





POLICY PAPER


The Western Balkans in 2020: Top 5 Developments to Follow

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1. Introduction

2019 has been a strained year for the Western Balkans, marred by scandals, street demonstrations, bilateral tensions and the prevalence of divisive political stances. Against the backdrop of nationalist and authoritarian leaderships, many countries experienced a sharpening political polarization, exemplified by burgeoning protest movements.

The year has been also difficult for the EU enlargement perspectives of the region while calls have been made for an overhaul of the currently brain-dead enlargement strategy.¹ Meantime, governments kept strengthening their grip on state institutions and fuelled the existing regional acrimonies to feed into the ingroup-outgroup dynamics for the sake of domestic consensus.

2020 is expected to be a challenging and worth monitoring year in the Western Balkans. Several elections will take place and the electoral campaigns will define the unfolding of the political and inter-party dynamics on the ground. 2020 could also more decisively determine the future of the EU enlargement process, which could be either revitalized with a new clear vision or, in the worst-case scenario, indefinitely shelved, thus sending an ominous message to the region.

In view of the many challenges ahead, this policy paper purports to present the five most interesting developments to follow in the Western Balkans in 2020. The topics chosen are the reform of the EU enlargement process and its ramifications for the region, the elections in Serbia and North Macedonia and the cleavages in their respective political landscapes, the future of protest movements in the region and Kosovo's new government along with the chances to re-launch the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

2. TOP 5 Developments to Follow in 2020 in the Western Balkans

2.1 EU Enlargement at a Crossroad in 2020. Reform Proposals amid Fears and Hopes

2.1.1 Background

The European Union's approach towards the Western Balkans has been two-pronged throughout the last two decades. On the one hand, it has revolved around building resilience in its immediate neighbourhood in view of its own security concerns.² On the other hand, it has reflected EU's willingness to eventually welcome all Western Balkans countries in the European family.

From the early 2000s, the European Union manifested its ambition to assume the role of a driver of change in the Western Balkans, under the allure of the EU membership. The launch of the Stability Pact and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)³, followed by the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration⁴ ushered a new era of EU involvement in the region. Nevertheless, complex enlargement cycles, coupled with the sovereign debt crisis and other EU internal problems, made further enlargement progressively less desirable, with the exception of Croatia who became EU's newest member in 2013.

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-18/macron-seeks-to-slow-eu-expansion-in-latest-sweeping-reform-push>

² <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/2018-AUT-Carapic-Gassmann-Mapping-Assistance-WBalkans.pdf>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_03_3

The launch of the 2014 Berlin process⁵, following Juncker's announcement of a 5 years enlargement suspension, represented a meagre attempt to keep Western Balkans countries on the reforming track as enlargement became a distant goal to be pursued at a slower and much safer pace.⁶ The 2018 credible enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans,⁷ made enlargement even less probable in the short and medium run, once again signalling that EU's engagement with the Western Balkans has been mainly shaped by resilience thinking.⁸

An ominous sign for future enlargement came in 2019 when Albania and North Macedonia were denied a starting date for membership talks although the European Commission had repeatedly called for the opening of the negotiations.⁹ During two consecutive EU summits, first in June and then in October 2019, the European Council failed to reach a decision on a starting date, spearheaded by the French veto. Furthermore, in November 2019 French President Emmanuel Macron presented its EU partners with a two-and-a-half page "non-paper" demanding a reform of the enlargement strategy, thereby further alienating and perplexing candidate countries and EU partners alike.¹⁰

2.1.2 State of play

The 'non-paper' presented by Paris in the lead-up to EU's General Affairs Council, proposed the replacement of the current accession process, which divides the EU acquis into 35 chapters, with a seven-stage process, comprised of sequential and coherent policy blocks that ultimately lead to accession.¹¹ The envisaged process would be based on 4 principles: gradual association; stringent conditions; tangible benefits and reversibility, which would even allow the EU to abandon membership talks if a candidate country's government backslides on key commitments.¹² In recent years, France has been one of the most vocal opponents of further enlargement, pending an internal reconfiguration of the European Union, viewed as the utmost priority.¹³

Following Paris's insistence, the proposed revision of the enlargement policy was scrutinized by its European partners and the Commission offered to submit its first reform proposals in January 2020. The French reform proposal gained some traction as six countries formally supported an overhaul of the enlargement process but rejected any further delays in the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, asking for a consensus to be reached on this topic by the March 2020 EU summit.¹⁴

Pending the reform proposals of the Commission, nine EU Member States have so far drafted their own 'non-paper', in order to contribute to the debate on how to improve the enlargement process.¹⁵ Nevertheless, none has supported the seven stages envisaged by France, but rather a division of the

⁵ <https://berlinprocess.info/>

⁶ <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/Western-Balkans-and-the-Return-to-Arms-Can-the-EU-stabilize-the-region.pdf>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁸ <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/2018-AUT-Carapic-Gassmann-Mapping-Assistance-WBalkans.pdf>

