

## **Western Balkans amid multipolarity and the European integration process, emergencies and territories**

OBCT/CeSPI position paper for the conference of presidents of foreign affairs committees

### **Introduction**

The European Union's enlargement path to the Western Balkans provides a frame and background to the bilateral and multilateral relations that take place between Member States and acceding countries. The emergencies that have characterised the last few months, from the pandemic to the rekindling of migratory flows through the so-called "Balkan Route", raise questions of great political importance, which may also affect the integration process into the European Union for the countries of the region.

The first two sections of this document focus on the challenges arising from these emergencies, highlighting the critical issues, but also the potential for a growing integration of the Western Balkans. Indeed, the importance of sharing on a transnational scale and the urgency to grasp the potential in place constitute the grounds for the third section, which focuses on the opportunities provided by the EUSAIR macro-regional strategy.

With its participation on an equal footing of EU Member States and acceding countries, and with its inclusive approach towards the various territorial stakeholders, the strategy could offer a specific contribution to enlargement and more generally to the shared management and enhancement of the Adriatic-Ionian region. Finally, a greater involvement of national parliaments in the strategy could make a crucial contribution to this aim.

### **1. Pandemic: Balkans, vaccines and European integration**

On December 28 of last year, Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi announced the adoption of a 70 million Euro aid package aimed at facilitating the access of Western Balkan countries to vaccines. However, three months later there is a widespread feeling in the Western Balkan countries that the European Union has abandoned them. Candidate countries were called upon to access vaccines through COVAX, the international scheme

that aims to share the vaccine even among the poorest countries, but very few doses have arrived from the EU.

Although the vaccination rate, and the vaccine supply itself, is a complex issue also for Member States, having failed to include candidate and potential candidate countries in the EU vaccination plan appears now burdensome. While the health situation in some nations of the region is dangerously getting worse, the Balkan countries sense that their expectations are being disregarded. Moreover, after the slowdown of the European integration process in the past years, there is a growing feeling that they will remain excluded.

This scenario has further enlarged the action space of powers having political and economic interests in this area, whose foreign policy moves on tracks that are alternative to those of Brussels, or even in open contradiction with the constitutive goals and values that form the basis of the European political system.

China and Russia stand out among the latter, having adopted a strategy differing from that of the Union as regards vaccines. In fact, instead of aiming to achieve the fullest possible domestic vaccination coverage in the shortest time, they have decided to use vaccines as a foreign policy tool, also in their relations with Balkan countries.

Various nations in the region are therefore acquiring doses of the Chinese Sinopharm or Sinovac vaccine or, to a lesser extent, the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. Serbia stands out among them, having secured approximately 3.5 million Chinese vaccines in all, including the doses it has already received and those that will arrive. This way it has become one of the first European countries by share of the population that has been administered at least one dose of vaccine (21%), and the first for the number of people who also received the second dose, and who are fully vaccinated (14.9%).<sup>1</sup>

Given the large amount of vaccines available in relation to the population, Serbia has decided to grant access to the vaccination also to residents of other countries in the area - should they travel to Belgrade - or donate vaccine doses to neighboring countries. The country also announced its intention to set up a factory to start production of Sinopharm in Serbia, with the help of the United Arab Emirates.

The EU's political choice could become paradoxically more complex if, due to its figures, Serbia were included among those countries whose rates exceed the EU average, which Brussels is thinking of excluding from the export of vaccines produced in Europe. This would inflame the feelings and widen the gap between the foreign policy guidelines followed by candidate countries and Brussels.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (data as at March 31, 2021)

On the other hand, it should be noted that, although the slowdown in activities suffered by European institutions originates in the intermediate steps typical of their decision-making process, and in safety protocols regarding vaccine control, their action focuses primarily on safeguarding its citizens. Whereas non-European powers often seem to pursue political and economic purposes, with their *soft power* on vaccines, placing them above the interests of their citizens. To date, Russia, for example, has only vaccinated 4.8% of its population<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans pursue aims that essentially differ from those between the latter and the other great powers: only in one case is there any reasoning on the future sharing of institutions and political space. In other cases, diplomatic relations could turn the Balkans into small satellites that revolve around the interests of their sponsors, with advantages only in cases such as this one, but often definitely less promising.

All the actors involved, including the EU countries, should keep in mind this substantial difference. In fact, by neglecting relations with the Western Balkans, the latter not only betray expectations, but also end up distorting the privileged political relationship that binds them.

