

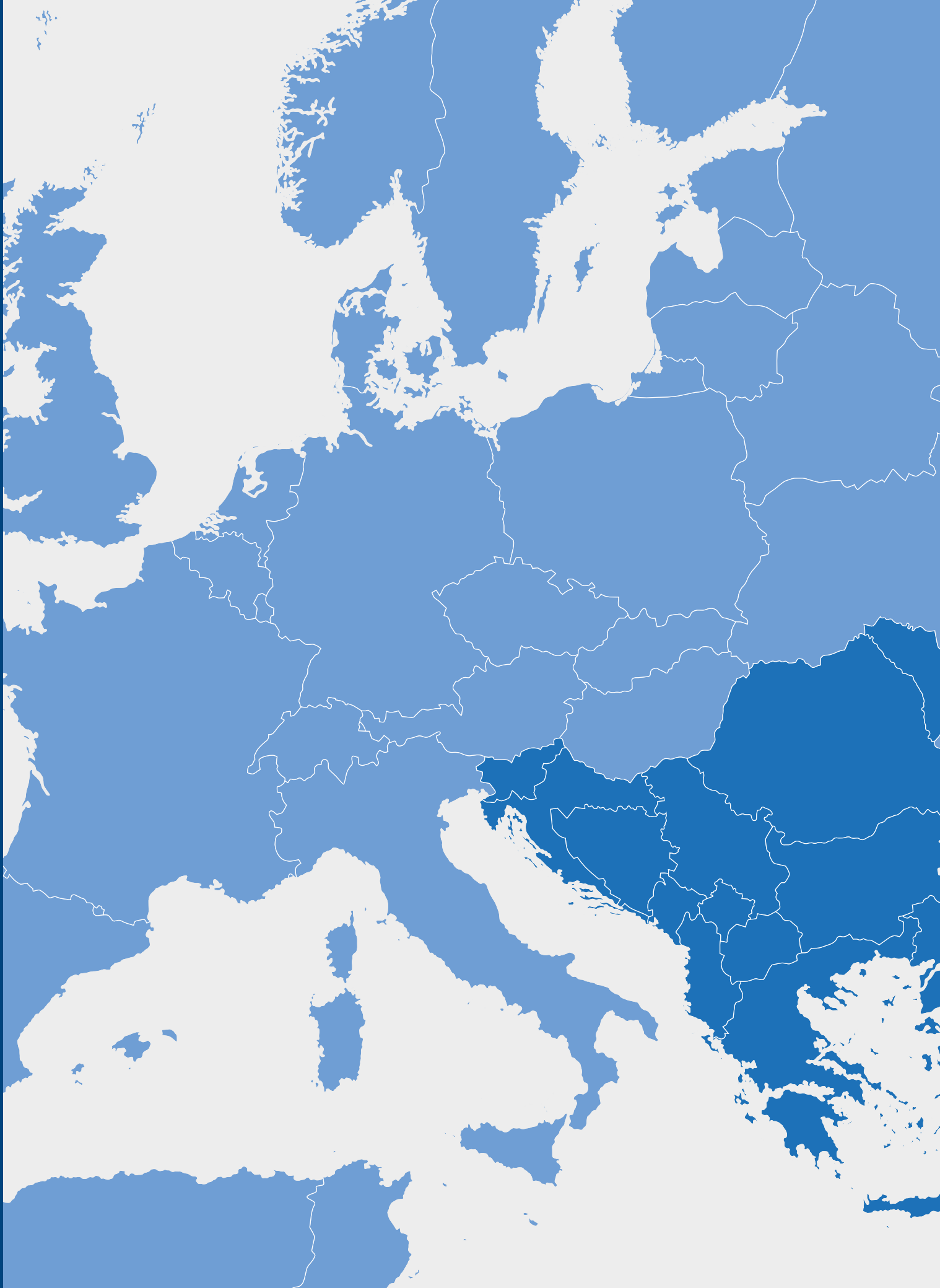
POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS



**NAVIGATING SOUTHEAST EUROPE'S FUTURE:
A VISION FOR 2030**

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South-East Europe



EDITORIAL



In response to the profound changes in Southeast Europe (SEE) and the impact in the region of geopolitical events in Europe and in the Middle East, this issue gathers perspectives on the region's future and the vision for it by 2030. A stellar line of authors was tasked with forecasting the dynamics of SEE, recognizing the implications for political, economic, and security landscapes.

While different authors accent complex issues that could affect the region and shape its position by 2030, they have stressed some evident challenges ahead. As we stand at the nexus of global shifts, these forecasts become critical tools for informed decision-making.

- The ongoing conflict in Ukraine reverberates across the region, reshaping security dynamics and alliances. Simultaneously, the EU's decisions on enlargement and neighborhood policies wield direct influence over regional governments and policies, necessitating careful consideration. The intricate dance with Russian malign influence and the repercussions of Middle East conflicts present complex challenges demanding thorough examination. They can trigger migration and security concerns in Southeast Europe.
- A concerning decline in public support for EU membership within the WB6 signals a pressing issue. Former champions of integration now adopt a dual strategy, endangering democratic values. This trend requires immediate attention to prevent further democratic backsliding and restore public faith in the European project.
- Foreign and regional actors inject complexity into the landscape, with Putin's Russia emerging as a potent hostile force. Regional interference, notably from Serbia, adds layers of complication. To counter these disruptive influences and foster genuine progress, a recalibration of strategies is deemed essential by the authors.
- The geopolitical shifts since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 demand a bespoke approach for each SEE nation. Authors advocate for a nuanced combination of gradual integration and mentorship/partnership, emphasizing progress based on individual merits. This tailored strategy is seen as imperative to navigate the unique challenges faced by each country.

- Depopulation emerges as a threat to the region's social fabric, compounded by economic disparities hindering growth. The envisioned benefits of EU integration must undergo reassessment to ensure equitable wealth distribution. Authors propose innovative social policies, including the promotion of immigration, to address depopulation and foster sustainable development.
- The urgent need to address environmental challenges is emphasized, with the SEE, EU and US urged to reassess their stance on fossil gas infrastructure. Counterproductive measures hindering decarbonization must be avoided to mitigate the compounding socio-economic issues exacerbated by climate change.

As SEE reaches a critical juncture, the EU's commitment to integration is pivotal. The envisioned success story of 2030 necessitates a strategic shift, recognizing the unique challenges presented by each country. The authors assert that only through concerted efforts, revised strategies, and a genuine commitment to change can SEE realize its potential as an integrated, prosperous, and stable part of Europe.

Vivien Savoye, Ioannis Armakolas and Alida Vračić

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THE POTENTIAL FOR EU INTEGRATION IN SEE BY 2030



Vesna Pusić

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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

Integrating the 6 SEE/WB states into the EU has become a security issue both for the WB 6 and the EU. The objective is still the same, but the circumstances have changed, so the approach needs to change accordingly. The main obstacles on that road are 1. WB leaders who have become anti EU and in that sense turned against their societies; 2. Different groups of disruptors; 3. The outdated approach by the EU and Western partners. Some indications how to devise a new approach in order to match the changed circumstances. Avoiding 2030 becoming a year of disaster and turning it into a year of success.

Time is the master of all things and time in Southeast Europe has in the last ten years taken a turn for the worse.

There was a time, not so long ago, when we thought that by 2030 all the Western Balkan 6 countries would be members of the European Union. That would enable the EU to consolidate its territory, improve its security, and give a boost to the fledgling Western Balkan democracies. For the countries of the region, the EU accession project has never been just an aspiration to join a prestigious club of wealthy, peaceful democracies. It was also, and maybe even primarily, an exercise in state-building. Of the six states, five declared their independence from Yugoslavia during the 1990s and 2000s. Only Albania had been an independent state before the 1990s, but ruled by such a brutal dictatorship that it might have made a democratic transition even harder. So, the only blueprint for building a democratic state has always been the condensed experience of the EU; the European democratic tradition, the only one they could evoke.

