



WB2EU

VISION WESTERN BALKANS 2030

Europeanisation meets democracy



FINAL PUBLICATION

The WB2EU Network



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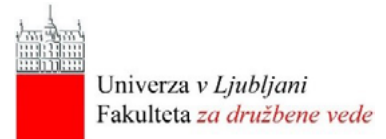
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PREFACE

The following publication gives the interested reader a very good insight into our journey towards a new European and democratic momentum for the Western Balkans. And what a journey it has been for our newly established network! 17 very different and mutually enriching institutions and organisations – from 16 countries and ranging from higher education and think tanks to NGOs and policy centres – have been working together for three years. Experts, researchers, analysts, activists, diplomats, politicians, and stakeholders engaging with a broad and interested public in all the countries, exchanging views and focusing on the challenges we face regarding the rule of law, social questions, and democratic developments in the Western Balkans – each of us learning from each other and making friends far beyond this project. A network dedicated to analysis and advocacy but also to supporting the next generation of Europeans. A group of people that have worked and grown together. A ring of experts that will outlast these three years and which will be the basis for many more cross-border projects to come. Together, we have lived and worked through different project phases. Not only in terms of designated topics, but in particular regarding dynamic external factors, which have pushed us to improvise, inspired, and reenergised our discussions and made us revisit many of our ideas and arguments. In the beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to meet in person, yet it offered the opportunity to adapt the project and even integrate new partners. It was followed by the terrible Russian attack on Ukraine, which quickly transformed into a historical turning point for European integration.

In fact, the Russian aggression has been a wake-up call for Europe. The political momentum and interest in EU enlargement are now back, and a window of opportunity for not only enlarging but also fundamentally reforming the Union is wide open. Only weeks ago, while the debate was gaining in speed and substance, Europe was on the brink of another armed conflict in the Western Balkans, triggered by a military attack by a Serbian paramilitary group in Kosovo with ties to an official EU candidate country. In January 2024, it will be ten years since EU accession negotiations opened with Belgrade. Today, Serbia is a warning example of what may happen if one does not speak the truth to power, and neither the EU nor this candidate country are taking the process of negotiating EU accessions seriously enough. Yet, waking up to a new geopolitical reality is not enough; one also has to get out of bed and make use of this wind of political change. If we do not manage to reap the benefits of this new situation in front of us, the tide may turn quicker than we think once the massive wave of public support for nationalistic forces celebrates its return.

Step-by-step

Political dynamics may push the EU towards enlargement. However, enlargement is not only driven by foreign and security policy concerns but also entails a strong economic, financial, and social dimension. Thus, the EU needs to undertake far-fetched reforms. That is why the European Commission rightly initiated a review of all policy areas to already discuss how to make them ready for a bigger and better Union. This is why it is paramount to include the EU candidate countries in the yearly Rule of Law Monitoring of the EU, which is already at an early stage. The sheer impact of a possible next enlargement with nine countries, in particular Ukraine, currently fighting for its existence, has no comparison. Next to the special security dimension, the substantial economic differences between the EU-27 and the current candidate countries need consideration, as the nine potential new member states all belong to the ten poorest countries in Europe. Once tough questions of competition or the future financing of the EU are on the table, negotiations and political decisions will naturally become more complicated.

Building on the next generation

Besides internal EU dilemmas and necessary reforms, one important task for the Union is to intensify and widen its networks and partnerships in the candidate countries. Closer cooperation with civil society, pro-European and emancipatory institutions, and grassroots movements would indeed be a welcome and much-needed help to boost democratisation from below. Frontloading some of the tangible economic and social benefits and an early, gradual integration into the single market could give new hope and perspective to the people. More attention should be given to the dreams and needs of the next generation in the candidate

countries. Young Europeans are the core constituency of the future of Europe, and it is them we have to inspire and engage with. In the end, it will be on them to secure internal democratic reforms and, with their passion and drive, to help hinder state capture.

Most importantly, all candidate countries and potential future members of the Union have to show full and honest commitment to reforms, which, in the end, they are not undertaking to please others but for their own wellbeing. They also must prove the will to adhere to European values and to follow up on their own sketched-out European ambitions. At the same time, the EU and all its member states have to raise their voices and take a clear and unequivocal stance vis-à-vis the volatile political systems seesawing between Moscow and Beijing. In the end, EU enlargement is and shall never be a process for the sole interest of political elites, but for the benefit of the people. It is the Union's core idea to promote European values, human rights, rule of law, and liberal and democratic societies, which apply to all, including, of course, the candidate countries. The Western Balkans are therefore a litmus test for the art of the possible. Not succeeding in a region where the Union has invested so much is not an option.

The war has put EU enlargement back on the table and created a new political dynamic. We need to seize this momentum for European integration to reform and enlarge. Our network is dedicated to contributing its grain of sand. At the end of the day, every bit helps, and we will all continue raising our voices for the future of Europe, just like many of us do in this publication. One last personal remark. Each project needs at least one good soul that holds a group together. In our case, the good soul of our WB2EU Network is Susan Milford-Faber. On behalf of the whole group, we are grateful to her for meticulously managing the editorial processing of all publications and for her tireless logistical efforts to stay connected and make this team effort a reality.

Paul Schmidt & Vedran Džihic

Coordinators of the WB2EU project
October 2023



Paul Schmidt, Secretary General, ÖGfE



Vedran Džihic, Senior Researcher, oiip

THE PROJECT IN A NUTSHELL

Brief presentation of the WB2EU project and the WB2EU Network

Europeanisation meets democracy from below:

The Western Balkans on the search for new European and democratic Momentum



Rationale and main focus

During the application process and at the start of this project in October 2020, there was little room for optimism for EU enlargement. At that time, the French "no" to opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania further aggravated the situation in the region. To regain momentum, the European Commission proposed a renewed enlargement methodology and prepared a communiqué for the Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May 2020.

The Western Balkans were and are still facing deeply rooted structural problems ranging from a flawed state of democracy to state capture. While political elites claim to be democratic, they engage in clientelistic policies that prevented social inclusion and deepened cleavages. To involve more with democratic and emancipatory civic movements in the region, a particular focus on the social dimension of enlargement remains crucial. It is encouraging that today social engagement, calling for free and just societies, is on the rise and can initiate a new wave of democratisation and Europeanisation, thus becoming a true alternative to the current elite set-up.

The next years will be decisive for the democratic and European future of the Western Balkans. In addition to a credible enlargement perspective and a positive enlargement narrative, it is still more vital than ever to support the rule of law, civil dialogue, pluralism, and the fight against corruption, as well as the social dimension. It is crucial to invest more in social inclusion to support the broad vision of just and democratic societies, which needs to include various bottom-up initiatives and actors.

Thus, the main focus of the "WB2EU Network" was to activate, connect, research, disseminate, and create joint output on the defined topics by bringing together academia, civil society, and relevant stakeholders at the national, regional, and EU levels.

Key objectives of our project

- reform, consolidate, and reenergize EU enlargement until 2025 and beyond
- mobilise, support, and engage with progressive and emancipatory forces from below (movements, citizens, and local initiatives) that are truly European and pro-democratic
- enhance youth and alternative voices and forces in the society
- strengthen the social dimension, rule of law, and justice in the region
- connect young and senior researchers, scholars, representatives of civil society, national and EU institutions, stakeholders, policy-makers, and citizens engaged in pro-democratic initiatives (local, regional, and national)

The proposed activities were implemented in 3 phases (29.10.2020–28.10.2023)

I Rule of law and justice / II Social dimension / III Democratisation from below

- 1 Policy Brief by each partner per phase (overall 45 editions)
- 1 kick-off event (Vienna)

- 1 closing event (Vienna)
- 6 “Ideas go public Labs” (Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Pristina, Paris, Belgrade, Berlin)
- 1 “Summer School” (Cres)
- new online platform wb2eu.eu
- a series of videos, op-eds and interviews
- a final report
- a final publication
- intense social media and dissemination activities

WB2EU Network

The network consists of 17 renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, higher education institutes and policy centres from the countries that were most decisive for the enlargement process in the last years.

Project initiators

Austria	Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE), Vienna (Coordinator & Project Leader)
Austria	Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), Vienna

Western Balkan countries

Albania	Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI), Tirana
Bosnia and Herzegovina	University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Sciences, Sarajevo
Kosovo	Change Experts Group, Pristina
Montenegro	Politikon Network (PIN), Podgorica
North Macedonia	EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies, Skopje
Serbia	Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society (BFPE), Belgrade

EU member countries

Bulgaria	New Bulgarian University, Centre for European Refugees, Migration and Ethnic Studies (CERMES), Sofia
Croatia	Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO), Zagreb
France	EuropaNova, Paris
Germany	Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP), Berlin
Greece	Department for Political Science & International Relations, University of the Peloponnese, Corinth
Hungary	Andrássy University Budapest (AUB), Budapest
Italy	International Affairs Institute (IAI), Rome
Romania	GlobalFocus Center, Bucharest
Slovenia	University of Ljubljana – Centre of International Relations (CIR), Ljubljana

The network was established to become a reference point in the area of EU enlargement and democratisation efforts in the Western Balkan countries. Besides the research and policy focus of the network, the outreach element was of crucial importance. The discussion was carried out far beyond the 17 organisations of the network to foster dialogue with decision-makers (on the local, national, and regional levels in the Western Balkans and on the European level within the EU institutions), as well as civil society representatives, activists, higher education institutes, the media, and the wider public. The network served as a catalyst, discussion and exchange platform, and knowledge disseminator. Thus, the network actively included various civic bottom-up initiatives able to enrich and foster democracy and Europeanisation in the region.

Beyond the provision of concrete analyses and policy recommendations, the creation of tangible visions for the Western Balkan countries and for the citizens of this region was a central goal of the project. Having a network able to support and work on the European and democratic vision for the Western Balkans in times of multiple challenges to EU enlargement, both internally within the

countries and on a geopolitical level, was and remains vital for the success of the region. Particularly, the rising influence of other geopolitical players, such as Russia, China, Turkey, and some Arab states, has raised awareness among enlargement supporters that the EU and the West are no longer the one and only international players and sole role models for the development of the region. As other powers increasingly use the Western Balkans to promote their interests, which are not rooted in democratic practices, it becomes clear that a vision of free, democratic, and open European Balkans is not self-evident. Moreover, there is a need to fight for it – to work on it as hard as possible, and to promote it both in the region and in the EU. This is why this particular WB2EU Network has further increased its relevance over the course of the last three years, thus seeking to not only influence but also co-shape the European vision in the region, and plans to continue cooperation in this sense.

Another focus was placed on the involvement of as many young researchers and civic activists as possible within the network. Each organisation nominated at least one junior researcher to work on the project and engage in the debate. All network partners from the region additionally nominated active young civic activists for participation in “Ideas go public Labs” and the “Summer School”. This led to 1) an increased interest and understanding of the topic of Europeanisation and democracy in the Western Balkans among young researchers and better opportunities to carry out specific research on the subject for young researchers; 2) new ties and networks between (young) researchers and civic activists to raise mutual understanding for democracy and Europeanisation; 3) new ways of influencing public debates through qualified, evidence-based, and yet politically engaged activities; and 4) increased opportunities in terms of employability and career development.

VOICES FOR THE FUTURE

Contributions by the WB2EU Network

Convergence of the Western Balkans towards the EU: from enlargement to cohesion

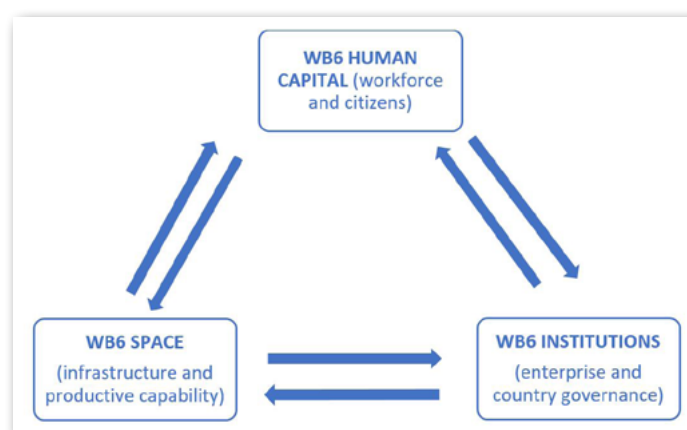
Ardian Hackaj

All six Western Balkan countries (WB6) claim to be engaged in reforms that are transforming their institutions, developing their economies, and improving the quality of life of their citizens. The European Union (EU), through its enlargement mechanism, is trying to support them. But on their way to membership, WB6 economies must grow quickly to catch up with their EU peers, and local infrastructure must be upgraded and extended. Domestic institutions should complete the reforms and also deliver on the rule of law, justice reform, the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as security and fundamental rights. WB6 citizens should enjoy employment, good health services, education, and social services and must keep their institutions accountable.

But can all this be done at the same time? Can we have privileged entry points for policy-makers? Who are the good actors for change? What should the mechanisms of change be? What are the pitfalls to be avoided? How do we make the outcomes irreversible?

Using a development-based approach, we have brought together space, people, and institutions as systemic components conditioning the WB6 accession path to the EU. 'Space' is defined by the endowment of the territory in production capability and in connective infrastructure (transport, energy, and data). 'Institutions' are the 'structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals' materialised in the array of both public and privately owned organisations. Local 'people' as a workforce are a key factor in growth, while as citizens, they keep local institutions accountable and efficient.

Those three elements can be represented in a triangle where the nodes of space, people, and institutions permanently interact with and impact each other.



The challenge for policy-makers is to identify actions that induce a positive improvement in one node without negatively impacting the rest of the triangle.

The enlargement dynamic is an optimal entry point, and the EU's political and financial support for the WB6 is a systemic external resource supporting development and accession. Together with the WB6 citizens, they can set in motion a virtuous development dynamic.

But regarding enlargement, the EU uses the intergovernmental model of interacting with the WB6 countries. This explains the preponderant role of the institution node in EU-WB6 interactions, and especially of state institutions. But when domestic state institutions are captured or are incompetent, they distort all the intended EU impact in the WB6 triangle.

The EU supports the WB6 in space, in people, or in institutions (through institution building), but those interventions are not comprehensively harmonised with the EU's own growth policies or interconnected amongst themselves.

Until now, EU infrastructure support has been designed separately from WB6 institutional reforms. The dependency of EU Connectivity Agenda implementation on the quality of WB6 institutions, their legitimacy, and good governance mechanisms has not been strategically assessed.¹ International financial institutions do not vet the good governance mechanisms, skills, or competences of WB6 public institutions in charge of infrastructure before allocating EU grants or approving loans. On the other side, the contribution of domestic non-state actors – civil society organisations, small and medium-sized enterprises, academia, or other interest groups – has been limited to their consultative and 'watchdog' roles.