On the other hand, candidates and potential candidates, while having the primary purpose of protecting the interests of their citizens also when shaping their international policy, should not waste the opportunity to firmly advance in the course of their accession. In fact, despite contingent interests, the relations of the multipolar world are not all equivalent.

## **2. The Balkan Route**

The migration route to Europe, known as the Balkan Route, is once again at the center of political and media attention in recent months, after the peak in 2015-16. The route design has often changed, based on this or that country successfully strengthening its border. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia are the non-EU countries in the area that presently find themselves managing the overwhelming majority of migrants crossing the region.

To be noted that these two countries find themselves managing thousands of migrants leaving Bulgaria and Greece and heading towards Northern Europe. This means that these two EU member states are first-entry countries. In other words, we are witnessing a reversal of EU-Balkan relations. Thus, instead of stabilizing the Western Balkans and consolidating regional democracy and human rights, the EU, given its difficulty in coherently coping with migratory pressure, faces the risk of exporting political instability to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (data as at March 31, 2021).

countries with far greater fragility, from an institutional, economic and political point of view.

Bosnia-Herzegovina, where there has been a considerable increase in migrants since 2018, has had to delegate the management of the reception to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The major problems of coordination between different government levels and between local entities prevented the country from having an assistance and integration system, even for the few refugees who obtained international protection. The situation got out of hand again last December with the fire in the Lipa camp, but it had already been at the center of international news the year before.

Similarly, Albania delegated the management of asylum seekers to the UNHCR and IOM. In Serbia, the situation is different, since the government directly manages the 19 camps located on its territory. However, even where the local reception system works, the region remains merely a transit area. Indeed, it is well known that migrants do not reach the Western Balkans to stay there.

Outsourcing migration controls to the Western Balkans cannot work, because the region is not located on the borders of the EU, but is internal to the Union, in geographical terms. The emergency in the Western Balkans would cease should the EU countries find a solution to share the burden of migrants stranded in Greece.

Moreover, migration management further complicates an already difficult situation in the Balkans. In fact, it should be recalled that countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia still have thousands of internally displaced persons to manage as a result of the wars in the 1990s. Furthermore, the Western Balkans are experiencing a strong migratory flow to EU countries. Bosnia-Herzegovina has lost 530,000 citizens between 2013 and 2019 (data from the BiH Statistics Agency) out of a population of 3.3 million. Serbia (OECD data as at December 2019) lost an average of 41,000 citizens a year between 2007 and 2016, about half a million in 11 years. This has already generated professional staff shortages in sectors such as education and health in the countries concerned, and will produce the collapse of the pension system over the next few years.

The worst risk that the EU faces, regarding the Balkan Route, is losing credibility in its political relations with candidate and potential candidate countries. On the one hand, the stalemate in the reform of the Dublin Regulation, on the other, human rights violations against migrants by a number of Member States.

### **3. The EUSAIR macro-regional strategy: enhancing the role of territories**

The Adriatic Ionian macro-regional strategy (EUSAIR), established in 2014, includes four European Union member States (Italy, Greece, Slovenia and Croatia) and five Western

Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia- Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and - from 2020 - Northern Macedonia). The recent entry of Northern Macedonia demonstrates the interest in the Balkan region strategy. Moreover, it highlights the opportunity that the last country in the Western Balkans that is still excluded – Kosovo – ought to join too.

The strategy is based on the acknowledgment of the common challenges and opportunities that characterise the Adriatic-Ionian region, which can be more effectively addressed by coordinating the implemented efforts and initiatives. Since 2014, the strategy offers a space for sharing and cooperating within the different pillars identified as priority action areas: blue growth, connectivity, environmental quality and sustainable tourism. Moreover, it adopts an inclusive approach towards different actors involved in transnational cooperation in various capacities.

The geographical coverage of the EUSAIR macro-regional strategy inevitably draws attention to the contribution that the strategy might make to reinvigorate the integration of the Western Balkans in the Union. This contribution - often mentioned in the initiative's policy documents - could take place by facilitating the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in the Balkan countries, in the areas of interest of the strategy. It could also be carried out by strengthening administrative capacity through concrete policies; by offering a framework in which different levels, processes, strategies and funds (EU and beyond) can converge; finally, by promoting strong stakeholder involvement and a participatory policy-making process, which increases governmental accountability while helping consolidate democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The contribution that EUSAIR can provide to these processes is based on a number of elements that constitute their main peculiarities. Mainly, EUSAIR centers on the involvement of EU and non-EU countries, at the same level. This way countries operate as equals, unlike what happens in the enlargement process, which, by its nature, centers on an asymmetrical relationship between the Union and the nations that wish to join it.