But time is the master of all things and time in Southeast Europe has in the last ten years taken a turn for the worse. The WB6 countries are politically worse off today than they were in 2012 when Montenegro started its EU negotiations, or 2014 when Serbia began. The ruling elites are for the most part much less pro-EU and much less pro-democracy than they used to be. Societies have been disappointed time and again, have grown cynical and increasingly skeptical of their EU future. In some cases they have also been exposed to systematic bom-

bardment of pro-Russian media. Europe-wide and globally, democracy is under threat, which additionally encourages emerging Balkan autocrats.

Although the EU enlargement process in Southeast Europe has not made much progress in the last ten years, the world has marched on and the circumstances have changed. The objective of turning these countries into EU liberal democracies stays the same, but the obstacles are new and the strategies need to change accordingly. There are three main groups of issues that need to be addressed:

Leaders against societies

Before the start of the disastrous war in the Middle East, the historian Yuval Noah Harari had suggested that in many cases political leaders turn different parts of their societies against each other in order to stay in power. In SEE this can be distilled down to political leaders turning against their own societies.

While ten years ago, public support for EU membership (which roughly equals support for liberal democracy) was in around 70-80% in the WB6. Today in most cases it hovers around 50%, while in Serbia it is 38% (Academy for Democratic Development, September 2023).

“ The absurd situation of negotiating directly with leaders whose personal interest it is to never achieve the goal. ”

The longer certain leaders stay in power and the richer they become while in power, the more anti-EU and anti-democratic they become. They fear rule of law and rules based politics because of the personal consequences they could suffer, and so they use the dual approach of pretending to be in favor of joining the EU while doing everything to obstruct EU reforms and foreign policy harmonization. Simultaneously, they use their control over the media and campaigns on social media to malign the EU and the West and promote Russia and Putin as their true allies, thus dramatically changing public opinion. The EU and different Western intermediaries find themselves in an absurd situation of negotiating directly with leaders whose personal interest it is to never achieve the goal which they are negotiating for.

So far, this travesty has produced expected results: democratic backsliding and decline in public support for EU membership. EU mistakes and inconsistencies, notably the backtracking on opening North Macedonia's negotiations after the Prespa Agreement, holding back Albania, and delaying Kosovo's visa liberalization and recognition by the EU non-recognizers, have also played a role in growing skepticism in WB societies. But if the EU is now serious about its intentions to integrate the WB states, it has to realize that it is very often negotiating with leaders who want to prevent their countries from ever making it into the EU. This decidedly does not mean that these countries should

be left out; that would be too dangerous for everybody. It means, however, that the approach to their integration by the EU and the Western partners should be changed.

Disruptors

It is often ignored or downplayed that there are a number of disruptors at work in the WB. These are countries, politicians, and influences that for different reasons try to derail EU integration and the road to democracy of the countries of the region. But there are also some well intentioned intermediaries who operate under some outdated assumptions and can produce negative effects by default. All of them could be roughly classified into three groups:

Foreign, hostile

The main and most important foreign hostile interfering power in the WB countries is Putin's Russia. Although it is sometimes presented as a big economic presence, Russia is in fact very much focusing on influencing and controlling the political scene, including the military and paramilitary structures and the secret services. This is particularly obvious in Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Montenegro, where their presence is particularly conspicuous. They buy and control the media, finance political parties, have been involved in an attempted coup in

Montenegro, support secessionist politicians in Bosnia Herzegovina, push false and divisive narratives through social media, attempt to rekindle, revive and enhance old conflicts, discredit pro-EU and pro democracy politicians, and so on. In general, Russia sees WB as a territory where it can wage a continuous proxy conflict with the West, especially the EU, and from which it can threaten European security. The war in the Middle East has provided the “second front” for Putin which takes away a lot of attention from his war on Ukraine. But WB is kept on shaky grounds just in case.

Regional, hostile

The main regional hostile interference comes from Serbia. Sometimes acting in collusion with Russia and sometimes on its own, the current regime in Serbia supports the secessionist leader of Bosnian Serb entity Milorad Dodik, repeatedly invoking territorial aspirations and promoting the creation of a “Serbian World” modeled after the notorious “Ruski mir”. Its secret service was involved, together with Russia, in the attempted coup in Montenegro, and it is currently very much involved in running the country itself, turning it away from its pro-EU and NATO policies. The Serbian Orthodox Church also plays an important role, with some of its clerics calling Montenegro “the Little Ukraine”. The most dangerous element is that there is almost a broad, quiet accept-

ance that control over Montenegro would be Serbia’s consolation prize for losing Kosovo.

However, the country suffering the most from this kind of Serbia’s politics is Serbia itself. In the past ten years it has been turned around from a pro EU country to an ally of Russia, with only 38% of its citizens supporting its EU integration. It treats all its neighbors either as enemies or as potential vassals and its government is more interested in regional politics than in improving the lives of their own citizens.

Albania and Croatia occasionally also play a negative role in achieving regional stability. Albania does so by attempting to politically patronize Kosovo, and Croatia by interfering into internal politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, neither of the two countries have territorial aspirations towards their neighbors and are not acting in collusion with or supported by Russia. That makes it easier for the EU to influence their policies.

Foreign, friendly

Foreign intermediaries from both the EU and the US have been in the WB since the wars of the 1990s. Initially, their objective was to stop the fighting and in that they have been exceptionally successful, especially in comparison with the current state of the world. Rich-

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The Russian aggression on Ukraine has demonstrated how fragile European security is.

ard Holbrook, Peter Galbraith, Jacques Klein, Wesley Clark, and NATO all ended wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia.

After that came the actual state-building and the convenience of EU accession as a tool in this demanding process. The initial logic was that Serbia, as the largest of the six and potentially the most disruptive for its neighbors, should lead the way to the EU and once its institutions, legislation, and foreign policies is harmonized with the EU, everyone else would follow. At a certain stage in the early 2000s, that logic made sense. But since then facts on the ground have changed quite dramatically. Serbia still needs to find its way to the EU because it has literally nowhere else to go and because as a non-EU outlier in the region it would be a permanent threat not only to regional but even to European security. But it can definitely no longer be the regional leader of that process.

However, in a number of instances, the EU and the US have operated based on an outdated sense of reality, ignoring the fact that the Serbian leadership but also the Serbian public have in the meantime turned against the EU and the West and formed strong ties to Putin and Russia. Continuous political appeasement of Serbian leadership in their conflicts and disruption of the neighbors and their foreign policy alignment with Russia has made that leadership even more convinced that the West

is a weak and indecisive partner, while Russia and potentially China are strong allies on which they can rely. As a consequence this Western appeasement has if not fueled regional tensions and conflicts, certainly failed to make any progress in resolving them.

The change in circumstances

Since the EU Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003 where it was decided that the WB countries should all join the EU and the last EU enlargement of Croatia in 2013, the circumstances in Southeast Europe, in the EU, and in the world have changed dramatically. That does not mean that these six countries now should not become EU members. But it does mean that, in order to be successful, the EU approach should change. The Russian aggression on Ukraine has demonstrated how fragile European security is. Getting it right in the WB presents a chance to prevent an even greater threat to European security, taking into account its geographical and geopolitical location. In that respect, today we are worse off and in a more complicated situation than we were ten years ago. 2030 as the year of EU enlargement to WB will not come by itself. If nothing changes, chances are that by 2030 the WB6 will be even further from EU membership and the EU security even more fragile (see ECFR: Living in an à la carte World). Having 2030 as a motivating year of suc-

cess requires a clear strategy, consistent tactics and concerted joint effort:

- The starting point is the realization and acceptance that the WB6 are not a single big package but six quite different countries, each requiring a tailor-made approach.
- In their EU integration, the EU should combine a gradual/staged approach with a mentored/partnered approach. The gradual approach means a country could join the EU common market when ready, and then progress towards full membership in stages. The partnered approach was most successful in partnership between the three Nordic EU members with the three Baltic states, on their road to EU accession.
- EU accession is impossible without strong public opinion support in any given country. Therefore the EU should develop additional strategies for directly addressing societies and creating a pro-EU atmosphere and public opinion in the WB6.
- Each of the six countries should make progress as it meets the criteria, rather than holding back the front runners because of the slackers. That would not only create healthy competition, but also demonstrate to the more skeptical that progress and membership are actually realistic and possible.
- Although Serbia is not in a position to be the regional leader in this process, it definitely needs to eventually join the EU. The one thing that would motivate its leadership would be competition with its neighbors. Serbia should be surrounded with success in order to resurrect its EU project.