To be virtuous and resilient, any change affecting the WB6 reforms and convergence dynamics towards the EU must be designed by taking into account all three nodes of the triangle. The resulting policies should be spread out from a long-term perspective and include sustainability and resilience factors on top of efficiency.

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¹ For more details on the interaction between the Connectivity Agenda and governance, see: Hackaj A., Hackaj, K., Berlin Process: Implementation of Connectivity and Institutional Governance, CDI, March 2019.

A new Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council: how to fight undue influences¹

Nedžma Džananović, Sead Turčalo

The judiciary is commonly considered to be one of the key factors in the resilience of democracy, good governance, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption in any society. As such, it has long been the focus of both the attention and efforts of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Since the judiciary is not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution of BiH and has been regulated only in the entity constitutions and in the Brčko District Statute, the international community in BiH has engaged heavily and enabled important progress in establishing and strengthening the judicial system at the state level. The early phase of the engagement, 1998–2006, has been particularly successful and resulted in the establishment of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC) in 2004, which replaced entity-level judicial and prosecutorial councils based on a transfer agreement from the entities, confirmed by the Constitutional Court. In addition, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Prosecutor's Office were established in 2000–2004 to fulfil the constitutional obligations of the state. The Constitutional Court confirmed their compliance with the Constitution in 2001.

The initial success, but also the changes in the “hands-on” approach of the international community and the reliance on EU conditionality in the later phase, slowed down the pace of the reforms significantly. The international presence was reduced and eventually ceased, thus creating a power vacuum that was filled by local political actors whose agenda quickly turned against the still fragile independence of the judiciary and established strong and elaborate mechanisms of undue influence.

In its Analytical Report from 2019² and consequent reports on BiH, the European Commission has pointed out that the judiciary in BiH, in general, is barely at an early stage, meaning that it has only some level of preparation for EU integration. They all provide very detailed accounts of the issues in the judiciary, but they are not the sole documents that point to critical problems. Numerous studies and research projects have only confirmed the worrying trends and dramatic developments in this area.³

In addition, for many years, the level of public trust in the judiciary in BiH has been consistently low, further diminishing the independence of judges and prosecutors. While the data on the level of public trust reflect worrying trends regionally,⁴ the judiciary in BiH appears to be one of the least accessible (62% of citizens find it poorly accessible) and costliest (66%). Public confidence has taken a steady decline since 2015, culminating with media and expert reports on only 19% of public trust in the judiciary in BiH.⁵ Along with the obvious loss of credibility of the judiciary that these data reflect, it is also important to take into serious consideration the indirect consequences: a lack of public trust makes judges and prosecutors even more vulnerable to political pressure as well as pressure within the judicial hierarchy.

Considering the cumulative impact of several dominantly political factors that influence the judiciary, coupled with the internal mechanisms of undue influence, it is obvious that the current state of affairs of the judiciary in BiH can be satisfactory neither for

1 This is a shortened version of a WB2EU Policy Brief 05/2022 published originally in April 2022. The topic has been revived by the new BiH's government attempts to adopt a new Law on High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council. Džananović, N., Turčalo, S. (2022). Rule of Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Transformation of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 05/2022.

2 European Commission Staff. (2019). Analytical Report Bosnia and Herzegovina 2019. European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-analytical-report.pdf>

3 USAID Justice Project in BiH. (2015). Diagnostic Analysis of the Integrity of the Judiciary Sector in BiH and Potential Risks of Corruption or Unethical Conduct in the Judiciary. USAID Justice Project in BiH.; Expert Report on Rule of Law Issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2019). <http://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ExpertReportonRuleofLawissuesinBosniaandHerzegovina.pdf>

4 Balkan Barometer 2022. (2022). [Public Opinion Analytical Report]. Regional Cooperation Council.

5 IMPAQ International, LLC. (2021). Judicial Effectiveness Index of Bosnia and Herzegovina. USAID Bosnia and Herzegovina Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity II (MEASURE II).

the EU, which sees the rule of law as one of its fundamentals, nor for the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who perceive the judiciary as poorly accessible, costly, and not trust-worthy. The vicious cycle of many related problems makes it very hard to prioritise, as many reports and studies indicate. Regardless of the optics, many of them recommend important steps that could be taken to create the appropriate environment for more dramatic reforms: the establishment of full financial independence of the judiciary and the reaffirmation of disciplinary and ethical standards that could restore public trust could lead to more comprehensive reform and restructuring of the HJPC itself. Those are the primary issues that the new draft law on the HJPC should address.

Policy recommendations

Full institutional and financial independence of the judiciary must be ensured on judicial levels, following the successful example of the Brčko District.

Amending specific aspects and provisions of disciplinary procedures and elaborating ethical codes to further develop, clarify, and promote the application of the highest ethical standards within the judiciary would be a measure particularly important for restoring public trust in the judiciary.

The revised Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council should ensure a comprehensive reform of its functioning, given its immense influence. While independence from external factors should be strengthened, internally it should be restructured to avoid the concentration of power. The Office of the Discipline Council, particularly, needs full institutional, financial, and personal independence from the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council.

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***Sead Turčalo** is an Associate Professor at the University of Sarajevo's Faculty of Political Science and the Faculty's Dean. He lectures on geopolitics, international security, and international conflict management and also researches state-building and international security issues.*

Post-democratic elites versus contestatory citizens: the case of Bulgaria

From post-communism to post-democracy: an unfinished battle between democracy and state capture

Anna Krasteva

Bulgaria dreamed of one positive post-communist transformation but experienced three, two of them negative. The first democratic transformation started as “the end of history” (Fukuyama), the end of rivals of liberal democracy, and the rise of the latter as the grand narrative of the post-communist transition. The second national-populist transformation reversed the direction of the democratisation. Paradoxically, extremist national populist parties emerged in Bulgaria not during the initial fragile post-communist democracy but only in 2005. Another paradox is that despite the short lives of the extremist parties, the symbolic cartography of national populism remains largely the same, structured around three pillars: identitarianism and politics of fear; statism and politics of sovereignty; post-secularism and religionisation of nationalism (Krasteva 2016). The national-populist transformation in Bulgaria has still not crystallised into an illiberal democratic project, but from ‘Ataka’ to ‘Vuzrazhdane’ (‘Renaissance’), today national populism frames the public debates, replacing the rule of law with identity politics, and works to detour the country from the EU and NATO towards Russia and Putin.

Post-democracy is the latest wave of post-communist transformations (Krasteva 2019). Post-democracy is understood in the vein of Colin Crouch (2004) as a regime in which there are democratic institutions, but they are becoming empty shells – stripped of their function to serve the public interest, they have been subordinated to private interests. This global trend is conceptualised as the ‘normalization of post-democratic action’ (Krzyzanowski, Wodak et al., 2023¹). State capture synthesises the transition from corruption to endemic corruption and “policy for cash” (Power and Taylor), as a popular saying summarises: other states have the mafia; in Bulgaria, the mafia has the state. The citizens experience post-democracy through the prism of the intermingled phenomena of corruption and poverty: Bulgaria is among the most corrupted EU countries, ranked 72nd among the 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, and the poorest EU member state.

Anti-corruption civic mobilisations and the formation of contestatory citizenship

Protesting citizens are the antidote to state capture and post-democracy. Civic mobilisations are the immune system of democracy. In the summer of 2020, Bulgarian citizens took to the streets, aspiring to reconquer the state captured by the post-democratic elites (Krasteva 2020). The main demands were the resignations of Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov and of Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev. Today, three years later, Boyko Borisov's GERB is again in power, but Ivan Geshev has been dismissed. In the summer of 2023, Bulgaria will once again be flooded with protests. The occasion is particularly cruel domestic violence, and the reason is the inadequate, incompetent, and irresponsible reaction of the institutions. Protests bring a future into the political temporality blocked by anti-reformist post-democratic elites in three fundamental ways:

- formation of a new generation of contestatory citizens,
- building a political culture of activism to make the elites accountable,
- defining political temporality not as a continuation of the post-democratic status quo but as a future and change.

1 Krzyzanowski, M., Wodak, R. et al., (2023). Discourses and practices of the New Normal. Toward an interdisciplinary research agenda on crises and the normalization of anti- and post-democratic action. *Journal of Language and Politics*. Published online 17 July 2023.

The transition from post-communism to national-populism to post-democracy is an expression of negative transformations, of the transition from corruption to state capture. The agents of the post-democratic transformation are the politico-oligarchic elites. Today Bulgaria has a coalition government uniting the parties that, until yesterday, were on opposite sides of state capture: GERB, the carrier and unfold of endemic corruption, and Continue the Change/Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) with anti-corruption rhetoric. The big winners are GERB and Boyko Borisov, who are whitewashing their image and responsibility. The government will last as long as it serves GERB interests. The big losers are the citizens who aspire to post-post-democratic changes and anti-state capture policies and do not have any clearer political representation.

The streets continue to remain the major topos of resistance and political alternative. Contestatory citizenship is a shield against post-democratic institutions and irresponsible rulers, producing crises instead of resolving them.

Anna Krasteva is Professor of Political Sciences at CERMES, New Bulgarian University; Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Lille, France; and President of the Policy and Citizens' Observatory.

The demographic crisis and the rule of law in Croatia

Nikica Kolar

The demographic decline in Croatia since 2010s has been severe and Croatian society faces many difficulties functioning on a daily basis. Labour emigration and a declining number of newly born people paint a bleak picture of the present and the future of Croatian society. Legal uncertainty motivates people to leave the country and discourages investment, both domestic and foreign. Systemic reforms towards strengthening the rule of law are a precondition for solving the demographic crisis in Croatia.

The demographic crisis

The 2021 census presented the demographic situation of the Republic of Croatia after waves of emigration caused by a long-term recession, decades of corruption, and Croatia's entry into the European Union in 2013. The 2021 census has almost 400,000 fewer inhabitants than the 2011 census.¹

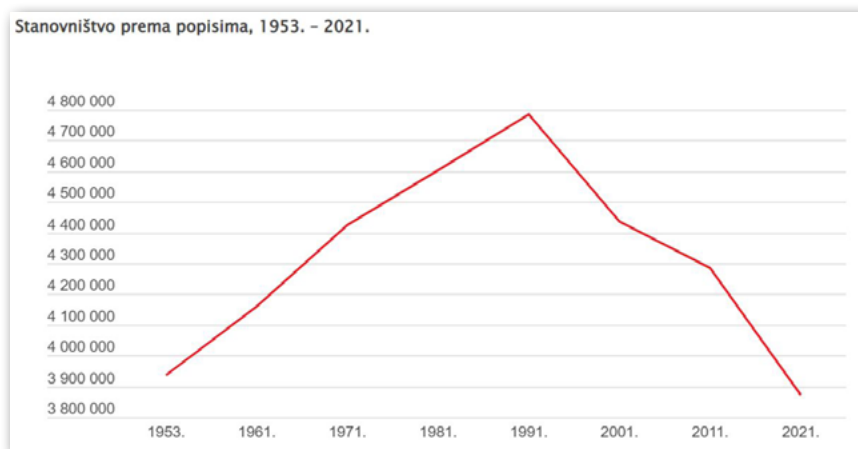


Figure 1. Croatian population by censuses, 1953–2021

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022.

Such a scale of depopulation is undoubtedly the result of the emigration of the Croatian population but also of a decreasing number of new-born children. The combination of mass emigration and the absence of a positive rate of natural population increase led to a crisis of social reproduction in Croatia. There are already a large number of workers missing in certain sectors of the economy.²

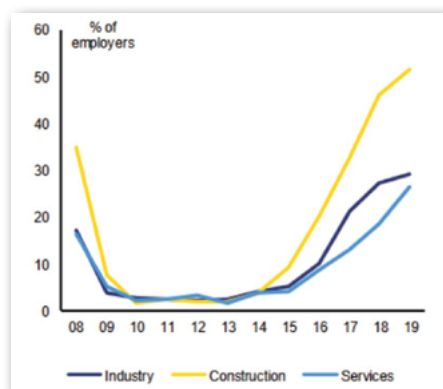


Figure 2. Labour shortages in Croatia in the construction sector, industry, and services as reported by employers, 2008–2019 (Q3)

Source: European Commission, 2020:35.

1 Lozančić, B. (2022, September 22). Census results by age, ethnicity and religion. HRT - The Voice of Croatia. <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/domestic/census-results-by-age-ethnicity-and-religion-9731887>

2 Butković, H., Samardžija, V., Rukavina, I. (2022). Foreign Workers in Croatia: Challenges and Opportunities for Economic and Social Development. IRMO. <https://irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Strani-radnici-u-Hrvatskoj.pdf>

In order to supplement the labour shortage, the government liberalises the arrival of foreign workers, increases the minimum hourly wage for students who work, and extends the possibility of employment to pensioners.³

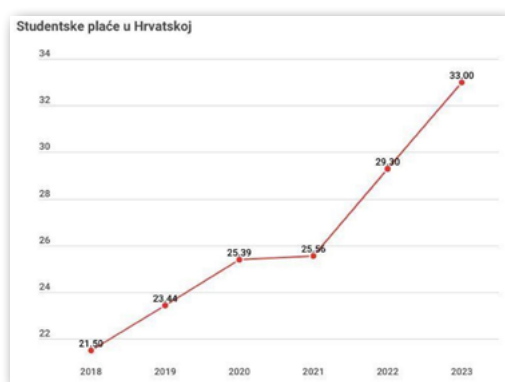


Figure 3. Increase in student hourly wages from 2018 to 2023 (in Croatian kunas)⁴

However, cheap and/or foreign labour is not a long-term solution in a society where domestic labour leaves the country en masse, because workers with less economic and/or social capital, such as young students and foreign workers, will also join the emigration wave in pursuit of a better life elsewhere.

The rule of law as a systemic reform

A prerequisite for positive change is people's trust in the work of state institutions. A restoration of trust would increase the attractiveness of Croatia, where people would like to stay, the diaspora would return, and investments would come.

Restoration of trust in the work of state institutions is neither easy nor possible to achieve in a short period of time, especially for societies like Croatia, which faces high corruption and is ranked between Saudi Arabia and Mauritius on the index of perceived corruption.⁵

The foundation of trust is the entrenched rule of law. A first step in entrenching the rule of law would be judicial reform, for which political will and the consensus of relevant political parties are necessary. Unfortunately, there is no such political will in Croatia today. Fighting corruption in Croatia is carried out more effectively by the European Public Prosecutor's Office than by the State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia and other offices of the Croatian judiciary.⁶

Public tenders for a job or a project often turn out to be a farce of equality in which the winner of a tender is known in advance. In such an environment, those without connections or those who do not want to rely on connections but on merits have two options: either accept an unjust system or emigrate to a society that will value their efforts more.

