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A Case for Positive Impact in the Western Balkans: Promoting Circular Migration

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The 2017 State of the Union address by President Jean-Claude Juncker suggested a ‘freeze’ of the European perspective for the Western Balkans, and it is 15 years since the last European Union- Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki. But in early 2018 the region returned to the European agenda.

In February, the Commission published a paper entitled “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”. Member states reacted to this in different ways. The Gymnich meeting following the Commission’s communication was possibly the moment of truth for many, both in the Western Balkans and in Europe: the debates among some of the key member states showed that setting dates for the next enlargement is not an option in the current societal circumstances in the EU. With many European societies divided on basic questions of values and goals of integration, pretending that the enlargement story can continue as business as usual was no longer viable. Two months later the Commission adopted its annual Enlargement Package, including seven individual reports, which reiterated the recommendation to the Council to open negotiations with Macedonia and to add Albania to the group. The difficult General Affairs Council debate this week (26 June) indeed produced an outcome which was positive to the extent possible (opening of negotiations with Macedonia and Albania in mid-2019) but also demonstrated the limits of pre-accession process and tools internally. This, in turn, has led to certain disappointment in the Western Balkans about the possible level and pace of political integration with the EU; but it also has opened up more avenues for intra-regional cooperation.

Stability has become the key word, rather than enlargement, and connectivity and security the major paradigms of EU member states for working with the region in the coming years. It was therefore no surprise that the Sofia Agenda produced as a result of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in May was, compared to the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, much less optimistic in its political message, which was not relying anymore on the so-called constructive ambiguity. The Sofia Agenda instead focused on concrete projects related to infrastructure, energy, digital connectivity, and economic regionalism. The upcoming London Summit within the Berlin plus process framework will further develop and interpret this agenda.

In the meantime, the EU’s increased attention to the region, combined with internal political shifts in some of the countries of the region, have provided for (unexpected) positive developments. Macedonia has signed a Good Neighbourly Relations Agreement with Bulgaria, and Skopje found a solution to a 27-year-old bilateral dispute with Athens.

These achievements serve as a positive signal towards the remaining bilateral disputes in the region, the resolution of which is a clear requirement in the enlargement strategy. They will inevitably put pressure on Serbia to make progress on the recognition of Kosovo, should it not want to lag behind its neighbours on the European path.

And, while border disputes and long-lasting bilateral arguments seem to have reignited in the past five years because of the growing ethnicisation of politics domestically, which external actors (mainly Russia, but also Turkey) have exploited, the perception of stability and perception in the Western Balkans is tainted by one major issue: emigration. Boosted by declining demographics (with the exception of Kosovo and Albania), brain drain creates an additional emotional accent of hopelessness and low expectations for the future in domestic politics. Together with notorious rule of law issues, this leads to a deterioration of the business and investment climate – and triggers a self-fulfilling prophecy. And because migration is the elephant in the Balkan politicians' cabinets and town halls, yet drives the public imagination towards a less secure future for the region, it is important to pay special attention to the issue. It is a mirror image of the (lack of) success in social reforms (health, education), economy, judiciary, and politics, and it may enhance some of the negative trends in the societies in question.

From a European perspective, migration from the Balkans constitutes an additional challenge within the already complicated migration/relocation/integration debate within the EU. It was against migrants from the Western Balkans that Viktor Orbán started building his then-famous wall in 2014, long before Syrians, Iraqis, and Africans had made their way into Europe in a significant wave. It was the group of around 7,000 Albanian economic immigrants in France that firmed up Emmanuel Macron's position on starting accession negotiations. Islam and organised crime had come to mind in conjunction with the social assistance element, and had overshadowed the recent achievements by Albania on vetting judges and de facto dismantling its Constitutional Court. Migration from the Western Balkans to Western Europe has contributed to growth in the richest part of the continent, but it has also enhanced some of the prejudices and fears about the region – or some of its citizens – coming closer to the EU.

According to a recent Regional Cooperation Council survey, nearly one in two respondents in the Western Balkans have contemplated leaving their economy and looking for a job abroad. This is probably the single worst indicator of the state of affairs in the region. The greatest share of respondents who gave this answer were from Bosnia and Herzegovina (50 percent), both women and men, many highly educated. Annually, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia (an EU member state) lose around 40,000 people. The size of this emigration is best understood when comparing the trends. The worldwide share of the sourced population in countries living overseas is only about 3 percent, but in the Western Balkans the rate is 31.2 percent. In other words, 1 in 4 people who identify as Albanian or Kosovar are living outside of their countries. The trend has become especially worrying in the past five years.

