

# POLICY PAPER

## EU membership of the Western Balkan states in times of crisis: From a strategic choice to protracted inertia

Marko Stojic

- **At the Zagreb Summit in May 2020, the EU once again reaffirmed 'its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans', while the Western Balkan states pledged that EU membership is 'their firm strategic choice'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the EU adopted a revised enlargement methodology<sup>1</sup> hoping to revive the accession process, finally agreed to open membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, and proposed a new Economic and Investment Plan for this region.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the Commission in its 2020 reports<sup>1</sup> painted a grim overall picture of the state of play in the aspiring members, demonstrating a lack of their genuine and credible commitments to joining the Union.**
- **The process that began twenty years ago has not yet resulted in sustainable political and economic changes aimed at stabilising and democratising this turbulent region. Apart from North Macedonia and, to some extent, Albania that have made progress in meeting the conditions for the launch of their EU membership talks, most (potential) candidates have stagnated or regressed in implementing reforms needed to join the Union. The Commission noted that 'credible progress in the rule of law area remains a significant challenge' and that 'democratic systems in the Western Balkans are still not functioning properly', while 'urgent efforts are necessary to ensure freedom of expression and the independence of the media across the entire region'.<sup>1</sup> Although more detailed and critical in assessing the state of play in each (potential) candidate, the Commission nevertheless missed an opportunity to call things by their real name, to directly point out the areas where candidates not only made no strides but also backslid, and offer more concrete – if not punitive – measures to overcome what is now a chronic lack of progress. The Commission reports also show that there are arguably no fundamental differences between countries negotiating EU membership for years and those that are yet to start accession talks, casting doubt on how much the EU genuinely contributes to the transformation of the aspiring members and their preparation for joining the bloc.**

## Serbia and Montenegro: Frontrunners in name only

Serbia, a candidate negotiating EU membership since 2014, made no progress<sup>1</sup> in the fundamental prerequisites for its EU integration – the reform of the judiciary, freedom of expression and the public administration reform. While limited progress was made on the fight against corruption and organised crime, the functioning of its democratic institutions significantly deteriorated over the previous year. However, the Commission assessed that ‘an overall balance is currently ensured’ between progress under the rule of law, on the one side, and progress in the negotiations across chapters, on the other side.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly worrisome that Serbia continues to make little headway in politically uncontroversial areas – free movement of goods and capital, public procurement, energy, social policy and employment, consumer and health protection, and customs union – indicating that reforms in even ‘technical’ chapters now pose a series challenge. The country made good progress in some economic areas, such as company law, intellectual property law, competition and financial services, but there was not a single policy area where it attained very good progress over the previous year.<sup>3</sup>

Although the COVID-19 crisis may have hampered work on these reforms, Serbian EU accession has effectively stalled due to the country’s spiralling slide towards authoritarianism<sup>4</sup> and a lack of political will

to undertake reforms that would expose the flawed and corrosive nature of the political and economic systems nurtured by the Serbian Progressive Party since 2012. Given ‘a mocking of democracy’ in Serbia, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament even called on the EU members not to open any new chapter in the accession negotiations ‘as long as the state of democracy did not improve’.<sup>5</sup> Although formal suspension of the negotiation is highly unlikely, Serbia has so far not opened any chapter in 2020 which is itself a powerful message of those EU members that have concerns over the chronic lack of progress in this candidate country.

On the other hand, Montenegro – the most advanced candidate for EU membership – opened the last negotiating chapter in June 2020, but ‘currently no chapter meets all the requirements for closing’.<sup>6</sup> The country made no progress on freedom of expression which ‘remains a matter of serious concern’, while only limited progress was made in the area of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. There was some progress in the fight against organised crime, while there was not a single area with very good progress achieved over the previous year. However, the Commission stated that ‘Montenegro has made steady progress in negotiating chapters across the board’<sup>7</sup>, coming a long way in reforming its legal and institutional framework in the area of rule of law. Still, any further strides towards joining the Union depends on the extent to which its authorities would be ready

---

<sup>1</sup> To evaluate the progress over the previous year, the following scale was used: Backsliding, No Progress, Limited Progress, Some Progress, Good Progress and Very Good Progress.

