



Briefing

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The European Project in the Western Balkans:
Crisis and Transition

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A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.



EDITORIAL

Jasmin Mujanović, Alida Vračić and Ioannis Armakolas

Hopes were high on June 18, 2019 at the EU ministerial meeting. Western Balkan leaders and analysts hoped the meeting would recognize North Macedonia's success in resolving the decades long dispute with neighboring Greece, and would be rewarded with a formal start for the country's EU accession process. Albania too hoped to start the negotiation phase, as it had received candidate status already in 2014. Both sides were disappointed, as the the Council opted (once again) to ignore the positive recommendations of the European Commission and revisit the issue in October 2019. And again, it was Paris and The Hague which most loudly protested the start of negotiations with Skopje and Tirana.

Most Balkan watchers were disappointed — but not surprised.

After the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the fundamental premise of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans was straightforward: reform and transform your political and economic regimes, and you too can join the most prosperous economic bloc in human history. In other words, the door was open, and it was up to local governments to seize the opportunity. In practice, of course, Brussels and the capitals actively facilitated those reform processes, especially in the region's most volatile polities, that is, those most affected by the Yugoslav Wars: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and (to a lesser extent) Serbia. Still the basic shape of the political circuit was clear cut: embrace "good governance" stridently enough, and you too will become an EU member state. That's how it worked for Slovenia, and, in time, that's what occurred with Croatia. And, indeed, that is how it had worked in most of the former Eastern Bloc, most of which had been successfully integrated into the EU and NATO over the course of the 2000s.

It is clear, however, that at present that basic deal — reform for membership — has collapsed. Some may argue that EU policy towards the region was never as transparent as all that, but whatever its details, even the broadest version of this bargain has now dissolved. Brussels and the EU Commission may still insist that the possibility for membership exists — but it is decidedly no longer an inevitability, and the EU is certainly no longer the "only game in town". But the root of the change has been in the capitals: confronted by the domestic crises unleashed by both the surging far-right and the rise of illiberal tendencies within the EU, as "external" shocks like the migration crisis and the long shadow of the 2008 financial collapse still loom on the horizon, appetites for further enlargement have decidedly cooled within the EU. Indeed, in capitals like Paris and The Hague the policy appears to have reversed entirely. In fact, the recent push by the Netherlands to suspend visa-free travel for Albania suggests something still worse: some EU governments, at least, are actually trying to roll back aspects of the existing integration regime between the Union and the Western Balkans.

Combined with the ongoing crisis of leadership in the U.S., and the growing political and economic clout of foreign powers like Russia, China, Turkey, and others, the contemporary Western Balkans find themselves tossed about in the most tumultuous international waters since the end of the Yugoslav crisis. And more than ever before, the way forward depends on a kind of creative synergy between domestic and international political actors that seems difficult to achieve, given how fluid the political situations at home and abroad have increasingly become. The strong showing by the decidedly pro-enlargement European Greens at the recent European elections provides some reason for optimism, as does the (potential) selection of a forward-looking, progressive Commission.

The contributions in this edition of our Political Trends & Dynamics bulletin invite sober reflection on the intertwined paths of the EU and the Western Balkans. By focusing on the often inverted faces of crises "here and there", our authors suggest that despite the political cleavages emerging between the EU and its Western Balkan "periphery", their futures remain fundamentally bound. There is in this fact still a tremendous degree of opportunity for progress and renewal. But by the same token, there is also great risk involved. If we do not collectively get it right in the Western Balkans — by helping establish functional, democratic, socially just regimes in the region — the price will be paid and shared by EU and non-EU polities alike.

THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE EROSION OF TRUST AND THE WAY FORWARD

Adnan Ćerimagić

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans is experiencing a rapid erosion of trust. At the heart of it is a crisis of trust in the EU enlargement policy; addressing this is crucial to the future of EU influence in the region.

In the 1990s, the basis for the EU's impact on the countries of the former communist bloc was an offer that politicians and citizens in those countries believed in and wanted: the offer of a more prosperous future as full members of the EU. It inspired politicians such as the pro-European Czech President Vaclav Havel to push for and deliver reforms. It also inspired citizens to seek change when politicians like Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Mečiar failed, who was known at the time as "a dangerous and ruthless populist presiding over a thuggish and corrupt regime."¹

In the early 2000s, the EU decided to extend this offer to what is today known as the Western Balkans, and it made an impact. Despite domestic opposition for over a decade, governments handed over dozens of people indicted for war crimes to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. In 2001, the EU helped Macedonia avoid going into a full-scale conflict. In 2006, it helped to manage the peaceful dissolution of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2010, it persuaded Serbia to accept an EU-facilitated dialogue with Kosovo. Since 2017, it has motivated the new government in Skopje to change its policies towards its neighbors, including its own Albanian minority.

At the moment however, there are doubts that the EU offer of a more prosperous and peaceful future for the Western Balkans is still there. Leading politicians in key EU member states are openly questioning if enlargement would actually be a good thing for the Union's long-term prospects. In May 2018, ahead of the meeting between Western Balkan leaders and their EU counterparts in Sofia, French president Emmanuel Macron explained that "what we've seen over the past 15



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years is a path that has weakened Europe every time we think of enlarging it."² Three weeks earlier, Macron told members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg that he was "in favour of the Western Balkan countries having a reinforced strategic dialogue."³ Brussels-based Politico Europe reported on Macron's statements as pouring "cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes."⁴ In April 2019, the Financial Times reported on the outcomes of the German-French meeting with Western Balkans leaders in Berlin as "France and Germany pour cold water on Balkan hopes for immediate EU accession."⁵

Macron's statements reflect the attitude of a majority of EU citizens who at the moment do not support future EU enlargement. In November 2018, as many as 61 percent of Germans were against EU enlargement.⁶ In France, results were slightly worse with 62 percent against.

Trust in the benefits of EU membership is also eroding in the Western Balkans. In July 2018, almost half of the region's citizens said that EU membership would either be a bad thing for

1 The Guardian, "Europe's black sheep returns to the fold", 28 April 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/apr/28/eu.politics>

2 Politico Europe, "Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes", 17 May 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Financial Times, "France and Germany pour cold water on Balkan hopes for immediate EU accession", 29 April 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/0c8e1402-6a9f-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>

6 European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 90", December 2019. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2215>

their countries (15 percent) or neither bad nor good (30 percent).⁷ Western Balkan politicians and elites have also become increasingly vocal about the change in attitude. In October 2018, president of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, told participants during the Belgrade Security Forum that in Serbia, no one cares about how many chapters in the accession process would be opened because “nobody knows what will happen after that. We need something tangible.”⁸

The most serious erosion of trust, however, is related to the European Commission’s assessment of the state of reforms in the Western Balkans. Western Balkans politicians questioning the credibility of the Commission’s assessments is no news, but increasingly, governments and parliaments across the EU are doing the same.

Some of them see the Commission as being too soft on the Western Balkans. When the Commission suggested in February 2018 that Montenegro and Serbia “could potentially be ready for membership in a 2025 perspective,” some EU member states rebelled.⁹ In June 2018, member states rejected the Commission’s assessment that North Macedonia and Albania were ready to start accession talks. The Commission’s assessment that Kosovo is ready for a visa-free regime was also deemed too earnest by some.

Yet other EU governments see the Commission as being too strict on the Western Balkans. When the foreign minister of Hungary, Peter Szijarto, came to Belgrade in April 2019 to speak at an event that gathered tens of thousands of Serbian citizens, he told them that they “deserve to become a member of the EU as soon as possible. If it was up to us you would be member of the EU already tomorrow.”¹⁰ He added that some countries “artificially slow down your accession negotiations” and warned against attempts to “lecture Serbia”, which is “a proper and proud European nation, something you have proved many times before.”

7 RCC, “Balkan Barometer 2018: Public Opinion Survey”, 6 July 2018. <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/66/balkan-barometer-2018-public-opinion-survey>

8 Belgrade Security Forum, “Grand Opening and Panel Western Balkans and the EU”, 18 October 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xx2g7E1g98>

9 European Commission, “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, 6 February 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

10 Pink TV, “Buducnost Srbije: Obracanje Peter Sijarto”, 19 April 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_M_8sjDpCU

Some observers and policymakers point out that despite this erosion of trust, the EU still has enough impact in the region to protect its interests. They justify EU inertia with a list of many internal challenges and more urgent external problems, from Brexit and Ukraine to Poland and Hungary.

