

---

## When a pandemic hits a region in long transition; - (Understanding Western Balkans's perplexities and aspirations in times of COVID-19.)

**Dr. Elira Luli**

European University of Tirana, Albania

---

### Abstract

The region of Western Balkans is part of the immense shock that the world is undergoing because of COVID-19. After the lock-down phase -similar to a standstill mode - the countries of the region are dealing with pejorative trends of this Pandemic, where Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina and Kosovo are experiencing a tremendous resurgence of COVID-19 cases, higher than in the time of the quarantine.

Western Balkans has been in a long transition for three decades. Transition turned as an identifying feature for this region where old political leadership classes and attitudes carry the heaviest culprits for this pitfall. The Pandemic left devastating footprints in some crucial aspects of life. Given the region's already fragile situation before this crisis, Western Balkans struggle to grapple with old and new hardships at the moment. The diverse landscape poses stagnations and dire progress relating to political reforms; high political polarization in some countries; endeavors to cope with EU commitments and aspiration; nationalist and populist narratives and discourses laden with past recollections; and external influences luring the region away from EU perspective. On top of that, implications stemming from COVID-19 have impacted vital sectors such as economy, health, tourism, and social realm. In such an unpredicted and sluggish region, resilience seems to be more a cliché than a path to determination and flexibility.

The paper provides a general overview and analysis of the current situation through a qualitative methodology. It aims to highlight the causes that lie in the core of this prolonged transition where the added recession impact caused by COVID-19 in the region and other strains and constraints underlie. Simultaneously, elaborates on the EU path, Western Balkans countries are following and the EU's role in the whole picture.

The conclusion draws a short overview of observations given the pressures and the dragging risks at present and some recommendations relating to some perspectives and key-interventions about the complex challenges these countries face at an early stage and some quite past and old.

**Keywords:** #Western Balkans; #resilience; #transition; #COVID-19; #challenges; #perspectives.

---

### 1. Introduction

Since the spread Of COVID-19 Pandemic, the world has suffered significant issues and concerns in various essential realms. Although the world has faced other kinds of pandemics before, the current one has more specifically affected public health and economies without recognizing the borders.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 hitting wave, governments launched restrictions hurriedly. Some countries depending on the number of infections and the overburden of the healthcare system, went to a complete lock-down; other countries put more flexible measures in motion.

The deadly virus has not hit all countries the same. When China was at the point of dropping in infected and death numbers, in countries such as Brazil, the US, UK, India, Italy, Spain, and France, the spread continued with much intensity stirring the lives and well-being of the people around the world.

As reported by WHO, until **10 August 2020** the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the world has been 19,718,030 confirmed cases, including 728,013 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Of course, recovery cases continue, but the worrisome fact lies in the fact that some countries now witness a rise in the number of infections when the situation seemed under control.

Most of the six Western Balkan countries are under strain again with a phase described as a "Second Wave" returning or still the first stage of an irregular spreading. The difference between them might be more precise if experts had come to a firm agreement on what specific features develop a second wave or a continuous phase of the outbreak.

Considering the extended genre of analysis, preliminary assessments, a series of maps and charts following the spread of the virus, expert interviews, updated news, and reports regarding the entangled challenges that weigh in this region - this paper elaborates on the current situation in the region through a qualitative methodology. The main address is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 outbreak in the Western Balkans, a region affected by endemic issues and concerns besides Pandemic. How political development continues to shift attention from this health crisis amid other crises. At the same time, it sets out strategic commitments; Western Balkan countries have undertaken regarding Euro-Atlantic integration what also goes in line with the systemic democratization process in a long transition phase. Second, it tries to analyze why the transition has been so enduring in this region, whereby political elites have contributed to this "status-quo" aiming unlimited power. Finally, the analysis highlights the EU's role, considering states' pledges with current pressures at the time. After this endurance and burdensome phase - the dragging risks regarding EU commitments - cannot be excluded. "The state of emergency created solid grounds" for the "strongmen" of top-level governance "to further strengthen their regimes, which have a pattern of abuse of every opportunity to capture democratic institutions." (BiEPAG; 2020:9)

In addition to pandemic issues, Western Balkan countries and some countries in Central Europe have also run into democratic backslidings. Issues such as authoritarian political leadership, hybrid or semi-hybrid regimes, endemic corruption going hand in hand with widespread organized crime, the feeble rule of law, media clientelism remain consistent. Although the ongoing COVID-19 lurch with perturbing resurgence in some countries in the region, sluggish measures and reforms implementations regarding EU integration even though being incommensurable from country to country continue with narrow endeavors.

---

[https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwxev3BRBBEiwAiB\\_PWLaaolvR5tm\\_FswUi1fKJZs7ARxJL60yIB2t7\\_CHDHxYlgK1ViJvBhoCtssQAvD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwxev3BRBBEiwAiB_PWLaaolvR5tm_FswUi1fKJZs7ARxJL60yIB2t7_CHDHxYlgK1ViJvBhoCtssQAvD_BwE)

According to Freedom of House report “Serbia, and Montenegro have all left the category of democracies entirely and are now classified as transitional government/hybrid regimes.”(RFE/RL 2020)<sup>2</sup>.

From one WB summits to another, the situation with "sine qua non" condition for the EU accession has experienced dire progress with what society but also EU countries expect from the governments of WB countries. The new methodology adopted by the EU for Western Balkan Countries will not favor countries that are already in the process of chapters' negotiations like Serbia and Montenegro; however, also countries like Albania and North Macedonia, waiting to open accession talks under firm and necessary conditions.

The Pandemic might not only cause delays such as diverting attention from essential reform implementation, postponements of important talks regarding intergovernmental conferences - but also neglect a returning surge of the Pandemic. The latter might happen due to overwhelming issues lying on the complexity of the current situation. Questions such as opening/non-opening borders, rescuing tourism, elections soon in Montenegro, and a post-election phase in Serbia and North Macedonia, drastic actions in the economy, and healthcare may outpace real warnings and containment about the continuous spread of the virus.