These are just some illustrations of a changed approach under changed circumstances. EU integration of the WB6 has become a primarily European security issue – and European security has become an EU survival issue. A sobering wake-up call in that respect are the findings of a broad global survey conducted recently by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR: *Living in an à la carte World*) showing that most people outside the EU and the West think that the EU will not exist in 20 years. Those are the same people that think Russia will win in Ukraine by 2030. In order to avoid making 2030 a year of disaster and turning into a year of success, the EU needs to show strength. Consolidating and integrating South-east Europe is an important step in that direction.

A NEW STRATEGY FOR FIGHTING POVERTY, DEPOPULATION, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN WB6



Dušan Reljić

Dušan Reljić is European Affairs Advisor in Brussels and Berlin. Between 2013 and 2023, he was Head of the Brussels office of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).¹

● KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Western paradigm of political and socioeconomic transition in the non-EU countries of Southeast Europe has come to a dead end. By 2030, the WB6 will probably be further depopulated, poorer compared to its vicinity, and environmentally more stressed than today. The only way to prevent further deterioration in the region and to initiate liberating political action is through an uncompromising analysis of the current conditions.

“Southeast Europe is a tense and fragile region, with Yugoslavia’s successor states still struggling and torn by internal, regional, and international conflicts.”

Horror stories from the comfort zone

The Western paradigm of political and socio-economic transition in the non-EU countries of southeast Europe has come to a dead end. The notion that it is difficult to predict the future is especially true in Southeast Europe, when attempting to consider the coming five to ten years. It is a tense and fragile region, with Yugoslavia’s successor states still struggling and torn by internal, regional, and international conflicts. In response to the invitation from the editors of the FES SOE Dialogue to forecast the condition of the region, I will refrain from addressing the usual ideological constructs and musings (such as “the EU should” and “countries in the region must...”) about the perspectives for EU membership. Instead, the focus will be on the tangible circumstances at hand.

I will point out the role of the “comprador intelligentsia” in Southeast Europe – the elite groups working on projects financed by the West. They typically embrace and promote the Western idea of transformation and development for the region with little questioning. In doing so, they create an ideological hegemony that prevents the critical examination of the region’s concrete relationship to the West. This relationship, in its political, economic, social and all other aspects, is decisive for the development of the region. Its essence is neo-colonial and in its present form does not offer chances for

achieving democracy and rule of law, sustainable growth paired with income equality, and the quick reversal of the vast environmental damage in the region.

Tackle depopulation!

The main feature of the situation in the Western Balkans 6 (WB6)² is that there are fewer and fewer people in the region and that they are getting older. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported recently that: “..the slow pace of convergence and the sizeable development gap with other European countries have continued to encourage Western Balkan Six citizens to seek employment and educational opportunities outside the region. The emigration rate from the Western Balkan Six has increased by 10% over the past decade; today, about one-fifth of the Western Balkan Six population resides abroad.”³

According to OECD data, almost five million people born in the former Yugoslavia and Albania now live abroad. Albania has the highest emigration rate at 28%, followed by Kosovo (22%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20%), and North Macedonia (18%). The emigration rates from Serbia and Montenegro are slightly lower but still significant, at 10% and 9% respectively. In the EU, the population grew by 1.5 % over 2011–2022, at an annual average of 0.1 %.

Figure 1: Number of people from the Western Balkans migrating regularly into the European Union
(first permits of residence in 2021)

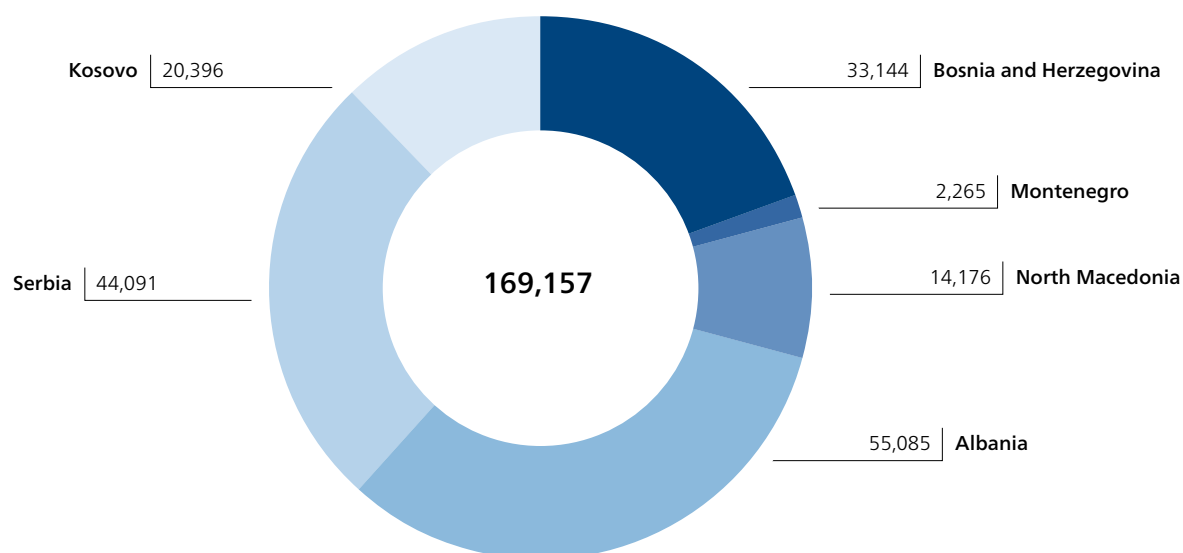
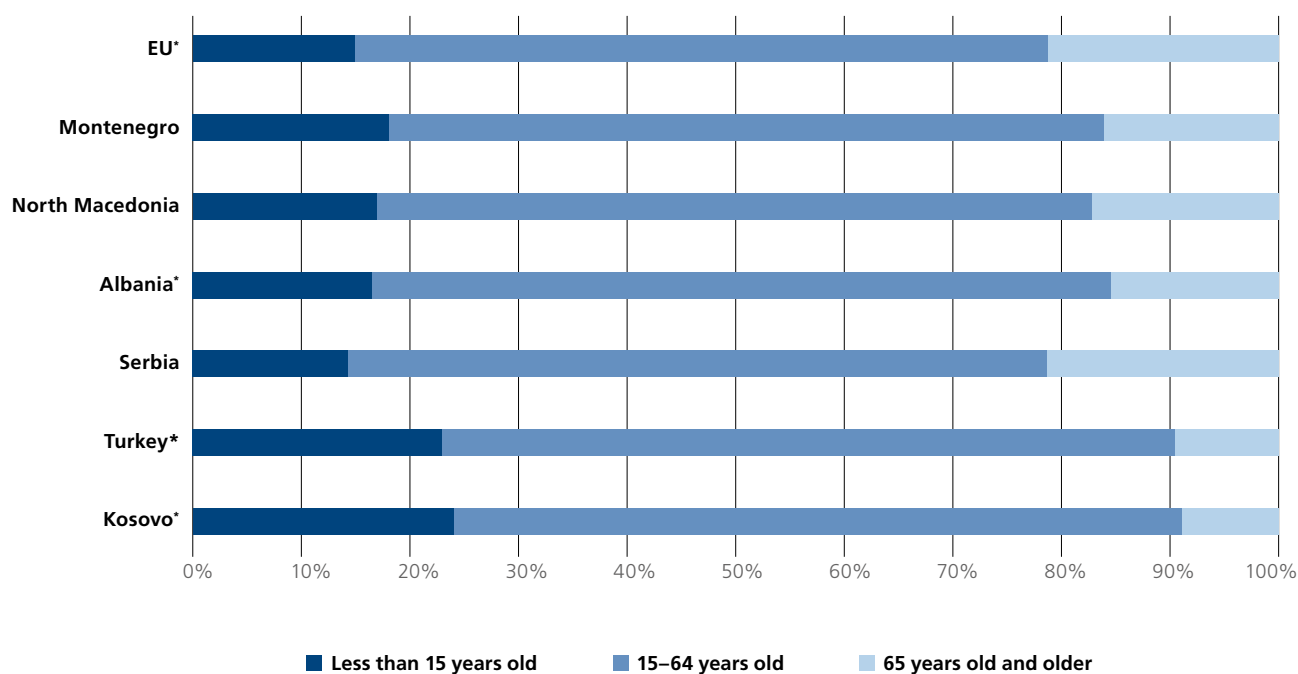