Yet this inertia can prove dangerous, as last summer’s ideas about border changes demonstrated. In August 2018, the presidents of Serbia and Kosovo, Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaci, suggested that they were ready to redraw borders along ethnic lines.¹¹ They received open support from the Trump administration and other third actors not interested in supporting multi-ethnic states in the region. Surprisingly, key members of the European Commission and several EU member states welcomed the idea. Many observers supporting the idea argued that since the prospect of full membership for Serbia is not certain, it should be given something more in return for normalizing its relations with Kosovo – namely, a territory with a high Serb population. These signals from Washington and Brussels immediately encouraged various actors in the region from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Albania, to play with the idea of redrawing borders along ethnic lines in their own countries. Those who remember the 1990s know where attempts to redraw borders along ethnic lines lead to in the Western Balkans. It was only the quick and cross-party reaction from Germany, subsequently supported by a majority of EU member states, that at least temporarily took the issue off the table. But it should serve as a warning of what could happen if the erosion of trust is not addressed and accession processes are left to inertia.

At the moment, EU member states have difficulties reaching a consensus on many issues, including enlargement. The EU should approach the Western Balkans with an honest warning that only a unanimous vote by all EU member states grants a candidate country EU membership and that momentarily, no such consensus exists which guarantees a future date for EU accession to any Western Balkan country. Conversely, there is also currently no consensus among member states that has taken away the perspectives of the Western Balkans of one day joining the EU.

11 ESI, “The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past”, 25 April 2019. https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=194

It is in the interest of the EU to see Western Balkan countries align themselves with EU standards as quickly as possible. If the EU wants to achieve impact in the region, the European Commission and key EU member states will have to augment their offer to the Western Balkans. To start with, financial support is crucial. In terms of percentage of GDP, Romania has two times more funds available than the Western Balkans. This should change. Furthermore, the Commission should explore the idea of pushing for a wide range of concrete reforms by offering the Western Balkans integration into the EU common market and creating the conditions for a Western Balkan Schengen area.

It is also important that the next European Commission is ready to be more direct and clear about the state of reforms in the region. Yes, when it comes to the accession process, Montenegro and Serbia are clear frontrunners. Both countries are engaged in membership negotiations, Montenegro since 2012 and Serbia since 2014. However, when it comes to the state of reforms – according to the Commission’s own assessments from May 2019 – the frontrunner in fundamentals (public administration reform, rule of law and economic criteria) is North Macedonia.¹² Regarding overall preparedness to join the EU, North Macedonia is doing better than Serbia and only slightly worse than Montenegro. With everything else that North Macedonia accomplished since 2017, including improving relations with Greece and Bulgaria and increasing the rights of their Albanian minority, North Macedonia is the clear front runner. But this does not come out in the statements made by the Commission’s officials when talking about the region and it does not lead to North Macedonia receiving more significant feedback and support from the EU. In fact, quite the opposite occurred since the opening of talks in June were postponed.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Adnan Ćerimagić argues recent moves by the EU and its member states to “pour cold water” on regional enlargement hopes are undermining trust among Western Balkan leaders and the public that the European perspective remains a viable option for the region. The result has been a surge in reactionary and revanchist rhetoric and policy, above all the proposed Serbia-Kosovo partition plan, which seeks to create alternative, illiberal horizons for the Western Balkans.

When President Macron poured “cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes” in April 2018, he also said that he was in favor of the Western Balkans having “a perspective, that we follow the reforms that are undertaken and that we encourage them - but without being lax or hypocritical.” This is what the Commission should do. The decision to send an expert mission led by Reinhard Priebe to look into the state of rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina in response to protests in Banja Luka over the suspicious death of 21-year old David Dragičević for instance, is a step in a right direction.

Direct and clear language about the state of reforms can help regain the credibility of the European Commission and EU policy in the Western Balkans both among citizens in the region and the EU, but also among skeptical EU governments. More importantly however, it could strengthen political forces in the region interested in genuine reform, as the Priebe mission helped do in North Macedonia.

In the mid-1980s, Vaclav Havel wrote that what motivated him to act was hope. He describes his hope “not as the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something

makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”¹³ When Havel wrote this, he was opposing communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. After becoming president of the Czech Republic, he worked on bringing his country into the EU. Havel was certain that this made sense. In the end it turned out well.

At the moment, many in the Western Balkans and the EU not only doubt that the accession process will lead to full membership but if it would even improve the state of their countries. This article listed some arguments, which suggest they are right. Indeed, everyone in the EU and the Western Balkans who still cares about maintaining peace and stability and increasing prosperity in the region should not dismiss but, rather, address these arguments.

12 ESI, “How are they doing in 2019? European Commission assessments of Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania (May 2019)”, 29 May 2019. <https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/ESI%20-%20How%20are%20they%20doing%20-%20deciding%20on%20merit%20-%20May%202019.pdf>

13 Vaclav Havel, “Disturbing the Peace”, 1991, pp. 181.

INTERVIEW WITH VEDRAN DŽIHIĆ

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FES: How has the growth of illiberal parties and movements affected intra-EU discussion about the Western Balkans?

Džihić: The growth of illiberal parties in the EU has been steady, even though there is still no common understanding of the term illiberalism. Viktor Orban himself, who infamously used this term several years ago to describe his vision of a renewed Hungarian nation and state, has recently been using the term “Christian democracy”. Yet, in an internal note to his friends and foes from the European People’s Party Group in the European Parliament (EPP) published by Politico on June 14th, Orban vehemently protects his Christian notion of democracy as a necessary, illiberal type of democracy. He distinguished himself and his policies from liberal democracies and defined the three distinct elements of Christian democracies in need of preservation: first comes family, which is fundamental and based on “one man and one woman”, secondly, Christian *Leitkultur* (dominant culture), and, finally, FIDESZ is against immigration.

Independent of how we ultimately define the phenomenon, whether as illiberal, right-wing or populist nationalist, we face a different type of political at the EU level that is rather inwards-looking towards an exclusively defined nation state. It is anti-integrationist, conservative, traditionalist, and even tribalist in terms of fundamental values. It is quite often nationalistic, and in any case based on the fear of migrants, foreigners, Brussels, and all possible kinds of “others” (usually defined in ethnic terms).

This phenomenon has been and will probably continue to grow. Even though the right-wing parties failed to achieve the predicted major win in the European elections, the relatively favourable results for some of those parties, notably Orban’s FIDESZ in Hungary, Kaczynski’s PiS in Poland, Salvini’s Lega Nord in Italy, or Le Pen’s Rassemblement National, will certainly increase their confidence and overall, the influence of the right in the EU.



To date, there has not really been a direct link between the rise of illiberal parties and the Western Balkans. This might be for the simple reason that the Western Balkans region has not been particularly high on the EU’s internal agenda. At the same time, the foreign policy focus of illiberal parties is rather narrow and does not necessarily reach towards semi-peripheral European regions such as the Western Balkans. However, I do see a more general and structural link, which impacts the Western Balkans first and foremost in terms of changing parameters in the politics of both the EU, but also some member states with strong illiberal parties.

Firstly, we have been witnessing an enormous trend towards the securitization of numerous policy areas (such as migration and/or border policies) accompanied with the “We first” rhetoric (Italy first, Austria first, Hungary first, etc.), -based on Trumps’ logic of America first. This certainly leads to disengagement in multilateral issues and the formulation of a rather critical stance towards further integration of the EU. Secondly, the events of the last few years on the “Balkans migrant route”, at least some parts of it, have cast migrants as subjects of a new wave of “other-ing”. They are often portrayed as security risks, criminalized, and in any case dangerously different from the West. Finally, the above-mentioned questioning of the democratic consensus by some parties within the EU directly questions the premise of EU enlargement as a de facto democratization strategy.

FES: How does Austria – as both a strong factor in WB politics and a country that has struggled with some illiberal developments of late – changed in its posture towards the region?

Džihic: Political developments since the mass migration of 2015 have been shaped by a right-wing partly illiberal turn led by the Austrian Freedom Party and tolerated as well as somewhat supported, by the dominant political force in Austria, the Austrian Peoples Party of the now former Chancellor Kurz. In general terms, the position towards the Western Balkans has not changed. The economic policy of Austria remains on the previously established and very successful track. Officially, Austria has undertaken a great deal to protect its economic interests in the region by accompanying them with a policy of support for EU integration and cultural activities run by Austrian embassies and Cultural Forums. The Western Balkans were at the top of Austria's foreign policy priorities during the EU Presidency in 2018 and support for EU enlargement has remained unchanged.

Yet, the question is whether this nominally strong support for the Western Balkans translates into strong and successful policies of working and lobbying at the EU level for enlargement and a more proactive stance towards the region. This is doubtful given the rather modest personal and financial resources invested both by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as other Austrian institutions.

