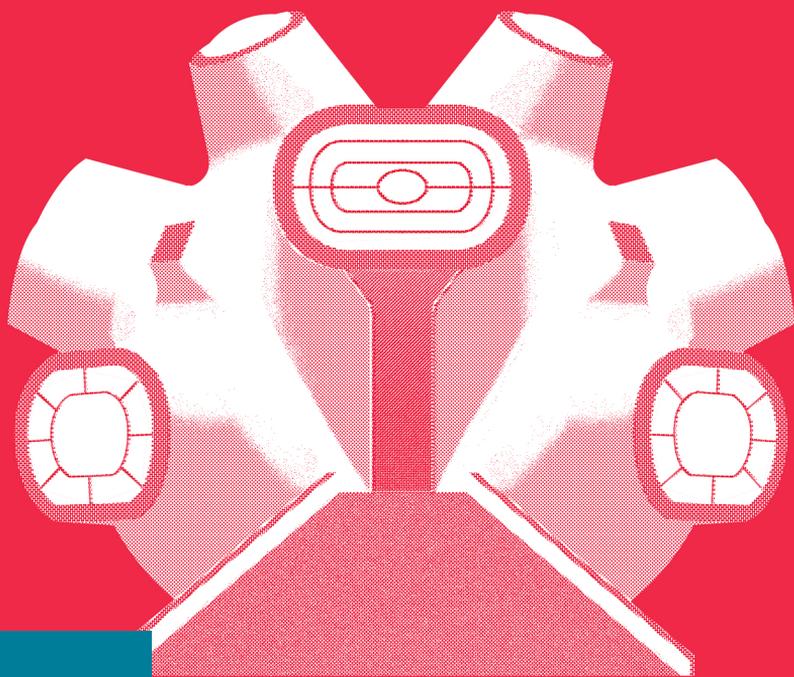


THE PANDEMIC IN THE BALKANS

GEOPOLITICS AND DEMOCRACY AT STAKE

edited by **Giorgio Fruscione**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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**GEOPOLITICS AND
DEMOCRACY AT STAKE**

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Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

THE PANDEMIC IN THE BALKANS:
GEOPOLITICS AND DEMOCRACY AT STAKE
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Introduction

One year after it landed in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has left a deep mark on the Western Balkans. For this region as well as many others, it has proven to be a mark of continuity and change. More often than not, it has accelerated previous trends. And, for the Western Balkans, the effects of the pandemic have been playing out both at an international and at a regional scale.

For external actors looking at the Western Balkans, the pandemic has exacerbated geopolitical dynamics that had been ongoing for decades – namely those involving the use of foreign assistance, be it official or unofficial aid, as a soft-power tool. External actors have changed their role and attitude towards the Balkan region, too. While the European Union has continued to be inconclusive, proceeding at a snail's pace with its carrot-and-stick approach, China has seized on the opportunity and expanded its footprint. What first started as “mask diplomacy” turned into “vaccine diplomacy”, with Serbia being the first European country to receive one of the vaccines produced by China's Sinopharm, and set to become a producer of the vaccine itself later this year. For its part, Russia continues to strive to bolster its traditional partnerships, although Beijing appears to be ready to exploit Moscow's economic weakness in assisting local allies. However, the pandemic has had deep consequences on domestic politics, too. The two keywords explaining local trends are continuity, on the one hand, and new hopes on the other. They both are on stage in the Balkans and are shaping the speed and direction of democratic transitions or consolidations, which remain far from complete.

These two interdependent dimensions of foreign interference and democratic retrenchment continue to plague the Balkan region, and have taken up renewed strength with the pandemic. On one side, the “old, new instabilities” – the title of last year’s ISPI Report on the region – are still there, and they are there to stay. On the other, new hopes have arisen, with some countries recording unexpected but much-welcomed progress.

In 2020 democracy, as in free (albeit not always fair) elections, has proven to be a double-edged sword for the region. In Montenegro, elections ushered in new beginnings when after three decades the coalition opposing President Milo Djukanovic managed to form a new government. But it consolidated illiberal trends, as in Serbia, where the national assembly is strikingly similar to the one-party system that was formally dismantled thirty years ago, with the SNS party holding 75% of total seats and the three-party governing coalition rising to 92% of seats. How democratic retrenchments can be dangerous during a pandemic is evident through an analysis of Serbian media, which last year shared uniform, often false information in order to preserve political power rather than to fight the spread of the virus. In a nutshell, “infodemics” at work.

However, if Balkan democratic systems continue to remain imperfect, this is also due to geopolitical dynamics. As the European Union fails to hold local governments accountable for backslides on their way towards democracy (as it is failing to sanction rule-of-law infringements in EU member countries themselves), it is not surprising that Western Balkan countries cultivate multidimensional relationships with authoritarian big powers, though formally remaining oriented towards EU accession. However, the loss of credibility toward the EU seems endemic, especially after a year that saw alternating green and red lights for further accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia (often due to vetoes from specific EU member states). With the EU’s credibility constantly at stake, the risk is that countries in the region will slowly but progressively disengage from it. This, in turn, would be a failure of the enlargement process of a self-declared “geopolitical Commission”.

In the first chapter of this Report, Nikolaos Tzifakis and Tena Prelec strive to put into perspective Covid-related health assistance received by Western Balkans countries, and account for the distorted perception of externally provided aid by people in recipient countries. They focus on bilateral health diplomacy towards the region, and comparatively examine the efforts of China and Russia to provide relief during the pandemic. They discuss those players' motives and methods of operation, and assess whether the pandemic has brought about a geopolitical change or simply a continuation of previous trends. The angle of discussion is then flipped to an 'inside-out' perspective, assessing the ways in which domestic players amplify geopolitical topics and create new, self-serving narratives through state-led propaganda. The analysis focuses on Serbia, the main regional recipient of Chinese and Russian health assistance, and is based on the reading of almost 380 Serbian tabloid articles on the vaccination campaign.

Giorgio Fruscione then turns the attention towards the "virus of authoritarianism" in Serbia, its genesis and its development during the pandemic. The choice to focus on this country is based on several reasons. First, autocratic tendencies in Serbia have been chipping away at the progress achieved in the post-Milosevic era. Secondly, despite this regression in democratisation, Serbia has long been considered by Western institutions as "a stability factor" and "a frontrunner" – together with Montenegro – in the EU integration of the Balkans, a consideration exploited by Serbian political actors themselves to increase their own political legitimacy, even as they moved their own country away from democracy. Thirdly, analysing Serbian slides on the path towards democracy helps us understand similar trends in its neighbours, especially Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, as countries towards which Belgrade nurtures different degrees of regional ambition. In other words, analysing today's Serbian political affairs is pivotal to better understanding the status of the rest of the Balkans, too.

In the third chapter, Jovana Marovic looks at the recent examples of government change in the region, primarily in Montenegro, and analyses the situation that preceded the 2020 election, with a special emphasis on media freedom and conditions for holding a free and fair vote. She highlights the shortcomings and irregularities that affected the elections and that helped elect the new parties to power, and identifies possible factors to help us understand what can lead to change in Balkan political systems.

Moving forward, Chiara Milan tackles the common concerns and challenges that the region is facing, such as the struggle for cleaner air, proper waste management and environmental protection. Environmental groups, citizens' initiatives and green-left forces are advocating for changes in these fields. While since 2020 the Parliaments of both Montenegro and Croatia include political parties that promote green policies, in the rest of the region it is still up to social movements, citizens' initiatives and NGOs to raise awareness on the topic by striving to influence the political agenda and showing that those topics are politically relevant. Notwithstanding its importance at the global level, the environmental agenda is not yet considered a priority by most regional institutions, and green policies in line with EU standards are almost absent throughout the Western Balkans. Green groups and parties are striving to put their claims forward, stressing how these are also in line with the EU's requests for alignment with EU standards in view of a future integration.

The fifth chapter, by Gentiola Madhi, seeks to compare and contrast last year's major developments in Albania and North Macedonia, in terms of the two countries' Europeanisation and democratisation processes. It starts with a short overview of the politicisation of enlargement policy by certain member states, followed by the geopolitical implications of the EU's ambiguous behaviour in the region. In the case of Albania, France and the Netherlands' opposition to its accession process have led to a deceleration in the speed of EU-sanctioned reforms and paved

the way for democratic backsliding. Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, the unilateral veto of Bulgaria in late 2020 could undermine the reform efforts and positive results achieved since 2017. As EU continues to send mixed signals and repeatedly delay accession talks, the chances that Western Balkan countries will look elsewhere are growing.

Finally, we decided to dedicate a special section, which closes this Report, to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Former Italian ambassador to Kosovo, Michael L. Giffoni, shares his point of view on the thorniest and most long-standing issue for the Western Balkans, and how this reminds him of a dialogue of the deaf (Kosovo and Serbia), led by the blind (the EU). Ten years after the launch of the mediation effort between Kosovo and Serbia by the EU, Brussels appears to be inconclusive. As efforts continued to lead nowhere, in 2020 the United States came back to the region “with a bang”, in what looks like an attempt to take over the role of lead negotiator/mediator from the EU.

In conclusions, a characteristic mixture of geopolitics and domestic politics continue to keep the Western Balkans region in a risky stalemate. Will national developments bring fresh air to the fledgling and weak democratic systems of the region? And how could the ongoing geopolitical shifts reshape relations among Balkan countries and towards big powers? Hard to say. But the feeling is that some actors – the EU included – are taking a gamble in the Balkans, and that some regional governments could soon be calling their bluff.

Paolo Magri
Executive Vice President, ISPI

1. From Mask to Vaccine Diplomacy: Geopolitical Competition in the Western Balkans

Nikolaos Tzifakis, Tena Prelec

The containment of the pandemic and the management of its consequences have brought health diplomacy into the spotlight. At the multilateral level, we observe efforts of different actors ranging from states and international organisations to philanthropic foundations and private corporations to contribute to global health governance. The case of the development, approval, and distribution of vaccines against Covid-19 demonstrates how different actors have endeavoured, in coordination or in competition, to protect people from the pandemic. At the bilateral level, health diplomacy refers to donations of assistance to specific countries that have been hard hit by the pandemic.¹ Alike traditional development assistance, healthcare and medical aid is an instrument of soft power that is not necessarily employed to help those in greater need. Instead, it is used to consolidate and expand influence over third countries.²

In the Western Balkans, the EU has been the single largest health-assistance donor during the pandemic. Its assistance,

¹ T.M. Fazal, “Health diplomacy in pandemical times”, *International Organization*, vol. 74 (Supplement), 2020, pp. 1-20.

² P. Gauttam, B. Singh, and J. Kaur, “COVID-19 and Chinese Global Health Diplomacy: Geopolitical Opportunity for China’s Hegemony?”, *Millennial Asia*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2020, pp. 319-322.

which has exceeded €3.3 billion, is very comprehensive and has encompassed financial support for the region's national health systems and to mitigate the pandemic's socioeconomic impact (€467 million), macro-financial assistance (€750 million), support for the economic recovery of small and medium and innovative enterprises (€455 million), and a credit line for public investments and private businesses from the European Investment Bank (€1.7 billion). Crucially, out of these funds, €38 million was provided as immediate assistance for the purchase of medical supplies, whereas €70 million has been given for the procurement of EU-approved vaccines.³ According to a study, EU pandemic-related financial assistance (grants and loans) to the Western Balkans amounts to around 60% of the entire funding for the public sector in the region, with the International Monetary Fund (30%) and the World Bank (10%) providing the rest of external financial aid.⁴

Nevertheless, the general impression in the Western Balkans is that the EU has reluctantly given too little and too late. While the EU has repeatedly stated that “the Western Balkans are part of Europe”,⁵ several EU actions (e.g. initial decision on authorisation for the export of medical supplies and the entire management of procurement and distribution of vaccines) demonstrated that Brussels has instinctively considered the region to fall outside of its area of main concern. EU assistance has arrived in response to appeals from Western Balkan leaders and following Chinese and Russian moves to win the “battle of narratives”⁶ in the region. Not surprisingly, according to a public opinion survey conducted in Serbia in September/October

³ European Commission, “Reinforced EU support to the Western Balkans in tackling coronavirus crisis and in post-pandemic recovery”, February 2021.

⁴ M.G. Marrano, *Not alone: Financial support of the Western Balkans*, Unicredit, Macro Research, EEMEA Country Note, 20 January 2021.

⁵ See, for instance, European Commission, “State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary”, 16 September 2020.

⁶ J. Borrell, *The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating*, EEAS, 23 March 2020.

2020, only half of the respondents believed that the EU helped their country during the pandemic, whereas eight and seven out of ten Serb people respectively appreciated positively the corresponding Chinese and Russian health assistance.⁷

This chapter strives to put into proportion health assistance for the Western Balkans as well as account for the distorted perception of externally provided aid by people in recipient countries. The study proceeds as follows. The next section adopts an “outside-in” perspective, focusing on bilateral health diplomacy towards the Western Balkans and comparatively examining the efforts of China and Russia to provide relief during the pandemic. It discusses those actors’ motives and methods of operation and assesses whether the pandemic has brought about a geopolitical change in the region. The angle of discussion is then flipped to an ‘inside-out’ perspective, assessing the ways in which domestic actors amplify geopolitical topics and create new, self-serving narratives. The analysis focuses on Serbia (i.e. the main recipient in the region of Chinese and Russian health assistance) and it is aided by a close reading of almost 380 Serbian tabloid articles on “vaccination”, published between 24 December 2020 and the end of February 2021. In the conclusion, the two angles of analysis are discussed and compared.

China and Russia

Motives

The pandemic has not altered China’s foreign policy priorities. Beijing has continued to undertake efforts to improve its soft power and linkages with third countries all over the world in order to promote its global geo-economic interests. While China has been strongly criticised for the outbreak of the

⁷ J. Gledić, R.Q. Turcsányi, M. Šimalčík, K. Kironská, and R. Sedláková, *Serbian public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: An unyielding alliance?*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, p. 12.

pandemic and its mismanagement during the first critical period, Beijing sought to improve its internationally tarnished image once it contained the spread of Covid-19 domestically. Crucially, it also perceived the pandemic as an opportunity to portray itself as a very efficient country in health management as well as an altruistic global leader in humanitarian assistance. To the extent that the pandemic exposed the deficiencies in the supply chain of medical goods, Beijing also found a chance to advance its “health silk road” initiative that was originally launched in 2017. In this way, it strove to increase support for the overarching ‘Belt and Road initiative’ that has been widely criticised.

In the Western Balkans, China has been financing projects related to its “Belt and Road Initiative” which would improve internal transport links and facilitate the access of Chinese-manufactured products to Europe. It has also sought to exploit business and investment opportunities and it has been using the Western Balkans as a testing ground or launch pad for economic activities that could eventually expand to reach the EU Single Market. In this light, China’s health diplomacy has targeted all Western Balkan countries except Kosovo, whose independence Beijing has not recognised. Serbia has been the focal point of China’s initiatives to provide medical assistance in the region owing, in part, to its size and strategic location and, in part, to the network of relations the two countries have developed. Indeed, Chinese-Serbian business progressed during the pandemic with, among others, Serbia’s acquisition of Chinese CH-92A military drones,⁸ the purchase of the Chinese FK-3 air-defence missile system,⁹ and Huawei opening an Innovations and Development Centre in Belgrade.¹⁰

⁸ V. Vuksanovic, *Chinese Drones in Serbian Skies*, RUSI Commentary, RUSI, 5 January 2021.

⁹ A. Vasovic, “Serbian purchase of missile defence system shows ties deepening with China”, *Reuters*, 3 August 2020.

¹⁰ S. Dragojlo, “China’s Huawei Opens Tech Centre, Consolidating Presence in Serbia”, *Balkan Insight*, 15 September 2020.

Similarly, Russia has viewed the pandemic as another playing field on which it can advance its predefined political priorities. Contrary to China, its health diplomacy concentrated only on a few countries considered crucial for its foreign policy. These included both Western countries (i.e. the United States and Italy) from which it expected support for its demand that Ukraine-related economic sanctions be lifted,¹¹ and its allies and friends all over the world – e.g. former Soviet Republics, China (at the beginning of the pandemic), Venezuela, Iran, North Korea and Mongolia¹² – with which it wanted to affirm its solidarity. In the latter case, Moscow’s policy has been informed both by its rivalry and competition for influence with the West as well as by its drive to find supporters for its proposal for a UN General Assembly Resolution that would, among other things, call for a suspension of sanctions for humanitarian reasons.

In the Western Balkans, Russia followed the pattern of rewarding friends and ignoring the needs of all other countries. Moscow sent assistance to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), while it disregarded the problems (e.g. evacuation of citizens) of the two Western Balkan countries that have recently joined NATO, namely, Montenegro and North Macedonia.¹³ Moreover, it exploited any given opportunity to increase popular dissatisfaction with the West. For instance, when the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, expressed frustration with the EU that it had not included the Western Balkans in its vaccination rollout programme, the Russian Embassy in Albania rushed to point out that Moscow was ready to send doses of its Sputnik V vaccine if Albania placed an order.¹⁴

¹¹ A. Rącz, “The Political Motives Behind Russia’s Coronavirus Aid”, *Berlin Policy Journal*, 3 June 2020.

¹² “Where Has Russia Sent Coronavirus Aid Around the World?”, *The Moscow Times*, 1 April 2020.

¹³ M. Samorukov, “Ventilator Diplomacy in the Balkans”, in D. Trenin et al., *Steady State: Russian Foreign Policy After Coronavirus*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 8 July 2020.

¹⁴ “Russia Urges Albania to Purchase Its Vaccine following Rama’s Criticism of the EU”, *Exit News*, 28 December 2020.

For various reasons, China and Russia have been well-placed to achieve their goals. First, by the time the pandemic flared up in Europe and the United States, it had been contained in China and it appeared (at least according to official accounts) to be relatively under control in Russia. As a result, while Western powers were absorbed with the management of the crisis in their own territories, China and Russia were able to respond to international calls for help from third countries. Moreover, when the pandemic erupted, 43% of global imports of personal protective equipment and 63% of global imports of mouth-nose protection equipment originated in China.¹⁵ Hence, China ranked first among the few countries in the world which could provide medical supplies globally. In addition, when the first Western-manufactured vaccines came out, developed countries rushed to procure the bulk of doses that would be produced in early 2021. Hence, the Chinese and Russian vaccines have been (at the time of the study's writing) the only vaccines on offer in the market to inoculate people in the rest of the world. Very importantly, contrary to the EU and the United States, China and Russia have run very aggressive public diplomacy campaigns throughout the entire researched period that, on the one hand, promoted their health management and vaccine efficiency and inflated the importance of their external acts of generosity and, on the other, denigrated the West and its corresponding efforts to contain the pandemic, manufacture safe and efficient vaccines, and offer health assistance abroad.¹⁶

¹⁵ C.P. Brown, *COVID-19: China's exports of medical supplies provide a ray of hope*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 26 March 2020.

¹⁶ C. Paun and S. Luthi, "What China's vax trolling adds up to", *Politico*, 28 January 2021; M.R. Gordon and D. Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say", *Wall Street Journal*, 7 March 2021; R. Weitz, "Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign During COVID-19", *ICDS Diplomatia*, 13 November 2020; S. L. Vériter, C. Bjola, and J. A. Koops, "Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the European Union", *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2020, pp. 569-582.

Modus operandi

Chinese and Russian diplomatic health initiatives have been adjusting to the changing context of the pandemic. During the first phase of global Covid-19 outbreak (March to May 2020), their assistance consisted mostly of medical supplies and the deployment of medical staff (so-called mask diplomacy). Since the beginning of 2021, the Chinese and Russian diplomatic health efforts have concentrated on vaccine supplies (so-called vaccine diplomacy).

During the mask diplomacy period, the availability and extent of Chinese health assistance (consisting mainly of masks, test kits, protective clothing and ventilators) mirrored the intensity of relations and links between Beijing and the aid recipient countries. Having said that, we should underscore the opacity of the volume and value of Chinese aid. Many of Beijing's deliveries of medical supplies were indeed procurements or purchases, instead of donations. Furthermore, while much aid has been provided by Chinese state authorities, a significant portion of Chinese assistance has been provided by private corporations (e.g. Huawei, Xiaomi and JD.com) and foundations linked to corporations such as the Alibaba Foundation, and the Jack Ma Foundation.¹⁷ To the extent that Chinese private corporations are not free from control by the State and the Communist Party, the public-private distinction in Chinese health diplomacy might be of limited relevance. Indeed, in terms of visibility and publicity, Chinese Embassies in aid recipient countries have treated donations from public and private parties indifferently.¹⁸ Beyond its opacity, Chinese aid has occasionally also been criticised for consisting of poor quality supplies.

Serbia has been the recipient of the bulk of Chinese health assistance to the Western Balkans. Belgrade received more than

¹⁷ E. Soula et al., *Masks Off: Chinese Coronavirus Assistance in Europe*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy Paper, no. 9, July 2020, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

15 million personal masks and equipment to manufacture more masks, medical equipment for two laboratories to carry out Covid-19 tests, testing kits and a team of medical experts who offered advice to the authorities on pandemic containment.¹⁹ In July, China made a further donation of medical equipment (e.g. 40 ventilators, 20 monitors for vital signs etc.) to the Serbian Ministry of Defence for its own health system worth €755,000.²⁰ The rest of the Western Balkan countries received much smaller volumes of aid. Albania and Montenegro received thousands of testing kits, protective clothing, masks, goggles and gloves.²¹ Similar aid arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also included six ventilators. As for North Macedonia, beyond some medical supplies consisting of thousands of masks, gloves and protective clothes, it received a donation of €30,000 in cash from the Chinese Embassy in Skopje.²² The Alibaba Group contributed to the above-mentioned donations of medical supplies to Serbia²³ and Montenegro and published a handbook in Serbian with information on the prevention and treatment of Covid-19 that was based on experience gathered in Chinese hospitals.²⁴

With respect to Russia, its health assistance was usually sent following a phone conversation between Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and his counterpart head of state/government in the recipient country. Interestingly, the most publicised cases

¹⁹ S. Blockmans et al., *Southeast Europe - COVID-19 Bulletin: International chessboard*, CEPS, 3DCFTAs Project, no. 3, 8 July 2020, pp. 18-19; S. Walker, “Coronavirus diplomacy: how Russia, China and EU vie to win over Serbia”, *The Guardian*, 13 April 2020.

²⁰ “Serbian army receives China donation for fighting COVID-19”, *Xinhua*, 17 July 2020.

²¹ S. Blockmans et al. (2020), pp. 7 and 13.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 16.

²³ Ž. Milošević, “Alibaba Foundation and Jack Ma Foundation send donation of protective face masks and other medical supplies to Serbia to help tackle the COVID-19 health emergency”, *Diplomacy & Commerce*, 16 April 2020.

