

Continuous transition: The growing crisis in the western Balkans and the role of the EU¹

Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis has put the western Balkans back on the agenda. The agreement of 18 May 2020 to provide a total of €500 billion in grants to EU countries in trouble – not loans, which is neither the German nor the northern European position with regard to the ‘communitisation of debt’ – was preceded by the ‘Zagreb Declaration’ of 6 May documenting the promise that the EU would fight the corona virus and its effects together with the countries of the western Balkans. This resulted in a package of €3.3bn being established, constituting emergency aid for the health sector and funds for social and economic consolidation. This has revitalised the stuck accession negotiations which had become stalled in 2019. This article, drawing on interviews carried out during a recent research trip to Serbia, seeks to question whether impending disruption between the western Balkans and the EU could be avoided given how the EU and other state actors have acted thus far, discussing such issues in the particular context of developments in Serbia and Kosovo and, reflecting from there, across the western Balkans.

Keywords: western Balkans, EU accession, CV-19, Zagreb Declaration, frozen conflicts, geopolitical strategy

A contradictory situation

In October last year, Emmanuel Macron, President of France, opposed the opening of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. In November, he went on fundamentally to question the enlargement of the EU to the western Balkans, describing Bosnia and Herzegovina as a ‘time bomb’. In doing so, Macron took aim at the quasi-protectorate, which has been governed by a UN High Representative since the Dayton Agreement in 1995 and which has seemed to exist in a state of perma-crisis. The High Representative has the right of veto and can quash or enact laws. Meanwhile, all three ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats – each have textbooks containing contradictory interpretations of history, and who simply block each other with their apparent inability to compromise.

1 This article is based on an essay ‘Im Fadenkreuz der Großmächte’, written by the author and Achim Engelberg, and published in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 1/2020 (January). The original piece has been radically re-worked and updated by the author especially for readers of the *SEER Journal*. All translations of quotes contained in German articles have been translated by the author.

Twenty-five years after the Dayton Agreement brought about an end to the war, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is stuck and the country has become impoverished. Furthermore, across the western Balkans, and not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina – although especially here – countries as diverse as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States and not least the EU are competing for hegemony.

Until the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, EU heads of state and government remained divided on the issue of enlargement; both the Netherlands and France have called for decision-making processes within the European Union to be reformed before further candidates are admitted. The EU, it seems, has not coped well with the accession of Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. Moreover, what is threatening to come true is what Peter Scholl-Latour (1994) predicted about the Balkans while the conflict was still going on: that east-west confrontation, believed to have been overcome, ‘Will flare up again at any time in a new and old form’ and that we could re-enter an ‘Era of uncontrollable and hopeless regional conflicts.’ Scholl-Latour went on to conclude:

What is happening in the Balkans is not an epiphenomenon, but the announcement of future disruption.

The controversy surrounding Macron’s remarks highlights a problem that is well-known: unity has historically been difficult. As a whole, the Balkan peninsula was last united in the time of the Romans. After the division of the empire in 395 and the birth of Byzantium, borders gradually emerged that have been repeatedly ignored and re-drawn by various rulers, including the Ottomans. Not only has the task of unity been difficult to accomplish but, where it has succeeded, this has often turned out to be short-lived. The Balkans remains a critical transition region lying in the crosshairs of various powers.

Today, the growing crises in the western Balkans, like those among EU member states, can be analysed with pinpoint accuracy (Becker 2008): since 1995, quasi-protectorates such as Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina exist alongside countries with polarised minority problems such as North Macedonia. Disagreements on borders are not confined to states seeking accession to the EU: EU member Croatia cannot stop the emigration of many of its citizens, with half a million Croatians now living in Germany alone. Meanwhile, deeply-indebted EU member Greece cannot recover on its own. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, there are more displaced persons and immigrants living in Turkey in 2019 than there are in the EU. Furthermore, the western Balkans is simply not able to cope with a new rush of incomers as it had to do in 2015 – and this will, at the same time, have consequences for the entire EU.

Transnational socio-economic contradictions abound everywhere – among others, mass unemployment and poverty, low purchasing power and corruption: in short, state failure on many different levels. This has led to a ‘brain drain’, i.e. the emigration of younger, higher-skilled workers who are able to find no or only poorly-paid work. Since the end of the wars sparked by the disintegration and division of Yugoslavia, the population has shrunk severely, an exodus which has been exacerbated

by promotional campaigns by European governments, of which simply the most recent is German health minister, Jens Spahn, posing in Kosovo with medical professionals.

