

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE IN TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC

**Senada Selo Sabic**  
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A snapshot of relations among neighbours over the course of nine months shows that vulnerability caused by COVID-19 has not been exploited against neighbours. It also, however, has not engendered significant solidarity, except in cases where it already exists.



The pandemic has allowed some friendships to be strengthened at the expense of pragmatic ones, but in general each country has pursued its existing foreign policy orientation.



The pandemic offered China a window of opportunity to present itself as a friend in tough times. China's donations of personal protective equipment, publicly endorsed and praised by Western Balkan politicians, led to a new concept – 'mask diplomacy'.



# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>CROATIA – EU PRESIDENCY</b> .....	3
<b>EU ASSISTANCE TO THE WESTERN BALKANS</b> .....	4
<b>CHINA</b> .....	5
<b>BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE AND THE US</b> .....	7
<b>RECONCILIATION</b> .....	7
<b>BERLIN PROCESS SUMMIT</b> .....	9



# INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy in Southeast Europe has not been dramatically affected by the pandemic. Foreign policy making, after all, always takes place in complex regional or global environments. The pandemic has, of course, added to this complexity, but has not caused any country in Southeast Europe<sup>1</sup> to significantly redirect its foreign policy. If some new messages have been sent out, they are more a reflection of the ongoing policy priorities of a given country than a result of the pandemic.

A snapshot of relations among neighbours over the course of nine months shows that vulnerability caused by COVID-19 has not been exploited against neighbours. It also, however, has not engendered significant solidarity, except in cases where it already exists, i.e. Serbia sending assistance to the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) or Croatia to Croat regions in BiH. In general, the media has been reasonable and responsible in covering the virus, focusing on the numbers of infected and deceased and the measures introduced to fight the virus, without seasoning their stories with comments about neighbours, which in other circumstances is not unusual.

## *The pandemic did not make the countries of the region drift away*

The pandemic has allowed some friendships to be strengthened at the expense of pragmatic ones, but in general each country has pursued its existing foreign policy orientation. In a few cases the closure of borders was interpreted as being linked to elections or the tourist season, but in general the perception was that border closures were just another measure by national crisis teams frantically searching for optimal solutions. A prevailing sense of human vulnerability is shared among citizens on social media across the region. While this sentiment has not brought the countries closer together, it has also not totally evaporated in the pandemic. Wherever it has, this is because of an already extant rift. Since the pandemic is not over yet, final conclusions cannot be made. The following sections discuss several selected foreign policy topics in Southeast Europe for the period March-November 2020.

1 Slovenia and Croatia are EU member states; Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are candidates or potential candidates for EU membership.

## CROATIA – EU PRESIDENCY

Croatia assumed its first-ever chairmanship of the EU Presidency on January 1, 2020. The government of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković presented this role as a historical opportunity for Croatia to advance the EU agenda and to set itself firmly in the EU family.<sup>2</sup> The program priorities envisioned a Europe that develops, connects, protects and is influential.<sup>3</sup> 2020 has been an important year for Croatia as it marks 25 years since the end of the war. The government argued that the EU presidency is confirmation of Croatia's success in the EU and an opportunity to advance Croatian national interests. Some analysts tried to explain that this is no confirmation of the country's success, rather the responsibility of a member state to chair the EU presidency on a revolving basis.<sup>4</sup>

EU enlargement has been high on Croatia's agenda and resonated quite strongly with the public. 20 years after the historic Zagreb summit when the countries of the Western Balkans were given EU membership perspective, on the condition of fulfilling the required reforms, a new summit in Zagreb would confirm not only Croatian dedication to further EU enlargement, but a Croatian specific role in it.<sup>5</sup>

## *The Covid-19 pandemic toppled the Croatian enlargement discussion plans*

- 2 „Croatia's EU chairmanship a historic moment for the country“. Press Release. Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. 30 October, 2019. Available at: <http://www.mvep.hr/en/info-servis/press-releases/32405.html>
- 3 „Priorities.“ Croatian Presidency. Available at: <https://eu2020.hr/Home/Custom?code=Priorities>
- 4 „Predsjedanje Vijećem EU nije vanjskopolitički uspjeh Plenkovićeve vlade, ali to u lipnju 2020. može postati.“ [EU Council Presidency is not a foreign policy success of Plenković's government, but it can become in June 2020]. *Faktograf.hr*. 21 November, 2019. Available at: <https://faktograf.hr/2019/11/21/predsjedanje-vijecem-eu-nije-vanjskopoliticki-uspjeh-plenkoviceve-vlade-ali-to-u-lipnju-2020-moze-postati/>
- 5 „Naše predsjedanje važno za odabir daljnjeg smjera EU-a, Hrvatska ima priliku dati Europi novi zamah“ [Our Presidency is important for EU's choosing further direction, Croatia has an opportunity to give Europe a new zest]. Government of the Republic of Croatia. 11 January, 2020. Available at: <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/nase-predsjedanje-vazno-za-odabir-daljnjeg-smjera-eu-a-hrvatska-ima-priliku-dati-europi-novi-zamah/28540>