Especially the economy and health care systems are really at strains. "Weak healthcare systems – mainly due to the lack of structural investments in the last twenty years of so-called "transition" accompanied by "the first feature of" some leaders' renewed autocracy: seen as fear is perturbing societies among the region.'The coin is double-sided' -" fear spread by governments and sometimes also "intimidation: through authoritarian tones when launching restrictions and measures and "fear shared by citizens, too, as a result of lack of adequate healthcare" (Fruscione G.; 2020) and economic insecurity.

Over the last decades - to some extent - experience has shown governments of these countries exhausting efforts rather than fulfilling obligations towards their countries and societies. The crisis with the Pandemic is not over yet; citizens have just started to deal with the consequences of restriction measures from the March lock-down phase. A frustration in sectors sharply devastated by the COVID-19 cannot be neglected, and the importance of continuing and advancing on reforms is essential. Stagnation of Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue for nearly two years (but restarted recently with abrupt events) leaves an open wound for the whole region, while still coping with alarming outbreaks in some countries in the region remains a struggle.

Considering the fragility of the current regional context with the complexity of internal and external issues amid a continuous spread of infections, Western Balkans remain under continuous pressure to manage the COVID-19 crises and revitalize critical sectors.

What will determine the nexus of this phase is defining priorities and being time productive since there is no more room to experiment after the region's chosen perspective on the path to EU membership.

---

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House Drops Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro From List Of Democracies, by RFE/RL; 2020  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/freedom-house-democracies-breakdown-balkans-hungary-serbia-russia-armenia-ukraine-uzbekistan/30595474.html>

## **2. Political developments remain high in the agenda, although alarming COVID-19 trends in the Western Balkan region.**

After lifting the restrictions and during the reopening phase, some countries of the Western Balkans caught them unawares, either by reaching a new peak or by being overwhelmed with new cases raised progressively. One noticeable fact is that amid imposed measures during the COVID-19 global crises and after the reopening phase, all of these countries more or less underwent crucial moments in the country's political life or state of affairs.

North Macedonia held elections planned on April 12, 2020, but postponed due to Pandemic on July 15, 2020. Serbia already left the event of the elections held on June 21, 2020. Regarding the Pandemic, Serbia had a high number of infected people and a high death toll, together with North Macedonia, Kosovo, and, to a lesser extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kosovo gathered parliament called by Democratic League of Kosovo in March in the peak of COVID-19 imposed measures to boot out the country's government in a no-confidence vote, living a full-blown political crisis in Kosovo besides the struggles to halt the surge of the Pandemic. Meanwhile, the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has been long overdue. There were no negotiating talks for nearly two years between Kosovo and Serbia. The restart looked even shady after the blow of planned agenda for Thaçi and Vučić to meet in the White House because of Thaçi's charge by "The Hague Prosecutors." A virtual talk led later on by Macron and Merkel and a meeting in Brussel (July 16, 2020) between Avdullah Hoti and Aleksander Vucic, seemed to change their respective stance barely. The perspective to reach an agreement soon is vague, given that both sides remain fixed in their positions with clear conditions on each side. However, the announcement for the resuming of dialogue in Washington once again brings a ray of hope in this shady limbo, despite its specific focus in economic cooperation. As diplomacy operates through different channels, parting from the economic track would be an essential kickstart for better economic opportunities for both countries and the region. The good news is that both two great western powers will share the burden of dialogue facilitation.

In contrast, the US will cover the economic domain, while the EU the political one. The bad news is that Serbia and Kosovo have to deal with a larger scale of COVID-19 cases and are coping with measures and difficulties posed by this situation. Serbian's head of state has to always explain and justify his position to the public opinion to avoid a reaction regarding the subject on the dialogue. At the same time, the public in Kosovo generally fears that Kosovo might be regarded in this process from a weaker position.

Bosnia and Herzegovina have registered a high death toll as aforementioned, marking a spike in new cases in two Cantons, and the situation is still critical in the country. Besides other political and social issues, the state deals systemically with corruption. Again, a "bigger challenge looms; "how to minimize corruption risks related to the management of international financial and material assistance." (Inzko V.2020)

Albania continues to confirm new cases with an unpredicted growing number.<sup>3</sup> After a COVID-19 pause from a very controversial political landscape, at the very beginning of the recommence

---

<sup>3</sup> According to media reports until beginning of August.

stage, riots erupted against the government for the demolition of National Theatre build during Italian occupation along 1938-39 years (an act highly condemned by Albanian society but also EU). The country is still in a critical phase as urged by Members of European Parliaments and highly expected by Albanian people to fulfill EU conditions to start accession talks finally. Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Conference is postponed in the fall of this year.

North Macedonia recently held elections and soon will have a new government. It looks as "the coronavirus pandemic has exposed and multiplied all the existing problems in the country's judiciary" (Magleshev V. 2020). The political life experienced crucial moments, but additionally, the most worrisome issue lies in the judiciary. "The spike in cases has made some courts totally ineffective, and this problem is expected only to deepen. The Pandemic and the state of emergency have, in fact, exposed the reality in which courts operate, with outdated equipment and not interconnected." (ibid)

Although pandemic fears, Western Balkans have witnessed a more significant public reaction and discontent expressed recently through protests, not only against measures and restrictions like the case of Serbia but also against the governments like it happened in Montenegro. The Pandemic caught Montenegro in the turbulence of demonstrations during 2019 and after because of people discontent with the government, accusing their President "over alleged corruption and abuse of office." The country deals with "widespread corruption" (Fiorentino M-R 2019), a tremendous hindrance to its very close path to the EU.

Although the Pandemic is getting worse, governments still have restored or reviewed significant measures with some hesitation. Serbia is in state of emergency, and Kosovo and Albania have tightened some limitations. Some borders in the region remained mostly closed until mid-summer. Anyhow a reluctance of citizens to travel in the area is noticeable for pandemic reasons. For tourism reasons, borders between Albania and Kosovo remained open, as Kosovo is labeled a savior of summer tourism in this tough pandemic phase for Albania. In early August, some states of the region decided that citizens would be able to cross the borders if they showed a negative COVID-19 test. Simultaneously, while the test-rules changed the situation at the borders between Greece and Albania, risked becoming a humanitarian tragedy. Long queues of cars and Albanian people waited for days to cross the Albania borders into Greece as Athens imposed stricter entry procedures..

