

The European Union and the Western Balkans in 2019

**Forecast for 2019 in the European Union and the
Western Balkans**



The European Union and the Western Balkans in 2019¹

*Written by Nikola Burazer and Igor Bandović,
with contribution of Aleksandar Ivković and Nemanja Todorović Štiplija.*

The past year was often marked as a “Year of Hope” for the Western Balkans when it comes to Euro-Atlantic integration. Pessimism from 2016 and the period of Brexit and Donald Trump’s election was followed by careful optimism at the end of 2017, when, after a series of defeats of Eurosceptic forces in the EU in 2017, a new encouragement was given to Western Balkan countries. This happened first through Juncker’s presentation of 2025 as a possible accession date, and then through the announcement of important events in 2018, including the publication of the European Commission’s Strategy for the Western Balkans in February 2018 and EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in May 2018, which was to be the first event of this kind since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit.

However, the developments in 2018 have, in large part, undermined this optimism. The internal problems of the European Union, as well as the evident lack of enthusiasm for the enlargement in the Western Balkans, have made the forecast much darker than just a year ago. The careful optimism from the beginning of last year has again been overtaken by pessimism.

At the end of 2018, an event titled “European Union and the Western Balkans in 2019”, in which experts from the region and the EU formulated their predictions for the next year, both for the Western Balkans and the EU, took place in Belgrade. This event, organised by the European Fund for the Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and European Western Balkans, took place behind closed doors, and the public was able to hear some of its conclusions in a public discussion which took place on the same day. The predictions formulated on this occasion are well aligned with the presented pessimistic view.

¹ *This analysis is a result of the forecasting event “EU and Western Balkans in 2019”, organized on 14 December 2018 in Belgrade by the European Fund for the Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and European Western Balkans.*

Western Balkans out of EU's focus, the appointment of a new Commissioner for enlargement of great importance

The event that will mark this year in the EU will undoubtedly be the elections for the European Parliament, which will take place at the end of May. Having in mind the trends of the past several years, the elections will probably see strengthening of the more radical options in Europe and the weakening of big European parties. Therefore, it seems likely that the three biggest political groups – European People's Party (EPP), Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Liberals (ALDE), will form a new coalition, and divide the positions in the future European Commission amongst themselves.

Even though some more extreme MEPs are expected to become vocal, the populists are not expected to gain much more seats than they currently control. The strength of some of their formal or informal leaders, such as Stephen Bannon and Yannis Varoufakis, is perhaps overestimated. Super-large coalition is nevertheless going to be seen as disingenuous by the voters because of the ideological differences. Social fractures, as well as inner-party divisions such as those in EPP, will not be resolved, even though this won't be reflected in the Parliament to a larger extent. The biggest problems, however, will arise not between political groups, but rather between EU and its member states.

Voter participation is not expected to change significantly and will remain relatively low, as the voters are not enthusiastic and do not see the institutions as their own. There is no real initiative, the discussions on reforms are often shallow, and therefore many votes cast in European elections are actually protest ones, concentrated on national rather than European issues.

Regardless of the elections, the issues of security, foreign affairs, rule of law and energy (with the adoption of the new Agreement on energy supply with Ukraine on the horizon) will continue to dominate the agenda of EU officials in 2019, while the number one concern of the average voter will still be the threat of terrorism.

The inclusion and strengthening of the extreme movements won't have a big influence on the possibility of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, given the fact that the big groups are those which are without a clear will for enlargement. It is doubtful that Manfred Weber will, in fact, become the new Commission's President, as it is uncertain if the *Spitzenkandidat* process will survive. The next President is nevertheless expected to be more conservative and cautious, since the next formation of the European Parliament will probably result in more instability. It is not without importance that the composition of the new European Commission will, for the first time, probably include Eurosceptics.

The organisation of the new Commission will be important for the Western Balkans, especially the question of who will succeed Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn, the departing Austrian conservative. The question is how the new Directorate for Enlargement Negotiations will look like, whether it will be merged or separated from Neighbourhood Policy, as well as which of these areas will be prioritized in the work of these institutions.

It can be expected that the EU will look at the Western Balkans from a security perspective and that enlargement will be pushed in the background by Brexit, Ukraine crisis and the issue of rule of law within the EU itself. The Berlin Process, which during the previous years has been an important mechanism of EU's engagement in the region, will probably have a diminished role. The concept of a multi-speed Europe may or may not be better for the region, but it also does not matter since nobody is probably going to bring up the issue of treaty changes, which could be politically costly.

