

THE ZAGREB SUMMIT: One step forward, two steps back

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THE ZAGREB SUMMIT: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

BACKGROUND

The leaders of the 27 European Union (EU) Member States and the six non-EU countries in the Western Balkan region (WB6) gathered on the 6th of May 2020 for what would be the second EU-WB6 high-level meeting in three years. Held at the behest and under the auspices of Croatia, the Zagreb Summit brought together –albeit via videoconference– EU representatives and enlargement hopefuls amid the dire outbreak of COVID-19 that is, to this day, wreaking political, economic and social havoc around the world. The meeting was greeted with both prudent expectation and a degree of scepticism, mostly stemming from the modest results yielded at previous such encounters. A few weeks after the summit, how tangible are its outcomes and what is there left?

This policy note will track the short history of EU-Western Balkan summits and provide the backdrop against which Croatia convened a new meeting in 2020 as part of its WB6-inclusive agenda. It will then go on to examine the successes and shortcomings of the Zagreb Summit in the context of the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and will furthermore evaluate the extent to which the notion of enlargement is running out of steam. Last, it will engage in a critical discussion on the future of EU-WB6 relations in the wake of COVID-19, on the EU's inconclusive role in the region against major world powers –with a special focus on

Kosovo–, and on the prospects for successful potential summits in the future.

THE ROAD TO ZAGREB

Political relations between the EU and the countries in the Western Balkans have traditionally been dynamic and lively. While the European Commission (EC) has demonstrated thorough willingness to engage with the region, and while informal diplomatic encounters between EU Member States and Western Balkan leaders have been manifold and substantively consistent throughout the years, reasonably few high-level initiatives have emerged in order to bring the two partners closer together.

The European perspective for the countries in the Western Balkan region crystallized for the first time at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki.¹ The erstwhile potential candidates² adopted and pledged their commitment to the implementation of the so-called Thessaloniki Agenda which foresaw, among other novelties, the inauguration of community programmes, increased mobilization of economic resources and cooperation with the EU in some areas of foreign and security policy.³ While 2003 has been historically considered a turning point in the EU-Western Balkans partnership, a previous European Council (EUCO) at Santa Maria da Feira⁴ in Portugal and a summit in Zagreb⁵ –both held in 2000– likewise paved the way to consolidating the European perspective of the region.

¹ 2003. The Thessaloniki Summit: a milestone in the European Union's relations with the Western Balkans. *European Commission*, [online] 18 June. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_03_860> [Accessed 13 May 2020].

² The following countries were represented at this summit: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro. On behalf of Kosovo attended the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General in Kosovo.

³ ME4EU EU4ME. Thessaloniki Agenda. [online] Available at: <<https://www.eu.me/en/2014-11-19-11-15-23/thessaloniki-agenda>> [Accessed 13 May 2020].

⁴ European Parliament, 2000. *Santa Maria da Feira European Council. Conclusions of the Presidency*. Brussels.

⁵ Vinci, A., 2000. EU and Balkan leaders hold key summit. *CNN*, [online] 24 November. Available at: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/europe/11/23/balkan.summit/index.html>> [Accessed 13 May 2020].

The next such initiative did not take place until 2018 when, at the behest of Bulgaria –which held the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU (hereinafter, the Council) and whose outspoken support towards the Western Balkan region’s integration stood as one of its mandate’s steering goals–, an EU-Western Balkans Summit was convened in Sofia. Fifteen years had elapsed since the Thessaloniki Summit and, by then, Croatia had already become an EU Member State, downsizing the list and thus bringing about the coining of the WB6 (Western Balkan Six) formula used today: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Despite Bulgaria’s commitment to reinvigorate the momentum lost between the EU and the WB6, the outcome of the 2018 Sofia Summit was received with disappointment. Genuine commitment to integrating the WB6 in the short or medium run was shared by only a handful of Member States, with the so-called *enlargement fatigue* acting as a doctrine for many others – in whose plans, it was claimed, was to discretely torpedo the summit.⁶ As a result, the meeting’s final text, the Sofia Declaration, contained no mention of EU enlargement or full-fledged membership for the WB6.⁷

Throughout the summit, the WB6 were referred to as partners rather than as States – given the reservations of some delegations regarding Kosovo’s independence.⁸ Out of the five EU Member States that do not recognize Kosovo as an independent country –Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain– it is arguably the latter that has traditionally acted as its

strongest opponent. Owing to fears of recognition through the back door, Spanish representatives have strictly avoided sharing a common space with Kosovan authorities at international gatherings. In line with this policy, the then Spanish Head of Government, Mariano Rajoy, boycotted the summit and was absent from the meeting as a sign of protest over Kosovo’s presence,⁹ a move that revealed an incoherent and uncoordinated response to the detriment of a unified, EU-wide stance.