²⁴ “Factsheet: Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation’s Global Donations and Efforts to Combat Covid-19”, *Alizila*, 15 April 2020.

of Russian medical aid (e.g. to Italy and Serbia) were dispatched by its Ministry of Defence (not the Ministry of Health) and contained military medical experts in countering biological, chemical and nuclear threats, equipped with microbiological disinfection equipment.²⁵ Moscow argued this meant it could contribute to the decontamination of facilities, a task that did not require the integration of its medical experts in the recipient country's health system.²⁶ However, critics voiced the concern that Russian military missions could include experts in intelligence gathering as well. Furthermore, in some cases Russian donations were mostly inadequate for the struggle against the pandemic. For instance, the medical supplies to the United States, among others, contained gas masks and gloves for house cleaning.²⁷

Russian health diplomacy in the Western Balkans concentrated on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In early April 2020, Serbia received 87 military medics and experts in microbiological disinfection as well as 11 plane-loads of medical supplies.²⁸ The Russian team decontaminated 160 facilities in 35 Serbian cities during the six weeks of its deployment.²⁹ Reportedly, the local authorities were not informed about the Russian team's action plan or projected duration of stay.³⁰ Moscow's health assistance also included a donation of medical supplies (e.g. a few thousand masks and protective clothing, and hundreds of goggles etc.) from the Serbian-Russian humanitarian centre in Niš,³¹ while Belgrade also received small private donations from subsidiaries or affiliates of Russian

²⁵ E. Braw, "Beware of Bad Samaritans", *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2020.

²⁶ A. Rácz (2020).

²⁷ E. Braw (2020); *Ibid.*

²⁸ "Serbia: Russian aid arrives to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic", *IBNA*, 3 April 2020.

²⁹ V. Vuksanovic, *From Russia with Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications*, LSE Ideas, Strategic Update, June 2020, p. 4.

³⁰ M. Samorukov (2020).

³¹ "Serbian-Russian humanitarian centre donates equipment to Interior Ministry", The Government of the Republic of Serbia, Press Release, 24 April 2020.

corporations (i.e. YugoRosGaz, Sberbank and NIS).³² The Russian Ministry of Defence also sent similar assistance, with a team of doctors and virologists and limited medical supplies to Republika Srpska (the Bosnian Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina). In the latter case, the Russian team stayed two weeks and offered advice on pandemic management in addition to decontaminating facilities.³³ However, the Russian assistance to just one part of Bosnia and Herzegovina generated much controversy. At the invitation of Dragan Covic, leader of HDZ (the largest Bosnian Croat party) and Speaker at that time of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia sent another military medical team in May to disinfect the University Clinical Hospital of Mostar. This time though the assistance was not delivered as the country's state authorities claimed it fell within the jurisdiction of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina to approve the deployment of a foreign mission with military staff carrying military equipment.³⁴

Although Chinese President Xi Jinping proclaimed in May that the Chinese-manufactured vaccine would be a “global public good”,³⁵ most of Chinese vaccine diplomacy concerns sales (not donations). While China announced, on the one hand, that it would give 10 million doses to the WHO's COVAX initiative to allow the entire world equitable access to vaccines³⁶ and, on the other, that it donated jabs to 14 developing countries (to which 38 more would be added),³⁷ these quantities have been a tiny fraction of its international supplies of vaccines (amounting to

³² M. Samorukov (2020).

³³ “Russian experts give recommendations to Bosnian Serb entity regarding Covid-19”, *N1*, 13 April 2020.

³⁴ “Russian Embassy: Humanitarian help a hostage of political contradictions”, *N1*, 5 May 2020.

³⁵ S. Wheaton, “Chinese vaccine would be ‘global public good,’ Xi says”, *Politico*, 18 May 2020.

³⁶ H. Wu, “China to donate 10M coronavirus vaccine doses to developing nations”, *The Associated Press*, 3 February 2021.

³⁷ “China provides COVID-19 vaccines to 14 developing countries and will aid 38 more: Chinese FM”, *Global Times*, 1 February 2021.

more than 424 million doses as of mid-February).³⁸ Russia has similarly pursued its vaccine diplomacy as a quest for markets for its Sputnik V. Howbeit the Chinese and Russian vaccines were released as tradable commodities that were additionally not accompanied by sufficient scientific (peer-reviewed) data on their safety and efficiency, their mere availability to order has been highly appreciated by many countries. These vaccines have provided an imminent solution at a time at which any delay to inoculate people has translated into thousands of losses of human lives and a devastating cost for national economies. Chinese health diplomacy also included loans to countries which were interested in the procurement of vaccines but faced economic difficulty, as well as investments for the construction of production facilities in Brazil, Morocco and Indonesia, i.e. countries whose populations participated in vaccine trials.³⁹ The private sector is part of this effort with the Alibaba Group building warehouses in Dubai and Ethiopia, from where vaccines would be distributed in Africa and the Middle East.⁴⁰ Likewise, Russia signed agreements with 15 manufacturers in 10 countries (e.g. in India, China, South Korea and Iran) to reach production capacity for the inoculation of 700 million people.⁴¹

Serbia was the first European country to trust the Chinese-manufactured “Sinopharm” vaccine and received 1.5 million jabs by mid-February 2021.⁴² In parallel, Belgrade placed its confidence in the Sputnik V vaccine. Not only did Belgrade order tens of thousands of doses of Sputnik V but it also proposed to Moscow that a vaccine production facility be established in Serbia. In March 2021, the Serbian government

³⁸ M. Safi in Beirut and M. Pantovic, “Vaccine diplomacy: West falling behind in race for influence”, *The Guardian*, 19 February 2021.

³⁹ H. Roxburgh and P. Weerasekara, “China’s ‘vaccine diplomacy’: A global charm offensive”, *AFP*, 10 December 2020.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ H. Foy and M. Seddon, “Russia’s Covid vaccine faces global production hurdles”, *Financial Times*, 17 February 2020.

⁴² R. Standish, “China’s Strategic Vaccine Diplomacy Gains a Foothold in the Balkans”, *RFE/RL*, 16 February 2020.

unveiled plans to produce China's Sinopharm vaccine in Serbia, with the help of the United Arab Emirates.⁴³ Frustrated with the delays in the procurement of vaccines via the COVAX mechanism, and seeing Serbia emerge as the first European country for percentage of inoculated people, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia decided to follow suit and place orders to get the Sinopharm and Sputnik V vaccines too.⁴⁴ In turn, China and Russia endorsed the Western Balkan states opting for their vaccines with rather symbolic gestures. China made a modest donation of 30,000 vaccines to Montenegro⁴⁵ and Sinopharm gave some medical supplies to the Sveti Apostol Luka Hospital in Doboj, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁶ As for Russia, it approved Serbia's request to organise a vaccine production facility at the "Torlak Institute" in Belgrade (whose limited capacity would suffice to meet the host country's domestic needs).⁴⁷

To sum up, China and Russia have both moved quickly to offer health assistance to the region, placing particular emphasis on giving support to Serbia. Although Beijing and Moscow delivered moderate quantities of medical supplies amounting to little more than symbolical gestures, they received plenty of credit: in part, due to their efficient public diplomacy policies and, in part, due to the way certain regional leaderships (predominantly, Aleksandar Vucic and Milorad Dodik) and their supportive media reported or positioned themselves in relation to external health assistance. The next section focuses

⁴³ S. Dragojlo, "Serbia Unveils Plan to Produce Chinese Vaccine Jointly with UAE", *BalkanInsight*, 12 March 2021.

⁴⁴ V. Hopkins, "Balkan nations turn to China and Russia for jabs", *Financial Times*, 2 February 2020; N. Stamouli, "Western Balkans goes east for coronavirus vaccines", *Politico*, 9 February 2020.

⁴⁵ "China to donate 30,000 coronavirus vaccine doses to Montenegro", *Xinhua*, 19 February 2021.

⁴⁶ "China's Sinopharm donates anti-epidemic supplies to BiH hospital", *Xinhua*, 23 January 2021.

⁴⁷ "Russia Gives Serbia Green Light to Manufacture Sputnik V Vaccine", *AFP*, 12 February 2021; H. Foy and M. Seddon (2020).

on Serbia and illustrates how the Serbian authorities and its friendly media contributed to distorting perceptions on the pandemic and its management with external aid.

Role of Domestic Political Elites and Regime-Friendly Media

It is increasingly recognised that the influence of external actors in the Balkans is driven more by *demand-side*, rather than by *supply-side*, factors.⁴⁸ In other words, the action of foreign powers in the region cannot be properly understood without analysing the crucial role played by domestic actors.⁴⁹ Far from being mere pawns on a geopolitical chessboard, domestic elites, political parties and elite-controlled media act as filters, distorters or amplifiers of the strategies of external actors, two of which (China and Russia) were examined in the previous section.

The pandemic was no exception. A crisis of such magnitude is, notoriously, a critical juncture – one that can set countries on a significantly different course in many respects (economy, health systems, democracy and respect for the environment, to name a few), but also one that can make or break the fortunes of political leaders.⁵⁰ Western Balkan politicians took note. What better moment to make use of a geopolitical narrative of “friends from abroad coming to the rescue”⁵¹ than the (literal)

⁴⁸ A. Maliqi et al., *Transition to What? Western Balkan democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium*, S'bunker / National Endowment for Democracy, November 2020.

⁴⁹ D. Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in South East Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017; F. Bieber and N. Tzifakis, *The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), June 2019.

⁵⁰ F. Bieber et al., *The Western Balkans in Time of the Global Pandemic*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), April 2020.

⁵¹ T. Prelec, ‘Our brothers’, ‘our saviours’: *The importance of Chinese investment for the Serbian government's narrative of economic rebound*, Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Analytical Study, Policy Paper, Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), October 2020; G. Madhi, “Our brother Erdogan” – *From official to personal relations of political*

salvation of the country's citizenry?

Some political leaders, however, either did not want or were not in a position to capitalise on these developments. In Montenegro, a change of power in August 2020, followed by a lengthy period being required to form the government, made a consistent approach towards the crisis a challenge. Tumultuous political events in Kosovo, which saw four different governments in 2020 and early elections in February 2021, presented even bigger obstacles. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fragmented political scenario was, as ever, too big a hurdle for the country to adopt a unitary strategy. Overreliance on the EU proved to be a disadvantage in the vaccine race. BiH's Federation, Kosovo (except Serb-majority Northern Kosovo), Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia all fully relied on the vaccine procurement promised by the EU for accession countries – ending up with no vaccinated individuals whatsoever by February 2021.

It is in Serbia that the potential to use a carefully crafted “multi-stools” policy in foreign affairs loomed the largest. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's positioning as a great friend of China during the coronavirus crisis is, by now, well-known.⁵² But the Serbian leadership was also uniquely placed to leverage its good standing with Russia, as well as the ever-proclaimed intent to join the EU.

The Serbian leadership has been very skilled at using this position to its advantage: it started its vaccination campaign early, on 24 December 2020, and, by February 2021, it had obtained a large quantity of vaccines from both Western (AstraZeneca; Pfizer/BioNTech) and Eastern (Russia's Sputnik V and China's Sinopharm) producers. By doing so, it became one of the few countries in the world where citizens could choose from a pool of four different vaccines. At the beginning of March 2021, Serbia was the second country in Europe (after

leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President, Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), 5 February 2021.

⁵² E. Soula (2020); M. Ruge and J. Oertel, *Serbia's coronavirus diplomacy unmasked*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 26 March 2020.

the UK) for vaccinations per capita, having fully vaccinated 8.6% of its population (against the 2.9% of both Belgium and Germany, and 0% of Austria, for instance).⁵³ There is no doubt, therefore, that the early vaccination campaign in Serbia has been successful: while the other countries in the region struggled, Belgrade was able to get access to large quantities and even act as a regional Maecenas, donating vaccines initially to Serb-majority areas in Bosnia (Republika Srpska) and in Northern Kosovo, but later also to the BiH's Federation, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

This "victory" has been greatly highlighted by the political leadership, and amplified hugely by the media friendly to it. While there have been repeated statements by Serbian politicians asserting that the vaccination campaign was not of a political nature and that it only concerned the health of the citizens,⁵⁴ our analysis shows that such statements were (perhaps purposefully) misleading. Serbia's vaccination campaign had a clear *political*, and indeed *geopolitical*, purpose. This does not, of course, discount the benefit for the immunisation of citizens – which is undoubted. At the same time, however, Serbia's geopolitical positioning through the vaccination campaign has turned it from a passive to an active geopolitical actor in the region, by ostensibly helping its neighbours; all the while deflecting and obscuring insistent accusations that the pandemic had hit Serbia much harder than the official figures showed.⁵⁵

⁵³ C. Harris, "COVID-19 vaccine rollout: How do countries in Europe compare?", *Euronews*, 5 March 2021.

⁵⁴ For instance, as repeated by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić in interviews for the CNN and the BBC in February 2021.

⁵⁵ N. Jovanović, "Serbia under-reported Covid19 deaths and infections, data shows", *BalkanInsight*, 22 June 2020.

Media coverage analysis

Numerous international watchdogs have attested to the close grip of the Serbian government on the media – a trend that has worsened throughout the period Aleksandar Vucic has been in power.⁵⁶ Among regime-friendly outlets, particular prominence is enjoyed by a host of private TV stations and daily tabloids. The latter have been found, in academic literature, to be especially prone to misuse for political ends, serving as conduits for the creation of specific negative or positive narratives that suit the ruling party's purposes.⁵⁷ In particular, the tabloid *Informer* was shown to paint a very positive image of the Serbian government and of President Vucic in particular,⁵⁸ while also not shying away from twisting facts or propagating outright falsehoods.⁵⁹

These considerations have underpinned the design of our research. To understand the narratives promoted by the Serbian leadership during the vaccination campaign, we have opted for a close analysis of articles tagged as “vaccination” (“*vakcinacija*”) by *Informer* from the first day of Serbia's Covid-19 vaccination campaign and throughout the first two months of 2021. In total, our sample has included 384 articles from 24 December 2020 until 28 February 2021.

Our analysis builds on the findings of Kleut and Sinkovic, who researched the early coverage of the pandemic by Serbian tabloids in spring 2020, finding that the framing of the

⁵⁶ M. Damjanović, “Serbia: Country Report 2020”, *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House, April 2020.

⁵⁷ I. Milić, “Politička upotreba tabloida u Srbiji” (“Political use of tabloids in Serbia”), in *Godišnjak fakulteta za kulturu i medije: komunikacije, mediji, kultura* (*Yearbook of the Faculty of Culture and Media: Communications, Media, Culture*), vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 347-362.

⁵⁸ S. Mladenov Jovanović, ““You're Simply the Best”: Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies Alo! and Informer”, *Journal of Media Research*, vol. 11, no. 31, 2018, pp. 22-42.

⁵⁹ S. Mladenov Jovanović, “Headlines as Fake News: Discursive Deception in Serbia's Daily Informer (2012–2018)”, *Central and Eastern European Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2019.

“responsibility” of the contagion was “used to present citizens as villains who undermine successful state measures, while China and Russia are portrayed as the heroes in the fight against the virus”.⁶⁰ In the later stage of the pandemic that is the object of our analysis, corresponding to the vaccination period, it is noticeable that the portrayal of the citizens as villains is dropped (making space to positively encourage them to get vaccinated), while the framing of Serbia and its government as victorious in the vaccine race is highlighted to a very large extent.

Serbia’s triumphalism is indeed, by far, the most covered theme. 238 articles – i.e. almost half of the total sample – boasted of *Serbia’s vaccination success*. Headlines included: “SERBIA, BE PROUD! We are the first in Europe in terms of the number of people vaccinated!” (30/01/2020), “SERBIA IS IN FRONT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS!” (23/02/2021); “GREAT SUCCESS OF OUR COUNTRY!”, “SERBIA IS THE FIRST IN THE REGION FOR THE NUMBER OF VACCINATIONS”, etc. A sub-theme of these articles is also the *glorification of President Vucic*, addressed with epithets such as “HERO OF VACCINATION” (16/02/2021) in 14 instances. As is noticeable from these examples, the topic of Serbia’s victory is firmly placed within a European and regional context, contrasting Belgrade’s result with what is characterised as the very poor performance of the EU and the other Western Balkan countries.

Articles *denigrating other (EU) countries* for their mishandling of vaccinations, either openly (even with ‘ad hominem’ attacks) or more subtly, are frequent. Of the 55 instances observed, 24 target the European Union itself. Of the EU countries, a particular target of vilification is Croatia, which is the topic of 16 articles. Most headlines are very direct, such as: “EUROPE proved to be a ‘handful of misery!’” (10/02/2021); “THE

⁶⁰ J. Kleut and R. Šinković, “‘Is it possible that people are so irresponsible?’: Tabloid news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia”, *Sociologija*, no. 62, 2020, pp. 503-523.

EUROPEAN UNION HAS A BIG PROBLEM! Because of the vaccine, many are turning their backs on them, and are approaching China and Russia!” (29/01/2021). In contrast to the bad image painted of the EU, the neutral or *friendly attitude towards Russia* (15 instances⁶¹) and *China* (17 articles) is clear. However, while the attitude towards the two Eastern allies that have helped Serbia stock up on vaccines is friendly, at this stage of the pandemic Russia and China are no longer “the heroes of the pandemic” as was noted by Kleut and Sinkovic in their analysis of the earlier period of the Covid-19 crisis.⁶² The mantle of the hero had, by this stage, been assumed by the Serbian government and by President Vucic in particular.

The way European countries are described and addressed is, however, multi-layered. While the EU as a whole is always painted in a bad light, certain European countries and leaders receive better treatment. It should be no surprise that the UK and – to a lesser degree – Scandinavian countries, Turkey and Hungary are discussed in a mostly positive light, as they are all either perceived to be sitting outside of the EU (especially Brexit England), or are undermining it from within (Hungary). It is interesting that, among EU leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron is the one receiving the most favourable treatment from *Informer*. The Biden administration in the U.S., on the other hand, is painted in a decidedly bad light (calling vaccination in the U.S. a “dark failure”, 21/01/2021). It is clear that the EU and multilateralism are not favoured by the editorial policy of the government-friendly tabloid, while the increasingly close bilateral relationship with Macron’s enlargement-sceptic France is seen with an eye of regard.

⁶¹ It is interesting to note that the brief bump in the relations with Russia, in summer 2020, has been overcome by this stage, with Serbia reverting to a position of keeping friendly relations with all allies. See: V. Vuksanović, “Belgrade’s New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe”, *War on the Rocks*, August 2020.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Any opportunity is taken to highlight Serbia's success through the eyes of foreign media. Headlines include: "SERBIA HAS VACCINES, UNLIKE US! The main news on Germany's Der Spiegel (30/01)", "FRENCH MEDIA EXCITED WITH THE SERBIAN IMMUNISATION PROGRAMME: SERBIA HAS THE BEST STRATEGY IN EUROPE, THE WORLD CAN LOOK AT THEM!", "WE JUST DID OUR JOB!" German "Bild" fascinated by President Vucic", etc. There are, in total, 37 Informer articles on vaccination in this two-month period that are dedicated to *amplifying positive news about Serbia coming from abroad*. Particular care is taken to highlight that even Serbia's "enemies" (e.g. Germany) are in awe of Serbia's handling of the situation.

Much of the media coverage highlights Serbia's generosity at home (showcasing the decision to give priority to specific categories, such as the elderly, health workers, taxi drivers) as well as its *generosity in the region*. Serbia's help to its neighbours in donating vaccines to other Western Balkan countries is a theme present in about 20 of the articles analysed. In the later phase of the vaccination campaign, the presentation of Serbia as a generous benefactor saving the whole region by donating vaccines becomes an increasingly prominent subject.

A final striking observation concerns the sheer amount of coverage dedicated to this topic. With an average of almost six articles per day and peaks of over a dozen articles per day in mid-late January, the frequency of coverage is impressive on any scale. While it is not surprising that vaccination was present in political discourse in this period, the extremely high number of articles on this topic should also be seen in connection with the willingness to redress what studies have found as reticence to vaccinate by considerable sections of the population in the Western Balkans.⁶³ Articles framed around the *importance of vaccination* were published in the earlier period of the campaign:

⁶³ F. Bieber et al., *The Suspicious Virus: Covid19 and Conspiracies in the Western Balkans*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), December 2020.

they appeared 111 times in the period 24 December-31 January, and 31 times in February (making up over one third of the total articles examined). It is furthermore relevant to note that a persistent theme picked up by our analysis is the coverage of *famous people receiving vaccines*: 28 articles were dedicated to this topic. Therefore, while tabloids have often been involved in spreading conspiracy theories in the Balkans, the coverage of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign was aimed at discrediting any doubts as to the efficacy of vaccines to make space for a 'triumphant' vaccination campaign. In this sense, it is likely to have had positive effects, encouraging Serbian citizens to take advantage of the vast offer present in their country.

Conclusion: A Geopolitical Castling

Although the EU has offered unmatched pandemic-related aid to the Western Balkans, many people in the region (especially in Serbia) believe that China and Russia have been the main donors of health assistance. There is indeed some frustration with the EU policies in the Western Balkans and a question emerges whether a geopolitical change is in the making in the region, marked by a reordering of the salience (or influence) of external actors.

Our study demonstrated that China and Russia have offered rather symbolic assistance to their allies and partners in the Western Balkans. They have both focused on Serbia, seeking to affirm their support and entrench their influence on it. Beijing and Moscow have used the pandemic as a new playing field for the advancement of long-established strategic interests. Deliveries of medical equipment and vaccines have represented new (additional) means at the service of previously defined policies. From this perspective, it seems continuity rather than policy change has prevailed in Chinese and Russian strategic thinking.

China and Russia have backed up their health-related assistance with dynamic public diplomacy campaigns aiming at getting the most out of them, especially in Serbia, where

their activities have profiled themselves most prominently over the course of the whole Covid-19 crisis. However, the success of these campaigns would not be that great if they were not endorsed (if not amplified) by President Vucic himself and his supportive media.

The analysis of the media coverage presented above gave a glimpse into the playbook of the Serbian political leadership during the pandemic, while highlighting the importance of external actors and geopolitical competition in the narrative pushed by regime-friendly media.

Although Serbian government officials have often stressed that their country's very active vaccination campaign has nothing to do with either politics or geopolitics, the analysis presented above showed that the topic is, indeed, exquisitely political, with geopolitical implications. During the second phase of the Covid-19 crisis, Serbia has used its geopolitical positioning (with allies in both East and West) to assert a more active geopolitical role in the vaccine race. It has made use of the help coming from its bigger "patrons", i.e. the vaccines manufactured by China and Russia as well as by Western countries, and set off to actively help its neighbours. In the presentation of this narrative, Serbia is trying to impose itself as the regional leader, while silencing the numerous critics.