The coronavirus crisis has brought south-east European societies to a standstill and threatens to exacerbate these problems.

The Gordian knot – Serbia and Kosovo

In a multitude of conflicts, Kosovo stands out. If the EU fails to achieve a lasting peace agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, with or without the help of Russia, the United States and China, it will see not only an erosion of trust within the western Balkans but also of its own ability to act.

Following NATO's intervention on behalf of Kosovo, the first combat mission involving German soldiers since World War II, attempts to consolidate the region began in 1999 with the Stability Pact for South-East Europe. This can be seen as the start of improvisational tactics in the western Balkans.

Financial and technical development aid followed, in line with the EU's approach to the region, with the basic premise being to maintain multi-ethnicity following wars which had been based on ethnic cleansing (Becker and Jurkeit 2001). Bodo Hombach, former head of the Federal Chancellery in Germany and the first Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact, recently recalled the strength of the diplomacy of the time which not only managed to offer a perspective to those in enemy camps but also an efficient mechanism in which their difficulties could be resolved (Hombach 2019). Hombach went on to explain that the Stability Pact functioned on the premise that mentalities could only be changed through something that was tangible; it operated:

On a simple, but effective, principle: clear conditionality: 'If you do *this*, we will do *this*.' Funding was given to what had cross-border significance and which had been presented jointly. Nine billion euros were based on this concept.

In 2008, the Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Co-operation Council for South-East Europe. At the same time, the European Commission established so-called pre-accession or preparatory aid (the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, or IPA) for the candidate countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, guaranteeing extensive financial and technical support for the reform process. The value of the support provided through the IPA was €8.9bn in 2007-2017, with a further €1.07bn envisaged for 2018 (European Commission 2018: 16).

In particular, the EU saw its task as one of opening up the prospect of accession and integration. In line with its reciprocity principle, the Commission expected candidate countries and aid recipients continuously to strengthen the rule of law, fundamental rights and governance. In addition, the countries receiving aid would have to:

Commit [unequivocally] ... to overcoming the legacy of the past... Without effective and comprehensive normalisation of Belgrade-Pristina relations through the EU-facilitated Dialogue, there cannot be lasting stability in the region. A comprehensive, legally-binding nor-

malisation is urgent and crucial so that Serbia and Kosovo can advance on their respective European paths. (European Commission 2018: 6)

All those interested in accession are, therefore, required to make substantial adjustments to meet the standards of the *acquis communautaire*, the entirety of the EU's legal framework. The awkward neighbours of Serbia, the region's most populous country, and Kosovo, which has been recognised neither by Serbia nor by five of the 27 EU countries, clearly play the key role especially since the unresolved 'Albanian question', together with the Kosovo Albanian diaspora in North Macedonia and in the Preševo Valley in southern Serbia, are ethnically charged, and growing, regional conflicts that are difficult to control. In the meantime, both countries, in the context of the EU accession game, are trying to put pressure on the EU through intensifying their relations with Russia and China (Serbia) or with the United States (Kosovo). In the light of such actions, it might be quickly concluded that the principle of reciprocal giving and taking, as outlined by Hombach, turned out to be something of a one-way street.

Multi-track Serbia

With 7m inhabitants and a trade volume of €24bn (2018), Serbia is the EU's most important strategic partner in the western Balkans. Accession negotiations have been underway since 2014 and the perspective for joining is 2025. Kosovo, which has a population of just under 2m, has a trade volume of €1.53bn (2018) with the EU but accession negotiations are not yet underway even though the EU is continuing to provide billions of euros in assistance. With a total package of €2.9bn, around €207m annually, Serbia has benefited the most from the IPA I and IPA II programmes. Mathematically, this amounts to €29 per head whereas, for example, the per capita figure for the aid provided to Turkey amounts to €8.

However, critical observers assume that only 10-15 per cent of the funding goes to projects in the western Balkans, with the rest seeping into the bureaucracy.² The actual outcome is difficult to establish without unravelling the interconnections between politics, oligarchy and the mafia. Meanwhile, Reporters Without Borders has downgraded Serbia annually since Aleksandar Vučić first became Prime Minister and then President. However, while freedom of the press is declining, it is also true that wages, while still low, are rising, thus creating a release valve which mitigates the concomitant social questions and which, in some cases, is also reducing the 'brain drain' to Germany.