In 2020, two converging factors were decisive for successfully convening a new EU-Western Balkans Summit. Firstly, **the EC’s thrust for serious engagement with the WB6**. At the presentation of the EU’s new enlargement methodology in early February this year, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Olivér Várhelyi, hinted at the possibility of holding a yearly WB6-themed conference. In the Commissioner’s words, “we would like the leaders of the European Union to have at least an annual debate about the progress that these countries are making; this could be based on the Zagreb Summit.”¹⁰ The EC’s commitment with the WB6 has consistently proved evident and more driving than that of the Member States. The second decisive factor was **Croatia’s role as president of the Council**, which pushed for an agenda particularly inclusive of the WB6.

CROATIA’S PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL

On the 1st of January 2020, Croatia became the bearer of the rotating presidency of the Council for a six-month term. This was a landmark event for a country which, after 7

⁶ García Martínez, F. J., 2018. Sofia Summit: straight ahead through an old road. *GLPS Policy Note*, 5. Prishtina: Group for Legal and Political Studies.

⁷ 2018. Sofia Declaration, 17 May 2018.

⁸ Rexha, A., 2019. An analysis of the European Enlargement Policy through years: the case of Western Balkans. *Iliria International Review* 9(2), 233-252.

⁹ Rojo, A., 2018. Rajoy no estará en la cumbre de Sofía por la presencia de Kosovo. *La Razón*, [online] 16 May.

Available at: <<https://www.larazon.es/espana/rajoy-no-estara-en-la-cumbre-de-sofia-por-la-presencia-de-kosovo-BM18365455/>> [Accessed 11 May 2020].

¹⁰ 2020. Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press conference on the revised enlargement methodology. *European Commission* [online] 5 February. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208> [Accessed 5 May 2020].

years of full-fledged membership, would be entrusted the duty of “driving forward the Council’s work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, orderly legislative processes and cooperation among Member States [...] as an honest and neutral broker.”¹¹

Croatia assumed the helm of the Council at a particularly tempestuous time for the EU, with Brexit hanging unfinished and in the aftermath of a prolonged enlargement ache for Albania and North Macedonia. Aware of the challenges ahead, Zagreb’s six-month presidency was bound to shape up as a true litmus test for its aspirations and ambitions as the youngest EU Member State. In the words of Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, “[u]nseen economic development, climate change, increased migration, dissemination of disinformation and growing populism are some of the challenges of today’s world to which citizens are expecting answers, and with good reason.”¹²

Under the overarching motto “A strong Europe in a world of challenges”, as per its programme, Croatia’s principles for the first six months of 2020 would boil down to four: a Europe that **develops**, a Europe that **connects**, a Europe that **protects** and an **influential** Europe. In practical terms, some of the priorities of the mandate would be to reach an agreement on the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), to establish a renewed partnership with post-Brexit United Kingdom and to ensure stability along the EU’s external borders.¹³ However, one of the

foremost expected breakthroughs would be placing the issue of enlargement in the spotlight as a confirmation of the WB6’s European perspective. These efforts would include the launching of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the promotion of progress in Montenegro and Serbia –the two WB6 frontrunners on the road to accession– and the further monitoring of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as potential candidates. The celebration of an informal EU-WB6 Summit in Zagreb was likewise envisaged for May.

Croatia’s six-month term at the helm started off amid the United Kingdom’s EU demise in late January and oversaw the Member States’ green light to launching accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia at the EUCO in March. However, barely halfway into the mandate, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the EU and took its members by storm, forcing the closure of borders and airspace, bringing about strict lockdowns and curfews and, by and large, wreaking social havoc. All informal meetings bound to take place in Croatia were postponed in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic¹⁴ and the Council presidency activated the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism in order to better coordinate the EU’s response to the crisis.¹⁵ Added to the disruptive repercussions of the virus, on the 22nd of March, Zagreb was hit by a 5.3-magnitude earthquake that left one dead and almost 30 injured, alongside sizable material damage.¹⁶

¹¹ 2020. The Presidency of the Council of the EU. *Council of the European Union*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/presidency-council-eu/>> [Accessed 6 May 2020].

