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INTEGRATION AND DEMOCRATISATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS
THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Content

Introduction

From 14-16 October, the ninth annual summit of the Berlin process will be held in Albanian Tirana where Western Balkan leaders will meet their European counterparts to discuss the future of EU integration and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe. The Berlin process was established in 2014 by European advocates of the Western Balkans' accession as a multilateral platform for high-level political cooperation within the region and with the EU. Its initial intention was to keep the European perspective of the region alive after it was damaged by a moratorium on enlargement set by the European Commission. Despite the ambitions and practical steps taken within the Berlin process, EU integration of the Western Balkans has further stagnated over the last decade and regional cooperation has been obstructed by unresolved regional disputes.

The upcoming summit, the first to take place in the region, will be held in a volatile atmosphere characterized by high expectations but limited capabilities on both ends of the enlargement process. As the geopolitical circumstances changed rapidly with the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the unstable Western Balkans with its unresolved conflicts and persisting Russian influence returned to the top political agenda on the EU level. Meanwhile, the states of the region put their hopes into a revival of the deadlocked enlargement policy as the EU has been, for clear geopolitical reasons, opening its door to Ukraine.

However, the EU itself is facing multiple internal challenges, including a lack of political consensus and institutional unreadiness, that effectively prevent any breakthrough in the enlargement. Even more importantly, the Western Balkan governments have been in the long-term struggling to fulfil the pre-accession criteria set by the EU, and their accession thus stands out of sight.

After more than two decades of EU engagement in the Western Balkans aiming at regional stabilization and democratization, the six states of the region are lagging behind in performing democratic reforms, strengthening the rule of law, and resolving their internal and bilateral conflicts.

This analysis identifies and discusses the key negative trends present in the region that all pose a principal challenge to democracy in the Western Balkans. The overview departs from domestic democratic deficits within political institutions, civil society, and media. Second, it discusses two problems of regional scope: unresolved disputes within and between states, and massive Westward migration. The analysis concludes with the broader geopolitical aspects and foreign influences that negatively affect the quality of democracy in the region, including Russian destabilizing influence, Chinese geoeconomic ambitions, and the EU's loss of credibility.

Based on this overview, the analysis also suggests policy recommendations for all participants of the upcoming Berlin process summit – Western Balkan leaders, policymakers from the participating EU members, and representatives of the civic sector from the region. We believe that all these actors have an equal stake in the region's democracy and its European perspective, which is the only viable geopolitical vision for stable and democratic Western Balkans.

Challenges for the WB6

1. Lack of pluralism, state capture and violations of human rights undermines democratic development

Decades into the political transition to democracy, Western Balkan democracies remain fragile and stuck in a state of "illiberal equilibrium". All countries do hold free elections and have developed political pluralism, while in most cases political competition does generate transitions of power. However, the political landscape across the region is dominated by populism and the competition is often based on purely ethno-nationalist grounds instead of on policy agenda, which further deepens political polarization. Institutions and the rule of law remain weak, unable to constrain political power, guarantee fairness in political competition and respect for human rights.

For years, the countries of the Western Balkans have been described as partly free, with a general long-term trend of stagnation across the region. Yet trends cannot be described in broad strokes as there are notably different and divergent dynamics by country. The latest Freedom House assessment notes that while Kosovo and North Macedonia have seen progress, Albania and Montenegro have stagnated, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have regressed.

Democratization reforms have largely subsided in parallel with the stagnation in EU accession, which had been their driver. Corruption remains a key challenge in terms of rule of law across the region, as it feeds the political-economic networks and state capture. Judiciary systems are also largely viewed as being central components of this state of capture because they are subjected to considerable political influence.

Many marginalized groups are on the receiving end of this institutional weakness. Discrimination against ethnic minorities presents a burning issue, particularly taking into consideration the fragile relationship between ethnic groups affected by past wars. Inadequate states' response is also omnipresent in preventing the violence against women while hostility against the LGBTIQ community is resulting in cases of hate motivated crimes that remain unprosecuted.