3 Simmonds, L. (2023, June 28). More and More Croatian Pensioners Continuing to Work. total croatia. <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/croatian-pensioners-4/>

4 Pahlčić, I. (2023, March 1). Usporedili smo studentski minimalac u 12 zemalja: Razlika je i do 10 eura po satu. evo kako stoji Hrvatska. Jutarnji list. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/usporedili-smo-studentski-minimalac-u-12-zemalja-razlika-je-i-do-10-eura-po-satu-evo-kako-stoji-hrvatska-15311204>

5 Corruption Perceptions Index 2022, Transparency international 2023. https://transparency.hr/upload_data/site_files/1021354530803854406949169904_report_cpi2022_english.pdf

6 Croatia: EPPO carries out searches at the University of Zagreb in probe into subsidy fraud and corruption, European Public Prosecutor's Office, 2023. <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/news/croatia-epo-carries-out-searches-university-zagreb-probe-subsidy-fraud-and-corruption>

Conclusion

Comprehensive systemic reforms that strengthen the rule of law are a necessary step to regain the trust of people who have left, who are thinking of leaving the country, and young people who are soon to find themselves on the job market. Without people's trust in the effective work of state institutions, depopulation will continue, people will leave the country, foreigners who come will not stay for long, and no one will want to invest their capital in a country that is empty of people and in which there is no legal certainty.

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The French perspective on EU enlargement and vision towards the Western Balkans

Nebojsa Vukadinovic

The Thessaloniki summit in 2003 strongly affirmed that the Western Balkans would join the European Union. Twenty years later, an impression of an endless and culminating membership process has emerged. However, many efforts have been made by the European Union through aid instruments and the establishment of IPA pre-accession funds since 2007. Currently, these funds, with multi-year budgets, are in their third IPA III phase for the period 2021-2027. Efforts have also been made to strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine has also contributed to raising the question of the timetable and the exact date of the accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union. Given this context, several points are worth raising.

First, France and the EU member states participate financially in the IPA pre-accession funds. These funds support institutions in the Western Balkan countries for the implementation of reforms in relation to EU accession. They also contribute to strengthening civil society. However, the amounts allocated are low in comparison with the needs and strategic orientations of the countries concerned. The amounts are also small if compared to the amounts that had been disbursed by Germany for the integration of East Germany. Finally, the amounts are particularly low in comparison with the structural funds from which the member states of the European Union can benefit. On several occasions, the proposal to increase the pre-accession funds¹ was presented in conferences, as was the possibility for the Western Balkan States to access structural funds during the accession process. However, this possibility comes up against the system of multi-annual programming of European funds, which suggests that a possibility of increasing European funds for the Western Balkans could not take place before 2028, after the period of allocation of IPA III (2021-2027) within the framework of the IPA IV funds, if they will be called like that or other instruments that could be set up again for a multi-annual period. The announcement of an economic and investment plan of 9 billion euros² for the period 2021-2027 was well received, but the needs are much greater, particularly in the field of infrastructure. In this context, we recommend the organization of debates on EU pre-accession funds, their amounts, their impacts, and their modalities in the processes of their programming and implementation in Western Balkans countries.

Secondly, the question of the enlargement framework deserves to be asked. Indeed, a new methodology has already been put in place. The new methodology for EU accession, supported by France, was another occasion to show the strategic interest in the EU integration of the Western Balkans. The new methodology was adopted by the Council in its conclusions of 25 March 2020. This methodology is based on four principles: credibility, predictability, dynamism, and greater political governance. It proposes "grouping the negotiation chapters into six thematic groups" or "clusters", which amounts to classifying the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* in six categories for more readability: rule of law; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources; agriculture and cohesion; and external relations.³ In addition, the idea of a stronger commitment by France in the Balkans and of a strengthening of the process of accession to the European Union was the subject of several meetings during the French presidency of the European Union in 2022.⁴

1 Pierre Mirel, *Union européenne-Balkans occidentaux: les illusions perdues ? Politique étrangère* 2022/4, p. 11-25.

2 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811

3 Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, *Union européenne: pourquoi la question de l'élargissement aux Balkans est importante*, JDD, 2022. <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/union-europeenne-pourquoi-la-question-de-lelargissement-aux-balkans-est-importante-4103127>

4 Florent Marciacq, Romain Le Quiniou, (dir.). *L'engagement de la France dans les Balkans occidentaux. Pour un renforcement de la coopération stratégique, politique, économique et sociétale*, Études de l'Ifri, 2022. <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/lengagement-de-france-balkans-occidentaux-un-renforcement-de>

On the other hand, in France, the idea of a gradual accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union was exposed during the years 2022 and 2023 in several policy papers.⁵ The effect of the new methodology should be evaluated.

Third, the question of the accession timetable is very important. On this subject, at the beginning of the 2000s, the year 2014 seemed to be a possible horizon, but the more the years passed, this horizon moved away. On February 6, 2018, the European Union (EU) launched a strategy entitled “A credible prospect of enlargement and a strengthening of European engagement with the Western Balkans” which is part of the “Roadmap for a more united, stronger, and more democratic Europe” presented on 13 September 2017. The strategy announced the year 2025 as an indication of the prospect of a possible enlargement. However, a real timetable is not yet on the agenda.⁶ The war in Ukraine has changed the situation, and the question of the duration of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union was raised, in particular among the states of the region, mainly after the announcements of applications⁷ from new countries that fell under the neighbourhood policy of the European Union. The engagement of several French think-tanks focusing on the Western Balkans since 2019 has highlighted the question of the future of this region. At the state level, France hosted the Berlin Process Conference in 2016. In 2020, France also lifted its reservations about the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The European Union should not give an accession date that cannot be kept in order to avoid an increase in Euroscepticism⁸. On the other hand, a realistic period for the accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union should be debated. For each country, it is important to consider a realistic timetable while at the same time knowing if there will be group memberships or not.

In addition to these points and recommendations, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans should be fostered through an increase in amounts for IPA Cross-Border Cooperation projects, regional projects in the field of environment, regional education projects, regional projects dedicated to a common understanding of history, and regional projects in higher education and research.

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5 Lukas Macek, Pour une adhésion graduelle à l'Union européenne, Policy Paper, Institut Delors, 2023. See: <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/pour-une-adhesion-graduelle-a-lunion-europeenne/>

6 Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, Union européenne: pourquoi la question de l'élargissement aux Balkans est importante, JDD, 2022. <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/union-europeenne-pourquoi-la-question-de-lelargissement-aux-balkans-est-importante-4103127>

7 Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have submitted their applications for EU membership beginning 2022.

8 Emmanuel Riviere, Marc Nebojsa Vukadinovic, Guillaume Kloss, Isabelle Negrier, How to fight against Euroscepticism among young people, EuropaNova – Report of the meeting held on Tuesday 27 June 2023.

A more assertive European Union!

Katrin Böttger, Dominic Maugeais

Let us be honest and self-critical, twenty years after the Thessaloniki Declaration, which gave the Western Balkans a concrete perspective on becoming members of the European Union (EU), the EU's enlargement process is in a severe crisis. Not only that, but the credibility of the process has been and is currently being undermined through constant politisation and bilateral hijacking of the agenda by individual member states. Even worse, the transformative effect has been disappointing, and democratisation processes in the region remain very fragile.¹ The lack of a credible accession perspective has led to frustration among the pro-European population, and the pressure from the citizens on the ruling elites has consequently been reduced, as the governments primarily blame the EU for not taking the membership perspective for the Western Balkans seriously. With Russia's attack on Ukraine and the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, the geopolitical urgency for making enlargement work has increased. From a declarative point of view, there is an expressed will to unblock the road to accession.² But how does this translate into practise? And what does the German Zeitenwende truly mean for the Western Balkans? An overall policy revision and more long-term strategic thinking are needed to make enlargement work and reduce the political, economic, and geopolitical costs of a potentially further marginalised region.

We argue that making enlargement policy work implies preparing the ground inside the EU for an enlarged union. That means, on the one hand, reforming the institutional system to make it fit for a Union of 30+ members. On the other hand, convincing the population in the EU-27 member states that an enlargement of the EU that closes the hole in Europe's southeast and east is in its own long-term political, security, and economic interest. That means, furthermore, that the EU takes the threat to its legal constitution and rights-based order seriously, enforces the rule of law in its member states, conditions the financial support on it, and if that is not sufficient, is enabled to exclude members on a temporary basis until the rights are secured again. This more assertive union would become a centre of gravitation for democratic countries and be more credible as well as flexible in its constitution. We therefore argued in our first Policy Brief,³ that the EU has to put compliance with rule of law standards at the top of its internal and external agendas. A lesson from the pre-Zeitenwende should be that anti-democratic developments in the EU's neighbourhood should not be overlooked for the sake of short-term stability but be confronted with negative conditionality in concrete political, economic, and financial consequences. These short-term costs will outweigh the long-term cost of appeasement towards autocratic governments, as the examples of Russia and Serbia have shown. Therefore, the primary addressee of the EU's support for the countries in the Western Balkans should be the pro-European and pro-democratic parts of the population. In times of democratic protests against autocratic governments, the EU should most visibly side with reform-oriented actors.

Another lesson of the past and present economic and demographic crises is that socio-economic policies towards the Western Balkans should be harmonised within the EU and guided by a long-term perspective. The current labour migration policy needs to be complemented by an effective circular migration policy that ensures that not only remittances but also human capital is flowing back to the Western Balkan countries.⁴ There are severe hidden costs of the emigration process that pose an additional burden on the long-term economic development outlook of the region. Therefore, a policy that strengthens the social and economic dimension of the enlargement process should be a priority.

1 See Freedom House (2023): Freedom in the World 2023. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf

2 Bundeskanzleramt (2023), Address by Olaf Scholz. Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany as part of the European Parliament's series of plenary debates "This is Europe", Tuesday, 9 May 2023 in Strasbourg. <https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-en/news/address-by-olaf-scholz-2189412>

3 Böttger, K., Maugeais, D. (2021). Countering the rule of Law Backsliding in the Western Balkans. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 11'2021.

4 Maugeais, D. (2023). Making the EU and member state policy towards the Western Balkans socio-economically more sustainable. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 04'2023.

Without a realistic outlook for the prospering development of these countries, the level of acceptance inside the EU for these future members will remain low, further delaying the accession process.

Progress in the field of rule of law should be economically rewarded, as this will add to the positive effect that these policies are having on foreign direct investment and lead to additional economic growth, as the example of Kosovo clearly shows.

In conclusion, we recommend that the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans should become more responsive to actual developments in the individual countries to stimulate positive political and economic developments and counteract backward developments. On the other hand, its socio-economic policies should be guided by long-term strategic thinking to avoid political and economic costs for the region that hamper the ongoing and future European integration processes.

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Strengthening the role of civil society organisations in Greece and North Macedonia

Nikolaos Tzifakis, Anastasios Valvis

When the refugee crisis broke out in 2015, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Greece and North Macedonia featured similar structural deficiencies: poor organisational capabilities, a lack of skilled human resources, and uncertain viability prospects. To that picture, we should also add those states' marginal support for CSOs.

In Greece, the availability of funding that came with the refugee crisis led some small and medium-sized CSOs to shift their priorities, gradually focusing their activities on migrants and refugees. The interaction of Greek CSOs with their international counterparts and their efforts to obtain grants from international donors helped Greek non-profits to increase their professionalism. Likewise, international CSOs arrived in North Macedonia and joined forces with local organisations to provide immediate assistance. Also, several grassroots movements emerged, such as 'Help the Refugees in Macedonia', which started as a Facebook group and was in due time supported by the UNHCR. Moreover, other CSOs like Legis, and Hera were also engaged in providing various on-site services to the refugees.

However, the interaction in both countries of local non-profits with international CSOs, donors, and organisations during the refugee crisis did not have a lasting effect on their CSO ecosystems. This is best confirmed by two surveys that were carried out in the respective countries. In Greece, the Thales survey showed that the organisational capacity of CSOs involved in the management of the migration crisis improved slightly during the period under examination (see Figure 1).¹

According to a member of the Thales team, "the significant increase of those CSOs' workload did not allow for more tangible benefits (...), with many enhancements staying partially superficial or on just top-level management procedures" (interview with S. Petropoulos, Director of HIGGS, 18.05.2023).

Similarly, for North Macedonia, a comparative review of the Sustainability Index of CSOs for the last six years reveals an insignificant improvement from 2016 to 2021 (see Figure 2).²

Moreover, the organisational capacity of CSOs in North Macedonia has almost been unchanged, improving from 3.7 to 3.6 from 2016 to 2021 (see Figure 3). This anaemic improvement should be ascribed to various developments in the country, such as the improvement of the legal environment governing the sector. Interestingly, the 2022 Report is also critical of the international donor community, mentioning their "limited support for institutional and strategic development [of CSOs], such as financing the drafting of strategic documents, facilitating long-term strategic planning, or targeted staff training".³

The precarious financial viability of CSOs in both countries obstructs the advancement of their strategic goals and diminishes their ability to attract or retain experienced and highly skilled professionals. Moreover, the European Union (EU) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) common practise of offering grants that should not be used to cover applicant CSOs core expenses (e.g., salaries of permanent staff) deters many small non-profits from applying. In addition, the short duration of EU and UNHCR-financed projects complicates the overall operational programming of CSOs.

1 On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 corresponds to the highest possible score, the organizational capacity of CSOs increased from 5.9 to 6.46 from 2015 to 2020. See: <https://www.greekngosnavigator.org/>

2 On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is the highest possible score and 7 corresponds to the lowest level of sustainability, North Macedonia's Sustainability Index improved from 3.9 to 3.6 from 2016 to 2021.

3 USAID (2022), '2021 CSO Sustainability INDEX North Macedonia', p. 3.

Thus, although CSOs in Greece and North Macedonia benefited from the availability of greater amounts of funds to manage the refugee crisis, they failed to capitalise on this context to increase their resilience and improve their organisational capacity. However, some positive signs in the organised civil societies of both countries do exist. These include a successful advocacy campaign in North Macedonia about the prevention of changes to the Electoral Code that could hamper independent civic lists and the pressure by Greek environmental CSOs on the Greek government to pursue more ambitious goals. Another step forward is the establishment of stronger collaboration between CSOs from the two countries, starting with the 'Cooperation for Common Future' programme, which supports the growth of cooperation linkages between the youth of the two countries. Yet, the role of CSOs in the public sphere in both countries could improve. To this end:

The EU should

- increase its support for the resilience of CSOs and earmark funds exclusively for CSO capacity building.
- support transnational civil society links and exchanges between Greek and North Macedonian CSOs to encourage common initiatives.

Greece and North Macedonia should

- improve the legal framework to stimulate the growth of their respective organised civil societies.
- systematically involve CSOs in consultation processes on institutional reforms.

CSOs from these countries should

- become less funding-driven and pursue their own priorities.
- adopt long-term strategies and invest in the growth of their human resources.
- establish more links with international CSOs and transnational advocacy networks.
- consider the formation of a civil society platform where non-profits from the two countries may exchange ideas and best practices.

