

EDITORIAL

# Editorial: the Balkans at the crossroads

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Anti-government protesters take part in a demonstration on the National Revolution Boulevard, which is the dividing line between the west and east of the city, in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, February 19, 2014. The people gathered expressed their discontent with the political leaders, the closure of factories and the loss of jobs. This type of protest was repeated for weeks in different cities of the country as a result of the mobilisations in early February 2014. Some analysts called it the "Bosnian Spring". Photo: Reuters/Dado Ruvic

Recent decades, perhaps even going farther back, have not been kind to the Balkans, a peripheral region of the European Union. The wars of the 1990s, which led to the disintegration of the Yugoslav space, and poor post-conflict management by both local and global actors, mainly the US and the EU, have left the affected countries in despair. For years they have been waiting on the fulfilment of the promises made by Brussels at the various summits held, starting with those in Santa Maria da Feira and Zagreb in 2000. At the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the European Council committed to assessing enlargement on a case-by-case basis, that is, depending on the progress of each state. At that time, a "regatta" approach was adopted, with certain instruments being introduced, such as the stabilisation and association process in 2000, through which the EU wanted to stabilise and accelerate accession – or so it was said. However, only a handful of the region's countries have been able to advance in their accession process and become members: Slovenia in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia years later, in 2013. After that, the only thing the region received was silence and indifference; that is, until the humanitarian and geopolitical crises arrived.

The 2010s were the decade where EU policies took a significant detour on the road to the cherished goal of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU, as well as the period in which the frustration of the countries in the region grew exponentially. The reasons for this were varied: the EU's preoccupation with tackling the policy challenges of successive major crises, the conservative turn in European societies following the European debt crisis, the complexity of interlocking problems in the Balkans, which included a good deal of unresolved status questions... The list goes on.

No matter the, albeit justified, reasons for the EU's growing 'enlargement fatigue', the message was not lost on the political elites and citizens of the Western Balkans. The EU had promised to integrate the Western Balkans but was obviously in no hurry to accept new members, and even the very prospect of membership could, in principle, be questioned. If anyone had doubts, the 2014 declaration of the then incoming president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, saying that there would be no enlargement during his term, consolidated the fears that things had changed in the EU integration game.

In the decade that followed, the region's fortune unquestionably went downhill. Plagued by difficult circumstances, the region abandoned the hopes it had placed in the EU, while the latter lost credibility among the countries' populations, as well as any influence it had, which was taken up by other actors, such as Russia, China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

In 2014, Germany launched an initiative known as the Berlin Process, which was meant to reassure the countries of the region that they remained candidates for accession but achieved the exact opposite; it increased fears that the EU was looking into regional cooperation alternatives. With few exceptions, democratic backsliding and the stalling of reforms accelerated. The notable resolution of the name controversy between Greece and North Macedonia aside, bilateral disputes and status questions remained open while tensions mounted. The socio-economic situation in the region deteriorated, prompting countless citizens from the most dynamic segments of the Western Balkan societies, including the well-educated youth, to emigrate to Western Europe.

Over the past decade, the democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans has become pronounced and reforms linked to the criteria for accession to the EU have stalled

Adding insult to injury, the EU frustrated the prospects of the region's most hopeful democratic experiment in recent times. North Macedonia's social-democratic government failed to advance on its path to EU accession, despite major efforts to break with its semi-authoritarian past and after painful compromises with neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria to resolve pending disputes. In addition, there were no clearer indications of the menacing prospect of the region returning to crisis and instability than the increased tensions in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and the escalating threat of Serb secessionism in Bosnia and

Herzegovina.

The EU's commitment to the region has never been pivotal. It is true that funds have never stopped coming in, but far from deepening the processes of democratic transformation, they have led to immobility, in the best of cases, and to the construction of illiberal regimes in the worst. The policy deployed by Brussels, based on a principle of conditionality that has focused more on stability and security than on democracy, has not helped progress in the region.

With the region in a precarious state of affairs came the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting revitalisation of the enlargement process. The prospect of EU accession for Ukraine and Moldova is clearly at the forefront of this new initiative, but EU policymakers insist that the Western Balkans' accession is now back in the spotlight. Now there are new and more receptive atmospheres for enlargement in Brussels and many European capitals. However, as they say, once bitten, twice shy, and the leaders and peoples in the Western Balkans remain quite sceptical about whether the EU truly means this change in enlargement policy. This is clearly indicated by the fact that tensions in Kosovo-Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain, by the electoral results in North Macedonia and by the Serbian leadership's continuing policy of equidistance between the EU and China and Russia.

