



YOUNG GENERATIONS FOR THE NEW BALKANS VISION 2030: TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE HORIZONS

SUMMER 2020 SUPPLEMENT

The Western Balkans Initiative, which is sponsored by the International Institute for Peace (IIP), the Karl Renner Institute, and the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), published its policy paper *Young Generation for the New Balkans Vision 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons* in December 2019. Since then, both the Initiative and the region itself have undergone important developments, changes, and updates. Within the region, a number of significant events have taken place this year, but the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its resultant consequences have had a dramatic impact on the political, social, and economic situation in the six countries of the region. In March 2020, in the first phase of the pandemic, one notable change was the EU's announcement of the opening of accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia. This provided a moment of optimism and hope for two countries that have worked hard in recent years to undertake drastic reforms across many sectors.

The onset of the pandemic, however, has had a number of negative and tragic impacts for the countries of the region. The Western Balkans have witnessed devastating consequences along economic and health dimensions, and there has been increasing political turmoil in a number of countries. Notably, Albania witnessed major protests after the shock demolition of the National Theater; Kosovo's government was toppled in a no-confidence vote; and protests in Serbia erupted after the government's harsh initial lockdown. Meanwhile, Serbia held its most recent round of elections in June, leading to a decisive win for President Aleksandar Vučić, while Croatia's HDZ won big in the July elections. Elections in North Macedonia and Montenegro are to follow later this summer.

Over the same period, the Western Balkans Initiative visited Tirana, Albania in February to present the *Vision 2030* policy paper and meet with representatives from the Albanian government, civil society, the media, and non-governmental organizations. Representatives from the Initiative shared ideas and discussed current challenges for the region with partners in Albania, and the delegation hosted a public panel discussion on the paper as a capstone to the visit. Elsewhere, the Initiative organized a series of videos and analyses on the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic

across the region as well as the impact of the opening of accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania.

Finally, the Initiative launched an online webinar series titled *Post-Covid or Post-Democracy Balkans?*, which featured panel discussions and analyses by Initiative experts on developments in the region since the start of the pandemic. The lectures in the series focused on political turmoil in Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia; human rights, media freedoms, and civil liberties; solidarity within the region and beyond; the future of the region; and transitional justice and reconciliation. This supplement to the 2019 paper will seek to distill the key themes and ideas from the series of webinars and draw relevant recommendations, taking into consideration the latest developments across the region as it simultaneously faces a health crisis, a political crisis, and an economic crisis.

A NEW FORM OF POLITICS

As the pandemic unfolded across the region, many governments revealed deeply un-democratic or illiberal tendencies, as evident in abuses of power, infringements of human rights and media freedoms, and increasing polarization. Numerous governments took advantage of lockdown measures and restrictions on protests to seize power or undertake previously opposed projects, such as the Albanian government's decision to demolish the National Theatre in Tirana while activists were forced to stay home. Similarly, governments implemented policies infringing on both human rights, such as through the introduction of trials by Skype in Serbia, as well as media freedoms, including the arrest of journalist Ana Lalić in Serbia. Moreover, governments used the pandemic to exacerbate pre-existing polarization, blaming opposition parties for the pandemic and using pro-government media outlets to peddle conspiracy theories. There is thus a need in the region to fundamentally change the form of governance, rather than simply the governments themselves, and move toward debates and an exchange of ideas rather than a more personal form of politics based on group alliances. Instead of debates over critical issues such as healthcare or education, politicians focus on building power for their parties and opposition parties focus solely on ousting the current government. Strong leaders such as President Vučić and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama command widespread support based on their personal networks and patronage. Finally, there is a need to link new ideas and policies with political forces by building partnerships between civil society and politicians in order to develop concrete proposals. These civil society partnerships should also extend across borders to promote regional civil society cooperation to share best practices and new ideas.

A CRISIS IN HEALTH

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the many gaps and failings in the healthcare systems of the six countries of the Western Balkans. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on countries and societies all around the world, but the health crisis in the region was greatly exacerbated by a failure to develop and improve healthcare systems and hospitals over recent decades. Politicians have neglected to focus on improving healthcare or promoting policies that address long-lasting

issues in health, and the region has simultaneously suffered from an exodus of trained healthcare professionals for EU countries in recent years. Most significantly, hospitals lacked sufficient supplies and protective equipment, and scandals concerning corruption over public procurement, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, impeded effective or rapid responses. Finally, the politicization of experts and medical professionals during the pandemic further contributed to the worsening of the outbreak, particularly as lockdowns were pre-emptively rolled back for political purposes. Most notoriously, the Serbian government used the virus as a propaganda tool during its electoral campaign, labelling the pandemic as an ally of the opposition, and relaxed nearly all lockdown measures far too early in order to hold rallies and the election itself. More responsibly, North Macedonia opted to postpone its election given its lack of capacity to ensure social distancing while also carrying out voting. It is thus vital that all countries in the region focus on building up their healthcare systems, ensuring vital equipment in case of future pandemics, de-politicizing healthcare and doctors, and supporting debate on healthcare policy that would improve the everyday lives of citizens.