The securitization that I mentioned above has become a dominant trend in Austrian politics and has definitely had an impact on Austrian policies towards the region. Externalizing the protection of Austrian borders from refugees passing through the Western Balkan states has been a trend since the migration through the Balkan route peaked in 2015. Austria was engaged in supporting the extension of the mandate of FRONTEX, and has been working with sectoral ministries, supporting border police forces in the region, and more.

Finally, the most significant change thus far has luckily been in relation to the political ambience or mood, and is a result of almost two years of dissonant voices by representatives of the Freedom Party, notably Heinz Christian Strache and Johann Gudenus. Both of them ventured into a very close relationship with Serbia and the repre-

sentatives of the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia. Strache publicly spoke against the recognition of Kosovo, even though Austria was among the first to officially recognize its independence. Meanwhile, Gudenus maintained strong ties particularly to the Republika Srpska and was in charge of keeping contact with Russia. Both Strache and Gudenus were awarded a medal by the Republika Srpska and Milorad Dodik, a step which Austrian opposition parties harshly criticized.

These attempts at countering the Austrian official foreign policy towards the Western Balkans did not go unnoticed and attracted a critical response in Austria. Though the Austrian image and reputation was not damaged, several question marks popped up on the horizon. With the sudden internal political changes in Austria due to the so called "Ibiza-Gate" and the end of the coalition government between Kurz and Strache, it is expected that the Austrian approach to the region will be as stable and positive as it has been in the last three decades.

FES: Can you comment on the links between illiberal parties in the EU and local regimes?

Džihic: As previously mentioned, the relationship between the Austrian Freedom Party, Republika Srpska, and Serbia played a significant role by at least giving some credibility for instance to Dodik, who is otherwise often met with disapproval from the international community.

Something more important is a process that is described as authoritarian convergence or authoritarian learning. Since 2010, Hungary under Orbán has been considered a role model for changing the political system from within to make it illiberal and semi-authoritarian. Orbán has been managing Hungarian de-democratization since 2010 and has established himself and his clique as the single most decisive power block in the country. It is not a coincidence that the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, was in fact, granted asylum in Hungary.

Speaking about authoritarian convergence and learning between illiberal regimes and parties in the Western Balkans region and in Europe, there is another interesting and important aspect. I would describe it as a neoliberal, authoritarian type of governance where democracy is used as a façade for establishing a powerful but clientelistic

and corrupt system based on neoliberal reforms, deregulation, and restructuring. Such a system is accompanied by a neoliberal discourse on pragmatism, efficiency, economic reforms, etc., while completely neglecting the social dimension of deepening inequalities, low wages, a new precariat, and an unsustainable lifestyle in general.

If one reads Viktor Orbán's inauguration speech in the Hungarian Parliament in May 2018 and compares it to similar important speeches made by Aleksandar Vučić, you can see how their thoughts on the economy, social relations, family values, as well as their pathetic narrative on how both nations are endangered, are almost entirely identical.

FES: Is there a way in which far-right and illiberal parties are actually more favorable to enlargement than the center-left/right parties of the EU mainstream? How should we respond to that?

This seems to be quite a paradoxical argument – why should those political parties that usually are quite Eurosceptic and against further integration within the EU support the next round of enlargement proceedings. But this is precisely what we see, at least at first glance. The cynical explanation for that would be the joke about optimists and pessimists towards EU enlargement. The optimists, so the joke goes, would hope that Turkey is going to join the EU during the Albanian EU-Presidency, while pessimists think that Albania will be able to join only when Turkey takes over the regular presidency of the EU. The paradoxical state of things leads us to potentially assume that illiberal parties argue for enlargement with the ultimate goal in mind of making the EU dysfunctional and obsolete. Despite their (i.e. Orbán, Kaszinski, or the Czech President Zeman) strong rhetoric against Brussels, these leaders know that support for the EU is still predominant in their countries and they would not risk waging that specific war against Brussels.

In order to explain the paradox better, let us look into *Realpolitik*. Recently, an alliance of thirteen states led by Poland was formed within the EU-28 to lobby for the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The alliance includes Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, and Malta. There are only two so-called "old" member states on the list, Austria and Italy. Both coun-

tries are close to each other and have strong economic and political ties to the Western Balkans. All others are "new members" that joined in 2004 or 2007. Here it seems that we see the emergence of a certain solidarity of newer EU members that still feel the gap between them and the "West", and the enlargement candidates of southeastern Europe. At second glance, the enlargement support of rather illiberal parties in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Italy, and partly Bulgaria and Slovakia, may also indicate some kind of ideological sympathy for regimes in the Western Balkans, which in the case of immediate membership would likely become strong allies of illiberal forces in the eastern part of the EU. The demonstrative friendship between Orbán and Vučić is perhaps existing proof of this argument.

On a fundamental level the contradiction remains: the end of the EU as imagined by far-right, illiberal, and Eurosceptic parties does not point to a more integrationist and strong EU, but rather one which is nation state oriented, inward-looking and which directly opposes those political forces and imaginations that want to see the EU strong and enlarged.

FES: How can the Western Balkans be involved in current European debates on the future and reform of the EU? And initiatives such as "Multi-speed Europe, FR-GR initiative, Macron"?

This is the million-dollar question, or at least million-dinar question for a simple reason. The European debate is so multifaceted, rich, and controversial, led by different stakeholders and alliances, that it is almost impossible to determine the pace and direction the debates will take in the next moment, or to foresee the epicenter of the debate. This plurality of the debate reflects – despite all skeptics who argue that the public sphere and democracy are dying out – a vivid and pulsating public sphere in most countries of the EU. Therefore, to involve outside actors in such a plural and rapidly changing debate is rather a challenge.

To become part of the debate, a change in the political philosophy of the region is needed. The region needs to start delivering in terms of democratic values and standards instead of expanding the rather authoritarian view of the few, choosing strong institutions rather than strongmen and transparency and openness instead of

closed circle decisions. In order to become part of the conversation, alternative actions are needed, and new and innovative forms of democratic engagement are necessary. Protests and movements have to reach out to those who are marginalized and in despair. Those living precarious lives need to become political again. They need to be recognized and addressed as political subjects engaged in a struggle for better living conditions and a more transparent political sphere. We have to learn how to be together with others rather than excluding and demonizing them. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, “the new always appears in the guise of a miracle”. This “being together with others” creates the possibility for both individual and collective action and is capable of sparking change.

In the wider regional picture, relations with neighbors have to be improved. Serbia needs to gain Croatian allyship in the European debate. Albania and Kosovo need to work on building better and closer ties to Serbia and Montenegro, while Serbia must embrace the strong Albanian population in the region. The whole Western Balkans region represents in total a smaller population than that of Romania. This is why I believe that a sustainable long-term perspective is only viable insofar as it includes the strategy forging of new regional alliances and the creativity needed to formulate a strong political argument for the region, which is relevant on the European level and contributes to European debates.

I am fully aware that what I am outlining here seems like a utopian view of an engaged and European Balkans within the EU, but as Rutger Bregman says in his book on real utopia, we have to fight for a society with visionary ideas, which are against the rather apathetic notion of “no alternatives” to the status quo because when they become imaginable, they are also finally implementable.

FES: *Does the resurgence of a far-right in the EU increase the possibility of armed conflict and political disintegration in the Western Balkans and if so, how?*

No, I don't see a direct link here. But there is something toxic about those repeating arguments and predictions of armed conflict in the Balkans. What I see when arguments of new armed conflicts pop up and political disintegration becomes anchored in the public and political perception of the Balkans in the West, are negative political repercussions based on the old and now reinvigorated “Balkanization” effect. As long as the region is portrayed and perceived as a threat to European security, policies designed for the region will be rather reactive, security-oriented, dominated by *Realpolitik* considerations and hardly based on European values. As long as this perception remains, we will keep coming back to debates like those happening right now about the re-introduction of the Visa-regime (Dutch parliament), security risks (German Bundestag), or mafia and crime-prone Albanians in Great Britain or France. In the long term, this will only harm the normalization of the region, but also European interests in it.

One particular development is potentially worrying – if the far-right forces in the EU keep relating and gravitating towards closer ties with Russia both in terms of a practical political agenda, as well as in terms of ideological principles that they share including illiberalism, traditional family values, tribalism, and a disregard for human rights, the effects of this on the Balkans could be negative. We already see an interest in the new geopolitical marketplace of the Balkans growing in countries like Russia, Turkey, China and some Arab states, which are promoting their interests and policies and in some cases more or less openly opposing the Europeanization of the region. But to be clear, we are far from a dominant

political position of far-right parties in the EU, which will not be able to exercise the influence that some pessimists were foreseeing for years to come. Irrespective of this reality, they should not be underestimated either.