Ever since October 2019 when the French President blocked the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, the enlargement policy has been on hold. The ensuing negotiations resulted in the revised enlargement methodology, endorsed by the Council of the EU in March 2020<sup>6</sup>, and granting North Macedonia and Albania opening accession talks.<sup>7</sup>

The COVID pandemic, however, completely disrupted Croatian enlargement discussion plans. The green light to North Macedonia and Albania went under the radar with the virus catching the headlines. The virtual EU summit in May 2020 reiterated EU commitments to the Western Balkans but ended with the word enlargement not being mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

Croatia initially announced 165 events and one summit in Zagreb and an additional 45 events in other towns in Croatia<sup>9</sup>, quite extraordinary even in pre-pandemic times. For example, Finland which preceded Croatia, had most EU Presidency events organized in Brussels. The pandemic drowned Croatian ambitions. To be fair, Croatia legitimately claims that during its Presidency both North Macedonia and Albania received an invitation to open negotiations along with the EU's generous emergency aid package for the Western Balkans. The handover of the EU Presidency to Germany, which took place on 1 July, coincided with preparations for the national elections in Croatia a few days later. The pandemic and the elections captured media attention and the ambitiously announced EU Presidency ended modestly and quietly.

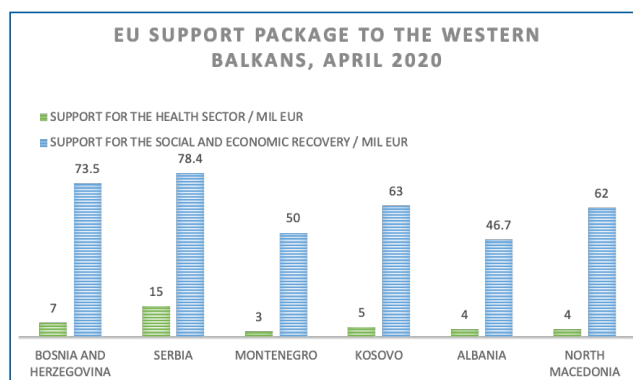
## EU ASSISTANCE TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

Lockdowns caused by the pandemic have hit all economies hard, but weak economies suffer more than rich ones. There were no savings to be used in dire times. Healthcare systems are struggling and it does not take a pandemic to reveal their limitations. To the average citizen in the Western Balkans, the effects of the pandemic are just further proof of the irresponsibility and incompetence of their governing classes. These countries are not poor in terms of resources, but a combina-

tion of weak governance and corruption stifles development. An obsession with history keeps their energies locked in the past, draining courage and stifling imagination away from the challenges of today and visions of the future.

## *The EU has come up with the solution it always does send money*

The EU, in its own dilemma over the Western Balkans, which it cannot ignore but at the same time cannot coach into reforms, has come up with the solution it always does – send money. In April 2020 it approved an assistance package to the Western Balkans for the fight against COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery. A total of 3.3 billion euros of support has been mobilized. Of this, 38 million euros was earmarked for the provision of medical equipment and PPE, while 389 million euros is assistance to support the social and economic recovery of the region. A further 455 million euros will be used for economic reactivation in the region, 750 million for macro-financial assistance and 1.7 billion has been pledged by the European Investment Bank. The EU also approved 4.5 million euros of humanitarian assistance for refugees and migrants, in particular unaccompanied minors and for general healthcare support in fighting COVID, as well as 8 million euros as emergency support to refugees and migrants stranded in the Western Balkans.<sup>10</sup>



In the Zagreb Declaration adopted on May 6, 2020 the EU explicitly says: "The fact that this support and cooperation goes far beyond what any other partner has provided to the region deserves public acknowledgement."<sup>11</sup> This is a rare moment of the EU's open acknowledgement of frustration with leaders in the Western Balkans who have publicly praised assistance received from non-EU countries but whose value, by all available information, lags far behind what the EU offers to this region.

