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From Business as Usual to the New Normal

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Introduction

The region of the Western Balkans is enclosed by the EU and NATO and the countries are deeply merged into the EU in geographic, political, economic, financial and human terms; and nowhere else have the EU and its member states invested so much political capital in the past three decades as in these countries. The COVID-19 pandemics confirmed this interdependence in the most brutal way and underlined the importance of changing the narrative about the European future of the region. Enlargement is not only about the interests of the Western Balkans, it is about the position and capacities of the EU as global actor. On the other hand, next to the need to take ownership of Western Balkan countries in the process of EU integration it is necessary that the region demonstrates a proactive approach and feels invited to partake in shaping the future European project.

Mistrust in the European institutions and the common European future is a natural result of the latest developments

at continental level. The EU of today struggles with challenges to the rule of law among its members and multiple crisis that test the feeling of security and the fundamental premise of solidarity within the bloc. Migration and competing geopolitical influences have posed additional challenges to the cohesion of the EU countries. The COVID-19 pandemics is a novel, complex, global crisis and not simply the return of one of the previous situations.

“It remains to be seen how exactly the crisis will affect the future of the European project. But it is clear that, in all, the coronavirus will call into question some of the basic assumptions on which the EU is founded.” (Krastev, 2020)

The European Union is now confronted with the fragility of its achievements and only through self-reflection it can rejuvenate its standing in Europe and the rest of the world. The pandemics imposed this need what at the same

time gives the opportunity to turn it to the EU's advantage. The challenge is not only to overcome the crisis, but to make political choices what will open a whole new horizon for an inspiring joint project. To create a Europe what can maintain all its achievements and to support a caring society. The EU's strength lies in inclusive, democratic and prosperous life. However, the current pandemics showed that people's well-being, the quality of the physical-, mental-, social and cultural lives must become values equally important as peace and prosperity.

The pandemic has also revealed the fragility of Western Balkans' state system (Tocci, 2020) and it hit the region already contested by the long and uncertain EU accession process, poor economic performance, weak democratic institutions, insufficient rule of law, authoritarian tendencies, questionable freedom of expression and media freedom, unresolved bilateral issues. For the first time since 2003 Serbia and Montenegro are no longer categorized as democracies in Nations in Transit 2020. At the same time, in March this year North Macedonia joined NATO as its 30th

member and the EU member states finally gave the green light for the beginning of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. This positive decision happened against the background of a large crisis and was therefore not the only news in town, different to the media coverage on the negative decision in October last year. However, it was a brave step in spite of the new circumstances. The impression is that enlargement got rediscovered as soft tool in promoting democracy and rule of law in the Balkans, recognizing the transformative power of the accession negotiations. At the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb (online) Summit on May 6, the EU leaders reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. What was striking however, was avoiding a clear expression and endorsement of these countries' membership. This approach was confirmed in the final Declaration following the Summit, where, as criticized by different actors, the same euphemism "European perspective" is used, when it should be rather talking about "EU membership", "enlargement" or "EU accession" of the countries of the region" (Cvijic, 2020).

Fighting together the coronavirus and its effects was high on the agenda of the Zagreb Summit. The EU's decision to mobilize a financial package of over 3.3 billion Euros for the region's fight with COVID-19 and its consequences confirms its commitment to the Western Balkans. The notion of unity and solidarity was reinforced by Luigi Di Maio, foreign minister of Italy, in his address to the State of the Union 2020 online conference "Europe: Managing the COVID-19 crisis" on May 8, where he thanked to the Western Balkans countries for providing medical and nursing staff and medical equipment.

The recent developments in the EU-Western Balkans relations, culminating with the French veto in relation to opening negotiations with N. Macedonia and Albania last year, and as result, communicating a new approach to the accession process by the European Commission in February this year, pose a number of issues what remain crucial for building the future EU-WB partnership: To what extent do the EU and the region need each other? Is this the opportunity

for the EU to discover the region in a new light, as a near neighbourhood with high importance in developing its strategies for the post-pandemic future? And could the current constellation bring a new dynamic into the reform processes in the WB countries? How different is the narrative about the common European future now?

The Western Balkans countries should be encouraged to pull their weight in the efforts to renew the political shape of Europe. It is more evident than ever before, that current problems discussed and analyzed in this collection of policy papers require common solutions. Europe as a whole must become fit for the next period and it is in the interest of both, the EU and the region, to find a new model of co-operation. It should contribute to the fast forward development of the countries of the region with the objective of full EU membership and it should provide constructive partners, the countries in the Western Balkans transformed, developed and capable to strengthen the Union and build a wider European project. This can only be achieved with sincere and transparent engagement from both sides.

Common challenges in Europe

It is self-evident that principles such as good governance and respect of the rule of law, apply to WB candidates just as they should apply to EU member states, an assumption which was challenged by the nomination of a Hungarian Commissioner – representing a country which has cleared away from European democratic and liberal ideas in recent years – for the portfolio of neighbourhood and enlargement. Accountability to all states involved in the European project, therefore, is needed and essential. A more politically dynamic and sincere approach towards completion of the EU enlargement should be made. There is the realistic danger that opening negotiations with Albania and N. Macedonia would only mean two more WB countries added to the group of those negotiating without substantial change in the dynamics of the overall process. A new normal is inevitable in the post-pandemic reality, and it could offer the opportunity

to a fresh start in the WB – EU accession relationship as well. The Western Balkan countries should commit to genuine implementation of the reforms in order to achieve lasting institutional and social change, while the European Union should be principled in assessing the progress. A meaningful accession can only take place if it is based on honest commitment to the democratization and economic development of the Western Balkan countries (EWB, 2020).