FES: *Do you have a short comment on the European elections and on the Enlargement package published recently?*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Vedran Džihić traces the growing ties between European far-right and illiberal political parties and Western Balkan regimes. While overt associations between the two camps have been relatively limited in the past, they have increased in recent years and appear poised to reshape both regional and European politics, as the illiberal actors gain influence but also develop their own visions for EU foreign and neighborhood policy.

Both the EU elections as well as the Enlargement package are neither good nor bad. In the EU elections we see reason for optimism when it comes to the rise of the Greens for example, or the stronger plurality and dynamism that we can expect in the EU parliament based on the new, partly changed political landscape in Europe. Debates, competitions, and a plurality of voices are good for European democracy. At the same time, the excellent results of some far-right and illiberal parties is worrying. Despite the fact that they did not manage to achieve the predicted major victory, their voice is a strong one in the European Parliament, especially in comparison to the role they usually play back home in their respective states – the role of a political spoiler.

The Enlargement package does not tell us anything new that other reports by other institutions have not been telling us for a while. The still rather bureaucratic wording of the reports has in the meantime become clear enough for all experts on EU enlargement – the message has arrived that the EU Commission is aware of both state and economic capture, authoritarian tendencies, politicized and controlled rule of law, intentional limitations on the freedom of the media, and more. This is good for the clarity of the relationship but does not provide a panacea explanation on how to change the political dynamics of the region. The EU enlargement process is simply (this is also nothing new and has not changed for a while) still a “dead man walking” – a process that must experience fundamental change to start delivering again.

INTERVIEW WITH SIMONIDA KACARSKA

Simonida Kacarska, PhD is the director of the European Policy Institute, a think tank in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia. Her research interests are related to the political transformation and European integration of the Balkans. In addition to holding research positions at several universities across Europe, Simonida was also a lecturer at her alma mater the American University in Bulgaria, and a civil servant in the European integration office of the Macedonian government. She is a regular media contributor and also consults international organisations.

FES: *The EU Commission has recently published its opinion for all countries of the region, repeating that the region belongs to the European family, yet reasserting that the EU accession process continues to be based on established criteria, fair and rigorous conditionality, and the principle of merit. How do you read the EU opinions, and what do they suggest about the future of the EU in the region?*

The reports on the Western Balkan (WB) region came shortly after the European Parliament (EP) elections and a year and a half after the European Commission introduced its “credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans” strategy. This year’s reports were published with a delay due to the campaign for the EP elections and were prepared by an outgoing Commission whose president at the beginning of his mandate ruled out enlargement in the next five years.

With the above circumstances in mind, we have gradually seen an evolution in the last five years of reports shifting to take on a more realistic approach, but also hinting at frustration due to the slow progress of the region. The key features I would single out from this year’s reports are:

- re-claiming the role of the Commission as an ally of the candidate countries by standing firmly behind the two recommendations for starting accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia,
- a bolder approach of singling out positive examples, but also problems in candidate countries, and
- increasing recognition of the need to review the instruments of the accession negotiations given the rule of law issues in the front-runner countries.



All of these features are also accompanied by the increasingly more evident and divergent views between the Commission and the EU member states about how or whether the process of enlargement should continue. This tendency is most clearly illustrated by the hesitation of the EU member states to reach a decision on the launching of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which the Commission has been pushing for since last year.

FES: *What kind of conditional relationship can be established between the EU and the WB that will keep the region focused on EU membership, given that enlargement seems off the table for the time being?*

Keeping the enlargement process alive is a challenge due to current conditions in the EU, but also in the Western Balkans. Support for EU enlargement in the EU is low, while the majority of Western Balkan countries in the region are not performing on the reform track. The distant perspective of membership does not provide enough of an impetus for the mobilization needed to transform these societies. Hence, there is a need to rethink how the Union could build a partnership with the region beyond the enlargement narrative and move past the government-centered approach which has been

common for the accession process. Furthermore, the focus on membership as a goal keeps us from devising ways of using the existing mechanisms that are in force and providing for possibilities to support the sectoral integration of the Western Balkans in the EU in areas which concern citizens directly.

FES: Apart from enlargement, what other ways can the EU make sure that its presence and influence matter in the region?

The presence of the EU in the region is possible through multiple mechanisms, however, not all of them are utilized effectively. For example, the Stabilisation and Association Agreements provide for the essential legal framework for cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and the EU, foresee gradual approximation and support sectoral integration of the region, but are not used to their maximum potential. In order to support the presence of the EU in the region, its institutions and member states will need to increase their engagement in the region with various stakeholders. Their influence must reach beyond the standard executive-centered approach of the enlargement process. At the same time, there is a need to increase the presence of the Western Balkans in the EU in order to bridge the gap between the public and stakeholders on both sides. One of the ways in

which the EU could foster this process is by including stakeholders from the region in debates on the future of Europe as a way of getting to know each other.

FES: Given the recent success in resolving the name issue between North Macedonia and Greece, what needs to happen to keep the country on the EU track?

The resolution of the name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece and the evident political will on both sides at that very moment in time, came as a result of the determination of the political leadership in North Macedonia to unblock the perspective of its EU and NATO accession. From this perspective, keeping the country on the EU track would primarily necessitate moving it to the next phase of the accession process, even if it comes a decade after the first recommendation for starting negotiations. This qualitative move to the next phase of the accession process is necessary in order to ensure the sustainability of many of the reforms which have taken place over the last two years, including the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, most of which is yet to follow. It is particularly important for North Macedonia, but also confirms the transformative power of the Union to support and foster democratic change.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Simonida Kacarska is encouraged by the shift towards “realistic” assessments of the state of regional politics and democracy in the EU’s enlargement opinions but worries about the growing chasm between the pro-enlargement views of the Commission and the anti-enlargement stance of a number of member states, arguing that this incoherence is undermining pro-EU trends in the Western Balkans.

A blue-tinted photograph of a wall. In the upper left, a white dove is painted on the wall, facing right. In the lower right, a large, patterned scarf is draped over the wall. The scarf has a complex geometric and floral pattern in white and black. The wall itself is light-colored and shows some texture and shadows. The overall mood is one of peace and stability.

POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

THE AIM OF THIS SECTION IS TO BROADEN THE DISCOURSE ON PEACE AND STABILITY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE AND TO PROVIDE ANALYSIS THAT INVOLVES A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, INCLUDING STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES AND ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.

THE INS AND THE OUTS

When it comes to the European Union, Southeast Europe remains very much a land of those 'in' and those still 'out'. For those still out, it seems that they will remain out for quite some time, not only due to their own slowness in meeting accession criteria, but also due to the increasingly questionable willingness of the EU to accept them. At least for now.

While most of the countries in the region wait in line to enter the EU, those inside held elections for the European Parliament. While in much of Europe the far right and Greens made significant advances in the European Parliament elections – albeit not as major as some had predicted or feared – in most of the Western Balkans the election results suggested business as usual. In **Croatia**, the election result was essentially a reaffirmation of the political status quo – the ruling HDZ party won the most votes, including four seats in the European Parliament, while SDP came second, also unexpectedly gaining four seats (with one subject to Brexit actually taking place). The centrist 'Amsterdam coalition' of smaller parties which survive on the Croatian political scene also got a seat, as did one far-right coalition and the insurgent Living Wall movement among others. Turnout, however, was an abysmal 30%, one of the lowest in the EU, compared to an overall turnout of 51% at the EU level. **Bulgarians** turned out in similarly dismal numbers – 33% – returning Bulgarian political parties with an almost identical mix of MEPs as in the previous elections (the ruling GERB was unchanged on 6 seats, the opposition BSP up one seat with 5 MEPs and the MRF down one seat with 3 MEPs).

By contrast, **Romanians** seemed far more interested in the European Parliament elections, with 51% of the electorate turning out to vote and long queues forming at polling stations for those living abroad. The ruling PSD came in second place, reducing its number of MEPs from 10 to 9 in what was seen as a significant blow for the party. Meanwhile, the biggest opposition party, the PNL, increased its number of MEPs from 8 to 10, while the PSD only very narrowly avoided being pushed into third place by USR-PLUS (a member of the Renew Europe, formerly ALDE block) which increased its seat share from 1 seat to 8. Former Romanian Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș will now head the

Renew Europe grouping in the EP. **Greece** also saw a strong turnout, with 59% of voters taking part in the elections. Voters dealt a blow to ruling Syriza, which won 24% of votes, trailing the opposition New Democracy which won 33% of votes cast. In response to this result, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras brought forward national parliamentary elections due in October to early July. The result of the **Cypriot** vote also suggested business as usual – the Democratic Rally, which has won every European Parliament election since the country joined the EU in 2004 came out on top once again with 29% of votes and 2 seats, while the leftist AKEL came second with 28% of votes and 2 seats. Two other centrist parties, members of the Socialists and Democrats EP family, gained one seat each. All in all, the seat distribution of Cypriot MEPs will be unchanged in the new Parliament.

Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović casts her ballot at a polling station during the European Parliamentary elections in Zagreb on May 26, 2019



What do the European Parliament election results mean for those Balkan EU accession hopefuls? The answer rather depends on who you ask. Optimists saw the advance of the various Greens as a hopeful sign for future enlargement prospects. In contrast, pessimists argued that the advance of the far-right populists would make European leaders even less likely to contemplate any steps towards enlargement.

In the short-term, all eyes are now trained on the composition of the new European Commission – with candidate countries eyeing whether 'enlargement' will make it into the title and remit of any of the new commissioners – as well as the new EU Foreign Policy chief and President. **Turkey's** accession process clung on by only a formal thread, with the conduct of the Istanbul mayoral elections

threatening to sever it completely; fortunately, in the end the AKP accepted the opposition victory in the mayoral election, leaving the formal thread of an enlargement process in place. While the wrangling to select who will fill the top jobs goes on in Brussels, EU leaders have poured cold water on the hopes of Albania and North Macedonia regarding the opening of accession negotiations. In the case of **Albania**, engulfed in ever-escalating political crises, this decision was perhaps not surprising. For **North Macedonia** and its government, the decision is a much more significant setback. The country's government had risked a great deal politically by signing the Prespa agreement, changing the country's name and resolving its dispute with Greece, in return for the promise of finally opening accession negotiations. As some sort of consolation, unofficial sources suggested that North Macedonia may yet secure approval for opening accession negotiations in September and that the European Council had not been willing to decouple the opening of accession negotiations for Skopje and Tirana at this stage. Media reported that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had assured North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev that the Bundestag would approve the opening of accession talks in September.

Despite this, Western Balkan accession hopefuls were left with a bitter taste in their mouths and a sense that, despite formal proclamations, their accession prospects were more bleak than ever. Perhaps the best way for Balkan elites to test the EU's accession bluff would be to truly embark on an effort to reform the way in which their countries are governed, particularly with regard to building the rule of law and eliminating corruption. Alas, there seems little danger that this will happen.

GOVERNMENT INSTABILITY

Across Southeast Europe, particularly its Balkan core, numerous governments looked more or less unstable.

Albania was clearly the instability front-runner, as the dispute between the ruling Socialists and opposition Democrats plunged into new depths. The German newspaper *Bild* published a series of wiretapped conversations in which Socialist Party officials are heard consorting with criminal underworld figures, or plotting electoral abus-

es. All of this only added fuel to the fire of opposition protests, which increasingly took on a violent tone. Tensions soared in Albania in the run up to the 30th June local elections, which the opposition vowed to boycott, raising fears of violence on election day. In the end, the vote passed off surprisingly peacefully, but turnout was down to an abysmally low 21 % (according to initial estimates), severely undermining the legitimacy of the election result. Prior to this, on June 8th, President Ilir Meta (formerly of the LSI) announced that he was cancelling the local elections. Rama reacted with fury, calling the move unconstitutional and vowing to have Meta removed from office in Parliament. Five days later, the Socialist-dominated Parliament adopted a resolution calling Meta's decision invalid and calling for the local elections to go ahead. In normal circumstances, Albania's Constitutional Court might be called upon to judge the constitutionality of Meta's decision; equally, Rama cannot drive through a motion to dismiss Meta without a Constitutional Court ruling that the

German Chancellor, Angela Merkel welcomes Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev during his visit in Berlin on June 13, 2019



President has acted unconstitutionally. The only problem is that Albania's judicial vetting process has been so thorough that it has left the Constitutional Court with only one – out of nine – judges, thus incapacitating it. In this kind of institutional vacuum, the Socialists forced through what amounted to a one-party election at the local level, while the opposition will now need to reassess new ways of trying to exert pressure on the government in the hope of forcing it to hold early Parliamentary elections.

In **Kosovo**, the governing coalition continued to limp on, neither holding a majority to pass legislation nor facing a majority willing to topple it. Regular spats between President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj continued, with an eye to some future election. Meanwhile, in early April, not long after the anniversary of the start of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Haradinaj sacked his Serb Minister of Local Administration, Ivan Teodosijevic, for having referred to Albanians as terrorists and claiming that they had fabricated certain war crimes in the process.

Despite almost nine months passing since the holding of national elections in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the country still remained without newly elected governments at most levels of the state. Indeed, the Republika Srpska entity was the only one to have elected a new government, while the election of the central-level Council of Ministers, the Federation entity government and many cantonal governments remained in limbo. In the Bosniak political camp, the SDA and SBB announced that they had agreed a tentative future coalition, with the DF also backing them. Many analysts believe that the details of the future possible coalitions have largely been thrashed out and that the continuing delay is more about political posturing and point scoring than anything else. Either way, Bosnia remains stuck as ever.

North Macedonia's reforming government came under strain from two fronts. One was the move by European leaders to defer any decision on opening accession negotiations at least until September. The promise of delivering the opening of EU accession negotiations was one of the crucial carrots used by the government in Skopje to sell the Prespa Agreement on the country's name to voters. Perhaps even more concerning for the governing SDSM-DUI coalition in Skopje

was how close the result of the presidential election held in April and May was. In an election that should have been an easy test for the ruling parties, the ruling coalition's candidate Stevo Pendarovski was just a few thousand votes ahead of his VMRO-DPMNE challenger Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. Pendarovski managed to pull clearly ahead in the second round of the election held on May 5th, in part thanks to an increased voter turnout. The clear message from the electorate was that its support for the SDSM had become much more lukewarm than it was a year ago.

Romania's governing PSD also suffered a number of setbacks. The party only narrowly avoided being pushed into third place in the European Parliament elections. Simultaneously with the elections, the ruling party also suffered a major blow when Romanian voters overwhelmingly voted in favour of judicial independence in a referendum seen as a rejection of its judicial reforms. More spectacularly, immediately after the EP elections, the Romanian Supreme Court sentenced Liviu Dragnea, the PSD leader, to 3 years in jail for graft. Hot on the trail of these defeats, the opposition National Liberal Party filed a motion of no confidence in the government in mid-June, which it nevertheless survived.

ELECTIONS

While the holding of local elections in Albania hangs in the balance, two other upcoming electoral processes will be watched with much greater interest. On July 7th, **Greece** will see the holding of Parliamentary elections. Originally expected in October, the election was moved forward following the poor performance of the ruling Syriza in the European Parliamentary elections. The opposition New Democracy is a strong favourite to secure an absolute majority in the elections.

Tensions were running high in **Turkey**, where the repeated Istanbul mayoral election took place on Sunday 23rd June. The re-run was sparked by the decision of the Supreme Electoral Board to annul the initial election held on March 31st on what is widely seen as a bogus technicality, motivated in reality by the unwillingness of the ruling AKP to accept the defeat of its candidate, Binali Yildirim, at the hands of the opposition CHP's Ekrem Imamoglu. The move was widely condemned by many,

both inside and outside Turkey as deeply undemocratic. The repeated mayoral elections showed that the AKP's gamble in cancelling the election and ordering a repeat had been a poor call. Imamoglu won the repeated mayoral election with an increased majority so convincing that the AKP was forced to congratulate him on his victory and accept the result. This was a relief for many who had feared a protracted political crisis in the event that the AKP refused to accept the election outcome.

Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu addresses the crowd in front of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Building on June 27, 2019



Post-election developments also took a dramatic turn in **Moldova** during the first half of June. Parliamentary elections held on February 24th delivered an inconclusive result and much political wrangling over who would form the next government. With no coalition in sight, President Igor Dodon warned on May 22nd that unless a government was formed in the next two weeks he would be forced to dissolve Parliament. Yet after eleventh-hour visits by US, EU and Russian officials, the pro-EU ACUM bloc and the pro-Russian Socialists, the PSRM, held talks on forming a government which would exclude the previously ruling Democrats. On June 8th, an ACUM-PSRM government was duly voted in, only for the democrat-dominated constitutional court to rule the next day, at the apparent behest of the Democratic Party, that the government had been formed illegally. After a brief but tense standoff and much manoeuvring, the Democrats conceded defeat and stepped aside. Soon after, Democratic leader Vlad Plahotniuc fled the country.