Figure 2: Population by age class, 2022 (Share of total population)



* EU: Estimates provisional; Albania and Turkey: 2021 data instead of 2022; Kosovo: 2020 data instead of 2022

Source: Eurostat

The caravan to the west has no end. According to data from Eurostat, almost 170,000 individuals living in the region were granted a residence permit for stays exceeding three months in the European Union for the first time in 2021. That figure was almost 250 thousand in 2019, and decreased in 2020 only due to the pandemic. A simple calculation shows that one citizen of the region obtains the papers to emigrate to the EU approximately every three minutes. If the emigration figures are added to the population decrease due to negative natural growth, the result is that the region loses one resident approximately every two minutes.⁴

The population of the region, particularly in Serbia, is also ageing, as shown in the graph below. It has a higher average age than the EU and is one of the global leaders in terms of old age.

Already, the region faces significant challenges in maintaining education, health, and other public services. The decrease in available labour will also diminish its attractiveness to external investors. Without educated and younger people, it will be tough to create a critical mass dedicated to upholding the rule of law, democracy, and

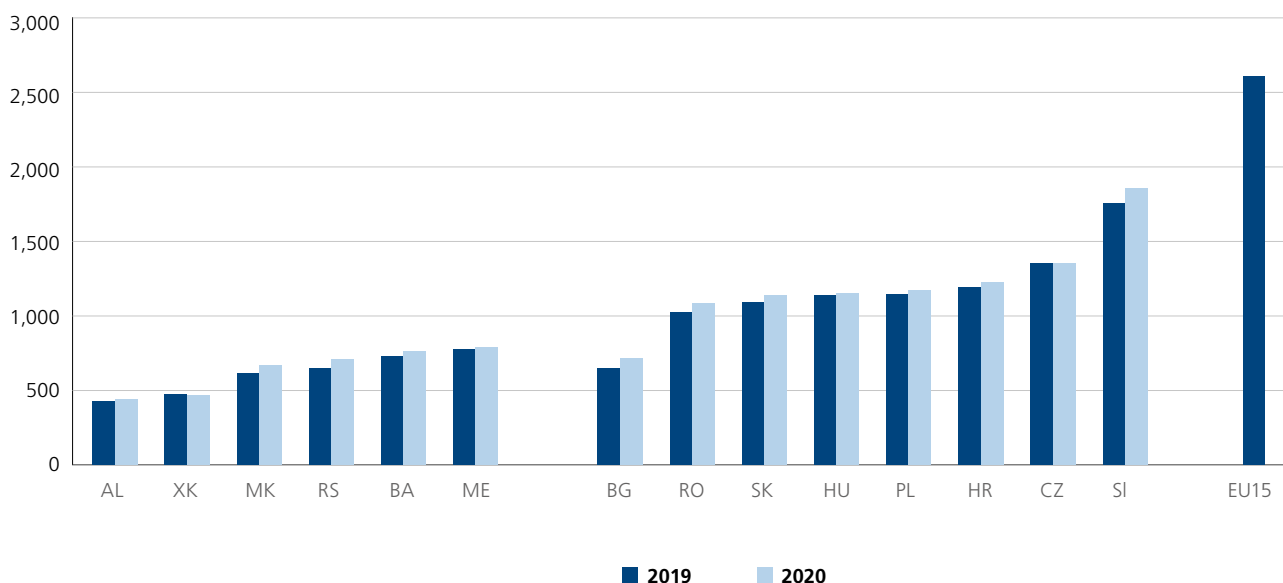
other means of opposition to current political conditions. However, through innovative social policies, including the promotion of immigration, depopulation can be tackled.⁵ Currently, through human capital from the WB6 arriving in the EU, the region contributes to the capability of EU member states, particularly those in Western Europe, to keep their competitive edge on the global market and uphold a high quality of life.

Fight Poverty!

Another noticeable feature of the region is widespread poverty. Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the living conditions in the region have remained stagnant – apart from Albania. In this country people are better off than before but they also had to restart from destitution at the end of the dictatorship. Altogether, when comparing the standard of living with the average in the EU and especially the “old” Union of fifteen members, the area has failed to make progress in the last decades.

The share of the population at risk of poverty after social transfers in the region ranged from 21.2% in Serbia

Figure 3: Average Monthly gross wages in EUR (purchasing power standard)



Source: Database of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), 2021

to 27.9% in Kosovo. In the EU in 2021 it was 16.8%, according to Eurostat data.⁶ One of the primary roots of enduring poverty in Eastern and Southeast Europe is that personal income remains significantly below the EU average, despite comprehensive economic integration with the EU for three decades. An analysis conducted by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies in 2021 revealed that the average monthly gross wages in the EU-15 was four to six times higher than that in the WB6 during the previous two years.

Demand your money back!

