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Strategic autonomy or multiple dependencies: the challenges of building resilience in a competitive geopolitical environment

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Introduction

From the early 1990s until fairly recently, the European Union enjoyed the privilege of operating in a regional context where it had no serious competition from rival powers (Debski & Hamilton, 2019) and it had a strong ally, the United States. It was thus able to both continue to build itself around its core values and principles of cooperation and further integration, and draw its neighbours into the same happy dance that held out the promise of prosperity, stability and democracy alongside EU membership. Its vicinity had never stopped being disputed among rival power interests, but these powers were themselves weak, facing domestic challenges of their own, while the US and EU, as winners of the Cold War, were enjoying the ideological attraction that comes with victory and the influence they garnered as leaders of a Western-dominated global order.

Eventually, Washington military power and political leverage, and the promise of eventual EU accession seemed to be

creating the long-term conditions for strategic integration, making the Western Balkans stable, secure, and sharing in the benefits of the democracy and free market-based paradigm of cooperation and integration. Brussels was bringing in visa-free regime, assistance with institution-building, rule of law and convergence of all sorts, as well as generous funding, political and economic investment. That path looked like the only option for the region, which was geographically, economically and geopolitically fully dependent on the larger continent.

What has changed since? First and foremost, the global environment of geopolitical competition. Western liberal order is being contested worldwide – and also in its immediate ‘sphere of influence’. The losers of the Cold War, reeling from their loss until not long ago, have lately recovered strength and ambition. Other emerging powers are looking to build up influence where their interests lie.

The EU no longer acts in the Western Balkans as an undisputed single 'patron': Russia, China, Turkey, and some of the Gulf monarchies all vie for influence (Bechev, 2020, Popescu & Secrieru, 2018). Meanwhile, the EU itself is facing internal problems and finds that its failures - and perceived hypocrisy in its handling of Western Balkans integration (Stratulat, 2019) – is making it look increasingly unconvincing, just as its previous success had made it attractive.

The EU is also now deprived of the power boost that the United States were providing. Washington now acts alone, unpredictably and sometimes against EU options (like in the case of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue) (Morina, 2020). Globally, its interests, its ends and means only partially converge with those of the EU.

In Brussels and member states' capitals, the discovery is being made that the EU only seems to be able to use European integration as an instrument of foreign policy where, on the receiving end, the candidate countries genuinely embrace

the process in its entirety. Such was the case with the ten new member states from the former Communist bloc, but perhaps not with the Western Balkans, where some try to make selective use of the benefits of enlargement, picking and choosing whatever eases their way to Brussels funding and travel freedoms, while shying away from difficult reforms. To be fair, this is not an irrational choice altogether, given that the EU itself has been acting confusingly, freezing enlargement during the years of the Juncker Commission, then unfreezing it just to see it blown up by Macron (Rankin & Walker, 2020), then eventually opening its doors to Albania and North Macedonia.

Common challenges

This long introduction seeks to provide context for the understanding of perhaps the single most immediate risk of a hybrid nature shared between the European Union and the Western Balkans: the potentially fatal mix of internal vulnerabilities and the willingness and drive of external competitors to exploit them to amplify existing problems, disrupt and destabilise, creating ample room for manoeuvre for competing interests. The fact that these rival powers are not necessarily seeking full control over the Western Balkans should not be misleading. For now, their agenda is merely disruptive, aiming to thwart EU moves and these countries' successful progress toward democracy, as well as their strategic alignment with the West. Just keeping the Western Balkans in a state of dependence and as 'consumers' of security, as opposed to them being contributors to European strategic autonomy, allows these disruptors

continued sway over the future of the region (Zamfir, 2020).

But as always, what happens in the Western Balkans never stays in the Western Balkans alone. The immigration crisis has recently demonstrated the extent to which the EU and its southern and south-eastern neighbours are co-dependent. The one lesson for Brussels is that the Union can no longer just be the equivalent of the American 'city upon the hill', a model for others to aspire to, generous but rather slow and reactive in its approach. It's high time the self-branded 'geopolitical Commission' started living up to its name and hopefully receiving member states' backing for this same proactive approach (Koenig, 2019).

The difficulties are not just external – rather perhaps primarily internal. Not all rival powers share the same agenda or approach, but they all share a non- or even anti-democratic model of governance and an interest to undermine liberalism and democracy within the EU and in its neighbourhood. Russia has been funding far-right, far-left and other

nationalist, populist and fringe political movements in Europe without ideological discrimination (Rettman 2017). It has been supporting Orthodox groups and churches in Central and Eastern Europe and among former Soviet satellites, in order to promote so-called 'traditional values' and portray EU civil liberties and secularism as actively undermining these. It has interfered in elections, sowed further mistrust between state (i.e. institutions of representative democracy) and society, against the backdrop of existing dissatisfaction with political leadership across the continent and the growing feeling of various electorates of being marginalised and underrepresented (Karlsen, 2019; Zamfir, 2019).

Less aggressively, but getting itself more and more deeply entrenched every day, China has advanced inside the continent from the edges, gaining a strong foothold for its trade and investment in the group of 17+1, acquiring strategic assets, promising loans without the governance standards conditionalities of the EU and international financial institutions. The most influential

state in the Western Balkans, Serbia, enthusiastically cooperated, as Xi Jinping's corrupt policies of engagement provide a favourable avenue for Aleksandar Vucic's personal interests (Gajic, 2019). As the COVID-19 pandemic has amply proven though, Beijing has also gained significant control over core EU, by leveraging its advantage in manufacturing and technology. Faced with possible backlash after the spread of the new coronavirus out of Wuhan, China has been stepping up its direct propaganda in Europe and is expected to continue doing it.

