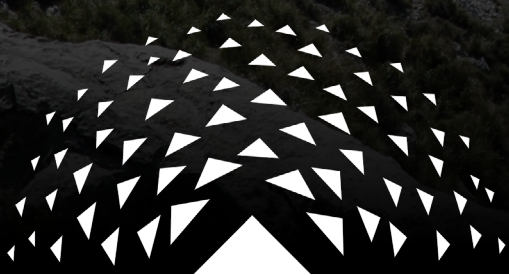




**KKI**

**4:1**



What Can Be Expected  
in the Western Balkans in 2022?



# KKI 4:1

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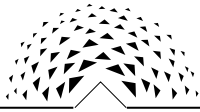
In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four experts give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue our topic is *“What can be expected in the Western Balkans in 2022?”*

## JULIANNA ÁRMÁS

Apparently we do not learn from our mistakes and try [again](#) and [again](#) to predict what to expect in the Western Balkans next year. While the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic would have been difficult to predict two years ago, our expectations were more accurate last year. Yet this success is bittersweet: the year was dominated by the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while in the field of EU integration there has been no breakthrough, as predicted. It must be acknowledged, however, that it is not possible to anticipate twists and turns like the spring [non-paper\(s\)](#) and their regional implications.

From my point of view, the EU's enlargement process has stalled and will certainly remain so for some time to come. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that the EU is in constant crisis management, be it the COVID-19 pandemic or regional conflicts, which makes it impossible to focus on a long-term strategy. On the part of the EU, this is reflected in its reactive attitude towards the Western Balkans: as there is no conflict zone in the Balkans that would keep the region on the EU agenda on a lasting basis, it will be more attentive. On the other hand, there is a lack of will on the part of the Member States for EU enlargement. In the absence of a credible perspective, Euroscepticism is expected to continue to grow, especially among the younger generations, as is the rise of great powers. Therefore, it would also be important to start intergovernmental conferences with Albania and North Macedonia as soon as possible, which draws the attention to Bulgaria, the current vetoing country. The attitude of the Kiril Petkov government to the Bulgarian-Macedonian debate is noticeably [different from that of its predecessor](#), but after the protracted domestic political crisis, political consolidation will become much more important, so the resolution remains questionable.

It is a question how the French EU Presidency, which begins in January, can, if not manage, but respond to some of these challenges. The Western Balkans is not one of the [priorities](#) of the Presidency program, nor is it a part of the Conference on the Future of Europe initiated by Emmanuel Macron, although the French president has also [covered](#) the Western Balkans in his presentation of the Presidency program, albeit in a more abstract way. As he has stated, “the European prospects of the countries need to be clarified”. However, given France's [previous](#) position on the enlargement of the Western Balkans, Macron's statement may not have a favourable outlook. It should also be noted that the French elections in April are likely to occupy Macron's attention. The program plan of the Czech Presidency,



which will start in July, is even more ambitious, with the prospect of [announcing](#) the date of EU accession for Montenegro and Serbia. Although announcing the date of accession depends more on political will than on fully meeting the EU expectations, looking at either the current trends in the aspiring member states or the European Commission's 2021 country reports, the likelihood of such a statement is low.

It is easy to acknowledge from within the European Union that no breakthrough is expected for the states of the Western Balkans in 2022. It is a fact that a credible enlargement perspective is still lacking, but this does not mean that the EU is not present in the region. However, as long as the resources provided by the EU are not visible, the influence of the community will remain negligible, and Russia, China, or Turkey will be able to emerge as increasingly prominent players, regardless of whether they lag significantly behind in terms of financial assistance, international trade balance, or investments. Meanwhile, the [perception](#) of the EU among the citizens of the Western Balkans is deteriorating; one third of Bosnians, Macedonians, and Serbs believe that their country will never join the European Union. The most striking change has been observed in North Macedonia in the past year: in 2020, 25 per cent of citizens were no longer trusting in a future EU integration, which rose to 31 per cent in 2021. Given the events of recent years, this should not come as a surprise, and an increase in these rates can also be expected in the future.

## **PÉTER DOBROWIECKI**

In the past year the political limelight remained on the Western Balkans, alas mostly for all the wrong reasons. The magnitude of internal and external factors affecting the stability and the further European integration of the region once again overshadowed some of the day-to-day successes attained in 2021. The problems emerging from the ongoing and unresolved disputes in most Western Balkan states (the repeatedly stalled Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the political instability and turmoil in Bosnia and Hercegovina, the protracted and disruptive debate between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and the widespread presence of [corruption](#), just to name a few) have added to the [mostly](#) grave effects of the still ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in rather slim possibilities for optimistic scenarios in 2022.