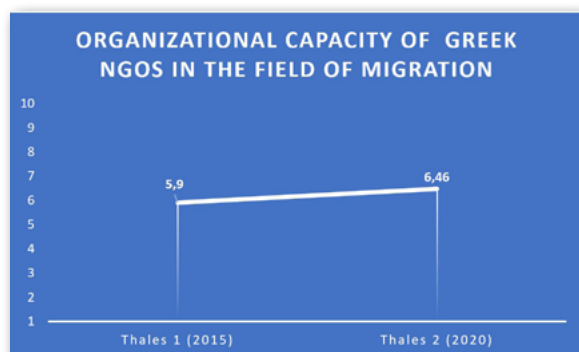


Figure 1. Organizational Capacity of Greek NGOs



Figure 2. CSO Sustainability Index in North Macedonia 2016-2021



Figure 3. CSO Organizational Capacity Index in North Macedonia 2016-2021

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Diffusion of illiberal democracy: Hungary's role model for the Western Balkans

Fanni Elek, Christina Griessler

Viktor Orbán's Hungary is known as a 'troublemaker' in the European Union (EU). His model of an illiberal democracy contradicts the values and norms of the EU and infringes on the principles of the rule of law. Despite constant criticism of the EU and 'Brussels', Orbán's government is considered as one of the most important supporters of EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries. It provided the necessary political support to Croatia to enable its EU accession in 2013, and it is actively engaged on political and economic levels with the countries of the region. Orbán repeatedly called on the EU to become proactive and admit the countries to the EU as soon as possible. Hungary has a reputation as an honest supporter in the region.

However, other EU members are concerned that the EU's 'problem child' Hungary actually wants to help countries that are politically more aligned to Orbán's ideas than to EU values. Moreover, Orbán propagates a more politically driven EU enlargement process, thereby undermining the EU Commission's 'merit-based' approach, which clearly links successfully implemented reforms with benefits in relation to the EU accession process. Because of that, there is no desire by some EU members to admit countries that might follow Orbán's lead in the future or diverge from EU norms. Although genuine Hungarian support exists for the Western Balkan countries, a too close political relationship with Orbán will hamper the countries' accession process. If the Western Balkan countries truly wish to join the EU, they will have to reject the Orbán model.

Serbia's political development shows similarities with Hungary, which might provide an explanation why the for generations strained relations between both countries profoundly improved on the political level throughout the last few years. Maintaining good neighbouring relations with Serbia is of interest to Hungary for numerous reasons, ranging from its geopolitical location, the Hungarian minority living mainly in the northern part of Serbia, the economic relations, and recently, due to the objective of establishing political alliances with similar-minded leaders. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungarian Premier Minister Viktor Orbán are regular visitors to each other's countries. Additionally, annual meetings of both governments have been institutionalised since 2014. In spring 2023, a huge crowd of the Serbian population went to the streets in protest of the persisting latent violent political culture in the country, which was blamed for leading to two recent shooting incidents with several victims killed. When these protests became critical of the government, Vučić reacted with an organised counter-demonstration, which was attended by Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó as a speaker to express the Hungarian government's support. This demonstrates the closeness of relations on the political level; both governments are repeatedly signalling that they will not let each other down.

Relations with Serbia are important to Hungary but might only be maintained as long as Vučić is in power. Hungary sees Serbia as the key country in the Western Balkans and is pushing hard for its integration into the EU. Even Hungarian EU Commissioner Olivér Várhegyi is pursuing the policy of promoting Serbia on its EU path, regardless of Serbia's actual reform progress.

To counter the democratic backsliding of both countries, as well as other Western Balkan countries, the EU should focus more on the youth and provide funds for exchanges and civil education programmes, whereby young people are able to get to know each other in the region but also understand the importance of rule of law and democracy and why the EU is defending these values. Serbia and Hungary are engaged in the Interreg-IPA Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Programme, financed by the EU, which has supported a substantial number of projects focusing on youth. In the project round of 2014–2020, approximately 40 percent of all projects had youth involvement. The CBC Programmes could require the submitted projects to address critical issues of the EU accession process to create a better understanding of the requirements of EU membership. If there is an interest in improving relations between the people of Hungary and Serbia in the long term, the continuation of the cross-border programmes and expanding youth cooperation should be envisioned. Providing equal access to the ERASMUS-exchange programme for all countries of the Western Balkans would be a worthwhile step to consider.

The guarantees of civil rights and freedom of the media are important indicators of the quality of democracy. In both countries, Serbia and Hungary, action was taken to restrict the space of civil societies. Whereas Hungary began to move against civil society organisations (CSOs) in the country legally by introducing laws to restrict their activities, Serbia did not hesitate to vilify CSOs in the media and to even physically intimidate them with the help of hooligans. The image of CSOs in the pro-government media is extremely negative; they portray them as ‘enemies of the state’ and actors that cannot be trusted at all. Especially foreign-funded organisations are painted as undermining the interests of the state and working against the government. The Serbian government has created its ‘own’ non-governmental organisations, which were then included in the EU negotiations, to officially fulfil the requirements of the EU accession process, which requires CSO participation.

Due to Hungary’s close relations with Serbia and other countries in the Western Balkan region, the diffusion of ideas from Orbán’s model of illiberal democracy has already spread to the region. Especially as long as the EU is not able to regain the trust of the Western Balkan countries and Orbán is not able to act as an honest broker for them, illiberal ideas might continue to spread. The EU will need to consider new initiatives to convey the benefits of joining the EU to the Western Balkan countries once they have fulfilled and implemented the required reforms. Reaching out to and including young people and CSOs might be a useful strategy to create a broad base of EU support within the countries.

The EU has to make clear what it stands for and that Orbán’s way is literally hampering the Western Balkans countries’ objective to join the EU.

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Beyond 'enlargement fatigue'?

Matteo Bonomi

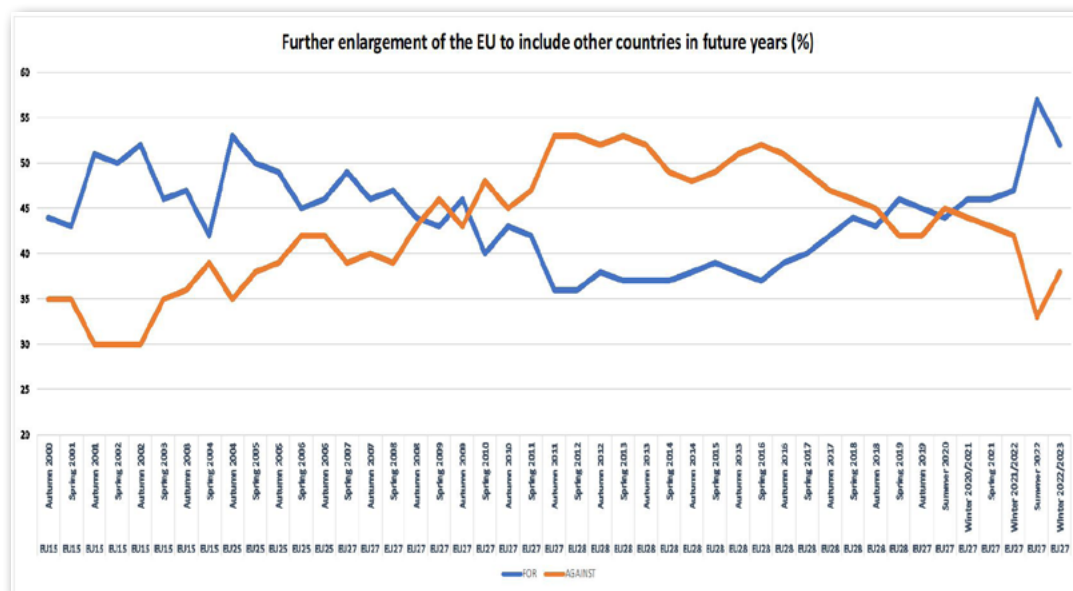
The return of war in Europe and the ensuing membership applications by Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia represent dramatic turning points in recent European history, which has put the spotlight on the enlargement policy of the European Union (EU) as a key tool to pursue peace, security, and prosperity across Europe. This new momentum for EU enlargement is testified to by important shifts in both European public opinions and elites' attitudes, which today seem more favourable towards new EU accessions than in the past. Yet, these new trends should be handled with extreme caution. When examining the evolution of EU enlargement fatigue, positive attitudes towards new enlargements seem to erode over time, and no fast-track accession policy is in sight.

Indeed, for a long time, unfavourable sentiments towards the admission of new members have dominated EU public opinion and characterised the so-called 'enlargement fatigue'. Yet, the Summer 2022 Eurobarometer registered an unprecedentedly high number of EU citizens' opinions in favour of a new enlargement of the EU. By mid-2022, 57 percent of EU citizens declared themselves to be in favour of the EU widening its membership in the future, while only 33 percent of the respondents were against it. This score represents a historical high, with no precedent within this Eurobarometer series, which was initiated in the second half of 2000 in order to follow the evolution of public attitudes after the EU opened accession negotiations with twelve Central and Eastern European countries that were to become members during the EU enlargement waves in 2004 and 2007.

At the same time, the fact that the European political elites affirmatively replied to third countries' demands for integration confirms a positive momentum and new dynamism in this policy. Indeed, the European Council already granted EU candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 and opened accession perspectives to Georgia. Soon after, it also opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and gave EU candidacy status to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Against this background, the central issue is, however, not simply to establish for how long this momentum could last. The crucial question here is about what type of enlargement policy might come out of war and which characteristics it ought to have in order to overcome the significant shortcomings that emerged in the EU accession of the Western Balkans so far, which have been on the path from post-conflict reconstruction to EU membership already for more than 20 years. In other terms, the crucial issue now for the 'European bureaucracy' is to provide concrete proposals to convert this opening and relative consensus among the general public and political elites into concrete policies that are more effective, suitable, and sustainable than those in the past.

To this end, it seems pivotal to correct some of the shortcomings of the current enlargement policy toward the Western Balkans and offer candidate countries several elements even before formal accession. These include: (1) provision of enough resources to strengthen economic convergence, for instance through the gradual access to EU structural funds; (2) bringing them closer to EU decision-making structures and institutions early on, in order to strengthen their institutional participation and their citizens' involvement; and (3) finding ways to raise peer pressure among EU member states to keep everyone in line, eventually even considering the possibility of reforming the decision-making rules, in order to limit the possibilities for vetoes and abuses of the enlargement process on the ground of not compelling bilateral issues or other domestic problems.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 54-98 (Autumn 2000-Winter 2022/2023)

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Empowering the youth in Kosovo

Fiona Kelmendi

Kosovo is among the few Western Balkan countries where democratic maturity continues to be reaffirmed through exemplary elections and smooth transitions of power, even when the entire political spectrum was outvoted in the 2021 elections. However, despite notable advancements on the ground and international reports affirming that Kosovo is today freer and more democratic than ever before, there is quite a gap to bridge before fully realising the potential of democracy. Democracy is about people and should be built around them – their needs, their voices, and most importantly, their ability to effectively participate in the governance of their country and to hold those in power accountable.

Although Kosovo has developed a solid legal basis for public participation at all levels of governance in line with best international standards and many mechanisms are already in place, its central and local governments need to now focus on better reaching out to wider groups of civil society and citizens and meaningfully engaging them in public life. And it just happens that Kosovo's largest demographic group also has its largest (currently untapped) potential.

Boasting the youngest population in Europe, 55% of the Kosovo population is under the age of 30, and over one third is under 18. There is a unique window of opportunity, expected to close in the next decade, to use this immense potential for growth. How do we provide these young people with the necessary tools for active and constructive civic participation in Kosovo and, perhaps, the European Union (EU)? The only way to ensure their sustained empowerment is through the education system. The pay-out will not be immediate, but if the right steps are taken now, this could be the most sustainable way to build a flourishing, EU-ready democracy.

In the most recent parliamentary elections in Kosovo, young people established themselves as vectors of socio-political transformation by overwhelmingly voting to bring to power for the first time a political party that has been sitting in opposition since running in the 2010 elections. The voting turnout among young people in Kosovo has consistently been the highest among all age groups, in stark contrast to many other developed democracies.

The 2021 election result wasn't just an anti-establishment vote; the winning party's social-justice-heavy campaign attracted primarily young people and women, two very large marginalised groups in Kosovo. These are the people who often feel disenfranchised at so many levels, not the least by being denied access to quality education in schools (currently only 33% find it very satisfactory) or being denied access to institutions and national decision-making (only 10% think their interests are "well" represented). Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation, and this needs to be the primary focus of current and future policymakers.

To truly democratise democracy in Kosovo, the largest part of its demographics must be included in decision-making processes, but the inclusion of youth cannot happen simply by formally opening the door to them to comment on specific decisions, policies, or laws. They need to first be given the tools that will genuinely allow them to channel their needs and enhance their voices.

To start with, there is an urgent need to build young people's essential life skills – skills that give them better access to jobs but, even more importantly, that allow them to meaningfully participate in public life, such as communication and critical thinking skills. Making use of non-formal education opportunities could help foster these and other skills needed in the 21st century.

When it comes to long-term policies, looking at demographic trends and considering that the school population at the primary and lower secondary levels will continue to decline, now is the time to increase the quality of education by making large strategic inves-

tments. There are many reports, assessments, and papers laying out clear and straightforward policies for improving the quality of education, but they require significant political will and budget to implement. Considering how young Kosovo's population is, the benefits of these investments will surely far outweigh the costs.

However, it is equally important that, in addition to investments, systemic (and cost-free) changes start being implemented as soon as possible, with all institutions, teachers, and parents working to actively engage children and young people in decision-making by maximising youth participation in and outside of the schools. The active involvement of children and young people in all types of decision-making during their school years needs to be institutionalised to build their civic awareness.

As a final note, while most of these recommendations are for the Kosovo institutions, the EU plays an equally important role when it comes to elevating progressive voices and investing in forward-looking agendas, not just in Kosovo but in the entire region. By promoting the very values upon which it was built, the EU will ensure that the Western Balkans will not only have an EU perspective, but that their eventual inclusion into the Union will be an enrichment and not a challenge.

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Montenegro – the next member of the European Union?

Nikola Mumin

The negotiation process towards Montenegro's membership in the European Union (EU) has been complex and transformative, officially spanning over a decade. Currently, the process finds itself in a state of stalemate, with the country facing numerous challenges on its path to becoming a full-fledged member state.

The defeat of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its coalition partners in what were essentially the first free, democratic elections in the country since the introduction of the multi-party system in the 2020 parliamentary elections marked a significant turning point. Expectations were high for the new parliamentary majority and government to address internal debts, tackle corruption and organised crime, strengthen democratic institutions, and initiate economic recovery after years of neglect and the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With a record high of 82% supporting Montenegro's EU accession process, the population demonstrates a strong desire for the country to embark on a stable and secure path towards becoming an EU member state as soon as possible.