¹² 2020. *Programme of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union*, p. 4.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Öztürk, T., 2020. COVID-19: Croatia postpones all EU informal meetings. AA, [online] 8 April. Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/covid-19-croatia-postpones-all-eu-informal-meetings/1797492>> [Accessed 11 May 2020].

¹⁵ 2020. COVID-19 outbreak: the presidency steps up EU response by triggering full activation mode of IPCR. *Council of the European Union*, [online] 2 March. Available at: <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/02/covid-19-outbreak-the-presidency-steps-up-eu-response-by-triggering-full-activation-mode-of-ipcr/>> [Accessed 11 May 2020].

¹⁶ Walker, S., 2020. Zagreb hit by earthquake while in coronavirus lockdown. *The Guardian*, [online] 22 March. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/cr>

The 2020 EU-WB6 Summit, the second of this kind since 2018, was originally scheduled for the 7th of May in the Croatian capital. It aimed to bring together both EU and WB6 representatives for the first time since Sofia – however, it was announced that it would be deferred to a later date, possibly in June.¹⁷ A few weeks later, with no near end of the pandemic in sight, the summit adopted an online format and was finally held via videoconference on the 6th of May.¹⁸

HIGH STAKES AND AN UNDERWHELMING SUMMIT

Originally envisioned as an opportunity devoted “to the enlargement policy and to achieving further progress by candidate and potential candidate countries”¹⁹, the objectives of the Zagreb Summit were shattered by the COVID-19 outbreak. The agenda was thus adjusted and ran along three segments: **responses to the health crisis and recovery plan**, the **European perspective of the region** and the **WB6’s commitment to reforms**.

The expectations for the summit were high. Albeit held online, Zagreb was the first EU-WB6 meeting with a new enlargement methodology up and running, as well as the first encounter since green light had been given to Albania and North Macedonia to launch accession talks after months of vetoes. The disappointing aftermath of the Sofia Summit had set a discouraging precedent, but Zagreb was bound to be enveloped in a different mood – not least due to the exceptional circumstances facing the whole continent.

[oatia-earthquake-causes-widespread-damage-zagreb](#)
[Accessed 6 May 2020].

¹⁷ 2020. EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb postponed, new date possible in June. *European Western Balkans*, [online] 8 April. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/08/eu-western-balkans-summit-in-zagreb-postponed-new-date-possible-in-june/> [Accessed 6 May 2020].

¹⁸ 2020. Zagreb Summit of EU and 6 Balkan countries to be held online on 6 May. *Jutarnji List*, [online] 24 April. Available at: <https://euractiv.jutarnji.hr/en/politics-and-society/expansion/zagreb-summit-of-eu-and-6->

Representatives from the Member States, the WB6 and the EU itself were present at the event, including EUCO President Charles Michel, who chaired the session, EC President Ursula von der Leyen, French President Emmanuel Macron, Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Moreover, one of the most noteworthy attendees was Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose presence remained a conundrum until the last minute. In contrast to the boycott of 2018, Spain would take part in the meeting alongside Kosovo on this occasion, provided that no national symbols –namely flags or coats of arms– would be displayed during the session. Likewise, country representatives would not be addressed by their positions, but by their name²⁰²¹

The main outputs of the summit, as reflected in the Zagreb Declaration, focused primarily on the measures to **counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic**, including a joint response between the EU and the WB6. A €3.3 billion assistance package would be allocated to the benefit of the region, alongside a post-pandemic recovery plan worth over €1.5 billion from the European Investment Bank (EIB).²² The EU leaders reiterated their support to the **European perspective of the WB6** and major priority policy areas were raised, such as the security sector, the fight against terrorism and extremism, countering corruption, human trafficking and money laundering, emphasizing the importance of tackling them collectively. However, they failed to incorporate the terms *enlargement* or

[balkan-countries-to-be-held-online-on-6-may/10242217/](#)> [Accessed 6 May 2020].