In 2018, the IMF certified that the Serbian government was, 'Thanks to good governance'³ still on a growth path. Lower oil prices, higher wages in the private sector and a higher export share, lower inflation rates and the consolidation of public finances had all had a positive impact on the economic balance sheet. Unemployment was 13.8 per cent in 2018, while youth unemployment was 34.8 per cent. That

- 2 Interview in Belgrade between the author and Achim Engelberg with Andrej Ivanij, journalist at the weekly *Vreme*, 24 May 2019.
- 3 *WirtschaftsBlatt* No. 4927/2015, 7 September 2015.

one-third have to live below the poverty line of an extremely low average of €130, and that about seventy per cent of young Serbs are considering migration, is usually overlooked, especially since EU countries such as Germany benefit from the immigration of young people. Nevertheless, after the global economic crisis brought Serbia to the brink of the abyss in 2008, it seems that the Vučić government, which has been in office since 2014, has brought Serbia back on track. Vučić's Serbian Progress Party (SNS), which emerged out of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of the convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, rules with, among others, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), whose chair (and Minister of Foreign Affairs) is Ivica Dačić, former press representative for Slobodan Milošević.

Vučić, whose period of political service also includes a stint in 1998-2000 as Milošević's Minister of Information, was elected President by a substantial majority in 2017. The opposition, which represents around twenty per cent of the parliament, is atomised while its own senior representatives have been drawn into an establishment elite which enriches itself regardless of political party affiliation. Independent observers report extensive money laundering by petrol stations that are said to generate large profits, as well as luxury hotels and others. This affects the provinces but also Belgrade, the capital. There, money flows from an Abu Dhabi investment fund into dubious construction projects such as the Belgrade 'Waterfront', accompanied by the demolition of Savamala, a neighbourhood in the historic old town.

There was no standard bidding process for the tender or mandatory competition of the architectural design,'

says Dobrica Veselinović, organiser of Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own (in Serbian: Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd (NDB)), in an interview for Democracy International (2018).

That was the first signal for us to organise and involve citizens in the struggle against this non-transparent process. We started with the basic steps: filing an official complaint about changes to the urban development plans, putting pressure on the institutional level, requesting public hearings.

In the dead of the night, around thirty masked men carrying baseball bats protected the demolition of a block affected by the project in Savamala. Residents called the police, but they did not turn up allegedly on orders from on high, further aggravating the situation. Speculation about the source of such instructions, as well as the demand for accountability and transparency, and for an end to the inaction of the authorities, led to further protest demonstrations.

Vučić's 'authoritarian *mafiosi* regime', according to Jovo Bakić, the Belgrade sociologist, controls the judiciary and the media as well as the apparatus of the state. The SNS has 700,000 members, ten per cent of the population, with tentacles that reach almost everywhere. The majority of people continuing to live in agricultural areas support Vučić's 'good governance', while the hastily-formed 'Alliance for Serbia' has, up to now, offered little in opposition to the government. Rather, it is hoping to build on the involvement of parts of the urban population in the street protests that have been going on since 2018.

The unions are not taking part in these political demonstrations and, on the whole, they are on the defensive. Accordingly, Duško Vuković, the Vice-President of the CATUS confederation of unions – a comparatively large organisation with 300,000 members – asserts that they have only the ‘social dialogue’ with the government with which to persuade it of the need to shoulder the ‘burdens of change’ fairly.⁴

Meanwhile, a further project is evident: with the help of Huawei, the Chinese telecom giant, Belgrade is currently being expanded into a ‘smart city.’ The growing influence of China, on which Serbia has become increasingly dependent, is a little worrying. Serbia progressing ‘step-by-step to becoming China’s bridgehead’ was the title of an article by Ulrich Laderner in the 18 March 2020 issue of the liberal weekly *Die Zeit*. Even prior to President Xi Jinping’s visit in June 2016, there had been a close strategic partnership between the two countries. During the visit, however, a series of co-operation agreements were signed in infrastructure, trade, energy, telecommunications, science, technology, culture and tourism, etc. The purchase of an armed drone system by the Serbian Ministry of Defence – the largest arms sale that China had made in Europe since the end of the Cold War – also caused a stir. Belgrade’s streets are reported to be controlled by mixed Serb-Chinese police teams, although the presence of Chinese police officers should at least give the increasing number of Chinese tourists a feeling of security (Laderner 2020).