2. Civil society has been disempowered to serve as an agent of democratization in breaking the political capture of institutions

Traditional advocacy-type Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) played a key role in promoting democratic reforms and leading most of the countries of Eastern Europe into the EU. Yet they are now facing serious challenges in achieving the same goal in the Western Balkans. This is not due to any formal types of restrictions and intimidations, as most Western Balkan governments are generally open to CSOs and have frameworks for their participation. It is also not necessarily due to typical CSO challenges like weak capacities and constituencies. A key challenge seems to be a general sense of disillusionment within civil society and the social delegitimization of their agenda and role.

CSOs have suffered considerably from loss of the credibility of EU accession and conditionality, which used to be a key anchor of democratic reforms. Most of the CSO funding is also anchored to the EU accession framework, which is a problem at a time when accession (and the reforms) has stalled. Traditional CSOs increasingly work on technocratic

issues or promote a symbolic pro-EU discourse that has consistently failed to produce tangible results to citizens – selling a story which people increasingly believe less in.

Traditional advocacy CSOs are also increasingly being undermined by irrelevant forms of inclusion and co-option in government reform processes that create the perception of meaningful influence and use the increasingly weightless EU integration process as a smokescreen. Political elites in the region, particularly in Serbia, have also grown skilled at generating a mirage and simulation of civil society activism by creating groups Government-sponsored Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) that legitimize government actions.

The response to this delegitimization of pro-democracy CSOs throughout the region has been the rise of a new wave of grassroots civil society movements, especially issue-based ones focusing on topics like the environment or gender. Yet these movements remain mostly sporadic and fluid, easily dispersed and insufficiently institutionalized to be connected to the democratization funding framework. Some of these protest movements and initiatives have also started to grow into auxiliary political movements, especially at the local level, but with limited success.

3. Political influence, judicial pressure and disinformation undermine professional and critical journalism

The level of media freedom in the region is one of the lowest in Europe, stagnated or even declining according to global indexes, with the most negative trends present in the largest country: Serbia. The Western Balkans countries in general are characterized by considerable media pluralism in terms of numbers of media outlets, but this does not necessarily translate into pluralism of narratives. That is because media ownership remains largely an extension of the extractive and clientelist model of governance, which ensures political control and transactional relations with media editorial lines - both private and public broadcasters.

Professional and critical media, especially investigative outlets, often manage to disrupt entrenched political powers. Yet, by using political influence over the media and the resources from extractive governance, political leaders use various tools to control mainstream narratives, including legal manoeuvres to suppress critical content. For example, legal tools have been considerably used to intimidate journalists through strategic lawsuits (SLAPP). Professional journalists are repeatedly subject to direct threats and attacks due to their reporting, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics such as corruption, misuse of power, and transitional justice.

Disinformation efforts by foreign authoritarian actors are widely present in the region – they are mostly used to amplify divisions and sow discord for strategic ends. A particular problem in the current geopolitical setting is the widespread pro-Russian narratives targeting Serb populations in the region and hybrid warfare campaigns against pro-Western and pro-democracy actors in the region. Yet, disinformation is more of a domestically sourced phenomenon instrumentalized by local elites.

4. New waves of Westwards migration are stripping away human capital needed for development and democratic reforms

One of the biggest challenges facing Western Balkans is the demographic hemorrhage from aging populations and persistently high rates of Westward migration. Part of the migration from the region is normal – a decades-long trend of poorer parts of the continent seeking better opportunities in the West, many of whom end up sending back money, and some returning with capital and valuable skills needed for development. However, the new wave of migration is also drawing away many skilled and established professionals.

Much of this is due to pull factors like the targeting of certain professionals by EU countries, especially Germany, but it is also a symptom of push factors like widespread pessimism in the countries of the Western Balkans about the future. For established middle-class professionals with children, the calculus of whether to stay in the region or leave involves thinking not just about jobs, but also typical middle-class demands like good health and education services or the rule of law.