The aim of such framing is, no doubt, to offset and redress heavy criticism that the government had mismanaged the Covid-19 crisis and had kept citizens in the dark about the true impact of the pandemic on the population. In June 2020, the investigative outlet BIRN revealed that Serbia had heavily under-reported Covid-19 infections and deaths⁶⁴ – which was one of the reasons that catalysed the anti-government protests after heavily contested elections that same month. The doubts over the truthfulness of Serbia's official coronavirus figures were corroborated by preliminary academic studies in spring 2021:

⁶⁴ N. Jovanović, "Serbia under-reported Covid19 deaths and infections, data shows", *BalkanInsight*, 22 June 2020.

two independent expert analyses have contrasted Serbia's figures to those published by other countries, and have come to the conclusion that the anomaly of Serbia's reporting is so jarring that the data cannot be trusted.⁶⁵ It is therefore doubtful whether such a rosy picture of Serbia's victory over Covid-19 is indeed warranted. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that the expected domestic political gains have determined the position of Vucic and his friendly media towards external health assistance.

⁶⁵ "Suvakov: Brojevi u vezi pandemije u Srbiji su namesten?" ("Suvakov: the figures related to the pandemic in Serbia are doctored"), *Nova TV / Newsmax Adria*, 8 March 2021. The second study is by Darko Doneski, SISSA – International School for Advanced Studies, forthcoming.

2. The Virus of Authoritarianism: The Case of Serbia

Giorgio Fruscione

One of the most evident effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Balkans has been on local, already weak democratic systems. In particular, 2020 witnessed an acceleration of the drift towards authoritarianism in some countries of the region. In some situations, the state of emergency was exploited in order to consolidate authoritarian rule. As a matter of fact, last year began with the downgrading by Freedom House of Montenegro and Serbia from democracies to “hybrid regimes”,¹ and the latest edition of the report has confirmed this negative trend.²

Authoritarianism in the Balkans is a complex political phenomenon that concerns not only the methods employed within local democratic systems and the way state leaders rule, but also several elements of society, as well as economics. Media control, the erosion of rule of law, state capture and corruption are all contributing equally towards the deterioration of democratic standards in the region, making it more unstable in geopolitical terms too.

In fact, as we underlined in last year’s ISPI Report, authoritarianism is one of the elements that are obstructing the

¹ Z. Csaky, *Dropping the Democratic Façade*, Nations in Transit 2020, Freedom House, 2020.

² S. Repucci and A. Slipowitz, *Democracy under siege*, Freedom in the World 2021, Freedom House, 2021.

progression of the Balkans towards the EU along a linear path. However, local autocrats are indirectly supported by Brussels,³ making the EU more incoherent and less credible.

One of the most tangible elements of the authoritarian drift is surely control over media outlets, above all in Serbia, where pro-regime tabloids have been monopolising information since President Aleksandar Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) seized power in 2012. The effects of media control in Serbia were particularly evident in the initial phases of the pandemic, as state officials shared inaccurate and misleading information with the public. At the end of February 2020, while Italy and other European countries were coping with the spread of the virus and first restrictions were under discussion, Serbian authorities underestimated the seriousness of the situation. "Coronavirus is the most ridiculous virus in the world [...] it exists only on Facebook", said the doctor and member of the task force against the spread of the virus Branimir Nestorovic at a press conference. A statement that – despite the fact that Vucic (who was at the conference, and smiled about it) later tried to reject it – shows both the state's level of preparedness in the very early days of the pandemic, and who was sharing misinformation.⁴ The way some Serbian media outlets reported on the pandemic in the rest of Europe during the very first weeks of the outbreak could be understood as a local version of "infodemic", which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it".⁵

³ G. Fruscione, "After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition", in G. Fruscione (Ed.), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities*, Milan, ISPI-Ledizioni, May 2020.

⁴ G. Fruscione, *Covid-19 in the Balkans: The Virus of Authoritarianism*, ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 30 April 2020.

⁵ *Understanding the Infodemic and Misinformation in the Fight Against Covid-19*, Department of Evidence and Intelligence for Action in Health, Office of the Assistant Director, Factsheet no.5, Pan American Health Organization, 2020. 4

But this would not be too worrying if Serbia had not been in a longstanding process of breakdown in its democratic standards. In fact, while media control is only the more visible aspect of such a trend, beneath the surface endemic state capture and the gradual disappearance of rule of law are stifling Serbian society and the country's economy.

This chapter will focus on the way authoritarianism has accelerated in Serbia since the pandemic hit the Balkans, as well as on the genesis of this negative trend. The choice to focus mainly on this country is explained by several reasons. First, authoritarianism in Serbia has been dismantling the progress achieved in the post-Milosevic era and is making the country increasingly resemble exactly that model.⁶ Secondly, despite this regression in the democratisation process, Serbia has long been considered by Western institutions as “a factor of stability” and “a frontrunner”, along with Montenegro, in the EU integration of the Balkans – a consideration exploited by Vucic himself to increase his own political legitimation and thus his illiberal rule. Thirdly, analysing Serbian authoritarianism helps to understand similar trends among its neighbours, especially Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, as countries in which Belgrade has different regional ambitions. In other words, analysing today's Serbian political affairs is pivotal to a better understanding of the situation in the rest of the Balkans too.

Power: A Constant State of Emergency

Last June, Serbia voted to renew the national assembly. What happened before, during and after those elections provides a good insight into how Vucic's authoritarianism works. After initially underestimating the virus, in March 2020 the government declared a state of emergency, imposed severe restrictions and the longest curfews in Europe. During those

⁶ G. Fruscione (Ed.), *Serbia Twenty Years After Milosevic: An Ongoing Transition*, ISPI Dossier, ISPI, 5 October 2020.

weeks, President Vucic addressed the audience – across all TV channels – with a worrying tone and giving quasi-threatening information, as when he listed the main Serbian cemeteries, saying they would not be enough if older citizens did not obey the authorities.⁷ Yet, with the same iron hand employed by the government in introducing the curfew, the state of emergency was lifted in early May, and life returned to normal without any instructions from the authorities on how citizens should practice social distancing or which protective devices they should use. On top of this apparent normality, football tournaments resumed without any restrictions on gatherings. On 10 June, the 200th edition of the “eternal derby” between Partizan and Red Star Belgrade was held in front of an audience of more than 25,000 people: one of the biggest gatherings on record in Europe since the end of the first lockdown.⁸ So, this is what happened before the elections: a total return to normality or, rather, a semblance of it, with no public information on the national strategy to combat the virus, which was therefore perceived as “defeated.”

On 21 June, during election day, the SNS played its usual role of “providing incentives” for citizens to vote, drawing them to the polls, threatening to fire public employees and demanding evidence of their electoral choice.⁹ The ruling party pushed for a higher turnout in order to counteract the boycott promoted by the main opposition parties – a political strategy they adopted to protest for free and fair elections. However, in Vucic’s Serbia, electoral fraud is only needed for adjusting the final percentage of votes gained by the SNS, as political competition is totally absent from the public discourse: opposition leaders have almost no space on national media, and Vucic has not had a single TV duel since he came to power in 2012. Outside of

⁷ “AP: Vucic assumes full power under state of emergency”, *N1*, 31 March 2020.

⁸ G. Fruscione, *Ahead of Elections, Serbia’s Democracy Is a Dead Man Walking*, ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 8 June 2020.

⁹ A. Ivković, “Election day in Serbia: Massive irregularities even without true competition and uncertainty”, *European Western Balkans*, 29 June 2020.

Belgrade, citizens barely even know the names of politicians who are not in power – except through the attacks and insults levelled against them by Vucic and tabloid newspapers close to him. So, in any election, the regime does not need fraud for the final win, but still uses it.

In the June 2020 elections, the ruling party gained more than 60% and only two other national parties crossed the 3% threshold – the Socialist Party of Serbia (10.6%) and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (3.6%). Given that both of them later supported the new government (as was to be expected), and that the opposition did not participate in the vote, the composition of Serbia's national assembly today is almost that of a one-party system, with a handful of minority representatives being the only real opposition in the parliament. However, the real post-election news came from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). According to their investigation, released the day after the elections, from March to June 2020 Serbian authorities had been under-reporting Covid-19 deaths and infections.¹⁰

This episode shows the extent of the “Potemkin village” Vucic has made out of Serbia: an apparently functional country, but behind the facade it appears for what it really is – a regime fooling its own people in order to consolidate his power. The strategy of under-reporting data on the pandemic was designed to restore normality in the country and push citizens into voting, thereby legitimising the much expected SNS victory and demonstrating the failure of the opposition-led boycott.

Two weeks after the vote, President Vucic could no longer lie about the pandemic, as hospitals across the country began to fill up with patients infected with Covid-19. At the beginning of July, in an important press conference, Vucic did not apologise for state authorities under-reporting deaths and infections, but rather blamed Bosniaks from the Sandzak region for celebrating

¹⁰ N. Jovanovic, “[Serbia Under-Reported COVID-19 Deaths and Infections, Data Shows](#)”, *BalkanInsight*, 22 June 2020.

the Eid holiday as the main cause of the coronavirus outbreak in the southern city of Novi Pazar. He mentioned neither the mass gathering organised by his party in front of the parliament building in May¹¹ nor the post-election celebrations at the SNS headquarters without any social distancing. Finally, he announced the introduction of new lockdown and curfew measures.¹² That same night (and the day after), thousands of citizens spontaneously gathered in front of the national assembly and tried to enter it by force protesting against the introduction of new restrictions. The protest – which was repelled by security forces with violence and tear gas – denounced and exposed all the lies of the government, as it keeps blaming citizens' behaviour for the rise of infections. Eventually, restrictions were not introduced, and people's anger waned after few days of more peaceful protests.

The government supported by the new assembly was finally formed in October, four months after the elections. But even before the representatives could vote on the new executive, President Vucic announced that this government would have a limited mandate, and called for new, snap elections – to be held no later than 3 April, 2022.¹³ If the good news here is that a national assembly entirely dominated by one party with no concrete opposition will last no longer than one and a half years, the bad news is that the government itself has no real power and that only President Vucic, who is also the SNS president, decides upon its life and death.

Today's Serbia is thus reminiscent of Slobodan Milosević's authoritarian rule, but some elements are even more worrying.

¹¹ “[Slika Srbije pred izbore - oči u oči ispred skupštine](#)” (“The image of Serbia before the elections - face to face in front of the assembly”), *BBCNews*, 11 May 2020.

¹² “[Vucic declares weekend curfew in Serbian capital](#)”, *N1*, 7 July 2020.

¹³ Vucic's announcement of new elections: O. Zorić and I. Martinović, “[Vučić: Opet izbori 2022, Vlada ograničenog trajanja, Dačić na čelu Skupštine](#)” (“Vučić: Elections again in 2022, Government of limited duration, Dačić at the head of the Assembly”), *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 20 October 2020.

Despite electoral fraud, Milosevic's Socialist Party never gained as many votes in parliamentary elections, while Vucic – despite the opposition boycott – today controls, directly or indirectly (through his party or its allies), 244 out of 250 parliamentary seats.

However, the two regimes have a very different look, and the regression in democratic standards of today's Serbia takes a different form than with Milosevic. While the latter was openly authoritarian, used intimidation on a wide scale and even the elimination of political adversaries and journalists (Vucic was Minister of Information when Slavko Curuvija was killed in 1999), and was condemned by the West for the Yugoslav wars, Vucic exploits democracy in order to appear as a progressive, pro-European reformer. He renounced his radical, nationalist stances to gain endorsement from the European Union but never really changed. Today's Serbia and that of Milosevic are very similar in their essence, but Vucic's system is "softer", and his authoritarianism is covered under a European mantle. He succeeded where Milosevic partially failed: controlling all institutions and media, winning endorsement from the West and presenting himself as a regional leader able to guarantee peace.¹⁴

In other words, Vucic is a "better" autocrat than Milosevic as he exploits democracy and "Western values" to rule in an illiberal way – the so-called "stabilitocracy" model.¹⁵ And the look of Vucic's "more acceptable" authoritarian rule is well expressed even by the composition of the new government. At first sight, in fact, it may appear to be inclusive as it includes one opposition representative and some non-party members, and half the ministers are women. Like Ana Brnabic, the country's first female and openly gay person to become prime minister in Serbia, is now serving her second term. But all these moves

¹⁴ G. Fruscione, *Serbia: From Milosevic to Vucic, Return Ticket*, ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 5 October 2020. 9

¹⁵ "West is best: How 'stabilitocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans", LSE Blog, 5 May 2017.

are carefully designed by Vucic to give a better image of his country to the West, since on paper, it must seem progressive – as the name of his party suggests – and not a return to the dark Nineties when the Radical Party, of which Vucic was a member, used to rule together with Milosevic.

As will be seen in the next section, the base on which to build this supposedly “new”, EU-oriented Serbia is the political creature that Vucic contributed to founding back in 2008 and of which he is still the ultimate master today: the Serbian Progressive Party.

Endemic State Capture

The genesis and development of the SNS are pivotal to understanding today’s state capture in Serbia, as well as Vucic’s transformism. Born in 2008 from a split within the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party, it was initially perceived – even by the then ruling Democratic Party – as a double advantage for Serbian politics. Firstly, it fragmented the main opposition party and, secondly, it increased parliamentary support for the modernisation of Serbia, on its path towards the EU. The split, in fact, occurred when the Serbian parliament had to vote on the Stabilisation and Association Process with the EU, which the Radicals had always been against. The new parliamentary group, initially called “Forward, Serbia!”, voted in favour. Therefore, the first impression the group gave of itself was that of a right-wing, moderate party that would not oppose the EU integration process as the Radicals led by war criminal Vojislav Seselj had been doing since the fall of Milosevic in 2000. However, it is worth underlining that, from an ideological point of view, the Serbian Progressive Party never denied its nationalistic stances, as these were – and still are – instrumental to grabbing and maintaining the electoral support that the Radicals used to have at the time, given that in the 2008 elections they gained 29.5% of votes (the party with the second largest share of the votes).

Four years later, in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, the split turned to the advantage of the SNS. It won 24% of the votes and formed a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party, while the then party chief Tomislav Nikolic became president of Serbia. The Radicals did not cross the 5% threshold and were out of parliament for the first since the introduction of the multiparty system. In only one election, the SNS succeeded in establishing a (seemingly) new political platform, which can be summarised as nationalistic in internal affairs and EU-oriented in foreign policy, and in sidelining the Democratic Party and its post-Milosevic course.

Since then, three things have been growing in Serbian politics: the SNS share of the votes, state capture and Vucic's political rise. During his nine years in power Vucic has served as deputy prime minister (and minister of defence), then prime minister and now as president of the republic. Since his time as secretary-general of the Radicals, Vucic has softened his approach to politics and built his own image as a reformer who will bring new, European standards to Serbia – using the rhetoric that previously made the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party. But such achievements only happened on the national television outlets and tabloids he controls.

For their part, EU officials have been trusting him (especially the European People's Party, to which the SNS is associated), mainly for geopolitical convenience. By assisting and financing Belgrade within the framework of EU integration, Brussels inadvertently legitimises Vucic's authoritarianism and demands little accountability for it.

As for the SNS, its ideology has never really transformed: it could be considered as a national-conservative party, with a populist catch-all approach to politics and an economic agenda oriented towards liberalisation. What the SNS has really managed to do is entangle all levels of society within a process of endemic state capture.¹⁶ By exploiting its control

¹⁶ Here a timeline of Serbian state capture main events, <https://zarobljavanje>.

over state resources, power and institutions, Serbia's political elite has been securing private and party gains for itself. This situation has led to the monopolisation of power in the hands of one political party and its leadership.¹⁷ Since it is impossible to alter this course through free and fair elections, today the process seems irreversible. In fact, the longer state capture is a familiar feature of a social and political context the harder it is to eradicate. And today's Serbia seems to be a case in point, with a system inherited from "the messy dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Milosevic government, which engaged in large-scale state capture and where current president Vucic served as the minister for information".¹⁸

In the last twenty years, state capture in Serbia has developed to such an extent that even some opposition parties are under SNS control. For these parties, a more suitable definition would be "structural opposition" or even "alternative position". This is the case for the Serbian Radical Party, which never openly opposed the SNS when it re-entered the national assembly, or the new, extremist "Serbian right" party, which serves the regime for its "dirty work" at municipal elections, as its members openly threaten local opposition representatives.¹⁹

As in other contexts, the main instrument for state capture is clientelism, that is the exploitation of state resources by political elites to benefit their supporters. In Serbia, this practice has been growing together with SNS membership: the more party members, the more state capture is strengthened.

According to some data, the SNS currently has 750,000 party members: this means that every ninth Serbian citizen is a member of the ruling party.²⁰ Some comparisons can help

bezbednost.org/

¹⁷ On state capture, see *M. Lemstra, The destructive effects of state capture in the Western Balkans, Policy Brief, Cligendael, September 2020.*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ S. Biševac, "Miša Vacić je ipak Vučićev projekat" ("Miša Vacić is still Vučić's project"), *Danas*, 12 March 2021.

²⁰ "Every ninth Serbian citizen a member of the ruling party", *N1*, 19 September 2020.

understand the importance of this figure. The League of Communists in Yugoslavia had 900,000 members, i.e. one out of 24 citizens; the Communist Party of China has almost 92 million members²¹ – one out of 15 citizens; while United Russia, with a membership of more than two million, has a share of one out of 70 citizens. From an electoral point of view, given that there are about 6,500,000 registered voters in Serbia²², 12% of all voters are SNS members. This percentage has great weight if related to the trend in voter turnout, which in recent years has hovered around 50% of voters, raising the percentage of sure votes for the SNS to 24%. This means that, if each party member “convinces” just one more voter, the SNS secures almost half of all ballots – between 45 and 50% – , i.e. the vote share that the SNS has been gaining up to the latest landslide victory.

This mechanism seems to find confirmation, with local electoral watchdogs like *CRTA* reporting many irregularities in the voting process, including violation of secret ballots, compilation of parallel lists of voters, voting without documents and the so-called “Bulgarian train” (a method of vote-buying that includes a recurrent process of casting pre-filled ballots).²³

However, state capture manifests itself in everyday social and economic life too. In this respect, party membership works like an ongoing method of corruption that enables the political elite to appoint, and control, loyal individuals in both the public administration and state enterprises. Also, it enables rewarding party loyalty with employment. Finally, placing government supporters in key positions in the administration has another significant benefit for political elites: it provides control over

²¹ “Number of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members in China from 2009 to 2019”, *Statista*.

²² “Pravo glasa na izborima ima 6.583.665 građana” (“6,583,665 citizens have the right to vote in the elections”), *Danas*, 6 June 2020.

²³ All of these methods were reported during last parliamentary elections. See “Minimalni standardi ispunjeni, demokratija ugrožena” (“Minimum standards met, democracy threatened”), *CRTA*, 22 June 2020.

the crucial stage of implementing legislation,²⁴ or in other state affairs.

In the last two years, plenty of such cases have been exposed by the few remaining independent media. The most representative is perhaps the “Krusik” affair, named after a Serbian state-owned arms manufacturer. According to the investigation conducted by BIRN,²⁵ a private company represented by Branko Stefanovic, father of the then Serbian Interior Minister and SNS presidency member, Nebojsa Stefanovic, had been buying weapons from Krusik at preferential prices, below the cost of production. The weapons were later sold to a private Saudi Arabian company, which supposedly supplied them to fighters in Yemen and other war fronts. The investigation showed that, by selling weapons at less than the cost of production, the state both benefited a private company represented by the relative of a high-ranking politician and caused an economic loss to the Serbian state itself. To make matters worse in the whole Krusik affair, state officials reacted by jailing and attacking Aleksandar Obradovic, the whistleblower who leaked the information to the media, while denying any wrongdoing.

Throughout this nine year-long decline in democratic standards, the European Union has done little to tackle state capture in Serbia. Consistently with the “stabilitocratic” model, the only political stability achieved by Belgrade is continued rule by only one political party. For years, this model has not caused concern in the EU mainly because Serbia has maintained a formal European orientation in its foreign policy. Despite its lack of accountability for the worsening democratic standards and purely rhetorical references to “Western values”, over the years EU officials have been praising Vucic’s government, and even labelled Serbia a frontrunner in the Balkans as regards the integration process.²⁶

²⁴ M. Lemstra (2020).

²⁵ On the Krusik investigation, see J. Veljkovic and A. Djordjevic, “Firm Linked to Minister’s Father Paid Less for Arms”, *BalkanInsight*, 19 September 2019.

²⁶ On Hahn’s statement, see “Hahn: Serbia a frontrunner in the region – Vucic:

However, Serbia is by no means a frontrunner and, finally, at the end of 2020, the EU decided to not open any new chapters in the accession negotiations with Belgrade due to the deteriorating state of democracy in the country²⁷ – a decision that, in any case, comes too late and cannot dispel doubts about the effectiveness of EU conditionality and its credibility. Meanwhile, during 2020, Belgrade strengthened its relationship with China – a clear demonstration that Beijing is filling the void left by the EU in its neighbourhood. Most importantly, such a decision will barely influence the control over media that the Serbian regime has been exercising during all these years.

The Contamination of Disinformation

Press freedom in Serbia is falling apart. This is also confirmed by the 2020 edition of the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, in which Serbia is down three places from 2019 and now ranks 93rd out of 180 countries.²⁸ According to the report, “[a]fter six years under the leadership of Aleksandar Vucic, first as prime minister and then as president, Serbia has become a country where it is often dangerous to be a journalist and where fake news is gaining in visibility and popularity at an alarming rate”. Several elements explain this decline, and the report summarises them as follows: high media audience concentration, influence of the state, no transparency in the privatisation process and local media concentration.

Analysing the way media freedom is falling apart in Serbia is pivotal to understanding the drift towards authoritarianism that the country has been undergoing since Vucic seized power.

[We received recognition and support](#)”, The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, 7 February 2018.

²⁷ “MEP: EU won’t open new chapters with Serbia due to deteriorating of democracy”, *N1*, 4 December 2020.

²⁸ 2020 World Press Freedom Index see on Reporters without Borders RSF, *Serbia*,

The president is aware of the important relationship between information and maintaining power, since under Milosevic he headed the ministry in charge of information, or – rather – of the regime’s propaganda. Also, Vucic was himself a journalist: he reported from the Bosnian Serb front during the siege of Sarajevo and is thus personally aware of the role of state media and pro-regime journalists. Yet, today’s decline in media freedom is quite different from that of the Milosevic era.

There are basically two actions the Serbian state carries out to control media: support and pressure. These actions are both allegedly legal, but the outcome they achieve is the same: the standardisation of national information. Support comes mainly in form of state funding for those media outlets that share pro-government information. As the Media Ownership Monitor by Reporters Without Borders highlights, “the state still has a significant role and impact on the media market. It controls media through ownership, but dominantly through different models of state funding. Public funds are distributed arbitrarily and in a non-transparent manner, usually in favour of pro-government media outlets, without clear and measurable criteria, public control and evaluation. For years the state through its Ministries and public enterprises has also been the biggest advertiser in the country.”²⁹ On the other side, the state puts pressure on media outlets critical of the government through “selective enforcement of tax laws”. This means that the bank accounts of media outlets that do not toe the line could be blocked if they have some unpaid tax, while pro-governments television channels or newspapers in the same situation are untouched by such measures and continue to receive public funds. One of the most notorious cases of such “tax pressure” took place in 2017 against *Vranjske novine*, a local newspaper in southern Serbia which was obliged to declare bankruptcy under pressure from tax inspectors, despite the fact that it had regularly paid off all its debts.

