**2014**

**June, 2014**

**Policy Paper: Unfulfilled Promise: Completing the EU Enlargement to the Balkans**

Eleven years after the EU committed itself to the European future of the Western Balkans, only one country—Croatia—managed to join. The accession process remains slow and the remaining aspirants in the region are unlikely to enter the EU before the end of the decade. In addition to an increasingly demanding conditionality, member states seem to be intervening more often with the integration process, often delaying in predictable ways. As a majority of citizens in many EU member states oppose further enlargement, membership seems remote and uncertain for many countries in the region. This policy paper explores the risks and opportunities that different potential paths in the integration process can take.

**September, 2014**

**Policy Brief: Completing the EU Enlargement to the Balkans: Dancing the European Kolo\*. A step to the side or a step forward?**

This BiEPAG’s policy brief builds on its May 2014 Policy Paper, where different scenarios for the future of the Western Balkans were analysed, coupled with a specific set of recommendations on how to reinvigorate the EU accession process in the region, with particular focus on unresolved bilateral relations and internal political dysfunction in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim of this Brief is to consider the latest developments related to the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, namely the election of the new European Commission, the new initiative for the restart of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession, the announcement of new bilateral conditions, and the on-going deterioration of regional cooperation.

**2015**

**May, 2015**

**Policy Brief: Keep Up With Keeping Up**

Last May, the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BIEPAG) published the report “The Unful-filled promise: Completing the Balkan Enlargement”. The report identified four different scenarios highlighting opportunities and risks for the enlargement process. While there were some positive developments since the launch of the first BIEPAG report (among others, Albania became a candidate country; a proposal for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Kosovo was adopted by the Commission; the launching of the Berlin Process), the words of the incumbent Commission President that no further enlargement would take place over the next five years cast a long shadow over the enlargement process. This year’s report will look at developments in the EU and the region to examine how they fit with our previous analysis and will make recommendations aimed, if not to shorten the time in the waiting room, to at least make it more rewarding.

**June, 2015**

**Policy Brief: Unraveling the Political Crisis in Macedonia: Toward Resolution or Calm Before the Storm?**

**Author: Dane Taleski**

In a period of less than two weeks, between the 5th and 18th of May 2015, Macedonia suffered violent protests, a weekend-”war,” resignations from the government, and continued social mobilization for and against the government, which resulted in two big rallies and the setting up of two separate tent camps in the center of Skopje, one against the government and another in its support. Negotiations between the political leaders, facilitated by international actors, brought momentary political stability; however, the question remains whether negotiations will resolve the political crisis in a deeply divided and polarized society or whether they will just be the calm before the storm. The all-day talks on 2 June 2015, mediated by EU Commissioner Hahn, appear to have yielded a tentative first step in resolving the crisis. Now, it is important to build on this momentum and to avoid a return to “normality” without change.

**August, 2015**

**Policy brief: Removing obstacles to EU accession: Bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans**

**Authors: Nikola Dimitrov, Marika Djolai and Natasha Wunsch**

The EU accession countries of the Western Balkans (WB6) have come a long way since the wars of the 1990s. Besides progress at the individual country level, the emphasis within the EU accession framework upon regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations has contributed to an overall strengthening of relations between the WB6 and their EU neighbours. Nonetheless, the persistence of unresolved bilateral disputes – some open, some only potential – poses a real risk of renewed instability by delaying EU integration and distracting from domestic reforms. It is therefore crucial that on-going international engagement with the region focus on tackling outstanding bilateral issues, both in their own right and in view of removing potential obstacles in the countries’ path towards EU entry.

**August, 2015**

**Background Paper: The Prospect of Job Creation in the WB6 Economies**

**Author: Dušan Pavlović**

Why don’t improvements in the business environment and deregulation of labour markets always result in the reduction of the unemployment rate? This question is addressed by looking at the relation between the level of regulatory burden for doing business and the labour market, and the unemployment rates in the six Western Balkan countries and territories— Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The sole dependent variable is the level of unemployment, which is examined in relation to the selected World Bank “Doing Business” indicators in the form of overall distance to frontier and labour market regulation pertaining to dismissing workers and tax wedge. The score for the WB6 countries is contrasted with the score of six “frontrunners” (those that are at the frontier) and six “backbenchers” (those that are farthest from the frontier). There is an apparent divergence among these three groups in both the level of unemployment and regulatory burden.