Whether young and skilled professionals will decide to stay or migrate during the next decade will largely depend on whether they trust that politics is moving things in the right direction, and whether institutions are delivering effective services to address key concerns. From a democracy perspective, the problem brought forth by the new wave of migration is not that it is only depleting the countries of human capital needed for development, but that it is also drawing away the kind of voters most inclined to support democratic reforms.

The more people who chose "exit" over engagement for change, the less the Western Balkans' democracies in the region will be resilient to authoritarianism. The experience of several countries in Central and Eastern Europe has been that those who stayed behind were older and more inclined to embrace nationalist or authoritarian leadership – with the existential dread of demographic collapse also providing a narrative which populist politicians can use very effectively.

5. The unresolved regional security architecture and revisionist narratives securitize the political discourse

The lack of normal relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as continued sectarian politics and secessionist agendas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are the two key political disputes fueling insecurity and preventing the full accession of the region into NATO and EU. Even within some NATO members like Montenegro, ethnic divisions have become the source of a deep political cleavage and struggle for control over the country's geopolitical orientation. The latest escalation of ethnic violence in northern Kosovo has once again proven the far-reaching destabilising potential of unresolved conflicts from the past for the future stability of the Western Balkans.

Divisions are being fueled by regress in the process of regional reconciliation and the resurgence of revisionist narratives - particularly in Serbia, where the promotion of convicted war criminals is being embraced by key political actors. Overall, questionable outcomes of the transitional justice process of the past decades continue to foster one-sided interpretations, lack of cooperation in dealing with the consequences of the war and a broader regional climate of impunity and denial. Constant disagreement about the conflict, its causes and outcomes leave almost no space for the recognition of suffering of others.

The security dilemmas created by the disputes and revisionist narratives end up fueling authoritarian and populist leadership, particularly in the region's largest country, Serbia. The first way in which they achieve this impact is by allowing political elites to instrumentalize security concerns and identity politics by placing them at the center of political discourse. They create regular opportunities to use and even engineer tensions and crisis to frame authoritarian leaders as national protectors, to target and delegitimize critics as less patriotic, and to overshadow other issues, especially rule of law reforms.

The second way in which the unresolved disputes and security concerns fuel authoritarianism is that they create an entry point for actors like Russia to project power and play spoiler in the region. Russia's grip over Serbia and its projection as a protector of Serbian populations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro allow it to fuel disruptive actors in these countries – something that became even more prominent after the war in Ukraine.

As such this context increases the leverage of authoritarian actors in the region to bargain with the West and obtain immunity from criticism on democratic standards, so long as they adhere to the West's security agenda. Many regional observers have for example noted how Serbia's authoritarian turn under Vucic has been enabled by the West's priority of drawing Serbia away from Russia's orbit and agenda in the Balkans. Persisting insecurity in the region thus results in legitimisation of strong man rule in the Western Balkans.

6. Russian aggression tests the pro-Western orientation and resilience of the region

Russia has traditionally been an active actor in the strategic area of the Balkans where it followed its own geopolitical interests, mainly packed into symbolic terms of Pan-Slavism and brotherhood with Orthodox Slavs. Since the Kosovo conflict in 1999, the Kremlin has openly opposed the Western policies in the region and worked intensively on building up its own alliances across the Western Balkans. Working closely with part of the local political elites, recruited mainly from the Serb-populated areas, Russia has created a political network that openly questioned the pro-Western orientation of a significant part of the region.

The latent ethnic conflicts smoldering across the region suit Russian interests and the Kremlin has been actively working on preventing their resolution. In addition to the soft power politics, Russia is also deeply involved in the regional energy sphere where it can rely on vital dependencies of part of the region on Russian oil and gas.

The destabilizing potential of the Russian influence in the region fully revealed with the Russian war against Ukraine after 2022. With its local allies holding power in parts of the region, the Kremlin seized the opportunity to exploit the vulnerability of the Western Balkans in its broader geopolitical confrontation with the West. It became clear that while Russia cannot offer the region any sustainable geopolitical alternative to the EU, it will try hard to use its influence in the Western Balkans as a leverage against the Western pressure.