²⁹ Media Ownership Monitor, [Serbia](#), Reporters without Borders.

“The dependency on state funding makes most media rather propagandists of the ruling party than objective and impartial providers of information for citizens. This became visible during the presidential elections in April 2017, when Aleksandar Vucic – both prime minister and presidential candidate at the time – had ten times more airtime on national broadcasters than all other candidates combined”, states the report. So, the distribution of public funds is neither a transparent nor a coherent process.

According to an investigation by the portal *Raskrikavanje*, in 2018 and 2019, the four biggest pro-government tabloids (*Alo!*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*) were the recipients of more than €600,000 in public funds.³⁰ As a matter of fact, according to another investigation by the same portal, in 2019 alone, the front pages of these four tabloids featured at least 945 false and undocumented news reports.³¹ The main target of the lies was the Serbian political opposition, but the pro-regime tabloids went further, with their front pages announcing in bold capital letters – then as now – plenty of wars, coup d'états and attempts to kill President Vucic – not one of them being true. According to *Danas*, in 2018, *Informer* and *Srpski telegraf* announced as many as 265 wars and conflicts on their front page, and with a specific ethnic target, as in 47 alleged cases of war against “ustaša” (term used to refer to fascist collaborationists from Croatia during Second World War) and 30 against “šiptari” (a pejorative term for Albanians).³²

So, fake news and disinformation are very useful to the regime for two complementary reasons. First, it helps to eliminate any

³⁰ V. Radojević, “Više od pola miliona evra za tabloide koji šire lažne vesti” (“More than half a million euros for tabloids that spread false news”), *Raskrikavanje*, 13 February 2020.

³¹ M. Vučić and V. Radojević, “Najmanje 945 lažnih vesti na naslovnica četiri tabloida u 2019” (“At least 945 fake news on the covers of four tabloids in 2019”), *Raskrikavanje*, 24 January 2020.

³² K. Živanović, “Koje su sve ratove najavljivali tabloidi u 2018. godini?” (“What wars did the tabloids announce in 2018?”), *Danas*, 1 January 2019.

form of political pluralism, giving no public space to anyone except President Vucic and the SNS, in order to increase his popularity, further diminishing what little opposition he has, and thereby legitimising his rule and allowing him to be as authoritarian as he wishes. The second and consequent reason is to consolidate, in the eyes of the citizens, the socio-political equation between President Vucic's leadership and the interests of the Serbian nation. According to this equation, built on nine years of control over every socio-political sphere, Vucic and the SNS alone are able to safeguard Serbia, both domestically and internationally, in a longstanding process he has been working on in order to provide electoral legitimacy for any arrangement over Kosovo that may be reached through a referendum. This propaganda scheme makes the equation work in such a way that opposition leaders, as well as dissidents and critics of the government, become the "enemy of the nation", and it is not surprising that they are often accordingly labelled "šiptari" in the media. This terminology serves to strengthen polarisation in the eyes of the readers: on one hand, there are Vucic and the SNS representing the interests of Serbia; on the other, there are "failed" opposition leaders who betray the nation.

However, as mentioned above, this decline in media freedom is not a return to the Milosevic era, but rather an improvement on it. Differently from Milosevic, Vucic has managed to gain control not just over national media outlets, but over local ones too. While during Milosevic's time, Belgrade-based broadcasters such as *Studio B* or *B92* were free and independent, in recent years they have become pro-government. In this respect, it seems that Vucic has realised Milosevic's "mistakes": in the Nineties, many local media were free and played a fundamental role in informing citizens, who gathered from every region of the country in rallies against the former Yugoslav president. Today, the few remaining non state-controlled local media, like the Nis-based newspaper *Južne vesti*, are constantly targeted by tax inspectors,³³ similarly to the case of *Vranjske novine*

³³ V. Kostić, "Tax Authority Checks Južne Vesti, but Not Televisions Connected

described earlier. Also, at the national level there were more newspapers supporting anti-Milosevic opposition (like *Naša borba*, *Demokratija* and *Glas javnosti*): an “alibi-card” the regime used to play in an attempt to prove that media freedom was not in danger. On national frequencies, in Vucic’s Serbia, only the *CNN*-affiliated broadcaster *N1*, and *Nova.rs* can be considered independent. And it comes as no surprise that their journalists have been the object of public criticism and attacks³⁴ by President Vucic and his tabloids whenever they put questions to him.³⁵

Therefore, when the pandemic reached Serbia, the regime’s propaganda was clearly ready to support Vucic’s role. While in the very first weeks of the outbreak Serbia experienced many cases of “infodemic” – with wrong information about Covid-19 shared on social networks and media which bordered on the ridiculous, as when President Vucic even suggested drinking homemade brandy against the virus³⁶ –, as soon as the health situation became serious, the state tried to monopolise information. On 15 March 2020, the government attempted “to implement a decree on centralised provision of information, according to which all information on the coronavirus epidemic could only come from the republic crisis staff. However, after a big reaction from the domestic and foreign public, the decree was withdrawn two days later.”³⁷ But the attitude did not change very much. On 1 April 2020, *Nova.rs* journalist Ana Lalic was arrested on charges of inciting panic for reporting on the medical equipment situation in the hospitals of Novi

with Gašić”, *CINS Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia*, 14 March 2019.

³⁴ “Pro-government media assault on N1 over Vucic question”, *N1*, 10 April 2020. /

³⁵ *Serbia: From Milosevic to Vucic, Return Ticket*, ..., cit.

³⁶ P. Živić and J. Georgievski, “Lažne vesti, korona virus i Srbija: Kome da verujemo” (“Fake news, the corona virus and Serbia: Who to trust”), *BBCNews*, 30 March 2020.

³⁷ S. Maksimović, “Serbia’s fall on media freedom list: ‘If it continues like this, there will no longer be anything to measure’”, *European Western Balkans*, 5 May 2020.

Sad.³⁸ Although she was later released on the “special request of President Vucic”, as announced by Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, showing once more how Vucic decides on everything and everyone’s destiny,³⁹ this action sent a clear message: the state is working responsibly and no one should question the way it takes care of the citizens. But given the underestimation of the challenge mentioned earlier, and the lies used for restoring normality as well as for mass gatherings for electoral purposes, the state seems to have been acting anything but responsibly, including with respect to its preparedness. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the epidemic, the state health system was not equipped to deal with it. The number of available ventilators was first declared to be “top secret” by Prime Minister Brnabic, while later it was made public by President Vucic, and by no one else, though doubts remained about the real quantity of available machines in Serbian hospitals.⁴⁰

The situation has changed from a year ago, and Serbia now ranks first in Europe in the anti-Covid-19 vaccination campaign. As thoroughly demonstrated by Prelec and Tzifakis in the preceding chapter of this Report, even the vaccine has become a weapon for the Serbian propaganda machine, with pro-regime tabloids reporting how the whole world is praising Belgrade and trying to imitate its model.

In conclusion, the steady decline of media freedom in Serbia will continue as long as the state remains “captured” by the ruling party. The pandemic has proved that the capture of Serbian media is highly resilient and able to adapt in order to serve the regime whenever it faces new, major challenges, such as dealing with a state of emergency.

³⁸ G. Mišić, “U Novom Sadu privedena novinarka ‘zbog širenja panike’” (“Journalist detained in Novi Sad ‘for spreading panic’”) *Aljazeera*, 2 April 2020.

³⁹ *Covid-19 in the Balkans: The Virus of Authoritarianism...*, cit.

⁴⁰ J. Tomić, T. Ćurčić, and D. Đorđević “Coronavirus: See How Many Medical Ventilators There Are in Your Town”, *CINS Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia*, 14 March 2020.

As independent journalist Tamara Skrozza has argued,⁴¹ unless there is a shift in the state leadership's attitude, and unless the atmosphere in which media work changes, the annual index on press freedom by Reporters Without Borders will be left with nothing to measure in Serbia.

Conclusions

“Serbia is no longer a democracy.” This is the outcome of Serbia's nine-year long drift towards authoritarianism as certified by Freedom House in 2020. During the pandemic, Vucic's party consolidated its power so that today's national assembly looks like a one-party system. The June 2020 elections took place in the midst of the authorities' under-reporting of Covid-19 infections and deaths – the most effective image to represent the Potemkin village that Vucic's regime has made out of Serbia: an apparent normality that hides real mismanagement and irresponsibility by authorities.

But authoritarianism has a long history in the country, where “the dividing line between state and crime [has] blurred completely”⁴² since the Milosevic era. However, today's Serbia is somehow even more worrying, as Vucic has worked to improve the image of his illiberal rule in order to please the West. The EU in fact only stopped the opening of new negotiating chapters due to the deterioration of democracy in late 2020, and today it can do little to counter both state capture and media control, both of which have proved to be highly resilient, even during the pandemic. They have been rooted in politics and society since the end of Yugoslavia, and from the Milosevic days they have been developed to serve Vucic's supposedly progressive European approach. On the one hand, state capture has entangled all levels of politics and

⁴¹ S. Maksimović (2020).

⁴² S. Cvijic, “[How the Virus of Criminal Authoritarianism Killed Zoran Djindjic](#)”, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 11 March 2021.

society through one of the highest percentage rates of ruling party membership among citizens, while on the other, media are controlled – in an apparently legal manner – even at the cost of subverting reality. A case in point occurred just as this chapter was being completed, in March 2021, when *KRIK*, one of the most trustworthy local investigative portals specialised in uncovering deals between criminals and the state, was accused by pro-regime tabloids of being linked to a crime gang that is currently under investigation.⁴³

Twenty years after the removal of Slobodan Milosevic, all the main achievements by democratic forces have been dismantled and authoritarianism is the main virus affecting Serbia today. And the vaccine to combat it, free and fair elections accompanied by media freedom, is a pure mirage.

⁴³ S. Dragojlo, “Serbian Pro-Govt Media’s ‘Shameless’ Campaign Against KRIK Condemned”, *BalkanInsight*, 10 March 2020.

3. Democracy Still Has a Say in the Balkans

Jovana Marovic

Although democracy has never been in particularly good health in the Western Balkans, it has hit a low point in recent years. The region's countries have been defined as hybrid regimes¹ and with the elements of captured states² among other things. The decline of the democracy index in the Balkans has gone hand-in-hand with a global trend of democratic backsliding, with the Covid-19 pandemic helping reinforce authoritarian patterns. The crisis brought about additional centralisation of power in the hands of the ruling parties, together with further restrictions on human rights and freedoms and a diminished role for parliaments. In countries that have never fully experienced democracy and where human rights and freedoms are already rather limited, this is particularly worrying. The countries of the Western Balkans face serious difficulties in building democratic systems, and numerous obstacles stand in the way: corruption, clientelism, institutions that lack independence, and the worrying conditions under which the media operate and elections are held.

On the one hand, the transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy is slow and painful, in large part because ruling

¹ Z. Csaky, *Nations in Transit 2020. Dropping the Democratic Façade*, Freedom House, 2020.

² European Commission, [2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy](#), Brussels, COM(2019) 260 final 29 May 2019, Brussels.

elites are unwilling to sacrifice their interests and benefits. On the other, the outlook for membership in the European Union, which is at least a rhetorical commitment of all six Western Balkan countries, is uncertain, and, alongside with internal restrictions, does not provide incentives to drive key changes and help suppress undemocratic practices. As a result, apathy is noticeable at all levels, especially among the citizens themselves, whether or not they exercise their rights to a degree: the right to be informed and involved in decision-making, their right to freedom of assembly, or merely the right to vote and change the ruling elite. Such an attitude on the part of citizens reflects their belief that their vote or participation in the decision-making process cannot change much – in other words, that change cannot come from within, since undemocratic practices are so deeply rooted in the system. Under such conditions, citizens often choose to remain passive. However, recent events and elections in the Western Balkans, and the surprising outcomes in Montenegro and Kosovo, together with the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in late 2020, challenge citizen apathy and their beliefs that the uneven playing field prevents them from bringing about change. These examples show that there is a homegrown appetite for change which can potentially have a positive effect on the citizens of other Western Balkan countries and trigger collective action.

This chapter looks at the recent examples of the government change in the region, primarily in Montenegro, and analyses the situation that preceded the election, with a special emphasis on media freedom and conditions for holding elections. It highlights the shortcomings and irregularities that affected the elections and helped elect the new parties to power, and identifies possible factors to help us understand what can lead to change.

What Influenced the Changes in Montenegro?

After running the country for more than thirty years, Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) had to concede defeat in the August 2020 elections. Following its years of dominance over the Montenegrin political scene, during which the DPS participated in all governments either alone or in coalition, Djukanovic's party fell short in their bid to form a new government for the first time since the establishment of the multiparty system, although they remained the largest party in parliament with 30 out of 81 MPs.

This was caused by several factors, from great dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation in the country, to the effects of the Law on Freedom of Religion on much of the citizenry, especially those affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC).³ The opposition, which in Montenegro is fragmented and divided along policy and ideological lines, coalesced as broadly as possible for the first time – into three coalitions encompassing over a dozen parties – from the nationalist far right to moderate and green parties. Their common goal, which later led to the formation of the forty-second government, was to put an end to the thirty-year rule of the DPS and the party's chokehold on all spheres. As a result, the campaign revolved around the fight against corruption and organised crime in addition to identity issues, which were stressed by the DPS⁴ but also arose due to the Law on Freedom of Religion.

Montenegrin society has long been deeply polarised. This especially came to the fore during the 2006 referendum, when independence was restored. The division into pro-Montenegrins

³ The law stipulated that if the SOC or another group cannot prove their right to religious properties built before 1918 they get transferred to the state. In the meantime, and after the change of government, these provisions have been amended in the parliament.

⁴ “[Montenegrin media did not report neutrally and objectively during the election campaign](#)”, *Centre for Civic Education*, 9 October 2020.

and pro-Serbs has not been overcome over time, as such a split was maintained by the DPS, but also by some other parties. Although Montenegrin and Serb identities were closely intertwined when Djukanovic and the DPS saw the regime of Slobodan Milosevic as an ally and mentor, the divorce began when the DPS started distancing itself from that policy in 1997 and formed sovereign bloc, which led to promoting the Montenegrin identity and nation as part of official policy.

On the one hand, the DPS has based its policy, public appearances and campaigns on the narrative of Serbia's interference in the internal affairs of the state, targeting domestic and external enemies in order to present itself as the guardian of the Montenegrin nation and state and the only party that could secure EU membership. It depicted the 2020 elections as a new referendum on the fate of Montenegro. By insisting on the endangerment of the state, the DPS actually strengthened its power, regardless of all the major problems its autocratic governance caused. While the Law on Freedom of Religion could have dovetailed with these tactics, it ended up turning against Djukanovic, since while it did provide the basis for similar narrative, the SOC managed to mobilise more voters than ever to vote against him and the DPS. On the other hand, while Belgrade and the SOC fuelled divisions in the country by pushing the exaggerated notion that the rights of Serbs in Montenegro are being jeopardised, the Law on Freedom of Religion "legitimised" Serbia's interference and significantly expanded its room for maneuver under the guise of protecting SOC interests in the country.⁵ SOC was actively involved in the election campaign, assisting the Democratic Front (DF) that led "For the Future of Montenegro" coalition in its door-to-door campaigning. Months before the election, the SOC organised mass protests against the Law involving thousands of citizens, which continued during the summer in the form

⁵ In addition, Serbia sees Montenegro as part of the "Serbian world", which is again to some extent part of the official policy.

of car rallies due to measures to combat the coronavirus. The influence of these protests on voters' feelings is unquestionable, since they were playing on the issue of "stealing saints" and endangering religious freedoms. This part of opposition was also strongly supported by funds and logistics, using some well-oiled mechanisms in mobilising voters, which the DPS perfected.

Another important factor that influenced the result was the high turnout. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and despite the fact that the diaspora was largely prevented from voting due to the crisis, 76.64% of voters went to the polls. In Montenegro, turnout has historically been high, reaching 73.33% in the 2016 parliamentary elections and 70.56% four years earlier. However, that turnout was so high during a pandemic is surprising and unexpected. This trend continued during local elections in the second largest city in Montenegro, Nikšić, held in March 2021, when over 80% of eligible voters went to the polls.⁶

The main outcome of the election is that Montenegrin citizens now believe they can influence democratic changes and processes in the country, something that was difficult to imagine just a few months ago. According to a BiEPAG study⁷ based on public opinion surveys, 80% of Montenegrin citizens now believe that the government can be changed through elections. This percentage is significantly higher than in other Western Balkan countries, as it stands at 43% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, and at just 38% in Albania. A slightly higher percentage compared to these three countries was recorded in Kosovo (56%) and North Macedonia (46%), as they also had changes in governments over the past half-decade.⁸

⁶ Center for Monitoring and Research, <https://cemi.org.me/en/2021/03/81-2-voters-exercised-voting-right-7-pm/>

⁷ T. Prelec and J. Marović, *No longer voting for the devil you know? Why the Balkans' collective action problem might be easier to break than we think*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), January 2021.

⁸ A public opinion poll was conducted ...

Uneven Playing Field at Best

Although at first glance it seems that the changes in Montenegro occurred due to very specific circumstances, including the perceived attack on the SOC that spurred it to play active role in the campaign and voter mobilisation, the core message to the citizens of the region is that it is possible to change the government even when conditions are not ideal, that is, when the conditions for holding elections are far from fair. An uneven playing field, is the central framework within which authoritarian regimes operate. In addition to the fact that fair and democratic competition is prevented due to fraud, repression and various forms of pressure on voters, what really puts the opposition on unequal footing – the uneven playing field – is unequal access to public resources and media. Thanks to greater media coverage and the misuse of public resources for electoral purposes, the ruling elites are more likely to win elections and stay in power. In that sense, an uneven playing field exclusively favours the ruling elites who created it in the first place, even where – unlike in the Western Balkans – there are no external manifestations of irregularities and fraud.

Montenegro's fragile democratic institutions were under attack in 2020, which was already affected because of the crisis caused by the coronavirus, while reforms were completely put on hold. During this period, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, the parliament was completely excluded from decision-making regarding the crisis, but not from the adoption of problematic changes to the law. At the same time, the government continued to violate legal regulations and to further restrict human rights.

As in all previous elections, the DPS had an advantage over other parties. What the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) call an “institutional

advantage⁹ was supposed to be once again a safe map in the hands of the DPS. Through various forms of abuse of office and public resources, members of the Government used their official activities, including those of President Djukanovic, as part of the campaign, while advertising through the official DPS communication channels.¹⁰

Although at the end of 2019 the election-related laws themselves were adopted and amended¹¹ many problems remained,¹² including those related to the implementation of the electoral legislation. A particularly serious problem concerned the work of institutions whose independence is of crucial importance for holding elections, such as the State Electoral Commission and the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption. The same applies to the overall atmosphere in which the elections were held: a deeply divided society and a very complicated epidemiological situation. Moreover, some additional amendments that were adopted later on further favoured the DPS. Thus, for example, the amendments to the Law on Political Parties and Election Campaigns from April 2020 enabled the payment of welfare benefits in an election year, with the excuse of reducing the consequences of the pandemic. Social benefits are a widely used mechanism for influencing the electorate. Moreover, this amendment allowed the Government to disburse €1.8 million in one-time funds for social assistance just one month before the elections, through its third package of socio-economic measures for citizens and the economy.¹³

The elections were called ahead of time, and in an unconstitutional way, since the mandate of the parliament

⁹ OSCE, “Montenegro. Parliamentary Elections 30 August 2020”, ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 11 December 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Such as the Law on Territorial Organization, relevant provisions of the Criminal Code, the Law on Financing Political Entities and Election Campaigns.

¹² “Montenegro. Parliamentary Elections 30 August 2020”... , cit., p. 5.

¹³ Ž. Vučinić, “Pomoć ili kupovina ugroženih: Vlada isplatila 1,8 miliona eura jednokratne socijalne pomoći” (“Help or purchase of the endangered: The government paid 1.8 million euros one-time social assistance”), *Vijesti*, 19 August 2020.

was not shortened.¹⁴ The timing was supposed to give the DPS an advantage in light of its belief that its coronavirus crisis management would have provided it with the necessary support from voters, while interrupting protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion.

The DPS and its coalition partners enjoyed greater coverage in state-sponsored and state-linked media compared to other political parties. Although the Law on Public Broadcasting Services of Montenegro and the Statute of the Public Enterprise Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG) stipulate the institutional autonomy and editorial independence of the public broadcaster RTCG, its editorial policy and reporting is biased. While the public service broadcaster had significantly improved its editorial policy during the parliamentary elections in 2016 and later on during 2017, as a part of the arrangement resulting from the Agreement on the Creation of Conditions for Free and Fair Elections,¹⁵ the ruling party regained control over the public broadcasting service overnight. In June 2018, the general manager was dismissed and replaced along with the editor-in-chief. The same happened to independent civil-society members of the public broadcaster's council, who were illegally dismissed by the Parliament and replaced by staff loyal to the DPS. In October 2020, the Basic Court in Niksic annulled the decision of the parliament on the dismissal of civil society organization representatives from the RTCG's council,¹⁶ yet another decision in support of the civil society representatives

¹⁴ The previous convocation of Parliament was constituted on 7 November 2016 and its mandate was to expire on 6 November 2020. The deadline for confirmation of new members is within 30 days from the date of the election, which in this case was by the end of September. The Parliament was constituted on 23 September 2020.

¹⁵ This agreement enabled the entry of opposition leaders, representatives and non-partisan figures into the Government of Electoral Trust, which was supposed to provide conditions for fair and democratic elections in 2016.

¹⁶ "Nezakonita odluka Skupštine o razrješenju Nikole Vukčevića" ("Illegal decision of the parliament on dismissal of Nikola Vukčević"), *Vijesti*, 6 October 2020.

who were illegally removed from key state institutions and regulatory bodies. So far, however, these rulings have not produced any consequences, and these representatives have not been reinstated. During the 2020 campaign leading up to last year's parliamentary elections, RTCG devoted the bulk of its electoral coverage to the DPS and its activities.¹⁷

The media scene in Montenegro is deeply divided along political lines between supporters and opponents of the ruling party, and this affects their editorial policies. Media outlets are seriously constrained in their work due to constant attacks and pressure.¹⁸ Independent journalists, their vehicles and premises are a constant target and attacks are frequent due to the sensitive issues they cover. Some of these attacks were connected to the corruption cases and the organised crime groups linked to the DPS that have been the object of independent media scrutiny. These include the 2004 murder of Dusko Jovanovic, editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper DAN, and the wounding of investigative journalist Olivera Lakic in 2018, which was the second attack on her. Because of this case, the European Commission threatened to activate the balance clause in the negotiation talks for the country's membership in the EU,¹⁹ but even the EU's threats to block negotiations and constant pressure from Brussels have not helped bring the case forward.

The legislative framework regulating freedom of expression and media has been improved to some extent in recent years

¹⁷ “Montenegrin media did not report neutrally and objectively during the election campaign”..., cit.