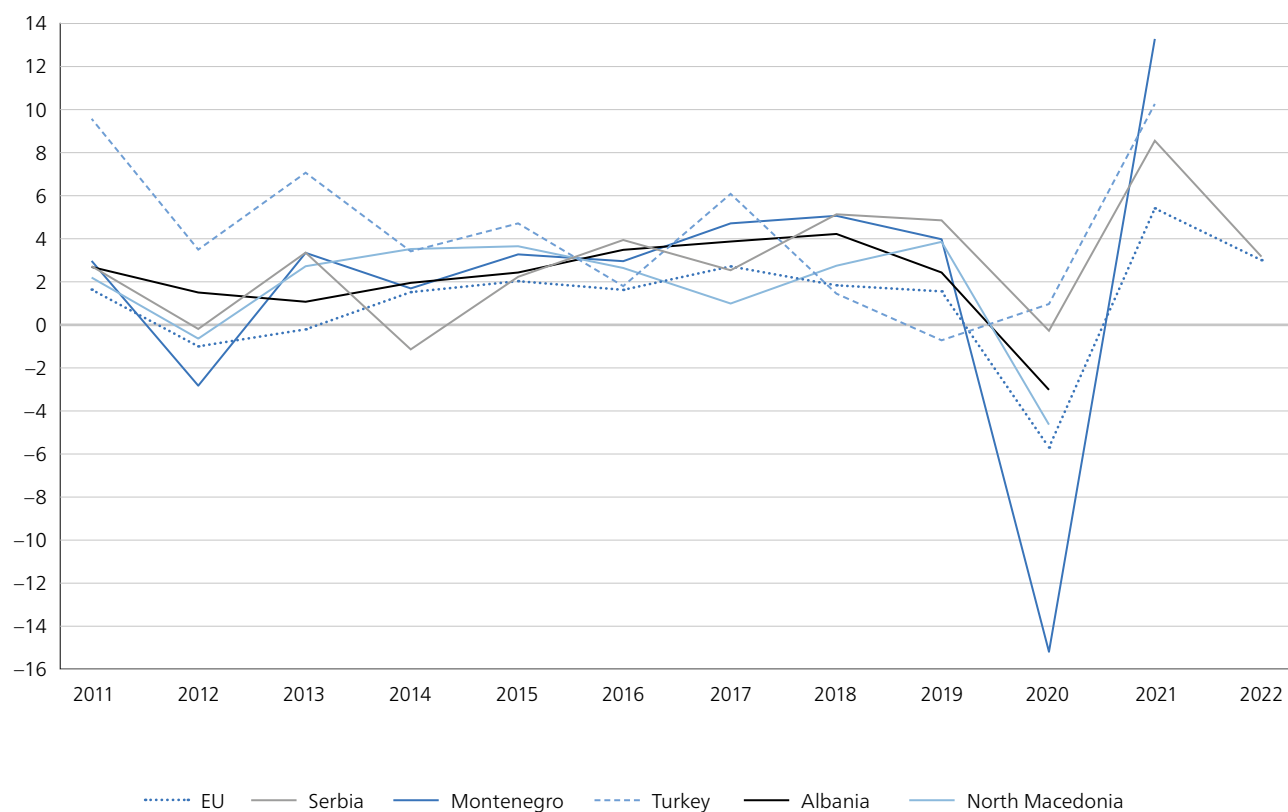
Connecting with the EU has resulted in increased prosperity and improved economic prospects exclusively for the Southeast European countries that have joined the

EU. Non-repayable EU development aid from the EU budget plays a critical role. The rest of the region is lagging. Kosovo and Albania are still the poorest areas in Europe, and the same applies to Moldova.

The economic takeover of the WB6 was politically flanked by the Stabilisation and Association Agreement that the countries signed with the EU. Through trade liberalisation and administrative facilitations, the economic integration of the WB6 into the Union was done swiftly. However, this has not resulted in significant growth. Actually, as shown in the graph below, growth rates have consistently fallen below this threshold, except for a brief post-COVID recovery period.

Catching up is unattainable as the political economy framework created through EU expansion in Southeast

Figure 4: Real rate of change in GDP per capita, 2011–2022 (% change on previous year)



Source: Eurostat

Investments come mostly from the EU and shape the industrial and technological development of Southeast Europe.

Europe prevents it. In a recent report, the OECD concluded that: “at the current average growth levels for both the Western Balkans and the EU, convergence would only be achieved in 2076 – in other words, in more than five decades.”⁷

Over the previous decade, the WB6’s trade deficit with the EU has exceeded one hundred billion euro, with almost 28 billion euro being accumulated alone in the past three years, according to Eurostat. A significant part of the exchange includes intermediary goods which are moved within value-producing chains of EU businesses. They have set up production facilities in the WB6 because of the combination of geographical proximity, cheap labour, tax reliefs, high government subsidies, and other incentives to invest. The state of democracy and the political development in the region had little or no influence on their investment decisions.

Investments come mostly from the EU and shape the industrial and technological development of Southeast Europe. Also, most tourists arrive from the EU, whose spending is an important source of income for the region, thus shaping the service sector as well. The EU is the main destination for massive labour migration and “brain drain” from the region.

The EU will be providing up to eleven times more grants and soft loans to its member states in Southeast Europe within its current seven-year budget than to the WB6.

Consequently, the region will inevitably fall even further behind in the coming years as its own accumulation of capital and capability to invest is not sufficient to close the gap with the EU. Even if the EU fulfils its latest commitments outlined in the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, announced in November 2023, it is unlikely to significantly advance the convergence between the WB6 and the EU. Even if the proposed increase happens, the WB6 countries will still get between six and eight times less funding for development than the EU members in the area.

In truth, Southeast European countries, including those aspiring to join the EU, are transferring significant wealth to Western Europe. This is partly due to trade deficits, repayments of loans, and the provision of cheap labour, but the most significant factor is the loss of human capital. The current political and economic arrangement with the EU is making the SEE6 region poorer, robbing it of its population and thus contributing to democratic decline.⁸

Turn down the heat!”

The above is the title of a recent World Bank Report on the current climate challenges for the region.⁹ In this report, the Western Balkans is portrayed as one of the areas on the planet that is heating up most, with more heat waves happening even up to 80% of the summer months in a world that is 4°C warmer. It reads like a horror story.

Here is just a selection of the imminent threats:

- The mean average summer temperature in the Western Balkans could climb to 7.5°C above pre-industrial times.
- Rainfall is projected to decline 20–30% in the Western Balkans at 4°C warming.
- The increasing occurrence (by 20%) of drought days will be a major threat to agriculture.
- Water availability in summer is expected to decrease through the century. Annual river discharge could be reduced more than 45% by 2100 in a 4°C world.
- Winter and spring flood risk is expected to increase, particularly along the Danube, Sava and Tisa rivers.
- Heat-related mortality would increase 20% to 1,000 per million people.

The region is slow to adapt to such risks. Among other reasons, many vested interests in the energy sector linked to the ruling circles are fighting to keep their spoils, even as the damage to society grows. Moreover, according to Bankwatch, an international network of NGOs monitoring public finance institutions in central, east and south-east Europe, “EU and US officials, as well as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), regularly undermine the transition to an energy-efficient, 100 per cent renewable economy by fervently promoting the construction of fossil gas infrastructure in the region.”¹⁰

Bankwatch says that the US support for new fossil gas infrastructure in the WB6 is at least easy to understand in terms of blatant self-interest as: in the first half of 2023, the US was the largest LNG exporter globally and its businesses are interested in developing LNG terminals and power plants abroad. The organisation has more difficulties explaining the EU’s position, except for the wish to push back Russian fossil gas exports to the region (which play a significant role only for Serbia and North Macedonia). However, building major new infrastructure to bring more gas, not just replacement gas, is utterly counterproductive in terms of decarbonisation and overall import dependence.

Smash the comfort zone!

Demagogues have ruled most of the region since Yugoslavia collapsed. They live in a political comfort zone:

these strongmen are tolerated by Western powers due to their perceived usefulness, despite their anti-democratic policies and even if their election was dubious. They are useful for business because they offer foreign investors dreamlike conditions: huge state subsidies, microscopic wages for workers and few consequences for violating social or environmental standards. They also incite crises in their political relationships with neighbouring states, with whom they still have outstanding accounts from the Yugoslav succession wars. But they avoid outright confrontation because this would endanger their political survival. They are a risk that the West can live with.

The demagogues also face little risk at home: the population is exhausted after the wars and still lives mostly in precarity, with little predictability and security. However, without a general improvement of living conditions, it is hardly possible to roll back corruption, foster integrity in society, and politically challenge entrenched right-wing populism.

The basic prerequisite for preventing the eternal reign of demagogues is to confront the dominant political paradigm that has led to the dead end with an evidence-based critique. However, a critical discussion is habitually prevented by the dominant “noise” in the public sphere, produced by the political elite and the “comprador intelligentsia”. Branko Milanović, an American economist of Yugoslav origin, uses this term to refer to a small local elite that emerges in connection with projects, or more precisely the Western funding that comes with them, in non-governmental, quasi-governmental, academic and governmental associations.¹¹ These institutions tend to be preoccupied with projects that are considered important or fashionable in the West, rather than with issues that really affect the people around them. How much ink has been spilled in recent years on discussions of the “new EU enlargement methodology”, the “phased EU accession model”, “resilience”, “malign external influences” and other obfuscations so popular in the NGO and think-tank orbit?