<sup>2</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Nations in Transit 2020 – Dropping the Democratic Facade, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

<sup>5</sup> MEPs: Mocking of democracy in Serbia, stop opening negotiating chapters, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a612576/MEPs-Mocking-of-democracy-in-Serbia-stop-opening-negotiating-chapters.html>

<sup>6</sup> Montenegro 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/montenegro\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/montenegro_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

to meet the rule of law interim benchmarks, set under the chapter on the judiciary and fundamental rights.

Amid 'the deep political polarization between the opposition and the ruling parties'<sup>8</sup>, the August 2020 election resulted in the first ever change of the regime in Montenegro. The outgoing government of the Democratic Party of Socialists was not able to make the key breakthrough in the reforms having a vested interest in preventing depoliticization of the judiciary and freeing the media from governmental influence. A new government, vowed to continue EU membership talks, will have a very difficult task to make any meaningful headway in the face of strong resistance from political and economic elites, deeply entrenched corruption and cronyism, as well as internal conflicts within a very heterogeneous ruling coalition.

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo: EU membership as far off as ever**

The report on Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most damning, as this potential candidate made almost no strides over the previous year. In 2019, the Commission adopted an Opinion on Bosnian EU membership application, identifying fourteen key priorities for the country to fulfil in order to be recommended for the opening of accession negotiations. Although, 'steps have been taken in the recent months to address some of the key priorities'<sup>9</sup>, a large majority of them remained unaddressed. The country made no headway on the reform of the

judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and freedom of expression. It is the only country in the Western Balkans that the Commission assessed as backsliding over the previous year – specifically in the area of public procurement given 'the decision on preferential treatment of domestic bidders in awarding public contracts', potentially a major source of high-level corruption.<sup>10</sup> Mired in constant internal disputes among its three constitutive nations, institutionally paralysed by conflicts between its two entities, too decentralised to take on membership obligations and ruled by ethnocentric parties fuelling nationalism, Bosnia and Herzegovina was as far off as ever from meeting conditions to become an EU member.

With regards to Kosovo, overall it made limited headway on EU-related reforms. Yet, there were not as many areas with no progress as in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A potential candidate for EU membership, Kosovo made some progress in the judiciary and fundamental rights, and limited progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime and freedom of expression. Importantly, Kosovo 'benefits from a lively and pluralistic media environment'<sup>11</sup> – unlike most of its Western Balkan counterparts – while the October 2019 election was assessed as competitive, except in Kosovo Serb areas. The ramifications of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia continues to hamper both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo from making any meaningful progress in their attempts to join the Union. This is particularly the case with Kosovo which has no

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/bosnia_and_herzegovina_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kosovo\* 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/kosovo\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/kosovo_report_2020.pdf)

realistic prospect of joining the bloc until its legal status has not been resolved.

## North Macedonia and Albania: Progress against all odds

The Commission praised North Macedonia as a champion of reforms in the Western Balkans. Despite the COVID-19 crisis and an early parliamentary election, this country 'increased its efforts and continued to deliver tangible results in implementing key EU reforms'.<sup>12</sup> It made good progress in two crucial areas: judiciary and fundamental rights (by implementing the judicial reform strategy, consolidating its track record on investigating, prosecuting and trying high level corruption cases) and justice, freedom and security (by implementing the security sector and the intelligence services reforms). It made limited progress on freedom of expression, but 'the overall situation and climate in which media operates, remain generally conducive to media freedom and allow for critical media reporting'.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to other countries, 'democratic governance continued to be consolidated', while the parliament fulfilled its legislative functions and improved its role as the primary forum for constructive political dialogue. This all resulted in a long-overdue decision of the Council to open accession talks, but the commencement of the negotiations remains in limbo. A country that has changed its name to start accession negotiations is

once again blocked, this time due to unreasonable Bulgarian objections denying the existence of the Macedonian language and a national identity.<sup>14</sup>