While governments in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia clearly aligned with the Western position on Russian aggression, Serb politicians across the region took more restrained positions. Some of them, including Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and Serb representatives in Montenegro, a NATO member, have cautiously maneuvered in the volatile

space between alignment with EU position, domestic demand and Russian pressure. Others, such as Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, openly aligned with the Kremlin within their domestic populist agenda.

This state of disunity currently suits best the interest of Russia which needs to distract attention from its aggression against Ukraine and disrupt the integrity of the response of the West. Any further escalation of instability in the Western Balkans would only fit Russian needs in the region and worldwide. Unless effectively contained by strong and united pro-Western forces, the Kremlin might not hesitate to use its influence over regional political elites to actively contribute to new crises in the region.

7. Chinese geoeconomic ambitions threaten economic stability and undermine transparent governance in the region

Unlike the traditional external powers, China is a newcomer to the Western Balkan geopolitical arena, yet it equals to them in terms of its ambitions, assets and agility. Beijing entered the regional stage in a big way after 2010 within its broader geoeconomic Belt and Road Initiative in which the Balkans has a strategic position for Chinese access to the European markets.

Chinese economic presence in the Western Balkans is focused primarily on development of infrastructure. Based on the controversial economic-political model applied by China in other parts of the world, Chinese state-owned banks provide massive loans to local governments for large infrastructure projects which are realized by Chinese state-owned enterprises. While this mechanism might seem to be favorable for both sides, it in fact endangers the fiscal stability of Western Balkan countries and makes them vulnerable to Chinese influence. In the most alarming case of Montenegro, the country with an annual budget of 2 billion €, took a loan of 1 billion € from a Chinese bank for the construction of a new highway by Chinese companies, bringing the government close to a long-term debt trap.

While China presents its engagement in the region in purely economic and development terms, its business comes with high political risks for democratic institutions. The Chinese way of negotiating strategic projects with local political elites across the region has been marked by controversy stemming from lack of transparency and questionable economic profitability for the region. Both the local civil societies and the EU have criticized Western Balkan governments for non-transparent deals with Chinese companies that often ignored local environmental and social needs.

Despite the controversies, Chinese representatives have been warmly welcomed by local governments. Regional leaders portrayed China as an important economic partner and used the deals domestically in building up their own public image. Serb political elite across the region also exploited strengthening economic links with China in seeking foreign policy alternatives to the EU.

Making economic deals with Beijing is seemingly an easy yet rather risky way of bringing the needed economic capital to the region. China, unlike the EU, does not condition its credits by any political criteria, but it mainly provides profit-oriented loans instead of direct investment into local economies. China thus only follows its own economic interests in the region and once the local governments are not able to pay back the loans, China will not hesitate to use

the influence it has built up over the politics in the region.

8. EU enlargement's loss of credibility opens space for democratic decline

In the early 2000s, the integration of the Western Balkans into the European structures had been widely accepted as a key tool for the desperately needed regional stabilization and democratization both by the EU and within the region. The landmark EU Thessaloniki summit in 2003 clearly formulated the perspective of future EU membership for all Western Balkan states based on the principle of conditionality.

After the initial decade of significant progress, when Croatia became an EU member and most of the countries achieved the candidacy status, the process lost momentum by mid-2010s. Over the last decade, the dynamics have stalled and only a few steps forward have been achieved while strategic decisions were held over on both sides. The stalemate of the integration process thus puts into question the assumption of regional stabilization and democratization driven by the EU-membership perspective.

The causes leading to the current standoff in the region's EU integration need to be sought on both ends of the enlargement politics. On the EU part, the credibility of the accession perspective has been undermined by political inconsistencies stemming from the disunity among the member states, some of which have put their own domestic or foreign interests ahead of the enlargement. The public image of the EU as a guarantee of democracy was also damaged by its own internal conflicts over the state of democracy in some member states, as well as by its tolerance towards stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans. Due to its own political inconsistency and local elites' reluctance to democratic reforms, the EU has been losing appeal across the region.