The Western Balkans' hoped-for convergence with the EU – a transition establishing legal, economic, and social conditions comparable to those in member states – has never taken place to the extent of people's expectations. This has resulted in a new and massive wave of emigration, including the brain drain migration of highly skilled individuals. Moreover, we

cannot overlook the effect that *stabilocracy* has on the societies in the region. This is the notion whereby the region attracts attention and prompts action in EU capitals only when there is a potential threat to stability. Meanwhile, deterioration of democratic processes, weakening checks and balances, and repression of the media and civil society are overlooked. This approach benefits and consolidates an ever-growing pool of autocratic leaders in the Western Balkans, creating a situation on the ground which incentivises people to leave.

Record highs in the emigration of qualified people have immediate consequences for the region – particularly in the public sector, as this can cause citizens to panic that they will be unable to access adequate services. One national medical workers' association reports on the alarming number of specialised doctors (around 300) departing Bosnia and Herzegovina annually. Sixty-nine percent of lecturers, assistants, and researchers working in Macedonia's higher education system say they would consider leaving the country to seek new employment opportunities, and 20 percent of them have already applied for a job abroad. The OECD forecasts that Serbia will lose around \$9 billion as a direct result of brain drain in the science, technology, and innovation sectors.

The Commission has pointed out that the brain drain could well be the most urgent issue to be addressed in the region, but the national-regional debate on this matter is completely missing and there are no realistic, viable, and sustainable policy measures to tackle it. Having in mind that emigration is often generated by labour market demand outside the region, there is little reason to think that the departure of highly skilled people will stop any time soon. On the contrary, given the ageing population in the EU, it will even accelerate. The only realistic way for governments to address this issue in a timely manner is to promote circular migration, where the countries of the Western Balkans could still benefit from mobility, but have an option of bringing home skills, knowledge, and ideas in an institutionalised way.

Circular migration is arguably the only force that can disrupt the worrying trend of people leaving the region and, no matter how difficult this conversation will be, it must take place within the regional context. At its core, the EU is about mobility. As such, the organisation may resurrect national borders or embrace greater mobility in future. Past experience has shown that even closing borders cannot prevent people from migrating. In the latter case, the EU should support mobility by using existing platforms to connect labour markets, clearly communicate employment demand and opportunities abroad, and promote circular migration by launching programmes that target professionals.

The EU's political and economic leverage, coupled with its well-established cooperation mechanisms in dozens of Western Balkans initiatives, allows it to offer guidance to governments in the region, and to integrate mutually beneficial measures into migration policies. The sheer number of people leaving the region – and its effects on local economies – demands that the organisation structure its approach to migration assistance. Dozens of cooperation frameworks provide a unique platform in this effort – particularly in building capacity in science, research, and technology, which will be most economically beneficial in the short term and motivate people to stay.

The undertaking should also involve labour markets and employment partnership schemes, taking advantage of the economic entwinement of EU and Western Balkans markets.¹ Despite EU member states' differing views on the development of the common labour market, those that have a demand for and capacity to absorb migrant workers – especially Germany and Sweden, but also the Netherlands and Slovenia – should openly support circular migration, and encourage both other EU and Western Balkans economies to participate in it. Member states could do more to promote circular migration as part of their ongoing pursuit of European approximation. This project is likely to unite member states in their efforts to formulate long-term economic and security strategies on the Western Balkans, given that they aim to bring prosperity to the region and eventually offer EU membership to countries there.

If this is not done in a timely way, a constructive approach to emigration will remain in doubt for as long as the issue continues to be discussed as strictly a moral and political crisis.

ECFR will continue to propose relevant and unique sets of policies constructed as a regional platform for the promotion and implementation of circular migration.

The Netherlands, along with other member states and EU institutions, should develop an improved understanding of what concrete measures would work in specific contexts and sectors and how regional actors would respond to them.

Given that the EU is already committing resources to the Western Balkans, it would benefit from opening further channels of communication between governments and institutions that can facilitate migration. Its immediate goal needs to be an open discussion about cooperation in the healthcare and education sectors, lest the departure of large numbers of skilled workers from the region damage societies there in the long term.

Tackling the migration challenge is difficult but not impossible. It has to happen within an open dialogue between publics and decision-makers (probably as a result of a public campaign), with political will for reforms, and well-designed policies. For all the reasons outlined above, this would be mutually beneficial for the Western Balkans and the EU.

Targeted measures for the promotion and implementation of the circular migration are needed, adapted to specific context/sector and involving key regional actors. Given that the Netherlands is already committing resources to the Western Balkans, it would benefit from opening further channels of communication between governments and institutions that can facilitate migration. The goal should be, through an open discussion about cooperation in the healthcare and education sectors, to develop policies for curbing the departure of large numbers of skilled workers from the region, which would damage societies there in the long mobilisation of civic society and push on governments to open

¹ Given that the EU accounts for around 75 percent of Western Balkans trade, and Western European banks control between 75 percent and 90 percent of the region's banking sector, the more organised and somewhat novel financial structures that emigration flows create could improve Western Balkans economies.

up the question of brain drain in a well informed way. A media and think-tanks led campaign would prepare the grounds for creating a regional policy platform circular migration. ECFR is working on a detailed project outline for such a platform.

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