Milanović’s criticism of the “comprador intelligentsia” is fundamental: “Intellectual activity which is largely unrelated to the real issues in a given place and time and responds to the epistemic desires of an entirely dif-

ferent place is meaningless. It leaves hardly any trace domestically. It does permit the country to remain within some vaguely defined orbit of international knowledge-creation, but the motivating forces of this knowledge-generation are entirely external. They produce little domestically, other than allowing the comparator intelligentsia a nice life of intellectual and material comfort ... Similarly to the comprador-driven domestic development which never resulted in economic growth, the comprador-driven intellectual development is sterile.”

By 2030, the SEE6 will probably be further depopulated, poorer compared to its vicinity, and environmentally more stressed than today. Possibly there will be more political lethargy and backwardness given the strengthen-

ing of right-wing populist movements. This may go largely unnoticed in the West, where political leaders will be probably grappling with the reverberations of runaway climate change, a second Trump presidency, the disaster in Ukraine, the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine, the growing influence of China and all the other “unknown knowns”, to use the expression of Slovenian free-thinker Slavoj Žižek.

To my mind, Southeast Europe’s “intelligentsia” must abandon its subservient status and push through an uncompromising analysis of the current socio-economic and political conditions to prevent further deterioration in the region. The knowledge of what oppresses you is the first step towards the formulation of conceptual alternatives and the initiation of political action.

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- 1 The author is European affairs advisor in Brussels and Berlin. Between 2013 and 2023, he was Head of the Brussels office of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Some parts of this article have appeared in his previous work.
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- 3 Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits, OECD Paris 2023, p.25 ; <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Labour-Migration-report.pdf>
- 4 Eurostat reports that Montenegro’s population decreased by -0.3 % over 2011-2022, corresponding to an annual average decline of just -0.03 %. The population of Albania was also down over this period, by -3.9 %, averaging -0.4 % per year. The Serbian population fell by -6.3 % between 2011 and 2022, corresponding to an annual average of -0.6 %. The number of residents in North Macedonia shrunk by -10.7 % over the period, at an annual average rate of -1.0 %. In Kosovo, from 2011 to 2021 (the most recent data available), the population grew by 0.2 %, at an annual average of 0.02 %. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s population fell by 9.1 % over the period 2011 to 2019 (the latest available data), corresponding to an annual average decline of -1.1 %.
- 5 C.f. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Departmental-Papers-Policy-Papers/Issues/2019/07/11/Demographic-Headwinds-in-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-46992>
- 6 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_statistics_on_living_conditions#Income_distribution
- 7 C.f.: <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/ECS-Policy-Paper-2%20web-1.pdf>
- 8 For a set of down-to-earth proposals how to change the EU-SEE6 relationship see: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/keeping-friends-closer-why-the-eu-should-address-new-geoeconomic-realities-and-get-its-neighbours-back-in-the-fold-all>
- 9 <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/494741468189532505/pdf/98220-WP-P148173-PUBLIC-Box393168B-pdf.pdf>
- 10 <https://bankwatch.org/story/the-eu-and-us-are-fossil-fooling-the-western-balkans-with-gas-how-can-the-region-cut-to-a-clean-future>
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THE EU ACCESSION ROUTE OF NORTH MACEDONIA: ROOT PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS



Katerina Kolozova

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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Western paradigm of political and socioeconomic transition in the non-EU countries of Southeast Europe has come to a dead end. By 2030, the WB6 will probably be further depopulated, poorer compared to its vicinity, and environmentally more stressed than today. The only way to prevent further deterioration in the region and to initiate liberating political action is through an uncompromising analysis of the current conditions.

Among the CSO and media organizations in North Macedonia, it is vastly perceived that the process of opening negotiations has never commenced.

Since June 2022, North Macedonia has lived in a state of a cognitive dissonance: the Bulgarian veto was lifted thanks to the Common Position and Negotiating Framework Proposed by the EU Council under the French Presidency, rendered obsolete. Yet again, to this day not only most of the media but the civil society specialized in EU integration continues to talk about “the [Bulgarian] veto.” The most prominent part of the civil society traditionally perceived as pro-EU (not so much currently),² or what one would conventionally term “pro-Western,” reacted vehemently negatively to the “French proposal” – the eponymous reference to the EU’s Common Position on opening negotiations with North Macedonia – calling upon the Prime Minister Kovachevski to reject it.³

The peculiar thing in these appeals was the explicitly expressed view and understanding that North Macedonia could “negotiate” the position of the EU member states adopted consensually. The absence of understanding that said document is not bilateral, i.e., does not involve North Macedonia as its party, that it is simply EU’s own position was glaring. To this day, we can only wonder if this reaction and the rhetoric behind it was due to lack of knowledge – low competencies of the supposedly competent sector? – or a political naiveté or something else? As we cannot guess the

root causes, we can simply establish the fact of its effects. Among the CSO and media organizations in North Macedonia, it is vastly perceived that the process of opening negotiations has never commenced – to this day.⁴ The fact that the first IGC took place in July 2022, is perceived as “not-a-real-act-of-opening-negotiations,” and this perception is presented relentlessly, by the supposedly most competent think tanks, as a fact. One can interpret the processes and its conditionality prior to opening specific chapters as de facto “not the real thing,” and this perception can and should be presented as such – as an interpretation, not as a fact. One’s fidelity to the interpretation they hold seems to give the right to rephrasing, reformulating terms that have legal weight such as the fact that the negotiations have been open, nominally and formally, which is not a neglectable thing, even if one disputes its de facto substance. The “formal” and the “nominal” are relevant forms of political reality, next to the “substantial”, and perhaps even more “real” than the “substantial” (insofar as material, practical, tangible). Here is why: legal status, thus “the merely nominal” reality is the terrain of politics. Discourse is the realm of politics, whereas material reality of socio-economic relations simply follows, takes the shape of the legal and discursive possibilities, molds them, influences them, interacts with them – as its very axiomatic possibility.

However, let us refrain from opening a full-fledged philosophical discussion and focus on what can be identified in simpler, more straightforward political terms. To keep insisting in the public that “North Macedonia has not been offered opening of negotiations yet,” and that the government lies when it says “the negotiations have indeed been open,” ignoring the information on EU’s official websites, ignoring statements by the President of the European Commission made in the Parliament referring to the country as a “negotiating EU candidate country,” comes down to misinforming. It is part of North Macedonia’s political culture to refuse to name things by their name if one finds an issue with them: for example, both Boris Trajkovski and Branko Crvenkovski were referred to as “so-called presidents” by the opposition media and politicians – during their actual presidency of the country. Similarly, it seems that the vast majority of CSOs, disillusioned by the EU (due to the much hated “French Proposal”), decided to treat the negotiating process as a “so-called” process, a null and void form – thus non-existent. Therefore, according to the most often cited think tanks in the country, North Macedonia is not really negotiating. Be it due to a political culture or other motives, the result is misinformation created by those who are supposed to be best informed precisely on the issue of EU accession. Therefore, we may not need to look for third party malignant actors as the source of misinformation concerning the EU as the country’s goal and a supposed subject to national consensus. It originates locally, due to its own inherent reasons. I would not exclude such third party external and malign influences, in particular Russian through its sources in Serbia, but I would not know – in my case that would be merely a blind guess.

Therefore, I would focus on the inherent reasons, grounded in our political culture. Next to the political violence, empowerment, and disenfranchisement through the act of (not) naming – quite ironic considering North Macedonia had suffered in its international relations precisely due to the way it named itself (Macedonia) – we have two other defining characteristics of our political culture that can explain the phenomenon at stake. Firstly, we are the perpetual victim of negation of our national identity by all our neighbors. Secondly, our political culture is endowed with an engrained penchant toward authoritarianism. The new SDMS, esp. that of

the era of Zaev, was “too liberal (read: unserious),” and it has lost much of its previous and longstanding public support, including among the CSOs and the media. The only remaining “serious party” is therefore VMRO-DPMNE, which defends the national pride (or the identity in all of its fragility) and is, also, immanently authoritarian.