Although **Croatia's** presidential elections are not due before the end of December, the field of contenders is already becoming crowded. While

incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović is a strong favourite for re-election, former Prime Minister Zoran Milanović has decided to throw his own hat into the ring, with the backing of his Social-democratic Party. Others putting themselves forward include the singer Miroslav Škoro and former judge Mislav Kolakušić, both on the far right.

In **Kosovo**, there was nothing surprising about the outcome of the snap mayoral elections in the four Serb-dominated municipalities in the north. With the Belgrade-backed Srpska Lista being the only one fielding Serb nominees, its candidates won with ease.

PROTEST

While **Albania** saw violent protests staged by the opposition, in other corners of the region opposition protests seemed to die down, if not die definitively.

A molotov bomb explodes behind police officers during an anti-government rally in Tirana on May 11, 2019.



In April, **Serbia** saw major rallies and counter-rallies staged by the opposition and ruling parties respectively. The major pro-government rally held in Belgrade on April 19 far outnumbered a major opposition rally held earlier, thanks to the ruling SNS' ability to mobilise state resources to bus crowds to Belgrade. Yet as the dust settled on the protests and counter-protests in April, it was clear that the opposition "1 of 5 million" protests, which began in December, had run out of steam, even if they were still not dead. **Montenegro's** anti-government protests also ran out of steam by late April, in part thanks to divisions between civil society and opposition parties.

In an unusual twist, during April and May, government officials also engaged, or threatened to engage in protest actions. In April, **Serbia's** Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin threatened to go on a hunger strike over what he referred to as the violence of opposition protesters, much to the merriment of the public. In **Bosnia**, Security Minister Dragan Mektić of all people called for protests after a compromising video was released, implicating a top judicial official in possible corruption.

MIGRATION

Whether it was the subject of refugees and migrants from the Middle East passing through the region, or the exodus by the citizens of the countries of the Balkans, migration continued to be a hot topic on the region's agenda.

Faced with serious labour shortages threatening its tourist season, the **Croatian** government bowed to pressure at the end of June to increase the quotas for seasonal workers coming to the Adriatic coast to work. Many were expected to come from **Albania**, **Kosovo** and **Serbia**. Meanwhile, in **Kosovo**, concerns over the emigration of young people were so strong that Parliament decided to hold a special session at the beginning of April to discuss the issue. Elsewhere, in **Moldova**, media reported that Israel had overtaken Russia as the biggest source of remittances, in a sign of changing migratory patterns among Moldovans.

When it came to migrants and refugees from the Middle East, the steady trickle of people attempting to travel through the region in the hope of reaching Western Europe continued. In early April, **Greek** police clashed with a group of several hundred migrants attempting to move toward the country's northern border collectively. Yet the situation remained most complicated in **Bosnia**, in particular the country's north-western corner around Bihac, where the biggest number of migrants and refugees are holed up as they attempt to enter **Croatia**. Local authorities struggled to cope with the number of migrants and refugees, while a lack of governments at the central and Federation levels of the state further hampered a coordinated state response.

Greek police intervene with tear gas as migrants attempt to move to the Macedonian border, outside a refugee camp in Diavata, a west suburb of Thessaloniki on April 6, 2019



SECURITY

Two and a half years after **Montenegro's** alleged 'coup' plot, in which a group of Serbs, Montenegrins and Russians – including prominent Montenegrin opposition leaders – were accused of plotting to overthrow the government, the 13 individuals indicted by the Special Prosecutor were finally handed down sentences on May 9th. All were found guilty and sentenced to serve time in prison by the High Court in Podgorica. Despite concerns that the court verdict could generate violent protests, the situation in Montenegro remained calm. Most of the defendants stated that they would appeal the decision. The ruling was particularly controversial as one of the prosecution's key witnesses, Saša Sindelić, appeared to retract his original testimony in a television show on Serbian TV Happy in mid-March.

Meanwhile, relations between **Kosovo** and **Serbia** became very tense for several days at the end of May when Kosovo's police staged a major operation centered on the Serb-populated north in which 19 local policemen were arrested in an operation related to organized crime. The spectre of burning barricades could again be seen in the north for a brief period of time, while a Russian UNMIK staffer was also seriously injured by Kosovo police officers. Serbia briefly put its army and police forces on 'full alert', while the head of the UN mission in Kosovo rebuked the Kosovo police for its actions.

YOUTH AS POTENTIAL AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Gazela Pudar Draško

A recent FES study on youth in the Western Balkans found that only 22% of the Serbian youth does not think of leaving the country.¹ The situation is similar in other Western Balkans Six states and surprisingly, not much better in Slovenia, the ex-Yugoslav country with the longest EU membership status from which about 65% of youth considers emigrating. Economic factors are important but not decisive. Young people perceive their countries as incapable of positive change and are driven away by an atmosphere of despair, corruption and violence.

Moreover, there is a high correlation between a pro-democratic, liberal-oriented youth and the previously mentioned potential emigrates. These numbers reveal the despair of young people and the persistence of an image of the Western world, primarily the European Union, as a desired target or model for their own countries. Youth see their future in the EU quite strongly in many WB countries – with Albania (94.5%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (84.9%), and North Macedonia (81%) being at the top of the list. The populist surge and divide witnessed in the EU seemed not to dampen that image too much. We could claim that the crisis in the EU is perceived as a temporary state of things. Simply, trust exists in the institutions of EU countries that they will overcome this moment and continue building the biggest peace project of all time.

The latest EU Parliament election results seem to support this claim. Firstly, high voter turnout is a sign that EU inhabitants see the Union as a relevant actor for their own lives. Secondly, there is an obvious demand for a political course that does not strengthen illiberal forces within the EU, which was partly expected. Young people played a major role in this demand. Analysis shows that the Greens, as the relative winners of the elections, mobilized first-time voters by addressing issues that are beyond the national and urging for a unified European reaction to climate change. Transnational mobilization reached young people in particular, while several campaigns were supported by the EU to increase this group's vot-



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er turnout.² Another initiative, “Fridays for the Future”, mobilized tens of thousands of students who walked out of schools across Europe as a part of a truly global movement. These young people, though not yet eligible to vote, offered an alternative way of politically mobilizing their communities. EU citizens entrusted their parliament with a mandate to act against the status quo in many areas, including climate change and energy policies.

Trust in state institutions is exactly what is missing in the Western Balkans. Illiberal politics pursued by the elites and political parties enact governmental policies with the aim of remaining in power indefinitely. They manage to continue their rule through the exploitation of populist sentiment by utilizing numerous changing narratives suitable to the moment. Consequently, there is a high mistrust in the political elites and politicians in general.³ Such mistrust greatly contributes to citizens withdrawing from the political arena, evidenced by the low turnouts in elections, which ultimately benefits those in power. Citizens in the Western Balkans increasingly tend to combine two, seemingly opposite, attitudes: 1) support for democracy and 2) support for a strong leader who “does not have to bother with parliament and elections” for the good of the country (59% in Western Balkans). Such a finding is not so surprising if we bear in mind that the majority of citizens are dissatisfied with the way democracy is being practiced in the region and claim that democratic institutions never truly existed. How-

¹ Miran Lavrič et al., *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019).

² See ie. Pan-European campaign Give a Vote if You Give a Sh*t; https://twitter.com/giveavote_eu?lang=en

³ Fiket et al., *Mapiranje političkih orijentacija građana Srbije*, (Belgrade: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017).

ever, even if this jeopardizes trust in democracy as such, it would be misleading to say that citizens in Southeast Europe are giving up on democracy altogether.

On the contrary, one could actually point out to recent examples of promising and inclusive participatory practices in the region. In 2016, protests about supporting educational reform spread around Croatia.⁴ The reform itself was relevant, timely, and hugely important for the Croatian educational system. However, this was not the only reason for the protest. It was the “new” model of policy-making that empowered all actors that have a stake in the educational system. What was the “new” in this model? Members of the expert working groups that were to be engaged in the reform development were selected through an open call with transparent and pre-defined criteria. All developed documents were subjected to open professional evaluation and public debate on its content. This public debate resulted in more than 2,700 received comments from over 900 experts and institutions, 1,800 conclusions from different events and more than 64,000 teachers and other professionals taking part in the process. They were invited to participate in the process, which made them feel like *agents of change* for the good of their own profession and country.