The kowtowing of top Serbian politicians to China, alongside a humiliation of the EU, also emerged during the coronavirus crisis. In March 2020, the European Commission was unable to respond quickly and non-bureaucratically to Serbia’s request for support arising from a lack of medical equipment in the context of the EU’s export ban. Vučić then responded with a begging letter to China:

I sent a letter to President Xi, in which for the first time I officially called him not only a dear friend but also a brother, and not only my personal friend but also a friend and brother of this country... European solidarity does not exist, it was a fairytale. Only China can help us! (quoted from Laderner 2020)

How has the EU responded to such gestures of subservience from the president of an important candidate for accession? According to observers of the Belgrade political scene, both the EU and the Merkel government continue to see Vučić as the reliable guarantor of stability which the EU badly needs. This always leads to Belgrade playing either the Chinese or the Russian card, in the latter case something which also calls to mind references to common Slavic bonds.

Hope for Kosovo; conflict in Kosovo

The former Serbian autonomous province of Kosovo, which claimed sovereignty and international recognition in 2008, has not been recognised by five of the 27 EU member states. The situation within the country remains tense. Many Kosovars emi-

4 Interview in Belgrade between the author and Achim Engelberg with Duško Vuković on 24 May 2019.

grate or are living either off the remittances of those who have left or, indirectly, through EU aid. Former Kosovar President Atifete Jahjaga characterised the situation in early summer 2019 thus:

Kosovo is suffocating from corruption and the abuse of power. We need positive change like never before.

Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj had to resign following the decision of the Kosovo Specialist Chamber, an EU-backed body set up in the Hague in 2015, to bring back war crimes charges against the former KLA commander. In the snap parliamentary elections in October 2019, Haradinaj's Democratic Party (PDK), which stood accused of corruption, achieved only 21 per cent of the vote while the winner, the left-nationalist *Vetevendosje* ('self-determination'), realised 26 per cent. Led by former student leader, Albin Kurti, *Vetevendosje* has a long-term policy of uniting Kosovo with Albania. Together with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), which won 25 per cent under its top candidate Vjosa Osmani, who turned out to be something of a superstar, *Vetevendosje* initially formed a government. It has thus fallen once again to the LDK, which was founded by Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Kosovar independence movement in the fight against the Milosevic regime, and who died in 2006, to lead Kosovo towards success. Osmani is clear about the importance of dialogue with Serbia, but is determined that it should facilitate the normalisation of relations and in such a way that it is of benefit to ordinary citizens, something that, in her view, requires concessions from Serbia not least on the issue of recognition.

Up until the beginning of 2020, there was at least consensus between politics and the Kosovo population regarding the role of the EU, which was regarded as having given Serbia preference in terms of EU membership and which was, as a result, regarded as having rather over-run its role as an honest broker.

The tension between government and opposition (and President Hashim Thaci, thought to be negotiating a land swap 'deal' with Vučić at the instigation of the US government) escalated. A vote of no confidence was called in March by the LDK (in spite of the opposition of Osmani, the Chair of the Assembly), in a debate between it and the PDK on the one hand and *Vetevendosje* on the other, over whether to use the coronavirus crisis to call for a state of emergency which would give the President more power while undermining Kurti's own authority. The vote was successful, although Kurti remained in office on a caretaker basis pending a decision by the Constitutional Court on Thaci's decision to give a mandate to Avdullah Hoti, from the LDK, to form a government without holding fresh elections. The Court's decision was given at the end of May, with it determining that such a move was not unconstitutional.

Due to the popular – because they are clear – measures which the government launched in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic (Rathfelder 2020), *Vetevendosje* has been able to consolidate its position in Kosovo's polarised party spectrum and its preference following the no-confidence vote was for fresh elections. It has greeted the Court's decision with dismay and has been rehearsing socially-distanced protests.

Thus far, the coronavirus infection and death rate has been limited (1,064 people have been infected, of whom 829 have recovered while 30 have died).⁵ However, it is of particular political importance that the Serbian minority, and other minorities in the country, are brought within the anti-coronavirus strategy:

Serbia probably believed that a *Vetevendosje* government would not test Kosovo Serbs for the virus. Serbia was amazed, however, that we don't divide the population according to ethnicity,

Kurti said recently (Rathfelder 2020). One positive signal, it seems, is that the virus can also produce pragmatic joint solutions because Serbia not only delivered 1,000 Covid-19 tests to Kosovo, and not specifically earmarked for Serbian communities, but also sent dozens of Serbian doctors to the country.