EU stated to open borders for the six Western Balkan Countries "on July 1, after over three months of a total border closure of the block for non-EU/EEA travellers."<sup>4</sup> but the date was postponed until further notice, and in meantime, "the list is updated every fortnight"<sup>5</sup> depending on the country's situation with COVID-19. While, "the border situation for Europeans remains a mixed picture, with each country imposing its own rules and its own timetable for re-opening."<sup>6</sup> There is an unlimited suspension on the movement of people and fear to travel, which has undoubtedly harmed the tourism sector. "The summer season that contributes to the majority of the tourism revenue in the region will be especially affected in the short-term". As part of a recovery plan,

---

<sup>4</sup> EU Opens Its Borders for Western Balkan Citizens on July 1

<https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-opens-its-borders-for-western-balkan-citizens-on-july-1/>

<sup>5</sup> (info) <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/22/which-european-countries-have-opened-their-borders-ahead-of-the-summer-holiday-season>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/22/which-european-countries-have-opened-their-borders-ahead-of-the-summer-holiday-season>

governments of these countries and tourism agencies – "in order to promote the domestic demand of tourism" (OECD.2020; 6) and foster domestic economies - have been calling their citizens to explore their country of origin and spend vacations "at home."

Health experts and government representatives from these six countries have been continually calling on citizens to respect physical distancing. The so-called 'social distance' and routine measures were not fully recognized after the "normalization phase." Maintaining a social 'status quo' as usual, although pandemics risks, is a typical attitude between individuals in these countries. Dropping the guard with a rapid openness toward people to people; lack of effective plans by the governments associated with their authoritarian attitudes and gathering for the public concerns or political events found people in another developing stage of the Pandemic - more alarming than the start of the health crises in March 2020.

### **3. The crisis in not over yet! What crisis to tackle first?**

The situation in five Balkan countries, except Montenegro, is in a state of emergency<sup>7</sup>. Some experts believe that the rising number of casualties and infected people results from lousy management from government structures and authorities. Others believe that people have their part of the guilt by not obeying to the routine measures. Cases in Italy early in March rang the bell for some of these countries. Although the authoritarian way used to deliver measures and restrictions was disturbing for most of the public, the spread containment showed success during the quarantine, but not after.

Now, "popular discontent is growing across the Balkans over governments' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, as concerns mount about continued lock-downs, poor testing provision and patchy access to healthcare." (Hpkins.V; 2020)

Governments are thinking about next moves and also launching new measures in some areas and sectors - an act that has been worrying people across the region.

Experts and society's fear is involute. There is now a general awareness greater than before among people in the Balkan region that the Pandemic could get far worse as it is still an enemy among us. However, the greatest fear is an economic recession. These three decades have been years of slow growth and economic sluggishness for the six countries of Western Balkans. Sustainable development has been in a constant struggle to reach a feasible level of stability. Unemployment rates have been high, a cause for pushing the young generation to migrate, and a reason to create discontent among the populations of these countries and loss of hope for the nearest future after a continuous green light slip for the EU approach.

Societies of these countries are aware of why the region is still the prey of uncertainties and vulnerabilities. All related to political and economic factors – also - geopolitical voids filled by foreign influences. "At the end of 2017, the World Bank anticipated economic growth to stay above 3% for 2018 and 2019, due to rising consumption, low inflation rates and improvement of the economic situation worldwide." (Andreychuk R.; 2018) Despite this urge, the pace of growth in these countries has been going from 2.7% to 4.1 (Albanian case in 2018) or 4.2% (Kosovo's case in 2019) in the best time. Then again, to slow down levels for some of the countries e.g

---

<sup>7</sup> Referring to July and August 2020.

projected growth of Montenegro with 2,6% in 2020 as reported by EBRD (Bennet V.2019). These data were foreseen before the Pandemic blow.

The Covid-19 makes this growth figure (above 3%) even more challenging and bleak now. "However, even if this growth could be achieved, it would take the Western Balkans 60 years to reach income levels on par with EU average" (Andreychuk R.; 2018). The fragile economy is a crucial aspect of the endless regional transition, and Pandemic grimes this despairing landscape even more.

"The main risk for the Western Balkans is that a prolonged pandemic, as well as a deeper recession in the European Union, could make the unfolding economic crisis difficult to handle." (World Bank 2020). The world's economy is under deflation and continuous frailty, especially with a deceleration in some critical sectors such as trade, supply, and production.

Reasoning, along with this fact, the downturn in Eurozone and partner countries will inevitably impact on a regional halt for any economic progress and struggle moves for sustainability will be acrobatic. "Countries in the region will suffer considerable economic losses and grave social consequences. Since they rely on the EU market for the export of their products, the EU's expected recession will also influence the economic and social well-being of the countries in the region." (BiEPAG; 2020; 12)

The slow pace of reforms and another chance loss of the opening of accession talks with EU for Albania and North Macedonia may dim foreign investment attempts and investitures' determination to invest in critical sectors and vanish hopes of the people that still believe in this project.

Coping with health care respond to COVID-19 has been a very striving task in Western Balkans. Although most government representatives from the executive level reiterated that things were 'under control,' media, opposition parties, and civil society individuals or independent experts in some of these countries reported differently. They claimed: lack of capacities, shortage of testing procedures; corruptive procedures with medical supplies; lack of crucial assets; misuse of funds, and other issues. Simultaneously, the crisis system's complete management chain revealed itself disruptive, depending on the country's level of preparedness. Recent reports show that these countries were not even medically and economically prepared to handle this global pandemic crisis while simultaneously unfolded political and financial tensions even more. "Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, health systems in the Western Balkans faced critical financing and service delivery challenges" (World Bank 2020). Also, shortcomings and gaps in the quality of health care, precaution and attendance, and health service in general.

Western Balkan countries have since long been in a continuous transition phase. The worrisome fact is that societies or the majority of the societies in these countries have been eagerly seeking stability and longing for sustainable development. This fact is upsetting because it seems that societies' demands have differed from the plans of governments in this region who do not recognize the real limitation of power, letting the region a quarry to constant challenges and crises.