**August, 2015**

**Background Paper: Media Freedom in the Western Balkans**

**Authors: Florian Bieber and Marko Kmezic**

Recent assessments of the situation concerning media freedom in the Balkans have been sobering. The region is brewing with incidents of media freedom violations, which bring under attack not just the basic right to freedom of expression, but also the state of democracy in the region. In addition, some of the same problems that existed a decade or so ago are still haunting the Balkans: political pressure, illegal state subsidies – often in the form of state advertising, reinforced by the economic crisis – professional weakness, and a lack of security for journalists. Although the legal frameworks are essentially in place throughout the region and have mostly been brought up to date with the assistance of international organisations, political elites in the Balkan countries are effectively resisting the implementation of adopted strategies and laws guaranteeing media freedom.

**August, 2015**

**Background Paper: Culture of Regional Cooperation in Southeast Europe**

**Authors: Dimitar Bechev, Filip Ejdus and Dane Taleski**

Regional cooperation in Southeast Europe started as an externally driven initiative, dominated by security concerns in the 1990s, but has now been locally appropriated. When considered an integral part of the EU and NATO agenda in the region, these externally started initiatives that were appropriated by local actors have delivered significant results in regional cooperation, for example in justice and security affairs. On the other hand, the early logic and structuring of regional cooperation has neglected the economy, energy and infrastructure, and social development. Thus, regional cooperation in these core policy areas is lagging behind. Even though regional cooperation between governments is dominant and expanding, leading to a multitude of local and top-down initiatives, for example in parliamentary cooperation, the results still do not match the announced high expectations. Greater political will and more commitment would be beneficial to sustaining and deepening local top-down initiatives and to increasing their capacities.

**September, 2015**

**Policy Brief: Western Balkans and the EU: Beyond the Autopilot Mode**

**Authors: Marko Kmezić, Florian Bieber with contributions from Dane Taleski, Jovana Marović, and Nikolaos Tzifakis**

As hundreds of thousands of refugees make their way through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Croatia to other EU countries, the Western Balkans have remerged in international news headlines - once again with pictures of refugees with their few belonging walking on foot along routes, stuck on borders and making their way westwards. This renewed attention on the Western Balkans primarily highlights the larger weakness of the EU to address this challenge. The countries of the region have been places of transit, and the refugee trek has left its traces and is likely to have lasting, even if hard-to-predict repercussions on the region.

**2016**

**April, 2016**

**Policy Brief: Ending the Crisis in Macedonia: Who Is in the Driver’s Seat?**

**Authors: Nikola Dimitrov, Ivana Jordanovska and Dane Taleski**

If 10 years ago Macedonia was a front-runner in the reform process, today it struggles to stop moving backwards on virtually every single political criterion for EU membership. It is sadly the most devastating case against the credibility of the EU’s enlargement policy; a country where the transformative effect has indeed made a difference, but in the wrong direction. A candidate country for membership since 2005, Macedonia has received six consecutive recommendations by the European Commission to open accession talks. But the doors to the most transformative stage of the integration process – the accession negotiations - were and remain blocked by Greece, due to an on-going dispute over the use of the name Macedonia. This blockage on Macedonia’s path toward Europe has taken the incentives for reform out of the political equation and created a sense of disillusionment with the EU, clearly contributing to the making of the biggest institutional crisis in the country since its independence.

**June, 2016**

**Policy Brief: The migrant crisis: a catalyst for EU enlargement?**

**Authors:** Natasha Wunsch and Nikola Dimitrov

**Contributing author**: Srdjan Cvijic

When the external EU and Schengen border is compromised, the borders of the Western Balkan states become European borders. When these states lag too much behind their European neighbours in economic development and democratic standards, their citizens migrate. Regrettably, the political response to both dimensions of the migrant crisis in the Balkans has so far centred mostly on containment and deterrence. Worse still, there have been signs of horse-trading stability for democracy in order to have strong leaders able to tackle the migrant crisis. On the contrary, a decisive re-launch of the enlargement process, using existing tools and EU leverage effectively, would enhance both the capacities of the Western Balkan countries to handle external shocks as well as their attractiveness for their own citizens. Such a change in approach, however, requires replacing the current auto-pilot mode with a political driver for the accession process.