6 "New enlargement methodology officially endorsed by the Member States". *European Western Balkans*. 27 March 2020. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/27/new-enlargement-methodology-officially-endorsed-by-the-member-states/>

7 „Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania. *Council Conclusions*." Council of the European Union. 25 March, 2020. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/hr/pdf>

8 [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf?utm\\_source=dsms-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Zagreb%20Declaration%2C%206%20May%202020](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Zagreb%20Declaration%2C%206%20May%202020); Augustin Palokaj. "Korona presudila ambicijama Zagrebačkog summita – zapadni Balkan" [Corona prejudged Zagreb Summit ambitions – Western Balkans]. *Jutarnji list*. 29 April, 2020. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/korona-presudila-ambicijama-zagrebackog-summita-eu-zapadni-balkan-10254757>

9 Hina. „Plenković: Europski proračun najvažniji dosje hrvatskog predsjedanja.“ [Plenković: European budget the most important dossier of the Croatian Presidency]. *Večernji list*. 2 January, 2020. Available at: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-europski-proracun-najvazniji-dosje-hrvatskog-predsjedanja-1370022>

10 European Commission. "Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery." 29 April, 2020. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/com\\_2020\\_315\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/com_2020_315_en.pdf)

11 Council of the European Union. "Zagreb Declaration, 6 May, 2020". Available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf?utm\\_source=dsms-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Zagreb%20Declaration%2C%206%20May%202020](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Zagreb%20Declaration%2C%206%20May%202020)

## *The EU's assistance demonstrates geopolitical thinking*

The EU's assistance is proof of solidarity and responsibility, and a demonstration of increasing geopolitical thinking – if the EU does not keep these countries close by, some other countries will step in. However, the zero-sum game policy assessment of the Chinese and other presences in the Western Balkans requires a deeper understanding and engagement from the EU, not least by “maximizing accession conditionality” as a guideline for steering other actors’ engagement in the region.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, “Brussels’ current policy of countermeasures and competitive bidding will not only fail, but be counterproductive. The EU’s development of a civic constituency and institutionalized culture of accountability – implied with the *acquis communautaire*, but de-emphasized to date in favour of an elite-based and pacification-focused policy – would provide not only the greatest resilience to external authoritarian penetration, but also the highest likelihood of “clubbable” future member states.”<sup>13</sup>

## *Covid-19 has had a disruptive effect on the Western Balkan economies*

In October 2020 the European Commission published progress reports for six Western Balkans countries.<sup>14</sup> A need for an additional reforms push cannot be stressed enough. All countries need to step up structural reforms in the field of the economy, implement public administration reform, fight corruption and organized crime, and strengthen the judiciary. While Montenegro and Albania are fully aligned with the European Common Foreign and Security Policy, others need to step up their alignment, in particular Serbia, which in the last year achieved 60% alignment.<sup>15</sup>

COVID-19 has had a disruptive effect on the economies of Western Balkan countries which are already lagging behind

the EU average. The proposed 2021-2027 EU budget foresees a generous 9 billion euro Economic and Investment Plan. These IPA III funds would be used for investments, to boost competitiveness, stimulate inclusive growth, continue the connectivity agenda and advance green and digital transition. In addition, the Commission proposes a new instrument – the Western Balkan Guarantee Facility – which could raise investments up to 20 billion euros.<sup>16</sup>

## *EU should tie assistance to the rule of law and good governance conditions*

The bleak economic perspective already indicated by the high rate of emigration from these countries has been additionally struck by the pandemic. Economic downturn and budget shrinkage as a result of lower economic activity will impact these countries in the years to come. The EU assistance thus is unique and generous, but the EU should strictly tie assistance to the rule of law and good governance conditions. It should also reach out to constituencies that genuinely support reforms. The ruling class in the majority of the countries are invested in the status quo; not keen to implement reforms that would harm their clientelistic networks and control of public assets. Along with its relationship with elected officials, the EU should start to actively build relations with citizens as its partners.

## **CHINA**

China’s relations with countries in Southeast Europe started more systematically in 2012 when the 16+1 Initiative was officially launched. As of 2019, with the addition of Greece, the Initiative has grown into the 17+1. Twelve EU member states and five candidates or potential candidates for EU membership<sup>17</sup> from Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe participate. Interestingly, there is no block discussion of issues within the Initiative. The annual summits serve as a photo opportunity with the Chinese prime minister. Projects are decided bilaterally as China prefers to work with each country individually.

This Initiative has been incorporated into a broader Belt and Road Initiative, a Chinese global outlook to boost trade and the economy. Chinese activities in Southeast Europe are met with increasing curiosity (and suspicion) by the West<sup>18</sup>, in par-

12 Wouter Zweers, Vladimir Shopov, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Mirrela Petkova and Maarten Lemstra. „China and the EU in the Western Balkans. A zero-sum game?” *Clingendael Report*. August 2020, p. 15. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>

13 Kurt Bassuener. „Primed Receptors: Synergies between Western Balkan Political Elites and Chinese Economic Actors and State Media.” *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*. 03/2020, October 2020. Available at: [http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/35-50\\_Kurt-Bassuener\\_SOM\\_03\\_2020-6.pdf](http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/35-50_Kurt-Bassuener_SOM_03_2020-6.pdf)

14 Albania [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1794](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1794); Bosnia and Herzegovina [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1793](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1793); Kosovo [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1797](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1797); Montenegro [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1796](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1796); North Macedonia [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1795](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1795); Serbia [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1792](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1792)

15 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_20\\_1792](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1792)

16 European Commission. „Economic and Investment plan for the Western Balkans”. 6 October, 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/economic-and-investment-plan-brochure.pdf>

17 Three Baltic countries, four Visegrad countries, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece are EU member states; plus five Western Balkan countries with the exception of Kosovo.