In most reports, Western Balkans dubbed as 'a region in transition' has repeatedly faced multi-sectorial crises. At the political level, those who should bear the most significant responsibility are the political executives/elites. In contrast, at the social level, society is becoming more responsible and trying to demand accountability and transparency by accusing their leaders of lacking vision

and national interest. As noticed, in most cases, the political elites have shown their egocentric power in governance style through all these transitional years.

#### **4. What is wrong with the top-level governance in these countries?**

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the aftermath of the war narratives, old and new tensions have dominated the region. However, the EU calls for good neighborly relations and peaceful attitudes towards one another remain constant. The populist rhetoric and nationalism card was played by national leaders either when their power was threatened - sometimes, as part of their political actions, their status quo was shaken or public attention required diversion from domestic misgovernance.

The problem does not rely solely on the fact that "COVID-19 provided a perfect pretext to catalyze the concentration of power in already weak democracies", where institutions are still weak and "the current authoritarian drifts are structural" (Fruscione G. 2020). These are crucial facts that persist and support an appropriate political oasis where illiberal or autocratic regimes systematically cast a blind eye to societies with propaganda rather than sound reforms and projects. They have managed to install a political culture in their favor, also complicated to uproot after all these political top-level organized agendas in three decades.

"The role of political elites in transition countries from communist to democratic regimes constitutes the core of the "transitology" theory and the methodological and procedural approach. An approach that differs from 'substantial approach' based on the study of western democracies evidencing the 'favorable preconditions', without which democracy is unlikely to be established (Filo Ll. Marku A.; 2014;106). In the western democracies, the public continuously demands on accountability, and political elites have to dedicate their actions and policy-making toward public and national interest because the favorable prerequisites have already established a culture of open interaction and communication between top-down and bottom-up level. A holistic political culture that according to "democratization theory" recognizes "the importance of strategic interactions between elites and citizens in complex processes that involve revisiting the basic rules of the political game" (GCSP; 2013;7)

In countries of Western Balkans, communist regimes suppressed the culture of civil society reaction and initiative. Citizens became used to a totalitarian culture where governing authority knew everything best. This way of governing deprived citizens of any collective act, nurtured individualism, lack of expression, and lack openness toward other ideas rather than constant indoctrination.

After 30 years of transition, the political culture has barely changed in these countries because old "political culture" is characterized by its 'sustainability' persisting 'behind' the changes that political institutions undergo" (Filo Ll. Marku A.; 2014;105). In line with the analysis, "what can be said about the efficacy and the role of political institutions established in post-communist countries" (ibid)?

The political elites who took in hand the fates of their countries were also expected to create a favorable democratic climate and proper conditions to enable democracy progress. Instead, an old school of political thoughts and ideas - to some extent - to all these countries was hardwired. The top-level elite established during or after the winds of change in the 90s had all the necessary public consent to enable appropriate conditions for democracy to flourish. Nevertheless, instead



of involving citizens in the decision-making process and advancing their interest, essential aspects of civil society or society, in general, continued to be disregarded until nowadays.

Old political class MPs are still dominant figures among the political environments of some WB countries such as Albania, Serbia, and to some extent, also in Kosovo and Montenegro. While in Bosnia and Herzegovina, issues of ethnic nationalism tend to predominate more than in North Macedonia.

Many scholars, observers, and experts of Southeast Europe studies and in particular of the Western Balkans, such as Primatarova A. and Deimel J. (2012) Bieber F. (more recently) think that a sort of "stabilocracy", has contributed to the extension of this transition in Western Balkans. They are marked by double attitudes by the head of government and politicians, while their actions promise little hope for the societies of these countries, despite looking committed to the EU.

In Albania, the situation is more complicated, because the persistent phenomenon of "particracy" is more specific than in other Western Balkan countries. Civil society is often conquered and bribed, meaning that even in the majority of the protests cases, they are led by political parties. (An example of that is the student movement/protest (2019). It started from the very bottom line, but in the end, political parties did the utmost to evaporate the whole movement by dividing the student's mass into groups according to their interest and managed to stop it).

The electoral system itself has not been the appropriate one for a long time as many electoral systems have changed and have not produced stability because the parties continue to control it. The media also shifts public opinion towards the political parties and the chairmen of these parties for manipulative reasons. At the end of the story, the electorate repeatedly chooses the same politicians but not programs or ready-made choices but not solutions.

In these 30 decades, political leadership did not manage enough to establish a functional democracy with stable institutions, attain sustainable development, or protect and provide enough security to its citizens.

Unlike other countries of Western Balkans, Albania is freed of ethnic or nationalistic disturbances - on the contrary, it has a leading role in good neighborly relations in the region. Nationalistic rhetoric comes in play whenever an internal political issue strikes, and public opinion needs to be diverted— while the main issues and dragging stem from politics. The old political establishment has managed to survive in power through recycling mechanisms, and be it left or right has "consistently divided the resources of the state between them" (Gjevori E. 2019) during all these years. "Post-communist leaders, in a bid to hold and cultivate political power, have auctioned jobs, education, development and the dignity of the people" (ibid). For the most pro-European country in the region and beyond, the expectations have been high to reach a stable level of democracy and fulfill the necessary reforms to join the EU as soon as possible. However, the expectation has been irrelevant to the persistent fueled political climate and debate, and the political class' back and forth endeavors to pursue self-interest rather than national interest.

In Kosovo, the situation is not better. The society also expresses discontent with the old political class, be them the member of the right or left spectrum. At least Kosovo has managed to give birth to a new political class but still in conflict with the old establishment. Another hindering issue remains the international recognition of Kosovo and the quarreled and problematic dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, but above all, stability in governance.

For some analysts and experts, "the solution lies in leaving the whole old political caste, who are the main culprits for the difficult economic, political situation and other spheres of life, and the main obstacles to economic underdevelopment." (Krasniqi F.2015)

Serbia has been declined in rank and estimated as a hybrid regime by Freedom of House. Like Montenegro, "for the first time since 2003, they are no longer categorized as democracies in Nations in Transit" (Csaky Z.2020). In the recent elections, Aleksander Vucic consolidated his position as a leader with uncontested political power spiked with populist, nationalistic, and authoritarian tones anew.