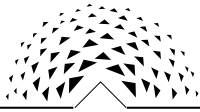
As expected, the 2021 EU-Western Balkan Summit held under the Slovenian EU Presidency in Brdo merely reflected the [current state of affairs](#) in Europe. The lack of unified political will within the EU favouring future enlargement resulted in a politically bleak reaffirmed commitment for the six Western Balkan countries to join the union, while at the same time the EU has refrained from starting accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The implementation of the ongoing financial engagements, the (planned) aligning of regional and EU transition goals, and most notably the proposed EUR 30 billion Economic and Investment [Plan](#) give the EU some tangible presence in the region; however, in light

of last year's events, political indecisiveness could hamper the EU's efforts in 2022 as well. The signs for this can be easily seen for example in the expected approach of the upcoming [French](#) and [Czech](#) Presidencies of the EU in 2022. The programs planned by the two successive Presidencies differ rather significantly when it comes to the European future offered to the Western Balkans. This indecisiveness comes at a time when the Western Balkans might need a unifying guiding force (e.g. European integration) even more than before. An all-encompassing solution for the deepening political strife within Bosnia and Hercegovina is highly unlikely, but a unified European (and ideally American) approach is more than required to halt the rapidly [deteriorating processes](#) that by now cast a shadow over the upcoming general elections in October 2022 and even endanger the statehood of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, without international engagements heralding mutually beneficial solutions, the Serbian-Kosovar tensions, as seen in 2021, might flare up in the near future as well, especially in light of the domestic political disputes in both countries and the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Serbia in April 2022.

It remains to be seen in the months to come what specific political agenda the newly established German coalition government will pursue in the region. In the past the Merkel government has often acted as one of the chief counterbalancing forces for enlargement-sceptic member states in the EU, while also undertaking a rarely seen unilateral step by successfully pushing for the appointment of [Christian Schmidt](#) to the Office of the High Representative in August 2021. The new German government has also voiced its official [support](#) for visa liberalisation with Kosovo, which could bolster Pristina's efforts to successfully put an end to a process that had been started back in 2012.

Some, rather limited, progress might also be expected on the stalled EU accession process of Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia. Following the intergovernmental conferences with Montenegro and Serbia on 13-14 December, Serbia could open Cluster 4 of the negotiation chapters (covering the topics of Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity). In the case of Montenegro and Serbia, their respective first intergovernmental conferences are not only blocked by the reluctance of some Western EU member states, but in the case of North Macedonia, also by the veto of the Bulgarian government. While Kiril Petkov's recently inaugurated government has promised to come up with a "feasible" solution as early as January 2022, the domestic political strings attached to the prolonged dispute and the recent [government crisis](#) in North Macedonia might make it difficult to find a lasting agreement without clear support from the EU.

Amid often conflicting and competing international interest in the region, all manner of local and regional cooperation formats are always welcome if they help the development of the Western Balkans. The Open Balkans initiative might bear some positive results in the years to come, but only if it proves to be a lasting and [inclusive](#) format that boosts the European integration of the states of the region.



## TIBOR ÖRDÖGH

Curbing the spread of the coronavirus epidemic will remain the main task of the Western Balkan countries in 2022, and it is important to ensure, or at least restore, economic stability. In recent years, the pandemic has caused [economic hardship](#) in some countries in the region, where people are already living in difficult financial circumstances, so the deterioration of poverty and social conditions will continue to be a significant issue in the new year.

Political instability continues in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The new year will drive the leaders of the countries towards solving old challenges. Following the [resignation of Zoran Zaev](#) in November 2021, he will govern the country as acting head of government until a new candidate for the post of prime minister can be found. If this does not happen, early elections should be held in the country, where polls suggest that the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE could get a majority. In a polarized political space, a high degree of political instability and another early election may not be conducive to development and good neighbourly relations. In 2022, political life in Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to encounter the most turbulence. 2021 was also full of tensions fuelled by the independence of the Republika Srpska. True to his old rhetoric, Milorad Dodik has voiced the [independence of the entity](#), but a motion was [passed](#) in December by the legislature of the entity to give the Serbian government six months to pass a bill that would take back military, fiscal, and judicial responsibilities from the federal institutions. All this means that they would perform these tasks in violation of federal law, thus ensuring greater autonomy in the conduct of their affairs. The big questions for the new year are whether this document will come to exist, whether it will have practical consequences, or if it will remain a rhetorical device used by the Serbian leader. This is also an important element because general elections will be held in October 2022, so there will be a heightened campaign mood in the country. Dodik's steps are aimed at reclaiming voters from rival Serbian parties, who have [criticized](#) his political performance so far. Perhaps the biggest question is whether Bosnia and Herzegovina will be able to hold itself together in 2022, or whether different reform plans will fragment the state.