Albania also made some strides as it 'has increased its efforts and delivered further tangible and sustainable results in the key areas'.<sup>15</sup> The justice reform has continued consistently, resulting in good progress overall. The fight against corruption and organised crime – one of the country's main weaknesses – was now assessed in positive tones as Albania made good progress. The report noted that the country's Special Prosecution and other anti-corruption institutions are now fully operational. The Commission also evaluated that 'extreme political polarisation' has somewhat eased with the ruling majority and the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition reaching an agreement to take forward the electoral reform'.<sup>16</sup> However, there has been a widespread view that the report presented a too favourable assessment of the state of play in Albania. Some EU members vowed that Albania needs to do more in regards to the functioning of the Constitutional Court and the media law, adding that 'the Commission's conclusion that almost all conditions have been met is premature'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the internal political dialogue has stalled, while the ruling party rejected the Commission's advice and to 'the dismay' of the European People's Party changed the electoral law.<sup>18</sup> As a result, although the Council decided to open accession talks

<sup>12</sup> North Macedonia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mind our language: Bulgaria blocks North Macedonia's EU path, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/17/mind-our-language-bulgaria-blocks-north-macedonias-eu-path>

<sup>15</sup> Albania 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The Netherlands wants Constitutional Court and media law prior to EU-Albania Talks, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/03/the-netherlands-wants-constitutional-court-and-media-law-prior-to-eu-albania-talks/>

<sup>18</sup> EPP letter to Rama: Refrain from voting the amendments until the Venice Commission has spoken, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/30/epp-letter-to-rama-refrain-from-voting-the-amendments-until-the-venice-commission-has-spoken/>

with Albania, the start of negotiations still hangs in the balance.

## The proper functioning of institutions and freedom of expression as elusive as ever

This year, the Commission expressed particular concern over the proper functioning of parliaments, including the conduct of free and fair elections. It noted that 'democratic systems in the Western Balkans are still not functioning properly' due to strong political polarisation, 'limited space for the oppositions' democratic control function, and opposition boycotts of elections and parliamentary work'.<sup>19</sup>

Over the reporting period, Serbia experienced the most serious backsliding in this respect. The Commission noted 'deep political polarisation' resulting in several opposition parties boycotting the parliamentary elections. This country did not address the OSCE recommendation for the improvement of the electoral process and held elections widely deemed the most problematic since 2000. The Commission stressed that 'voter choice was limited by the governing party's overwhelming advantage and the promotion of government policies by most major media outlets'.<sup>20</sup> Tensions and mistrust among political actors were also high in the run-up to the elections in Montenegro that were 'marked by undue advantage for the ruling party and unbalanced media

coverage'.<sup>21</sup> Numerous recommendations made by the OSCE also remained unaddressed, although the country made limited progress in improving parliamentary accountability, the oversight of the executive and democratic scrutiny, and the legislative-making process. In Albania, where political parties reached an agreement on electoral reform in early 2020, the ruling Socialist Party reversed its conciliating approach and unilaterally changed the electoral law arguably aimed at getting PM Edi Rama another term in office.

Moreover, the Commission singled out freedom of expression as an area where 'there has been least progress in the last year'.<sup>22</sup> It noted that 'threats, intimidation and violence against journalists are a source of serious concern',<sup>23</sup> while more efforts are needed to guarantee the independence of public service broadcasters and to promote transparency in public and private funding of the media. No country made strides on this issue, except North Macedonia where the 'political climate in which the media operates remained generally conducive to the promotion of freedom of expression'.<sup>24</sup> It is not surprising that the aspiring members did not advance in this area; the media outlets that act as mouthpieces for the regimes are the crucial levers of power of the Balkan strongmen. At the same time – in the presence of weak and fragmented opposition – the professional and independent media is oftentimes the only obstacle to the consolidation of autocratic tendencies in the region. Although the Commission repeatedly

---

<sup>19</sup> 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Montenegro 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/montenegro\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/montenegro_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> North Macedonia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf)

emphasised that 'urgent efforts are necessary to ensure freedom of expression and the independence of the media',<sup>25</sup> the local leaders are highly unlikely to address its concerns. Doing so would pull the rug from under their feet and strip away the vital source of their political power.