However, complex and often antagonistic internal relations among political actors, as well as divisions based on nationality, culture, and ethnicity, have impeded progress on the domestic front. The EU's policy of prioritising stability over reforms has contributed to the formation of rigid and clientelist structures within an already cumbersome and inefficient post-socialist system. This lack of wider social, political, and parliamentary consensus has hindered the necessary reforms.

One of the most influential stumbling blocks on Montenegro's path to EU membership has been the need for significant rule of law reforms. Various accusations of high-ranking state prosecutors, judges, and police officers engaging in criminal activities have significantly undermined the legitimacy of these institutions. Recent efforts by the state prosecution to address issues of organised crime and corruption at high levels have been hindered by parliamentary sabotages and failures to elect crucial high-ranking positions within the state judiciary and prosecution, leading to a prolonged crisis within the judicial branch of government.

Additionally, the quality of democratic processes and elections requires attention. What has often been emphasised in the annual reports of the European Commission has been the quality of the electoral legislative framework, especially in relation to local elections. Namely, as local elections in Montenegrin municipalities are not being held on the same day, they have been used by the political establishment as a mechanism to undermine citizens' rights to elect and be elected, thereby hindering the foundations of democracy. Local elections can be used to introduce open lists and individual candidatures as a ground for the democratic consolidation of Montenegrin society and a higher level of political accountability.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted the way the EU treats its enlargement policy and criteria for current and future membership candidates. In the case of Montenegro, especially after the recent parliamentary elections in June 2023, it is evident that the country urgently requires a stable, diverse, and inclusive parliamentary majority and government to navigate the challenges it faces. The role of the parliament must be brought to the forefront, as elected political representatives need to collectively address the crucial reform challenges. The parliament's responsibility in appointing key judicial figures is of utmost importance and should be promptly utilised to advance rule of law reforms. If this process is completed in the foreseeable future, we may be looking at the finalisation of the negotiation process by 2027. Moreover, improving the quality of democratic elections, particularly in relation to local elections, necessitates a broader and more inclusive dialogue between the parliamentary majority and the opposition.

However, a factor that can delay Montenegro's accession, especially if the judicial reforms are not conducted in the next period, is the EU's long-term financial framework, scheduled to be adopted in 2027. If this framework fails to account for the Union's expansion, Montenegro may find itself waiting for EU membership until 2035.

The upcoming period implies further challenges in consolidating Montenegrin democracy and its political, economic, and cultural development. Long-term EU support for the previous stabilocratic and state capture regime led by former President Milo Đukanović must now be countered with a strong push for reforms in key areas and support for actors that have contributed to the development of political pluralism, democracy, and institutions over the past two decades. The unwavering and ever-increasing citizen support for full EU membership serves as a strong indicator of the existing political will within the country to take steps towards this goal. This alignment of internal political support for the country's most important external political objective must serve as a foundation and a stepping block for future endeavours in this process.

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North Macedonia's EU bid endangered...again

Dimitar Nikolovski

North Macedonia currently faces serious challenges and complexities surrounding its efforts to join the European Union (EU). The primary hurdle is the bilateral issue with Bulgaria, which revolves around identity, language, and historical disputes. Despite the EU's adoption of a new methodology and the removal of the French veto from 2019, Bulgaria's reluctance to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania persisted until June 2022, when the French EU Presidency came up with the so-called "French Proposal", which, for that moment, unblocked the process for the two countries.

This resolution, however, requires concessions from North Macedonia's leadership, potentially increasing political cynicism and Euroscepticism among its citizens. Moreover, the current discussions and cacophony on the potential date for accession (2030), as well as President Emmanuel Macron's initiative hinting at internal debates on enlargement, have produced yet another uncertainty about the EU's commitment to enlargement, which leaves the Western Balkans vulnerable to influence from illiberal international actors.

North Macedonia has shown its commitment to the European project by making progress in inter-ethnic relations, promoting the rights of non-majority communities, and resolving disputes, such as the Agreement with Greece. It can also contribute to resolving other regional disputes by sharing its experiences in reaching consensus. However, challenges remain, including high levels of corruption, remnants of state capture, a completely dysfunctional judiciary, and the need to enhance institutional and human capacities for the accession process.

As per the French proposal, the country formally started negotiations through the explanatory and bilateral screenings, but the clusters and chapters are to be opened after the most difficult task has been completed, which is the inclusion of the Bulgarian community into the constitution of North Macedonia, among other communities listed and recognized. On 18 August, 2023, this proposal was formally submitted to Parliament by the government (alongside the Bulgarian, Egyptian, Montenegrin, Croatian, Slovenian, and Jewish communities). However, the opposition, VMRO-DPMNE, is adamant that they would not accept constitutional changes 'under Bulgarian dictation'. The requirement for constitutional changes is that a minimum of two-thirds of MPs vote in favor of an amendment, which is impossible without the support of at least seven of the VMRO-DPMNE MPs.

All international attempts to convince VMRO-DPMNE's leader, Hristijan Mickoski, to vote in favor, such as from EU and US representatives, have so far fallen on deaf ears. VMRO-DPMNE requests that snap parliamentary elections be held, for which the current polling numbers suggest that they would win. Afterwards, they make a vague claim that they would support the constitutional changes, but only after they receive guarantees from the EU and Bulgaria for the protection of Macedonian identity and that no new requests regarding history, language, and culture will be brought from Bulgaria. How they would achieve this, and how they would define these guarantees, they are unable to say.

On the other hand, another parliamentary opposition party, Levica (the Left), proposes moving away from the European path and having closer ties with Russia and the BRICS. Such a stance is supported by many smaller, marginal opposition groups and non-parliamentary parties. They are even more open to supporting the Russian aggression against Ukraine, propose a firm Macedonian nationalist stance against the West, and are trying to stir inter-ethnic tensions again. Luckily, for the time being, their popularity is quite low, and there is no unity among them. However, on certain topics, such as the debates surrounding gender identity, they are managing to show the potential of their power.

The parliamentary majority does not agree with snap elections and expects to hold them in the regular term of 2024. If the constitutional changes are not brought soon and the country does not start opening clusters and chapters, this leaves a vacuum in the political scene, one that might be filled by pro-Russian, illiberal actors.

Overall, this stalemate offers little hope for the second stage of the opening of negotiations for North Macedonia, and the possibility of 2030 as a date for full accession seems elusive. Even if, in 2024, the government stays the same, the same challenge would remain. If VMRO-DPMNE wins, as current expectations are, they will face a tough choice between the firm stance of their voters and the necessity for at least some flexibility in their relations with the EU. The fact that President Macron is again speaking of a “multi-speed Europe” even strengthens VMRO-DPMNE's commitment to wait and see what developments are going to take place at the EU level and does not urge them to act in favour of the negotiating framework. The once-certain pro-European consensus in North Macedonia is struggling to hold, and it would take a serious concerted effort from all partisan and civil society actors to keep up the momentum for democratic reforms, which seem to be forgotten in the noise about language, history, and identity.

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The case and limitations of Romania's democracy from below

Andrei Tiut

Between 2012 and 2017, successive waves of protests in Romania brought public officials to account. Governments were overthrown¹, and significant pieces of legislation seeking to curb the rule of law were overturned. In 2016, a new liberal party (Save Romania Union) entered parliament, asking for the democratisation of public life and boasting its own internal democratic decision-making. In 2018, anti-liberal voices showed their weakness by spectacularly failing to pass a referendum enshrining same-sex marriage into the constitution². Events like these contributed not only to increases in the quality of democracy as measured by international indexes but also to democratic resilience.

In 2020, the GlobalFocus Center built a Democratic Resilience Index³ to solve a paradox in the evolution of democracy within Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. While some formerly acclaimed democratic successes like Poland and Hungary were experiencing democratic backsliding, less acclaimed or troubled democracies like Romania seemed to show greater resilience, as massive protests in Bucharest thwarted government attempts at reversing rule of law reforms and ultimately ousted the ruling party altogether at the polls. This seemed to showcase that the reasons that make a democracy blossom are not always the reasons that make it endure.

According to the index, one recursive element pushing up Romania's scores was, loosely speaking, citizen influence from the bottom up. Romania scored higher than the other two countries in the pilot study, Hungary and Moldova, in areas like internal party democracy, trust in the judiciary system, democratic support from public media, ease of starting a media outlet or blog, liberal values in civil society, influence of civil society, influence of the diaspora, popular support for international organisations, and popular understanding of capitalism, all while communist melancholia was hardly present.⁴

Unfortunately, the situation has deteriorated since. The quality of democracy has declined, reaching a low point in 2021, according to V-Dem.⁵ This was mainly because of the failure of the government to communicate with the population effectively during successive crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine and its economic impact.

Public dissatisfaction did not manifest itself through pro-democratic protests like in the past; on the contrary, we can see an increase in the voting intention for extremist parties at present. Thus, the far-right AUR party (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians), led by football hooligan and activist George Simion, and the SOS Romania party, led by pro-Kremlin lawyer Diana Șoșoacă, have been able to mobilise a significant portion of the population around a populist and nationalist agenda. They gather together a voting intention of up to 20% in opinion polls⁶ compared with election results in 2020. Also, we can see a general decrease in trust in democratically oriented institutions, be they internal or international.⁷

1 Both right-wing prime minister Emil Boc and left-wing prime minister Victor Ponta were forced to resign due to a combination of popular pressure and politicking.

2 <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-same-sex-marriage-referendum-low-turnout-dragnea/29529342.html>

3 <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Democratic-Resilience-Index.pdf>

4 Idem.

5 <https://v-dem.net/>

6 <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national-martie-2023/>

7 See <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national-martie-2023/> compared with the election results in 2020 <https://prezentia.roaep.ro/parlamentare06122020/romania-pv-final>

Democracy from below has shown its limits.

As we show in our Policy Brief,⁸ a structural reason for the medium-to-long ineffectiveness of democratic movements from below in Romania is the lack of stable institutions that can organise and act as a voice for new movements. Thus, trade unions, NGOs, and political parties all have issues with (low) membership, (controversial) reputations, and (a lack of) internal democracy. They have difficulties gaining and maintaining public trust. The structural problems have been compounded by several crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and inflation. Politicians and the civil service have failed to effectively communicate and have left room for extremist forces to take advantage of the weaknesses in democracy^{9 10}.

However, this does not have to be a halt to democratisation from below. In Romania's recent history, public pro-democratic protests have been slow to take off due to the reasons shown above. But they have taken off nonetheless, finding improbable causes to start rallying around¹¹ and acting largely as leaderless movements to compensate for adequate representation. There is reasonable hope, though there is no guarantee, that some form of democratic movement will come back in time to have an impact on the 2024 elections.

What can we learn from the Romanian case?

For other countries in the region, one lesson may be that highly decentralised, leaderless mobilisation strategies are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they allow democratic movements to organise even in countries such as Romania, where interpersonal trust is low. On the other hand, such movements often lack staying power, allowing established politicians to wait them out.

As modern life allows an ever-greater number of citizens to make demands for agency and be civically active, these tend to be less politically participative at the same time and rather take their grievances to the streets in cases when representative institutions don't accommodate their desire for inclusion. We should not mistake low political participation for apathy or temporary authoritarian governments for being fully representative of the whole of their societies. Many Western Balkan countries currently have leaders who are less democratic, reformist, or pro-European than their societies. Hence, the EU should seek to reach these societies through more than just government channels and engage the actual drivers of change on their side.

In order to get a new generation of European-minded political leaders embedded into functional institutions, there is a need to expand the existing mechanisms for outreach to civil society and the grassroots, as well as focus policies to produce a tangible positive impact on people's quality of life, even if the change is not dramatic. Besides the democratic gains that can be thus achieved, this could restore credibility to the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans, where the EU is currently seen as empowering autocrats rather than having a truly transformative quality. The Western Balkan countries themselves could have a voice in the EU to speak about the value of their potential membership that comes from outside the largely unresponsive establishment and represents their civil societies, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, etc.

Politicians who take advantage of the lack of organisation within grassroots movements do so at their own risk. If they choose to ignore the underlying dissatisfaction of the population, then other forces will fill the void of representation. Sometimes these forces can be democrats and liberals, but other times they will be populists and extremists. With the economic crisis pushing prices up and the quality of life down, trust in the political class is extremely low in the Western Balkans. This leaves a lot of room for anti-establishment parties, and if those are not civic, liberal, pro-European newcomers born out of the militant civil society and

8 Tiut, A. (2023). Democracy from below in Romania: how far can it get before breaking. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 21/2023.

9 <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/01/government-and-civil-society-preparedness-to-identify-and-counter-information-manipulation-and-malign-influence-in-the-context-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>

10 <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/12/pandemic-born-far-right-party-has-rattled-crisis-stricken-romania's-democratic-future>

11 Before the pro-environment and anti-corruption protests in 2013 few people knew of the situation of the Roşia Montană proposed gold mine.

empowered by their European partners to carry a pro-democratic message, then the nationalists, anti-Europeans, and radicals will have the upper hand. This will be compounded by the utter depletion of these countries' populations through emigration, generated by the lack of prospects in their countries of origin. Those who leave will likely include the most entrepreneurial, open-minded, and liberal-minded. Experience shows they can be a positive force for change in their homelands even from abroad, voting for reformist, pro-European parties, but they will still not exert that pressure except on occasion, and in time they are also easy prey to nationalist political rhetoric.

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Addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence in Serbia

Radomir Aleksić, Mirjana Đorđević, Luka Milovanović, Svetlana Stefanović

Gender inequality and gender-based violence are persistent challenges faced by many societies worldwide, including Serbia. While various factors contribute to these issues, one crucial aspect that exacerbates their prevalence is economic dependence. In this article, we will explore how economic dependency perpetuates gender inequality and fuels instances of gender-based violence in Serbia. By understanding these interconnections, we can work towards dismantling the barriers that hinder gender equality and fostering a safer, more equitable society.

Economic dependence often leads to gender inequality due to prevailing gender norms and discriminatory practises that restrict women's access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. In Serbia, traditional gender roles continue to define women primarily as caregivers and homemakers, limiting their participation in the formal economy. Consequently, women are more likely to experience financial insecurity and rely on their male partners for economic support.

This economic dependence creates a power imbalance within relationships and perpetuates gender inequality. Women may face limitations in educational and career development opportunities, resulting in limited financial independence and less control over their lives. As a consequence, women often face reduced bargaining power in households, an unequal distribution of resources, and limited decision-making authority.

The intersection of economic dependence and gender inequality significantly contributes to the prevalence of gender-based violence in Serbia. Financial vulnerability and reliance on an abusive partner can create a toxic cycle, trapping women in abusive relationships. Economic control and manipulation by perpetrators further reinforce the power dynamics, making it challenging for women to leave abusive situations.

The link between economic dependence and gender-based violence is evident in various forms, such as intimate partner violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and exploitation in the informal labour sector. Perpetrators exploit the economic vulnerability of women, using financial control as a means to maintain dominance and instil fear. Lack of economic resources, social support, and viable alternatives often make it difficult for survivors to escape abusive environments.