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process/>

¹¹ <https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

¹² <https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-enlargement/size-matters-france-deflates-eu-enlargement-aspirations-idUSKCN1TX2AA>

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/6-countries-write-to-juncker-to-support-eu-enlargement-reform/>

¹⁵ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>

enlargement process in macro groups of chapters thematically close that can be opened in parallel and not sequentially as Paris suggested.¹⁶

As a whole, Brussels regards 2020 as another potential "pivotal year" for enlargement in view of the proposed reforms and given that representatives of the European institutions pledged to open accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania, thus correcting the "historical mistake" committed last October.¹⁷ The new EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi also voiced his ambition to make at least one Western Balkan country ready for EU membership during his term.¹⁸

In the meantime, the failed decision to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia has discredited the achievements of their governing authorities domestically. Both countries had embarked on a reform-oriented agenda, made tangible progress and took steps towards regional reconciliation, as demonstrated by the Prespa agreement signed by Skoplje.¹⁹ The failed opening of negotiations has likewise exacerbated the political polarization in the two countries, making them more vulnerable to further destabilizations.

With regard to the accession hopes of other Western Balkans countries, in 2019 Serbia opened only two new chapters in its accession negotiations²⁰ while Montenegro expects to open the one remaining chapter in 2020. Moreover, the new year started with the Croatian presidency of the European Council, as Croatia vowed to keep enlargement high on its agenda.²¹ That being said, elections in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and possibly again in Kosovo might somewhat thwart advancements in the EU integration of these countries in 2020.

2.1.3 Future prospects and policy recommendations

Already throughout the first quarter of 2020 we will get a sense of whether the discussed overhaul of the enlargement approach will amount to mostly cosmetic changes or a deeper analysis of the causes halting enlargement will take place. Additional reform proposals, from Member States and other stakeholders can be also expected in this period.

One of the pivotal questions is whether consensus will be reached as to the beginning of accession talks, at least with North Macedonia, especially in view of the early general elections that the country will hold in April. It appears that the willingness of the Commission to discuss a reform of the enlargement policy, might be attached to its hopes that in turn France will not oppose the opening of membership talks with the two candidate countries, which might represent an acceptable compromise for Macron.²²

Further delays in setting a starting date with Albania and North Macedonia could embolden anti-EU forces in the two countries and discredit their reform-oriented agendas, with pernicious ramifications for the region as a whole. Another rejection will also fuel the acrimonious political polarization within the two countries which might even backslide on rule of law, democratic practices and their fight against organized crime and corruption.

¹⁶ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/>

¹⁷ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a557283/Zapadni-Balkan-i-clanstvo-u-EU-Jos-jedna-kljucna-godina-ili-jos-jedno-nista.html>

¹⁸ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a557283/Zapadni-Balkan-i-clanstvo-u-EU-Jos-jedna-kljucna-godina-ili-jos-jedno-nista.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/world/europe/greece-macedonia-name-dispute.html>

²⁰ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a557773/Joksimovic-Otvaranje-dva-poglavlja-u-2019.-relativno-podnosljiv-rezultat.html>

²¹ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/eu-to-explore-further-enlargement-in-2020-150542>

²² http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC_Policy_Note_Enlargement_Strategy_Shift.pdf

An overhaul of the enlargement process cannot be solely focused on the deficiencies of Western Balkan countries while ‘sparing the EC and member states from any accountability’.²³ The reform discussion should be regarded as an opportunity ‘to fully address the question of how to improve democratic and social issues in the Balkans while recommitting to liberal democratic values and standards.’²⁴

A failed approach towards the proposed reform process and an indefinite postponement of enlargement without a clear vision and a road map, will also bolster the attempts of Russia, China and Turkey to fill the vacuum created by the decreasing credibility and transformative power of the EU in the region.²⁵ It also remains to be seen how an enlargement reform could impact Serbia and Montenegro given that they have been in membership negotiations for years.²⁶

2.2 Serbia’s Political Crisis and the 2020 Divisive General Elections

2.2.1 Background

The year behind us has been characterized by an aggravating polarization of Serbia’s political landscape, resulted from a growing dissatisfaction towards the governing authorities and exemplified by street demonstrations and opposition boycotts of parliamentary sessions.²⁷ The dissatisfaction in turn stems from what a growing number of constituents perceives as an increasingly illiberal government that has been state capturing the country, stifling democratic liberties and repressing media freedom. Such allegations have been also corroborated by the 2019 Freedom House Report which downgraded Serbia from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’.²⁸

The beginning of 2019 recorded a new wave of demonstrations. Following a physical attack to an opposition politician in November 2018, numerous demonstrators took the streets under the banner ‘1 of 5 million’ to protest against the climate of ‘political violence’.²⁹ As the weekly protests gained momentum the demonstrators formulated their demands, including the resignation of President Aleksandar Vučić, conditions for fair elections and investigations into cases of politically motivated violence.³⁰