## Things should be called by their real name

While notably more detailed and more explicit in evaluating the lack of progress in the aspiring member, this year's report still failed to accurately portray the decline in democracy and the rule of law across the region. It particularly downplayed the severity of deterioration in Serbia. Remarkably, the report did not point out more directly that Serbia dramatically regressed in meeting the political criteria for membership, turning into a state without opposition in parliament whatsoever. Euphemisms such as 'Serbian parliament is marked by the overwhelming majority of the ruling coalition and the absence of a viable opposition' do not provide a real picture of the deep political and institutional crisis – which the Commission termed 'intense political polarisation'.<sup>26</sup> In reality, 'years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Djukanović in Montenegro have tipped those countries over the edge'<sup>27</sup>; according to all relevant organizations, they can no longer be considered democracies, but 'party free' hybrid regimes or 'electoral autocracies'.<sup>28</sup>

However, the Commission continues to shy away from calling things by their real name and from using the adequate terminology – such as 'backsliding' – to characterise political systems in the Western Balkans (unlike Turkey). It should stop tiptoeing around this issue to appease the Balkan strongmen (fearing they may turn to other non-European actors in the region), unambiguously highlight their authoritarian tendencies and discuss the concrete examples of non-democratic practices. This would crucially raise the credibility of the Union, particularly with pro-EU stakeholders, political parties and the general public. Without emphasising the depth of the problems these countries face, the Commission is only doing a great disservice to their citizens. Its diplomatic language will certainly not alter the reality that their drift towards authoritarianism become a major obstacle to EU accession.

## When EU membership talks yield inertia and stagnation

According to the reports, North Macedonia and Albania – that are not yet negotiating EU membership – paradoxically not only made more strides in the last year but were at the same or higher level of preparation overall for joining the bloc than Serbia and Montenegro which have been negotiating membership terms for years. Namely, on freedom of expression, North Macedonia and Albania got ahead achieving 'some level of preparation/were moderately

---

<sup>25</sup> 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Nations in Transit 2020 – Dropping the Democratic Facade, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

<sup>28</sup> Skoro svi relevantni međunarodni i domaći izveštaji u 2020. pokazuju pad demokratije u Srbiji, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/skoro-svi-relevantni-medjunarodni-domaci-izvestaji-u-2020-pokazuju-pad-demokratije-u-srbiji/>

prepared'<sup>29</sup>, while Serbia and Montenegro were at 'some level of preparation.' Regarding the fight against corruption, North Macedonia outpaced other countries, while on the fight against organised crime Montenegro and North Macedonia achieved 'some level of preparation/were moderately prepared', with others lagging behind. Importantly, all four Western Balkan candidates were moderately prepared with the reform of their public administration irrespective on how far they formally advanced on their EU paths. Remarkably, North Macedonia was at a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy, while Montenegro – having opened all negotiating chapters – remained moderately prepared. Despite negotiating membership terms for six and eight years respectively, there was not a single policy area in which Serbia and Montenegro were assessed as well advanced in their preparation for joining the Union.

In other words, there seem to be no fundamental differences between the candidates negotiating membership conditions and those not doing so. This raises the key question: to what extent do EU membership talks truly contribute to the transformation of these countries and their readiness to join the EU? The current EU enlargement policy appears to be less about the candidates' genuine domestic reforms and more a reflection of wider geopolitical rivalries in the region and particular interests of the most influential EU members to hasten or hinder this increasingly ill-suited policy. The revised enlargement methodology<sup>30</sup> arguably seeks to address this issue by proposing to provide tangible

rewards for countries that genuinely deliver on the reforms, while withdrawing benefits of closer integration for those stagnating or backsliding. However, it remains to be seen whether the Commission will have enough political clout to propose suspension of integration with candidates that consistently fall behind; so far, it proved to be very reluctant to do so.

