

The Plight of the Western Balkans Is a Wake-up Call for Europe

by Vedran Džihic and Paul Schmidt

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

The coronavirus pandemic has deepened the vulnerabilities affecting Western Balkan countries and exposed the weakness of their state institutions, especially in the health sector and social protection.

At the same time, related to the limited effectiveness of the EU enlargement process over the past years, the progress of reforms has stagnated and some countries have even experienced concerning regressions in the rule of law.

The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis has meanwhile increased the presence of other geopolitical players in the region, mainly in the context of competition over vaccinations, not only of China but also of Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

Awareness is growing that the EU and the West is not the only available partner. As other powers not known for their democratic practices use or misuse the Western Balkans to promote their interests, the vision of a free, democratic and truly European Balkans is no longer self-evident.

After a prolonged lean spell in terms of EU enlargement, now is the moment to act and put the whole range of EU policies applicable to the region back

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on the agenda.

In times of major geopolitical shifts, the EU has to leave its conventional tool-box behind. It needs to advance the Europeanisation of its neighbours in the Western Balkans and provide substantial funding and sufficient political will to its own enlargement policies.

The recent enlargement policy reform entails some new approaches and mechanisms, but is dealing with countries in the Western Balkans that fear permanently remaining the outside the EU.

It is, therefore, high time for the EU to catch up with reality, reassure and demonstrate that the countries of the region are potential future member states, and – to be concrete – speed up enhanced investment plans.

While internal EU reforms are essential to consolidate structures, improve the EU's own functioning and enable it to enlarge, it would be wrong for the EU to withdraw within its own borders and pretend not to see the rising challenges in its closest neighbourhood.

On the contrary, an element of pragmatic optimism and geopolitical realism would help push the combination of corona, reform and enlargement fatigue aside.

A European global player, with a geopolitical European Commission at its centre, would now be the best inspiration to share European values, inspire and not merely protect its way of life and but convince others of its

democratic ideals and achievements.

The EU must not turn a blind eye to a Western Balkans facing deeply rooted structural problems, ranging from a flawed state of democracy to societies captured by dominant elites, exclusive politics and nationalist discourses.

Governments fearing a collapse of fundamentally weak health systems have introduced strict measures, including states of emergency without time limit, general lockdowns, restricting individual freedom and increasing their overall control over societies.

An already weak system of checks and balances has been further eroded, as parliaments are sidelined, formal procedures disregarded and the judiciary weakened.

Such dynamics, justified by a crisis situation, strengthen the notion of impunity and a lack of accountability among governing elites.

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

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

Time to change the old elite-centred approach

This discrepancy between words and deeds reminds us that the Europeanisation process may have vested too much attention in elites and their formal European stances.

This must change. By altering an elite-centred approach, the various EU programmes, such as those supporting mobility, visa-free travel, civil society and the media, will gain more prominence and become real vehicles for change.

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

In the middle of the pandemic, new regional dynamics can be seen: the change of power in Montenegro raises many question marks about the politics of the new government. In the elections in Kosovo, younger voters and women gave strong support for Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osman, compelling them to deliver on their promises.

In other parts of the region, new bottom-up and grassroots movements and initiatives are fighting for a broader vision of just and democratic societies. They are still often small and local but point to the potential that civic mobilisation and engagement born out of daily struggles can have.

These emancipatory civic movements are the centre of broader societal changes that should lead to more democratic, free, equal and just societies in the Western Balkans. This is why a more prominent and consistent focus on the social and civic dimension of the region seems without alternative.

It would be encouraging to see the EU fiercely supporting these new forces, creating an environment for change in the Western Balkans, and also becoming an integral part of the EU-internal debates, such as in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

A renewed EU enlargement, a new and true commitment to the European future of the region, has to be based on mobilising its people and building trust – offering opportunities, hope and optimism.

This is not only what the Western Balkans needs. It is what the whole European continent during a pandemic, with all the consequences this entails, urgently needs as well.

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