Addressing gender inequality and reducing gender-based violence requires a multifaceted approach. Recognising the intersectionality of gender, economic, and social factors is crucial for implementing effective interventions. Here are a few key strategies:

1. **Economic Empowerment:** Creating opportunities for women to attain financial independence through vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and access to credit and resources
2. **Education and Awareness:** Promoting gender equality education, both within formal education systems and through awareness campaigns, to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes
3. **Legal Reforms:** Strengthening legal frameworks to protect women's rights, enforce gender equality laws, and enhance access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence

4. **Support Services:** Expanding support services, including shelters, hotlines, counselling, and legal aid, to assist survivors and provide them with the necessary resources to rebuild their lives
5. **Male Engagement:** Encouraging men and boys to actively participate in efforts to challenge gender norms, promote gender equality, and prevent violence against women

Economic dependence plays a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality and contributing to gender-based violence in Serbia. By recognising and addressing the interconnected nature of these issues, implementing targeted interventions, and promoting gender equality, we can create a society where individuals of all genders have equal opportunities, rights, and freedom from violence. Building such a society requires collective efforts from individuals, communities, civil society organisations, and policymakers to transform societal norms and structures, ultimately fostering a safer, more inclusive Serbia.

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Doing the impossible - enlarging and reforming at the same time

Faris Kočan, Marko Lovec

Over the past decade and a half, relations between the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans have become a game of pretence. The EU has pretended that it still wants to take in the Western Balkans; the regimes of the Western Balkans have pretended that they are ready for the necessary reforms; and those from the region who wanted to join the EU have already done so as temporary workers or students.

This mimicry was the result of a series of crises within the EU triggered by global change that challenged the EU's identity as a transformative power that thrives on 'reproducing itself in its neighbourhood', with enlargement policy – the EU's strongest foreign policy tool – playing a central role in this regard. The global financial and economic crisis, the growing role of China, and a more assertive Russia acted as external shocks, triggering domestic crises such as the eurozone and migration crises. The crises revealed a lack of efficient decision-making and solidarity, followed by Brexit and democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe.

While the EU introduced new and new conditionalities to externalise its insecurity by countering the risk of backsliding after accession, it did so at the expense of its self-confidence. The latter is the main source of its attraction in competing with other countries that do not condition their support on democracy and the rule of law, which limits the ability of increasingly autocratic regimes in the accession countries and the EU's neighbours to hold on to power.

One way to solve this game of pretence was to sacrifice norms, which have now become empty words anyway, and accept the lowest common denominator as fact. The latter was embodied by the idea of the European Political Community (EPC), proposed by the current French government, which included the Western Balkans in the outer circle of the EU, along with the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and Turkey. According to this vision, the countries of the Western Balkans (or their elites) would continue to do business with the EU, both literally and indirectly, by receiving funding in return for protecting the vital interests of the EU (or its individual member states).

The question arose, however, whether the EPC would truly represent a universe in which other groups would orbit around the EU as a centre of gravity, or whether this would at best consolidate the status quo or at worst foster further centrifugal forces. As opposed to accession, that would represent a long-term commitment, the incentives for countries in the outer layer to follow the EU would depend only on the EU's ability to take a unified position and exert pressure on each individual issue, which is something that has so far proven difficult to achieve. Moreover, the EU would have to match the role of countries like the United States, Russia, or China, which speak with one voice and credibly commit to mobilising significant resources to achieve their strategic goals. Most importantly, by giving up on enlargement, the EU would betray the most pro-European part of the Western Balkan societies: young people, entrepreneurs, and supporters of the values identified with the EU, which the EU claims to put first.

The EU's new enlargement methodology, a response to the proposal of the new French government, balanced domestic political constraints (the need for EU reform to make decision-making more efficient, contested by weak internal cohesion) with the need for a more active approach on the international stage (strategic autonomy and geopolitical EU). The idea of combining individual negotiating points into packages to achieve greater political leverage could become a 'more-for-more' approach if the EU wants to put pressure (in the form of carrots and sticks) on the candidate countries to implement reforms and join. More realistically, however, it could also consolidate the status quo.

The pandemic and war in Ukraine have demonstrated to Europe that its crucial strength lies neither in its military power, for which it depends on the United States, nor in its economic power, for which it is increasingly challenged by China. The EU's strength lies in its core values, which unite Europeans and mobilise support for unprecedented action. It is precisely these values for which Russian aggression in Ukraine has failed to achieve its primary goals. Hard military power may be indispensable as an instrument of deterrence. However, effective projection is impossible without sufficient soft power, that is, the ability to convince people that what you are doing is the right thing to do (as the West itself has proven many times, e.g., in its failed invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan). Russia has failed because it overestimated its military power while overlooking the broad implications of a lack of freedom and accountability. Similarly, the EU can match China not in quantity of resources but rather in the quality of norms and values that enable it to make more of its limited human potential.

Instead of weighing whether it is more realistic to reform or expand first (and do neither), the EU should do the impossible – enlarge and reform at the same time. Yes, it may cost some money. Yes, it may cost some people some power. But that's nothing compared to what the EU has to lose if it keeps muddling through. As the saying goes, if you lose money, you lose nothing; if you lose health, you lose something; if you lose identity you lose everything. The EU has lost not because of economic competition or coercion, but because it has abandoned its identity, as a transformative force for good that has in the past resisted what was considered impossible. The Ukraine has reminded the EU and its leaders of this remarkable capacity, which they seemed to have forgotten.

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Western Balkans' Plight is Wake-up Call for Europe

In societies devastated by the pandemic, the EU needs to leave its conventional tool-box behind and urgently speed up the Europeanisation of its neighbours in Southeast Europe.

Paul Schmidt, Vedran Džihic

The coronavirus pandemic has deepened the vulnerabilities of the Western Balkan countries and exposed the weakness of their state institutions, especially in the health sector and social protection. At the same time, related to the limited effectiveness of the EU enlargement process over the past years, the progress of reforms has stagnated and some countries have even experienced concerning regressions in the rule of law. The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis has meanwhile increased the presence of other geopolitical players in the region, mainly in the context of competition over vaccinations, not only of China but also of Russia and the United Arab Emirates, UAE. Awareness is growing that the EU and the West is not the only available partner. As other powers not known for their democratic practices use or misuse the Western Balkans to promote their interests, it's becoming clear that the vision of a free, democratic and truly European Balkans is no longer self-evident.

After a long lean spell in terms of EU enlargement, now is the moment to act and put the whole range of EU policies applicable to the region back on the agenda. In times of major geopolitical shifts, the EU has to leave its conventional tool-box behind. It needs to advance the Europeanisation of its neighbours in the Western Balkans and provide substantial funding and sufficient political will to its own enlargement policies. The recent enlargement policy reform entails some new approaches and mechanisms, but is dealing with countries in the Western Balkans that fear permanently remaining the outside the EU. It is, therefore, high time for the EU to meet up with reality, to reassure and demonstrate that the countries of the region are potential future member states, and – to be concrete – speed up enhanced investment plans. While internal EU reforms are essential to consolidate structures, improve the EU's own functioning and enable it to enlarge, it would be wrong for the EU to withdraw now within its own borders and pretend not to see the rising challenges in its closest neighbourhood. On the contrary, an element of pragmatic optimism and geopolitical realism would help push the combination of corona, reform and enlargement fatigue aside. A European global player, with a geopolitical European Commission at its centre, would now be the best inspiration to share European values, inspire, and not merely protect its way of life and but convince others of its democratic ideals and achievements.

The EU must not turn a blind eye to a Western Balkans facing deeply rooted structural problems, ranging from a flawed state of democracy to societies captured by dominant elites, exclusive politics and nationalist discourses. Governments fearing a collapse of fundamentally weak health systems have introduced strict measures, including states of emergency without time limit, general lockdowns, restricting individual freedom and increasing their overall control over societies. An already weak system of checks and balances has been further diminished, as parliaments are sidelined, formal procedures disregarded and the judiciary weakened. Such dynamics, justified by a crisis situation, strengthen the notion of impunity and a lack of accountability among the governing elites.

Yet, there is dire need to strengthen the rule of law as the fundamental pillar of any stable, liberal democracy, not loosen it. This is even more so in a context where populism, polarisation and tendencies to authoritarian rule are on the rise not only in parts of

Europe but globally. Some of the power elites, also within the EU, pretend to be democratic and in favour of European integration, but when the limelight is turned off, engage in clientelist policies that prevent social inclusion and deepen cleavages in society.

Time to change the old elite-centred approach

This discrepancy between words and deeds reminds us that the Europeanisation process may have vested too much attention in elites and their formal European stances. This must change. By altering an elite-centred approach, the various EU programmes, such as those supporting mobility, visa-free travel, civil society and the media, will gain more prominence and become real vehicles for change.

The next few years will be decisive for the democratic and European future of the Western Balkans. In addition to a credible enlargement perspective and a positive reform narrative, which needs to be reinvented and reinvigorated, it is vital to boost the rule of law, civil dialogue, pluralism, social justice, and strengthen the fight against corruption. In the middle of the pandemic, new regional dynamics can be seen: the change of power in Montenegro raises many question marks about the politics of the new government. In the elections in Kosovo, younger voters and women gave strong support for Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osman, compelling them to deliver on their promises. In other parts of the region, new bottom-up and grassroots movements and initiatives are fighting for a broader vision of just and democratic societies. They are still often small and local but point to the potential that civic mobilisation and engagement born out of daily struggles can have.

These emancipatory civic movements are the centre of broader societal changes that should lead to more democratic, free, equal and just societies in the Western Balkans. This is why a more prominent and consistent focus on the social and civic dimension of the region seems without alternative. It would be encouraging to see the EU fiercely supporting these new forces, creating an environment for change in the Western Balkans, and also becoming an integral part of the EU-internal debates, such as in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. A renewed EU enlargement, a new and true commitment to the European future of the region, has to be based on mobilising its people and building trust – offering opportunities, hope and optimism. This is what not only the Western Balkans needs. It is what the whole European continent during a pandemic, and with all the consequences it entails, urgently needs as well.

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Vaccine diplomacy and enlargement fatigue: Why the EU must rethink its approach to the Western Balkans

*The EU's stalled enlargement process and the Covid-19 pandemic are reshaping the politics of the Western Balkans, write **Paul Schmidt** and **Vedran Dzihic**. Faced with these new realities, Europe's political leaders must make a fresh and genuine commitment to the European future of the region.*

The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened vulnerabilities in Western Balkan countries and exposed the weakness of state institutions in the region, especially in the health sector and with regards to social protection. At the same time, partly as a result of the rather limited effectiveness of the EU enlargement process over recent years, the implementation of reforms has stagnated and some countries have even experienced regression of the rule of law.

The outbreak of the pandemic has further increased the presence of other geopolitical players in the region, mainly in the context of the competition over vaccines. These include not only China, but also Russia and the United Arab Emirates. Awareness is growing that the EU and the West are not the only available partners. With other powers, which are not particularly known for their democratic standards, now using (or misusing) the Western Balkans to promote their interests, the vision of a free, democratic, and truly European Balkans is no longer self-evident.

Time for action

After a long lean spell for EU enlargement, now is the moment to act and put the entire range of EU policies applicable to the region back on the political agenda. In times of major geopolitical shifts, the European Union must leave its conventional toolbox behind. It needs to advance with the Europeanisation of its neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans and provide substantial funding and sufficient political will to its own enlargement policies.

The EU's recent enlargement policy reform entails some new approaches and mechanisms, but it will have to deal with countries in the Western Balkans who now fear they will be permanently consigned to the outer circle of the EU. It is therefore vital for the EU to demonstrate that the countries of the region are potential future member states, and to speed up enhanced investment plans.

Internal EU reforms are essential for consolidating structures, improving the EU's own functioning, and enabling the Union to enlarge. But it would be wrong for the EU to withdraw behind its own borders and turn away from the rising challenges in its closest neighbourhood. Rather, a degree of pragmatic optimism and geopolitical realism would help push the combination of Covid-19, reform, and enlargement fatigue aside. A European global player, with a geopolitical European Commission at its centre, would be the best inspiration for sharing European values. Instead of simply protecting its way of life, the EU should aim to be a model for other countries to follow while setting new achievements and advocating for its democratic ideals.

The EU must not ignore the deeply rooted problems present in the Western Balkans. These range from flawed democratic structures to societies that have been captured by dominant elites, political parties, and nationalist discourses. Many Western Balkan governments, fearing the collapse of their fundamentally weak health systems, have introduced strict measures including open-ended states of emergency, lockdowns, restrictions on individual freedoms, and reforms that increase government control over society.

These developments have further diminished already weak systems of checks and balances. Parliaments have been sidelined, formal procedures disregarded, and judiciaries weakened. While such measures have been justified as a response to the crisis, they have only strengthened the notion of impunity and lack of accountability among governing elites. In reality, there is a dire need to strengthen the rule of law, not to weaken it. Even more so given populism, polarisation, and shifts toward authoritarian rule are on the rise, not only in parts of Europe, but also globally.

For many of Europe's political leaders, including some within the EU, it has become the norm to feign support for democracy and European integration, while simultaneously pursuing clientelist policies out of the limelight that prevent social inclusion and deepen the cleavages within society. This discrepancy between words and deeds underlines that the Europeanisation process has invested too much attention in the actions of political leaders and their formal European stances. This must change. By departing from the elite-centred approach of the past, EU programmes geared toward supporting mobility, visa-free travel, civil society, and media would automatically gain more prominence and become real vehicles for change.

A decisive moment

The next few years will be decisive for the democratic and European future of the Western Balkans. In addition to a credible enlargement perspective and a positive reform narrative, which must be reinvented and reinvigorated, it is vital to boost the rule of law, civil dialogue, pluralism, and social justice in the region, as well as strengthen the fight against corruption.

In the midst of the pandemic, new regional dynamics are already visible. There has been a change of power in Montenegro, albeit with many questions remaining about the politics of the new government. The recent elections in Kosovo saw younger generations and women give strong support to Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, who are now obliged to deliver upon their promises. In other parts of the region, new grassroots movements and initiatives are fighting for a broader vision of just and democratic societies. While still relatively small and local, these movements point to the potential for real change to emerge from civic mobilisation and engagement born out of daily struggles.

These emancipatory civic movements are the centre of broader societal changes that should lead to more democratic, free, equal, and just societies in the Western Balkans. This is why a more prominent and consistent focus on the social and civic dimension of the region is sorely required. It would be encouraging to see the EU supporting and engaging with these new forces, creating an environment for change and establishing them as an integral part of internal debates within the EU, for instance through the framework of the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe.

A renewed EU enlargement policy, with a fresh and genuine commitment to the European future of the region, should be built on the mobilisation of its people. It should seek to build trust, offer opportunities, give hope, and spread optimism. This is what not only the Western Balkans, but the whole European continent during the pandemic urgently needs.