¹⁸ Information on the state of media freedom in Montenegro was to some extent obtained from a focus group with representatives of the civil society held in March 2020 in Podgorica, within the project “Promoting Democratic Values and Reforms approved by the National Endowment for Democracy”, which was conducted by the Sbunker organization, and in which I was engaged as a country expert.

¹⁹ The balance clause allows the EU to block a country from further opening negotiating chapters until satisfactory progress on reforms under chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamentals Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) has been achieved.

under the auspices of the European integration process and EU conditionality policy. In July 2020, the Law on Media and the Law on the National Public Broadcaster were adopted in the Parliament after two years of consultations, but they were also criticised.²⁰ The problems in restricting media and freedom of speech in Montenegro are not new, nor can they be solved by changing the laws. Media freedom has been deteriorating for many years in Montenegro, while self-censorship is pervasive. According to a report by *Reporters Without Borders*,²¹ Montenegro has the worst press freedom index in the region. Defamation was fully decriminalised in 2011 and removed from the Criminal Code. Since then, injured parties have had to rely on civil litigation. In practice, this decision has caused considerable damage to media and DPS critics. Defamation claims for writing critical of the regime are frequent and often filed by Montenegro's president himself or his family members. In the last 11 years, about 150 defamation cases have been brought against journalists²² before Montenegrin courts, while independent outlets such as *Vijesti*, *Monitor* and *Dan* have paid more than €300,000 in damages in defamation cases.²³

Crises are always conducive to spreading panic and misinformation. This held true during the coronavirus crisis, as social media users repeatedly shared false information on the virus and on case numbers. However, freedom of expression ends when it jeopardises the rights of others or violates their security, territorial integrity or public safety. It isn't always easy to trace such a line, and in particular it must not be the subject of arbitrary interpretations or selective penalties, which would

²⁰ A. Durović and L. Šćepanović, “[Reporteri bez granica pozivaju Đukanovića da ne potpiše Zakon o medijima](#)” (“Reporters Without Borders urges Djukanovic not to sign the Media Law”), *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 28 July 2020.

²¹ Reports without borders (RSF), [Montenegro](#), report published in April 2020.

²² “[Sagovornici Agencije “Mina” O Čestim Tužbama Protiv Medija](#)” (“Interlocutors of the Mina Agency on frequent lawsuits against the media”), Trade Union of Media of Montenegro (SMCG), 20 February 2020.

²³ Information obtained from a focus group with representatives of the civil society held in March 2020 in Podgorica.

indeed be a restriction on freedom of expression. During the last year the EU often called on the Montenegrin authorities to reach such a balance.²⁴ Moreover, local NGOs also pointed to cases where it was unclear on what basis the prosecutor determined that the sharing of fake news was “inducing panic and disorder”.²⁵ In early 2020, journalists were arrested for publishing fake news and causing panic²⁶. The Montenegrin Ministry of Culture reacted by announcing that Montenegro was at the centre of an unprecedented disinformation campaign caused by the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, and urged citizens to be careful when sharing information on social networks.²⁷ During the same period, people were also detained for posts on social media, such as one in which an activist was insulting the police chief; the detainment was condemned by the U.S. Ambassador and marked as a limitation of freedom of expression.²⁸ However, the Government has continued with issuing statements and advising citizens to report to the police insults on social media.²⁹

Overall, conditions to ensure fair and free elections were not in place, and in Montenegro the situation was exacerbated by decades of rule by the same political elite, making it difficult to draw a clear line between the state and the party.

²⁴ “EU poziva crnogorske vlasti da vode računa o slobodi izražavanja” (“The EU calls on the Montenegrin authorities to ensure freedom of expression”), *Radio Sloboda Evropa*, 15 April 2020.

²⁵ “By abusing Criminal law, the state violates the freedom of expression”, *Human Rights Action*, 10 April 2020.

²⁶ S. Kajošević, “Montenegro Targeted by ‘Fake News Campaign’, Ministry Claims”, *BalkanInsight*, 14 January 2020.

²⁷ “Ministry of Culture: Montenegro exposed to unprecedented disinformation campaign”, Government of Montenegro, 13 January 2020.

²⁸ P. Milić, “Ambasadorka SAD zabrinuta zbog hapšenja za uvredu šefa policije” (“U.S. Ambassador worried about arrest for insulting police chief”), *Voice of America*, 24 January 2020.

²⁹ Ž. Vučinić, “Građani javljaju policiji ko vrijeđa i huška na društvenim mrežama” (“Citizens report to the police who is abusive on social networks”), *Vijesti*, 20 February 2020.

The Best Is Yet To Come. Maybe

A recent electoral earthquake also occurred in Kosovo, where Albin Kurti's left-wing Vetevendosje won a landslide victory in the February 2021 election with 50.28% of the vote, ahead of the centre-right Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), and the conservative ruling Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). This result clearly showed what the citizens of Kosovo think about the old long-standing elite. According to experts,³⁰ the citizens voted for change, as they did in 2019, but Kurti's government did not survive the no-confidence vote in parliament.³¹ At the heart Vetevendosje's successful election campaign was the fight against corruption, and the improvement of living and working conditions. Reports like those of the European Commission or the World Bank point to major problems in the country, including widespread corruption, a continuous decline in FDI, and high youth unemployment rates.³² Although close to 2,000 votes from the diaspora were rejected,³³ it also overwhelmingly supported Vetevendosje. This is important information for those countries where diaspora voting still needs to be regulated. Kurti's party received four times more votes than all other parties combined, underscoring the scope of his victory in Kosovo and the degree of pent-up dissatisfaction. An interesting outcome of the elections in Kosovo is that women won almost 40% of the seats in the new parliament, a significantly higher percentage than ever before.³⁴ The change was achieved through a program that focused on the real problems facing citizens, while the

³⁰ "Emini: Vote for LVV is punishment for the old ruling elite due on how they governed Kosovo", KoSsev Kosovo Sever Portal, 15 February 2021.

³¹ "Kosovo's government toppled through no-confidence vote over coronavirus response", *DIW*, 25 March 2020.

³² A. Rexha, "The Consolidation of Institutions in Kosovo: What is the Nash Equilibrium for the Kosovar voter?", *European Western Balkans*, 4 March 2021.

³³ "Thousands of Diaspora Votes Rejected in Kosovo", *Exit news*, 18 February 2021.

³⁴ A. Higgins, "In a Land Dominated by Ex-Rebels, Kosovo Women Find Power at the Ballot Box", *The New York Times*, 6 March 2021.

previous elites were seen as the personification of corruption and the poor state of the country. At the same time, these trends indicate that young people, women and the diaspora had a decisive influence on the outcome, which again highlights the generational and political gap and the difference between the old and the new ruling elite.

The examples of Montenegro and Kosovo indicate that changing the ruling elites in the Western Balkans through elections is not an impossible scenario, regardless of aggravating factors and circumstances and the precarious state of democracy in the region. On the one hand, the citizens' awakening and the election of candidates alternative to the longstanding ruling elites that had caused such harm to regional economies and public administrations is of great encouragement to other countries in the region where change is not yet on the horizon. On the other hand, the removal of undemocratic regimes is only the first step in building better systems and achieving real democratisation. The parties that come to power have great responsibility in paving the way for democracy, and must be careful to avoid repeating the mistakes of the previous governments. This primarily involves eliminating clientelism and nepotism³⁵ while refraining from relying on similar approaches to please coalition partners and consolidate power. Another important part is opening their work completely to the public and fully involving civil society in decision-making, while building mechanisms to enable citizens to influence reforms and hold the Government accountable. The inexperience of new governments and of the parties that support them can also be an important factor hindering efforts to make key changes. In its first hundred days, the Government of Montenegro showed a complete lack of strategy in communicating with the public. It made hasty decisions, with a lack of coordination between its members, and avoided public hearings on important laws, including amending the aforementioned Law on Freedom of

³⁵ F. Bieber and J. Marovic, "Seizing the democratic opportunity in Montenegro", LSE Blog, 8 September 2020.

Religion. Of particular concern in the post-election period in Montenegro is the further heightening of polarisation and nationalism, pervasive hate speech in social media, misogynistic outbursts and frequent attacks on marginalised groups. Retaining what good the previous government did, which in the case of Montenegro involves staying on the same foreign policy course, is equally important; at least for now, this is not a cause for concern.

A very important element in the building of democracy in the Western Balkans is the role of external factors and actors, primarily the European Union. The prospect of membership and the active role of the EU in overseeing reforms is an essential incentive to achieve a certain level of democratisation. The new enlargement methodology presented by the European Commission in February 2020 has yet to be tested,³⁶ as Albania and North Macedonia, for which it was primarily intended, are still waiting for the green light to start accession negotiations, while Montenegro and Serbia, which have meanwhile accepted it, are waiting for implementation of the guidelines for its application. However, the outlook for membership is uncertain and the current EU framework for democratisation and its implementation on the ground are insufficient for key reforms. There is no consensus among the EU member states on the Western Balkans, or the enlargement process in general, while the Union itself faces serious structural problems. This is all the more problematic if we consider that the EU's transformative power is an important factor in democratisation. That the EU is prospecting membership while keeping the Western Balkans at an arm's length can also negatively affect citizen mobilisation.

Nevertheless, regardless of the prospect of EU membership, building a culture of rule of law in the countries of the region is a long-term process that must adopt a broader approach aimed at all levels of society while building awareness of desirable behavior

³⁶ “[Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#)”, European Commission, 5 February 2020.

and respect for the law. Such an approach should involve formal and informal education channels, the media and civil society, but especially governments in bringing reforms closer to citizens. It should also promote the very notion of the rule of law and while showing that corruption is both curable and unacceptable.

Conclusions

There are no easy and quick solutions for building democracy in the Western Balkans and replacing authoritarian regimes. The internal weaknesses of the democratisation process in the Western Balkans, as the ruling elites create frameworks that are favourable to them and fail to foster fair political competition, while deepening differences and divisions in societies if it helps them survive in power, negatively affect the will of citizens in trying to effect change from within. This is especially true in light of the prevailing attitude that elections cannot make a real difference. However, recent elections in several countries of the Western Balkans have shown that change is possible even in such unfair conditions, and that citizens are increasingly aware of their role in democratic change and processes. Although a change of government, in and of itself, is still a long way from full democracy, such trends can potentially encourage citizens in countries where change is not even on the horizon.

Therefore, citizens must take an active role in democratisation; this can be achieved by combining several approaches:

- by participating in elections and voting for alternatives to corrupt politicians and authoritarian regimes;
- by influencing decisions that directly affect them, especially at the local level where activism is still in its infancy, and even when budgets are on the agenda. It is, for example, worrying that as many as 88.1% of Montenegrin citizens have never requested data based on a request for free access to information, which indicates that citizens are not sufficiently informed about

- the procedures and mechanisms available to them;³⁷
- by participating in protests and collective actions that challenge government decisions and call for a review those which are inconsistent with the public interest, or are discriminatory and restrict human rights and freedoms; and by insisting on a clear agenda for the fight against corruption and organised crime, with clearly defined priorities and indicators.

³⁷ “Dissatisfaction and apathy are the main tools of Montenegrin citizens”, *Politikon Network*, 9 June 2020.

4. The Need for a More Progressive Region

Chiara Milan

On the heels of a trend that began in the previous years, 2020 in the Western Balkans was also marked by democratic decline, rising authoritarianism and increasing citizen mistrust in political institutions. Yet some novelties have appeared on the political scene. After years of stalemate, in 2020 the emergence of new green-left forces in the region was a political watershed point. Although they might not instantaneously reinstate old power structures, the results of the 2020 elections point to a remarkable discontinuity in a panorama dominated so far by nationalist parties. Moreover, they indicate that elections are not considered just a “window-dressing to democracy” anymore.¹

After experiencing continuity of rule by one party and no alternation of power since 1990², in August 2020 the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic, of the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS), had to acknowledge the victory of a coalition formed by opposition parties united under the name “For the future of Montenegro” (*Za budućnost Crne Gore*). Created with the aim of ensuring the alternation of power in the country, the heterogeneous

¹ T. Prelec and J. Marović, *No longer voting for the devil you know? Why the Balkans' collective action problem might be easier to break than we think*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), January 2021.

² F. Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.

pre-electoral coalition managed to gain the majority of seats in the Parliament. In Croatia, the year 2020 also marked a watershed, since left and green forces entered the Parliament for the first time thanks to the success of a coalition led by the *Možemo* (We can!) party. The green-left coalition managed to achieve parliamentary representation by electing seven MPs.³ In Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter BiH) the municipal elections held in November 2020 ushered in some change as well, as for the first time since the introduction of multiparty elections in 1990 electoral trends proved more favourable for outsiders than for the candidates of the main ethnic parties.⁴ In December, elections were held in the city of Mostar for the first time since 2008. Although generally confirming the tendency of citizens to cast their vote for established nationalist parties in power, the polls did bring about some fresh elements. The “BH block Mostar” coalition, which drew together the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska Partija BiH*, SDP BiH) and the progressive Our Party (*Naša Stranka*, NS), managed to secure six seats in the 35-member city council with a programme that promoted multiethnicity and unity.⁵ Another novelty in the local electoral panorama was the independent list “Right to the city” (*Pravo na grad*), whose founders decided to run for election after a lengthy struggle against the illegal waste disposal site at Uborak, defined “an ecological bomb on the outskirts of the city”.⁶ In spite of not managing to gain a single seat in the Mostar City Council, the list nevertheless garnered 226 votes.⁷ Overall, however, voter turnout at the municipal

³ Which became six after the Workers’ Front (*Radnička Fronta*), which managed to elect one MP, left the green-left coalition.

⁴ A. Burić, “Bosnia Erzegovina, Qualcosa Si Muove” (“Bosnia Herzegovina, Something Moves”), *OBC Transeuropa*, 24 November 2020.

⁵ “Ethnic Parties Dominate First Vote In Bosnia’s Mostar In 12 Years”, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 21 December 2020.

⁶ A. Cateux, «Bosnie-Herzégovine : Mostar se mobilise contre la décharge d’Uborak», *Le Courrier des Balkans*, 12 December 2019.

⁷ A. Burić, “Mostar, un circolo vizioso” (“Mostar, a vicious circle”), *OBC Transeuropa*, 25 February 2021.

elections of November 2020 in BiH remained low, under 50% of eligible voters – a discrepancy that might be attributed to the out-of-date voter roll.⁸ Other countries, such as Serbia, where parliamentary elections were held in the same year, did not experience any changes in the electoral panorama. While most of the opposition boycotted the elections as a sign of protest against the autocratic rule of President Aleksandar Vucic, the polls confirmed the landslide victory of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna stranka*, SNS). The President, who also heads the SNS party, thus confirmed his firm grip on power, gaining 63% of preferences and taking nearly complete control over a Parliament where the opposition is essentially non-existent except for a few representatives of minorities.⁹ In Kosovo's parliamentary elections of February 2021 the anti-establishment *Vetevendosje!* (Self-determination) party, led by Albin Kurti, secured a landmark victory. Inspired by social democratic values, *Vetevendosje!* counts on the support of the young and of the diaspora. The party, which won almost 48% of votes,¹⁰ combines nationalism, leftist ideas and criticism towards the international presence in the country,¹¹ while not including the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue amongst its priorities. Since its onset, *Vetevendosje!* has called for the respect of the rule of law and has fought against the rampant corruption that affects the country.

The changes coming through the polling booths in the Western Balkans in 2020 suggest a slowly growing confidence in the possibility that change in the region can be brought about by means of elections. Although the time is not ripe to predict a radical change in the ruling class, the electoral results represent clear signs that further attention must be paid to the appearance

⁸ T. Prelec and J. Marović (2021).

⁹ P. Kingsley, “Serbia’s Strongman Wins Big in Election Boycotted by the Opposition”, *The New York Times*, 22 June 2020.

¹⁰ G. Fruscione, *Kosovo: Kurti vince le elezioni e seppellisce le élite di guerra* (Kosovo: Kurti wins elections and buries war elites), ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 15 February 2021.

¹¹ F. Bieber (2019).

of new progressive forces on the political scene, be they parties, coalitions or independent platforms. Similarly, recent results invite a more careful look at the political alternatives that are developing at the national level, while also putting renewed attention to the local level of government as the place where these alternatives are emerging out of social movements and political activism. The appearance and rise of new electoral subjects, namely political parties or coalitions/platforms with a green-left orientation, which in most cases arise from long-term grassroots activism, constitutes the focus of the first section. The next section tackles the common concerns and challenges that the region is facing, such as the struggle for clean air, proper waste management and environmental protection. Environmental groups, citizen initiatives and green-left forces are advocating for changes in these fields by means of direct action and protests, but also by looking for allies inside the institutional arena. While since 2020 the Parliaments of both Montenegro and Croatia have hosted political options that promote green policies, in the rest of the region it is still up to social movements, citizens' initiatives and NGOs to raise awareness on the topic by striving to influence the political agenda and imposing those topics as politically relevant. Notwithstanding its importance, the environmental agenda is not yet considered a priority of institutions in the region and green policies in line with EU standards are essentially absent anywhere the region. Green groups and parties are striving to put their claims forward, stressing how these are also in line with the EU's requests for alignment with EU standards in view of a future integration. The relationship between social movements and the EU constitutes the focus of the last section.

From the Streets to the Institutions: Green-Left Platforms Enter the Political Scene

The transformation of contentious movements into political parties and/or platforms undoubtedly constitutes the main

novelty in the electoral panorama of the region. The driver and frontrunner of this shift “from the streets to the institutional arena” has been the Croatian party *Možemo*, which blazed a path for other groups across the region. The decision of several activists to constitute a political party originates from the awareness that “structural change in their respective societies is difficult to achieve without them eventually taking their struggle to the realm of electoral politics”.¹² The decision to create the green-leftist political platform, now the leading progressive force in the region, was taken in 2019. *Možemo* ran for the June 2020 Croatian parliamentary elections as the head of the “Green-left coalition” (*Zeleno-lijeva koalicija*), which included five other parties, namely the New Left (*Nova Ljevica*), Sustainable Development of Croatia (*Održivi razvoj Hrvatske, OraH*), Workers’ Front (*Radnička fronta*) and two civic movements (*Zagreb is Ours, Zagreb je naš!* and *For the city, Za grad*). The coalition gained around 7% of votes, garnering seven seats¹³ in the Croatian parliament. This was the first time that left and green forces entered the Croatian national parliament. The coalition is formed by local green and leftist movements and defines itself as eco-socialist. The electoral programme of the coalition includes a strong environmental component advocating for environmental sustainability and reducing the ecological footprint. As political party, *Možemo* had already run for the 2019 European parliamentary elections in coalition with *Nova Ljevica* and *OraH* (that in 2014 elected one MEP), but it failed to meet the necessary threshold to elect any MEPs.

In turn, *Možemo*’s origins lie in the *Zagreb je naš* (ZjN) group. Born as a ‘right to the city’ group opposing the commodification of public space in Zagreb, ZjN turned into

¹² G.P. Draško, V. Dzihic, and M. Kmezić, (*Unheard*) *Calls for Democracy from below? Social and Protest Movements and Potential for Democratic Renewal*, Sarajevo, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2020.

¹³ As mentioned before, the MPs of the coalition are now six after the Workers’ Front (*Radnička fronta*), which managed to elect one MP, left the green-left coalition.

an electoral platform that ran for local elections in 2017. The coalition, which incorporated four left and green parties – *Za grad* (For the city), *Nova Ljevica*, ORAH, and *Radnička Fronta* – obtained 7.6% of votes in the municipal elections, winning four seats in the Zagreb City Assembly, 21 seats in city districts and 41 seats in local councils. Many newly elected councillors are youths engaged in social movements, with almost no prior experience in institutional politics. After four years spent in the opposition, ZjN is currently preparing to run again for municipal elections in May 2021. The electoral campaign has been shaken by the sudden death of the long-time – and highly contested – mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, who died of a heart attack at the end of February 2021 after having served as city mayor almost uninterruptedly for the last twenty years,¹⁴ amid allegations of corruption and scandals.

Besides Croatia, other green-left subjects are emerging throughout the region and striving to get access to the institutional arena. In Montenegro, the United Reform Action Civic Movement (*Građanski Pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija*, URA) is a social-liberal, progressive and green party whose leader, Dritan Abazović, currently serves as incumbent Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, the first government in three decades not dominated by the Democratic Party of Socialists. In addition to being the president of the URA, Abazović leads the centre-left *Crno na bjelo* (Black on White) electoral coalition. The progressive and environmentalist bloc won four seats in the Montenegrin Parliament in the 2020 elections. As Abazović explained to the Serbian newspaper *Danas*, after nearly thirty years of same-rule party “the opposition is also extremely ideologically heterogeneous, and in changing the bad and autocratic systems it resorts to find the smallest common denominator”.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Long-Time Mayor of Croatian Capital of Zagreb Dies at 65”, *The Independent*, 28 February 2021.

¹⁵ *Danas*, “Dolenec, Abazović i Veselinović Za *Danas*: Talas Promena Se Širi Regionom!”, (“Dolenec, Abazović and Veselinović For Today: The Wave

All over the region the smallest common denominator keeping together oppositional, green-left forces appears to be the need for progressive and green policies. Political movements turned into parties are advocating for social justice, solidarity, environmental sustainability, democratisation, and gender equality. This is the same struggle that the initiative *Ne davimo Beograd* (NDB, Do not let Belgrade D(r)own) continues to conduct in Serbia, in spite of having no electoral representation at the moment. Formed in 2015 by a group of activists and cultural workers dissatisfied with urban development plans in Belgrade,¹⁶ NDB attempted, through both contentious and conventional means, to oppose harmful urban development projects, first and foremost the gigantic “Belgrade on the Water” (*Beograd na vodi*) project. The three-billion-euro Dubai style redevelopment project entails the demolition of the riverside neighbourhood of the capital, Savamala. The project, bankrolled by a United Arab Emirates property developer,¹⁷ has already brought about controversial urban changes in the capital, from the dismantlement of the Austrian-style train station to the construction of skyscrapers hosting business malls and shopping centres that will be unaffordable for the majority of the local population. After years of protests in the streets, NDB became a “relevant political actor who advocates in accordance with the needs of its inhabitants”.¹⁸ In 2018 NDB activists decided to run for the Belgrade city elections with a list called “Initiative Do not let Belgrade d(r)own – Yellow duck – Whose city, our city” proposing the architect and activist Ksenija Radovanovic as candidate for the position of mayor. The initiative gained 3.48 % of votes, under the 5 %

of Change is Spreading Through the Region!”), *Ne davimo Beograd* (blog), 30 September 2020.

¹⁶ N. Stojmenović, *Initiative Ne Davimo Beograd*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Belgrade - Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, 22 February 2021.

¹⁷ S. Dragojlo, “Grassroots Group Eyes Belgrade on Route to Toppling Serbian President”, *Balkan Insight*, 24 July 2020.