## Concrete conditions and tangible rewards to boost the motivation for reforms

How to explain the varied progress of the Western Balkan countries, clearly noticeable in this year's reports? First, when the conditions and guidelines are defined clearly and unambiguously, the candidates are more likely to deliver. For instance, Albania has been conditioned to adopt the electoral reform in accordance with the concrete OSCE recommendations – ensuring transparent financing of political parties and electoral campaigns, implementation of the judicial reform, including ensuring the functioning of the Constitutional Court, as well as the establishment of the anti-corruption and organised crime specialised structures. Vaguely worded requirements such as 'Serbia needs to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and the autonomy of the prosecution'<sup>31</sup> allows considerable leeway for the local politicians in interpreting the report according to their own narrow political interests.

Second, the EU needs to provide clear and tangible rewards if the candidates forge ahead. The start of

---

<sup>29</sup> To assess the overall level of preparation, the following scale was used: Early Stage, Some Level of Preparation, Moderately Prepared, Good Level of Preparation and Well Advanced.

<sup>30</sup> Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans,

[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

accession negotiations was a clear incentive for North Macedonia and Albania to intensify reforms. Their counterparts, not having an immediate benefit in sight, made little or no strides at all. This speaks to the need for boosting the candidates' resolve to reform after the initial enthusiasm – following the opening of negotiations – wane over time. This may be done by providing intermediate incentives for countries that successfully implement reforms. As duly envisaged in the revised enlargement methodology, this may include the opening of negotiations in clusters of chapters rather than individual chapters, or 'phasing-in' to the EU policies, its market or programmes. However, the question is whether this will be compelling enough to spur the candidates into action since getting the ultimate reward – EU membership – has been a long shot for quite some time.

Third, the political will to carry out reforms proved to be vital. As the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows, clearly stated conditions and significant incentives – becoming a candidate for EU membership – do not necessarily foster domestic adjustments. The local leaders will implement reforms only to the extent that they do not jeopardise their deeply vested political and economic interests. As the stagnation of Montenegro demonstrates, when faced with a dilemma between making a breakthrough in EU integration and clinging on to power, they will certainly opt for the latter. Change can only happen if the regional leaders transcend their narrow political interests and assess that the benefits from reforms exceed the political and economic costs they are bound to pay. It seems that the current North Macedonian leadership realised that they have a stake in joining the bloc, creating the conditions for the

country to get ahead of its Balkan counterparts. However, whether this is out of the conviction that changes are good for society as a whole, or just a reflection of the fact that these initial reforms have not so far affected their particular political and economic interest, remains to be seen.

### 'It is always good to see a European Commission report'<sup>32</sup> and do nothing to address it

The Commission reports have been traditionally selectively interpreted in the region. While the authorities tend to highlight areas with at least some progress, the opposition and civil society often point to the lack of tangible headway, accusing the government of mimicking reforms. It is no surprise that two sides read the reports according to their political needs and objectives. However, the key issue is that the Commission employs overly technocratic and ambiguous language leaving room for diametrically opposed interpretations of its findings. In this way, the reports lose their purported intent and do not achieve their ultimate goal – to accurately assess the situation in (potential) candidates and motivate their authorities to step up efforts to join the Union.

This year, it was particularly noticeable that the reports no longer have nearly the political weight and significance they once had. While in the past they were eagerly anticipated and thoroughly analysed in the media and the general public, this time they were just one of many events in the candidates' dynamic political realms. Apart from Albania and North Macedonia that carefully listened out for Brussels'

---

<sup>32</sup> Vucic accepts responsibility for claims in EC report, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a658734/Vucic-accepts-responsibility-for-claims-in-EC-report.html>

reactions hoping to start negotiations with the Union, the publishing of the reports turned out to be a non-event in other countries. This shows how much the credibility and influence of the EU has weakened, but also the attitudes of local authorities towards the Commission that is no longer perceived as an authoritative actor - to the extent that its findings are not only ignored, but also disrespected or ridiculed.