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Non-Papers and the Elephant in the Room: Rule of Law in the Western Balkans

Jovana Marović, Nikolaos Tzifakis

While the European Union has initiated a yearlong Conference on the Future of Europe that gives the floor to its citizens to debate contemporary challenges and prospects, another dialogue is in parallel held about the future of the Western Balkans. However, the latter is neither public, nor participatory. It has been launched through the release of non-papers.

The most radical ones were unsigned and undated. The first (in order of appearance) and most notorious presented as panacea to the region's problems is based on the terrible idea of multiple changes of borders to create Greater Albania, Greater Croatia and Greater Serbia.

The second (admittedly, much more conventional) non-paper proposed the establishment of an Autonomous District in North Kosovo as part of a deal to resolve the ongoing conflict between Belgrade and Pristina.

While such a structure might assuage some of the fears of Serbs residing in North Kosovo, its creation would be very challenging given that the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue has already stalled over the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities in Kosovo.

The disclosed authorship and ownership of these non-papers raise obvious questions of accountability and legitimacy. Yet, this is not their main deficiency. Arguably, the very logic of releasing a non-paper is to test the merits of a fresh idea or proposal.

And no-one claims that the Western Balkans are not in desperate need of more attention and out-of-the-box approaches to their long-lasting problems.

Indeed, those non-papers' release coincides with a widespread acknowledgement that the policy of EU enlargement is deadlocked, largely due to the lack of interest and energy by both the European Union and the leaderships of most Western Balkan countries.

On the one hand, in recent years, the European Commission has issued several documents to revitalize the integration process, from the so-called strategy for a credible enlargement perspective of the Western Balkans of 2018 to the new enlargement methodology of 2020.

In practice, though, these policy revisions are little more than an additional complication to the enlargement process to the extent that new instruments are not accompanied by an increased political engagement of the EU on the ground.

In addition, EU policy "revitalizations" have not helped to overcome the primacy of political decision-making over a merit-based assessment of progress.

Individual EU member-states are still able to hijack the process in order to promote their national preferences. Enlargement policy revisions also do not seek to provide any concrete benefits to Western Balkan citizens that could stem from the EU integration of their countries such as the diminution of the GDP per capita gap between the EU average and the Western Balkan countries.

On the other hand, some Western Balkan leaders see the EU reluctance to provide a clear membership perspective as a permission to maintain autocratic practices. In essence, for them, strengthening the rule of law is a means to achieve a certain goal not a goal in itself.

Therefore, they are delivering only the bare minimum of reforms, opting for procedural rather than genuine compliance with EU prescriptions.

Failing to demonstrate its true transformative power, the EU is no longer perceived as an integrative factor, while various plans "calling" for the disintegration of the region are emerging before its eyes, and probably even in its own backyard. In that sense, it could be said that the invasion of new "solutions" for the Western Balkans is a consequence of the EU's inability to help the region transform itself, in fostering the rule of law and resolving bilateral disputes.

Irrespectively of who hides behind these non-papers, they generate concern because they contain ideas linked to identifiable political trends with supporters in both the Western Balkans and the EU. In other words, they should not be treated as science fiction. They indeed build on well-known demands by decision-makers, who have become increasingly outspoken during the last years. Even if the propositions contained in the first non-paper are too radical to succeed, they carry the danger of presenting a great evil that might relativize the ramifications of a milder scenario of limited territorial adjustments in Bosnia and Herzegovina or in Kosovo.

These ideas are actually the very opposite of what European integration stands for which is to overcome boundaries and nationalism.

Overall, the main deficiency of these non-papers is that they fall within the wrong, failed paradigm that accounts for the current stagnation in the reform process. They are underpinned by an overwhelming concern about the region's stability, overlooking the backsliding in democracy and the rule of law.

They seem to treat the impasse in conflict resolution as an obstacle to those countries' reform efforts, while the exact opposite is the case: semi-authoritarian leaderships nurture ethnic disputes (and capitalize on those disputes' protraction) to divert attention from their own grip to power.

Both non-papers also take the policy of EU enlargement out of the equation, whose transformative power (when conditionality is employed consistently) should not be altogether neglected. Very importantly, the idea of stabilizing the region without exploiting the promise of EU membership is tempting for member-states who have lost appetite for any new rounds of enlargement.

The EU has long put stability ahead of integration in the Western Balkans, pushing in the background reforms that would improve the well-being of citizens and consolidate democracy. To some extent, the non-papers that have been lately receiving a lot of public attention paradoxically fall within the same (mainstream) approach that has contributed to the reign of stabilitocracy.

Very worryingly, they carry the additional risk of triggering new conflicts and causing an even greater slowdown to the region's EU accession process. However, what the Western Balkans need is the exact opposite: a more active EU engagement to enlargement and the Union's reaffirmation of its strong commitment to spread its own values and democracy in the region.

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Ukraine War is Europe's Wake-up Call to Revive Enlargement

The EU must use this moment of exceptional crisis to radically re-evaluate its neighbourhood policy and jump-start its stagnant enlargement process.

Paul Schmidt, Vedran Džihic

On 24 February, Europe woke up to a new reality. The course of the Russian war on Ukraine and the propaganda by the Kremlin show the extent of this attack on the free world. President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a turning point in European history. In the first weeks of the war, the West and the European Union presented unexpected determination and unity. However, as every week and month of the war passes, the West's unity will be tested more and more. The latest debates on stopping imports of Russian energy, and the consequences of this, are only the beginning.

As much as we hope that the human suffering of the Ukrainians will end as soon as possible, we have to accept that the process of dissolution of the European post-war order has just started. The war is changing our continent and calls on the European Union, its member states and partner countries, to see the bigger picture, adjust to new realities and realign. One topic that has returned to the top of the EU agenda is enlargement, which has been in a technocratic but also political stalemate for some time. The applications for EU membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia offer evidence that the geopolitics of enlargement are gaining importance. Ukraine pushes for a clear European perspective, rightly arguing that it is precisely them that are defending European values, in their fight against the Russian invasion. The Western Balkan countries, which have lingered for too long in the waiting room of the Union, are part of this geopolitical equation. Non-democratic great powers such as China or Russia are interfering in the region and challenging the EU and the West. Serbia's strongman, Aleksandar Vučić, still manoeuvres between pressure from the West to join sanctions against Russia, the supposed sympathy of big parts of the Serbian population for Putin and his preference for the Chinese state model. The pro-Russian Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik's playing with fire in the mainly Serbian Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia has become a permanent threat to the stability of the country.

It is not a good moment for political sleepwalkers. Instead, it is time to prioritise the European integration project and radically re-evaluate the European neighbourhood policy and the EU's stagnant enlargement process.

Wanted: new neighbourhood and enlargement policy

For years, the people in the Western Balkans have been waiting for progress on EU integration. The political standstill in many countries of the region has meanwhile resulted in authoritarian tendencies gaining ground. The blocking of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania has damaged their populations' trust in the EU. The latest opinion surveys in Serbia show that for the first time since its accession process started, most Serbs no longer favour of EU membership. The deadlock on both sides is a major risk to political stability. This is why a more credible EU accession perspective is needed – overcoming the mental blockade in certain individual member states and ending nationalist blackmailing – such as Bulgaria's, in the case of North Macedonia. Serbian acceptance of Russian narratives must be condemned, along with ongoing attempts to undermine the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The EU is learning to use its considerable economic power politically, and these lessons should feed into a new and forward-looking policy stance towards the Western Balkans, aimed at deterring destabilising developments in the region. The next Western Balkans Summit would be a good opportunity for this. It is a long overdue chance to finally start EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and abolish visa requirements for Kosovo.

Show courage

A credible signal of commitment from Brussels is needed – a wake-up from the technocratic rigidity that has characterized EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy. The EU needs clarity on what can be achieved with the enlargement process. Any further drift of the Western Balkans from Europe would be more than counterproductive for the region and the whole continent.

A common geopolitical “Europeanisation” of the countries of the Western Balkans, together with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, must become a priority of the EU. We have also to stop postponing the bulk of political rewards until the very end of the process, and instead enable a step-by-step integration into EU politics. This does not mean abolishing conditionality but frontloading more incentives, while increasing the pressure for reforms. EU integration will not happen overnight and all the countries will need time until their integration journey reaches the final goal of full membership. While membership in a European confederation, as proposed recently by France’s Emmanuel Macron, could be offered rapidly and materialise in deeper cooperation with the EU, the perspective of actual EU membership at the end of the road should be preserved – if and when countries choose to and meet the criteria. On this road to membership, tangible results are necessary to improve people’s lives and promote political courage to take the right steps leading to further integration into the European Single Market and participation in selected EU programmes and structural funds.

Today, the EU is learning the fast way that close trade relations do not automatically oust illiberal despots. Economic power must become a political tool, and a value-based political vision must be promoted more decisively. At the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s people believed that “Europe’s greatest hour” had come. In fact, it had not. In light of the most serious threat to peace in Europe since the World War II, Europe’s “hour” now finally needs to arrive. The current momentum for an independent, democratic and geopolitical union that welcomes its neighbours with open arms should not be missed.

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Europe Must Seize this Opportunity to Enlarge – and Reform

The Ukraine war has put both EU enlargement, and fundamental reform, back on the table – but the window of opportunity won't stay open for long.

Paul Schmidt, Vedran Džihic

For more than a decade, the once-radiant instrument of EU enlargement seemed to have lost its popular appeal and was put on the shelf. Mantra-like repetitions of political declarations and empty rhetoric about enlargement only led to fatigue and even further into a technocratic impasse. The European Union pretended it wanted to enlarge, while the countries of the Western Balkans simulated reforms. The result was a standstill.

Then came the Russian attack on Ukraine, a dramatic moment for Europe and, as it seems, a new lease of life for EU enlargement. The political momentum and interest in enlargement are now back, and a window of opportunity for not only enlarging but also fundamentally reforming the Union is wide open.

Only weeks ago, while the debate was gaining in speed and substance, Europe was on the brink of another armed conflict in the Western Balkans, triggered by a military attack by a Serbian paramilitary group in Kosovo with obvious ties to an official EU candidate country, Serbia. In January 2024, it will be ten years since EU accession negotiations opened with Belgrade. Paradoxically, since then, the country headed by President Aleksandar Vucic, has joined the list of the ten most autocratic countries globally. Today's Serbia is a warning of what may happen if one doesn't speak the truth to power, and neither the EU nor this candidate country are taking the process of negotiating EU accessions seriously.

Ivan Krastev, one of the sharpest minds analyzing Central and Eastern European realities, put his finger on the point, stating that it is not enough for Europe to wake up to a new geopolitical reality. You also have to get out of bed and make use of this wind of political change. If we don't seize the opportunities in front of us, the tide may turn quicker than we think once the massive wave of public support for nationalistic forces in Europe translates into new government formations and Donald Trump, or his ideology, celebrates its return.

Target dates are not enough

What needs to be done? First, the EU needs to get its act together and undertake serious and far-fetched reforms. It is not enough to name possible target dates for the next round of EU enlargement, as Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, has done. Yes, political dynamics push the Union towards enlargement; it has become a geopolitical imperative. However, the devil lies in the detail, and enlargement is not only driven by foreign and security policy concerns but also entails a strong economic, financial, and social dimension. That is why the European Commission proposed to review all policy areas and make them ready for a bigger and better Union. This is why it is paramount to include the EU candidate countries in the yearly Rule of Law Monitoring of the EU already at an early stage.

However, institutional questions are the easier exercise. The sheer size of a possible next enlargement, with nine countries, in particular with Ukraine currently fighting for its existence, has no comparison. Next to the special security dimension, we should not neglect the huge economic differences between the EU-27 and the current candidate countries; the nine potential new member states all belong to the ten poorest countries in Europe. Once tough questions of competition or the future financing of the EU are on the table, negotiations and political decisions will naturally become more complicated.

Don't forget the young, they're the future

Besides internal EU dilemmas and necessary reforms, one important task for the Union is to intensify and widen its networks and partnerships in the candidate countries. Closer cooperation with civil society and pro-European and emancipatory grassroots movements would indeed be a welcome and a much-needed help to boost democratization from below. Frontloading some of the tangible economic and social benefits and an early, gradual integration into the single market could give new hope and perspective to the people, improving the quality of their lives. More attention should be given to the dreams and needs of the next generation in the candidate countries – young Europeans. They are the core constituency of the future Union, and it is them we have to inspire for our common European objectives. In the end, it will be on them to secure internal democratic reforms and, with their passion and engagement, to help hinder state capture by a still too often corrupt political elite.

Most importantly, all candidate countries and potential future members of the Union have to show and prove serious commitments to European values and their own European ambitions. The EU and all its member states have to raise their voices and take a clear and unequivocal stance vis-à-vis volatile political systems see-sawing between Moscow and Beijing, such as Serbia, or with Georgia, still eying Russian support and proving the case in point. In the end, EU enlargement is and shall never be a process for the sake of political elites but for the benefit of the people. We must not forget what stands behind the idea of EU enlargement: it is the Union's core idea to promote European values, human rights, rule of law, and liberal and democratic societies, which apply to all, including, of course, the candidate countries.

A test as big as German reunification

To get enlargement back on track, we need a new set of rules, putting the functioning of the Union on a stable footing and making it ready to successfully integrate new members. But do we have the political strength and will in all EU capitals to take this path? The next few months will tell us whether the EU is able to prove that it understands realpolitik and, in particular, geopolitics. There will be no enlargement without internal reform. The next enlargement, with Ukraine as the core country, would change the Union in a way maybe only comparable to German reunification or the 2004 “big bang” Eastern Enlargement.

The Western Balkans are the litmus test for the art of the possible. Not succeeding in a region, where the Union has invested so much is not an option. Failure in the Western Balkans would only make everything much more difficult – for the whole of Europe.

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Yes, EUtopia is possible!

*“Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises”,
Jean Monnet, founding father of the European project*

While the war is raging in Ukraine, we might not even recognize what a paradoxical gift we hold in our hands, which is to live in peace. New security risks for Europe as a whole, but especially for fragile regions such as the Western Balkans, have brought the area back into international spotlight and given it a renewed chance to leave conflicts and frictions behind, thus moving towards a common European future.

The Western Balkans were torn apart by its wars in the 1990s and although the prospect of joining the European Union (EU) rose in the early 2000s, the process has proven to be unpleasantly slow. In many aspects, EU enlargement has still not achieved concrete steps towards progressive change so much needed by the people in the region, especially the youth. In consequence, the odds of joining the EU started to fade, driving national and regional Euroscepticism.

However, there will be no stability for the whole European continent without anchoring the Western Balkans firmly within the EU. We believe that the long-term guarantee for peace and prosperity is not only secured by the ink to sign treaties but based on sustainable and ever closer European cooperation for which we need a common vision – our EUtopia.