In February, the main opposition grouping ‘‘Alliance for Serbia’’ (a catch-all alliance, ranging from left wing liberals to far right factions) announced their boycott of parliamentary sessions in a show of solidarity with the demonstrators, pending conditions for fair elections led by a transitional government.³¹

In June 2019, President Aleksandar Vučić announced new snap parliamentary elections to be held in the spring of 2020.³² Although an unexpected set of closed door meetings took place between the ruling party and the opposition to discuss conditions for the upcoming elections,³³ the negotiation soon failed³⁴ and the main opposition parties voiced their intention to boycott the elections.³⁵

²³ http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC_Policy_Note_Enlargement_Strategy_Shift.pdf

²⁴ http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC_Policy_Note_Enlargement_Strategy_Shift.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/10/csdp-eu-accession-talks>

²⁶ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/26/how-will-enlargement-reform-affect-serbia-and-montenegro/>

²⁷ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/02/12/why-is-serbia-s-opposition-staging-a-parliament-boycott-euronews-answers>

²⁸ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf

²⁹ <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a446394/One-of-five-million-protest-against-violence-in-Belgrade.html>

³⁰ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/02/tens-of-thousands-in-a-new-serbian-anti-govt-march-02-01-2019/>

³¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-opposition-announces-parliament-boycott-calls-for-snap-elections/29763773.html>

³² <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/vucic-elections-in-late-march-or-early-april-2020-the-toughest-elections-yet/>

³³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/30/serbian-ruling-party-and-opposition-meet-for-first-time/>

³⁴ <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a508836/Serbian-Opposition-walks-out-of-meeting-with-authorities.html>

³⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/15/serbian-opposition-leans-toward-election-boycott/>

At the end of August, the EU's Parliament Foreign Committee sent two delegates on an 'exploratory mission' to Serbia tasked with better understanding the political dynamics in the country and possibly strengthening political dialogue within the National Assembly of Serbia.³⁶ The visit paved the way for the opening of EU Parliament mediated negotiations between ruling and opposition parties.³⁷

Following three rounds of meetings, a set of conclusions was reached last December on actions to be taken by the government to ensure fair elections.³⁸ Nevertheless, the meetings were boycotted by the representatives of the Alliance for Serbia, who met with EU delegates separately and reiterated their intention to go ahead with the boycott.³⁹

In Serbia, 2019 has also been a year marred by scandals involving government officials which in turn has evidenced the bias of most media stations with national coverage who either downplayed the events or failed to fully report the alleged misconduct from governing authorities.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the lack of political will to sanction or properly investigate the cases, has further alienated part of the political spectrum whose determination to boycott the institutions and the elections has become more severe.

2.2.1 State of play

As a result of the third round of the EU mediated inter-party dialogue, the Serbian government agreed to fulfil a set of obligations to improve electoral conditions pending the upcoming 2020 elections. The most important points regard the freedom of media and the role of the public broadcasting service. Other provisions would concern improvements in the work of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media, the founding of a Supervisory Committee in the parliament to oversee the election process, and the application of agreed amendments to relevant election related laws.⁴¹ Furthermore, the general elections' date has been postponed from March to the end of April or the beginning of May 2020.

President Aleksandar Vučić claims that the concessions made have been even greater than those demanded by the opposition.⁴² While this statement is clearly exaggerated, the threat of a widespread boycott might have pushed the government to give some concessions to the opposition and allow the European Union to get involved in the inter-party dialogue process. Nonetheless, the government's behaviour indicates that it is ready to go ahead even without the participation of an ample portion of the political spectrum, with the hope that a high turnout will legitimize the results of the vote.

Leaders of the main opposition group, the 'Alliance for Serbia' have dismissed the government's concessions as insufficient to guarantee fair elections. They have repeatedly demanded a comprehensive agreement on electoral conditions along with a mechanism for its implementation and the establishment of a technical government that would set the conditions for fair elections and ensure

³⁶ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/08/30/kukan-and-fleckenstein-we-are-ready-to-work-closely-with-all-serbian-political-parties/>

³⁷ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/03/kukan-and-fleckenstein-to-facilitate-the-dialogue-between-serbian-mps-next-week/>

³⁸ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/16/conclusion-of-the-party-dialogue-in-serbia-commitments-need-to-be-implemented/>

³⁹ <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a544031/EP-delegation-meets-Serbian-opposition-before-talks-on-elections.html>

⁴⁰ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-afere-2019/30353925.html>

⁴¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-mediated-dialogue-fails-to-persuade-serbian-opposition-to-drop-boycott-plans/>

⁴² <http://rs.n1info.com/documents/1402768/comments/Vesti/Vucic-Popustljiv-sam-covek-vlast-opoziciji-dala-i-vise-nego-sto-je-trazeno.html>

equal representation on national media over a 9-month transitional period.⁴³ Other opposition leaders, that participated in the EU mediated dialogue, have largely expressed cautious optimism about the progress made and await the implementations of the agreed provisions.⁴⁴

The Chair of the EU Parliament's Delegation for Serbia Tanja Fajon, the leading EU figure in the mediated political dialogue, although satisfied with the agreed obligations, expressed her concerns that even if the agreed laws are adopted, they might only remain on paper.⁴⁵

Another key EU mediator, Knut Fleckenstein, confirmed following the last negotiations round, that if elections were currently held in Serbia, they would not be fair as proper conditions are not currently in place.⁴⁶ While it was announced that the EU mediated dialogue will resume only after the 2020 general elections, we expect the EU to closely monitor the implementation of the agreed provisions. As a matter of fact, the involvement of Ms. Tanja Fajon as of the second round of talks, testifies to the gravity of the situation.