¹⁸ N. Stojmenović (2021).

threshold necessary to enter the city's assembly. The list's strong showing in three central Belgrade municipalities, though, were welcomed with optimism for NDB's political future.¹⁹

The electoral defeat did not prevent NDB from continuing to fight at the local level and building up political networks across the region. Currently NDB continues its activities, and it plans to run again for Belgrade city elections in 2022. As one of the leaders explains, this decision is supported by the willingness and perceived necessity to have “one foot in the streets and one in the institutions”.²⁰ Besides opposing the “Belgrade on the water” project, NDB is currently involved in several environmental campaigns advocating for better air quality, the opposition to the construction of an incinerator for waste treatment in Vinca, and the preservation of one of main green areas of Belgrade, Kosutnjak. The announcement that city authorities envisaged the construction of a residential and commercial complex of about 600,000 square metres inside the green area of Kosutnjak, which would have led to the destruction of a natural monument of local importance under state protection, sparked the indignation of citizens and activists alike. In 2020, they launched a successful environmental campaign that included a petition called “Initiative for the Defence of Kosutnjak” against the possible destruction of almost 35 hectares of forest and green areas in the park.²¹ Much like other groups in the region, NDB strives to incorporate environmental issues into the political agenda, stressing the interplay between harmful (and corrupt) urban development plans and environmental protection²². Belgrade's mayor Zoran Radojicic has announced that the city will compete for the title of European Green Capital 2022, as it already had in 2019. Ironically, the award is given to cities that successfully respond

¹⁹ G.P. Draško, V. Dzihic, and M. Kmezić (2020).

²⁰ *Danas* (2020).

²¹ N. Dotto, “Battle for ‘Košutnjak’, Belgrade's green lung”, *OBC Transeuropa*, 6 November 2021.

²² N. Stojmenović (2021).

to urban environment and climate change challenges – which seems not to be the case in Belgrade.

Several factors explain the positive and encouraging results achieved by these political movements as they have turned into parties. Firstly, as new players on the political arena, they are perceived as credible alternatives to the *status quo*. In fact, they mainly comprise outsiders with no prior experience of institutional politics. Secondly, the candidates have not come out of the blue, but rather have a long record of engagement in movements fighting for women's rights, green policies and social equality. A prominent member of *Možemo* underlines that their newness to the political scene constitutes a point in favour of new green-left forces. As she explains, the candidates are seen as trustworthy as “they have been active in public and activist life for many years, but have never benefited from [official] positions, nor are they interested in that, because ... they have their jobs”.²³ Therefore, the candidates for the position of councillor or MP do not seem eager to enter into politics merely to make a profit, which instead is precisely how professional politicians in the Western Balkans are perceived. By contrast, they appear genuinely driven by a willingness to enhance citizens' and city life. At times, though, their status as outsiders and their newness to institutional politics comes at their detriment, as they have to spend a considerable amount of time and energy familiarising themselves with institutions and their functioning once they are elected.²⁴

Through their electoral programmes, claims, goals and actions these political groups and coalitions challenge, for the first time since the end of the 1990s wars, the ethno-national discourses that have shaped public debates in the region for decades. They strive to bring to the fore pivotal topics and issues that have so far been obscured by the endless debate on ethno-nationalism:

²³ Interview to a prominent member of *Možemo*, 22 January 2021.

²⁴ C. Milan and L. Gegić, “Inside or Outside the Institutions? The Struggle of Zagreb Je Naš for a Better City”, *Chiara Milan. Notes from Southeastern Europe* (blog), 1 December 2020.

labour rights, growing economic inequalities, social justice, the rule of law and the struggle against corruption and clientelism. They also attempt to advance concrete policy proposals, putting ordinary citizens first. That is why they often embrace municipalist principles, which advocate for changing politics starting from the lowest governance level²⁵ which, in the former Yugoslavia, is that of the councils of the local community association (*mesne zajednice*, MZ).²⁶ An innovative element concerns the attempt to widen citizens' participation by involving the public, which is often excluded from this process, in drafting the parties' platforms. This represents another point of rupture with the existing system and with that of the traditional political parties in the region. This participatory approach conflates citizens' consultation in online forums with in-person assemblies and neighbourhood meetings, often held in MZ community spaces.²⁷ In this way, citizens can meet and discuss with candidates, while having a say in the drafting of electoral programmes by participating in online surveys. By means of a public web platform, it is in fact possible to indicate and attribute a priority to the needs of every neighbourhood. Already adopted in previous elections in Zagreb and Belgrade, this participatory approach combines online and in-person consultation, fostering the elaboration of a political programme together with the citizens. This model is being implemented on the occasion of the city elections in Zagreb scheduled for May 2021.²⁸

²⁵ M. Thompson, "What's so New about New Municipalism?", *Progress in Human Geography*, 2020.

²⁶ *Mesne zajednice*, or *mesne odbori* in Croatia, are the councils of the local community association.

²⁷ G.P. Draško, V. Džihic, and M. Kmezić (2020).

²⁸ The survey is available [here](#) (access 19 February 2021).

Environment, Waste and Air Pollution: Common Concerns and Similar Challenges for the Western Balkans Region

As mentioned in the previous section, in recent years the environment has become an important matter of concern in the Western Balkans, where citizens and activists alike are involved in struggles against gigantic urban development plans. Spatial planning and environmental protection have long been flashpoints. These issues recently increased in importance, to the extent that nowadays “green topics and the reduction of social inequalities stand as connecting points amongst the citizens all over the region”.²⁹ In addition to the struggle against investor urbanism that is destroying natural resources, other important matters of concern are air pollution, large corporations privatising natural resources and the construction of mini-hydropower plants along rivers. These battles build upon longstanding ones focusing on the mismanagement of public space and public resources in local communities. In that regard, the Western Balkans’ grassroots movements have started to strengthen regional cooperation and to unite their forces.

Alongside protest movements in the main urban centres in the region, local environmental initiatives in rural areas have also blossomed. In Serbia, for instance, several initiatives emerged such as “Say No to Mini Hydropower Plants” (*Odbranimo reke Stare planine*), which is fighting against the destruction of small mountain rivers by means of the construction of hydroelectric power plants in South and South-Eastern Serbia, and “Let’s protect Jadar and Radjevina” (*Zaštitimo Jadar i Radevinu*), which stresses that the damaging effects of HPPs are greater than their potential benefits, as the impact on the entire ecosystem would heavily affect the surrounding flora and fauna.³⁰ Furthermore,

²⁹ *Danas* (2020).

³⁰ J. Vasiljević, “Environmental Activism in the Balkans: From Direct Action to Political Subjectivity”, The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, BiEPAG Blog, 16 September 2020.

in 2020 hundreds of citizens in Serbia protested against the British-Australian company Rio Tinto's plans to open a lithium mine in Western Serbia, near the town of Loznica.³¹

Another matter of concern in the region is the worsening air quality. In fact, the Western Balkans have some of the worst air quality in Europe. Coupled with the recent deaths from the Covid-19 pandemic, air pollution is provoking an increase in the number of respiratory diseases, leading to a rise in the already high mortality rate.³² The main culprits for air pollution are particulate matters (PM), which affect the same cells and cell parts in the human body as the coronavirus does.³³ The concern about air pollution has led to the development of cooperation on this issue, which resulted in the regional campaign "Balkans United for Clean Air". Launched by the European Fund for the Balkans, the campaign calls upon institutions and citizens in the region to take joint action to improve air quality.³⁴

Although environmental concerns in BiH are not represented in any political party or platform, they remain at the forefront of current struggles. Attempts to halt the construction of mini-hydropower plants along the country's rivers are emerging with force. Waste management and illegal dumping sites constitute another pressing topic. Bosnian rivers like the Drina are filled with tons of trash, endangering both the ecosystem and human health, especially around the city of Visegrad.³⁵ This problem is directly caused by inadequate waste management measures and widespread illegal dumping sites and landfills situated along the river, both in BiH and across the region, in an area where environmental awareness is generally low. Several local environmental activists are striving to raise awareness on the

³¹ I. Krstić, "Rio Tinto in Serbia: Privatization of Natural Resources, Obstruction of Sustainable Development", *Mašina English* (blog), 12 November 2020.

³² "Nevolja Nikad Ne Dolazi Sama, Aerozagadenje i Covid-19", ("Trouble never comes alone, air pollution and Covid-19"), *Ne davimo Beograd* (blog), 4 February 2021.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Europe Fund for the Balkans (EFB), *Air Pollution and Covid-19 in The Western Balkans: Misfortune Never Comes Alone*, 4 February 2021.

³⁵ "Trash Fills Bosnia River Faster than Workers Can Pull It Out", *ABC News*, 25 February 2021.

environmental disaster that the country will have to deal with if the situation does not change soon³⁶. In the last year, the opposition to the construction of hydro-power plants along Bosnian rivers saw women at the forefront. The so-called “Brave women of Kruščica”, from the name of a village located near Vitez, received the 2019 EuroNatur Award “for their exemplary commitment in protecting the European natural heritage”.³⁷ Their 500-day action prevented the construction of two small hydropower plants along the river that gives the village its name. From August 2017 to December 2018, day and night, this group of courageous women blocked the bridge over the river on a number of occasions to prevent trucks and excavators from passing and building the contested hydropower plants. They did not give up even after receiving serious police intimidation and attacks. They stopped their protest only once the court ruled in their favour and against the planned hydropower plants. Their case became known region-wide and caught the attention of the media and general public. The women received support from local and international civil society. Amongst others, the Sarajevo-based association for culture and art CRVENA initiated a solidarity campaign³⁸ to sustain their legal and political struggle. Their movement also showed that environmental concerns overcome ethno-national divisions, as women from different communities stood together to protest. A similar case took place in the town of Strpcë, in Kosovo, where the struggle against the HPP blamed for endangering the source of local drinking water united ethnic Albanians and Serbs.³⁹

³⁶ J. Gomez, “Illegal Landfill Sites along Rivers in the Balkans Are Causing an Ecology Disaster”, *euronews*, 19 February 2021.

³⁷ “Brave Women of Kruščica Win EuroNatur Award for Averting Construction of 2 SHPPs”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 1 August 2019.

³⁸ M. Išović Dobrijević, “KAMPANJA ZA ŽENE KRUŠČICE: Solidarnost Sa Hrabrim Ženama Koje Mjesecima Čuvaju Svoju Rijeku!” (“CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN FROM KRUŠČICE: Solidarity with brave women who have been guarding their river for months!”), *Buka*, 6 March 2018.

³⁹ “Srbi i Albanci protiv izgradnje MHE u Štrpcu: Protest zbog hapšenja komšije”,

Political Movements in the Western Balkans and the EU: The Urge for More Protagonism

With a long tradition of environmental activism and deep local roots, green-left forces in the Western Balkans have gained visibility in recent years, reflecting broader European trends. All over Europe, we are witnessing a revival of green groups calling for environmental justice, as well as transnational movements such as *Fridays for Future* urging for serious action to tackle the climate crisis. The Western Balkans' green-left forces often stress that their calls to improve air quality and respect environmental standards are in line with the EU's requirements. Western Balkans countries will have to comply with – or have had to comply, in the case of the region's only EU member, Croatia – the EU's *acquis communautaire* to join the EU. The *acquis* is the body of common rights and obligations that are binding on all EU countries, and comprises strict legislation and measures relating to environmental protection that must be accepted and adopted – and, it goes without saying, respected – before joining the EU. In fact, in view of their integration into the EU, the Western Balkans countries have to align their legislations with the EU *acquis communautaire*, which includes chapter 27 on “Environment and Climate Change”. While Montenegro had already begun to do so in 2018, Serbia followed in 2020, and submitted its negotiating position to the Council in January 2020,⁴⁰ in view of a future EU accession. Still having the status of potential candidates, both Kosovo and BiH are lagging behind the other countries of the region in the respect of environmental standards.

As several activists argue, the struggle for environmental protection and sustainability is a European battle, and as such the EU should be seen as an ally of these new forces in pushing

(“Serbs and Albanians against the construction of SHPPs in Strpce: Protest over the arrest of a neighbor”), *N1*, 5 August 2020.

⁴⁰ V. Spasić, “[Serbian Government Adopts Chapter 27 Negotiating Position](#)”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 23 January 2020.

for much needed reforms in the field. Nevertheless, the EU is playing a controversial role, as it continues to address local autocrats as valued interlocutors and partners. Stabilitocrats in the Western Balkans thus enjoy the external support of the EU⁴¹ as they are seen as guarantors of stability who are formally committed to EU accession and democracy.⁴² However, in practice they do not seem committed to implementing the progressive and green policies that civil society groups are urging. As a result, the controversial role of the EU undermines the confidence of activists and citizens of the Western Balkans in EU institutions. This mistrust is bolstered by the fact that the EU still appears unable to offer a credible perspective of integration to candidate and potential candidate countries.

To conclude, a call for the region's new political forces to take on a central role is emerging with force. The EU is asked to help the region in its attempts to "leave behind the politics of the 1990s and turn to modern trends".⁴³ Yet to support this effort political movements in the region are demanding more protagonism *vis-à-vis* the EU, as Danijela Dolenc, one of the prominent figures in the political scene, elucidates: "We see as a problem the fact that the governments in Croatia, after the long process of accession, still behave towards the EU primarily as a student who follows instructions, and not as a potentially important actor that can co-shape EU policy towards the region".⁴⁴ The Western Balkans should not only be the recipient of rules and regulations decided by the EU member states, but also key players in their elaboration.

⁴¹ F. Bieber and M. Kmezić (Eds.), *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion*, BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group), 2017.

⁴² F. Bieber (2019), p. 9.

⁴³ *Danas* (2020).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusions

Social movements in the Western Balkans have been facing a number of unprecedented challenges in recent years. Old problems overlap with the new needs arising from the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (and the economic, political and social crises that followed). Compounded with the existing hurdles stemming from the difficulties of mobilising in authoritarian settings, the context exposes movements to additional constraints. Moreover, in countries like Serbia activists remain a regular target of smear campaigns, court trials, close police monitoring and phone tapping. Nevertheless, over the years green-left forces have managed to attract visibility and to gain public trust, forming well-established networks at the regional and international level. As the recent election results showed, they have successfully become a credible contender for political power.⁴⁵

Capitalising on years of activism and on the public trust they have earned over time, green-left forces keep staging street protests and organising advocacy campaigns while pushing for reforms from inside the institutional arena. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of movements is a process that is known to drain human capital and resources usually devoted to street action and campaigns.⁴⁶ It remains to be seen how activists-turned-politicians will be able to balance their resources between street action and institutional obligations, since the everyday management of a city, district or neighbourhood requires energies and forces that can no longer be left to volunteer activism. Looking at the emergence of these new political actors in the political scene and at their electoral results, recent developments are grounds for optimism regarding democratic change from below in the region.

⁴⁵ G.P. Draško, V. Dzihic, and M. Kmezić (2020), p. 13.

⁴⁶ S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

5. Is the European Dream of the Western Balkans Fading Away?

Gentiola Madhi

The outbreak of the epidemiological crisis in March 2020 not only triggered negative effects in the health sector worldwide, but also posed several hurdles to democracy and fundamental freedoms in many countries, allowing illiberal leaders to expand their power. Although the pandemic's long-term effects still remain to be seen, so far it has hit the existing structural challenges and fragile democratic institutions of the Western Balkans hard, potentially damaging their EU accession.

In the last decade the pace of EU enlargement has slowed down considerably, and the pandemic outbreak seems to push Balkan membership “out of reach” in the near future. The so-called frontrunners, Montenegro and Serbia, embarked on negotiations respectively in 2012 and 2014, and the light at the end of the tunnel is still out of sight. For three years, Albania and North Macedonia have been waiting at the EU's door to receive a concrete date for the effective opening of accession talks. Bosnia and Herzegovina continually remains a potential candidate, as does Kosovo, while still queuing for visa liberalisation despite having fulfilled the conditions since 2018. While in principle this “waiting time” should help the countries to be better prepared in terms of alignment and enforcement of the EU *acquis*, in practice it is having the reverse effect. With the pandemic unveiling major deficiencies in the Balkans, conserving the status quo is impacting negatively on good

governance in the region. Democratic backsliding is visible and, faced with pressure to contain the spread of the virus, Balkan governments have resorted to discriminatory and restrictive measures on fundamental freedoms.

Despite the EU's attempts to inject some political momentum into the enlargement process by adopting new documents, such as the 2018 Enlargement Strategy on a credible perspective for the Western Balkans or the 2020 new accession methodology, the results remain discouraging and the European Union's ambiguity is growing. The Council's genuine effort in issuing a formal greenlight to accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020 was overshadowed by the pandemic and, in the space of a few months, it turned into a mere symbolic gesture and *déjà vu*. For more than a decade the European Union has been focusing on its internal challenges, namely the financial crisis, migration, Brexit etc., while halting enlargement in its foreign-policy agenda. As the Balkans continue to face domestic reform struggles and some "waiting fatigue", the revival of EU Member States' tendency to abuse their veto power in enlargement matters sheds light on the EU's in-house fractures and unclear vision for the future. Such little interest in and resistance to enlargement is primarily based on domestic political reasons, and the domination of national agendas is defying Brussels' credibility in "Europe's soft underbelly". As the sceptical Member States have turned into 'real gatekeepers', their behaviour is making enlargement more politicised and less attractive.

In the light of the current uncertainties, and repeated accession setbacks, expectations to bring forward the enlargement agenda and start the accession talks with two Balkan countries during 2021 are fading away. The implications of this are reflected on the effectiveness of the conditionality approach the EU uses in the region to incentivise reforms and promote political and economic transformation. In fact, conditionality "seems to be struggling to make substantial steps forward on the path

to the region's European integration".¹ The weakening of the EU position and its loss of perspective instead open up new endeavours for illiberal tendencies as well as new opportunities for third countries to wield influence. The existing trends have also been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.

The present chapter seeks to analyse and contrast the major developments of last year in Albania and North Macedonia, in terms of their Europeanisation and democratisation processes. It starts with a short overview of the politicisation of enlargement policy by some Member States, followed by the geopolitical implications of the EU's ambiguous behaviour in the region. For Albania, the opposing reactions of France and the Netherlands to its accession process have led to a deceleration about the speed of EU reform and the presence of democratic backsliding. Whereas, in North Macedonia, Bulgaria's unilateral veto could undermine the reform efforts and positive results achieved since 2017. Faced with the EU's mix of signals and repeated delaying of the accession talks, the chances to get these countries on track are diminishing.

Politicisation of Enlargement

The multiple crises the EU has faced over the last decade have exerted considerable influence on the politicisation of its public sphere, with implications for the enlargement process towards the Balkans. While new enlargement is perceived as premature and to a certain extent a burden for the EU, the effects of politicisation emerge first and foremost through the slowing down of the Council's decision-making process. In the light of an increase in politicisation, Member States have regained the role of determining the pace of accession, showing a preference for unanimity and making effective use of their

¹ H. Blewett-Mundy, "The EU tries to revive Western Balkan Enlargement in Midst of a Pandemic", *Global Risk Insights*, 7 December 2020.

veto power.² Paradoxically, the 2020 accession methodology seems to reinforce this perspective.

France is the first example with its resistance to commencing accession talks in the past two years, turning into such an emblematic case that, because of its persistence, the EU adopted a new methodology for accession negotiations. It has justified its position for a more rigorous approach to accession based on the democratic backsliding experienced in Member States like Hungary and Poland.³ Paris' delaying of enlargement also reflects some purely domestic political calculations. In view of its presidential elections due in April 2022 and the Council's rotating presidency during the same semester, there are few prospects for a breakthrough for Albania and North Macedonia. France, followed by the Netherlands, still deems Albania's performance on rule of law and combatting corruption as insufficient. This was confirmed also by the High Representative Josep Borrell in the last EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Council, arguing that beyond the Commission's assessments, "[s]ome countries believe that Albania is not ready yet to be integrated in the EU".⁴

Domestic parliamentary politics have also dictated Dutch behaviour as the country held general elections in mid-March 2021. Using a "strict and fair" approach as justification, the Dutch government's position is influenced to a certain extent by the widespread scepticism in the country towards enlargement. Particularly for Albania, its official position has not differed much during the last year. In a letter sent to the national Parliament, the Dutch government recognised that Albania

² G. Madhi, "Diluting principles, darkening EU accession perspective: Politicization of Kosovo's visa liberalization process", in I. Armakolas et al (eds.), *Local and International Determinants of Kosovo's Statehood: Volume II*, Pristina, 2021, pp. 301-334.

³ D. Bechev and D. Marusic, *North Macedonia on the threshold of Europe*, Atlantic Council, December 2020.

⁴ "[Some EU countries not convinced for Albania's integration](#)", *Albanian Daily News*, 1 March 2021.

has continued to make progress in key areas, but there are still concerns about the media and the fight against corruption and organised crime needs to be stepped up.⁵

Another Member State that has instrumentalised enlargement and the veto mechanism for pure domestic politics is Bulgaria, *vis-à-vis* North Macedonia this time, on the grounds of an interpretation of “shared history”. The Bulgarian-led controversy came right after the landmark agreement signed between North Macedonia and Greece after a decade long veto by the latter due to the name issue. By using its veto, Bulgaria’s behaviour is interpreted as shedding light on the general “hypocrisy inherent in the EU’s overall approach to the Western Balkans and its European perspective”.⁶ As Bulgaria was expected to go through parliamentary elections in early April, the arbitrary controversy with North Macedonia served the political elite in the domestic electoral campaign. At EU level, its veto has put the accession process on a dead-end path, compromising the conditionality approach and undermining the founding values and criteria on which the process was built.

In response, the Commission argues that both Albania and North Macedonia have made decisive progress with their respective reform agendas, injecting hope for the start of the first intergovernmental conferences.⁷ This decoupling between the Commission’s official position and the single Member States sitting on the Council has led to a binary, parallel process on enlargement. On the one hand, the decoupling undermines the EU’s credibility and the progress of reform processes in the Balkans. Moreover, it also affects the Commission’s credibility, leading to fragmentation within the EU’s institutional structure. On the other, the region’s ruling

⁵ “Parlamenti hollandez diskuton per Shqiperine” (“The Dutch Parliament discusses Albania”), *Exit.al*, 3 November 2020.

⁶ E. Fouere, *The EU’s enlargement agenda is no longer fit for purpose*, Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 11 January 2021.

⁷ “Albania, North Macedonia ‘Should start EU accession talks this year’”, *BalkanInsight*, 6 October 2020.

elites instrumentalise the Commission's position domestically for political purposes, arguing they are complying with EU conditionality. By blaming the behaviour of certain Member States for stalling enlargement, the ruling elites remain indifferent to democratic and reform stagnation, and explore unaccountable practices. This "prolonged and disrupted process has resulted in obscurement of [enlargement] essence and loss of its transformative power".⁸ The political spiralling of this situation makes the process even more complex, by paralysing the transformative power of conditionality and undermining future Europeanisation prospects for the Balkans.

