

Is the future of the Western Balkans in Europe at stake in 2021?

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Although the EU reaffirmed its “unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans” at the virtual Zagreb summit in May 2020, uncertainties will prevail in 2021. Indeed, even 20 years after their ‘European vocation’ was recognised and 17 years after the Thessaloniki summit, little progress has been achieved. Only Slovenia and Croatia have joined the European Union. Serbia and Montenegro have fallen into the Freedom House ‘hybrid regimes’ category, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are in political limbo. Meanwhile, the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia is being blocked by the Bulgarian government.

Some think tanks and politicians in the Western Balkans blame the EU for the slow accession process. The European Union may indeed have been sleepwalking for a long time and it has not provided the financial support that the post-war situation in the Western Balkans required. This has paved the way for the influence of re-emerging powers – from Russia to Turkey, and from China to the Gulf countries.

In the EU accession process, however, the burden of proof is on the candidates, and their compliance with the accession criteria and conditionality. Unlike with the Central European countries in the 1990s, many leaders in the Balkans have placed their short-term interests of staying in power ahead of the long-term benefits of their countries’ EU accession. This is because the hard reforms required by the EU accession criteria might cut off the very branch on which these leaders are sitting. The functioning of institutions in the Western Balkans is being hampered by state capture and corruption, and media are often under state control. Inequalities are growing, amid a massive exodus and a continuous demographic decline. The backsliding of democracy is indeed worrying.

This situation is obviously not conducive to the EU’s readiness to welcome new members. Furthermore, some EU member states fear that enlargement of the bloc to include the Western Balkans would result in a Hungary- and Poland-type ‘illiberal’ contagion. It is thus high time for all democratic forces to wake up, together with civil society organisations, including those for reconciliation, where women play a major role. Let us hope that 2021 will mark a turn towards fundamental reforms, from words to deeds, as the Western Balkans are essential for the EU,

and are indeed geographically embedded in Europe. Their stability is our security. Geopolitics abhors a vacuum. And the expectations of citizens in the Western Balkans towards Europe should at last be answered.

Nevertheless, no upsurge in reform can be expected unless the EU gives primacy to the rule of law and good governance everywhere, moving away from its acceptance of the so-called 'stabilocracy'. The link that has recently been agreed between reforms in accession countries and EU financial support will offer a strong incentive for primacy being given to the rule of law, providing that the EU does not shy away from insisting on this link. In addition, for reforms to come about, increased empowerment of civil society organisations should be sought. The new accession negotiation methodology will also help. Nonetheless, it is the countries' political will to undertake the reforms, as well as the EU's political will to fulfil its commitments, that will remain the key to progress. It is now essential for the long-awaited opening of negotiations with North Macedonia to take place in 2021. And the unprecedented vetting process of magistrates in Albania should equally be rewarded as soon as the constitutional court is up and running.

The EU has already re-engaged with the Western Balkans with a €3.3 billion package agreed in May 2020 to support the health sector and social and economic recovery, along with a €9.5 billion investment plan under the new multiannual financial framework. However, this financial support will not be sufficient to meet the needs in the Western Balkans, or to reduce emigration and unemployment, or to accompany the regional common market that has recently been declared. Nor will it be enough to reduce the attractiveness of other powers, like China, in the region. If the current EU framework does not prove effective enough, consideration should be given to establishing a form of structural funds following the 'more for more' principle.

Two other issues will also largely determine the fate of the Western Balkans region. First, the inter-ethnic blockade in Bosnia and Herzegovina is worrying, 25 years after the Dayton peace agreement. Second, the stalemate of the Kosovo-Serbia issue, ten years after the start of the EU-facilitated dialogue is also of concern. It seems unlikely that long-term solutions to these issues will emerge in 2021, given how deeply rooted in the war legacy the prejudices appear to be – which the leaders keep abusing to stay in power – and given how profound is the institutional crisis in both countries. What is more, long-term solutions are also unlikely in 2021 because Russia is close to Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and because Russia holds the key to Kosovo's recognition by the UN.

Renewed efforts and trust, as well as close cooperation with the Biden administration, will be needed – away from the transactional Trump practice – to ensure, at least to start, a better functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina and operational agreements to improve the daily life of Kosovo's citizens. The long-awaited visa liberalisation for Kosovo's citizens would greatly help the EU regain credibility.

Where else but in the Balkans can the EU turn geopolitical and ensure European sovereignty? Both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the yardstick for measuring whether the EU has fully exploited the geopolitical assets advocated by the Commission to assert the European Union as effective, credible, and sovereign.