Arguably, the novelty of this case was that it actually exemplified the appropriate policy development process, giving both a voice and purpose to its participants.⁵ As such, it was paradigmatic of democratic debate and thereby differed from other policy and political events in the Western Balkans due to its core objective – these were citizens’ protests for something which was both concrete and positive in society. Although their goals are yet to be fully achieved due to the lack of political will to continue with overall reform and conservative opposition, the protest conveyed a clear message

– #CroatiaCanDoBetter. It signaled the potential and the desires of (young) people to stay in the country and help build a society which makes them equal and empowered.⁶

This is just one of many examples in the region of street mobilization and the emergence of new social movements where younger generations played a significant role and were seen as a potentially vital political factor. It is important to note that in the future, their success will be facilitated or made more difficult by the policies of the new EU administration and its priorities, which remain to be seen after the appointment of the new commissioners. Existing Western Balkans political elites may stick to their political allies in the EU, whether they are for or against EU integration. The real difference is in the new social and political movements that could seek alliances and cooperation with the new parliamentary members. Firmly pro-EU, with the (worrying) exception of Serbia, social movements in the region would need to build or promote agendas that merge global priorities and their local environment.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Gazela Pudar observes that while pro-EU and broadly liberal attitudes are widespread among Western Balkan youth, even more pronounced is their disillusionment with regional politics and a widespread desire to emigrate. The drift towards emigration, in particular, has not been sufficiently mollified by underdeveloped civil society, government, or EU efforts to integrate this segment of the population in urgently needed reform efforts.

The context is welcoming for posing demands on environmental issues, like the catastrophic state of polluted Western Balkan cities (such as Tuzla, Tetovo, Skopje, Sarajevo, Belgrade) and serious disputes around water and mini-hydroelectric plants in the region. The global context could also be beneficial for pursuing a leftist agenda, keeping in mind incoming elections in the US where democratic socialism has risen

in opposition to the conservative, neoliberal, and exclusionary politics of the current administration.

Moreover, the local context is such that most political parties do not have clear action plans or strategies for attracting voters. Instead, it is the democratic, participatory and inclusive movements with a strong vision for society that can move towards much needed change in the political life of the Western Balkans. Social movements can mobilize the trust of the citizens and *rescue* politics from corrupt and negatively per-

4 Boris Jokić and Zrinka Ristić Dedić, *Cjelovita kurikulurna reforma: Izvorne ideje i procesi*, (Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018).

5 Some, although rare, exceptions could be found – development of the first National Strategy for Youth in Serbia in 2008 is a case known to the author.

6 More details on the protests can be found on <https://hrvat-skamozebolje.org/> (accessed on 23.6.2019).

ceived *politicians*. They build their whole agency around participatory democracy, pushing for different participatory models within the movements.⁷ These movements emphasize horizontality, leadership without leaders and deliberation before decision-making, frequently searching for consensus within a core team of activists. This is their strength and they clearly see it as an opportunity to offer *different* inclusive politics, which prioritize the public good, rather than the interests of narrow, privileged groups.

However, in order to be widely recognized as agents of change, social movements need to overcome internal issues and show greater capacity for cooperation and coalitions *beyond* their core groups, as well as national borders. Regional solidarity and regional connectivity should be placed high on the list of priorities for these movements and emerging political actors. In doing so, they should have support for strengthening their own capacities from all international actors that still focus on the Western Balkans. The European Union, as the key economic and political partner of Western Balkan countries, needs to overcome its politics of stabilocracy and retract support for leaders that increasingly exhibit authoritarian practices and state programs, which are implemented by captured institutions. The EU needs to support and push for a key ingredient that could revive institutional trust and build truly democratic societies – the participation of citizens in the policy-making process of the Western Balkans.

7 Jelena Vasiljević et al., *Demokratizacija odozdo: Formiranje i delovanje novih društvenih pokreta u Srbiji i Makedoniji* (Beograd: IFDT, CELAP, 2019).

SECURITIZING THE “OTHER” IN THE EUROPEAN FAR-RIGHT IMAGINARY

Spyros A. Sofos

Western European as well as global politics are undergoing a sea of change with a number of anti-systemic or non-systemic parties mounting a significant challenge to the political status quo that was established in the aftermath of World War II. In Europe, the most anti-systemic parties are situated in the far-right fringe of politics. They share repertoires of contestation, political action and discourse, which are increasingly being deployed to question and challenge the existing European institutional architecture.

This transformation of the political systems of the continent has been slow; it has been underway for several decades but has intensified over the last decade. Back in 2018, a team of researchers working on populism found that populist parties had more than tripled their electoral support in Europe in the span of two decades.¹ Despite possible disagreements on whether the multitude of parties included in the survey are populist or not,² there is indeed enough evidence to show that the Western European political scene has undergone a transformation over the past two decades. Since at least 1998, when so-called populist parties were mostly a marginal force in Europe, accounting for just 7% of votes across the continent, their fate has substantially improved. According to the same team of researchers, in recent national elections: “one in four votes cast was for a populist party”, thus elevating what they call populism from a political fringe phenomenon to a mainstream feature of the European political landscape.

The European Parliament elections of May 2019 confirmed trends that had already become evi-



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dent in the national elections over the past decade or so. They provided evidence that a number of anti-systemic or non-systemic parties are not only mounting a significant challenge to the political status quo that was established in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, but are also solidifying their contender position into the political landscape both nationally and at the European level where they are now trying to overcome their differences and articulate a shared voice and vision. Nevertheless, the advance of the so-called populist block was not as sweeping as originally expected in last May's elections. Although the European parliament poll has traditionally been viewed as an opportunity for disgruntled voters to express their concern by voting for the “outsiders”, last month the contender parties did not dominate the political scene to the extent that was anticipated. Meanwhile, their differences are becoming even more stark as they embark on attempts to build a Europe-wide political force.

The Voiceless Speak?

While the European political landscape has not been overrun by the “newcomers”, there is very little doubt that it is changing. European politics are more fragmented and polarized than it used to be twenty years ago and political tribalism is rendering dialogue and the development of shared horizons increasingly difficult to attain. It is not easy to analyze the verdict of Europe's electorate and as a result, an extensive and detailed analysis is required. The vote reveals multiple trends, fears, and sets of expectations, displaying voters' uneasiness with the ways that European societies are governed. The social and

1 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

2 The methodology used to determine which parties are populist (accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/20/measuring-populism-how-guardian-charted-rise-methodology>) relied on the compilation of a list of parties that could be categorised as either populist, far-right, far-left or Eurosceptic at various points over the past twenty years, thus diluting any working definition of populism. Yet, such an approach ends up in producing a map of diverse parties seeking to challenge established forces within European political systems. As I have argued elsewhere, the shortcomings of catch-all understandings of populism necessitates resisting the “charms” of populism - the prevalent uncritical use of the term to describe all sorts of parties, social movements or discourses that challenge the political status-quo (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/turkish-election-as-warning-against-irresistible-charms-of-populism/>)

emotional dislocations brought about by the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, the eurozone debt crisis a year later, and the politics of austerity at a national and Europe-wide level, as well as increasing concerns about the mismanagement of climate change have weakened trust towards the traditional political mainstream. The centre-right and social democratic parties that have traditionally dominated politics, especially in Western Europe, have ushered into the political arena the so-called populist parties of the right and to a lesser extent, rejuvenated the left's Green parties. Voters who feel they have no say over the business of government and express disillusionment with formal politics have been more willing than usual to look for alternative forms of political expression and to place their confidence in parties and personalities, which they consider outsiders to the political arena.

This sense of unease and mistrust of the post-World War II political establishment has provided an opportunity for the far-right to break out of the political wilderness where it found itself for most of the past sixty years in order to build the reputation it longed for. To this end, Western European far-right forces have been drawing on diverse resources. They have been mobilizing local and Europe-wide shared or public narratives (stories underpinning national identity, or expressions of historically conditioned fears and frustrations, "memories" of the expansion of Islam into European territories, but also the cultivation of silences about moments of shame such as the holocaust or European colonialism) and global tropes (such as the clash of civilizations thesis articulated by Samuel Huntington, or the global panic over Islamic terrorism after 9/11), in order to tap into the crisis of confidence in the political system that parts of Western European societies have been experiencing and to cultivate a sense of societal insecurity that it could mobilize.³ Despite their predominant national focus, far-right parties have been learning from each other in terms of themes, communication and mobilization strategies. Throughout

3 For a discussion of the notion of societal insecurity see Jef Huysmans, "Security! What do you mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier", *European Journal of International Relations* 4(2), 1998.