The Western Balkans' instincts may not be far off. The EU will have to have a complete change of heart and undergo no small measure of difficult policy changes in order to proceed with new accessions. The success of the far right in the recent European election and numerous national and regional votes in Member States indicates that we have entered a new period of political volatility and introversion. This context is not in line with the progressive change of mindset required by European societies in order to accept a number of politically and economically weaker states as full members of the EU.

At EU policymaking level, there is far from consensus as to whether radical institutional changes will be required to accept new members or whether this can be done within the existing Treaty and institutional framework. A number of Member States are pushing for far-reaching reform, which could include the extension of voting by qualified majority to new policy areas, a change that will certainly be resisted by several smaller Member States. The financial burden of new memberships, including that of Ukraine, which are sure to have an impact on a number of policy areas, including agriculture, will certainly create frictions; it remains to be seen how these will (or will not) be resolved. Managing the (re)distribution of power and resources within an EU of 30+ members will also be a tall order. And no matter what different states think about the need to integrate former Eastern neighbours or the Western Balkan countries, policy and the pace of change will depend on national agendas and the very material interests of the various Member States.

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The geopolitical ambiguity of certain candidate countries will also be a matter of concern, especially for the Central European and Nordic states. All in all, although the war in Ukraine bolstered hopes that the EU will finally take decisive steps towards new accessions, full European integration in Eastern and Southeastern Europe will be anything but guaranteed in the coming years.

## The IDEES magazine special issue, a space for reflection

This special issue on the Balkans will address these and other essential questions to understand the current reality of the region. In the first block, we begin with a review of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, where Ivan Vejvoda discusses the main milestones of the conflict, the first to take place on European soil since the end of the Second World War. The article addresses the differentiating features of these societies, which are sustained by the absence of a democratic political culture, as well as the drift towards the ethnicization of politics that finally led to the so-called Yugoslav Wars. In the next article, Esma Kučukalić deals with the issues related to the construction of national identities in various countries, paying special attention to the case of Bosnia. There is also a contribution from Vjeran Pavalakovic entirely focused on transitional justice and the difficulties that Bosnia-Herzegovina and other countries are going through. In this text, the author warns us about the risk of instability in the region as a consequence of unresolved issues in “dealing with the past”.

In the second block, we reflect on democracy and political participation. An article by Alejandro Esteso Pérez discusses the processes of political change and the difficulties of moving towards liberal democratic systems that include illiberal drifts of various kinds. In an effort to address more transversal issues affecting problems of a social nature, in her article, Miruna Troncotă deals with the situation of young people, a group searching for its place within society. Social mobilisation is one of the issues addressed in Berta López-Domenech's text, which points out how, beyond national impulses, other issues have appeared that affect matters such as the environment, LGBTQ rights and democratic regeneration. In an effort to discuss more transversal issues that affect problems of a social nature, Miruna Troncotă analyses, in her article, the situation of young people, a group seeking its place in society.

This is followed by a third block that offers an approach to issues related to the most significant socio-economic biases. The articles take us from the demographic crisis addressed by Tim Judah to Milica Uvalić's portrait of the economic development that has taken place during the last 30 years in the six territories that emerged after the disappearance of Yugoslavia.

Together the three blocks trace the lines of continuity between the societies of the Balkans and the societies of the rest of Europe.

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debates that are taking place in the Balkans through an interdisciplinary lens

Of course, we cannot forget the enlargement process, which the fourth block deals with from a twofold perspective: one, penned by Isabelle Ioannides, analyses it from Brussels' vision, while author Simonida Kacarska looks at the Balkans region's perception of this process. Both texts show two views of a single process, which should lead to these countries' future accession to the European project, and the points of contention between them.

The final block is focused on geopolitical, security and defence issues, including the need for regional cooperation. All three matters are essential to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges that the whole region faces. Engjellushe Morina analyses regional cooperation as a question of utmost importance, since without it, the connectivity and development of infrastructure and the real development of the region would not be possible. Meanwhile, Florent Marciaq links the need for the countries in the region to move towards the European Union with concerns on security and stability. In her article, Ana Krstинovska takes a look at the geopolitical influences of powers such as China or Russia in the Balkans following the region's time in oblivion in Brussels. Her text focuses on how these powers have increased their footprint in the region and how the perception of their presence in these countries has provoked an important wave of disaffection towards the European project. Finally, Eric Hauck addresses Catalonia's ties of solidarity with the peoples from the former Yugoslavia and Southeast Europe, with a special focus on the cooperation between Barcelona and Sarajevo.

The purpose of this IDEES magazine special issue is to bring the essential debates that are taking place in the Balkans region to a wider audience and through an interdisciplinary lens that includes history, society, politics, economy and, of course, geopolitics. Due to the current geopolitical situation and the decisions that are going to be made regarding the future of the European Union and its enlargement, knowing the different perspectives on the various issues is essential if we are to understand how much is at stake.

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