**September, 2016**

**Policy Brief: EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans in a Time of Uncertainty**

**Authors: Florian Bieber and Marko Kmezić**

**With contributions from: Milica Delević, Marika Djolai, Tobias Flessenkemper, Milan Nič, Corina Stratulat, and Dane Taleski**

In recent months, Europe has moved into great uncertainty. This uncertainty threatens to unravel some of the pillars of stability on the European continent that have been in place for decades. While since 2008 the global economic crisis has brought instability and threatened economic and currency collapse in Europe in several waves, the current crisis is more profound and its consequences are potentially further-reaching. The European Crisis What is this crisis? It is foremost a crisis of liberal democracy and of compromise-based decision-making and cooperation at the European level. Rather than viewing the uncertainty as a result of a series of individual developments and events, such as the Brexit vote in the UK, the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump, the near success of a far-right candidate in Austrian presidential elections, the increase in popularity of anti-immigrant far right parties in Europe, the consolidation of authoritarianism in Turkey, frequent ISIS-inspired terrorist acts in Europe, and xenophobic and antiliberal governments from the Baltics to the Balkans, these are part of a larger pattern.

2017

March, 2017

**Policy Paper: The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy**

Democracy in the Western Balkans has been backsliding for a decade. There is no single turning point for the entire region, but the downward spiral began a decade ago, and accelerated with the economic crisis in 2008 and multiple crises within the EU that distracted the Union from enlargement.2 The regression happened in plain sight, but lacked the fanfare or highprofile watershed: There have been no controversial new constitutions, as in Hungary, or major constitutional revisions, as in Turkey next month. Autocrats in the Western Balkans rule through informal power structures, state capture by ruling parties, patronage and control of the media. Lacking the size and clout of Turkey or EU membership of Hungary, autocrats had to fly below the radar, allowing them to combine EU accession with stronger domestic control. Thus, the decline did not happen by stealth, but was ignored or downplayed by the European Union and the United States for too long.

March, 2017

**Policy Study: The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion**

**Editors: Marko Kmezic and Florian Bieber**

Democracy is increasingly under challenge on a global scale, with a crisis of democracy the prevailing narrative. The assumption of a linear and normative transition, which prevailed during the third wave of democratisation, has proven to be overly optimistic and misleading. Even though the countries of the Western Balkans embarked belatedly on the path towards democracy, the expectation of a straightforward transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy still applied to them. Their recognition as candidates for EU membership at the 2000 Zagreb Summit made it likely that they would follow the path of “democracy through integration,” which initially had proven to be successful formula for the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.1 By providing specific incentives for domestic change, the EU would export democratic standards through its enlargement policy.

**July, 2017**

**Discussion Paper: The future of the Berlin Process**

**Authors: Zoran Nechev, Florian Bieber, Marko Kmezic**

The Berlin Process is the only high-level political venue that exclusively focuses on the six remaining non-EU Western Balkan (WB) countries. Amidst the multiple crises within the EU that distracted the Union from enlargement over the past few years, coupled with an increasingly member states driven approach to enlargement, the Berlin Initiative, promoted since 2014 by the German government, is a much-needed boost in preparing the WB countries for future EU membership by trying to tackle some of the core structural problems in the region. As such, the format of the Berlin Process-hosted EUWB6 Summit Series should continue beyond the initial 5 years framework set to end in 2018. In this policy brief, the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) proposes several structural changes to be introduced within the Berlin Process after the 2018 London Summit in order to make it more effective for the countries involved, and more beneficial for their citizens.

**October, 2017**

**Policy Paper: Western Balkans and the EU Fresh Wind in the Sails of Enlargement**

**Authors: Marko Kmezic and Florian Bieber**

Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has gone through a multiple set of crises, including the global financial crisis, the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit. These have been accompanied by geopolitical instability on Europe’s southern periphery and the failure of the EU’s Ostpolitik following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. On top of this, the EU is facing a major crisis of democracy in some of its member states. Preoccupied with dealing with its internal problems, the EU has in the meantime kept its enlargement policy to the Western Balkans (WB) on an auto-pilot mode, 1 or in the worst case it has misused it - for example when closing the WB refugee corridor – in order to preserve internal stability. As a result, 18 years after the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) with the EU, WB countries (apart from Croatia, which managed to join in 2013) are still far away from EU accession. At the same time, WB democracies have been backsliding for nearly a decade, while some countries are still or again governed by semi-authoritarian leaders who have adopted democratic rhetoric, but continue to use undemocratic methods to preserve their power.