Europe, the far-right has been constructing what theorists working on mobilization call injustice frames,⁴ which evoke a sustained sense of disenchantment, 'a shared feeling of being cheated', and a constitutive moment of injustice against the nations and peoples of Europe.

Constructing an Existential Crisis

The far-right strategies have been largely circumscribed by the traditional repertoires of the nationalist and racist forces that have occupied the far-right fringe of the political spectrum. The financial crises Europe experienced, the social impact of austerity, the intensifying pace of social change, the socioeconomic dislocation it entails, as well as the dysfunctions of Europe's democratic systems have been framed as manifestations of an overarching crisis of national sovereignty. Mainstream politicians and "European bureaucrats" according to this narrative, have emasculated nation states, endangering their identity and security and jeopardizing jobs and access to the welfare state.⁵ Sovereignty has become the

rallying point of far-right parties throughout Europe. Marine Le Pen has been campaigning for reclaiming sovereignty from the European Union and has argued that only a restored national sovereignty can protect France from the challenges of migration and terrorism. Similarly, the Italian far-right Lega has been campaigning for reclaiming national sovereignty with Matteo Salvini, arguing for the reas-

sertion of Italy's borders⁶, while its coalition partner, Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), has called for leaving the Eurozone in order to restore the country's economic sovereignty. As Alessandro Di Battista, one of its most vociferous cadres puts it, the party fights for recovering "slices

KEY TAKEAWAY

In a careful academic analysis, **Spyros A. Sofos** suggests Europe is in the midst of a generational transformation that is as much rooted in a complex constellation of socio-economic crises, as it is the product of an ideological revolution, championed by the far-right, in which the Western Balkans, in particular, have become a veritable totem for all real and imagined problems confronting the EU and "the West" more broadly.

4 For a discussion of injustice frames see William Gamson (2013). "Injustice Frames". In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (eds D. A. Snow, D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam). doi:10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm110

5 See my discussion of the case of the Sweden Democrats www.goethe.de/ins/se/sv/kul/sup/nnm/21257746.html.

6 www.euronews.com/2019/05/03/europe-will-become-an-islamic-caliphate-if-we-don-t-take-back-control-salvini-tells-hunga.

of sovereignty”.⁷ Across the English Channel, the *UKIP* and more recently, the *Brexit party*, have been demanding to “take back control” so that the UK can allegedly generate its own legislation and control its borders. Throughout Europe, the far-right has been building its preferred version of a crisis that put the nation-state and its demise in a central position. Drawing on feelings of mistrust and disillusionment, as well as on a general sense of insecurity generated by the global and Europe-wide economic crises, far-right forces are fully aware that a public debate regarding the emotionally charged themes of sovereignty, national culture and the nation will give them an advantage over their opponents.

The migration flows that were set in motion by the Syrian conflict in 2011 provided yet another element of tangibility to the discourse of the sovereignty crisis that far-right forces have been deploying. Migration was a topic that had already been featured on the *Front National* and its successor *Rassemblement National*, which suggested that migrants, mainly Muslim North Africans, were unable to assimilate and were a potential threat to French society due to their cultural differences and their lack of loyalty to the Republic. In Germany, *Pegida* (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes – Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident*), a nationalist, Islamophobic, far-right political movement established in 2014, or the *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*), have focused on the alleged perils of Muslim immigration and according to some analysts, have informed political agendas.⁸ They have even influenced the left, where the new *Aufstehen* (*Stand Up*) movement has suggested that a break with traditional leftist policies of open borders is necessary if the left is to win back disenchanted voters who have joined the far-right.⁹ Similar developments have been taking place in neighbouring countries such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and further afield with the far-right mobilizing alongside lib-

7 www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/09/29/news/di_battista_campagna_contro_di_me_mi_ha_fatto_male_-207665320/

8 www.dw.com/en/pegida-determining-political-debate-in-germany/a-18124875

9 Having said that, the position of *Aufstehen* is not against extending asylum to those persecuted and is definitely not Islamophobic. Yet it seems to oppose economic migration as well as to consider that public apprehension at the perceived failure of integration policies is legitimate (see the interview of the movement’s founder, Sahra Wagenknecht, to *Berliner Kurier* (<https://www.berliner-kurier.de/news/politik-wirtschaft/interview-sahra-wagenknecht---es-koennen-nicht-alle-fluechtlinge-kommen--23710068>)).

ertarian forces to protect “the European way of life” against the invading Muslim Other.¹⁰ The European refugee crisis of the past few years revived the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant political movements of the far-right, which sought to focus on the perceived criminal and terrorist threats, as well as the cultural dangers posed by Germany’s refugee policy, initially crafted in response to the Syrian crisis.

Beyond Islam: Othering the Balkans

The obsessive reference to national borders is but one manifestation of the act of “Othering” that renders the far-right message simple and effective. It turns differences into a threat and externalizes failures and the source of disillusionment by placing the responsibility on “outsiders”. The malaise and unease experienced by the European electorate is therefore the result of incoming Muslim migrants, but also of an imposed, corrupt political system that “does not serve the people”.¹¹ Arrogant politicians out of touch with the people, inept European bureaucrats, migrants from corrupt countries with a lifestyle alien to that of Western Europe, are all part of this “Other” that Europe’s far-right needs to take on.

So, what is equally significant about the far-right’s reaction to the refugee crisis is its emphasis on the re-imposition of borders not only around, but also, within the EU. Western European far-right politicians have already cultivated fear regarding potential threats to job security, welfare, public health and order from internal migrants coming from Eastern European countries such as Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Such intolerance largely draws on historical prejudices¹² and the ideological byproducts

10 For a more extensive discussion of this topic see Spyros A. Sofos and Roza Tsagarousianou, *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks*, Palgrave Macmillan 2013.

11 British Eurosceptic MP David Davis juxtaposed popular sovereignty over parliamentary sovereignty, thus appealing to the vague notion of the people as a source of legitimacy at the expense of the legitimacy of the liberal democratic institutions, the judiciary and the checks and balances they provide. This way of reasoning is premised on the assumption that a vague national or popular will is stronger than individual rights and the mechanisms that protect them. See <https://opendemocracy.net/uk/anthony-barnett/sovereignty-bites-back-and-media-take-on-judges>

12 For the European tradition of orientalism with reference to East-Central and Southeastern Europe, see Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998 and Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

of existing economic disparities within the EU.¹³ The people flows set in motion by the Syrian conflict may have been exploited by the far-right to strengthen its narrative of a full-scale Muslim invasion of Europe, but they also created the opportunity for the far-right to express its Euro-scepticism and cast doubt about the trustworthiness in a Europe-wide response. The problems of refugee flow management and the failure of the settlement quota system agreed by EU members were construed and presented as signs of the inability of the European Union to protect Europeans. It enabled the far-right to advocate for national solutions, such as the reinstatement of border controls ultimately giving borders more tangibility.

Despite its lip service to a European family of nations, the “European” far-right discourse is riddled with ambiguities; national sovereignty and its symbols (borders and immigration control) remain at the center of the of the far-right agenda even when this inhibits further integration and the mobility of other Europeans. Its Euro-scepticism has already cast doubts about the future enlargement of the EU and a host of cultural, administrative and economic arguments have already been mobilized to meet this end.¹⁴ Turkey has for a long time been considered an unfit candidate even by Christian Democratic circles, due to its economic and administrative lack of preparedness, but also for standing at the antipodes of European “Judeo-Christian culture”. The same is true for the Western Balkan countries lining up for accession. Their “Balkan” character and their Ottoman past are seen as an explanation for their lack of readiness to join the EU, and even their unsuitability.

The Manichean understanding of politics promoted by the far-right places Southeast Europe in an exclusionary realm together with many imagined “others”. The logic that citizenship is reserved for the deserving few, those who “can fit” and “who are like us” makes EU enlargement a problematic issue; that despite the small size of

the Western Balkan countries, the idea of more people having the right to cross national borders and settle in other EU countries is not a palatable one in the imagination of the far-right where walls, fences and borders loom large and where the development of open societies, shared horizons and solidarity is considered a mortal threat.

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 13 See, for example, Roos Pijpers, (2006), ‘Help! The Poles are coming’: Narrating a contemporary moral panic. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88: 91–103. doi:10.1111/j.0435-3684.2006.00207.x; Jinrong Tong & Landong Zuo, (2019). Othering the European Union through constructing moral panics over ‘im/migrant(s)’ in the coverage of migration in three British newspapers, 2011–2016. *International Communication Gazette*, 81(5), 445–469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518802237>

14 See for example <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/21/balkan-states-eye-eu-elections-in-hope-of-enlargement/>

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