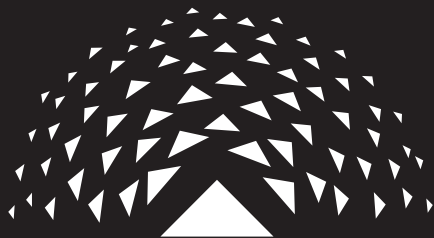




**KKI**

**4:1**



**What Can Be Expected  
in the Western Balkans  
in 2020?**

INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

# KKI 4:1

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*In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same questions concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "What can be expected in the Western Balkans in 2020?"*

## **FERENC NÉMETH**

Uncertainties will characterise the new year for the Western Balkans. Political turbulences and structural challenges will keep the countries occupied, while it might be difficult for the region to achieve significant progress in EU enlargement in 2020.

Several countries will hold parliamentary elections that can lead to prolonged coalition-buildings (in North Macedonia) and further political polarisation. Where elections are not likely to shake up the political landscape (in Montenegro and Serbia), long-lasting anti-government protests will echo the rising dissatisfaction towards the status quo. Furthermore, the so-called "[mini Schengen](#)" initiative will result in limited achievements in this year; meanwhile, it may only give floor to new political cleavages [between countries](#). Due to the unforeseen nature of these developments, societal and structural problems of the region will be side-lined once again.

The decreasing trust in political and judicial institutions as well as the systematic problems (weak rule-of-law, high level of corruption and organised crime, lack of media freedom) will continue to form a gap between politics and society. The high rate of unemployment and the lack of a credible future will amplify the outflow of (young) skilled people and will result in serious demographic issues. The insecurities arising from an unclear EU perspective will worsen the above-mentioned problems: the European Union might not be able to use its normative power to initiate further internal reforms in order to strengthen democratic values.

The EU–Western Balkans relations will still be defined by the political (and psychological) impacts of the [French veto](#), the discussions about a [new accession methodology](#) as well as the United Kingdom's [departure](#) from the EU. Given these circumstances, the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union cannot bring major progress in enlargement. Zagreb can nevertheless keep the Western Balkans on the agenda and push for some long-due rewards; namely, for the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Visa liberalisation with Kosovo, however, will most likely to be linked to the resumption of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue which is unlikely to take place under the Croatian Presidency.

The biggest challenge for the EU is maintaining its credibility in the region. The new European Commission seems more engaged and ambitious towards enlargement than its [predecessor](#). Creating a positive atmosphere by having a pro-enlargement President of the Commission and a proactive Commissioner



for Neighbourhood and Enlargement is essential, however, the whole process will continue to be highly politicised by the Member States in the European Council. Nonetheless, the strong support of the V4 countries for the region's European perspective will remain constant.

Political and societal developments in the Western Balkans suggest that 2020 will not be the year for major achievements. The missed and long-awaited rewards from the EU – due to its own uncertainties – will remain limited; thus, the upcoming months will bring more insecurities both within the region and from the EU too.

## **ANDRÁS BRAUN**

It is never easy to predict what will happen in the Western Balkan region, but one can be sure: 2020 is going to be an intensive year for the region and the EU as well.

Spring 2020 will start with important elections. Parliamentary elections will be held in Serbia and North Macedonia. According to the latest [polls](#), there is little chance that the Serbian opposition will challenge the incumbent Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), even though protests against President Aleksandar Vučić might continue. Besides the demonstration of the civil society, the European institutions also expressed their [concerns](#) regarding the state of democracy in the country. If Belgrade wants to accelerate the EU accession process, the government has to react to some of these demands, to avoid any kind of [electoral crisis](#). Also in spring, early [elections](#) will take place in North Macedonia, and unlike in Belgrade, the right-wing opposition there has a real chance to beat the SDSM coalition. The VMRO–DPMNE might play the “identity card” as Hristijan Mickoski's party accused the Zoran Zaev-led government of betraying the national interest by changing the name according to the Prespa Agreement. The third parliamentary election of the year will be held in Montenegro, most probably in autumn. Milo Đukanović's DPS has to face not only [discontent citizens](#) but also the Serbian nationalist opposition. Therefore, analysts [expect](#) that the governing party will refer to the national identity in the campaign. Besides the parliamentary elections, an important municipal election will be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the citizens of Mostar will finally have the chance to elect their city council. Although we cannot expect a “Western Balkan Spring”, these elections might cause a bit of a headache to longstanding leaders of the region. In addition, nationalist rhetoric used in the campaign periods can fuel the already existing regional tensions.