2.2.3 Future prospects and policy recommendations

The first couple of months of 2020 will be pivotal in determining whether the political divide in Serbia can be bridged and whether the governing authorities are willing to change the direction of their policies. The participation of the opposition will highly depend on the readiness of the government to uphold its commitments and in a timely fashion. This could assuage certain opposition groups and convince them to battle the leading SNS party within the electoral process.

On the other hand, the 'Alliance of Serbia' will almost undoubtedly boycott the elections, given their adamant request for a 9-month transitional government, among other conditions. Furthermore, the scandals that have recently marred the government coupled with its general disregard to provide clarifications, have somewhat tarnished the image of the government while giving momentum to an emboldened opposition.

The legitimacy of the 2020 general elections will be contingent upon the voter turnout, the number of participating opposition parties and the fulfilment of the agreed obligations. The starting point would be the actual implementation of what has been agreed during the inter-party dialogue. In that regard, doubts have arisen especially as to whether the provisions will be executed by the agreed deadlines.

The promptness and the efficacy in the adoption of provisions will then affect political participation both by opposition groupings and the constituents. On the other hand, we can expect the Alliance for Serbia to stage a widespread campaign to dissuade people to cast their ballots. That all being said, the EU should carefully follow the development that will unfold in the following months and intervene diplomatically if the agreed conditions are not upheld.

⁴³ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/15/political-dialogue-in-serbia-no-meaningful-progress-between-the-two-rounds/>

⁴⁴ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a552022/Treca-runda-medjustranackog-dijaloga-uz-posredovanje-EP.html>

⁴⁵ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/15/political-dialogue-in-serbia-no-meaningful-progress-between-the-two-rounds/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-mediated-dialogue-fails-to-persuade-serbian-opposition-to-drop-boycott-plans/>

2.3 Snap Elections in North Macedonia. Past Politics or EU path?

2.3.1 Background

The past decade has been very tumultuous for North Macedonia. The country experienced an autocratic government under the VMRO DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski, was shattered by corruption scandals, resolved a deep political crisis and signed historical agreements in the name of a reformist and EU-oriented agenda.

Although during his tenure Nikola Gruevski overhauled a depressed economy, under a nationalistic and liberal banner,⁴⁷ his party successfully captured the state, taking control of multiple government organs and running a deep patronage system.⁴⁸ In 2015, recordings of private conversations, leaked by the SDSM opposition, unveiled how for years, the ruling VMRO DPMNE party had spied on its own citizens and was involved in a wide array of wrongdoings, from rigged elections and pressures on media and businesses to an assassination cover-up.⁴⁹

The wiretapping scandal opened a deep political crisis, solved ultimately by the EU-mediated ‘Pržino’ agreement⁵⁰ which foresaw, inter alia, the early resignation of Nikola Gruevski, a caretaker government and a Special Prosecutor tasked with investigating the eventual crimes highlighted by the wiretapping scandal. Following a convoluted transition process, Nikola Gruevski was finally ousted and a new government took office.⁵¹

With the arrival of the Social Democrat-led coalition government in 2017, North Macedonia took significant steps towards domestic and regional reconciliation, which in turn enhanced its credibility among EU member states. The new government embarked on a reformist agenda⁵² with a view to reviving the EU integration process⁵³, and signed the 2018 landmark ‘Prespa’ agreement, which settled the long-standing name dispute with Greece.⁵⁴ Furthermore, new measures improved the status of the Albanian minority and eased the often strained inter-ethnic relations in the country.⁵⁵

The progress made by the SDSM government has been tarnished by two events over the last year. Firstly, the failure of the European Council to open membership talks with North Macedonia discredited the achievements of the government and led Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to announce early general elections in 2020.

Secondly, the arrest of Katica Janeva,⁵⁶ head of the crime-busting Special Prosecution, due to her involvement in the so called ‘extortion’ scandal, has jeopardized the credibility of an institution sponsored by the government and tasked in 2015 with fighting high level government corruption cases. The scandal coupled with rumours about the alleged involvement of SDSM officials in the extortion scheme⁵⁷ further compromised the status of the now embattled government and gave new lynch to the VMRO DPMN opposition party.

