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With a plethora of high-level gatherings, summits and strategy papers on the Western Balkans due this year, 2018 has been dubbed as the year in which the EU has rediscovered the Western Balkans. The region has been largely overlooked, as the EU struggled to keep its unity in the face of the poly-crisis it has encountered over the last decade namely; the Eurozone debt crisis, the mass influx of refugees from the conflict-stricken Middle East and lastly the UK's decision to leave the EU. As the EU has turned increasingly inward trying to put its own house into order, enlargement has dropped down the EU's list of priorities. Meanwhile, populism and Euroscepticism have flourished among EU publics as by-products of these crises. While in the Western Balkans, the fading promise of membership perspective has translated into a slowdown in reforms, a considerable regression in the rule of law and fundamental rights and a heightened risk of inter-ethnic tension. The EU's relative negligence has created a vacuum which outside powers such as Russia and China have been vying to exploit.

This situation has alarmed High Representative Mogherini, who in her briefing to EU Foreign Ministers following her very first visit to the region, a year and a half into her position, in March 2017, described the region as the chessboard where the next great power game could be played. Following the completion of the election cycles in leading member states in 2017 and leaving behind a challenging year after the Brexit referendum, the Western Balkans are back under the EU's radar.

Balkan-Friendly Presidencies and European Commission's Western Balkan Strategy Paper

There are various developments which confirm the EU's Balkan comeback. First, the fact that the EU's rotating presidency will be assumed respectively by Bulgaria, Austria and Romania all of which are Member States with strong affinity to and interests in the region, is promising for the Western Balkan countries. Bulgaria, which is currently in the EU's driver's seat, has made the Western Balkans a priority item in its EU presidency programme and hosted the first EU-Western Balkans Summit in 15 years. Austria, which is set to take over from Bulgaria in the second half of the year, has also pledged to facilitate the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU. It is important to note that, although the role of the rotating presidency has been greatly reduced following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty creating a permanent post for the European Council



President, Bulgaria has done a good job in bringing the Western Balkans back on the EU's agenda.

The dangerous trends visible in the region have also led the EU executive to revise its policy concerning the Western Balkans. On 6 February 2018, the European Commission adopted a strategy paper aimed at revitalising the European perspective of the Western Balkans and upgrading its engagement with the region. The strategy, which spells out 2025 as a potential date for the accession of Montenegro and Serbia, – the two “frontrunner” countries with which accession talks are underway- highlights the importance of revitalising the reform momentum in the key areas of rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights and assist the countries in resolving their bilateral disputes. Despite the fact that the strategy paper emphasises the indicative nature of the 2025 perspective, by setting a possible date for accession the Commission has departed from its famous policy of non-committal to accession dates. It is important to note that the 2025 perspective is more ambitious than it seems. Bearing in mind that it took the latest EU member Croatia two years to complete the ratification process of its accession treaty, for the 2025 membership perspective to be realized, Montenegro and Serbia would have until the end of 2022 or early 2023 to complete negotiations in 35 chapters and resolve their outstanding disputes. By setting a target date, the Commission's aim is to leverage the political elites in the Western Balkan countries to undertake the reforms required for membership and to incentivize them to resolve the bilateral disputes left over from the former Yugoslavia.

2018 Enlargement Package and the Macron Effect

Another important event for the Western Balkans as well as Turkey was the adoption on 17 April 2018 of the Enlargement Package consisting of the enlargement strategy and the individual country reports after a year and a half break. As it might be recalled, in November 2016, in an attempt to synchronise the enlargement package with economic reform programs, which is the European Semester equivalent for Western Balkans and Turkey, the Commission changed the calendar for the adoption of the enlargement package from fall to spring. The Commission's objective for doing so was to highlight the importance of the economic criteria for the Western Balkan countries none of which qualify as functioning market economies. The 2018 Enlargement Package was the first enlargement package to be adopted in accordance with the new calendar.

The long-awaited 2018 Enlargement Package was overshadowed by French President Macron's remarks ruling out any future enlargement until the internal reform of the EU was completed. Addressing the MEPs at the European Parliament's plenary session on the very same day, French President Macron, who is seen to be a key figure along with German Chancellor to shape the future of Europe, indicated that no enlargement should



take place before the EU completed its internal reform process. In response to President Macron, European Commission President Juncker warned against the risk that the absence of the prospect of EU accession, could rekindle the tragedy of the 1990s. Macron's remarks favouring deepening over widening were striking as a revelation of the existing dichotomy between the Member States as well as the Commission and the Council over the EU's strategic priorities. That being said, although the likelihood of a return to the dark days of 1990s is an exaggeration, the absence of the EU perspective could play into the hands of outside powers and could strengthen ultra-nationalist and authoritarian tendencies in the region.