In terms of regional conflicts, it is worrying that the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue was put on hold, while the recent [church dispute](#) between Serbia and Montenegro can intensify the regional tensions. Therefore, the EU has to remain the main mediator and has to encourage the leaders to find appropriate solutions as soon as possible. After the [French veto](#) last year, some feared that the EU has turned its back on the Balkans, but fortunately, it does not seem to

be the case. The new European Commission supports the start of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, besides accelerating the accession process with Montenegro and Serbia. The [Croatian EU Presidency supports](#) the ambitious efforts of the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell. In any way, the Commission and the Member States have to intensify their communication. To that end, the commissioner might propose a new methodology for the enlargement process and if it pleases Paris, Skopje and Tirana will receive the green light in May at the Zagreb Summit. A result-oriented approach that would combine technical and political elements would certainly increase the predictability of the enlargement perspective.

Besides enlargement, it is going to be interesting to observe the EU's role when it comes to regional security and counterbalancing the growing influence of the external powers, such as Russia, China, or even Turkey. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [described](#) the Commission as a geopolitical one, still, at this moment, it would be hard to believe that European security can be guaranteed without the transatlantic alliance. The [appointment](#) of the two special envoys to the Western Balkans shows that the United States of America wants to [re-engage](#) with the region. Here, the question rises whether Brussels and Washington can [harmonise their policies](#). Increasing resilience in the Western Balkans in 2020 is of utmost importance since non-European powers are not expected to abandon their influence in the region.

## **PÉTER DOBROWIECKI**

The year 2019 was a turbulent one for the Western Balkan region with the unsuccessful attempt to open the EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia by the European Council being the negative highlight of the year – a decision that most probably will continue to be the source of negative spillover in the Western Balkans if not addressed clearly by the European Union in 2020.

Despite the setback, the integration of the Western Balkan states into the European cooperation framework is still an open question and it will remain one of the major discussion points in European foreign policy in 2020. The new EU Commission's declared priorities, Croatia's first EU Presidency (followed by the German Presidency in the second part of the year) and the upcoming EU–Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May 2020 all indicate a prolonged, high-level discussion regarding the possible future integration of the region. However, with the [ongoing uncertainty](#) surrounding a possible compromise between EU Member States regarding the future format, pace and level of EU enlargement (most notably between France and Germany), the chances for a decisive breakthrough remain limited.



This continuous political limbo can have a devastating effect on pro-EU parties and groupings throughout the region, while it will also contribute to the deepening of the ongoing political crises in a number of Western Balkan states. Domestic political uncertainty will continue to be a key issue in the region with no well-defined solution in sight to resolve the ongoing governmental deadlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Albania. In Kosovo, although elections took place in October 2019, Albin Kurti and his *Vetëvendosje* party has [yet to agree](#) with his potential coalition partners about the composition of a new government. The protracted process of government formation raises questions over the stability of the [possible new](#) Kosovar government, as the country might face an early election for the second time in six months.

Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia will all have parliamentary elections this year. As partial or complete oppositional boycott cannot be ruled out, social divisions might further deteriorate. The North Macedonian elections in April 2020 will be especially crucial, as the government of Zoran Zaev aims to retain voter support despite the lack of progress towards EU membership. The outcome will have a big influence on whether Skopje will maintain its agenda focusing on EU membership, or will the opposition, in case of an election victory, steer the country's foreign policy towards a less EU-oriented direction – a path that other regional states might also find alluring in the absence of a clear European alternative. On the other hand, with the region's EU accession roadmap hanging in an air of uncertainty, North Macedonia's official accession to NATO in 2020 as the alliance's 30<sup>th</sup> member state might be one of the few clearly positive messages this year for the supporters of the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic integration.