Gulf monarchies and proxy criminal organisations have been exchanging their piles of cash for not just political, but also social influence. In the Western Balkans, they have both funded corrupt local leaders through lavish investment projects wrapped in a thick veil of non-transparent dealings, and invested in the social infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals), while conditioning those on building mosques and essentially enjoying increased freedom to recruit

jihadists. In Europe, these proxies have contributed to the radicalisation of the Muslim population.

Turkey has been promoting its commercial interests in the Balkans energetically and in recent years it has been able to twist a few arms to test to what extent these would translate into allegiance to Erdogan. As was the case of the so-called 'Gülenists' lined up for deportation to Ankara (BIRN, 2018), Turkish efforts aimed at building up influence seem to have paid off. As the regime becomes more and more authoritarian, its influence is likely to become ever more toxic – and not only on the Western Balkans, since the EU's dependence on Turkey for managing immigration is giving Erdogan a blank check.

All of these social, political, economic and foreign policy/ security vulnerabilities open wide inroads for malign influence, whether from external actors or domestic players with vested interests. In fact, much of this malign influence is demand-

driven. Sharp power is supposed to be a (relatively) low-cost, high return on investment strategy, whereby the enemy uses the target's weaknesses against it; it does not need to create gaps, it just needs to exploit and enlarge existing ones – and this could not be easier than by enlisting domestic players who don't just enjoy, but actively seek this interference in support of their own agendas. In the case of the Western Balkans, local political players and governments have long been playing big powers against one another to extract the maximum of (personal) benefits from all (Zamfir, 2019). The European Union has, unfortunately, lent support to these by choosing to engage mostly with governments to advance the enlargement agenda, because they were the ones that could deliver, while forgetting to invest in the democratisation and adherence to the project of the larger society. All this while the latter was getting more and more disconnected from its increasingly authoritarian leaders and regarding the EU as propping them up for its own interest.

More recently, Western Balkan autocrats

have found a champion within the very European Union. Viktor Orban's model of so-called 'illiberal democracy', which ridiculises the constitution, separation of powers or human rights, trampling upon every principle and value of the EU, has been embraced south of the Danube as the ultimate source of legitimacy: after all, Hungary is an EU member and the EU has not punished Budapest for its backsliding, so how could it demand from others to refrain from behaviour that it allows among its own ranks? Moreover, Orban has slyly acted, to a large extent, within the framework that democratic rules allow him – he has used democracy to undermine democracy; he has not simply discarded it. Besides, he is not alone: Poland and Hungary reinforce each other; Slovakia, Czechia experiment with their own versions of limited democratic backsliding and/or dangerous games with Russia and China; the same was attempted last year in Romania, though an antidemocratic takeover by the country's largest party was stopped short; Bulgaria, with its high levels of corruption; all provide examples that EU

membership does not equal complete democratic transformation. Western Europe itself is faced with everything from growing populism and nationalism, to far-right extremism, radicalisation and Euroscepticism.

These are not reasons for the EU to step down from the role of active promoter of democracy or European integration in the region; or from developing an effective strategy to counter hybrid threats. Shared challenges provide a good opportunity to acknowledge that we're in this together – and that 'this' is a global geopolitical competition where the EU seems to be losing some of its position of advantage mostly because it has been late in recognising its occurrence and hesitant in engaging. Otherwise, it could still outsmart its competitors, at least on the continent, because it has the money, the population, the ability to mobilise the combined potential of its member states (and has demonstrated it, albeit belatedly, during the current pandemic), the capacity for innovation, the jobs, the cultural and standard-of-living attractiveness.

On their end, the Western Balkans also really only have one option: their population is in Europe (and that is at the same time one of their biggest problems (Judah, 2019)), their economy is inextricably linked to that of the EU, their societies have a clear European identity and are gradually converging toward the European model, rather despite than thanks to their governments. In the current competitive context though, failure to act together resolutely and fast could amount to backtracking that could take many hard years to reverse.

The way ahead for our shared European future

Hence the clear set of minimal joint actions needed:

- work together toward a common risk assessment of hybrid threats, one that works from the identification of vulnerabilities, to the design of resilience and response (this approach is more practical and less likely to end up in controversy, as opposed to starting from a discussion around who are the enemies);
- the framework for this assessment needs to take into account the reality of hybrid threats as a form of sharp power whose end goal is to achieve transformational effects on society and politics. Democratic resilience and resilience to hybrid threats are therefore to be regarded as closely linked and dealt with accordingly;

- the conversation needs to take place in a multistakeholder format, with a whole-of-society approach. Governments alone may be less enthusiastic to engage or less genuine, in some cases, whereas inclusion of civil society may be more conducive to success;
- the enlargement process needs to be both convergence-oriented and a process of stabilisation and security-building, circumscribed by the larger strategic autonomy umbrella. EU interventions and funding should seek to strengthen resilience, especially as many would target the same areas that are critical to democratisation. Brussels should make sure society – and not just political leaders - partakes in the benefits;
- the EU needs to become a more ambitious and agile geopolitical player; to this end, other than working out its institutional conundrums and post-Brexit crises, it also needs to set its house in order. Unless it identifies the means to react to democratic backsliding among its own and thus fix its own resilience gaps, it will not be taken seriously externally;
- in the Western Balkans, it all eventually goes down to whether these countries truly want to shake off different patrons fighting one another in the region – in which case they should strengthen collective resilience by building up cooperation among themselves and with the EU starting from areas of opportunity (infrastructure, technology, manufacturing, etc.), including but not limited to the enlargement process.

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About this contribution

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Information about IDSCS

IDSCS is a think-tank organisation researching the development of good governance, rule of law and North Macedonia's European integration. IDSCS has the mission to support citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and strengthen the participatory political culture. By strengthening liberal values, IDSCS contributes towards coexistence of diversities.

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