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Fostering resilience in the Western Balkans

by Zoran Nechev and Florian Trauner

It has long been assumed that the EU would take the lead in the transformation of the Western Balkans. Yet this assumption is no longer unchallenged. While the EU's enlargement process seems to have lost momentum, other external players – notably Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states – have come to play a more prominent role in the region.

Yet the Western Balkan states do not only face exogenous challenges: most of them are still struggling to consolidate their democratic systems. In its annual country reports, the European Commission has expressed concerns over their 'backsliding' with regard to the separation of powers, political interference in the work of the judiciary, and a weak record of fighting high-level political corruption. Some Balkan governments seem willing to silence critical media outlets and 'capture' state institutions. Indeed, public trust in the political system and state institutions is at a historic low.

With the recent publication of a Joint Communication on 'A strategic approach to resilience in the EU's external action', the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission have further developed the notion – first articulated in last year's EU Global

Strategy (EUGS) – of resilience as both a guiding concept and a strategic priority. The broader intention of the EU is to foster state and societal resilience in its neighbouring countries and surrounding regions – and thereby also improve the Union's own (internal) resilience.

In the case of the Western Balkans, improving resilience requires a careful analysis of how the enlargement process (the EU's main framework of engagement with the region) can be adapted and improved in order to maintain its transformative power, as well as ensure that reforms are both sustainable and irreversible.

Mapping fragilities

The Western Balkans region encompasses a diverse set of states. While Montenegro is advancing in its accession negotiations, the EU's integration process of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has come to a standstill due, *inter alia*, to the name dispute with Greece. For more than two years, Skopje has experienced a severe political crisis, with the former government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski facing allegations of mass surveillance and wiretapping, as well as high-level corruption. The formation, in May 2017, of a new government comprised of



the main opposition and a party dominated by ethnic Albanians now presents an opportunity to return to 'normal' politics.

The risk of ethnic tensions meanwhile is higher in those countries with contested constitutional arrangements and ethnically diverse populations such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. In one high profile example, the government of Republika Srpska, one of Bosnia's constitutional and legal entities, is threatening to hold an independence referendum in 2018.

The Western Balkan countries – just like the unhappy families from *Anna Karenina's* famous opening line – are therefore all fragile in different ways, and their progress (or lack thereof) has been determined by a complex interplay of domestic and international factors. The EU has been and remains the key for the region's stability and transformation. Since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the EU has promised to accept the Western Balkan states if they comply with the accession criteria. These are more comprehensive compared to previous enlargements, and are now known as 'Copenhagen Plus' criteria. The promise of the region's eventual EU integration was reiterated on several occasions, most recently by the EU heads of state and government in March 2017. Yet, the enlargement context has become less favourable. The EU has been absorbed by its multifaceted crises and multiple challenges, and the rise of Eurosceptic and anti-immigration parties makes the Union's expansion a more contested issue.

The EU's standing in southeastern Europe is also being eroded by the altered geopolitical context. Opposed to NATO enlargement and pursuing a more assertive foreign policy, Russia has upgraded its relations with most Western Balkan states by targeting government elites and societal groups which are dissatisfied with 'mainstream' politics. The Russian government does not pursue a comprehensive strategy comparable to the EU's enlargement policy. Instead, it focuses primarily on key areas such as energy, foreign policy alignment, and media and communications. Russia wields particular influence in Serbia, the only country in the region which is not seeking to join NATO.

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Russia also started to become more active in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia after the country's failed attempt to join NATO in 2008. Moscow then backed the conservative government in 2015 when it came under pressure from protests over allegations that it had violated the rule of law. In line with the executive in Skopje, Russia framed these protests as a Western attempt to topple an elected government (and the same convergence of messaging happened again a few weeks ago when protesters stormed in the Parliament building).

Russia's engagement, however, has also met opposition: from the Montenegrin government, for example, which accused Russia of orchestrating a *coup d'état* on the day of the elections earlier this year in a bid to prevent the country from joining NATO. Furthermore, other external actors which are increasingly present – such as China, Turkey and the Gulf states – are (for the time being at least) adopting stances that are compatible with the region's desire to integrate with the EU.

Internal drivers

It is not only the intensified competition for influence among international actors that is a source of fragility in the Western Balkans. The region is also struggling with a rise in authoritarianism, with incumbent governments unwilling to relinquish power and resources. According to Freedom House data, four out of the six countries have a weak compliance record in terms of democratic standards. Institutions like the judiciary are vulnerable and have come under increasing pressure by ruling elites, while the most contentious issues are related to tackling widespread corruption and ensuring the independence of democratic institutions and watchdogs.

These developments have increasingly been framed as 'state capture'. The European Commission used the term for the first time in its 2016 annual report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, when it spoke openly of its 'concerns' regarding the matter. Skopje's political crisis demonstrates the dangers for a government that is unwilling to accept political and judicial scrutiny. With the political debate becoming highly polarised and

conducted on parallel tracks, upholding the constitutional order becomes a serious challenge. Meanwhile, the lack of accountability and the growing culture (and mentality) of impunity are becoming ever more entrenched.

Perhaps the crisis in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is an extreme case in point, but it does reflect a wider problem. Galvanising emotions and capitalising on ethnic tensions is a tried and tested strategy for nationalist politicians across the region to divert attention away from large-scale corruption and administrative misconduct – in short, bad governance. There is still legal progress being made in the countries' rapprochement with EU standards, but these laws are often subsequently hollowed out and replaced with more informal procedures. Paradoxically, this may worsen the closer candidate countries come to actual accession because of the need to adapt to EU standards, on the one hand, and the weakness and/or unwillingness of governments to implement harmonised legislation (especially in the rule of law domain), on the other.