⁴⁷ <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/why-macedonia-s-discredited-rulers-will-win-again-12-04-2016/>

⁴⁸ <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/why-macedonia-s-discredited-rulers-will-win-again-12-04-2016/>

⁴⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/why-macedonia-s-discredited-rulers-will-win-again-12-04-2016/>

⁵⁰ <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/07/15/macedonia-warring-leaders-struck-crisis-deal/>

⁵¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/31/macedonia-parliament-approves-zaev-s-new-govt-05-31-2017/>

⁵² <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/07/06/zaev-presents-3-6-9-plan-fast-reform-package-recommendation-negotiations-eu/>

⁵³ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/26/macedonia-governments-plan-18-transformed-screening-plan/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/world/europe/greece-macedonia-name-dispute.html>

⁵⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-s-albanian-language-bill-becomes-law/29711502.html>

⁵⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/21/north-macedonia-arrests-outgoing-chief-special-prosecutor/>

⁵⁷ <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/03/north-macedonia-top-official-charged-with-helping-fraud/>

2.3.2 *State of play*

The forthcoming 2020 elections will be pivotal as they might result in a return to past politics with the VMRO DPMNE or confirm the continuation of Zoran Zaev's reformist agenda. The embattled Prime Minister called for snap elections last October after the setback suffered at the European Council, when the opening of membership talks was once again denied.⁵⁸ The early elections have been carefully scheduled on April 12, as the government expects to obtain full NATO membership by then and cash some vital electoral points.⁵⁹

In compliance with the 2015 Pržino political agreement, in January 2020 the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev had to resign 100 days ahead of the elections to allow the formation of a technical government tasked with leading the country to the ballot.⁶⁰ The caretaker government took office on 03 January, led by the Social Democrat Oliver Spasovski and a new cabinet that must also include opposition ministers and deputies in several key positions, most notably from the centre-right VMRO DPMNE party which now runs the Interior Ministry, among other posts.⁶¹

The 'Extortion' scandal has deeply disillusioned those who believed in the new political process and will play a heavy role in the election campaign. In August 2019, Katica Janeva, the head of the crime-busting body was arrested on suspicion of "abuse of office" in an extortion scheme in which two men took 1.5 million euros from a third man under investigation, in exchange for pulling strings with the prosecutors.

Furthermore, investigators are also looking into the hefty bonuses received by Ms. Janeva⁶² and the country's prosecution recently charged the vice-president of parliament, Frosina Remenski, a SDSM official, with assisting fraud in a case linked to the ongoing "Extortion" trial.⁶³

The main opposition party, the right-wing VMRO DPMNE has gained momentum following the failures of the current executive. Their current leader Hristijan Mickoski has vowed to try to annul the Prespa agreement signed with Greece.⁶⁴ Furthermore, a return to power would potentially reopen the door for the return of their historical leader Nikola Gruevski, who fled the country in 2017 amid numerous investigations and a jail sentence.⁶⁵

According to recent poll, the two main parties are neck and neck. The SDSM leads with 22.1 per cent while the VMRO DPMNE trails with 20.4.⁶⁶ That being said, a big role in the formation of a new majority government will be played by the Albanian parties, most notably the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which was the main coalition partner in the VMRO DPMNE led government while in 2017 it joined forces with the SDSM in a Social Democrat led executive. Provided that the new government has improved the status of the Albanian minority and pandered to their requirements,⁶⁷ we might expect DUI to support the current government coalition, although DUI has recently sided with the opposition in the Parliament.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50109054>

⁵⁹ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/09/25/north-macedonia-to-enter-nato-by-april-2020-ministers-announce/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/north-macedonia-pm-zaev-quits-before-april-polls/>

⁶¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/06/north-macedonia-caretaker-pm-vows-to-honour-peoples-trust/>

⁶² <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/26/investigators-search-north-macedonia-special-prosecution-offices/>

⁶³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/03/north-macedonia-top-official-charged-with-helping-fraud/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/north-macedonias-pm-if-the-nationalism-returns-well-lose-decades/a-51834352>

⁶⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46223909>

⁶⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/28/north-macedonia-parties-close-to-deal-on-technical-govt/>

⁶⁷ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFfiles/CP_147%20Balkan%20Futures.pdf

⁶⁸ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/23/north-macedonia-passes-budget-amid-political-recrimination/>

The decisions taken by the European Union during the first quarter of 2020 will influence the pace and nature of the electoral campaign. Despite the recent setback at the EU summit and France's demands for an overhaul of the enlargement strategy numerous countries have expressed the need to reach a consensus on North Macedonia's membership talks by March 2020 and thus rectify a 'historical mistake'.⁶⁹

2.3.3 Future prospects and policy recommendations

There are two main scenarios awaiting North Macedonia: the return to power of the VMRO DPMNE, with a potential re-emergence of nationalistic politics and the continuation of the current coalition government.

Fundamental in determining who will get the upper hand during the electoral battle will be the decision of the European Council on the opening of membership talks, that might be reached by March 2020, thus before the snap elections. Any further delay will be detrimental to Zoran Zaev and discredit his reform-oriented agenda.

