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SPECIAL EDITION – SERIES OF ESPRESSO INSIGHTS

European
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2020 has been a year to remember, especially in Kosovo. In this Espresso.Insights series, GLPS recaps and analyses the main events in the fields of politics, law and society that have affected the country this year and identifies the challenges ahead of 2021. In part 4, Alejandro Esteso Pérez discusses this year's main events regarding Kosovo's European integration path.

#KOSOVOin2020: The COVID-19 pandemic

By: Alejandro Esteso Perez – International Research Fellow at GLPS

Among the six Western Balkan non-EU countries (WB6), Kosovo currently stands last in the line towards European Union (EU) membership. It holds the status of potential candidate, alongside Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the inauguration of Kosovo's new government in the beginning of 2020 hinted towards the consolidation of a reform-oriented political leadership, this year's unexpected twists have made Kosovo fall short in its progress.

Off to a good start...

2020 started off with the inauguration of Croatia as the holder of the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU. For six months, Zagreb would steer the EU's policy agenda while driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation and ensuring the cooperation among Member States. As the newest EU country, Croatia opted for a programme where relations with the Western Balkans in the framework of the EU's enlargement strategy would constitute one of the central priorities. The year was off to a good start.

The European Commission (EC) announced in early February the establishment of a new enlargement methodology aimed at rendering the integration process more credible, dynamic, predictable, and political. This tool was devised as a cosmetic adjustment in an attempt to circumvent the persistent opposition of France who, alongside the Netherlands and Denmark, had persistently conveyed scepticism towards the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. While France believed that the EU had to reform itself before moving on to accept any new members, the Netherlands and Denmark were reluctant that Albania had met all the reform benchmarks. As the European Council (EUCO) approved in March the implementation of this new methodology, the veto was subsequently dropped. North Macedonia and Albania were given green light to start accession negotiations.

In Kosovo, whose pace of reform and alignment had hitherto been very modest, this breakthrough contributed to set novel scenery. The experimental nature of the new methodology [could be interpreted as a relative advantage for Kosovo](#), since it would allow for the country to observe and witness the strategy's effectiveness ahead of time—thus being able to track down and anticipate potential challenges and ambiguities in the process.

...until the pandemic struck

As this deadlock was broken, the enlargement process seemed to be back on track after a difficult two-year period of stagnation. However, an uninvited guest was about to make its appearance: COVID-19. The eruption of the pandemic in early March took the EU and its members by storm, forcing the closure of borders and airspace, bringing about strict lockdowns and curfews and, by and large, wreaking social and economic havoc.

The enlargement agenda was no less affected by COVID-19. In May, the EU Member States and the WB6 geared up for what would be the second EU-WB6 high-level summit in two years. It was originally scheduled for the 7th of May in Zagreb, but it ended up adopting an online format given the persistence of the pandemic and was finally held via videoconference on the 6th of May. In the framework of the meeting, Kosovo saw several positive breakthroughs: first, the attendance of Spain, who had refused—until that summit—to sit at the table with representatives from Prishtina; second, the remarkable allocation to Kosovo of €100 million in financial assistance to counter the effects of the pandemic. [In return, however, the idea of enlargement had visibly lost political traction.](#)

During the summer, Kosovo's turbulent government transition was followed by the decision of the incoming administration to unequivocally revoke the 100-percent tariffs over products and goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This breakthrough was welcomed by EU institutions as an important step for Kosovo to resume its dialogue with Belgrade, and to advance in its European integration path. Shortly thereafter, in July, Germany was inaugurated as the new holder of the rotating presidency of the Council, increasing Kosovo's hopes for major political gains—including the long-awaited decision for visa liberalization. [High expectations notwithstanding, this proved to be no more than an illusion given the extraordinary attention that Berlin would direct towards the fight against COVID-19.](#) This, of course, came to the further detriment of the enlargement agenda.

In October, the EC launched the much-awaited 2020 Enlargement Package, including Kosovo's individual Country Report. [The Report painted a very bleak picture of Kosovo's reform process,](#) which had inevitably been drawn to a halt in the wake of a tumultuous political year. This led to a very poor parliamentary performance, where norm drafting and implementation in the realms of corruption, public administration and the judiciary, among many others, fell short.

Towards the end of the year, Kosovo's government announced the unexpected removal of the Ministry of European Integration—which had headed the country's European integration process since 2010—from the ministerial structure. This decision came after a series of political pledges in support of a government downsizing, which had already seen the overall number of ministries go down from 21 to 15, and then up to 16, throughout 2020. Upon the ashes of the Ministry of European Integration, the executive presented in November a renewed (but fragile) institutional arrangement for Kosovo to advance in its accession process.

2021, a hard nut to crack

Kosovo is expected to endure 2021 in an overtly unprecedented way, since the political, social and economic uncertainty generated in the wake of COVID-19 is far from diminishing. The country is yet to deliver on the reforms envisaged in its EU-oriented policy tools, namely the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and European Reform Agenda (ERA) II. Reforms in the framework of these strategies will expectedly drag on until the end of 2021—if not later—before Kosovo can see tangible progress in its way towards full candidate status.

In this context, the absence of a strong and consolidated institutional mandate within the government's ministerial line up, traditionally embodied in the vanished Ministry of European Integration, provides a very weak basis for Kosovo to tackle the challenges ahead in a diligent and timely manner. Expectedly, thus, the effectiveness of the country's new European integration structure will be put to the test in 2021.

Espresso.Insights

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