18 Jacob Mardell. „China’s Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans.” *Bertelsmann Stiftung*. January 2020. Available at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSI/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/asia-policy-brief-chinas-economic-footprint-in-the-western-balkans-28c4d775834edcc469f4f737664f79f932d6f9a1.pdf>

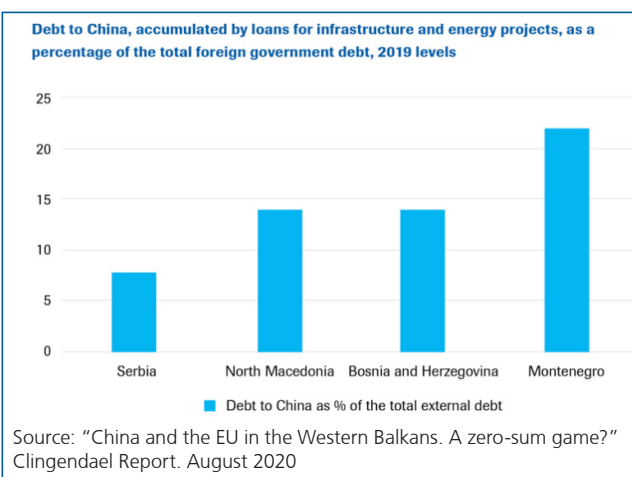
particular in light of increasingly complicated relations, reflected in the conclusions of the virtual EU-China summit in June 2020.<sup>19</sup>

## *Chinese economic activity in Southeast Europe is steadily rising*

Despite warnings that the contracts which Chinese state-owned companies are signing with governments in the Western Balkans harm their macro-financial stability or targeted environmental standards<sup>20</sup>, Chinese economic activity in Southeast Europe is steadily rising (although the EU remains the main trade partner and investor). Even Croatia, which until the mandate of Andrej Plenković had not expressed any significant desire to seek contracts with China, has given a Chinese company the biggest infrastructure project in decades – the construction of the Pelješac bridge in the south of the country. Approximately 85% of the financing cost comes from European funds, a reference the Chinese construction company will use in future tenders. Chinese FDI in the region is the largest in Serbia, where in recent years it has acquired Smederevo steel manufacturing and the Bor copper factory, while in Albania a Chinese state-owned company took over Tirana airport. In Albania, Chinese capital is invested in an oil company that is one of the largest employers in Albania. In BiH, China has given loans for two thermal power plans – in Stanari and Tuzla, while Republika Srpska in May 2020 signed an agreement with a Chinese company for the construction of a large-scale hydropower plant in the south of BiH at a cost of 200 million euros.<sup>21</sup> This is in addition to the already accumulated debt of 1.1 billion euros that BiH owes to China, around 13% of its total external debt.<sup>22</sup> The hydropower plant project is strongly opposed by local environmental NGOs arguing that the environmental hazards caused by this construction will be devastating. It has been reported that BiH plans two more coal power plants – Banovići and Sanski Most, the cost being 350 and 500 million euros respectively.<sup>23</sup> Not only will this increase BiH's debt, but it will further increase already high air pollution levels.

“China replaces Russia as Largest Investor in Montenegro” reads a headline, reporting that 70 million euros invested in

the first half of 2020 make China a top investor in Montenegro.<sup>24</sup> This completes the picture of Montenegro's debt to China being the highest among the other countries in the region. China is the “single biggest bilateral lender” to Montenegro.<sup>25</sup> North Macedonia also borrowed from China for the construction of two highways, while Kosovo, not recognized by China, has no reported loans.



The pandemic offered China a window of opportunity to present itself as a friend in tough times. Serbia, still basing its foreign policy priority on four pillars – EU, US, Russia and China – has been the first address. Chinese planes with PPE and other necessities to fight the coronavirus (NB: the cost of the transport was paid for by the EU<sup>26</sup>) landed at Belgrade airport in March 2020. The Serbian president told his nation: “European solidarity does not exist. It was a fairy tale. I have sent a special letter to the only ones who can help. That is China.”<sup>27</sup> A large Thank you brother Xi billboard appeared afterwards in Belgrade. China also sent assistance to other countries in the Western Balkans, with the exception of Kosovo. The value of aid, however, was not disclosed.

