

Club of Three Webinar 09 June 2021

The Balkans in an age of renewed great power competition: can the EU still be a stabilising force?

Meeting summary

In June, the Club of Three held an online discussion taking stock of the current state of play in the Balkans, with Carl Bildt (Co-Chair, European Council on Foreign Relations); Majlinda Bregu (Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council), and Tim Judah (Balkans Correspondent, The Economist) as main speakers. It was chaired by Milica Delevic, Director for Governance and Political Affairs at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The past decade or so had been characterised by a complete lack of progress in the EU's enlargement process. At the same time, concerns about unresolved political tensions in the Western Balkans, challenges in the rule of law area and persistent economic fragility had led to increasing pessimism about the region's integration into the EU.

Was this the end of the road for efforts by the EU to present itself as the main problem-solver in the region, and was there still any hope that it could provide the framework required for them to achieve stability and prosperity?

On the EU's side, there had been fading interest in the Balkans for some time. In Brussels, the Juncker Commission had famously announced that there would be no new membership during its five-year tenure. And among Member States, France had made clear it did not want to rush into another round of new accessions, blocking the opening of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 together with Denmark and the Netherlands, and demanding instead a reform of the enlargement process. Even the UK, which had been heavily involved in the Balkans over the years and was still perceived in some ways as a champion for the region, had made no mention of the Balkans in its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. All of this had contributed to sending a negative signal to accession candidates in the Balkans. As one of the Club of Three participants put it during the discussion, the region was seen by many in Western Europe as "yesterday's news".

However, the Covid pandemic had provided a new focus on the region by deepening vulnerabilities in Western Balkan countries. It also further increased the presence of other geopolitical players, mainly through vaccine diplomacy.

In the EU, there was a growing realisation that more needed to be done to support the Balkans in this new geopolitical context. EU shipments of Covid vaccines to the six Western Balkan countries announced in April 2021, which followed shipments sent by China and Russia, were meant to demonstrate its commitment to the region. However, a British participant stressed that concerns over increasing foreign interference in the region were somewhat over-exaggerated. Russia, China and Turkey were not new regional players. They had been involved in the Balkans for a long time. Far from being subjected to their influence, countries like Serbia had in fact used this renewed great power competition to their advantage in order to become one of the leading European countries in terms of vaccination coverage.

On the other end, other countries like Montenegro were in desperate need of geopolitical and economic help. Despite the hard line pursued by its new government, a Serbian participant point out that Montenegro would never leave NATO. His understanding was that it was trying to carve out its own position between Belgrade and the former regime of Milo Đukanović. Given the size of its debt vis-à-vis China, supporting Montenegro financially would require huge efforts on the EU's side. This was all the more necessary in that the country was seen as a test case for possible backsliding in the region.

Despite growing disillusion vis-à-vis the EU accession process, another participant from the region said that a high percentage of the population still supported it and saw the EU as their final destination. But more and more people also thought that regional cooperation would improve their lives faster. The implementation of 'green lane' border crossings to ensure the uninterrupted trade of essential goods and medicine during the pandemic had shown that Western Balkan countries could work together very effectively. The launch of the Common Regional Market in November 2020 was also an important step towards deeper regional economic integration. The hope was that it would eventually be connected to the EU market. If EU accession was going to take a while, the EU and Western Balkans could at least focus on concrete measures like these to help boost the region's economic development in the meantime.

The EU attitude towards the Western Balkans also needed to change. The region's socio-economic situation had vastly improved over the past 20 years. One of the participants noted that Albania's GDP had increased by 458% since 1990, and that a city like Tirana was today almost unrecognisable from what it was then. The gap with Western Europe had narrowed. However, the region

continued to be seen as an area of lawlessness and corruption, which some participants argued was quite unfair as this perception tended to ignore positive developments when they had been occurring. Given that some of its Member States on its eastern flank were defaulting on the rule of law, some felt that the EU was no longer in a position to insist so imperatively on compliance with such standards vis-à-vis accession countries.

In order to move forward, bilateral issues also had to be left out of accession talks. Many agreed that Bulgaria for instance should not have been allowed to veto a decision to open EU accession talks with North Macedonia in November 2020 because of a separate dispute of historical nature between the two countries. This had indirectly impacted Albania which is part of the same accession package. Bilateral issues, particularly historical ones, were abundant in the Balkans and could seriously derail an already lengthy and complicated EU accession process, one of the participants pointed out. However, the green lanes' success story had shown that Balkan countries were able to put aside these bilateral issues in order to cooperate and show solidarity during a crisis.

On the issue of border changes in the Western Balkans, the view was that land swaps between countries would be a dangerous move and in that sense could not be a possible way forward to solve some of the ethical and historical issues that persisted in the region. Such proposals were today definitely not on the table, one of the participants noted. This was reflected in the criticism that had followed the release of the so-called Slovenian non-paper in April 2021.