

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG)

“Western Balkan Expectations against the Backdrop of Renewed Western Partnership – Situation Analysis and Recommendations”

3rd Virtual RSSEE SG Works Meeting
12 May 2021

PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



Executive Summary of Recommendations¹

- **EU:** Accession negotiations should be started without further delay with both Albania and North Macedonia.
- **EU/US:** The glorification of war crimes and genocide denial by official representatives should be subject to political and financial sanctions.
- **EU/US:** Alternative and young political actors who did well in the 2020 local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be upgraded to the role of constructive political partner.
- **EU/US:** A game-changing arrangement in the context of Kosovo and Serbia should entail EU candidate status and membership in NATO's PfP for Kosovo and an extensive economic package for both Kosovo and Serbia.
- **EU:** The Inter-Party Dialogue in Serbia about fair elections in 2022 should be accompanied by a permanent and experienced EU rapporteur.
- **EU/US:** Support for NGOs focusing on democracy should be increased to ensure civil society control in a situation of domestic fragility in Montenegro.
- **EU/US:** Political contacts with the Montenegrin parliament and government should be strengthened, in order to secure a pro-Western course.
- **Kosovo government:** The Brussels Agreement (2013/15) should be fully implemented by enabling the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo.
- **EU/North Macedonia:** In cooperation with Skopje and Sofia a mutually acceptable model for dealing with historical issues should be found, based on best practices in the European Union and through supporting people-to-people contacts.

Situation Analysis

Geopolitical Implications of the Pandemic (January – May 2021)

The delays in assisting the Western Balkan countries with COVID-19 vaccine doses have worsened the EU's perception in the region and further reduced its political influence, especially vis-à-vis Serbia. It reinforced the general impression among the governments of the Western Balkan states that relying exclusively on Western partners in (health) crises is risky.

In contrast, Serbia's cooperation model of different geopolitical partnerships in the region was enhanced by the Corona pandemic. The Serbian government was the only Western Balkan state that managed to organise vaccines from Western producers as well as Russian and especially Chinese ones. In addition, Serbia was able to distinguish itself as a regional crisis manager with vaccination campaigns also for non-Serbian citizens in the Western Balkans.



The main geopolitical beneficiaries of the slow-start vaccination campaigns in the Western Balkans were China and Turkey. China delivered hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses before EU deliveries to the Western Balkans began in early May. Turkey, a regional power in South East Europe, was also able to increase its political influence, especially over Albania, by distributing the Chinese vaccine Sinovac through Turkish companies.

Western Balkan countries that, like Kosovo, relied exclusively on vaccine doses produced in the West were mostly left behind in the vaccination campaign. In addition to the very slow start of vaccine deliveries through the international aid programme Covax, corruption and mismanagement of procurement processes in some Western Balkan countries additionally hampered successful Corona crisis management. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), there were several protests against the government for this reason.

Western Partnership and the Challenges ahead in the Western Balkans

The difficult global conditions caused by the pandemic and the resulting more negative perception of the EU's role delay the resolution of unresolved conflicts in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, following the election victory of US President Joe Biden, there are expectations in the Western Balkans that a renewed strategic partnership between the EU and the US can help to resolve outstanding conflicts.

In **Albania**, this mainly concerns the political polarisation between the ruling Socialist Party of Prime Minister Edi Rama and the opposition Democratic Party, the Socialists' main rival. The confrontational relationship between the two parties continues after the parliamentary election of 25 April, in which Rama's party once again emerged as the winner, but the opposition Democrats were able to maintain their position as a substantial opposition party in terms of their share of the vote.

The opposition accuses Rama of authoritarian behaviour and election rigging. Officials of his party are accused of electoral fraud. Despite an unambiguous pro-EU course in Albania, Rama's rapprochement with Turkey and Arab states during the pandemic raises concerns in opposition circles about a less predictable foreign policy course in future.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is still far from meeting the conditions set by the EU for candidate status. The same applies to the conditions for completing the mandate of the High Representative, the guardian of the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Important steps in this direction would be the reform of the electoral law and constitutional amendments to end the unequal political treatment of BiH citizens. No policy that guarantees the rights of all citizens – regardless of their ethnicity – can be expected from the currently ruling three clientelistically organised national parties of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats (SDA, SNSD, HDZ BiH). Much more likely is the continuation of a manipulative patronage policy supported by nationalism.

Possible alternative forces to this nationalist-clientelist policy exist in all ethnic groups and entities. Young politicians in particular have been successful in the 2020 local elections with a credible anti-corruption programme within the framework of alternative political alliances. Examples of this are the young mayors of Sarajevo and Banja Luka, both of whom are under 30 years old. It would be important for the West to support new actors like these as they represent a possible alternative to the corrupt national parties.

In **Kosovo**, the victory of Albin Kurti's Movement for Self-Determination in the parliamentary elections in February marked a paradigm shift in domestic politics. It is a government that does not include representatives of parties that emerged from the Kosovo Liberation Army. It enjoys a high level of trust among the Kosovar population with regard to institutional reforms and a credible anti-corruption policy. This political change was further underlined by the election of the young lawyer Vjosa Osmani as president of this Balkan state.

In relations with **Serbia**, however, Kurti's election will very likely make the already very difficult normalisation dialogue even more difficult. For Kurti, improving the still hostile relations with Serbia is not a foreign policy priority as long as Belgrade is not willing to recognise Kosovo as a state, which is not to be expected in the medium term. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić also has no interest in any meaningful progress in the dialogue

prior to the next presidential elections in Serbia scheduled to take place in the spring of next year.