The appointment of United States Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell as special envoy for the currently stalled Belgrade–Pristina dialogue (just a month following the appointment of Matthew Palmer as US special representative for the Western Balkans) showcases a strong intent from the Trump administration to facilitate the restart of the negotiations between the Serbian and Kosovar governments. It remains to be seen, whether the United States' [reengagement](#) in the region will have the sufficient continuous political support and the strategic focus required for lasting [progress](#) to be made. A more proactive US diplomatic presence in the region could also act as a motivating [factor](#) for the appointment of the EU's own special representative for the Western Balkans, or the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue specifically.

## **ANNA OROSZ**

**T**he European Union missed several opportunities in 2018 and 2019 to strengthen its leverage in the Western Balkans. In 2020, an even more turbulent year could be expected as elections will take place in many Western Balkan countries which can further increase domestic and interstate tensions.

After the [decision of the European Council in October 2019](#), it is the task of the new [European Commission to prepare a new methodology for EU enlargement](#) that could please all EU Member States, particularly France and that can break the deadlock in the accession process of the Western Balkans. The time frame makes this task quite challenging as in the ideal case the Member States should agree before the European Council meeting in March. The Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU put the Western Balkans' EU integration process high on its agenda, but their ambitions might face tough obstacles. The second chance is to have a decision in June that could be prepared on the EU–Western Balkans Summit in May in Zagreb.

But a decision in June might be too late. [Snap elections](#) will be held in mid-April in North Macedonia and the Council's decision can have a major impact on the popularity of the governing social democrats and the former prime minister, Zoran Zaev. The start of accession talks would justify the steps made by the government to change the country's constitutional name. A negative decision or the postponement of the decision could underscore the critics of the opposition, although it is unlikely that the VMRO–DPMNE would annul the agreement if they get into power.

The decision regarding North Macedonia will affect the attitude of the Serbian decision-makers as well: is it worth risking popularity for normalising relations with Kosovo if there would be no progress towards EU membership? The answer is likely to be no, and before the parliamentary elections there will not be any party in Serbia that would foster ending the [campaign against Kosovo's recognition](#). In addition, there is no government in Kosovo at the moment which Belgrade could negotiate with. And if Albin Kurti and his party, the *Vetëvendosje* manage to form a government, the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue will not be on the first on its [priority list](#). Kurti made it clear that he would like to establish first a functioning state administration, the agreement on the withdrawal of 100 percent tariffs on products from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and strengthening public support for the negotiations with Serbia could come later. Consequently, a rapid closing of this source of conflict is unlikely, which allows Moscow to stay on the playground too.

Opening the accession negotiations with Albania is also doubtful. Political parties in Albania are unwilling to reach a compromise even if it jeopardises the EU perspective of the country. Many decision-makers in the Western European Member States would be relaxed if the EU does not start the accession talks with Albania, which might lead to decoupling the accession process of Skopje and Tirana. Such step could have further security implications, including strengthening rhetoric about Greater Albania.

The Serbian parliamentary elections will not bring any essential change into domestic political dynamics. At the same time, a credible EU perspective is inevitable to foster reforms that could facilitate less biased circumstances for the opposition. Further pressure might be expected from Croatia chairing the Council of the EU which might use its position to reach progress in bilateral debates with Serbia.

But real progress could be only reached if Berlin and Paris can agree on the future of the enlargement process. This might be hindered by the overstuffed

agenda of the EU: the Member States should reach an agreement on the multi-annual financial framework, putting an end to Brexit, reach a compromise on various policies (Cohesion Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, migration, etc.). Furthermore, other international security challenges like the increasing tension between Iran and the United States of America might draw attention away from the region again and such situation might be abused by other external actors, including Russia and China.