On the Western Balkan side, the governments across the region have been reluctant to perform the substantive reforms prescribed by the EU that would strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law. Local political representatives also generally lacked a true goodwill to work on improving the inter-ethnic relations within and between the states.

The recent indications of revival of the enlargement process, such as overdue opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania or granting the candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, are formally important yet politically rather symbolic gestures that alone cannot fix the EU's damaged reputation. The latest EU 'growth plan' for the Western Balkans presented by President Von der Leyen in May 2023 might potentially mark a turning point in the process, yet determination and political will on both sides will be still needed for its materialization.

Unless the full political credibility of the EU accession perspective is reestablished soon, both politicians and voters across the region might look elsewhere for their democratic standards and geopolitical anchors. In light of the Russian war against Ukraine, jump-starting the stalled enlargement process based on democratic reforms is more important than ever.

Policy recommendations

A. For Western Balkan leaders

Political leaders from the region should take the overall Berlin process and its summit seriously as an opportunity to revive the stalled EU integration of the region, which is complementary to the institutionalized EU accession process. They need to reflect that the platform brings together their key European counterparts who will be defining the political dynamics of European integration in the upcoming volatile period that can be crucial for the pace and scope of the enlargement.

The regional political leaders should take the opportunity provided by the top-level regional meeting to express their goodwill clearly and vocally for finally negotiating sustainable settlements in ongoing regional disputes and fostering inclusive regional cooperation in the economic sphere. They should also articulate their credible commitment to democratic reforms. On all of these matters, they should work closely with their partners from regional civil society, and the summit would be a great opportunity to reaffirm common goals of regional governmental and non-governmental bodies and strengthen their partnership.

B. For participating EU policymakers

European leaders present in Tirana should use the occasion of the top-level meeting to reaffirm their commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans and thus help restore the credibility of the overall EU accession process. They should send a clear signal that the roadmap leading to the EU will bring back the original principles of conditionality, meaning that the aspirant states will be awarded promised progress in their accession process once they meet the criteria, while failure to align with the EU conditions will be penalized.

The representatives of the EU should use their leverage over the Western Balkan leaders to facilitate the swifter resolution of regional disputes, which fuel authoritarianism and ethnonationalism throughout the region. They should particularly tackle the urgently needed rapid de-escalation of recurring tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. European leaders should also motivate the Western Balkan governments to strengthen their regional cooperation, particularly in the economic and energy sphere where all of them would directly profit from it.

C. For civil society in the Western Balkans

CSOs from the Western Balkans should use the Think Tank forum organized prior to the political summit to strengthen their regional cooperation and work across borders. Their regional approach is essential in securing the resolution of ethnic disputes and fighting trends that fuel authoritarianism and hold the region back from the EU. Civil societies from across the region should continue developing intense communication and exchange of experiences in spheres of democracy and human rights promotion, reconciliation, or environmental protection, where a cross-border approach is essential.

Regional CSOs should also use the occasion to advocate together for common interests to convince decision-makers within the EU of the region's societies' readiness and interest in

getting closer to the EU, despite the reluctance of some of their political leaders. Regional civil society would thus strengthen its role as an alternative partner to the EU in those parts of the region where governments fall behind in getting the countries closer to the EU.

Authors

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About the project region

The Southeast and East Europe project region is organized by the Foundation's regional office in Sofia and has numerous project offices throughout the region – including Belgrade, Istanbul, Tbilisi, Kyiv and Bucharest. In addition to the numerous activities in areas such as human rights or liberal democracy in the all project countries, the regional office in Bulgaria implements a number of initiatives and programs that have an overarching function for the region. For instance, the annual "Future of Freedom" consultation promotes political dialogue between partners, liberal opinion leaders and multipliers from politics and society.

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