Against the background of these difficult political conditions concerning the continuation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the damage to the EU's image in the Western Balkans, the value of mediation efforts through a concerted approach by Brussels and Washington is growing.

The political course of the new, heterogeneous government in **Montenegro** has so far been characterised by very different signals. The Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović, emphasise Montenegro's clear strategic orientation as a NATO member and EU candidate. When it comes to reform projects and important legislative changes, the Deputy Prime Minister, in particular, makes an effort to involve the population in the democratic opinion-forming process.

Montenegrin society also seems to remain polarised along national and political lines. The refusal of the Minister for Justice, Human and Minority Rights, Vladimir Leposavić, who had questioned the genocide in Srebrenica, to resign from his post caused the first government crisis in Podgorica. In the meantime, parliament passed a vote of no confidence. Apart from these ideological tensions, journalists from independent media are still subject to strong repression and are attacked in individual cases.

The government of **North Macedonia**, which most recently had impressively demonstrated its pro-European sentiments, especially through its substantial contributions to the settlement of the decades-old name dispute with Greece, finds itself held hostage by Bulgarian domestic politics. Such a development could have negative consequences for the reform process, which has recently gained momentum, especially in the area of justice, and could have a negative impact on the internal stability of North Macedonia.

Policy Recommendations

With reference to Albania

- **EU/US:** Western stakeholders should advise the Albanian opposition to refrain from reverting to political guerilla tactics by applying extra institutional means (boycott, protest etc.).

With reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina

- **EU/US:** Further support of the domestic political actors is necessary in the adoption of Electoral Law amendments, in order to achieve a compromise, which would satisfy all sides and ensure the respect for human rights.
- **EU/US:** The glorification of war crimes and genocide denial by official representatives should be subject to political and financial sanctions.
- **EU/US:** Alternative and young political actors who did well in the 2020 local elections should be upgraded to the role of constructive political partners vis-à-vis the hitherto dominant national-clientelist actors.
- **BiH institutions:** Against the backdrop of the negative experiences regarding Corona crisis management, the capacities and external oversight of public procurement procedures should be comprehensively improved.

With reference to Kosovo

- **EU/US:** Restored Trans-Atlantic cooperation through a "one-voice approach" is crucial to achieve results in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue.
- **EU/US:** A game changing arrangement provided by the Western actors upon successful conclusion of negotiations, should entail EU candidate status and membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace for Kosovo, and an extensive economic package that would boost economic development and regional integration.
- **EU:** The visa regime for Kosovo citizens should be lifted immediately in order to regain some credibility and leverage regarding the process of European integration.

- **Kosovo government:** The Brussels Agreement on the normalization of relations with Belgrade (2013/15) should be fully implemented by enabling the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo.

With reference to Serbia

- **EU/US:** Western representatives should be in constant contact with the pro-European opposition in order to get full information on the critical democratic situation in Serbia.
- **EU:** The Inter-Party Dialogue in Serbia, which aims to establish fair and democratic conditions for the presidential, parliamentary and Belgrade elections in spring 2022, should be accompanied by a permanent EU rapporteur (experienced diplomat or politician).
- **EU:** It is necessary to insist on the reform of independent bodies crucial to democratic and fair elections such as the Republic Electoral Committee (RIK), Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), as well as the editorial board of public broadcasters (RTS and RTV).
- **EU:** Brussels must insist on the legal resolution of all the corruption cases that have been uncovered in the “Bilčik Report”.

With reference to Montenegro

- **EU/US:** Support for NGOs with a focus on human rights and democracy should be increased to ensure a civil society control in a situation of domestic fragility.
- **EU/US:** Political contacts with the Montenegrin parliament and government should be strengthened, in order to secure a pro-Western course.
- **EU:** A clear roadmap with democratic and legal benchmarks should be provided to the Montenegrin authorities for the further EU membership negotiations pursuant to the recommendations from EU’s Montenegro report 2020.

With reference to North Macedonia

- **Stakeholders in North Macedonia:** All stakeholders in North Macedonia should refrain from nationalistic rhetoric towards any of its neighbours. The opposition should be included in building a national consensus and strategy to end Bulgaria’s accession blockade.
- **EU/North Macedonia:** The EU member states should work with Bulgaria and North Macedonia to find a mutually acceptable model for dealing with historical issues, based on best practices in the European Union and through supporting people-to-people contacts.

¹These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 3rd Virtual RSSEE Meeting on “Western Balkans Expectations against the Backdrop of Renewed Western Partnership – Situation Analysis and Recommendations”, convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe”, 12 May 2021. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna) on the basis of proposals submitted by the webinar participants. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Mirjam Habisreutinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna). The participants of this webinar were in alphabetical order: Milena Bešić (Center for Democracy and Human Rights, Podgorica), Alba Çela (Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana), Jürgen Eise (PfP Consortium Operations Staff, Garmisch-Partenkirchen), Filip Ejđus (University of Belgrade), Olaf Garlich (PfP Consortium Operations Staff, Garmisch-Partenkirchen), Sanita Hadžović (Center for Security Studies, Sarajevo), Benedikt Hensellek, Predrag Jureković, Simonida Kacarska (European Policy Institute, Skopje), Izabela Kisić (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade), Sandro Knezović (Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb), Lulzim Peci (Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, Prishtina/Priština), Djordje Popović (Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence), Matthew Rhodes (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen) and Lisa-Maria Tagwercher (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).