Although a democratic turn in 2000 linked with Europeanisation and modernization discourse and acts, still a bumpy road is marked with nationalistic hurdles and democratic deficiencies, where the following ruling elites pursued the tracks of old class (The ideological political substance of Slobodan Milosevic's politics). After all, what unites the Serbian political parties after the fall of the Milosevic era is the nationalist ideology based on identity.

There is a distinguishing element in Serbian leadership and politics that has to do with identity and influence through identity's idea. The dissolution of Yugoslavia pronounced through bloody wars and conflicts went through spiking events like the Dayton Agreement, separation of Montenegro in 2006, and Kosovo independence later on in 2008. Moreover, global changes that impacted the Balkan region, and its EU Path commitments, did not alter its politics of continuity relating to its identity. The attitude on sanctifying the identity has also supported shaping power-gain, influence, and action in Serbia and communities or groups outside the country. At the same time, albeit supposing to have a higher political performance noted through economic development, political institutions throughout the years, since some years Serbia is experiencing a decline in crucial realms. "In recent years, it has become impossible to find an international organization that, in its reports and indexes, records Serbia's progress in the field of democracy, the rule of law and media freedom". (Ivković A. 2020) Authoritarian tendencies prevail, noticed through: grassroots anti-government protests in the last years, and during Pandemic (when introducing new measures after reopening phase); problems with freedom of media; media reforms, and media ownership; "judiciary" probably "notoriously corrupt and subject to intense political interference" (Eror A. 2019) and unlimited power aggregation. Serbia presents difficulties separating from the past, too, although being committed to the EU as the "final" destination. To some perceptions, it seems like the old "state apparatus was never cleared away." (Eror A. 2019) This fact poses the main obstacle in one side to advance on democratization and reforms. On the other side, it weighs on the much vacillating dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo.

North Macedonia is the newest NATO member and managed to finally overcome one of the main obstacles to its Euro-Atlantic path, namely the name-dispute with Greece, which resulted in success with the signing of the Prespa Agreement and the name change to North Macedonia. Over the years, North Macedonia had a political scene dominated by ethno-nationalism forces and ethnic-supporters among communities. Still, fatigue among the citizens is noticeable in all communities as they do not experience an improvement in all sectors and quality of life. The country held elections recently won by SDSM (Social Democrats). The new government's product will be with ethnic Albanian parties - who gained more seats in the parliament than the last elections. The Albanian political leadership is not in a comfort station for long. Although they reinvigorated strengths in these elections – they remain yet fractioned into many parties. This

particularity has accompanied the ethnic Albanian political class in all these years, an approach that has to adjust itself toward a more cooperative and unifying vigor and essence for the future.

The ex-ruling party VMRO DPMNE decided to cut the cord with former party leader Nikola Gruesvski by vacating "the title of honorary party president." An act that "comes alongside other changes to the party statute that the party said would "democratize" its functions and transfer more power to the membership and the local party committees." ( Marusic J.S; 2020) A turn, honing particular moderate values by tending to separate from the old political leadership and old forms of party's operation and organization if it is not in the frames of a façade. The political class at least efforts to draw a new image on a political construct still in the making.

When one tries to depict the political background of Bosnia & Herzegovina, the political backdrop is even shadier when it comes to ethnic, political ramification agendas. The political leadership is sharpened with extreme parties' divergences that operate in a much entangled political system and follow specific nationalistic tracks. The consociational and decentralized governance "makes the political system and decision-making process very complex." (Dhoga 2019; 116) Bosnia & Herzegovina face deep socio-economic inequality, lack of sound investments, high rates of unemployment, and an old traditional way of political performing following specific ethnical sections' interests.

The country deals with systemic corruption, a high level of nepotism, and bribery procedures. Moreover, "the internal risks for Bosnia and Herzegovina include uncertainty about much-needed reforms and economic slowdown in the eurozone." (Bennett V.2019) The division in ethnical segments poses the risk that these population pivots toward patronage influences that may further deepen the segregation among three ethnicities.

According to the report of Freedom of House, Montenegro is also a country that relating to its "democratic progress" has "left the category of democracy entirely" and has shifted into a "transitional government/hybrid regime" (Freedom House 2020). Since 2006 it looked like Montenegro followed an independent and challenging path not only to rescue national values and symbols related to Montenegrin identity but also to show vigor and willingness to accelerate its perspective and final landing to EU. The importance of international assistance has been paramount for the consolidation of institutions, democracy, and other significant reforms, so in this regard also much exploited by the state of Montenegro to achieve the necessary EU oriented results. Achievements reached along the way have been impacting essential sectors such as economy, tourism, and infrastructure. Although noted clear progress, Montenegro has to advance in crucial reforms related to "political institutions, corruption, human rights, and the rule of law, sound economic reforms "and political media freedom." Also, improve on "key points where most of the criticism consists" by the "European Commission" (Sako M. 2019; 168).

As nationalism never heals in the Balkans, suddenly turned into a hotspot in the Montenegrin political scene in one shot. The law adopted in 2019 on freedom of religion caused crowdie protests and much discontent (paused by COVID19) an act happening a year before planned elections, foreseen to happen by the end of August 2020 or maybe later. Being the third country to hold elections in a pandemic time in this region, after Serbia and North Macedonia, attention has since long focused on this event. The act of the law adoption probably impacted a polarization in two fronts, making the religious aspect a vulnerability for the interference of external forces such as Serbian and Russian influences. Considering that the opposition is weak, not a significant change in political power or class is expected. The public attention and opinion are continuously shifted

by essential aspects of living standards and economic growth and reforms pending, such as fighting against corruption, freedom of media, and organized crime.

Moreover, considering how important is the circulation of elites in democracy, "the country has never witnessed an alternation of power," considering the head of the executive level "in a position of power since 1991" (BIEPAG; 2019; 6). Nevertheless, the ruling party has declared a firm stance and a steadfast orientation to its Euro-Atlantic path. However, the coming elections (2020) will be a test for the county's democracy and stability.