INCOMPLETE TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND COMPETING VICTIMIZATIONS

The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the previously-stalled transitional justice and reconciliation efforts across the Western Balkans. On a broader level, however, the region suffers from a lack of regional judicial cooperation on war crimes issues, and most governments lack the necessary political or institutional will to improve or strengthen transitional justice. One of the most immediate consequences of the pandemic was the collapse of Albin Kurti's government in Kosovo as well as the announced indictment of President Hashim Thaçi for war crimes. These developments will impact the state of transitional justice in Kosovo, but Thaçi's indictment also derailed the US-led negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo that might also have borne consequences for transitional justice measures between the two countries. In recent months, the electoral campaigns in Serbia and Croatia, among others, have also brought about an increase in nationalist rhetoric within both countries, as politicians seek to stir up domestic voters and seek scapegoats for their poor handling of the pandemic. Competing narratives of victimization further complicate reconciliation processes, as governments deny the injustices suffered by others. It is thus not surprising that several accused or charged war criminals appeared on electoral lists in Serbia during the June elections, while convicted war criminals currently serve in the Serbian army, various ministries, and ruling party, highlighting Serbia's lack of respect for rulings by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Conversely, Bosnia and Herzegovina has made several notable strides in regards to convicting war criminals and furthering transitional justice, compared to the lack of progress in Serbia and Croatia. There is thus a need to increase regional judicial cooperation, censure politicians or groups who capitalize on nationalism and past crimes, and engage more deeply with the EU as a facilitator to ensure regional solutions.

EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

As schools and universities were forced to move online when lockdown measures came into force, many gaps and areas in need for development and improvement came into the spotlight. Similar to the crisis faced by the region's healthcare systems, education systems have suffered from a lack of development and adequate investment in recent years as well as long-standing issues of corruption. The digitalization of classes had mixed results across countries, with some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, more effectively pivoting to distance learning while others, such as Kosovo and North Macedonia, lacking the necessary technology. In addition, the number of students and other young people from the Western Balkans who leave for education or work opportunities within the EU remains neglected by local governments, and as a result their needs as well as their potential resources for their home countries are overlooked. At the same time, the crisis revealed persistently low levels of media literacy and civic education among young people. The spread of conspiracy theories and fake news throughout the crisis was thus more pernicious due to a lack of resiliency among the population. Insufficient civic education also prevented young people from knowing what action to take, who is responsible, and how to hold their politicians accountable. Thus, there is a need to increase investment in education systems and specifically to improve education in the areas of media literacy and civic rights as well as to gather data on students and young people outside the region whose needs and skills could be utilized by the region's governments.

A NEED FOR MORE SOLIDARITY WITHIN THE REGION AND WITH THE EU

As the pandemic began to spread across the Western Balkans, many in the region turned to the EU as a possible partner and as a mark of solidarity in managing the crisis. It was significant, therefore, that EU officials decided to ban exports of critical medical equipment to non-EU countries, including the Western Balkans. Given the EU's much greater size, international bargaining position, and economic strength, this decision was poorly received in the region, encouraging leaders such as President Vučić to turn to countries such as China and Russia for support. On a broader level, the region has also struggled with a lack of clear communication and long-term strategies coming from the EU regarding cooperation and integration prospects. At the same time, the US appears less engaged in the region and efforts to promote democracy and human rights, while Russia and China leveraged the crisis to increase their involvement in the region. China in particular provided equipment and support for Serbia, for which President Vučić showed significant gratitude while downplaying the EU's support. The EU is still needed in the region to help restore the political system, recover democracy, boost media freedom and human rights, and help resolve outstanding bilateral issues. The EU must engage with the region across sectors on a deeper level by involving the Western Balkans in all major initiatives, including in trade, the fight against Covid-19, and the European Green Deal, and at the same time challenge competing narratives from China and Russia. Moreover, the EU should work more closely with regional governments on the issue of circular migration to better understand migration in and out of the

region and adjust to the needs and possible skills of these migrants. Finally, the European People's Party in particular should show more solidarity with pro-democratic forces in the region by winding down support for Croatia's HDZ and Serbia's SNS. For its part, the European Social Democrats should also monitor illiberal trends and support democratic standards among its partner parties in the region, particularly in Albania under Prime Minister Rama. At the same time, the region itself must focus on domestic reform and approach the EU jointly on integration matters. Regional cooperation is essential for a number of processes, including transitional justice as well as economic and transport integration. Thus, the Western Balkan governments must do more to jointly address issues in the region, adopt sectoral integration along EU standards, and speak with one voice to collectively lobby for further EU integration.