**December, 2017**

**Policy Brief: Seizing the Macedonian Moment**

**Written by Florian Bieber, with contributions by Zoran Nechev and Marko Kmezić**

Five years ago, the EU commission branded the Western Balkans in an elaborate video campaign as “So similar, so different, so European”. The contradiction was clear in the slogan as the EU showed sights of the Western Balkans suggesting that they could be from any EU member. Including the Western Balkans needs not a trick to pretend the region is just like the EU, but rather a self-confident affirmation of the region’s contributions to the continent. After years of the Western Balkans sneaking closer towards the EU without a sincere commitment on either side, 2017 has offered a new opportunity to change the dynamics of enlargement. Enlargement will not happen with half-hearted committed to the enlargement in the region and the EU. The transformative moment in Macedonia highlights that support for democracy and EU membership, citizens engagement are possible and continue to be a potent engine for change.

**2018**

**April, 2018**

**Policy Brief: New European Balkans Partnership**

**This policy brief is a collaborative effort of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) Members`**

2018 is widely considered a year of opportunity for the countries of the Western Balkans (WB) to decisively move towards becoming open, stable and prosperous democracies. The EU also seems resolute in seeing the region advance along the European integration track, as demonstrated by the renewed commitment expressed in the latest Commission Strategy for the WB, the visit undertaken by the Commission President Juncker to the region and the upcoming high-level summits in Sofia and London. This EU reengagement with the region is crucial for the WB, which has gone adrift in recent years amid increased tensions, democratic backsliding and destructive geopolitical meddling by external actors. If the region seizes the current opportunity, it can quickly arrive at the EU’s doorstep by means of democratic and economic convergence. If this chance is missed, the WB risk remaining distant from the EU, without clear direction and menaced by instability that could spread to the EU as a whole.

**April, 2018**

**Policy Brief: Bilateral Disputes Conundrum: Accepting the Past and Finding Solutions for the Western Balkans**

**Authors: Marika Djolai and Zoran Nechev**

The language of the European Commission Strategy “A Credible Enlargement Perspective and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans” signals a more integrative approach and marks new dynamics in the EU – Western Balkans (WB) relations. The Strategy sets out an Action Plan with six concrete flagship initiatives targeting specific areas of common interest: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. However, WB countries still face a number of obstacles on their EU path, from fulfilling accession conditionalities and implementing fundamental reforms to solving numerous bilateral disputes. In the Strategy, the EU is clear about not accepting to import these disputes and instability they may entail and makes a bold stance by demanding that the responsible parties solve the bilateral disputes as a matter of urgency. Given the aspirations for a stronger, more stabile and resilient Union in the coming decade, resolving outstanding disputes has now become even more of a priority.

2019

**January, 2019**

**Policy Study: Strengthening the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Call for a Revolution against Particularism**

**Authors: Jovana Marović, Tena Prelec, Marko Kmezić**

**Contributions by Corina Stratulat, Florian Bieber and Natasha Wunsch**

The European Union (EU)’s conditionality for the aspiring members of the Western Balkans in the rule of law field has been constantly upgraded over the past years. Nevertheless, its impact remains rather limited. Instead of strengthening democratic reforms and institutions, democracy is retreating in the Western Balkans, the pace of transformation is slow, and a solid track record of results has yet to be established in all the Western Balkan countries. For some of the EU-hopefuls in the region, democratic backsliding has paradoxically started after the opening of accession negotiations with the EU. This policy study contains three sections that analyse the core problems of the EU’s current approach to the promotion of the rule of law in the Balkans. The sections offer complementary approaches to the rule of law issue and together amount to a fully-fledged strategy. The study follows in the footsteps of previous efforts of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) on the subject matter, offering fresh thinking on how to foster sustainable EU integration that is as effective as it is uncompromising, and that would benefit prospective and existing EU members alike.

**June, 2019**

**Policy Brief: The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options**

**Authors: Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis**

The rationale of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has been changing during the last couple of years. The consolidation of stability and the full implementation of liberal political and economic reforms are no longer the principal (or the sole) arguments cited to make the case for the region’s EU accession. European decision-makers have been increasingly claiming that the EU should move on to contain the negative influence in the Western Balkans of other external actors, namely, Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf countries. Those actors’ engagement extends from economic investment, particularly in large-scale infrastructure, to political support for governments and parties, as well as active media engagement. Beyond that, there has been more clandestine and covert engagement, often the subject of intense speculation. The EU considers itself involved, against its will, in a traditional geopolitical game of influence in a European periphery where its competitors allegedly strive to redefine the rules of the game, to the disadvantage of the Western Balkan region and the EU.