Pejorating shifts in democratic standards and progress have ascended in Central and Eastern Europe. Although having specific characteristics and different paces toward the European Union, Western Balkans' countries carry along with these three decades issues, divergences, and nationalistic rhetorics` through their transformation process. Political establishments who are not firmly committed to robust reforms and transformation try from time to time to back up recallings' from past events - keeping still alive fossils of old political culture and attitudes. Pluralism in the Balkans did not happen by any great revolution from the bottom-line or grass root level. Merely, it was a process conducted and commanded from the top-level, something that overall has proceeded as a fabricated and compromised process.

Considering this complex background, the "democratic community' has an important role to play in this case for Western Balkans, az Zselyke Csaky, research director for Europe, and Eurasia has stressed. "It is essential for democratic countries to stand up to bullies, but that is only possible if leading politicians promote democratic principles through their words and actions," (Freedom House 2020) In this regard support, reinvigoration, consultation and financial aid (subjected to scrutiny) is very much needed by EU and US for a region drained of power to change.

### **5. Europe so close, yet so far....**

The Balkans, this geographic area in southeastern Europe, have seen and witnessed a lot throughout history. An area in Europe, with an EU goal, but still self-limited. Furthermore, the EU has been a testimony, a supporter, a mentor, and a promissory mechanism for three decades.

The year 2020 is (a challenging year and phase for the whole globe because of the Pandemic). Nevertheless, the region carries along with historical controversies, appetites of various nationalistic segments devouring ancient quarrels. While elites consolidate their power with EU-discourse and up and down endeavors and flirtings`.

The fact that this region is still identified as a region in transition for thirty years is perturbing. However, the fragilities are well known by its population that is continuously shrinking, especially by the young generation who keeps on leaving for better chances and hopes. EU is the nearest target and most preferred destination and shoulders the burden of this worrisome trend.

The membership perspective has been a mechanism to keep these countries EU-oriented and on track, although the path has sometimes been intensive and sometimes stagnant. Whenever stagnation happens, external factors (not having the same mentorship ideas and intentions as EU) are ready to interfere and play by their own rules or spoil for an entanglement.

Montenegro has reached the final phase of the negotiation process. Finally, it has to conclude with chapter 8, the final one. Although the coming elections, Pandemic, and the passing of the law on religious communities posit some challenges ahead, still being the closest country to join the block

is a hope delivering episode. The negotiating process has been slower on the Serbian side. With 18 out of 35 opened chapters, the pace had been even tardier in 2019. Albania and North Macedonia are still in the waiting list to finally open accession talks - but in the spirit of hopes - to finally start this chapter. Progress on reforms, meeting the necessary requirements/conditions remain firm obligations. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are still not granted the candidate status. Furthermore, Kosovo still expects the much-awaited visa liberalization process to finally happen.

Since years scholars and different experts have warned about the risk that Western Balkans poses if they do not get real incentives from the EU to join the block and the risk of losing momentum any time a decision weights at their door, is still relevant. This warning is not a breakthrough anymore, but merely a potential threat at southeast European borders. The WB region is shaky, and now with the insufficiencies caused by the Pandemic, atrocities may resurrect. "Democratic institutions are often merely a facade, only partially hiding what turns out to be leaderships with autocratic tendencies, but which nevertheless enjoy endorsement from the West." (Fruscione G.;Magri.P: 2020:8)

Europe has been great assistance by delivering "a crisis relief package to give the region's health systems the resources" deemed necessary and immediate for the pandemic response. "In the immediate term, it provides nearly 38 million euros for medical equipment and protective gear. In short to medium term, it gives 374 million euros to address the socio-economic implications of the Pandemic and help the region's economic recovery. (Shehaj A.2020) Anyhow, it remains to be seen if this financial aid will be used effectively and not mismanaged and misused.

Except for its undisputable role, EU has also been subjected to many critics regarding Western Balkans, such as leaving them in an "autopilot"<sup>8</sup> mode, or treating the region as a "friendzone" or for using a "stop and go approach of EU institutions (Fruscione G.; Magri P. 2020; 8) for too long. In some countries, these endeavors have provoked frustration and lack of patience among societies, sometimes blaming themselves. However, most of the time, pointing the finger toward the EU for its conditional policy and lately for the novel reformed methodology.

In some countries, these endeavors have provoked frustration and lack of patience among societies, sometimes blaming themselves. However, most of the time, pointing the finger toward the EU for its conditional policy and lately with the novel reformed methodology.

Considering the worsening situation and the fragilities caused by COVID-19, it is uncertain whether the reformed methodology and EU conditionality instrument will succeed in such short notice, given the tense situation the region is going through. Additionally, new instabilities arise among a handful of inherited ones. That makes the limbo trickier, even when some politicians and heads of states feed on the European discourse for electoral reasons and public opinion gain, but for the same aim to linger their power. "In a nutshell, conditionality works well if membership criteria are clear, if the same criteria are applied to all applicants, if they are strictly but fairly monitored, if the findings are transparently communicated, and if there is no doubt that the reward will come once conditions are met. Currently, all this is not the case" (BIEPAG; 2019;5)

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BIEPAG-Western-Balkans-and-the-EU-Beyond-the-Autopilot-Mode.pdf>

In the light of this global crisis posing a complexity of threats, where the future of humankind is bleak just a "maximum financial and technical support" or "coordinated, decisive, inclusive and innovative policy action from the world's leading economies", "required for the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries"<sup>9</sup> would still not bring the necessary incentives and inputs in the Western Balkan countries for a very clear reason. As many experts and journalists have noticed and reported, "the Western Balkans' response to COVID-19 has unveiled a latent tendency to govern with strict authority and little compromise." (Shehaj A. 2020)

While observing populist tendencies, anti-European discourse from some authoritarian leaders, the shrinking population because of migration causes, economic deficiencies, and instabilities - the region finally needs a seal of approval. The starting of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia promises more excellent institutional stability towards constitutional and democratic advancement under EU monitoring auspices.

Anyhow, the growing role of grass-root movements marks a quantum leap in the history of long endeavors that society has been going through. Now society knows best and can recognize autocratic tendencies accompanied by a lack of the rule of law, low standards of living, and poor services in vital sectors.