## *At some point, Serbia will have to decide where it stands*

Serbia acquired Chinese drones and accepted Chinese military donations. In Belgrade, over 70 locations have high-definition rotating Huawei cameras installed with optical zooms and infrared lamps. The Serbian Ministry of Interior announced that there will be over 800 locations where these cameras will be installed, raising the question of how data

19 European Council. „EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership.” *Press Release*. 22 June, 2020. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/22/eu-china-summit-defending-eu-interests-and-values-in-a-complex-and-vital-partnership/#>

20 „Will the Western Balkan countries fall for China's 'debt-trap diplomacy'?” *United Europe*. 12 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.united-europe.eu/2020/10/will-the-western-balkan-countries-fall-for-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy/>

21 „China Gezhouba Group has signed a Construction Contract for 160MW Facility Hydro Power Plant.” *Sarajevo Times*. 15 May, 2020. Available at: <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/china-gezhouba-group-has-signed-a-construction-contract-for-160mw-facility-hydro-power-plant/>

22 Zweers *et al.* Clingendael Report. August 2020 p. 15.

23 „Analiza – Kina je spas za BiH” [Analysis – China is to save BiH]. *Kina-danas.com*. Available at: <http://www.kina-danas.com/analiza-kina-spas-bih/>

24 Samir Kajosevic, „China Replaces Russia as Largest Investor in Montenegro.” *Balkan Insight*. 20 October, 2020. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/20/china-replaces-russia-as-largest-investor-in-montenegro/>

25 Zweers *et al.* Clingendael Report. August 2020, p. 14.

26 „Letom EU u Beograd stigla medicinska oprema iz Kine” [EU flight brought medical equipment from China]. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 26 March, 2020. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30511677.html>

27 Shaun Walker. “Coronavirus diplomacy: how Russia, China and EU vie to win over Serbia.” *The Guardian*. 13 April, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-diplomacy-how-russia-china-and-eu-vie-to-win-over-serbia>



generated by these cameras will be protected.<sup>28</sup> Balancing opposing foreign policy priorities Serbia, between the West and the East, seems to be serving Serbia well so far. Being the only European country that supports China in its treatment of the Uighur minority may seem a small price to pay. However, at some point, Serbia will have to decide where it stands.<sup>29</sup> This applies to others as well. With further complications in relations between the EU and China as a result of disagreements on trade issues, investment conditions and human rights standards, non-EU member states in Southeast Europe will need to demonstrate where their alliances lie. Chapter 30 of the *acquis* requests candidate states to progressively align their foreign policy with that of the EU. This is not a formality, but a reflection of their commitment to EU membership. The EU should note any shirking of this responsibility and adequately respond.

## BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE AND THE US

The US-backed agreement on economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo in September 2020 captured the spotlight for a few days. Meant to demonstrate that the two sides are able to overcome hostilities and are ready to turn a new page in their relations, it was quickly followed by Serb officials insulting Albanians, including the Albanian president Edi Rama.<sup>30</sup> Who can trust an agreement which ignites further fire? Some analysts concluded that the deal was more important to US president Trump for his electoral campaign than it was to the benefit of the two countries.<sup>31</sup> At a campaign rally the US president described the deal as historic and one that would win him the Nobel Peace Prize: “We are stopping mass killings between Kosovo and Serbia... They have been killing each other for so many years. They are going to stop the killing”, he explained.<sup>32</sup> The only concrete outcome has been Israel’s recognition of the independence of Kosovo. The prospective change of administration in Washington will likely have an effect on this deal. The fact that the EU offered only very mild praise for the deal will resonate with the new team in the White House.

Is this deal a reflection of Russia and Serbia’s drifting apart, as some have speculated?<sup>33</sup> The change of government in Serbia and removal of former foreign minister Ivica Dačić’s party, a long-term Russian ally, from some key positions in the government further heightened these speculations, with the conclusion, however, that the government reshuffle should not be interpreted as a realignment of Serbian-Russian relations.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the summer of 2020, the EU invested effort in reviving talks on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. In July, the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo met in Brussels in an attempt to demonstrate their will for progress in their relations.<sup>35</sup> In October, the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, Slovak diplomat Miroslav Lajčák, paid a visit to both cities, following the September deal the two sides signed in Washington and the resignation of Kosovo president Hashim Thaci who left office to face charges of war crimes, with few other suspects, at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in the Hague.<sup>36</sup>

