

## FOREWORD

# Foreword: reconnecting with the Balkans

Javier Sánchez Cano



A boy walks past graffiti in the northern part of the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, Kosovo. February 6, 2023. Photo by Florion Goga/Reuters

We had often thought that, in order to interpret Balkan complexity, we had to look primarily at the past. That the dynamics affecting the region actually respond to long-standing and unresolved conflicts; a chronicle of the end of empires, nation-building and ethnicities. And it is true that, as Ivan Vejvoda explains in the article that opens this issue of IDEES magazine, history has not gone away and probably never will. However, the future of the Balkans is neither written nor predetermined. The title chosen for this new special issue, number 63 —coordinated by Ioannis Armakolas and Ruth Ferrero— is no coincidence: we have chosen to speak of a crossroads, a critical moment, in which the choice of the path to follow can lead to very different places and consequences that are difficult to reverse.

This IDEES magazine special issue offers us the opportunity to reconnect with the Balkans and calls us to take an interest in their situation and their future. We will see more clearly how the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia responded to struggles to preserve power, which made use of mechanisms —identity politics, social polarisation, disinformation, etc.— that are, sadly, all too familiar to us today. We will understand the meaning and scope of the European promise for these peoples, and appreciate the efforts they have made to live up to it, to become full members of a European Union seen as a guarantee of progress, cohesion and political stability. We will examine the difficulties of the struggle for civic space and for democratic freedoms and guarantees, in the face of the survival of elites that resist alternation and the emergence of new leaderships, even more illiberal and populist

than those they are replacing. We will also see how the powers intervening in the region (especially Russia and China, but also Turkey and the United Arab Emirates) are taking advantage of the vacuum created by the EU's indecision to promote not only their commercial and economic interests, but also anti-Western values. We will go into detail to better understand the developments of the past decades, and the serious challenges we face today.

We wanted to place the emphasis on the people, societies and governments of the Balkan region: on their subjectivity and their protagonism at a key moment —this is our impression— for the definition of their future. But the articles also show us —and this is really the thread running through this special issue— the fundamental role of the European Union: the need for it to respond to the expectations raised and find the means and energy to act decisively, reviving the enlargement agenda and preventing the resentment and illiberal regression that will inevitably follow if the EU fails to rise to the occasion. This monograph reaffirms the idea that the Balkans, which are Europe, must be part of the political integration project that we Europeans have equipped ourselves with in order to ensure peace among our peoples. A project based on values that are under threat today, inside and outside the EU. The future of the Balkans cannot be separated from the future of Europe.

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