin Process, the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum and the Youth Forum – the scope of the consultation should be widened to include sectoral issues and with a view to creating more practicable and implementable solutions.
- **Reaching out to interest groups** that would benefit from the introduction of EU standards (farmers, different business sectors, etc.) and presenting concrete benefits to them through workshops and study visits. If possible, this can be linked with including the Western Balkans in specific EU programmes under clearly defined conditions. As a result, interest groups might start pushing more intensively for implementing reforms in specific sectors in their respective countries. A strong lobby for Europeanisation of the Western Balkans could be a powerful tool for putting enlargement back on track.

### **The Weimar Plus Working Group on the Western Balkans**

The Weimar Plus Working Group assembled a number of experts on EU enlargement policy and the Western Balkans from Poland, France, Germany and Austria. In a series of online workshop sessions that took place in November and December 2020, the participating researchers exchanged on a number of key questions relating to the EU's enlargement policy in light of the Covid-19 crisis and, based on their analysis, formulated concrete policy recommendations. This policy brief outlines the outcome of their discussions.

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### **The Genshagen Foundation**

The Genshagen Foundation is a non-profit foundation under civil law. Founders are the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the Land of Brandenburg. The foundation is a platform for exchange between politics, business, science, culture and civil society. It promotes dialogue between Germany, France and Poland in the spirit of the »Weimar Triangle«. The most important third party donor is the Federal Foreign Office.

### **The Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/ÖFZ)**

The Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe was established in 1978 by President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. It organises international conferences, bilateral colloquiums and short seminars; publishes policy studies and connects experts, policy advisors and civil society representatives from all over Europe. Its work contributes to the deepening of the relations between France and Austria, the promotion of European integration in the Western Balkans and the strengthening of regional cooperation in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.

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