The message from the EU is that, although assistance from friendly states is welcome, the EU should be the one leading the process of normalization, in light of the EU membership perspective both Serbia and Kosovo express, which requires investment in good neighbourly relations and mutual trust-building.<sup>37</sup> The new administration in Washington, willing to rebuild trans-Atlantic ties, may support the EU’s efforts, but the EU needs ‘to show robust leadership.’<sup>38</sup>

## RECONCILIATION

August is always a hot month, seasonally but also politically, in both Croatia and Serbia. The anniversary of the military operation ‘Storm’, when in 1995 Croatia liberated major parts of its territory occupied by Serb-rebel forces, is celebrated in Croatia as a day of historical victory. At the same time, Serbia commemorates Operation Storm as a day of national tragedy, a day that marks the exodus of the Serb people from

28 Marko Crnjanski. „Sve je više Huawei kamera na beogradskim ulicama – čemu služe i da li prepoznaju tvoje lice?“ [More and more Huawei cameras are on the streets of Belgrade – what are they for and do they recognize your face?]. *Netokracija.rs*. 17 June, 2020. Available at: <https://www.netokracija.rs/huawei-kamere-beograd-171048>

29 Milivoje Pantović. „Serbia has rolled out the red carpet to China – but at what cost?“. *Euronews*. 8 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/08/serbia-has-rolled-out-the-red-carpet-to-china-but-at-what-cost>

30 Bekim Bislimi, Ljudmila Cvetkovic and Andy Heil. „Serbia Officials Double Down On Ethnic Insult, Stoking Tensions With Albanians.“ *Radio Free Europe*. 9 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-officials-double-down-on-ethnic-insult-stoking-tensions-with-albanians/30883836.html>

31 Xhorxhina Bami and Milica Stojanovic. „In Search for Serbia-Kosovo Deal, Everything is Political.“ *Balkan Insight*. 4 September, 2020. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/04/in-search-for-serbia-kosovo-deal-everything-is-political/>

32 Denijal Jagic. „Trump’s Kosovo-Serbia normalisation deal is all about Israel.“ *Al Jazeera*. 28 September, 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/9/28/trumps-kosovo-serbia-normalisation-deal-is-all-about-israel/>

33 Vuk Vuksanovic. „Russia and Serbia: A Partnership Past its Prime.“ *RUSI*. 23 September, 2020. Available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-and-serbia-partnership-past-its-prime>

34 Andy Heil. „Some ‘Pro-Russian’ Voices Tamed In Serbia, But Vucic Keeping His Options Open.“ *Radio Free Europe*. 10 November, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/some-pro-russian-voices-tamed-in-serbia-but-vucic-keeping-options-open/30940585.html>

35 „Serbia and Kosovo to resume rocky road towards an accord.“ *Euractiv*. 16 July, 2020. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbia-and-kosovo-to-resume-rocky-road-towards-an-accord/>

36 „Kosovo leader Thaci in Hague detention over war crimes charges“. *BBC*. 5 November, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54822789>

37 “Lajčák: The Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue is clearly connected with the European future of Kosovo and Serbia.“ *European Western Balkans*. 12 October, 2020. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/12/lajcak-the-belgrade-pristina-dialogue-is-clearly-connected-with-the-european-future-of-kosovo-and-serbia/>

38 Engjellushe Morina. „Twin crises: Political dysfunction in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.“ *European Council on Foreign Relations*. 28 October, 2020. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/twin-crises-political-dysfunction-in-the-kosovo-serbia-dialogue/>

Croatia. This year, however, offered a different scenario. Following the victory in the July elections, Prime Minister Plenković decided that domestic reconciliation between Croats and Serbs will be one of the important goals in his second mandate, keen to lead HDZ towards the political centre. Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević, from a Serb political party which participates in the governing coalition, attended the 25th anniversary of Operation Storm in Knin in August. The media, both domestic and foreign, positively commented on this symbolic step,<sup>39</sup> while right-wing politicians in Croatia criticized it,<sup>40</sup> as well as Serbian politicians.<sup>41</sup>

Due to the pandemic, Serbia decided not to hold a traditional commemoration for the victims of Operation Storm. Instead of a massive gathering in Belgrade, the Serbian government organized a commemoration on a bridge in Sremska Rača and unveiled a memorial plaque. The ceremony included a line of tractors and cars full of people parked on the bridge recalling the scenes 25 years ago when around 200,000 Serbs left Croatia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced the construction of a memorial park at this location, together with Republika Srpska (RS) from BiH. 95% of the cost will be covered by the Serbian government, with the remaining 5% by the RS. “We will build the largest memorial park to ensure that the crime of the largest ethnic cleansing since the end of the Second World War is never forgotten”, promised the Serbian President.<sup>42</sup>

Following the breakthrough of the joint attendance in Knin in August, in late September the Croatian prime minister together with his deputy Boris Milošević attended a commemoration for the civilian Serb victims killed after Operation Storm in 1995. Nobody has yet been prosecuted for these crimes. With words of regret and deep respect for the victims, Plenković concluded that the perpetrators must be found: “This crime is an insult to modern Croatia because it

offends human dignity.”<sup>43</sup> Mixed Croat-Serb delegations also attended commemorations for civilian Serb victims in Grubori. In November, for the first time, an envoy from the Serbian president attended a commemoration for the Croatian victims of the Vukovar massacre.