Economic growth and development is also fragile. According to data from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the gap in terms of prosperity between the EU and the Western Balkans is not getting any narrower. In terms of purchasing power parity, GDP per capita in the Western Balkans is only half that of the EU's easternmost member states, while it is only a mere quarter of the EU's richest members in Western Europe. Improving the economic situation in the region will entail difficult reforms, improving trust with external investors and increased cooperation within the region itself.

There are other sources of vulnerability, too. The Western Balkans was at the forefront of the 2015/2016 migration crisis when hundreds of thousands of migrants crossed southeastern Europe on their way further north, and were presented as key partners for northern EU member states in efforts to close the 'Western Balkan' route in early 2016.

Beyond the refugee crisis, the issue of migration from outside and *within* the region remains a salient one. Many citizens from the region opt

for a new life abroad, impacting local demographics and causing severe 'brain drain'. One-third of those born in Bosnia-Herzegovina live now abroad, for example, and it is only slightly less in the case of Albania. Young people are not only frustrated with the lack of opportunities and economic hardship, they also struggle with schooling and education: the OECD comparative survey of educational systems (known as PISA) painted a particularly dire picture in Skopje and Pristina, for instance.

Strengthening resilience

'The EU has still considerable influence on the countries' policies and institutions: joining the EU has remained a popular objective and public opinion polls reflect this fact.'

The point of departure for any attempt to improve resilience has to be a clear objective and vision. What goals does the Union want to achieve in the region? Any policy has to begin with a common understanding of the drivers of fragility,

whether endogenous or exogenous. The EU has still considerable influence on the countries' policies and institutions: joining the EU has remained a popular objective and public opinion polls reflect this fact. The citizens of the Western Balkans feel that there is no credible alternative to the Union's enlargement policy, regardless of the stronger engagement of other international actors.

Yet the EU can engage more. Even if full EU accession is not a realistic short-term prospect for these countries, the Union could upgrade its commitment to their EU integration. Brussels could increase public pressure to reform and fight corruption: jeopardising the independence of the judiciary, oppressing the free media and preventing opposition parties from expressing their views *has* to come at a cost.

The Western Balkans could, for instance, be part of the European-wide border and migration management system which is gradually taking shape (*inter alia*, with the reform of border controls and the Dublin system, as well as the internal relocation mechanism for asylum seekers).

Opening up the EU's structural and investment funds to the Western Balkans could also be beneficial for all parties involved, and this may even be possible in the pre-accession period. In the same vein, the EU could also grant access to some of its EU instruments prior to accession.



The Union could also boost its credibility by supporting particular rule-of-law operations in the region. In Albania's reform of the judiciary, for instance, the EU has been given an observer role in the vetting of judges. Although it is a somewhat unusual practice to give an international organisation an active role in a seemingly trivial procedure within the judiciary (such as the hiring or firing of judges), it is at this stage that many rule of law violations occur. The EU's involvement can only enhance the presently low levels of credibility of the Albanian judiciary in the eyes of the public.

State vs societal resilience?

According to the EUGS, a resilient state is a safe state. Security is understood as a condition for prosperity and democracy – and vice versa – and the EU seeks to foster both state and societal resilience. This is a particular challenge in the Western Balkans as citizens' trust in governments and state institutions is low. The relationship between governments clinging to power and their citizens has become ever more problematic, with young people realising how difficult it is to gain access to jobs and other opportunities if they do not belong to the same ideological camp as the government.

Does improving state resilience therefore occur to the detriment of societal resilience? States need backing from their citizens to remain legitimate: from this perspective, civil society organisations are key players as they represent people who come together to pursue shared objectives and ideals. In the Western Balkans, they often find themselves in a precarious situation, sidelined politically and under-resourced financially. The Commission and EU member states could support them at critical junctures so that they remain active in a dialogue with the state authorities.

The EU would also benefit from upgrading its public naming and shaming, especially in the areas of its interest such as the rule of law, as the Commission did last year by labelling the activities of Gruevski and his government as 'state capture'. It can also more pro-actively engage with Russia's disinformation campaigns and 'soft' cultural penetration by further expanding the scope of the East StratCom Task Force to the Western Balkans and targeting audiences that are particularly susceptible to hostile messaging.

Finally, the principle of *local ownership* inherent to the EU's concept of resilience needs to be

treated with caution. The underlying rationale is that the governments of third countries should not become dependent on EU-induced reforms and assistance. In the Western Balkans, however, the promotion of this principle may be (and has been) seen as a sign of disengagement. If clarity is not provided, this may feed a narrative that the EU is not serious about enlargement.

Communication is strategic

Communication is essential in fostering resilience. And, here, the EU could do better. According to official data from the Serbian European Integration Office, from 2000 to 2015 the international development assistance grants provided by the EU (including aid from bilateral and multilateral development partners and international financial institutions) amounted to more than €2.7 billion, which is significantly more than any other donor. However, a significant number of Serbian citizens (27%) are convinced that Russia is the biggest donor.

Indeed, there is a clear correlation between local resilience and the level of EU engagement. Increased EU engagement and timely political interventions are critical to achieving results in the region. Disengaging from the region is an open invitation for other external actors to expand their operation in and exert influence on all countries. Whenever the EU has maintained an intensive and credible engagement with the Western Balkans (as, for instance, with the visa liberalisation process), the desired results were achieved.

In addition to a renewed regional focus and pressure for reforms, the EU could simultaneously develop and promote country-specific risk and resilience analysis. Looking at how to address fragility and foster resilience in specific countries – building on the recent Joint Communication released by the EEAS and the Commission – is a promising way to start afresh in a region of high strategic importance for the EU.

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