On the other hand, the current investigations regarding the extortion case might unveil new connections between SDSM officials and the extortion schemes and thus further tarnish the party's image. In any case, we can predict a very confrontational and acrimonious electoral campaign⁷⁰ which might even reopen dangerous societal cleavages. In that regard, both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic strives should not be discounted as any future setback could stir interethnic tensions with the Albanian minority, in the medium and long run.

To conclude, it will be interesting to see what the turnout and the political participation will be. Last year, during the Presidential election, the turnout was 41% in 1st round and 47% in 2nd, which evidenced a high level of voter apathy.⁷¹

2.4 The Future of Protest Movements in the Western Balkans. Discontent versus Apathy

2.4.1 Background

Over the last decade, cities across the Western Balkans have witnessed a rise in protest movements against the mismanagement of the common good by governing authorities. These movements represented a rupture with the past when protests revolved mainly around identity politics and labour rights.⁷²

In recent years, many governments in the region have embraced more authoritarian stances and exacerbated the relations both with the opposition and the electorate. A sense of general economic and political stagnation, the perception that fundamental freedoms are deteriorating and the emergence of scandals and revelations of government abuses of power, state capture, corruption and links to organized crime, all contributed to fuel discontent.

Consequently, 2019 has been a year in which numerous protest movements emerged, some led by opposition parties against their political foes and others by grassroots civic movements decrying numerous policies or abuses.⁷³

⁶⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/6-countries-write-to-juncker-to-support-eu-enlargement-reform/>

⁷⁰ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/07/germany-deals-blow-to-albania-north-macedonia-eu-hopes/>

⁷¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/22/north-macedonia-presidential-election-goes-to-runoff-as-name-change-divides>

⁷² <http://www.erstestiftung.org/en/social-movements-in-the-balkans/>

⁷³ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/02/28/protests-wb-amidst-democratic-decline-can-eu-change-approach/>

The main anti-government protests in 2019 took place in Serbia, Albania and Montenegro. In Serbia, the ‘1 of 5 million’ civic movement emerged to condemn authoritarian policies and the climate of political violence allegedly fomented by President Aleksandar Vučić and his ruling Serbian Progressive Party.⁷⁴

In Albania, the opposition organized weekly protests in Tirana, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister Edi Rama. Some protests turned violent when protesters clashed with the police⁷⁵ while the political polarization worsened under new allegations of corruption and collusion of government officials with the organized crime.⁷⁶ In Montenegro, the “Resist” movement, a civic initiative, took the streets when evidence emerged that a well-known businessman illicitly financed the mayor of Podgorica and the election campaign of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists.⁷⁷

Furthermore, in Croatia several demonstrations were held in favour of women’s rights.⁷⁸ In Bosnia and Hercegovina, demonstrations organized by the ‘Justice for David’ group kept protesting against police brutality.⁷⁹ Likewise, environmental protests, mainly against the building of hydro-power plants took place across the region in 2019.⁸⁰

Other demonstrations however were once again linked to identity politics such as the recent wave of protests in Montenegro against the freedom of religion law,⁸¹ opposed by the large Serbian community, and the anti-NATO membership protests in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Hercegovina.⁸²

2.4.2 State of play

With a new year upon us, it remains to be seen whether anti-government protests, social activism and the condemnation of the misuse of the public good will carry forward and possibly gain strength in 2020 or whether it will yield to political apathy and a sense of powerlessness.

In Serbia, the ‘1 of 5 million’ movement which rattled the government in the first quarter of 2019, lost progressively its appeal with a decreasing attendance throughout the year.⁸³ One problem was the partial ‘take over’ of demonstrations by opposition parties which thus weakened its civic nature.⁸⁴

On the other, the emergence of several scandals involving government officials⁸⁵ and the upcoming general elections made the political opposition more determined to boycott the electoral process and battle the government, possibly on the streets. We might thus expect that most of the anti-government protests in 2019 will be organized by the opposition, mainly coalesced in the ‘Alliance for Serbia’ grouping.

⁷⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-serbs-protesting-against-aleksandar-vucic/a-48306953>

⁷⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/03/violence-flares-up-in-albania-opposition-protest/>

⁷⁶ <https://exit.al/en/2019/06/18/albanian-prosecution-starts-investigation-into-leaked-wiretaps-published-by-bild/>

⁷⁷ <https://www.total-montenegro-news.com/politics/3646-protest-continues-odupri-se-movement-biggest-in-montenegrin-history>

⁷⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-50110706/croatians-protest-over-release-of-teen-s-alleged-rapists>

⁷⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/one-year-on-dragicevic-death-still-haunts-bosnia/>

⁸⁰ <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/protests-against-hydropower-planned-across-balkans-from-july-6-16/>

⁸¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-lawmaking-protests/montenegros-parliament-approves-religion-law-despite-protests-idUSKBN1YV0WT>

⁸² <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/26/bosnian-serb-city-hosts-rival-protest-rallies/>

⁸³ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/06/10/six-months-of-protests-in-serbia-dropping-in-size-but-still-carrying-on/>

⁸⁴ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/06/serbian-opposition-at-sea-on-anti-government-protest-anniversary/>