In its 2018 Enlargement Package, assessing the level of preparedness of the enlargement countries, the European Commission called for the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia. A candidate since 2014, Albania was given a list comprising five key priorities namely; public administration reform, judicial reform, fight against corruption and organised crime, protection of human rights, on which its readiness to start accession talks would be judged. Acknowledging the progress made in fulfilling the five key priorities especially with the appointment of the vetting institutions which was considered to be a key component of the judicial reform process, the European Commission recommended opening accession talks with Albania.

The other winner from this year's enlargement package was Macedonia, which has been stuck in the EU's waiting room for years due to the "name dispute" with Greece. Leaving behind the latest episode of political crisis, which was dubbed the deepest political crisis since 2001 when the country came to the brink of civil war, thanks to EU mediation, Macedonia has received the most positive assessment from the Commission in years and managed to get an unconditional recommendation for the launch of accession talks. It is important to note that although the Commission has been recommending the launch of accession talks with Skopje since 2009, for the last couple of years it has underlined the conditional nature of its recommendation as a warning for Skopje not to divert from EU values such as the rule of law and democracy.

This year's positive assessment has been possible thanks to the efforts of the incoming government. The government led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, in power since May 2017, made Macedonia's integration with the EU a priority. To this end, Skopje has taken steps to implement the long-overdue reforms and improve relations with neighbouring countries. Last August, a Treaty of Friendship and Good-Neighbourliness was signed with neighbouring Bulgaria which had previously blocked the launch of EU accession talks with the country. The most important development however has been the intensification of the UN-mediated talks aimed at resolving the decades-long name dispute between Skopje and Athens. As known, Athens objects to Macedonia's constitutional name on the grounds that it implies territorial claims in Greece's northern



region of the same name and therefore has been blocking both the country's membership to NATO and the launch of EU accession talks.

The Macedonian government has made concessions by changing the name of the airport and the highway named after Alexander the Great. Both UN envoy Matthew Nimetz and European Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn have confirmed that the talks aimed at resolving the name dispute have entered their last phase, and pointed out that the coming weeks could be crucial for reaching an agreement on the issue. A breakthrough in the name dispute would not only revive the country's integration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions which remains deadlocked due to its northern neighbour's veto, but also send a positive signal to the entire region which could encourage other regional states to resolve their bilateral disputes.

In its assessment on Montenegro, which having opened 30 out of 35 chapters and closed three, is the most advanced country on its path to the EU, the European Commission reiterated its position that the pace of the negotiation process will continue to be determined by the progress achieved in the two "super-chapters" (i.e. Chapter 23 on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Chapter 24 on Justice, Freedom and Security) covering the rule of law. Concerning Serbia, which having opened 12 chapters and closed two, is regarded a frontrunner along with Montenegro, the Commission pointed out to shortcomings regarding the freedom of expression and freedom of the media. On the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, which is one of the two criteria against which the pace of Belgrade's accession negotiations will be determined, the Commission underlined the need for Serbia to implement all the agreements reached in the EU-sponsored Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which not long ago risked being left behind due to successive political crises and its failure to implement the Sejdić-Finci ruling – regarded as a precondition for the entry into force of its Stabilisation and Association Agreement and therefore naturally its application for membership, finally submitted its application for EU membership in February 2016 after the EU revised its conditionality for the country by placing the focus on structural socio-economic reforms called the "Reform Agenda". Bosnia is currently awaiting the Commission's opinion on its EU bid. The entry into force of the coordination mechanism, which would allow the country's different levels of government to be able to speak with one voice on EU-related matters, has been hailed by the Commission. Thanks to the entry into force of the mechanism, Bosnia was able to send coordinated answers to the questionnaire, the Commission is set to use in formulating its opinion on Bosnia's application for EU membership.

However, Bosnia is in risk of facing possibly its biggest political crisis after the general elections scheduled for October 2018, unless the country's squabbling politicians reach a



compromise on amending the electoral framework. In December 2016, the Constitutional Court annulled several parts of the election law and called for it to be amended on the grounds that it undermines the rights of the three constituent peoples to elect their own representatives as enshrined in the country's constitution. Bosnian Croats claim that the election law gives the numerically superior Bosniaks disproportionate power in electing representatives to the House of Representatives. Bosniaks on the other hand fear that such a move could lead to Bosnian Croats forming a new entity. Unless the election law is amended, the country could face its most serious political crisis after the elections in October 2018, which could impact negatively on its EU aspirations.

Kosovo, still not recognised by five member states, continues to conduct its relations with the EU on the basis of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement which entered into force in April 2016. According to the assessment of the Commission, the past year and a half in Kosovo's political life was marked by increased polarisation and fragmentation, culminating to the use of teargas in parliamentary sessions which impaired the adoption of EU-related reforms and prevented building consensus over issues of strategic importance.

Initiatives by a group of 43 parliamentarians to abrogate the law on Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office tasked with investigating crimes committed during and after the Kosovo War, which forms an integral part of EU conditionality vis-à-vis the country, was met with concern. On the issue, the Commission underscored the importance for Kosovo to fully comply with its international obligations.