¹⁹ 2020. *Programme of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union*, p. 8.

²¹ Villarejo, E., 2020. Sánchez, en una reunión con Kosovo sin banderas ni símbolos. *ABC*, [online] 6 May. Available at: https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-sanchez-reunion-kosovo-sin-banderas-simbolos-202005060813_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F [Accessed 11 May 2020].

²² 2020. Zagreb Declaration, 6 May 2020.

membership in the final text of the Declaration; similarly, no mention was made of the launch of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The document ultimately highlighted the significance of the **WB6's commitment to reforms** and the necessity to progress "towards full alignment with EU foreign policy positions"²³.

PANDEMIC FIRST AND COSMETIC ENGAGEMENT: THE WB6'S FUTURE AFTER ZAGREB

The COVID-19 crisis has shaken the foundations of the global order, with Western Europe being one of the main epicentres of the pandemic in the world. It is not a daring claim that the devastating effects of the virus are likely to redefine not only the main political priorities within the EU itself, but also the relationship between the EU and the WB6 for the years to come. Against this extraordinary backdrop, the Zagreb Summit has constituted yet another paving stone in the long road towards the WB6's full-fledged EU membership, and its outcome has arguably disappointed many.

The modest results yielded after the 2018 Sofia Summit were discouraging, and Croatia's initiative to reinvigorate the EU-WB6 dialogue after nearly two decades of rusty dynamics was viewed both hopefully and sceptically. While it was expected that two summits in three years would give a fresh impetus to the enlargement process, little seems to have changed.

In the months and probably years to come, the COVID-19 crisis is certainly expected to drive Europe's political, economic, social and environmental agendas – something that was not overlooked at the summit. The WB6's prospects for further integration have, simply, been overshadowed by the global health emergency and

enlargement was dropped from the list of priorities, as have countless other issues. Even though EU institutions, imaginably spearheaded by the EC, will attempt to convey the perception that integration of the WB6 into the European club is being worked upon with the same vigour, this will in all likelihood be far from the case.

Amid an uncertain setting where the EU will strive to recover from COVID-19, enlargement will only very rarely be on the political agenda. The EC's decision to postpone until October the publication of the annual Enlargement Package, traditionally published in the spring, is a recent proof of this. This move, although seemingly insignificant, proves that workforce and resources are being redirected towards efforts to counter the effects of the pandemic, a scenario that does not seem bound to change anytime in the foreseeable future.²⁴ This diversion of means and capital will, furthermore, add to the structural doctrine of enlargement fatigue advocated by several Member States – to the detriment of the WB6.²⁵ In the light of both fewer resources and a lack of political consensus, the odds for a smooth integration process are in free fall.

On an optimistic note, the COVID-19 crisis can potentially contribute to a swifter alignment between the EU Member States and the WB6 on the development of joint responses to health emergencies or debacles of any other nature. The shared struggle among national governments in terms of crisis management, alongside the common experience of Pan-European hardship among the countries' populations could build an awareness basis for brisker future cooperation and solidarity. If developed, this could provide a favourable opportunity for the implementation of the phasing-in dynamics

²³ *Id.*, p. 6.

²⁴ Brzozowski, A., 2020. Enlargement Package postponed until autumn, negotiation framework to go ahead in June. *Euractiv*, [online] 20 May. Available: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/enlargement-package-postponed-until-autumn->

[negotiation-framework-to-go-ahead-in-june/](#)> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

²⁵ Esteso Pérez, A., 2020. Renewing Hope? An Analysis of the New EU Enlargement Methodology and its Implications for Kosovo. *GLPS Policy Analysis*, 1. Prishtina: Group for Legal and Political Studies, pp. 5-6.

envisaged in the new enlargement methodology, whereby candidate countries would gradually integrate into individual EU policies, regulations, programmes and markets at the same time as regional cooperation would be strengthened.²⁶