The noted proneness to use this health crisis for authoritarian exploitation, restriction of individual freedoms, manipulation of the electoral framework, lack of transparency, misgovernance, misuse of funds, etc., - was not a let go for civil society and individuals from the grass-root level of this region who still endure the impacts without significant support and service from the state. They tried to raise the voice and react in protests in some of these countries.

Civil society actors are critical players in long transitions, and this also accounts for the Western Balkan region. It seems like this region has finally experienced an awakening in terms of reactions and mobilization of mass movements.

## **Conclusions**

Europe has played a significant solidarity role in this situation by assisting and supporting these countries trying to recover to some extent their health system fragilities and socio-economic deficiencies. At the same time, it has reconfirmed its position as a leading player among other influences trying the supporter's role with clear other aims to build ties and spoil Europe's efforts.

From an inside perspective, the way people and some experts, in general picture EU, is blurry and elusive because of the transition phase the EU is undergoing. This fact has interfered with Western Balkan's governments' commitments to mislead attention and concentration from reform implementations. While trying to fulfilling the necessary criteria at the same time, they have been allegedly playing with the narrative of conditionality and sticks. However, the pitfalls of the novel reformed methodology are present.

Indeed, the dilemma from the EU side is noticeable. A dilemma, bearing a mix of apathy and lack of vision of a plaguing burden on how to finally deal with a region just on their doorstep. The fact that countries of Balkans are prone to produce crises, the politics and policy-making echo reminiscences of the past, also other restlessness aspects - are tiring both for the EU, and societies

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/covid-19-pandemic-most-challenging-crisis-since-second-world-war-un-chief/articleshow/74923642.cms>

of these countries. A derelict observation from the EU side may cause the boomerang effect, and other regional crises may arise from the lack of continuous commitment and observation.

In brief, these crises not only fall at the expense of the societies of these Western Balkan countries who may feel oppressed and divided but also may fall indispensably over the EU and NATO.

The COVID-19 Pandemic is not over yet and continues to shake the worldwide equilibrium, posing a threat and "the most challenging crisis the world faces since the Second World War, one that is killing people and will also lead to an economic recession that probably has no parallel in the recent past"<sup>10</sup>

Going back to Yugoslav wars, the aftermath events that followed created an open hearth that already incited a worldwide conflict. In this context, the phrase of Winston Churchill, "The Balkans, produce more history than they can consume," is still relevant. That is why a more persistent approach of soft power tools (rewards) mixed with conditionality sticks by the EU is needed.

There are many gaps from the past and a lack of positive energy in the Western Balkans to bring about the changes that the society of this region has been waiting for a long time because it lacks the political-intellectual emancipation class and consequently lacks the liberation of the public opinion. On top of that, it lacks the maturity to face the ongoing challenges - as long as an egocentric kind of politics is being in continuity pursued.

The long and tiring transition is becoming a dangerous 'modus vivendi' that must be reviewed and thoroughly analyzed. From time to time, the EU has lost its credibility by leaving voids in the region ready to be filled by players that also reverse the little victories. In the transition phase, expectations remain for the metamorphosis to finally happen. Western Balkans still suffers incapacitation and adjusting mechanisms according to the EU model for such a long period. Interferences and transitions phases inside an already existing transition path have continuously hindered this region from finally becoming an integral part of the EU and returning to its identity. To become such, the EU has a continuous meaningful caretaker and monitoring role in avoiding the region's detachment risk.

### **Recommendations:**

- The world has seen pandemics before, and people have faced even harsher diseases throughout history. In one way or another, humanity has to learn to live with it by reviewing, readjusting from time to time, and respecting necessary measures. The Balkan governments being always under pressure because of political events, avert the measures that need to be reviewed concerning COVID-19, taking into account both the persisting virulence of this Pandemic and the autumn viruses and cases of flu that may create an overlapping with Coronavirus (as medical experts warn). Moreover, hospital conditions in other districts and areas should be adjusted to operate the same as those in central cities or capitals, in order not to deepen the collapse in leading hospitals that have continually been dealing with the majority of the cases. Another isolation in the Western Balkan region or some countries would mean not only giving up to people's freedom but also halting the

---

<sup>10</sup> read more: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/covid-19-pandemic-most-challenging-crisis-since-second-world-war-un-chief/articleshow/74923642.cms>



flow of vital sectors. A deeper recession may follow in case of another lock-down. Humanity, in general, cannot deter now from life and essential routine needs because of a Pandemic and cannot escape but face it with accountability, plans of measures, observation, and expertise.

- Governments need to consider the human dimension, although their mix of reactions and response manifestation, given the conspiracy theories that have accompanied this Virus/Pandemic, media coverage, mistrust among people, and the behavior they demonstrated along with this phase. Therefore an explanation through facts and expertise not through orders and command tones and attitudes (as often has happened in the case of some countries in Western Balkans) is necessary because such tones and attitudes may trigger the opposite results.
- The EU has to find ways to be more attentive on how to consolidate the process of EU integration. The same discourses and narratives about the EU prospect and a reformed methodology is a wooden or dry effort toward this complex region. Western Balkans exploits enormous energy for controversies but deprives itself of inner strengths when it comes to progress, development, and emancipation to adopt the EU system accordingly. In this perspective, a more significant and persistent, multidimensional assistance and lead by example from EU and western powers is needed, even when leaders play the sovereignty card when they fear their power decrease. Therefore, external leverage is necessary and irreplaceable in the Western Balkans case as a mechanism that should accelerate the integration process by empowering civil society, valuing achievements, and pointing out failures.
- Although at strains and insufficiencies, governments of WB should not lose control of this Pandemic crisis but cannot afford to elude from the European path. They should stick to reforms to finally start negotiations talks, (referring here to the process frontrunners - in this case - Albania and North Macedonia). The region finally needs a stimulus after a long wait and a freezing phase of the EU enlargement perspective.
- The EU has been the initiator of the current political project and path in today's Balkan region. Therefore, its role is indispensable in building democratic systems, peace, and entente between these counties/societies. Therefore, assistance and supervision are required from the EU to integrate the Balkan region both with the EU and with itself. Of primary importance remain infrastructure projects in the form of corridors that connect the EU with the Balkans and the Western Balkan countries with each other, especially railways and road projects that should continue with high intensity. Also, project assistance is required for a more excellent economic-cultural-sport-educational approach.
- There are a lot of bilateral agreements in this plan left on the paper. Thus, the scheme of the agreement should comprise a "triangle track," whereby in a trilateral approach, the EU may have the controlling mechanism and leverage to advance the projects and the goals - if attempts to stall them persist.
- Regarding the education field of these countries, a vast and unifying work must be achieved through projects, books, lessons in order to introduce the new generation to the EU and the



values that underlie to the core of this project, its transformative power and examples of civil society operations and acts.