Plenković sees reconciliation among Croats and Serbs in Croatia as an essential task of his government. Those with a longer memory, however, remember earlier attempts at reconciliation between Croatia and Serbia (Presidents Josipović and Tadić, for example) in which a step forward was followed by two steps back. Successor governments have a tendency to undermine progress achieved earlier – after all, it is not easy to give up on nationalism as the currency that has proved stable among Balkan voters.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was never a part of the commemoration of Operation Storm. This year, however, the Croatian president decided to award, as “a debt of honour”<sup>44</sup>, the Croatian Defence Council from BiH for its contribution to the success of Operation Storm. The person who accepted the medal is Zlatan Mijo Jelić, charged by BiH’s Prosecutor with war crimes. The indictment was announced in late 2015, when on the same day, apparently tipped off, Jelić with his family left BiH for Croatia and subsequently renounced BiH citizenship. Criticism from BiH, including from the SDP, Milanović’s former sister party, did not wait long. Unabashed by the anticipated criticism both from BiH and from left liberal circles in Croatia, the Croatian president seemingly did not “hesitate for a second”, according to General Pavao Miljavac. He was in the delegation that made the recommendation to the president whom to award, but with little hope that Zoran Milanović would actually accept as even former president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović had rejected their proposal the year before.<sup>45</sup> In October 2020, the Zagreb State Prosecutor’s Office launched an investigation into serious war crimes against Jelić.<sup>46</sup>

39 Andrea Jung-Grimm. „Opinion: Croatia on path towards reconciliation with Serbian minority”. *Deutsche Welle*. 7 August, 2020. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-croatia-on-path-towards-reconciliation-with-serbian-minority/a-54472683>

40 „Škoro: Nema razloga ni za kakvo pomirenje. Dolasku Borisa Miloševića u Knin pridaje se i previše pozornosti.” [Škoro: There is no need for any reconciliation. Too much attention is given to Boris Milošević’s arrival in Knin]. *Slobodna Dalmacija*. 5 August, 2020. Available at: <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/politika/skoro-nema-razloga-ni-za-kakvo-pomirenje-dolasku-borisa-milosevica-u-knin-pridaje-se-i-previsje-pozornosti-1036526>

41 „Dačić: Odlazak Miloševića u Knin pogrešan, u interesu Hrvata” [Dačić: Milošević’s presence in Knin wrong, in the interest of Croats]. *Rtv.rs*. 5 August, 2020. Available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr-lat/politika/dacic-odlazak-milosevica-u-knin-pogresan-u-interesu-hrvata\\_1150976.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr-lat/politika/dacic-odlazak-milosevica-u-knin-pogresan-u-interesu-hrvata_1150976.html)

42 Milica Stojanović. „Srbija: Komemoracija posvećena žrtvama ‘Oluje’ otkazana zbog koronavirusa” [Serbia: Commemoration for the victims of Operation ‘Storm’ cancelled due to coronavirus]. *Balkan Insight*. 30 July, 2020. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/30/srbija-komemoracija-posvecena-zrtvama-oluje-otkazana-zbog-koronavirusa/?lang=sr>

43 L.R. „‘Ovaj je zločin ožiljak na obrambeni rat’: Plenković izrazio žaljenje na komemoraciji u Varivodama i objasnio s čim se moraju suočiti Hrvati i Srbi” [‘This crime is a scar on the defence war’: Plenković expressed regret at the commemoration in Varivoda and explained what Croats and Serbs need to confront]. *Dnevnik.hr*. 28 September, 2020. Available at: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/premier-andrej-plenkovic-na-komemoraciji-u-varivodama---621890.html>

44 Margareta Jozinović. „Milanović odlikovao generale HV-a i gardijske brigade HVO-a” [Milanović awarded medals to Croatian Army generals and to Guards Brigades of the Croatian Defence Council]. *HRT*. 4 August, 2020. Available at: <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/640808/milanovic-odlikovao-generale-hv-a-i-gardijske-brigade-hvo-a>

