



Executive Summary of Recommendations from and for the Western Balkan Countries and International Stakeholders in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

1st Virtual Meeting

PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” 28 May 2020¹

- *Western Balkan (WB) governments and EU:* Despite a moderate development of COVID-19 in the WB to date, the epidemic has revealed blatant weaknesses in the resilience of regional health systems. Therefore, health systems should be supported in a targeted manner, in particular with funds from the EU’s announced € 3.3 billion support package and other Western sources, so that a possible further pandemic wave can be met with sufficient resources.
- *WB governments:* Public funds dedicated to the crisis to be used transparently and any opportunities for corruption to be curtailed.
- *WB governments, EU and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):* Similar to their reactions to major catastrophic events (floods, fires), the WB states have proven during the pandemic that they will set aside nationalist animosities in times of crisis. This should serve as the starting point for structured regional cooperation in the fight against the pandemic, which should also be promoted by the EU Commission and the RCC in Sarajevo.
- *WB governments:* Given the low resilience of the local health care systems, a moderate development of COVID-19 in the WB was only to be achieved through rigorous curfews. These were based on semi-authoritarian and non-transparent decisions taken by politicians and bypassing parliaments and their constitutional rights. This is why the clear separation of executive and legislative powers has to be restored, decisions by the constitutional courts relating to COVID-19 measures must be implemented, and the monitoring rights of ombudsmen and the monitoring role of NGOs must be respected.

¹ The participants of this virtual meeting were in alphabetical order: Milena BEŠIĆ (Center for Democracy and Human Rights, Podgorica), Alba CELA (Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana), Filip EJDUS (University of Belgrade), Benedikt HENSELLEK (National Defence Academy, Vienna), Predrag JUREKOVIĆ (National Defence Academy, Vienna), Sandro KNEZOVIC (Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb), Magdalena LEMBOVSKA (EUROTHINK, Skopje), Lulzim PEĆI (The Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, Prishtina/Priština), Djordje POPOVIĆ (Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence), Denisa SARAJLIĆ (Independent Consultant, Sarajevo) and Marcel SZALAI (PfP Consortium Operations Staff, Garmisch-Partenkirchen). A somewhat more detailed policy paper by the participants of the virtual meeting, which will also contain recommendations for individual Western Balkan countries, is in preparation.

- *EU*: In the wake of the Corona crisis, domestic political tensions have intensified in almost all WB states. The Special Representative for the WB, Miroslav Lajčák, should therefore engage proactively in order to demonstrate serious interest in the region's democratic development and to contribute to constructive conflict resolution within and between the individual WB countries.
- *EU*: The Corona crisis should not be used as an excuse to further delay the EU enlargement process. Instead, the EU should use the agreement on the new enlargement methodology and the "green light" for accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia as a starting point for a more accountable and dynamic integration policy *vis-à-vis* the entire WB. A visa-free regime should be granted to Kosovo without further delay.
- *EU and other international stakeholders*: The independent judiciary should be further strengthened, with special attention given to the use of public funds during the crisis. Any misuse of public funds by politicians during the crisis should be publicly condemned, as should any individuals involved.
- *EU and OSCE*: Election monitoring should be intensified as well as the commitment to free media coverage, as the pandemic is expected to further lower democratic standards in the parliamentary or local elections planned for this year in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia.
- *EU and US*: Contradictory signals within the EU on important issues of peace consolidation should be avoided (e.g. Borrell and Lajčák on Kosovo) and the clear common EU-US line on the Belgrade-Prishtina/Priština dialogue and other core topics of regional consolidation should be restated. Otherwise, regional instabilities can be expected to increase, as will multipolar influences on the Western Balkans.