The extent to which the summit's main takeaways can be considered both successful and a significant step forward is debatable and has to do, for the most part, with a difference in readings. On the one hand, if the Zagreb meeting is seen as the birth of a multilateral recovery front in the light of COVID-19, its success is undeniable – as evidenced by the unprecedented €3.3 billion assistance package in order to address the health, economic and social emergency in the WB6.²⁷ It is in the EU's best interest to promote this recovery instrument and render it one of the cornerstones of its message to the region, in an attempt to reaffirm its status as the WB6's most reliable partner. On the other hand, however, when looking at the Summit from a broader perspective, namely with regard to enlargement, the picture seems dull. Given the reservations and scepticism that several EU Member States have historically showcased about the WB6's potential EU membership, like France or the Netherlands, the COVID-19 crisis has provided the most suitable pretext to push these expectations to the back of the room. Already at the EUCO in March, the urgency in dealing with the pandemic outshined Albania's and North Macedonia's launching accession talks, indicating a diversion of attention that would be difficult to regain. The idea of enlargement as a whole is losing traction at a time when

cooperation, solidarity, trust and reliability must be essential in guiding the relations among Europe's peoples.

In a prospective scenario marked by political and economic uncertainty and considering the modest gains yielded after the summits at Sofia and Zagreb, enlargement as a trustworthy tool is losing its momentum and the credibility of EU-WB6 high-level gatherings is at stake. While, on the one hand, the EC has traditionally conveyed an enthusiastic demeanour regarding the WB6's perspective for full-fledged EU membership, it is doubtful whether national governments will approach this matter in the same way – given the growing reluctance of some of these States over the years. It remains to be seen whether Member States will be willing to keep up with EU-WB6 summits and whether their holding will become a consistent practice, something encouraged by the EC.²⁸ Bulgaria and Croatia, the only two hosts of the reinvigorated new summit model, are Balkan states themselves and are tightly linked with both the WB6 region and the EU enlargement process, of which they have been the most recent beneficiaries. In this context, will future Council presidency holders render enlargement a high enough priority to convene new EU-WB6 summits and avoid the process from withering? Of the future holders, only Slovenia, whose period at the helm of the Council will run from July to December 2021, can be argued to share these features.²⁹ Otherwise, only Germany, who will head the Council between July and December 2020, has hitherto displayed proactiveness and outspoken interest in

²⁶ 2020. Revised enlargement methodology: questions and answers. *European Commission*, [online] 5 February. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_182> [Accessed 1 June].

²⁷ 2020. Infographic - COVID-19.: €3.3 billion EU package for the Western Balkans. *Council of the European Union*, [online]. Available at:

<<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

²⁸ 2020. Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press conference on the revised enlargement methodology. *European Commission*, [online] 5 February. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208> [Accessed 22 June 2020].

²⁹ The upcoming Council presidency holders will be Croatia and Germany (2020), Portugal and Slovenia (2021), France and the Czech Republic (2022), and Sweden and Spain (2023).

engaging seriously with the WB6's EU prospects.³⁰ The most important question, moreover, would be finding out whether the holding of such summits in the future –and therefore the successful preservation of this new model– would bring along actual development for the region or if, as has mostly been the case in the wake of the Sofia and Zagreb gatherings, would mean little more than grandiloquent statements to conceal the lack of overall progress.

KOSOVO'S PATIENT TUG OF WAR

More than as an isolated event of helplessness, the Zagreb Summit must be interpreted as one of the most recent episodes of EU ineptitude the WB6 have witnessed throughout the past years. The meeting has offered a broader picture of the 27 Members' unclear role vis-à-vis its neighbouring region, a clear consequence of the Union's internal turmoil and evidence of its unease in the wake of Brexit, the deterioration of relations with the United States (US), Euroscepticism and COVID-19.

Throughout the WB6, the EU has failed to fully defend its geopolitical ground against major world powers, whose vested interests in the region are inspiring cunning struggles for influence.³¹ In an exercise of instrumentalization of its still fragile and contested status, Kosovo provides a clear depiction of how the EU's decaying leverage has been taken advantage of by the US, which has tenaciously vied for a more prominent role in steering the diplomatic dialogue with Serbia – not without interference in Kosovo's internal political

affairs. As a reaction to this, the EU announced the swift appointment of Slovak top diplomat Miroslav Lajčák as its Special Representative for the Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues.³² His designation, partly devised as a countermeasure against the US's competing narrative and in an attempt to reinvigorate the EU's decaying role in the country, has effectively brought to the fore the growing differences between Brussels and Washington.