⁸⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/19/snowballing-scandals-no-match-for-serbias-teflon-president/>

New protests could re-emerge in North Macedonia in view of the April 2020 elections and the unfolding of the extortion scandal. The main right-wing opposition party VMRO DPMNE has repeatedly announced street protests to battle the Socialist led government.⁸⁶ While other revelations of links of the SDSM ruling party with the extortion scheme would probably incite potential protests, the nomination of the caretaker government in January might assuage inter-party tensions. Furthermore, grassroots protests are unlikely to take place given the presumed level of political apathy in the country.⁸⁷

In Montenegro, protests have recently taken the identity politics road again, following the approval of the freedom of religion law, contested by the Serbian minority and the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, new anti-corruption protests by opposition leaders could reappear pending the parliamentary elections scheduled in October 2020.

Similarly, in Albania protests could resurface, especially in view of the approval of the controversial anti-defamation law which allegedly muzzles free speech and media.⁸⁹ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, civic-led protests against environmental degradation are expected to continue, while there are no indications that mass demonstrations such as those that inflamed Bosnia in 2014 could take place.⁹⁰

2.4.3 Future prospects and policy recommendations

In 2020 we might expect to see the prevalence of demonstrations organized by opposition parties, especially given the approaching elections in many countries. Moreover, 2019 has ended with civic protests losing momentum and the emergence of demonstrations linked to identity politics.

There's the risk that political apathy might prevail in 2020 across the Western Balkans. A good case in point is the '1 of 5 million' movement in Serbia, which lost its appeal after political parties got involved and in view of the utter disregard of authorities towards their demands which generated a sense of powerlessness in the ability to truly influence the public discourse. A good case in point is Bosnia, where widespread anti-government unrest in 2014 didn't eventually lead to real changes on the ground.

Nonetheless, the protests in Bosnia taught us a lesson, namely that public discontent and widespread frustration can erupt any moment when a country is state captured. Furthermore, protest movements can also evolve spontaneously and unexpectedly such as the 'Sardines' movement in Italy⁹¹ but it then becomes pivotal to create a credible platform to sustain the cause, without being hijacked by opportunistic political parties.

As a whole, although the protests that spread throughout the Western Balkans in the first six months of 2019 lost their appeal and strength as the year progressed, new waves might be on the horizon especially in view of the several approaching elections.

⁸⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/28/north-macedonia-oppositions-mass-protest-threat-lacks-credibility/>

⁸⁷ <https://globalriskinsights.com/2019/06/division-and-apathy-in-north-macedonia/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-lawmaking-protests/montenegros-parliament-approves-religion-law-despite-protests-idUSKBN1YV0WT>

⁸⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/albania-approves-controversial-anti-defamation-laws>

⁹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/07/bosnia-herzegovina-wave-violent-protests>

⁹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/14/world/europe/italy-sardines-salvini.html>

2.5 A New Executive in Pristina and the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

2.5.1 Background

Kosovo-Serbia relations have become more strained as 2019 was characterized by inflammatory statements,⁹² contested measures,⁹³ controversial police operations⁹⁴ and the de facto suspension of the EU-mediated talks.

Historically, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has been tumultuous but at times timid willingness to reach compromised solutions prevailed as evidenced by the 2013 Brussels agreement,⁹⁵ whose implementation unfortunately has been poor to date. That said, a de facto suspension of the negotiations occurred in October 2018 when Kosovo introduced a 100 per cent tariff on Serbian imports in retaliation to Belgrade's pursuit to prevent Kosovo from joining international bodies.⁹⁶

Before the cessation of the dialogue, news emerged about a controversial plan backed by Pristina and Belgrade to redraw their borders and implement territorial swaps following ethnic lines, in an attempt to find a long-lasting solution.⁹⁷ The proposal encountered the apparent willingness of the European Commission and the United States to contemplate such a resolution but was later scrapped over human rights concerns and fears of regional repercussions.

With the talks stalled, in 2019 Kosovo adopted a new platform for the dialogue with Serbia declaring that "any final agreement must be consistent with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Kosovo".⁹⁸ Moreover, the legitimacy of the Kosovo negotiating team with Serbia was put in jeopardy after the top court in the country ruled that its powers did not comply with the constitution.⁹⁹

The possibility of a forthcoming relaunch of the dialogue was made even more difficult after snap elections were announced following the resignation of Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj.¹⁰⁰ The elections were held on 06 October 2019 and resulted in a close victory of the Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) movement which garnered the 26.29 per cent of votes, followed by the LDK at 24.47 per cent.¹⁰¹ The close result meant that the country would have a coalition government. However, what has been predicted as a straightaway government alliance between the LDK and Vetevendosje was jeopardized by complicated post-election coalition talks.