General elections will also be [held](#) in Serbia in the spring. Aleksandar Vučić's presidential power is not in danger, the only important players in the predominant party system are Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party. In the system developed in recent years, the predominance of the media, the breakdown of the resistance of state institutions, and the huge financial background make it possible for them to win first place. The opposition is divided: some still argue for a boycott of the vote because the election conditions are inadequate; however, another part of them would have already set off, seeing the results of the 2020 election, when there was almost no opposition left in parliament. It is likely that neither the person of the president nor the governing parties will change much after the election, and a policy dominated by Progressives will remain.

The prospects for the region next year are mixed. European integration negotiations have been going on for almost two years, bringing Montenegro and Serbia further away from full membership. Perhaps in 2022, the number of these intergovernmental meetings will start to increase. [Negotiations](#) with North Macedonia and Albania are also pending, with little chance of progress.

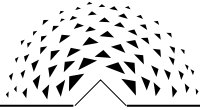
## FERENC NÉMETH

Power shifts in European politics, great-power competition, and (post-)pandemic economic recovery will be among the large-scale tendencies that will directly impact the Western Balkans in 2022. Meanwhile, local processes, such as the crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina, elections in Serbia, and the rise of environmental problems, cannot be sidelined, either.

Changes in European leadership and rising divisions within the EU will send strong messages to the region. Although the new German government is still pro-enlargement and considers the region a [priority](#), Berlin will most probably be occupied with its economic recovery and ongoing EU affairs. The latter includes the rivalry with Paris for the leading position of the EU, culminating in the [French EU Presidency](#) and the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe. President Macron may not be reluctant to make some gestures towards the Western Balkans: this could include the first intergovernmental conferences with Albania and North Macedonia and provisionally closing chapters with Montenegro. On the other hand, putting an end to Bulgaria's veto on the accession of North Macedonia, visa liberalisation for Kosovo, or developments concerning the Belgrade–Pristina normalisation talks are not expected this year. The above-mentioned small yet important steps would be enough to sustain the EU's credibility but not sufficient to raise it.

The greatest challenge remains the economic impact of the pandemic. The Western Balkans have already got a little taste of it, given the rising [inflation](#) and the global [energy crisis](#), and further economic challenges can be foreshadowed. The recovery of the EU, and more importantly, the stability of the eurozone, will also be crucial for the region. In addition, environmental concerns will play a bigger role in the years to come. The growing 'green issues' of the region, such as the high levels of air and water pollution, will spark more grassroots demonstrations and movements; the case of [Rio Tinto](#) and protests against [Chinese investments](#) are prime examples that this policy field should not be neglected, either.

There is no doubt that Bosnia and Herzegovina will take the centre stage of attention this year. The ongoing multiple crises the country is facing, with Republika Srpska's secessionist tendencies and its "[return to Dayton](#)" policy, as well as the [electoral reform](#), not only impact its functionality and EU bid, they also highlight the rivalry between great and regional powers in the Balkans. It can thus be expected that great-power competition (between Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and to



some extent, Ankara) will intensify in the entire region in the upcoming months. As for Bosnia, the current tendencies might reach boiling point around the general elections in the second half of 2022.

Bosnia and Hercegovina is not the only country where citizens will go to the polling stations; parliamentary and presidential elections are also going to take place in Serbia and Slovenia. As it is very likely that the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka) and President Aleksandar Vučić will remain in power, the elections present a good opportunity to check whether the government and Vučić himself have been able to sustain their popularity, especially against a [single opposition list](#), amid environmental protests, and citizens' growing dissatisfaction. The results could create more balanced political representation with the opposition's return to the Skupština. Although elections are not scheduled for Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, the political situation in these states remains shaky. Somehow, the latter two have managed to avoid snap elections by keeping their fragile coalitions together in 2021, but the Albin Kurti government in Kosovo might not be as stable as it looks. Overall, this coming year will not be free from political turbulence, either.

The countries of the Western Balkans once again enter a year full of challenges: the different visions on the future of the EU, great-power rivalries, and the looming global economic crisis will also have a negative impact on the local and regional development of the six countries.