Echoing visible disappointment with the reports, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić noted with heavy sarcasm that that 'it is always good to see a European Commission report'.<sup>33</sup> Referring to Serbian close ties with non-European actors and the Commission's warning that 'any use of force [against demonstrators expressing dissatisfaction with the government] must be measured and proportionate at all times'<sup>34</sup>, he said: 'The list of my sins is long, and I accept them. I insist on cooperation with Russia and China, I said no one should do anything to the protesters before they take over an institution, they don't have to write that down, I accept it'.<sup>35</sup> Demonstrating unwillingness to understand, let alone address, the Commission's concerns, Vučić ironically concluded that 'there is criticism of me saying that I used my position as president and won votes from my party list of candidates [...] but I have accepted responsibility and I am prepared to face the consequences'. His media advisor was more explicit in rebuking the report noting that it was unfair, meaningless and

hypocritical<sup>36</sup>, whereas PM Ana Brnabić argued that 'some of the assessments are too arbitrary, while others are being constantly repeated without giving concrete examples'.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, EU integration minister interpreted the report as a 'a strong call for Serbia to accelerate the reform process'.<sup>38</sup> What may be seen a response to the Commission's call for 'a transparent and inclusive dialogue with political parties and other relevant stakeholders'<sup>39</sup>, the authorities resorted to an unusual invention. They created a new dubious Ministry for Social Dialogue, arguably a smokescreen designed to disguise the lack of real intention to hold an over-due social dialogue.

The reports did not stir up much attention in Montenegro, preoccupied with the first ever transition of government. Its president noted that the report 'is an expected and realistic view of the partners' and stressed that it is important 'to see how reforms can be accelerated'<sup>40</sup> without acknowledging that he himself may be the reason for the stagnation. Although the evaluation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most damning since this country made no strides over the previous year, its presidency remarkably assessed that 'if we work at the pace shown in the last few months, the country can get candidate status in the summer of the next year'.<sup>41</sup> Still, being aware of the real situation, a Serbian member of the presidency ironically noted that he is

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Vucic accepts responsibility for claims in EC report, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a658734/Vucic-accepts-responsibility-for-claims-in-EC-report.html>

<sup>36</sup> Vasiljević: Izveštaj EK nije fer, besmisao i licemerje, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vasiljevic-izvestaj-ek-nije-fer-besmisao-i-licemerje/>

<sup>37</sup> Brnabic says European Commission assessment arbitrary, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a658561/Brnabic-says-European-Commission-assessment-arbitrary.html>

<sup>38</sup> J. Joksimović: Report – call for acceleration of reforms because Serbia is counted on, <https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/news/1312/189/335/details/j-joksimovic-report-call-for-acceleration-of-reforms-because-serbia-is-counted-on/>

<sup>39</sup> Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Đukanović: Tranzicija vlasti protiče bez problema, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/djukanovic-tranzicija-vlasti-protice-bez-problema/jw5k0wp>

<sup>41</sup> Dodik u Briselu: "Za sve što ne valja ja sam kriv", <https://www.dw.com/bs/dodik-u-briselu-za-sve-%C5%A1to-ne-valja-ja-sam-kriv/a-55223121>

'guilty of everything that is wrong', while a Croatian one was more expressive finding excuses for the country's failure stating that 'I can assume my share of responsibility because I love my country and I am willing to sacrifice for it'.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, the Commission reports demonstrate that most leaders in the region have not been willing to sacrifice for the sake of joining the EU, and even less so while the Union is in crisis. If they are serious about bringing their countries closer to the EU, love for their countries would not suffice. It would take deeds – difficult but resolute decisions and political courage to break the deadlock between necessary societal changes and vested interests that only a few of them have shown so far.

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.