Building strong and resilient democracies

In the past years and decades, anti-democratic tendencies and the rise of far-right parties have contributed to the polarization of European societies. Their political game consists of simplifying complex problems and effortlessly offering unrealistic solutions. The ‘migration card’ has been played intensively, resulting in hate speech, the rise of discrimination as well as violations of human rights. Consequently, the Russian war against Ukraine has posed new threats to democracy. Yet, it could also sharpen our understanding of democratic values and offer a new momentum to strengthen the unity of Europe. It has become more obvious than ever: if we want to live in a pluralistic and liberal democracy, we have got to take action. Now.

Dysfunctional democracies provide fertile ground for autocrats in the Western Balkans and beyond to capture core-mechanisms of democracy such as elections, rule of law, free media, and independent institutions. Democratic backsliding, a lack of political engagement, disinformation and threats to the freedom of speech is daily reality particularly for the citizens of the region and puts us, the progressive youth, into a seemingly hopeless situation. But we are not giving up, we feel responsible for our region and the whole of Europe and we want to push for change.

We will not stand still, but rather do everything in our power to safeguard freedom of speech by actively countering disinformation both in social media and within our peer groups. By investing in our education and claiming for us the right to be listened to, we will contribute to the resilience of our society. We don’t want to be mere passengers on a ship without a clear course, but rather contribute to shaping a progressive and open society based on solidarity and equality.

Yet, we cannot do it alone. Many more of the young people in the region – or with roots in the Balkans and living all across Europe – need to join us. We all call for being recognized and accepted as equal Europeans. Let us start by saying loud and clear that what is sold as “freedom of movement” shall be no more burden to anyone. Kosovo for example has fulfilled all the conditions for visa liberalization the EU has demanded for years. Now is the time to abolish this absurd visa regime.

We demand more institutionalized participatory processes, like the Conference on the Future of Europe – where the youth of the Western Balkans shall be an integral part of this transnational exercise. Our ideas and experiences also need to be translated into concrete political action and tangible policies.

No second-class Europeans

February 24th has put the European political landscape upside down. It is now high time to bring the Western Balkans closer to a European, progressive, and democratic future. For that, it is crucial to reiterate and further promote the common European values such as human rights, dignity, democracy, freedom, and equal opportunities.

Although many young people in the Western Balkans share these values, they are not recognized as equal Europeans. The region is often perceived as not “good” or “mature” enough to belong to the EU. This public perception runs the danger of breeding new frustrations. This feeling of exclusion becomes a reality on the labour market, in education, health and social security systems – all aspects of daily life – when the promise of liberal democracy turns into a false illusion and deception for so many of us. Intentionally or not, EU leaders treat millions of people as inferior even though they only want the same things as their counterparts fortunately to them born slightly further west: a prosperous and good life in peace and stability. This discrimination has to end.



WB2EU Summer School, Cres (Croatia), 2022

Education and social inclusion are key in the fight for equal opportunities. That is true also within the EU where inequality between member states, take the example of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, is alarmingly high. While EU enlargement has taken place, integration is still lacking behind.

Second-class status is ghettoizing. If you're not given a perspective to break out of your pigeonhole, you will stop even striving for it. Western Balkan countries thus need a realistic perspective to be an integral part of the European family to make sure that they do not turn away from it – no more empty promises but equal opportunities!

Together we want to work towards our real EUtopian idea, our vision for Europe's future. Given the historic momentum Europe finds itself in, not only do we need to learn how to dream of utopias but we need to learn to actively live in them. As the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek put it, the core of pursuing this real utopian idea lies in shaping reality and opening up the space for a possible other and better future.

This OP ED was written during the WB2EU network's Next Generation Summer School by 17 young people from 13 countries on the Croatian island of Cres. It is part of a project on the future of the Western Balkans and EU enlargement, co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme: www.wb2eu.eu.

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<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/09/yes-eutopia-is-possible/>

ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Highlights of the WB2EU project

PHASE I – Rule of law & justice

33 op-eds, articles, interviews

15 Policy Briefs

9 network meetings

8 videos

2 Ideas go public Labs

1 Kick-off Conference

1 press release

1 Media Cooperation with European Western Balkans (EWB)

1 project website

WEBSITE

Launch on 21 March 2021 / total visits until 25 October 2023: 8,472): wb2eu.eu

EVENTS

Western Balkans 2 EU: Kick-Off Conference, 23-24 March 2021, Vienna (Austria)

23 March Public debate: "New perspectives on rule of law and justice – Where do we stand and what do we need?" (livestream)

Internal debate (Zoom meeting)

24 March Public debate: "How to get EU enlargement back on track? Prioritising rule of law and judicial reform." (livestream)

1st Ideas go public Lab, 7-9 June & 30 June 2021, Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

In cooperation with the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo

7 – 9 June 3 Internal debates (Zoom meetings)

30 June Public debate: "Moving forward or standing still? New momentum for the European future of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (livestream)

2nd Ideas go public Lab, 14-15 October 2021, Ljubljana (Slovenia)

In cooperation with the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences and the Europe for Citizens Project *Tackling Illiberal/Eurosceptic Narratives from Below*

14 October Workshop: "Eurosceptic and illiberal alliance in the region" (hybrid format via Zoom)

Public debate: "Is the EU losing the Western Balkans and/or vice versa?" (hybrid format, livestream)

15 October WB2EU Network meeting (hybrid format via Zoom)

POLICY BRIEFS (15 issues released, 23 September 2021 – 9 March 2022)

- 21.9.2021: Böttger, K., Maugeais, D. (2021). Countering the rule of Law Backsliding in the Western Balkans. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 11'2021
- 4.10.2021: Kočan, F., Lovec, M. (2021). What can the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union do for the Western Balkans? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 12'2021.
- 13.10.2021: Popović, D. (2021). Rule of Law and Justice – Case Serbia. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 13'2021
- 22.10.2021: Griessler, C., Elek, F. (2021). Hungary, an anti-role model for successful EU integration? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 14'2021
- 28.10.2021: Nikolovski, D., Stojanovski, A. (2021). The controversy of 'more (economic) freedom'. Can liberalisation in North Macedonia cause more problems than benefits? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 15'2021
- 16.11.2021: Tzifakis, N., Valvis, A. (2021). The Rule of Law and Foreign Direct Investment in the Western Balkans: The Greek Experience. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 17'2021
- 1.12.2021: Poli, E., Salvia, M. (2021). The Conditionality Regulation: A true European means to face a rule of law crisis in wider Europe and foster media freedom. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 20'2021
- 3.12.2021: Kolar, N. (2021). Rule of Law and Justice in Croatia after the EU accession. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 21'2021
- 7.12.2021: Krasteva, A. (2021). State Capture versus Contestatory Citizenship in Bulgaria. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 22'2021
- 20.12.2021: Mumin, N. (2021). The rule of law in Montenegro between deep polarisation and an unstable majority – how to get back on track? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 23'2021
- 22.12.2021: Nela, I. (2021). Lessons learned from the justice reform in Albania. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 24'2021
- 19.1.2022: Bernard, E., Leloup, J. (2022). Considering EU enlargement through the prism of security cooperation. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 01'2022
- 10.2.2022: Popescu-Zamfir, O. (2022). Building a constituency for rule of law. Lessons from the Romanian anti-corruption drive. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 03'2022
- 17.2.2022: Tahiri, B. (2022). Is there hope for Kosovo's rule of law system? Three immediate actions needed. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 04'2022
- 9.3.2022: Džananović, N., Turčalo, S. (2022). Rule of Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Transformation of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 05'2022

PHASE II – Social Dimension

26 op-eds, articles, interviews

26 videos

15 Policy Briefs

5 network meetings

2 Ideas go public Labs

1 Summer School

1 Media Cooperation with European Western Balkans (EWB)

EVENTS

3rd Ideas go public Lab, 17-18 February 2022, Pristina (Kosovo)

In cooperation with Change Experts Group

- 17 February 2 WB2EU Network meetings (closed sessions, Zoom provided for network members)
- 18 February WB2EU Network meeting (closed session, Zoom provided for network members)
- Public debate: “Succeeding despite...” – the challenges of “young Europeans” in Western Balkan countries (hybrid format, livestream)

4th Ideas go public Lab, 19–20 May 2022, Paris (France)

In cooperation with EuropaNova

- 19 May Round table discussion: “The Western Balkans EU accession process in a French perspective” (closed session, Zoom provided for WB2EU Network members and registered participants)
- Public debate: “The path to the EU – how the war in Ukraine has reopened the case for enlargement” (hybrid format, livestream)
- 20 May WB2EU Network meeting, visit of the French Senate and discussion in the Austrian Embassy

WB2EU Summer School, 5–9 September 2022, Cres (Croatia)

In cooperation with the Center for Advanced Studies – South East Europe (CAS SEE), University of Rijeka & Moise Palace

“Regaining new European and democratic momentum together”

POLICY BRIEFS (15 issues released, 23 September 2021 – 9 March 2022)

- 13.10.2022: Tzifakis, N., Valvis, A. (2022). The social impact of air pollution in the Western Balkans. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 15’2022
- 22.10.2022: Bakić, S. (2022). Cultural Policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Recognising Culture as an Integration Tool. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 16’2022
- 4.11.2022: Staykova, E. (2022). Return Migration in Bulgaria: A Policy Context of Missed Opportunities. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 17’2022
- 11.11.2022: Bernard, E., Ibrahim, F. (2022). Kosovo: ending isolation. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 18’2022
- 17.11.2022: Stefanović, S., Vračar, M. (2022). The Vulnerability of Women in the Labour Market in Serbia. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 19’2022
- 24.11.2022: Mahmutović, M. (2022). Listening to the people: How the Green Agenda Action Plan can do better for the Western Balkans. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 20’2022
- 1.12.2022: Šelo Šabić, S. (2022). Demographic decline of Croatia: What is to be done? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 21’2022
- 7.12.2022: Nikolovski, D., Stojanovski, A. (2022). Digital Europeanisation in North Macedonia: slowly moving forward. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 22’2022
- 19.12.2022: Elek, F., Griessler, C. (2022). Youth Cooperation in the Serbian–Hungarian Context. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 23’2022
- 21.12.2022: Mumin, N. (2022). Local elections in Montenegro: beyond political campaigns. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 24’2022
- 27.2.2023: Nela, I., Smolica, G. (2023). Sustainable development in the Western Balkans: Is youth on board? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 03’2023
- 9.3.2023: Maugeais, D. (2023). Making the EU and member state policy towards the Western Balkans socio-economically more sustainable. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 04’2023
- 15.3.2023: Fattibene, D., Castiglioni, F., Bonomi, M. (2023). Bringing sustainability to the Western Balkan region. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 05’2023
- 28.4.2023: Kelmendi, F. (2023). Kosovo’s youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 09’2023
- 5.4.2023: Tiut, A., Teacă, A. M. (2023). Emigration from Romania: impact and legacy. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 10’2023

PHASE III – Democratisation from below

28 op-eds, articles, interviews

15 Policy Briefs

4 network meetings

2 Ideas go public Labs

1 press briefing

1 press release

1 Media Cooperation with European Western Balkans (EWB)

EVENTS

5th Ideas go public Lab, 19–20 September 2022, Belgrade (Serbia)

In cooperation with the Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

19 September	Public debate: “Tackling inequality – a step towards solidarity” (hybrid format, livestream)
	Public debate: “Mainstreaming youth vision – avoiding youthwashing” (hybrid format, livestream)
20 September	WB2EU Network meeting (closed session, Zoom provided for network members)
	Round table: Meeting with EUROPRIDE organisers (round table, closed session, Zoom provided for network members)
	Meeting with the representatives of MORAMO Movement (round table, closed session, Zoom provided for network members) and discussion at the Austrian Embassy

6th Ideas go public Lab, 23–24 March 2023, Berlin (Germany) in cooperation with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP)

23 March	Expert round table: “‘Zeitenwende’ for EU Enlargement Policy? A view on the Berlin process and the promotion of regional integration”
	Public panel discussion: “Towards a credible EU Enlargement Policy? What does German ‘Zeitenwende’ mean for the Western Balkans?”
24 March	WB2EU Network meeting (closed session, Zoom provided for network members)
	Virtual Exchange with MdBs Josip Juratovic (SPD) and Thomas Hacker (FDP)

Closing Event, 9–10 October 2023, Vienna (Austria)

In cooperation with the Austrian Institute for International Affairs – öiip

9 October	Press briefing
	Public debate: “Is EU enlargement back on track? Moving towards a democratic and united Europe”
10 October	Guided tour at the newly renovated Austrian Parliament and WB2EU Network meeting

POLICY BRIEFS (15 issues released, 7 June – 28 October 2023)

- 7.6.2023: Vukadinovic, N. (2023). Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 12'2023
- 15.6.2023: Aleksić, R., Milovanović, L., Đorđević, M. (2023). Civil society: a driver for democratisation from below in Serbia. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 13'2023
- 6.7.2023: Mrdović, P. (2023). The role of digitalisation in transforming Western Balkan societies. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 14'2023
- 13.7.2023: Elek, F., Griessler, C. (2023). Civil society organisations and their "space" in backsliding democracies. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 15'2023
- 21.7.2023: Tzifakis, N., Valvis, A. (2023). A missed opportunity? Civil society organisations in Greece and North Macedonia after the 2015 refugee crisis. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 16'2023
- 2.8.2023: Krasteva, A. (2023). Citizens vs. Elites: Symbolic Battles Over the Uses of Political Crises in Bulgaria. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 17'2023
- 29.9.2023: Hackaj, A. (2023). Convergence of the Western Balkans towards the EU: from enlargement to cohesion. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 18'2023
- 5.10.2023: Bonomi, M., Rusconi, I. (2023). From EU 'enlargement fatigue' to 'enlargement enthusiasm'? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 19'2023
- 13.10.2023: Jašić, M. (2023). Balancing Freedom of Expression and Democracy: The Case of the "Za Dom Spremni" Greeting in Croatia. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 20'2023
- 19.10.2023: Tiut, A. (2023). Democracy from below in Romania: how far can it get before breaking. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 21'2023
- 25.10.2023: Hajrullahu, V., Hoxha, T., Puka, D. (2023). Kosovo: democratising democracy. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 22'2023
- 27.10.2023: Maugeais, D. (2023). How to support democratisation in the Western Balkans? Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 23'2023
- 27.10.2023: Missini, I., Nikolovski, D. (2023). Tackling the local beyond partisan politics. Can independent lists in North Macedonia boost local democracy? ÖGfE Policy Brief, 24'2023
- 28.10.2023: Mumin, N., Popović Kalezić, M. (2023). Rebuilding democracy from below: A case for local communities in Montenegro. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 25'2023
- 28.10.2023: Bakić, S. (2023). Media and minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a path towards an inclusive and democratic society. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 26'2023

FINAL PUBLICATION

"Vision Western Balkans 2030 – Europeanisation meets democracy"

(500 printed copies, online version)

All activities and publications of our WB2EU project can be found on the following website: www.wb2eu.eu

IMPRINT

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