

# REPORT

## EU enlargement during the coronavirus crisis

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2020  
Online stream

- **The panel discussion titled “EU enlargement during the Coronavirus crisis” was organised by the Think Visegrad in Brussels platform and took place on Thursday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. Due to the special circumstances related to the Coronavirus pandemic, the debate was held on the online platform Zoom and broadcasted on the Facebook page of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. The panellists focused on the implications of the Covid-19 health crisis on the EU enlargement policy in Western Balkans. In light of recent developments, such as the introduction of a revised enlargement methodology and the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, experts reflected on the future perspectives of the region after the pandemic.**

The welcome words were delivered by Zuzana Stuchlíková (Head of Brussels Office, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy). The discussion was moderated by Tomáš Strážay (Director, Slovak Foreign Policy Association). The panel featured Vladimír Bilčík (Member of the European Parliament, EPP, Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee), Jana Juzová (Research Fellow, EUROPEUM) and Tomasz Żornaczuk (Head of Central Europe Department and Senior Research Fellow on Western Balkans, PISM). More than 60 people followed the live stream and overall the video recorded over 1 900 views.

Mr Strážay opened the event by highlighting the interest that surrounds the topic of the EU enlargement, while at the same time wondering how the Coronavirus will affect on the future of the process in the Western Balkans. The debate was structured in three parts: an initial discussion on the impact of the current crisis on the region, followed by an analysis of the specifics of the six Western Balkans’ countries, with the last block focusing on the role of the Visegrad countries as supportive partners in the enlargement.

The first speaker was Mr Bilčík who discussed the possible destabilisation of the Western Balkans’ region due to the outbreak of Covid-19. On the one hand, he stated that the crisis has destabilised the region as well as the entire continent with consequences that are political,



economic, social and with an even wider spread of disinformation and anti-EU propaganda by the local media. On the other hand, as a Member of the European Parliament, he said that the European Union remains fully committed to the region and has already supported the countries in mitigating the effects of the virus. Economically speaking, the Commission has released emergency measures and offered extra macro-financial assistance (about €3 billions) to the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, there still is much concern over the management of democratic institutions in these countries with regards to the possibility of acts that would go against the people's freedoms and to their commitment towards the EU. In this respect, Ms Juzová added that the support for the EU membership in the area will be affected by the current events depending on how the Union will manage to position itself inside the region. On the top of this, the issue of communication remains crucial and poses challenges for the Union: in Serbia, for example, the assistance provided by the European institutions has been portrayed less compared to the aid coming from Russia and China.

A question posed by the audience asked the panellists to address the topic of the violations of human rights during the Covid-19 and how the latter could represent an excuse for state control in new democracies as the Balkans. Mr Żornaczuk answered by stating that the consequences of the virus on such themes are to be seen in every democracy, whether strong or weak, Balkans included. Mr Bilčík added that as concerns exist over the state of democracy in these countries, this is a topic current discussion in the Parliament, with Western Balkans high on the EP's agenda.

The second part of the panel focused on the possible consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on the new enlargement methodology introduced in February, 2020. Mr Bilčík welcomed the new methodology as a step towards a more unified attitude of the EU about the enlargement, thus creating better prospects. Ms Juzová agreed to welcome the revised methodology, despite the fact that she admits it is ambitious and it still remains to be put into practice.

Nevertheless, it could be particularly beneficial if the EU was able to combine the procedure with a comprehensive response to the Covid-19. On the contrary, Mr Żornaczuk expressed a more sceptical view regarding the outcomes of the revise methodology. He judged it as a logical step but his doubts remain on the achievements, especially in areas like Serbia and Montenegro. To respond, Ms Juzová argued that although she agrees that some aspects of the procedure remain problematic, whether results will be achieved or not depends more on the political will of the government rather than on its effectiveness. Regarding the new provisions coming with the revised methodology, Mr Bilčík stressed the positive greater emphasis put on the issue of the Rule of Law which is now at the centre of focus of the European Institutions. New guarantees are provided on the topic, yet he agrees that the Union needs to act more politically and be more politically active on the ground and in the region, not simply in Brussels.

The debate then moved on discussing the postponement of the elections in Serbia and Macedonia, wondering how the Covid-19 will impact on the results in terms of more nationalisation or deeper commitment to the EU. According to Mr Żornaczuk it is too early to estimate this as it is a perspective that depends highly on how the crisis will develop especially economically. In this regard, Mr Bilčík reaffirmed a commitment by the EU Institutions that are aware of the crucial importance of the subject, as politics mustn't be guided by instincts. Finally, Ms Juzová called for a more concrete strategy and a structured approach by the Union, as she envisaged positively the possibility of EU integration for the Western Balkans countries moving together towards this common goal.

The final block of the panel was dedicated to the role of the Visegrád countries in the EU enlargement policy. The main topic of discussion was whether V4 countries can be judged as reliable partners for the Western Balkans and to what extent they might work in favour of the accession process. In this respect, Żornaczuk addressed the major presence of the V4 in the area on the basis of first and foremost the case of Poland, where the several meetings



with prominent personalities from the Balkans give evidence of the Polish attention towards these states. The same was highlighted by Bilčík: the commitment coming from the Visegrad group is real, however he points out that in order to achieve positive results for the enlargement policy the V4 must also act in cooperation with other EU partners. Mr Juzová agreed on this last argument and called for a greater cooperation with Western European countries such as Germany and France: a better communication and coordination with them would provide the V4 with the opportunity to truly establish themselves as a constructive partner in this domain.

To sum up, although the premises for the EU's commitment towards the Western Balkans remain positive, the outbreak of the Coronavirus crisis has certainly come with difficulties to address. The future of the enlargement policy in the region is going to be determined on the basis of the political, economic and social consequences of the Covid-19, with effects that will be seen for example in the future elections in Serbia and North Macedonia. Nevertheless, if the European Union manages to show its commitment and to be present on the ground, there is a positive outlook for the accession of some countries in the region.