Geopolitics of EU Enlargement

Recently the Commission has sought to adopt a geopolitical approach to the Western Balkans, which was also acknowledged in the 2018 Enlargement Strategy. Back then, the High Representative Federica Mogherini said "the integration process of the entire Western Balkans ... is not a favour we make, it is a matter of self-interest for the European Union".⁹ With the establishment of the new institutional cycle in late 2019, the European Union's high-ranking officials pushed the EU's geopolitical agenda further, with President Ursula von der Leyen pledging to lead a "geopolitical Commission" and High Representative Josep Borrell asserting the "EU has to learn the language of power".¹⁰ Despite such statements, in terms of enlargement as a "geostrategic investment",¹¹ the Commission has failed to turn its words into concrete actions.¹²

⁸ M. Ristevka Jordanova, "The Macedonian path to Brussels: Breaking the vicious cycle", European Policy Initiative, 5 February 2021.

⁹ Speech by HR/VP Mogherini at the event "Albania: Committed to the reform" at the European Parliament, Brussels, 20 March 2018.

¹⁰ European Parliament, [Hearing with High Representative/Vice President-designate Josep Borrell](#), 7 October 2019.

¹¹ European Commission, [Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#), COM(2020) 57 final, Brussels, 5 February 2020.

¹² M. Petrovic and N. Tzifakis, "A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another

With the adoption of the new accession methodology, the Commission recognised the non-technical nature of accession negotiations, giving Member States the ability to conduct parallel assessments and define the rules and speed of the game in accordance with their own national interests.¹³ The pending status quo for the accession talks for Albania and for North Macedonia provides a clear example of how certain Member States are using enlargement policy, crafting extra conditions that go beyond the adoption of the *acquis*. The European Union's disengagement and questioning of enlargement plays in favour of third parties edging onto the regional scene. In a sign of solidarity and by providing alternative support to cope with the far-reaching effects of the pandemic, both China and Russia have seen their influence in the region multiply. "Mask and vaccine diplomacy" are reinforcing their position, in contrast to Brussels. Last April, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic said "EU solidarity is an illusion" and when he welcomed Chinese aid he symbolically kissed the Chinese flag.¹⁴ Meanwhile Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama stated, a few days before the Council's greenlight on accession talks, that his government has put a list of requests to tackle the effects of coronavirus on Turkey's table.¹⁵ The same example was followed later on by Kosovo's former President Hashim Thaci, who found Turkey an ally in the battle against Covid-19.

Although it is difficult to determine to what extent the increased competition and power politics between EU and external players is going to affect future developments in the trajectory of Balkan countries, it is certain the pandemic has

postponement? An introduction", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 20 February 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A. Ivkovic, "Perception of Eu aid amidst the pandemic faces challenges across the Western Balkans", *European Western Balkans*, 17 April 2020.

¹⁵ "Ne rast se do te permbyset bota... Rama: Kam folur me Erdoganin, kemi ndihmen e garantuar" ("In case the world is overthrown... Rama: I talked to Erdogan, we have guaranteed help"), *Balkanweb.com*, 19 March 2020.

served as an excuse for the region's ruling elite to continue democratic backsliding. By delaying accession, the EU has sought to preserve stability, closing both eyes to the real state of the rule of law and human rights in the Balkans. While the accession frontrunners are progressing slowly, democratic decline is acknowledged in almost all countries. Paradoxically, the Western Balkans have found themselves involved in a "ring of empty promises".¹⁶ The contradictory situation sees, on the one side, the EU's inclination for "stability and a pro forma adoption of reforms"¹⁷ and, on the other side, Balkan leaders' acknowledgement that "their accession progress no longer depends on their own efforts".¹⁸ In this situation, illiberal behaviour has been favoured, with ruling elites formally committed to the EU agenda and competing to delight Brussels, while ignoring domestic accountability and reinforcing the vicious circle of mutual non-credibility.¹⁹

Albania Hitting the EU Wall

Albania's journey towards EU membership resembles a long, bumpy road, marked by the regular introduction of pre-conditions and never-ending assessments. The Council's issuing of the greenlight to open accession talks with Albania was accompanied by a list of 15 new pre-conditions, to be satisfied prior to holding the first and second intergovernmental conferences. The first nine concerns were raised by the German Bundestag resolution of September 2019, while the remaining six accommodate the concerns raised by France, the Netherlands and Greece. The pre-conditions show Albania's

¹⁶ S. Economides, "From fatigue to resistance: EU enlargement and the Western Balkans", Dahrendorf Forum, 20 March 2020.

¹⁷ E. Fouere (2021).

¹⁸ "Breaking the impasse: Exploiting new opportunities to strengthen EU-Western Balkans relations", European Policy Center, 7 December 2020.

¹⁹ M. Ristevka Jordanova (2021).

need to make further progress on fundamental rights, rule of law, electoral law, population census, minority, etc. In principle the pre-conditions address legitimate interests on the rule of law spectrum, in line also with the *acquis*, but the time left at the disposal of the Albanian government to comply with them is of ambiguous intent. On the one hand, the fulfilment of these pre-conditions demands long time periods as a considerable part deals with “the fundamentals”, the content of the first negotiation cluster,²⁰ whose enforcement is expected to take place during the negotiation phase. On the other hand, how the pre-conditions are set out in the official document raises questions on how progress is effectively measured, providing opportunities for Member States to interpret the results achieved, while generating the risk of prolonging the waiting phase and politicising the process. Nevertheless, six months later, in October 2020, the Commission declared that Albania had fulfilled the requested pre-conditions for the first intergovernmental conference, asking the Council to deliberate on this. The Commission’s assessment did not get many positive reactions, with France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain and Germany arguing that Albania has not yet addressed two key conditions, namely electoral reform and the functioning of the Constitutional Court.²¹ The different interpretations of Albania’s progress have led to a certain confusion and generally harmed the EU’s credibility domestically.

When Rama came to power in mid-2013, his top priority was commencing accession talks, especially once the Council awarded the country candidate status in June 2014. Albania was the first candidate country, embarking on unprecedented and comprehensive justice reform in 2016 – backed by the EU (and U.S.) – prior to the commencement of negotiations and

²⁰ A. Hoxhaj, “[The EU-Albanian accession talks: Renewed hope or yet another symbolic gesture?](#)”, *Global Policy*, 8 April 2020.

²¹ “5 shtete të BE kundër hapjes së negociatave për Shqipërinë, Zykaj: Kushtet që nuk përmbushen” (“5 EU countries against the opening of negotiations for Albania, Zykaj: Conditions that are not met”), *ABC News*, 6 November 2020.

the process is still going. The request to fulfil the above-listed pre-conditions, such as improving the country's track record on the fight against organised crime and corruption, in principle requires a fully functioning judicial system, with enough judges and prosecutors. As the vetting process is still ongoing and the new justice institutions recently started operating, it is hardly possible to have the two processes proceeding in parallel: establishment of institutions with new judges taking office, and simultaneously achieving a satisfying track record against organised crime. Meanwhile the electoral reform pre-condition was initially interpreted as mere legislative approval, but later on the focus from the EU side shifted to its effective implementation in the next general elections on 25 April 2021. The moving target of the EU's interpretation of the pre-condition automatically implied a temporary postponement to the start of accession talks, from potentially the end of 2020 to June 2021 at best.

In front of this missing carrot and uncertainty coming from the EU side, there is little motivation for the Albanian government to proceed quickly with the requested reforms. After a suspension of the vetting process due to the pandemic, the temporary re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors proceeded steadily, with around 62% dismissed due to unjustified assets or resignations.²² Following the pressure exerted by the U.S. Embassy, at the end of the year Albania's Constitutional Court regained functionality, with seven judges in office out of nine. A similar destiny was reserved for the electoral code, which was modified by consensus in mid-summer 2020 with the mediation of the U.S. Ambassador in Tirana. However, some weeks later the Parliament unilaterally adopted a series of amendments to the electoral code, which disappointed the opposition and increased domestic political tension. To justify Albania's slow progress towards EU accession in the eyes

²² European Commission, "Key findings of the 2020 Report on Albania", Brussels, 6 October 2020.

of public opinion, Prime Minister Rama regularly uses, as a pretext, the forthcoming national elections in some sceptical Member States, which are instrumentalising the enlargement process for their domestic electoral purposes.²³

In 2020, Albania showed both aspects of reform and waiting fatigue, coupled with some democratic backsliding. Recently Freedom House categorised it as a partially free country, ranking in 66th position, one point lower for the second consecutive year.²⁴ The pandemic outbreak resulted in a state of emergency being declared, suspension of parliamentary work, partial suspension of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and some concentration of power. The government took advantage of the health crisis to make decisions without consultation, like illegally demolishing the National Theatre, a historical building, and acting brutally against the protesters.²⁵ Later, a young man was shot by the police in unclear circumstances for having violated the curfew. The deterioration of democracy was worsened by the deep political polarisation and dysfunctional system of checks and balances, following the parliamentary opposition relinquishing their mandates in February 2019.

Media freedom was also attacked, with the government insisting on passing the amendments to the so-called anti-defamation package, targeting online media particularly. The intervention of the Venice Commission highlighted the legislative package's violation of international standards and the increase in censorship and self-censorship among media workers.²⁶ While the legislative package has been suspended, Prime Minister Rama has continued to use derogatory terms like "trash bin" for the Albanian media, fomenting anti-journalist rhetoric and delegitimising media professions.

²³ A. Shuka, "Rama: Vendimarrja varet nga dinamikat e brendshme të BE" ("Rama: Decision-making depends on the internal dynamics of the EU"), *DW*, 19 September 2020.

²⁴ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021*.

²⁵ G. Madhi, "Albania: The end of a theater", *OBC TransEuropa*, 18 May 2020.

²⁶ European Commission, "2020 Report on Albania"..., cit.

North Macedonia's Delayed EU Bid

Already 15 years have passed since North Macedonia was granted candidate status and still the country is waiting for a concrete date for accession talks to begin. Its EU integration path has been unprecedented in how it has been marked by the use and misuse of the veto power by some Member States due to reasons of history and identity. Yet, 2020 was particularly notable for having started with the French veto of the country's accession and concluded with the Bulgarian one. The Council's March attempt to inject impetus to accession by deliberating formally on commencing talks left North Macedonia in a profound political crisis, due to Paris's double veto in 2019. Parliament had already been dissolved by February 2020 and although the intention was to hold general elections in April, the pandemic outbreak meant they were postponed until mid-summer.

Even though not completely a surprise, Bulgaria's unilateral statement annexed to the March Council conclusions insisting on a series of conditions to be met prior to the first intergovernmental conference²⁷ was the first sign of a short-sighted approach and little credibility for any major accession outcome. Dragged down by reasons of history and identity, in November Bulgaria made its veto of North Macedonia official, creating another case of *déjà vu*. Paradoxically, the refusal came one week after the Sofia Summit, held within the framework of the countries' shared presidency of the Berlin process, which aims to contribute to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Back in August 2017, the parties had signed, and later, ratified a joint Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation, which recognised both countries' territorial integrity and their commitment to work closely to resolve differing views of history. Nevertheless, despite the mediation efforts of the German Council presidency, Sofia was intransigent in protecting the "Bulgarian roots" of the Macedonian language.

²⁷ E. Fouere (2021).

In December when the Council's draft conclusions used the wording "misinterpretation of history", the Czech and Slovak governments declined to accept what they considered as an attempt at "falsifying history".²⁸

The Bulgarian veto is seen as a calculated political move by the government led by Boyko Borisov because of the country's domestic problems and forthcoming general elections in April 2021. However, this decision has been criticised domestically as it could isolate Bulgaria in the EU.²⁹ In a broader perspective, the Bulgarian veto may have adverse consequences for the EU's pragmatic ambitions in the region and it shows accession is a moving target. On the one hand, the Bulgarian veto undermined the Copenhagen criteria and questions the credibility of enlargement policy in the Balkans. On the other hand, Sofia's behaviour attempts to set a precedent for future accession rounds, creating unequal positioning for the parties involved. The weight of bilateral disputes on historical grounds in the accession framework burdens the EU and implicitly its Member States with taking on the role of judges. For as long as Bulgaria decides to insist on its position, there will be little incentive for North Macedonia to move ahead with implementing the EU reform agenda. The democratic backsliding and state capture that North Macedonia went through under the Nikola Gruevski government are an example of what can occur in the region when the European perspective deteriorates and there is a lack of credibility.

Since Zoran Zaev's rise to power, the Macedonian reform agenda has taken a U-turn with positive results in rule of law and good governance. Although classified as partially free by Freedom House in its 2021 Freedom in the World report, the country has managed to improve its score with +3 points compared to the previous year, ranking in 66th position together with Albania.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ B. Stojkovski, "Bulgaria's veto for North Macedonia's European hopes spells trouble for the region", *New Easter Europe*, 3 February 2021.

³⁰ Freedom House, "Global Freedom Scores", Freedom in the World 2021.

Considering the pandemic outbreak found the country with a technical government in office and without a functioning Parliament, the danger of the country being derailed from its EU path could not be excluded a priori. Despite some signs of setbacks in the oversight of the executive during the management of the first pandemic shock,³¹ the institutions established in the post-Gruevski phase managed to pass the stress test of holding competitive elections. The results reinforced the position of those in office, with Zaev reconfirmed as Prime Minister.

The new government in office still has a lot to do in terms of the independence and impartiality of judicial institutions and the dismantling of corruption and organised crime. The democratisation of public institutions cannot happen overnight, but major deficiencies do still exist, particularly in relation to public administration reform. Civil society reports show that the practice of taking the spoils and patronage is still present,³² and meaningful interventions and enforcement can only occur if there is an evident EU carrot. Nonetheless, a lot also remains to be done on fundamental rights and media freedom. The breach of personal data protection rights during the first pandemic wave – justified by the Minister of Health as a way to raise awareness – shows the lack of understanding and incapacity of state institutions to lead by example. The deterioration of media freedom and the various alerts about attacks against journalists and media workers show how acute the problem of press freedom is in North Macedonia. Seen in a broader context, these attacks constitute a breach of human rights as they not only aim at silencing journalists, but also at hiding unaccountable practices and exerting a dampening effect on public debate.³³

³¹ “North Macedonia in 2020: Major events that shaped politics in North Macedonia in 2020”, *IDSCS*, Skopje, 2021.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Resource Center on Media Freedom in Europe, “North Macedonia: MFRR partners express concern over recent attacks on journalists and media workers”, 28 September 2020.

Conclusions

The EU enlargement process for the Western Balkans has encountered major hardships in recent years and could cause more trouble than might initially have been foreseen. The multiple crises the European Union has been dealing with, along with the Covid-19 crisis that began in spring 2020, have led to serious in-house fractures between Member States' interests in enlargement and shed light on some of the short-sighted effects of the EU's foreign policy.

In the recent past, the EU has been sending mixed signals to countries in the region. The EU's practice of relying on symbolic gestures and *déjà vu* acts has started to produce the first effects in terms of democratic backsliding, restriction of freedoms and concentration of power in some countries. On the one hand, the Member States increasingly prefer to reinforce national priorities, with short-term national agendas prevailing over the European Union's long-term interests. In particular, the "reappropriation" of veto power by specific sceptical Member States has made enlargement more politicised and reduced Brussels' credibility and attractiveness in Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, the politicisation has led to a decoupling between the Commission's official position and that of the Council. As the decoupling negatively affects the European Union's credibility and the speed of reforms in the Balkans, it also has an impact on the level of internal fragmentation of the EU's institutional structure. Nonetheless, delaying accession by using the veto could seriously compromise the conditionality approach and have consequences for the EU's pragmatic ambitions in the Western Balkans.

The contradictory positions between sceptical Member States and the Commission on the progress of reforms in Albania or North Macedonia could further harm the accession process and bring it to a dead-end. The real beneficiaries of such "EU division" are the ruling elites in the region, who succeed in instrumentalising both the Commission's position and Member

States' domestic developments, as a way to justify their failings on democratic standards and good governance. The spiralling of this complex political situation reinforces the illiberal ruling elites in power and paralyses the transformative power of conditionality, putting the EU in front of a *fait accompli* to choose preserving stability over democracy in the region.

Overall, the pending *status quo* for the commencement of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia remains a clear example of how accession has turned into a moving target, and that the European Union's disengagement is playing in favour of third countries interested in edging into the region.

Expert View

Belgrade and Pristina: A Dialogue Between the Deaf Mediated by the Blind?

Michael L. Giffoni

“The problem is to understand each other. Or perhaps no one can understand anyone: every blackbird believes he has put into the whistle a meaning that is fundamental for him, but only he understands it; the other replies something that has no relation to what he said; it is a dialogue between the deaf, a conversation without head or tail. But are human dialogues perhaps something different?”¹

Almost a year ago I used this evocative imagery from Italo Calvino’s novel *Palomar* to describe the languishing state of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, officially mediated by the European Union and strongly supported by the United States, in a phase of new and high hopes for its resumption. The negotiation exercise, launched in 2011, was defined from the outset as essential for both the emancipation of Kosovo, independent since 2008 but without full international legitimacy (since it is only recognised by about 110 countries), and Kosovo’s relations with Serbia (whose non recognition is blocking its full legitimisation), as well as for the prospects of rapprochement and accession of the two countries to the European Union and for the stabilisation of the entire Western

¹ From I. Calvino, *Palomar*. (First edition in italian: Milan, Einaudi,1983).

Balkans region. Not surprisingly, the reference to the dialogue among blackbirds still appears relevant since Balkan mythology traces back to the legendary battle of the “Field of Blackbirds” (Kosovo Polje-Gazimestan, 28 June 1389) the implacable hostility between Serbs and Albanians over control of Kosovar territory, which is still at the core of the “Kosovo issue”.²

A Disharmonic Concert of Voices

The dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade mediated by Brussels is a good example of dialogue between the deaf, from its promising beginnings on a technical level, through an exciting phase that led to the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013, prematurely defined as “historic” since none of its main provisions were implemented, up to its apparent death in 2018 due to the Kosovo government’s imposition of a 100% tariff on Serbian products. Last year actually saw an apparent resurrection of the dialogue, mostly thanks to the hammering and tweeting mediation of U.S. Special Envoy Richard Grenell. Though spectacular, this process was not very consistent, resulting in a series of vague and still controversial documents signed in early September 2020 at the White House, which increased, rather than decreased, the confusion.

It seems that through all these years, opposite actions and reactions by Pristina and Belgrade as well as uncoordinated initiatives in Washington and Brussels (the main mediators and promoters of the dialogue itself) produced an unpromising disharmonic concert of voices instead of a plain and frank dialogue aimed at a definitive resolution of the issue. The mediators themselves were often contradictory, moving blindly and rashly, and without a clear vision of the reality on the ground and of the way to tackle the stalemate.³

² M.L. Giffoni, *Kosovo e Serbia alla prova del dialogo* (Kosovo and Serbia put to the test of dialogue), ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 17 March 2020.

³ G. Fruscione, *La fine del dialogo per come lo conosciamo* (The end of the dialogue as we

In its current form, the long-running dispute has two distinct parts: the first concerns Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence and Kosovo's lesser-known refusal to recognise Serbia; the second concerns who will effectively govern the areas where Kosovo's Serb population is predominantly located in the territory of Kosovo and where Belgrade's influence still persists. Finally, in recent months, the political climate, aggravated by the consequences of the pandemic, has been heated both in Serbia and, in an almost extreme way, in Kosovo. The question is whether, in view of the recent developments in Pristina and Belgrade as well as in Brussels and Washington, it is still possible to hold out hope for a resumption of negotiations, still considered essential for the stability and progress of the entire Balkan area. To answer the question, we need to run through the ups and downs of the exercise and then assess from which negotiating aspects and with which approach the talks can be restarted.

The descent into hell, the UN limbo and the path to contested statehood

The Kosovo issue was at the heart of Yugoslavia's descent into deadly conflict from 1991 to 1999, launching the career of strongman Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, hastening the country's break-up and the consequent wars that led to the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. After many years of "non-violent resistance à la Gandhi" preached by Ibrahim Rugova, even Kosovo's ethnic Albanians started an insurgency seeking independence from the Republic of Serbia. The latter responded with harsh and brutal repression, leading to the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention and UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which ended Serbian rule over the territory of Kosovo. After a period (known as "the UN limbo") of UN administration and a failed attempt to negotiate an agreement

accepted by both Parties, the U.S. and most of the members of the European Union shepherded Kosovo towards a formal declaration of independence in February 2008, which was rejected by Belgrade. Since then, Kosovo has been recognised by about 110 states and has also joined a number of international bodies, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, but its bids to join Interpol and many UN agencies have failed due to Serbia's tireless obstructionist campaign.⁴

The opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the beginning of the (technical) dialogue

After Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, any form of dialogue or cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina simply stopped but there were no violent clashes since Serbia sought a legal remedy. In an attempt to roll back international recognition of Kosovo's independence, Serbia asked the UN General Assembly to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legality of Kosovo's 2008 declaration. The UN General Assembly did so, and two years later the Court found that Kosovo had not violated international law or UN Resolution 1244. The General Assembly did not call for a new dialogue on status as Belgrade had hoped but, under strong pressure mainly from the EU and its member states, it welcomed new talks focused on practical issues to improve the daily lives of those affected by the dispute, basically all the ethnic groups making up Kosovo's population. Those talks started in 2011 under EU auspices and were designed to lock Serbia into gradually accepting the Kosovo government's authority over its entire territory, without raising the status issue explicitly but trying to find agreement on technical issues of primary importance for citizens' daily lives. The parties agreed on many issues, including mutual recognition of licence plates and school diplomas, national civil registry and cadastral records. Although implementation of the agreements

⁴ *Relaunching the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue*, International Crisis Group, ICG Report, no. 262, 25 January 2021.

was (and is still) lengthy and complex, there was undoubted progress toward better cooperation, which convinced European mediators to upgrade the level of the talks, extending the “positive experience of working together, solving problems” beyond the people involved to the broader political class in Kosovo and Serbia.

The 2013 “Brussels Agreement on Normalisation of Relations”: What Does Normalisation Mean?

In 2012 and 2013, the then EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton mediated talks at prime ministerial level, discussing directly with Kosovo’s Hashim Thaci and Serbia’s Ivica Dacic the sensitive topic of integrating Kosovo Serbs into the Pristina government and dismantling Serbia’s parallel institutions in Kosovo. Because of the distance between the parties, the mediators backed away from trying to reach substantive agreement on key issues and introduced what they considered to be “constructive ambiguity” by using deliberately vague language. The talks culminated in the first Brussels Agreement on Normalisation of Relations (19 April 2013), but what this document meant by “normalisation” was itself ambiguous. For Pristina, the U.S. and many EU member states, the term meant recognition of Kosovo in substance if not yet in form, while for Serbia it meant merely a set of pragmatic arrangements on the ground.