**References:**

- 1) Book: Institucionet politike në sistemet e qeverisjes/ “Political Institutions in governance systems”, by: Llambro Filo, Alketa Marku, Albanian University Press (as part of Albanian University), Tirane 2014 (Pg: 105-106) Faqe/pg -406.
- 2) Book: Shtetformimi, demokratizimi dhe Europianizimi i Ballkanit Perëndimor/ State building process, democratization and Europeanization of Western Balkans. Marsela Sako, pg:168; Nysjola Dhoga, pg:116. Pergat.për bot., rec, red K. Beshku; Dh. Milori; red. G. Madhi – Edlora -2019; Tiranë, faqe/pg-250.
  - a. <https://jeanmonnetalbania.wixsite.com/jeanmonnetalbania/publishing>
- 3) Freedom House Drops Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro From List Of Democracies, by RFE/RL; 2020
  - a. <https://www.rferl.org/a/freedom-house-democracies-breakdown-balkans-hungary-serbia-russia-armenia-ukraine-uzbekistan/30595474.html>
- 4) Valentin Inzko; 6 May 2020; UN News; Corruption, political blockages, threaten international efforts to help Bosnia and Herzegovina weather coronavirus
  - a. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063432>
- 5) EWB - 06.07.2020; Western Balkan countries continue to record spikes in COVID-19 cases, some measures reintroduced
  - a. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/06/western-balkan-countries-continue-to-record-spikes-in-covid-19-cases-some-measures-reintroduced/>
- 6) Hpkins Valeie; July 12 2020, Public anger rises across Balkans as coronavirus toll grows; Financial Times
  - a. <https://www.ft.com/content/103377cd-9cfb-41e3-8030-65aac20762dc>
- 7) Vanora Bennett. 2019, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; EBRD expects growth deceleration in the Western Balkans in 2020
  - a. <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2019/ebrd-expects-growth-deceleration-in-the-western-balkans-in-2020.html>
- 8) The World bank report, Spring 2020; Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Spring 2020
  - a. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>
- 9) Giorgio Fruscione/ 30 Apr 2020/ Covid-19 in the Balkans: The Virus of Authoritarianism; ISPI
  - a. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/covid-19-balkans-virus-authoritarianism-25925>
- 10) GPSp; Geneva Papers; Bringing Back Transitology Democratisation in the 21st Century; Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and Timothy D. Sisk; Copyright © Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2013
- 11) Gjevori Elis; Albania, a crisis thirty years in the making; 29 Jun 2019/ TRT world;
  - a. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/albania-a-crisis-thirty-years-in-the-making-27888>
- 12) Faik Krasniqi; Kasta e vjetër duhet të largohet nga politika! 28 Prill 2015; Sot.com;

- a. <https://sot.com.al/opinione/kasta-e-vjet%C3%ABr-duhet-t%C3%AB-largohet-nga-politika>
- 13) Aleks Eror, May 14. 2019/Two decades after the fall of Milosevic, Dictatorship is returning to Serbia, World Politics Review,
  - a. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/27847/two-decades-after-the-fall-of-milosevic-dictatorship-is-returning-to-serbia>
- 14) BiEPAG; 03/2019; Policy Brief Western Balkans and the EU: Beyond the Autopilot Mode; Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BIEPAG-Western-Balkans-and-the-EU-Beyond-the-Autopilot-Mode.pdf>
- 15) BiEPAG; April 2020; Policy Brief The Western Balkans in Times of the Global Pandemic;
  - a. <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf>
- 16) Albana Shehaj/ April 20. 2020 /AFTER THE PANDEMIC: PERILS AND PROMISE FOR WESTERN BALKANS,
  - a. Balkaninsight.com; <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/20/after-the-pandemic-perils-and-promise-for-western-balkans/>
- 17) Giorgio Fruscione , Paolo Magri; THE BALKANS: OLD, NEW INSTABILITIES A European Region Looking for its Place in the World 2020 Ledizioni LediPublishing, (May 2020) (pg:136)
  - a. [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/isp\\_i\\_report\\_balcani\\_2020\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/isp_i_report_balcani_2020_0_0.pdf)
- 18) Raynell Andreychuk (Canada)Rapporteur; 21 Sep 2018; Security in the Western Balkans/ Political Committee (PC) Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships (PCNP) (pg;15)
  - a. <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2018-security-western-balkans-andreychuck-report-178-pcnp-18-e-rev1-fin>
- 19) OECD; THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solution/2020/ oecd.org
  - a. <http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf>
- 20) Vasko Magleshev, COVID-19 Puts Justice in North Macedonia on Standby/August 14.2020/ Balkaninsight
  - a. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/14/covid-puts-justice-in-north-macedonia-on-standby/>
- 21) Michael-Ross Fiorentino with Reuters • Balkans on the brink: Tense protests flood Montenegrin, Serbian and Croatian capitals/ last updated: 03/03/2019, euronews.com
  - a. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/03/podgorica-protestors-thousands-call-on-montenegro-president-ukanovic-to-resign>
- 22) Zselyke Csaky, Research Director, Europe and Eurasia/ Nations in Transit 2020
  - a. Dropping the Democratic Façade. freedomofhouse.org
  - b. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>
- 23) Aleksandar Ivković - Reports cited by Serbia in response to Freedom House show an even darker image of democracy in the country/26.05.2020/European Western Balkans
  - a. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/05/26/reports-cited-by-serbia-in-response-to-freedom-house-show-an-even-darker-image-of-democracy-in-the-country/>