Further fall of democracy in the Western Balkans expected, EU can improve the situation, but also do a lot of damage

The present trends in the Western Balkans, such as the rise of authoritarianism, mass emigration and depopulation, will probably continue. The only question is whether the fall of democracy in the countries of the region will be drastic, which is the case with Serbia, or more gradual, as in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The social movements alone will not be enough, because a legitimate change of power can only come through voting.

Emigration won't be stopped, but the important challenge of the countries in the region will remain how to use this process to reap its underestimated benefits, such as the transfer of knowledge, technology and remittances, while at the same time working to establish the environment which will encourage people to return in greater numbers.

The optimism regarding the June 2019 European Council meeting is low. There is no agreement on the enlargement package, EU leaders such as Macron remain unsupportive of enlargement, and without a comprehensive strategy, the region is left with a series of small steps, which is not enough. Other noteworthy moments of 2019 will be the address of the next President of the European Commission and Croatia's posturing before its first EU Presidency.

EU's influence on regional developments when it comes to democracy cannot be expected, as the enlargement process does not go hand in hand with democratic

transformation any longer and the EU initiatives in the region in the past several years have largely been unsuccessful. European integration even has a tendency to strengthen the executive branch at the expense of the legislative one. European Union can either benefit the Western Balkans to a certain extent by influencing and stopping this trend or do a lot of damage by following the sole interest of short-term stability.

Two biggest issues in the region in 2019 concern bilateral disputes, the implementation of Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece and reaching the agreement on comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Both of these processes represent significant issues for the whole region, and especially for its European perspective.

Macedonia's NATO membership on the horizon, agreement between Serbia and Kosovo probably not before 2020

It can be expected that the implementation of the Prespa Agreement goes down smoothly, although there are some degrees of concern in both countries. However, despite the implementation of the Prespa Agreement being clearly connected to the EU membership perspective of Macedonia and the opening of the first chapters in 2019, it is expected that Macedonia's accession to NATO this year or in 2020 is far more likely and would represent the most tangible result of the reaching of the agreement.

The implementation of the Prespa Agreement will be influenced by regional developments. If the Serbia-Kosovo normalisation process completely fails, EU will put further weight behind Greece-Macedonia deal, because it is important that the region has its success story.

There is much more pessimism with regards to Serbia-Kosovo relations. It is not very likely that a legally binding agreement will be reached during this Commission's mandate, which means that the solution of this issue probably won't come before 2020. There are fears that the existing crisis in Belgrade-Pristina relations was caused with the aim of legitimising border change, which could have different negative effects, including the escalation of violence.

There are a lot of questions and doubts when it comes to the expected agreement on comprehensive normalisation of relations. It is not quite clear which form the agreement could take, and also whether it would be followed by a referendum in both Serbia and Kosovo, as well as whether it would be a final agreement, or just another step in negotiations that would then continue further.

Since the aim of comprehensive normalisation of relations is opening the EU path for both Serbia and Kosovo, it is also unclear in which way Kosovo's UN membership and non-recognition from the remaining five members of the Union will be dealt with, as some EU and UN Security Council member states have their own reasons for not recognizing Kosovo's independence.

Both societies face polarization in relation to the issue of normalization, and the undermining of democratic standards, especially in the areas of elections, calls the legitimacy of governments and processes led by them into question. Political instability in both societies can be expected, especially in Kosovo, where a noticeable weakness of the current government is still present and where extraordinary elections seem probable.



Centre for Contemporary Politics

The **Centre for Contemporary Politics** is a think tank from Belgrade, founded in 2012. The main goals of the organisation are development and promotion of democracy, the support for the EU integration process and the promotion of European values, as well as regional stability and cooperation.

The Centre for Contemporary Politics is a founder of the ***European Western Balkans*** web portal, a regional web portal in English language, on European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, through which it realises its media projects.

European Fund for the Balkans

European Fund for the Balkans

The **European Fund for the Balkans** is a joint initiative of European foundations that envisions, runs and supports initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's emerging challenges.

The up-to-date programme strategy is based on three overarching areas – Capacity Development, Policy Development and Regional Cooperation - and channelled via flagship programmes and selected projects, complemented with a set of actions arising from EFB's regional identity as a relevant player in its fields of focus.

Their synergetic effects are focussed on continuous "Europeanisation" of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession, through merging of the region's social capacity building with policy platform development, and a culture of regional cooperation.