Emmanuel Macron, who had so recently put a spanner in the works of the EU policy towards the western Balkans, took the initiative in April 2020 to revive the Serbian-Kosovar dialogue that had been broken off in November 2018. The diplomat chosen for the job of EU Special Representative was no less than Miroslav Lajčák, a Slovak and former High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If the two-time foreign minister in his country – one of the five EU members that does not recognise Kosovo's statehood – does turn out to be able to mediate successfully, this would help in restoring, at least partially, the EU's damaged reputation.

With the appointment of Hoti as new Prime Minister, some experts assume that Thaci, supported by Richard Grenell, Trump's special representative for the western Balkans, wants to revitalise the Kosovar-Serbian dialogue in favour of a land swap deal. Recently, the media portal *BalkanInsight* revealed that Kosovo's former PDK government had financed a French PR agency to push 'Kosovo's position' supporting 'territorial modification' as a means to achieve a Kosovo-Serbia peace deal. The contract with the agency was:

Signed and negotiated in 2018 by Dhurata Hoxha, Kosovo's Minister of European Integration from the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, in the PAN coalition government led by Ramush Haradinaj. This contract was extended in March 2019. (Xharra 2020)

Thus it seems that the US, which supports Thaci and the Kosovar-Serbian dialogue as a means of developing a new frontier in the formation of a US-led Balkan coalition against other competitors, such as the EU, China and Russia, is back in the game. The US remains popular in Kosovo and is considered to be the protector of Kosovan independence. Kurti, who is vehemently opposed to making concessions to Serbia in return for recognition of independence (Pabst 2020), would have disturbed this high-stakes game.

Mitrovica as a symbol

The bridge over the River Ibar in Mitrovica, the divided city in Kosovo, will perhaps never become a hotspot for tourism like the historic bridge over the Drina in Ivo

5 Figures as of the end of May 2020.

Andrić's novel of the same name, which made Višegrad world-famous and which became a symbol for the region. Despite the bridge's sweeping construction, the Ibar is a calm river here, but the bridge represents the inner drama of the region amidst new global political constellations.

This was exemplified in Mitrovica in 2003, where stones thrown by Serbs at Kosovar boys playing in the Ibar escalated into mutual violence and showed the international community how fragile is the situation between the Serbian minority and the Kosovar-Albanian majority. Putin t-shirts are sold on one side of the river while the USA is worshipped on the other. In Serbia, the influence of Russia is increasing, Gazprom is a monopoly supplier and there are numerous other investments; in Kosovo, there is Bondsteel, the large US military base. The Chinese are suspicious of US behaviour because it interferes with their imperial New Silk Road project. All the while, the debt and the dependence on the major powers of the countries of the western Balkans is increasing.

Shortly before the Kosovo war in 1999, Boris Yeltsin, then Russian President, asked Bill Clinton to refrain from bombing Serbia:

My people will reject America and NATO from now on. I remind you how difficult it was for me to convince the people and politicians in my country to look west, to the United States. I managed to do that, and now everything looks otherwise.⁶

Nine months later, Yeltsin resigned, Vladimir Putin became his successor and Russia turned away from the west.

For the Federal Republic of Germany and the USA, Mitrovica is a city in the state they recognise as Kosovo but, for Russia and China, it is still part of Serbia. Russia is weaker than the Soviet Union was, but Putin would never write pleading letters to an American president using the words of his predecessor. Meanwhile, China is on the way to becoming a leading world power and, as we have seen, is building bridgeheads in the western Balkans.

In 2008, Putin described Kosovo's declaration of independence as a 'terrible precedent' and acted in revenge in the Caucasus, which has similar significance for Russia as the Balkans does for central Europe. Russia has recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, although the west has not. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the Kosovo conflict represents a Gordian knot that no politician has been able to sever so far.