Another very worrying current trend is the massive emigration/depopulation/brain-drain or as some call it “democracy-drain” from the region. However, these countries are not completely empty yet. Far from that. Luckily, there are (among others) still remains of a vibrant and multi-layered civil society with remarkable actors and leaders, great examples of entrepreneurship and successful new business models in spite of the unfriendly environment (in most countries), a large cohort of people who went through a variety of capacity building and empowerment programs who belong to a network of individuals

with powerful skills and capacities, what in total represents a largely “unused” human capital existing in these countries. A massive investment during the past two decades in building this human capital, by boosting the potentials of the most motivated and engaged parts of different sectors including the government, civil society, media, academia, business and political parties, contributed to developing a region-wide knowledge base and valuable resource. This potential should be harnessed and integrated in the development scenarios of the WB countries and in working on common interests of the region and the European Union.

To develop a solid foundation for a prosperous future, to generate societal transformation in the WB and for finding supporters for substantial democratisation of these countries, there must be new instruments for empowering people and for promoting participation and a shared sense of purpose. The EU is an example on how successful policies are made by a multitude of actors working at different levels, where political processes in

fragmented societies must bring in many voices (Balfour, 2019). The citizens of the region must be invited to participate in pan-European debates on concrete policy questions, bringing in appropriate stakeholders from different sectors.

Civil society actors in many countries are rising to the pandemic challenge in myriad different ways. They are filling in gaps left by governments to provide essential services and spread information about the virus. The ability to mitigate the impacts of the crisis relies heavily on the ability of civil society to maintain its role and keep governments to account while giving voice to the most marginalized. Yet the crisis will also hamper civil society’s ability to respond. Closing civic space, constraints on movement and increasingly authoritarian policies in many countries make the environment for advocacy and accountability an extremely difficult one to work in. CSOs in WB countries demonstrated their capacities as essential actors in the democratization and Europeanisation process. Expert organizations proved to be constructive partners to their governments and to the

EU by contributing to relevant political processes, by communicating the latest expertise and field findings to decision-makers, and by engaging in public advocacy campaigns.

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has undergone a fundamental shift over the past decades. While in the wake of violent conflicts it was mostly about strengthening security, and later it focused on stability and confidence building, nowadays the principal goal is to kick-start economic growth and development in times of prolonged crisis. Considerable resources have been invested, and regional initiatives have mounted. There is an urgent need to redefine and rationalize regional cooperation and further develop a sense of nurturing regional identity.

The Way Ahead for our shared European future

Back to the basics approach. This kind of approach in the WB entails that the WB governments must demonstrate clear and honest dedication to the fulfillment of the accession criteria and the process must be based on genuine democratic principles, values and public debate. For the European Union, 'Back to the basics' means that the European Union should provide a credible narrative for the EU accession of all WB countries and by implementing the revised enlargement methodology, it should allow participation to the WB countries in certain EU sectoral areas once the conditions are met.

Fostering innovation, invest in human capital. Preventing democracy-drain is essential for the political and economic well-being for the countries of the Western Balkans. Therefore, by using the existing regional cooperation mechanisms, a new collaboration effort should be focused on developing instruments for supporting talents and fostering innovation. The

region should recognise its available potentials, by reaching out to this existing human capital, and proactively getting involved in common actions with the EU and participate in emerging policy areas as environment and digitalisation.

Inclusion in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The COVID-19 pandemics confirmed the interdependence between WB and EU and emphasized the importance of changing the narrative about the European future of the region. Completion of the European project in this part of Europe is not only about the interests of the Western Balkans, it is also about the position and capacities of the EU to act as a global actor. It is about EU's expressed interest in practicing strategic sovereignty/autonomy. Therefore, the involvement of the WB citizens in the European debates, including the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, which agenda will be broadened with topics emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic is important and highly relevant.

Think tanks/CSOs as indispensable partner in policy/political processes. Civil society in

general must be considered as key partner in the post-pandemic recovery process both by the WB governments and by the EU. New instruments should be developed for providing more comprehensive political and financial support for civil society by recognizing the organic development of the sector in WB and its new actors and forms of engagement (i.e. new social movements, hybrid forms etc.)

Make the most out of regional cooperation. The countries of the region should take the full ownership and use the potential of regional cooperation as a tool for progress in different policy areas from rule of law to competitiveness and environment and development. The positive results of the Berlin process need to be further enhanced, nurtured and concretized by focusing on those initiatives, which are the most feasible and can provide tangible and visible results on the ground. And finally, the societies of the region should acknowledge and take full advantage of the fact that there is a highly developed and vibrant platform for cooperation at regional level which enables formal and non-formal networking and partnerships.

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About this contribution

This contribution builds upon the panel discussions of the [2020 Think Tank Forum Western Balkans Skopje 'Stimulating strategic autonomy - Western Balkans' contribution for a shared European future'](#), organized within the 2020 joint Presidency of the Republic of North Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria with the Western Balkans Summit Series.

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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Link

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