The “Association/Community of Serb municipalities”

The agreement, which was prematurely defined as “historic”, did not address Kosovo’s status at all. Instead, its centrepiece was an arrangement intended to facilitate integration of Kosovo’s Serb-majority areas and to enhance their autonomy, but it has entirely failed to do so since the new grouping of Serb-majority municipalities (vaguely defined with a dual name: “Community” for Serbs, “Association” for Kosovars) has still not been established eight years after the signature. Belgrade

considers this grouping as a sort of autonomous entity much like “Republika Srpska” in Bosnia-Herzegovina, while for Pristina it is little more than a repackaging of its existing arrangements for local self-government included in the 2008 Constitution. Even so, it has resisted creating the “Association”, citing a December 2015 judgment by its Constitutional Court which found that parts of the 2013 deal may have been unconstitutional, as an argument for delaying its establishment. Issues relating to Serbia’s influence over parts of Kosovo where Serbs live in substantial numbers are really essential and cannot remain undefined. Precise population figures for Kosovo’s Serbs are unavailable due to census boycotts and difficulties in completing the census, but estimates put the Kosovo Serb population at about 145,000 out of a total population of 1.8 million. Between 60,000 and 70,000 live in four heavily Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, on the border with Serbia. Another 50,000 to 60,000 live in six southern Serb-majority municipalities (known as “Serbian enclaves”). The town of Mitrovica is a sore and worrisome point: it was divided mostly along the Ibar River in 1999 and Serbs with drew to the northern part.⁵ Today, it comprises two municipalities: South Mitrovica (loyal to Pristina with an Albanian population) and North Mitrovica (loyal to Belgrade with a Serb majority and substantial Albanian and Bosniak minorities). Tensions between the two persist, notably along the main bridge joining the two sides of the river, periodically blockaded by Serbs and therefore constantly guarded and patrolled by NATO/KFOR forces.

The “Srpska Lista”: Belgrade as Political Rentier in Kosovo

In recent years, Serbia has fully consolidated its control over Kosovo’s Serb political leadership. During the years before and immediately after the declaration of independence, the Serb

⁵ I. Bancroft, *Dragon’s teeth: tales from North Kosovo*, London, Ibidem Press, 2020.

political scene in Kosovo was composite and fragmented, with a variety of political parties, including branches of many Serbia-based parties and homegrown ones. The situation changed completely in 2013-14, when the EU pressured Serbia into shutting down its parallel municipalities and ensuring that Serbs turned out to vote in Kosovo's elections, which they had been boycotting for years. Belgrade complied by setting up a new party, the Serb List (*Srpska lista*), which in a few years obtained a near monopoly on Serb votes in Kosovo, remaining openly loyal to Belgrade and benefiting from the constitutional requirement that Serbs hold at least one ministerial post and ten Assembly seats. As a sort of local follow-up to the steady rise to absolute power of Aleksandar Vucic in Belgrade, the Serb list quickly co-opted almost all other parties and is today the only parliamentary party representing ethnic Serbs, acting in effect as a subsidiary of the Serbian Progressive Party led by Vucic, the strongman's ruling party in Serbia proper.

The "elephant in the room"

In 2014-15, the new EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini convened a second round of prime ministerial talks aimed at remedying Pristina's lack of progress toward establishing the Community/Association and reaching deals on energy, telecommunications and the bridge joining North and South Mitrovica. Implementation of these deals has been mixed, and the Community/Association system remains essentially an idea on paper. EU officials later sought substantive talks on the "status issue" or Kosovo's independence, as the parties had reached the limits of what they could agree on without addressing this issue. The move and the way it was conducted led to only one devastating effect: it introduced an "elephant in the room" that effectively blew the chances of negotiation and of any progress on dialogue.

The negotiations were secret, and precise details have yet to be made public, but it was soon leaked that they included a "land swap" (or "border modification") widely assumed to

involve trading parts of the four, predominantly Serb, northern Kosovo municipalities for parts of Serbia's Presevo Valley, which are predominantly inhabited by ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia. The discussions culminated in a 2018 draft agreement meant to be put before the UN Security Council, with Russia and the U.S. apparently, albeit quietly, supportive. Once it became public, however, the idea of adjusting borders immediately aroused fierce opposition both locally and internationally.⁶ A number of EU member states, led by Germany, protested strongly enough to halt the talks, objecting that other Balkan countries, notably Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia, were opposed due to the repercussions such an agreement could have for their national unity and integrity. Thaci also ran into strong criticism at home, where Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj destroyed all chances of continuing talks by imposing a 100% tariff on goods imported from Serbia as a response to alleged Serbian trade abuses and Serbia's successful lobbying against Kosovo's bid to join Interpol and UNESCO.

Amessy 2020 and the end of the dialogue as we knew it

In 2019 and 2020, both Thaçi in Pristina (hoping to redeem himself internally and to regain political ground after the first electoral loss against Albin Kurti, his fierce rival and opponent who had become prime minister and was overthrown after only two months in power) and Vucic in Belgrade (who, on the contrary, consolidated his absolute power after an election boycotted by the main opposition parties) approached the Trump administration with a proposal to restart talks under U.S. auspices. Washington welcomed the approach and President Donald Trump appointed the then U.S. Ambassador in Berlin Richard Grenell as Special Envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, who insistently tweeted and successfully pressured Pristina into lifting tariffs. The problem, as before, was that the deal under discussion reportedly included a

⁶ *Relaunching the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue...*, cit.

trade-off between recognition and border adjustment, attracting intense popular obstruction in both countries and concomitant strong opposition from several European governments, led by Germany. Moreover, in Brussels there was evident European antipathy toward Washington's growing role in a process involving the resolution of a dispute in their own backyard. The EU responded by appointing Miroslav Lajcak – former foreign minister of Slovakia with extensive Balkan experience but with the 'original sin' of coming from one of the 5EU non-recogniser member states – as EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.⁷

What eventually prevented the Washington talks from getting off the ground, however, was the announcement of Thaci's pending war crimes indictment issued by the special court in The Hague (which led to his resignation at the end of the year). In place of the substantive negotiations planned by Grenell, Vucic met Kosovo's prime minister Avdullah Hoti at a Washington summit on 4 September 2020 that produced an Oval Office photo opportunity and a pair of unusual documents, one signed by each leader. These were a repackaging of earlier commitments, with a number of promises to honour U.S. foreign policy goals unrelated to the Balkans (concerning the Middle East and Jerusalem) and very few items of bilateral importance. It is very difficult to consider the different parts of the arrangement as a real bilateral agreement since, among other things, they were poorly coordinated and began to fray immediately, with Serbia reneging on the Jerusalem embassy move after learning of Israel's recognition of Pristina. During the same period, Lajcak mediated talks on missing persons, returnees and other items, without reaching any concrete agreement and without being able to place on the agenda the controversial but still key question of the "Community/ Association of Serbian municipalities". We have basically seen

⁷ M.L. Giffoni, *Kosovo: una lunga, turbolenta primavera* (*Kosovo: a long, turbulent spring*), ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 26 June 2020.

the end of the dialogue as we knew it and its division into a double-track channel, mediated by the U.S. and the EU respectively, but there has been no visible progress toward resolving core issues that need to be dealt with for the two states to enjoy a normal relationship.

Albin Kurti's revenge in Kosovo

It is now time to turn our attention to the internal political situation in Kosovo and Serbia, which set the background for the recent skirmishes in the dialogue just described. On 14 February 2021, early elections were held in Kosovo after a year of backward-looking policies and political instability, amid a pandemic emergency, serious economic difficulties, stalled dialogue with Belgrade and an environment of deep public frustration with the establishment. The left-wing nationalist party *Vetevendosje* (Self-Determination) easily won the parliamentary elections, effectively a referendum with a 47.8% turnout, and its leader Albin Kurti could take his revenge. Kurti had also won in 2019, but was removed after 51 days in power officially due to bad management of the pandemic crisis but most probably thanks to domestic political machinations and foreign interference because he had refused to remove the tariff on goods from Serbia which resulted in suspension of the dialogue for a year.

Albanian voters, especially young people, punished not only the previous government coalitions and their policies but also the entire generation of warlords turned political leaders that dominated the Kosovar scene for twenty years and which Kurti and his followers openly accuse of crimes, corruption and nepotism. Most of the "old guard", except for Ramush Haradinaj, were eventually removed from the scene, and the four leaders of the former Kosovo Liberation Army and the PDK (Hashim Thaci, Kadri Veseli, Jakup Krasniqi, and Rexhep Selimi) are currently in The Hague where they have been charged with a series of crimes. The election campaign, however, was dominated by domestic issues, mainly the

economic recovery and the fight against unemployment and corruption, two calamities endemic to Kosovo.⁸ Listening to the wishes of the voters, after his election victory Kurti stressed that the public ranks dialogue “sixth or seventh in the list of priorities”, and this issue was definitely not a top priority for any of the candidates or parties during the election campaign. In any case, how Kurti will use the opportunity for a new beginning or a “new political era” this time around also largely depends on the “external factor”, above all on the negotiation processes with Serbia. The stability and progress of the people of Kosovo ultimately depends on the definitive, peaceful and just solution of the “Kosovo issue”. Kurti and the new political elite in Pristina, and not only the “old guard”, know this to be true, and they can also be coaxed toward a less intransigent position. Washington and Brussels can help give a push in this direction, but only if they act in a coordinated and not in a competitive way.⁹

Vucic's strong political hand in Serbia

In contrast to his counterparts in Kosovo, President Vucic is playing an exceptionally strong political hand in Serbia. His populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came out of the 21 June 2020 elections somewhat tarnished by a fierce (but ineffective) opposition boycott and low turnout, but with an ironclad parliamentary majority of 171 seats out of 250. In addition, allied parties fill most of the remaining seats, with only a few small parties representing ethnic minorities in opposition. Although Belgrade saw violent demonstrations on 7 July after the announcement of new lockdown measures, the unrest did not pose a strong challenge to Vucic's power. For the time being, Vucic stands very much on top of his country's

⁸ G. Fruscione, *Kosovo: Kurti vince le elezioni e seppelisce le élite di guerra* (Kosovo: Kurti wins elections and buries war elites), ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 15 February 2021.

⁹ L. Hartwell, *The Serbia-Kosovo dialogue: ripe for resolution?*, Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), 2 March 2021.

political scene and he appears to consider a deal with Kosovo as a legacy worth fighting for.¹⁰ The fact is that, although his dominant position gives him room for manoeuvre, the way forward is not a smooth path. Firstly, Vucic may not find a Kosovar counterpart who also wants to reach a deal and is politically strong enough to present it to his support base and to the wider public. Thaci was a counterpart who appeared to be truly committed to finding a solution, but whose domestic support was badly eroded. Secondly, the final concession he will be required to make (recognition) is irreversible and still emotionally challenging in Serbia. It is true that many Serbs understand on some level that Kosovo is now an independent country, but it is also true that a formal acceptance of that tough reality remains painful. Thus, if Vucic is committed to progress in the dialogue, he will need to take two essential internal steps.

The first is to come to grips with the terms on which he would be prepared to agree to recognition for Kosovo. The second is to share these terms with all the political élites and wider public across the country. It is worth remembering that under Serbia's constitution recognition of Kosovo requires a referendum. In order to ensure a successful outcome in a referendum, Vucic will certainly need a real and credible strategy for building public support, which will almost certainly have to include a higher level of communication and perhaps the expenditure of much of his substantial political capital. Also, Brussels and Washington's call on Serbian leaders to resume the dialogue with Pristina will only be useful if it is coordinated and univocal, all the more so since their influence in Belgrade is strongly counterbalanced and opposed by Moscow, Serbia's traditional friend, and by Beijing, the new (and even stronger) ally, whose influence and reputation among Serbs has grown considerably during the pandemic.

¹⁰ G. Fruscione, *Serbia al voto ma a democrazia è ormai in fin di vita* (Serbia to vote but democracy is now dying), ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 26 June 2020.

Back to the Real and Essential Points

Given the difficult political context in Serbia and Kosovo just described, it seems that a serious resumption of dialogue is only imaginable with a convergence between the leaders of the two capitals as a result of an extreme effort by both to persuade the public of the urgent and essential need to solve once and for all two key open issues, without which there will never be a true and effective normalisation of relations. The first is the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by Belgrade, and the second is the building, not only on paper, of an effective system of autonomy for the Serb minority communities in Kosovo that goes beyond both the generic decentralisation set out in the current Kosovar constitution and the *de facto* parallel patronage system existing today. There is now little potential for purely technical talks and for “constructive ambiguities”, since every technical question will inevitably be seen in relation to the endgame. Such a tough but honest truth should be recognised not only by the parties but also by the mediators and the promoters of the dialogue, Brussels and Washington, who should avoid linking the dialogue and its real objective (the stability and progress of Kosovo, Serbia and the Western Balkans) to their particular and partial interests. First of all, they should try to recapture the common purpose and action that led to the few concrete results achieved at the beginning of the exercise. Therefore, it would really be better for all concerned to abandon this sort of double-track system and for Washington and Brussels to work in a more coordinated way.

Unfortunately, the EU’s role as a mediator has in many ways been hampered by its own ambiguities and technicalities. But the main problem is that so far the EU has been unable to adopt a common position stating that recognition is a goal of the dialogue, given that 5 member states do not recognise Kosovo at all. Although a formal change in the EU’s common position may be beyond reach due to the political realities in the 5 non-recognising states, there are many potentially useful steps

that the EU Council could take to clarify both its objectives and the special representative's mandate. Coordination with Washington will be strongly needed by Brussels since its credibility has been badly eroded by the EU's inability to extend visa-free travel to Kosovo citizens more than 5 years after the European Commission recommended it. Washington's help may be especially important given political upheaval in Pristina and the need for Kosovo's political elite to unify around a set of realistic negotiating positions if talks are to have any prospect of success. At the same time, Joe Biden's new administration has already announced a strengthened and concrete U.S. engagement in the Balkans, particularly on Bosnia and Kosovo and, contrary to the Trump administration, such interest seems not to be connected with the president's desire to score a personal success in the international arena and to link talks in the Balkans with other negotiations led by U.S. diplomacy around world, first and foremost in the Middle East.¹¹

A way forward

Finally, as for the substance of a compromise worth being pursued, there are many options but, as for the essence of the Kosovo issue as it looks today, which we have described above, only one of them still seems the most viable. It would be to rely on the possibility to define and implement a viable system of autonomy for the Kosovo Serb communities and municipalities with the creation of new autonomous districts for Kosovo's Serbs, and possibly also for Serbia's Albanians in Serbia proper. This approach could pave the way for a normalisation of relations, ultimately leading to reciprocal recognition in order to proceed without preconditions along their respective EU integration path. Autonomy would therefore seem the better choice, with a track record of success elsewhere in Europe and in the world, and support among EU member states. But the risk is that it would face the most negative reaction from the parties

¹¹ L. Hartwell (2021).

themselves, especially from Kosovo's leaders who worry that it would lead to the loss of national sovereignty or to paralysed governance as seen in Bosnia-Herzegovina after Dayton.¹² The alternative would be to return to the land swaps-border modification approach that was at the core of the miscarried 2018 draft deal. In this respect, anyone with a modicum of experience of how the Balkans have evolved over the last 30 years would have legitimate and serious concerns about the destabilising precedent that redrawing borders could create in the Balkans and beyond.

The fact is that more than two decades after the armed struggle that led to Kosovo's assertion of independence, Serbia and Kosovo remain locked in a dispute that serves the interests of neither of them, but which cannot be solved without mutual concessions that to date neither has been prepared to make. The status quo is certainly better than open conflict, but it is very unsatisfactory, fuelling frustration and resentment among the citizens of both countries, of all ethnicities, and leaving a dangerous wound right in the heart of the western Balkans. The parties and the mediators in Brussels and Washington who seek to help them talk and come to an agreement still have some hope of patching things up. It would be insane to lose the opportunity: a dialogue between the deaf might be possible and even successful, provided it is not mediated by the blind.

¹² *Relaunching the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue...*, cit.

Conclusions

Giorgio Fruscione

From a geopolitical perspective, this report has shown that during the pandemic China and Russia have offered rather symbolic assistance to their allies and partners in the Western Balkans. They have both focused on Serbia, seeking to affirm their support for the country and establish their influence on it. Beijing and Moscow have used the pandemic as a new playing field for the advancement of long-established strategic interests. However, these campaigns would not be so successful if they were not endorsed and amplified by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic himself and his supportive media.

In fact, “Serbia is no longer a democracy.” This is the outcome of Serbia’s nine-year long drift towards authoritarianism. During the pandemic, Vucic’s party consolidated its power so that today’s national assembly looks like a one-party system. The June 2020 elections took place in the midst of the authorities’ under-reporting of Covid-19 infections and deaths. But authoritarianism has a long history in the country as it has been developing since the Milosevic era. However, today’s Serbia is somehow even more worrying, as Vucic has worked to improve the image of his illiberal rule in order to please the West. For its part, the EU only stopped the opening of new negotiating chapters due to the deterioration of democracy in late 2020, and today it can do little to counter both state capture and media control, both of which have proved to be highly resilient, even during the pandemic.

There are clearly no easy and quick solutions for building democracy in the Western Balkans and replacing authoritarian regimes. The internal weaknesses of the democratisation process in the Western Balkans, as the ruling elites create frameworks that are favourable to them and fail to foster fair political competition, while deepening differences and divisions in societies if it helps them survive in power, negatively affect the will of citizens in trying to effect change from within. This is especially true in light of the prevailing attitude that elections cannot make a real difference. However, recent elections in several Western Balkan countries – like Montenegro and Kosovo – have shown that change is possible even in such unfair conditions, and that citizens are increasingly aware of their role in democratic change and processes.

One of the hopes for the region is the establishment of social, citizens movements. Over the years green-left forces in the countries of the region have managed to gain visibility and public trust, also forming enduring networks at the regional and international level. As some recent election results have shown, they have succeeded in becoming credible contenders for political power. Looking at the emergence of these new political actors on the political scene and at their election results, recent developments give grounds for optimism regarding democratic change from below in the region.

For the Western Balkans, completion of the EU integration process remains a dream with few prospects of coming true as in the last two years Brussels has been sending mixed signals to the countries in the region. On the one hand, EU member states are increasingly asserting their national priorities and short-term national agendas over the Union's long-term interests. In particular, the 'reappropriation' of the veto power by certain sceptical member states has intensified the politicisation of enlargement and detracted from the credibility and attractiveness of Brussels among Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, this politicisation has led to a decoupling between the Commission's official position and that of the

Council. As the decoupling negatively affects the Union's credibility and speed of reforms in the Balkans, it also impacts on the level of internal fragmentation of the EU's institutional structure. At the same time, the use of the veto in order to delay the accession of Albania and North Macedonia threatens to seriously compromise the conditionality approach and to have consequences for EU's pragmatic ambitions in the Western Balkans. Overall, continuing the status quo on the opening of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia is a clear example of how accession has turned into a moving target and how the Union's disengagement is benefiting third countries interested in gaining a foothold in the region.

Lastly, twenty years after the Kosovo war and ten years after the launch of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, the EU is still chiefly responsible for the most complicated open issue in the Balkans. But the normalisation process that the EU has been leading since 2013 has so far been ineffective in finding a compromise between the two countries. This ineffectiveness has driven the US to return to the region in the midst of the presidential campaign, with the Trump administration exploiting the agreement promoted last September for electoral purposes. The status quo is certainly better than open conflict, but it is very unsatisfactory, fuelling frustration and resentment among citizens of all ethnicities in both countries and leaving a dangerous wound right in the heart of the Western Balkans. The parties and mediators in Brussels and Washington who are seeking to help them talk and come to an agreement still have some hope of patching things up. It would be madness to waste the opportunity: a dialogue between the deaf might be possible and even successful, as long as it is not mediated by the blind.

About the Authors

Michael L. Giffoni as an Italian career diplomat from 1992 to 2014 held several and demanding diplomatic positions, both national and European. After spending the entire 1990s in Bosnia-Herzegovina (as Deputy Head of Mission at the Italian Embassy in Sarajevo and as Principal Political Advisor at the Office of the High Representative for the implementation of the Dayton Agreement) and most of the rest of former Yugoslavia at war, he was from 2004 to 2008 Head of the Task Force for the Balkans of the High Representative for EU Foreign Policy, Javier Solana, in Brussels, then for five years first Italian Ambassador in Kosovo (2008-13) and finally (2013-14) Head of the Office for North Africa and Arab Transition at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome.

Giorgio Fruscione is Research Fellow and publications editor at ISPI. Before joining ISPI, Giorgio has been living for years in the Balkans, working as freelance journalist for several Italian and international media outlets, like EastWest, Venerdì di Repubblica and Balkan Insight. Since 2010, he has also been deputy director and news correspondent from the Balkans for East Journal. He holds a Bachelor degree in International Relations and Human rights from the University of Padova and a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe from the University of Bologna, with a master thesis on the Yugoslav socialist system of self-management.

Gentiola Madhi works as consultant researcher and currently she is based in Italy. She is an associated researcher at European Movement Albania. Since 2018, Dr. Madhi regularly contributes to Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso - Transeuropa on Albania's political, societal and cultural landscape. Previously, she worked as project manager at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania and as national programme officer at Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Tirana. She graduated from the College of Europe (Bruges), University of Florence and European College of Parma. Her research interests include regional cooperation, media and EU integration of the Western Balkans.

Jovana Marovic is Executive Director of the Politikon Network, a think tank based in Podgorica, Montenegro, and a Member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, BiEPAG. From 2004 until 2016, she worked as a Counselor for the European Union within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' multilateral department, Advisor for International Relations and European Integration within the cabinet of the Budva Municipality's Mayor, Research Coordinator at the Institute Alternative and Special Advisor to the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare. Dr. Marovic is a Member of the Working Group for Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, within the Montenegrin Accession Negotiations for EU membership. She holds a Ph.D. in International and European Studies from the University of Belgrade.

Chiara Milan is Research Fellow at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore (Italy), where she coordinates the Jean Monnet Network "Transnational Political Contention in Europe" (TraPoCo). Prior to that she was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Center for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz (Austria) where she led the research project "Reclaiming the cities in the post-Yugoslav space" (ReCitYu). She holds a Ph.D. in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute. Her

research interests include social movements and civic activism, nationalism, citizenship, ethnicity, and migration, with a particular focus on Southeastern Europe. She has published several articles in international journals and chapters in edited volumes. She is the author of the book *Social Mobilization Beyond Ethnicity. Grassroots Movements and Civic Activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2020).

Tena Prelec is a Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford and a Research Associate at LSEE-Research on South Eastern Europe, European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science. Dr. Prelec is also a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), supported by the European Fund for the Balkans. She is a Region Head at Oxford Analytica and a Marshall Memorial Fellow, German Marshall Fund of the United States. She holds a PhD from the School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex, and is affiliated with its Centre for the Study of Corruption.

Nikolaos Tzifakis is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Department of Political Science & International Relations of the University of the Peloponnese; member of Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Board; and Research Associate of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. His publications include articles in journals such as *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *Conflict Security & Development*, *Ethnopolitics*, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *Global Society*, and *Problems of Post-Communism*. In 2008, he was awarded the Marcel Cadieux Distinguished Writing Award for his co-authored article with A. Huliaras, published in *International Journal*. He recently co-edited (with F. Bieber) the book *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries* (2020).