2.5.2 State of play

Although the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Vetevendosje signalled their intention to coalesce in a potential government as of August 2019,¹⁰² post-election coalition talks proved to be

⁹² <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/09/kosovo-serb-minister-fired-for-calling-albanians-terrorists/>

⁹³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/08/kosovo-mps-draft-resolution-accusing-serbia-of-genocide/>

⁹⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/tensions-rise-after-police-operation-in-northern-kosovo/29968533.html>

⁹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/serbia-kosovo-historic-agreement-brussels>

⁹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46287975>

⁹⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fglobal-opinions%2fwp%2f2018%2f09%2f19%2fkosovo-and-serbia-are-talking-about-redrawing-their-borders-its-a-terrible-idea%2f%3f>

⁹⁸ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/03/08/kosovo-assembly-endorsed-platform-dialogue-serbia/>

⁹⁹ <https://balkaneu.com/kosovo-constitutional-court-quashes-negotiating-team-in-charge-of-the-talks-with-serbia/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49047355>

¹⁰¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/07/kosovo-final-election-result-confirms-vetevendosje-victory/>

¹⁰² <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/21/in-kosovo-bitter-rivals-turn-electoral-allies/>

very complicated. The post of the President soon emerged as a point of contention followed by other disagreements on how to divide government posts.¹⁰³

In an unexpected twist, the LDK announced last December that it would not join the coalition but rather endorse a Vetevendosje-led minority government.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Albin Kurti, the leader of Vetevendosje, announced that they are in the final stages of delivering a coalition agreement with the LDK.¹⁰⁵ With the clock ticking, on 6 January 2020 Albin Kurti announced five potential ministers and deputies for the new executive and was given 48 hours by President Hashim Thaci to nominate a candidate for the prime minister post.¹⁰⁶ In that regard, it is expected that Albin Kurti will nominate himself. However, if Vetevendosje fails to form a new executive within the constitutionally allowed time frame, a new mandate might be given to the LDK to explore the possibility of an alternative government coalition, which would leave Albin Kurti's party in the opposition.¹⁰⁷ Finally, the absence of a feasible resolution might result in new snap elections.

If Albin Kurti manages to form a Vetevendosje-led executive, the possibility of restoring the stalled normalization talks with Belgrade will reappear. Albin Kurti, a historically staunch opponent of the dialogue with Belgrade, announced that as the new Prime Minister he will immediately start a dialogue with Kosovo Serbs and relaunch the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue following Serbia's 2020 general elections.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Kurti announced that 33 agreements reached with Belgrade during the EU-mediated talks will be evaluated.¹⁰⁹

The European Union declared that concluding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue by the end of 2020 is among its priorities as laid out by the new European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi,¹¹⁰ an objective echoed by the new EU Foreign Minister Josep Borrell.¹¹¹ Furthermore, in 2019 the US, Britain, France, Germany and Italy urged Kosovo and Serbia in a combined statement 'to show willingness to compromise and relaunch their dialogue'.¹¹²

2.5.3 Future prospects and policy recommendations

The prospects for a relaunch of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in 2020 will be contingent first and foremost upon the formation of a new executive in Pristina. The possibility that Vetevendosje might lead a minority government will make its position extremely vulnerable to the Parliament and delegitimize its governing position, which will in turn impede its ability to negotiate with Belgrade.

On the other hand, a coalition government with the LDK, or any other majority government, will bring more stability and will potentially ensure the completion of the parliamentary mandate. Indeed, a minority government could be easily and strategically weakened by the opposition with a view to jeopardising its public support and damaging its performance in potential new snap elections.

¹⁰³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/26/kosovo-main-parties-fail-to-form-governing-coalition/>

¹⁰⁴ <https://thedailybreakingnews.com/european-union-2/bulgaria/ldk-to-support-kosovo-minority-government-from-opposition/>

¹⁰⁵ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a558407/Taci-i-Kurti-o-formiranju-Vlade-Kosova.html>

¹⁰⁶ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a558353/Taci-dao-Kurtiju-48-sati-da-imenuje-premijera.html>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/mustafa-i-taci-izmicu-kurtiju-fotelju-premijera-10-1-2020>

¹⁰⁸ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a557593/Kurti-Dijalog-sa-Srbima-pa-sa-Beogradom.html>

¹⁰⁹ <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a557601/Fresh-elections-will-be-the-worst-scenario-Kurti-says.html>

¹¹⁰ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/03/varhelyi-announces-new-proposals-on-enlargement-by-the-commission-in-early-2020/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/borrell-visit-kosovo-first-as-eu-foreign-policy-chief-commission-hearings/>

¹¹² <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/13/western-govts-urge-end-to-kosovo-serbia-dialogue-stalemate/>

In any case, if Albin Kurti becomes the new Prime Minister, he will be under the spotlights to see weather he will show the willingness to opt for a more compromising approach in the dialogue with Belgrade.

To conclude, the restart of the dialogue will not occur prior to Serbia's general elections scheduled in May 2020, where under the current electoral conditions a new victory for incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić is highly expected.

3. Conclusions

As another challenging year is ahead of the Western Balkans, the 5 developments presented in this policy paper, bear the potential to define the political dynamics of the region for the foreseeable future or at least to hint at the direction that the region might take over the next decade.

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