All the countries participating in the strategy, including those in the EU, have always been strongly aware of – and have focused on - the enlargement process, feeling therefore inclined to devote resources and strategies to it. Furthermore, EUSAIR's transnational regional dimension suggests a sense of belonging and identity for Balkan countries that goes beyond the borders of the "Western Balkans" in which they are traditionally confined in every type of analysis and representation: this way, EUSAIR can facilitate the Europeanisation process.

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<sup>3</sup> OBCT/CeSPI (forthcoming) EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) facilitating the enlargement process of Western Balkans, European Union, Service Contract n. 2020CE160AT051

Moreover, EUSAIR's action pillars center on a cooperation and capacity building approach that potentially allows a revitalised enlargement path, starting from tangible cooperation on matters of common interest, and therefore beyond its traditional logics and narratives. Finally, EUSAIR emphasises cooperation between territories, stimulating cooperation between local and regional authorities, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders at different levels. It also shows an inclusive approach that enhances the contribution of different categories of actors to transnational cooperation.

There is also a general convergence between EUSAIR's priorities and some key themes of the forthcoming EU programming period. In particular, the protection of the environment and the sustainable development of the opportunities it offers have always been lead themes within EUSAIR.

Strengthening the involvement of Parliaments in EUSAIR's activities, leveraging on closer relations with the strategy's national representatives, could greatly boost EUSAIR, increasing its impact especially in the context of enlargement. For example, in the Western Balkans, this relation would facilitate the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in matters covered by the strategy. Moreover, it could more generally lend greater political weight to the initiative, taking better advantage of the opportunities it offers.

In a context of growing international competition, EUSAIR shows us the importance of enlargement in the European future of all. For this reason, it is essential that parliamentary foreign committee representatives of the countries involved, whether they are EU members or (potential) candidates, closely monitor developments in regional relations. As elected representatives of the citizens, they act as guarantors of the transparency of political decisions.

EUSAIR provides the Western Balkans with the opportunity to participate in specific policy initiatives and to harmonise national legislation with the related *acquis*, facilitating the gradual approach to accession. The Western Balkans can greatly benefit from macro-regional cooperation, also regarding the consolidation of democratic institutions, especially thanks to the involvement of stakeholders and the centrality that EUSAIR attributes to territories. Finally, EUSAIR's effort to reconcile economic growth and the environment can contribute to European cohesion, which is seriously endangered by the pandemic, by taking action on tangible issues of great interest to citizens.

At the same time, for Member States, the political experience in the macro-region could reinforce awareness of how important regional integration is for achieving common objectives and how transnational policies are necessary. Because, whether the issue is the protection of the sea or the management of the pandemic or the migratory crisis, the Western Balkans are already an internal area of the European space.



## About the authors

**Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)** is a think tank that combines empirical research and journalism to report on the socio-political and cultural developments of six EU member states, of seven countries taking part in the EU Enlargement process, and much of post-communist Europe included in the European Neighbourhood Policy. OBCT runs the non-profit online media [www.balcanicaucaso.org](http://www.balcanicaucaso.org) and boasts a wide record of research, in-depth reporting, multimedia production, and social media campaigns. A recent publication on SEE: SITA-OBCT – ADRION 2021-2027: Analysis of the territorial challenges, needs and potentials of the Adriatic-Ionian Region and strategic options for post-2020 ADRION Programme –Interreg V-B Adriatic – Ionian Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 (Bologna - Italy, 2020)

The **Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale** – CeSPI is a research Institute specialised in policy-oriented research on various areas of international relations. It has developed strong competences in policy analysis, evaluation and capitalization of the EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood policies, macro-regions, and cross-border cooperation, with a special focus on sub-national governments, the private sector, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and diasporas. Several research projects have been devoted to the process of European enlargement to the Western Balkans producing reports and publications; the latest is the book *Al di là dell'Adriatico. L'Italia nei Balcani occidentali* (Across the Adriatic. Italy in the Western Balkans, Donzelli, Rome, 2020)