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The Western Balkans in 2022

The political reverberations and the conflicts of the 1990s will continue to haunt regional politics in the Western Balkans (WB) in 2022, especially at the interstate level. The feud over culpabilities, unresolved border disputes, political manipulation, the instrumentalisation of ethnicity, and the nationalist rhetoric will persist as the 'national' project of the right-wing ruling elites in most WB countries. Indeed, these elites use all this as a sort of tool to stoke popular support and to stay in power. The best example is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) which will continue to be in a push and pull stalemate between the Republika Srpska, Croatian and Bosnian entities and their external supporters, including Serbia, Croatia and Turkey. The electoral and constitutional process under discussion in the BiH in the coming year will be a good indicator of the country's future. Meanwhile, the recent developments with external meddling in Montenegro do not bode well for that country's stability, while the situation in Kosovo remains painful with unfinished business for both the Kosovan and Serbian sides, each with different objectives.

On the democratic front, corruption and authoritarian (covert or overt) actions, as well as the lack of rule of law, will continue in an environment where "elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance", as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have put it in *How Democracies Die*.¹ Indeed "this is how most democracies die today: slowly, in barely visible steps", they state.

The perversion of democratic values (resulting in nationalism, anti-immigration and anti-abortion stances, corruption, and an aversion to feminism and gender equality which are seen as an assault on family and traditional religious values whatever the denomination) will furthermore continue in 2022 through a seemingly politically correct right-wing 'democratic' rhetoric and the covert institutional subversion of democracy.

Most progressive and Social Democratic parties have been weakened from the outside and/or from within. They have limited space for political manoeuvring, and it remains unclear whether they will manage to survive in these conditions, let alone become stronger. The unfortunate, uneasy, and mistrusting relationship between civil society organisations

¹ Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2018) *How democracies die*, New York: Crown Publishing.

and progressive and Social Democratic parties will continue in 2022, while unholy, opportunistic opposition coalitions will remain problematic as they sacrifice principles and ideology for the sole goal of toppling the existing governments.

In Serbia, the opposition is a hodgepodge of ideologically diverse and opportunistic political parties. This does not bode well for a change in the political status quo in the country in the near future. Even if the government under President Aleksandar Vučić recoiled on itself or if an unforeseen event caused destabilisation, such a coalition of diverse opposition forces would be difficult and might turn dubious. Meanwhile young, uncompromised, bold and charismatic new leaders and leaderships may be on the horizon and need support.

Despite the Social Democrat-led coalition in North Macedonia remaining in government, it is to be expected that it will continue under an increasing threat from the resurgence of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party.²

Some trends, however, offer a glimpse of hope for 2022. Recent local elections in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia have brought progressive coalitions of Greens, independents, and Social Democrats to power in many municipalities. Civil society activists, who are either from left progressive parties or who have decided to run as independents, are gaining popularity among an electorate that is disenchanted with traditional political parties. Unfortunately, these new democratic coalitions currently have limited space to produce more meaningful and sustainable change. They are confronted with an ossified conservative political and institutional environment, as well as a cynical, rather passive electorate. In addition, they lack the political and financial capacity to break the stalemate.

Given that the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and ensuing inflation will be difficult to resolve in the short term, it can be expected that poverty levels, currently affecting roughly a quarter of the population in the WB region, will worsen. The good news is that the private sector has managed to remain quite resilient and regionally interconnected. Regional mobility of goods and people is indeed on the rise. However, as social measures and the care economy remain financially strapped and without the reforms they so urgently need, trends such as the shortage of labour and the chronic brain drain from the region, along with the downward demographic direction, will continue.

The slow pace of the EU accession process is alienating otherwise pro-European citizens in the WB region, who are caught between mixed messages from their own governments and the European Union, with its support to 'stabilocracy' – a legitimisation of corrupt leaders. The perception of citizens is that there is inadequate and irresolute political will on both sides – that of the regimes, and that of the EU. The EU's credibility is therefore at stake. The ensuing stalemate and lack of progress in EU integration increasingly opens up the space for China to engage economically in the region, and for Russian strategic political positioning.

More deliberate inclusion of the WB in the implementation of the European Green Deal could help the countries of the region leap faster into the future. Regional engagement in

2 Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

the discussions around the Conference on the Future of Europe could furthermore stimulate a substantive dialogue in WB countries on their own democratic perspectives.

Overall, in an unfavourable international environment, the political trends in the Western Balkans are likely to remain unstable in 2022. Indeed, the situation there is reminiscent of the 1990s pre-conflict environment. For both Europe and the region, complacency and inaction is therefore not an option.