45 Slavica Lukić. „Istražili smo: Hoće li DORH kazneno goniti čovjeka čiju je postrojbu Zoran Milanović odlikovao?” [We have investigated: Will the Croatian State Prosecution bring charges against the man whom Zoran Milanović awarded a medal?]. *Jutarnji.hr*. 8 August, 2020. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/istrazili-smo-hoce-li-dorh-kazneno-goniti-covjeka-ciju-je-postrojbu-zoran-milanovic-odlikovao-15012508>

46 L.R. „DORH pokrenuo istragu za ratne zločine protiv generala HVO-a kojeg je odlikovao predsjednik Milanović” [State Prosecutor initiated an investigation into war crimes against the Croatian Defence Council general whom President Milanović awarded a medal]. *Dnevnik.hr*. 15 October, 2020. Available at: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/dorh-pokrenuo-istragu-za-ratne-zlocine-protiv-general-a-hvo-a-zlata-na-mije-jelica---624257.html>

## BERLIN PROCESS SUMMIT

The seventh edition of the Western Balkan Summits in the framework of the Berlin Process took place on 10 November in Sofia, co-hosted by neighbours Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Goodwill for regional cooperation was expressed by Western Balkan participants and warmly welcomed by the EU, which once again underlined its support, backed by a generous financial package.<sup>47</sup> This spirited cooperation was followed by a cold shower on 17 November when the Bulgarian government blocked the commencement of EU negotiations for North Macedonia over identity issues, history and language. This is a harsh blow from a nominally pro-enlargement country, further weakening enlargement dynamics.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Bulgarian government blocked the start of the EU negotiations for North Macedonia*

Within the same Berlin Process a ‘mini Schengen’ initiative was launched last October when the leaders of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia agreed to explore the possibility of creating a zone of free movement for citizens, capital, goods and services among these three countries, inviting BiH, Kosovo and Montenegro to join them. Rising tensions in the region (Serbia-Montenegro, Serbia-Kosovo, polarization in BiH) have not facilitated these plans. The pandemic put them on hold. However, on 9 November, during an online meeting among the leaders of the three countries, Albania and Serbia signed an agreement to allow the citizens of both countries to travel to the other using only ID cards.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the three countries signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in fighting COVID-19. They will share information about the virus and if residents of one country become infected while visiting the other, they will be able to receive treatment without the need to pay for the medical services.<sup>50</sup>

Cooperation among the Western Balkan countries, as well as EU and non-EU member states in Southeast Europe, has no alternative. However, much political will must be invested to make the necessary breakthroughs. The question is not if these breakthroughs are possible, but whether the leaders are willing to invest in building trust, or will merely exploit divisions.

47 European Commission. „Western Balkans Summit in Sofia: Important steps taken to advance regional cooperation to boost socio-economic recovery and convergence with the EU.“ Press Release. 10 November, 2020. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_2051](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2051)

48 Jacopo Barigazzi. „Bulgaria blocks EU membership talks for North Macedonia“. *Politico*. 17 November, 2020. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-blocks-eu-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia/>

49 The same agreement both countries already have with North Macedonia.

50 Nikola Đorđević. „In the Western Balkans, a mini-Schengen begins to take shape.“ *Emerging Europe*. 11 November, 2020. Available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/in-the-western-balkans-a-mini-schengen-begins-to-take-shape/>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Senada Selo Sabic** is a Senior Scientific Associate at the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb. Her research interests include Croatian foreign policy, Southeast Europe, EU enlargement, development cooperation and migration. She holds Ph.D. in political science from the European University Institute in Florence (2003) and has earned two Masters degrees – in international relations from the University of Zagreb (1999) and in peace studies the University of Notre Dame, USA (1996).

## IMPRESSUM

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Office in Belgrade  
Dositejeva 51 | 11000 Belgrade | Serbia

Responsible:  
Dr. Max Brändle | Director, Regional Office for Serbia and Montenegro

Phone +381 11 3283 285  
[www.fes-serbia.org](http://www.fes-serbia.org)

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## FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE IN TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC



Foreign policy relations between neighboring countries in Southeast Europe have not significantly changed as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic has not generated higher solidarity among neighbors, except where ethnic/religious links already existed, but at the same time, it has not been manipulated against neighbors. EU enlargement, reconciliation, and the activities of non-EU actors – the dynamic in all these areas reflected already existing trends in the region and has not dramatically changed.



Lockdowns caused by the pandemic have hit all economies hard. The EU, in its own dilemma over the Western Balkans, which it cannot ignore but at the same time cannot coach into reforms, has come up with the solution it always does – send money. In April 2020 it approved an assistance package of 3.3 billion euros to the Western Balkans for the fight against COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery. This is a proof of solidarity and responsibility, and a demonstration of increasing geopolitical thinking – if the EU does not keep these countries close by, some other countries will step in.

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