The future for North Macedonia and for the enlargement process is sadly grim unless the EU assumes a more hands-on approach, reassesses what projects and organizations it supports in the country and whether due to its technocracy it unwittingly funds all that goes against its strategic goal of enlargement. A more political EU and a more geopolitical Commission – instead of a technocratic one – is required to unlock the enlargement process of North Macedonia and thus the Western Balkans, an area of the continent surrounded by EU member states – sadly, still an empty space, a hole at the heart of what could and should be unified Europe.

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POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of human security, which includes structural sources of conflict such as social tensions brought about by unfinished democratization, social or economic in-

equalities or ecological challenges, for instance. The briefings cover fourteen countries in Southeast Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

After the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, the region of Southeast Europe has been forced to deal with yet another conflict near its borders. War in Ukraine continued to shape the dynamics of the region as well, including the upcoming decisions on EU enlargement – however, the annual European Commission reports showed that the accession process in the Balkans leaves more to be desired. Local elections held in multiple countries in October in November showed the weaknesses of some ruling parties, while Serbia has embarked on yet another early parliamentary election, possibly in reaction to the Banjska attack in Kosovo. The process of the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina has, therefore, once again been paused and any major steps, despite continuous urging by the EU, will have to wait for the next year.

ANOTHER CONFLICT BREAKS OUT IN THE REGION'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

The region of Southeast Europe has continued to be affected by the geopolitical crises at its borders. On October 7, a bloody conflict broke out when Hamas attacked southern Israel, killing more than a thousand and abducting hundreds of people. This has led to a massive retaliation by Israel focused on bombarding and invading the Gaza strip, which has so far led to over ten thousand deaths, a large portion of them Palestinian civilians.

While the European Union and the United States stood firmly in support of Israel following the attack by Hamas, as the conflict unfolded, Israel's brutal operation in Gaza has started to receive increased criticism. In Southeast Europe, Turkish leadership in particular has strongly condemned Israel's actions. At the end of October, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described Israel as "war criminal" during a rally of support for Palestine in Istanbul.

The conflict has made the shaky relationship between Turkey and Israel even worse, and Ankara recalled its ambassador to Tel Aviv in November. It also affected the marking of the 100 years of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, which took place in October, making the celebrations more subdued. The Turkish stance has also put it at odds with its Western allies, though the situation does not seem

to be beyond repair – Sweden has confirmed in October that Turkey planned to go through with the ratification of its NATO membership in the coming weeks.

The complexities of the Israel-Hamas conflict were also on display in other parts of Southeast Europe. In Cyprus, for example, the government expressed support for Israel, while multiple pro-Palestinian rallies have been held as well. The country abstained from the vote for a resolution of the UN General Assembly demanding an immediate ceasefire, with the Foreign Ministry spokesperson saying it wanted to "maintain balance". The vote divided the rest of the region, with multiple other countries abstaining as well – Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia. Other countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia and Turkey – voted in favor, while Croatia voted against the resolution, siding with Israel and the United States.

War in Ukraine has also continued to be felt in the region. The first visit of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Bucharest, Romania, on October 10 was marked by controversy when his speech in the parliament was canceled, the first time this has happened during his official visits since the start of the war. The decision appears to have been made due to potential obstructions by pro-Russian MPs.

This incident, however, has not affected the relationship of the two countries, as Presidents Zelenskyy and Klaus Iohannis signed a declaration on deepening cooperation and Romania pledged to continue supporting Ukraine, includ-

President Erdoğan with his wife at the rally of support for Palestine, October 2023; Source: Facebook / Recep Tayyip Erdoğan



ing militarily. A week later, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu visited Kyiv, where further cooperation was discussed.

Ciolacu, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, is eyeing to succeed Iohannis in the next year's presidential election. The internal political situation in Romania, however, is currently marked by an uneasy grand coalition between the Social Democrats and the National Liberals, which passed the politically salient but financially controversial Pension Law, that will increase the pensions by 40% in election year. Meanwhile, right-wing populist AUR party has overtaken the National Liberal Party as the second strongest in the polls.

ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE: GOOD NEWS FOR UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA, MOSTLY DISAPPOINTING FOR THE BALKANS

Another way in which the war in Ukraine has continued to show its influence was seen during the release of the annual European Commission reports on the progress of candidate countries in November, which included the recommendation to start accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. While the two countries received mostly positive assessments of their reform efforts, the prevailing interpretation is that geopolitical considerations, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, played a role as well. The Council of the EU will decide on the recommendation later in December.

Shortly before the release of the reports, the Government of Moldova adopted strategic plans for the EU accession process. The country also continued to turn away from Russia. At the beginning of November, the Commission for Exceptional Situations decided to suspend the broadcast licenses of six TV channels for the period of the state of emergency. Security intelligence service stated that TV stations were managed by the criminal groups with ties to Russia. This decision comes months after the Constitutional Court decided to outlaw the Shor party, which was also accused of being supported by Russia.

The European Commission reports were less positive for the Western Balkan countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina did not receive an unconditional recommendation

to start accession talks, unlike Ukraine and Moldova. The recommendation will be provided, according to the Commission, "once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved," on which this institution will report to the Council of the EU by March 2024. The lack of sufficient progress on adoption of the laws in the area of the judiciary was assessed as one of the factors contributing to the decision.

A new round of sanctions was imposed by the United States in October on the children of Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska, Igor and Gorica Dodik. US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, OFAC, also sanctioned four legal entities used to, as stated, "facilitate Dodik's ongoing corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska entity, allowing him to siphon public funds from the RS and enrich himself and his family."

The European Commission report on North Macedonia particularly negative. The document assessed that there was no progress in the prevention and fight against corruption. The recent changes of the Criminal Code were highlighted as a matter of serious concern. In the short term, this has resulted in halting or even terminating, a large number of high-level corruption cases, including the ones from the former Special Public Prosecutor's Office. One of the consequences of the changes means that there will no longer be the opportunity to determine legal responsibility for the illegal mass wiretapping scandal that plunged North Macedonia into a prolonged political crisis in 2015.

At the end of November, North Macedonia hosted the annual foreign ministers meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with Baltic nations and Ukraine refusing to attend over the presence of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. EU High Representative Josep Borrell, meanwhile, used the occasion to urge North Macedonia to complete the process of constitutional amendments which would allow it to proceed to the next stage of the EU accession process.

The European Commission report for Montenegro mostly showed a stagnation of reforms, which was partially the consequence of the long absence of the ruling majority. Following the June parliamentary election,



Government of Miloško Spajić, elected in October 2023;
Source: Government of Montenegro

Prime Minister-designate Miloško Spajić finally managed to form a government, whose primary members are his own Europe Now Movement and the Democratic Montenegro party. The government is receiving minority support from the pro-Serbian “For the Future of Montenegro” coalition, whose leader Andrija Mandić was elected as Speaker of Parliament. Spajić’s predecessor Dritan Abazović went to the opposition. The holding of the delayed population census in a country still strongly divided over identity issues is the first major challenge of the new government. The process started on December 3.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REGION – A MIXED BAG FOR THE RULING PARTIES

There were no national elections in October and November, but the region saw a series of local elections, some of which carried an outsized political weight. In Moldova, the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) of President Maia Sandu came in first with about a third of the vote. It was a drop compared to its national result two years ago and received as a warning that there might not be a clear pro-EU majority after the next parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for 2025. The main rivals of PAS, pro-Russian Party of Socialists, won about 16% of the vote.