A major breakthrough during the reporting period, the Commission stated, has been the ratification of the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro. By ratifying the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro, amid the use of teargas in parliamentary sessions, Pristina fulfilled one of the two outstanding criteria for visa liberalisation. Being the only Western Balkan country, whose citizens are devoid of the right to visa-free travel to the EU's border-free Schengen zone, visa liberalisation is a key priority for Kosovan authorities. In order to obtain visa exemption for its citizens, Pristina will now have to improve its track record in fighting organised crime and corruption.

Pointing to the early level of preparedness concerning the fight against organised crime and corruption, and judicial reform, the Commission underscored the need for Kosovo to undertake further efforts to contribute to the establishment of circumstances conducive to the full normalisation of relations with Belgrade, as it did with Serbia.



EU-Western Balkans Summit: Nothing More than a Photo Opportunity

The next important event of the year for the WB6 was the EU-Western Balkans Summit in the Bulgarian capital. On 17 May 2018, leaders of EU28 (except Spain) and their Western Balkan counterparts gathered in the Bulgarian capital for the much-anticipated EU-Western Balkans Summit. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia was important for two reasons. Not only was it the most important event in the calendar of the Bulgarian EU Presidency, which in its first ever presidency programme, promised to conduct a truly “Balkan Presidency” by putting the Western Balkans back on the agenda of the EU, but it was also the first of its kind since the historic 2003 Thessaloniki Summit where the promise of EU membership was extended to the region for the very first time.

The idea of convening a special summit focused on the Western Balkans came up in the letter of intent presented by EC President Juncker following his 2017 State of the Union address in the European Parliament, where in a U-turn from his previous stance, he announced that the post-Brexit EU would be more crowded than 27 members. These remarks marked a departure from Juncker’s previous stance closing the door to further enlargement during his Commission’s time in office.

Contrary to expectations, the EU-Western Balkans Summit failed to be the “Thessaloniki II” moment the Western Balkan countries were looking forward to. The reason why the summit did not go beyond being a photo opportunity for Western Balkan and EU leaders had to do with the fact that enlargement was excluded from the agenda of the summit. While there was reference to neither “enlargement” nor “accession” in the summit programme, EU leaders decided to focus on practical issues such as increasing connectivity and boosting cooperation for dealing with joint security challenges.

Moreover, the summit was overshadowed by Spain’s boycott over Kosovo’s participation. Madrid’s level of participation in the summit remained a mystery until the very last minute. Being among the five non-recognizers, Spain’s sensitivity on Kosovo has considerably increased following last year’s controversial independence referendum in Catalonia. Having previously expressed his reservations about participating, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy did not attend the summit, and instead Spain was represented in Sofia by its permanent representative to the EU.

The Sofia Declaration, which was endorsed at the end of the summit, reiterated the EU’s unequivocal support for the European perspective of the region and underlined the primacy of the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights which constitute the backbone of EU conditionality in the region. As such, the document was criticised for falling behind expectations namely due to its overemphasis on the accession criteria while remaining silent on the 2025 membership perspective put forward by the Commission in its Western Balkans Strategy.



In Sofia, there was optimism over a possible breakthrough in the talks between Athens and Skopje over the “name issue”. Meeting in the margins of the summit, Greek Prime Minister Tsipras and Macedonian Premier Zaev reported progress in the name talks.

Beyond Sofia...

The prospects for the region’s integration with the EU will continue to be determined by the progress the political elites make in undertaking the required reforms and addressing outstanding disputes, as well as the climate within the EU. The positive message the region needs could come from the UN-sponsored name talks between Skopje and Athens. Should an agreement on the name dispute be possible before the upcoming European Council meeting scheduled for 28 June 2018, in which EU leaders will deliver their verdict on Commission’s recommendations in the 2018 Enlargement Package, Macedonia could get a greenlight for starting accession talks.

The good news from the Sofia Summit is that Western Balkan leaders will not have to wait another 15 years for their next big get together with their EU counterparts. As stated in the Sofia Declaration, the next EU-Western Balkans Summit is set to take place in 2020 and will be hosted by the latest EU member state, Croatia - a Western Balkan country itself.

The next stop after Sofia for the Western Balkan countries is London. On 10 July 2018, the leaders of the WB6 will come together with their counterparts from member states with affinity to the Western Balkans in London for the fifth and final summit within the framework of the Berlin Process- a brainchild of German Chancellor Merkel’s. The fact that the summit will be hosted by the UK is symbolic of the country’s willingness to continue its stabilising role and involvement in the region even after leaving the EU.

With many high-level gatherings, summits and a strategy paper, the EU is clearly making an opening to the Western Balkans. Although all of these are welcome developments, they will fail to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU unless a credible membership perspective supported by concrete steps is extended to the region. It is important to note that the final decision concerning enlargement will be made in Member State capitals, and more precisely in Paris and Berlin. Therefore, the upcoming talks between Merkel and Macron on Eurozone reform and the way in which the reform of the EU will play out will have a huge impact on the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries.