Against this backdrop, the country's perspective after the Zagreb Summit seems anything but rosy. The long-sought visa liberalization for Kosovo's citizens remains a frozen issue, while the dialogue for normalization of relations with Serbia is entering a new phase, in parallel to the EU-US leverage struggle. No progress towards enlargement is expected in the near future, let alone Kosovo's recognition as an official candidate country, inasmuch as many SAA- and ERA-linked reforms still have to be implemented.³³ On a positive note, however, Spain's attendance at the summit has signified one modest but conclusive step forward, indicating a change of paradigm vis-à-vis Kosovo and addressing its relations with Prishtina in a substantively more constructive fashion. With recognition being nowhere in sight due to Spain's internal struggles with secessionist movements in the Catalonia and Basque Country regions, Madrid's choice not to boycott the summit is highly suggestive of a slightly softening approach.

CONCLUSIONS

³⁰ Mudge, R. and Feilcke, A., 2019. German Maas says Western Balkan states belong in EU. *DW*, [online] 13 November. Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-maas-says-western-balkan-states-belong-in-eu/a-51221777>> [Accessed 1 June 2020].

³¹ Walker, S., 2020. Coronavirus diplomacy: how Russia, China and EU vie to win over Serbia. *The Guardian*, [online] 13 April. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-diplomacy-how-russia-china-and-eu-vie-to-win-over-serbia>> [Accessed 2 June 2020].

³² 2020. Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue: EU appoints a new Special Representative. *Council of the European Union*, [online] 3 April. Available at: <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/03/belgrade-prishtina-dialogue-eu-appoints-a-new-special-representative/>> [Accessed 2 June 2020].

³³ Esteso Pérez, A., 2020. Renewing Hope? An Analysis of the New EU Enlargement Methodology and its Implications for Kosovo. *GLPS Policy Analysis*, 1. Prishtina: Group for Legal and Political Studies, pp. 12-13.

The European perspective for the countries in the Western Balkan region reached its turning point at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki, after two preliminary attempts in 2000 in Santa Maria da Feira and Zagreb. The gained momentum contributed to Croatia's obtaining EU membership in 2013, which has since remained the Union's most recent addition. The next such initiative did not take place until 2018 when, at the behest of Bulgaria, a new EU-WB6 Summit was convened in Sofia. By then, fifteen years later, new challenges and demands had arisen at the core of the EU and enlargement was hardly considered a policy priority any longer.

Two key factors contributed to convening a new EU-WB6 Summit in 2020: firstly, the EC's outspoken push for engagement with the WB6, consistently conveyed throughout the years but in practice torpedoed by several of the most sceptical Member States; secondly, Croatia's role as president of the Council, which endorsed an agenda where relations with the WB6 and enlargement would be treated as a priority issue. In spite of the tempestuous times amid which Croatia was assuming the helm of the Council, including the handling of Brexit and the deciphering of the EU's self-identity crisis, European integration and enlargement seemed to be timidly placed back into the agenda – only until the irruption of COVID-19.

The Zagreb Summit, although online, was envisioned as an opportunity to focus on

enlargement and to strive for further progress and reforms in the WB6, but its prospects were overshadowed by the pandemic outbreak. What many optimists conceived as a second attempt to reorient the region's path is now further evidence of the EU's unconvincing role vis-à-vis the WB6, where Brussels is failing to assert itself in the face of major world powers that are also vying for leverage.

While this summit makes yet another paving stone in the road towards the WB6's EU membership, its outcome has not shed any significant light upon the process. Remarkable financial assistance to face the aftermath of the COVID-19 has been announced, rightfully rendering the WB6 a privileged EU partner region; in return, however, the idea of enlargement as a whole has lost traction. The noticeable diversion of EU resources and capital to counter the effects of the pandemic will furthermore add to the structural doctrine of enlargement fatigue, whereby EU Member States will seek cooperation during the continent's period of reconstruction but will, most likely, not engage in enlargement-related issues. Although the COVID-19 crisis could contribute to an alignment between the EU and the WB6 regarding the development of common responses to health emergencies or crises of the like, very rarely will enlargement pop up as a policy priority over the upcoming months and years. It seems, ultimately, as though the WB6 had taken one step forward and two steps back.

POLICY NOTES

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