Local elections were also held in Bulgaria. The reformist pro-Western coalition We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) narrowly won the crucial mayor-

al race in the capital, Sofia, as well as the city of Varna. On the other hand, the party of the former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, GERB, won the majority of contests, including cities such as Plovdiv and Burgas. The party is still the strongest nationally, according to the polls.

Just like in Romania, there is a grand coalition in Bulgaria between PP-DB and GERB, whose stability was tested in the light of local elections and during a failed no-confidence vote initiated by the opposition in November. The relations remain fragile, and a rotation at the position of Prime Minister is expected in March, as per the agreement of the parties, though Borisov did not exclude the possibility of his withdrawal of support before then. In November, the parties supporting the government announced a deal to scrap its exemption to EU sanctions against Russian oil six months earlier than planned after the media reported on the loophole had allowed the Kremlin to rake in an extra €1 billion for its war effort in Ukraine.

Local elections were also held in Greece, where the ruling New Democracy, following a landslide victory in the June parliamentary election, unexpectedly lost in country’s two largest municipalities, Athens and Thessaloniki. In the capital, the winning candidate was backed by the centre-left PASOK, while in Thessaloniki the winner was an independent. New Democracy only managed to win seven of the country’s thirteen regions.

However, on the national level, the New Democracy currently appears to have little cause to worry, as the election of the new leadership of the opposition SYRIZA caused a number of prominent members to leave the party, which governed the country from 2015 to 2019. The new leader, previously unknown 35-year-old Stefanos Kasselakis,

Meeting of Greek PM Mitsotakis with the new Syriza leader Kasselakis;
Source: Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic



a shipping executive and former Goldman Sachs trader, is regarded as unacceptable by the party's more left-wing members. As of the end of November, 11 MPs left the party, reducing its number in the parliament to 36. PASOK, a revived version of the formerly dominant centre-left party, has climbed to the second strongest party in the polls, still far behind the ruling ND.

REGIONAL ISSUES – MINORITY RIGHTS, MIGRATION AND ESPIONAGE

Relations between Greece and Albania continued to be burdened by the case of Fredi Beleri, an ethnic Greek who was jailed just before he was elected mayor of Himare in May local elections. Albanian authorities accused Beleri of vote buying, while Greece regards the case as a violation of minority rights. Athens has refused to support the opening of the Fundamentals Cluster with Albania, which is the next step in the country's EU accession process, but the final decision on this is yet to be made in December in Brussels, when the court in Albania is also set to rule on Beleri's case.

Despite relations with Greece souring, Albania made a breakthrough with another EU member. In November, the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced a new protocol with her Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, to outsource the processing of up to 36,000 asylum applications per year to the Balkan country. The procedure will apply to migrants who are rescued at sea by Italian authorities and then disembark on the Albanian coast, where two centres will be built and managed by Italy. Rama has been criticized for enabling the displacement of migrants and taking the decision without consulting state institutions.

Another bilateral dispute that broke out between Croatia and Serbia, when Belgrade declared a Croatian diplomat persona non grata for "gross violation of diplomatic norms" in November. Pro-government newspapers alleged that he had carried out espionage. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Croatia stated that the country was not provided with a reason for expulsion. It reciprocated the measure by designating one Serbian diplomat. Some analysts interpreted the original decision by Serbia as being influenced by the pre-election campaign.



Edi Rama and Giorgia Meloni sign a memorandum on migration;
Source: Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Italy

In October, Government of Slovenia reintroduced border controls with Croatia and Hungary, citing terrorist risks. For the same reason, Italy introduced controls on the border with Slovenia and Austria. The Ministers of the Interior of Croatia, Slovenia and Italy met in Trieste at the beginning of November, where they agreed to launch joint border patrols, set up joint reception centres for foreigners, and hold regular three-way ministerial meetings to exchange key information.

Both Croatia and Slovenia experienced changes in government in the fall. Prime Minister of Croatia Andrej Plenković dismissed the Minister of Defense Mario Banožić after he was involved in a traffic accident that resulted in a casualty in October. Banožić himself was seriously injured. Prime Minister of Slovenia Robert Golob, also lost two Ministers – for Environment and Agriculture – after he withdrew his confidence in them. Uroš Brežan, Minister of the Environment, resigned in October after the dissatisfaction with the Government's response to damaging floods in August.

Golob announced the further shrinking of the size of the cabinet, which is in contrast to his initial decision to add more ministries once he took office. The recent surveys showed a drop in support to the governing parties, including Golob's Freedom Movement, which might explain the need for changes. Opposition leader Janez Janša, who is now leading in the polls, called for snap elections.

SERBIA GOES FOR SNAP ELECTIONS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE BANJSKA ATTACK

On 1 November, President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić dissolved the National Assembly of Serbia and called a snap election, hours after the parliament Speaker Vladimir Orlić called early elections in 65 cities and municipalities, including the capital of Belgrade. The signs of upcoming early elections were evident in late September, when the mayors from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party started resigning en masse to trigger the dissolutions of local parliaments.

Therefore, the decision hold elections, which are scheduled for 17 December, seems to have been made mere days after the attack in Banjska on 24 September. Some analysts assessed that this event was the primary cause of the elections, though Vučić has repeatedly announced the possibility of a snap poll since the anti-government protests broke out over mass shootings in May.

Milan Radoičić, Kosovo-Serb businessman and politician who took the responsibility for the Banjska attack, has remained out of prison, with the United States and the European Union officials demanding that all responsible be prosecuted. The process against Radoičić has started in Serbia, but it does not seem to be moving speedily. The only other strong reaction that came from the EU was the European Parliament resolution condemning the attack and asking for the Union to freeze financial assistance to Serbia if the involvement of the official institutions is proven.

The Serb List party, of which Radoičić was Vice President before the attack, elected new leadership. In November, Aleksandar Vulin resigned as the Director of Security and Intelligence Agency. Commentators believe that the attack increased the pressure for his resignation, which was already present after the United States sanctioned him in July.

Meanwhile, the leaders of France, Germany and Italy – Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, and Giorgia Meloni – met separately with Aleksandar Vučić and Albin Kurti in Brussels in October, requesting that Kosovo move forward with the establishment of the Association of Serb-

majority Municipalities, and Serbia moves forward with the de facto recognition of Kosovo. This implies the implementation of the provisions of the Brussels and Ohrid agreements accepted earlier this year, including Serbia's non-objection to Kosovo's membership in international organisations.

Neither side has made any significant moves in this direction since then. Comments of the French President Macron, who stated in October that the EU expected Kosovo to deliver on its obligations in the Dialogue with Serbia since France had made a gesture of confidence when it agreed to Kosovo's visa liberalization, caused a stir. The statement was interpreted as a threat of unilateral blockade of the visa-free travel, which the citizens of Kosovo are expected to start enjoying from 2024. This was, in fact, not the case, and visa liberalization is expected to come into force on January 1st.

The European Commission proposed to the Council that holders of special passports issued to Serbian citizens in Kosovo allow visa-free travel as well, which caused criticism in Kosovo due to concerns that this encourages the refusal of Serbs to fully integrate. Serbian citizens of Kosovo will once again have to vote in Serbian elections from special polling stations opened in Serbia, as the government of Albin Kurti refused to allow holding of elections in Kosovo without an official request from Belgrade, which the Serbian government did not submit as it would entail recognition.

In the elections on 17 December, pro-EU opposition united in a list "Serbia Against Violence", named after the anti-government protests that first broke out in May.

Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Progressive Party at a campaign rally in Belgrade, December; Source: Serbian Progressive Party



It is the largest opposition coalition thus far and is expected to have a serious chance to challenge the ruling party in the capital of Belgrade. On the national level, polls and analysts expect that the ruling SNS will most likely maintain power. Nationalist opposition, whose main campaign issue is the opposition to the French-German plan (Brussels-Ohrid agreement), is running on several lists.



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