To this day, the unresolved 'Albanian question', whether because of Kosovo or the existence of predominantly Albanian settlements in southern Serbia and North Macedonia, occupies a key position in the continued development of south-east Europe. Federica Mogherini, then the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as well as the Trump administration, has provided positive feedback on the talks about an exchange of areas along ethnic lines as per the Kosovar-Serbian

6 See also the bizarre conversation between Clinton and Yeltsin reported by Klaus Wiegrefe in 'Gib Europa an Russland' ('Give Europe to Russia') in *Der Spiegel* 7 September 2018, available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/bill-clinton-und-boris-jelzin-gib-europa-an-russland-a-0000000-0002-0001-0000-000159308856>.

presidential dialogue in 2018. For a short period, a ‘peace deal’ seemed to be in the air. However, any border corrections based on the establishment of mono-ethnic territories has also alarmed politicians and the media, who see this as endangering the established multi-ethnic approach to the western Balkans (Münch 2019).

Everything may change, but the critical issues raised by borderland regions are surprisingly persistent. The border between east and west marks out to this day the region of transition. Either side, Catholic Croatia and Orthodox Greece are weak members of the EU; in the states in between, the Ottoman influence on history is evident. That these borders delineate an issue which continues to be such a virulent one can be seen in the reverberations between Croatia and Serbia over the war; while cities like Mitrovica constitute ‘frozen conflicts’ within the Balkans that could start again at any time.

Many efforts have been made in the region to combat the widespread collusion between politics, business and organised crime. However, attempts to:

Break this nexus by fighting corruption, strengthening the rule of law and normalising the social and political conditions

have failed while the focus must now – perhaps necessarily – shift towards attempts to:

Deconstruct the stereotype of the Balkans as an ancestral hotbed of crime. (Solioz 2017: 150).

With this in mind, strengthening open societies, developing social market economies and encouraging regional co-operation – as the EU wants – seems to imply that facilitating an approach based on open borders is the best way to fight corruption and war crimes.⁷

The struggle for the Balkans

Christoph Schiltz, writing in early May in *Die Welt*, the daily newspaper, sums it thus (Schiltz 2020):

Russia, China, Turkey and some Gulf states have discovered the western Balkans as a sphere of influence right on the EU’s doorstep. They invest billions, build bridges, schools and mosques, buy media outlets and produce false reports in a targeted manner – even during the coronavirus crisis. And they are gradually expanding their influence on political decisions.

It is a struggle for the western Balkans, but Europe is clearly in a better position as its most important trading partner and immediate neighbour.

7 Christophe Solioz (2017: 49-156) provides some helpful suggestions for new paths to strengthen the EU’s approach towards regional co-operation. In his consideration of a new multilateral world order, with greater Chinese and Russian influence amidst a trend towards relative decline in that of the EU and the US, it is worth discussing his ideas to ‘break the chains of weariness.’ In this light, his view that the western Balkans ‘Is less a homogenous region than a multifaceted network linked to other networks’(p. 121) takes on greater resonance.

Europe must fight back via the EU; otherwise, it is out of the game.

Without new unifying ties, the crisis-ridden western Balkans will remain a region lying in the crosshairs of the great powers and may increasingly become an Achilles' heel for a fractured EU. The EU can only regain its creative power through a radical revision of its strategy towards the western Balkans. Here, the coronavirus crisis may yet prove to be the catalyst leading to the development of such a coherent EU strategy. If the multi-billion euro EU reconstruction programme remains as politically ineffective as the tough accession negotiations stance which has applied over the past two decades, the EU has no future in the Balkans. In particular regard to the growing influence of China and Russia, it must assert itself more aggressively, if necessary via the withdrawal of grants and with other penalties, while never compromising its ideas of democracy, the rule of law, good governance and the social market economy.

The Zagreb Declaration underpinned the commitment from the EU to supporting – via a €3.3bn aid package – the efforts of western Balkans states to tackling the coronavirus and assisting the post-pandemic recovery. The region has an 'unequivocal' commitment to its European perspective. However, it is also clear that the Declaration – made in consultation with western Balkans leaders – proceeds along a two-way street. Here, the starting sentence to point five of the Zagreb Declaration sounds encouragingly fresh but, in order for this to remain credible, it must also be enforced in the future:

The fact that this **support and cooperation goes far beyond what any other partner has provided** to the region deserves public acknowledgement. (Emphasis in original)

Returning finally to the words of Bodo Hombach, the clear condition here should be: 'If you do *this*, we will do *this*.' The heads of government, but also the populations, of western Balkans countries wishing to join the EU must recognise the solidarity of the EU and beware of false friends in China and Russia. If it is otherwise, then you simply have to let them go.

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