**August 2019**

**Policy Brief: Leadership Adrift: American Policy in the Western Balkans**

**Author: Florian Bieber**

**With contributions and comments by Tena Prelec, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Marko Kmezić, Majda Ruge, and Mirna Vlašić Feketija**

A number of Balkan countries, and particularly the frontrunners in the EU accession process, Serbia and Montenegro, , have been experiencing a serious democratic decline in recent years. This is reflected in key international indices, such as those of Freedom House and the Economist Democracy Index. However, the governments’ and presidents’ formal commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration has obscured the democratic decline. Recently, protest movements in both countries have displayed broad dissatisfaction with the respective regimes. And while the protests are waning, their causes remain unaddressed. The democratic decline poses a particular challenge for the United States and the EU. The democratic and European consensus has been undermined by autocratic leaders who have co-opted the discourse of pro-European reform, while systematically undermining democratic institutions. The regimes’ use of pro-Western positions taints the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration in the eyes of many citizens. As a result, the pro-Western consensus that has shaped the region for the past decade is no longer secure.

**November 2019**

**Overcoming enlargement deadlock: An action plan for the incoming EU Leadership**

**Author: Natasa Wunsch**

**Contributions by: Marko Kmezic, Corina Stratulat and Nikolaos Tziafkis**

EU enlargement policy appears to have reached a deadlock. Following years of stagnation and relative neglect, the European Commission's attempts in 2018 to reinvigorate the EU’s engagement with the Western Balkans and to provide ‘a credible enlargement perspective” to the region have been thwarted by a lack of commitment on the part of (some) EU member states. The October 2019 European Council decision to once again postpone the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is but the latest in a long series of delays in the enlargement process over the past years. This latest stunt has left the region reeling, with local leaders alternately endorsing a rapprochement with Russia and China? Or calling for snap elections to confirm their countries’ European path.? Reluctance on the part of the EU member states to endorse Skopje and Tirana’s formal progress on the road towards accession, despite the European Commission's positive recommendation, reflects concerns over the aspirant countries’ lack of preparedness. Moreover, it mirrors growing scepticism among European citizens regarding the admission of further countries into the Union and. In the case of France, it also corresponds to a perceived opposition between the deepening and the widening of the EU.‘ At the same time, the deterioration of the quality of democracy and the rule of law and widespread.

**December, 2019**

**The BiEPAG non-paper: Busting 10 myths about EU enlargement**

**Authors: Florian Bieber and Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Marika Djolai, Srđan Majstorović, Marko Kmezić, Zoran Nechev, Donika Emini, Jovana Marović, Natasha Wunsch, Nikos Tzifakis, Vedran Džihić**

In their latest policy product and the so-called BiEPAG “non-paper” "Busting 10 myths about [EU](https://twitter.com/hashtag/EU?src=hashtag_click) enlargement" the BiEPAG Members have tried to demystify and debunk 10 most common myths on EU Enlargement.

The BiEPAG non-paper is available in:

ENGLISH: <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BiEpagBrosura.pdf>

FRENCH: <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BiEPAG-non-paper-in-French.pdf>

**April, 2020**

**Policy Brief: The Western Balkans in Times of the Global Pandemic**

**Authors : Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, Marika Djolai, Donika Emini, Jovana Marović, Srdjan Majstorović, Vedran Džihić, Alida Vračić, with contributions by Nikos Tzifakis, Natasha Wunsch and friends of BiEPAG Will Bartlett for Health Care and Social Security, and Richard Grieveson and Mario Holzner (WIIW) for Economic Implications**

The global COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken by governments around the world constitute a major rupture to the “business as usual”, and this includes the Western Balkans, too. The pandemic has been overshadowing other developments while also accelerating existing trends, and it will continue to do so. This analysis establishes the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical juncture, a crisis that can permanently shake up institutions and societies. There are considerable dangers beyond the impact of the pandemic on human lives, ranging from an economic crisis which could turn out to be worse than the one in 2008/9, to a heightened crisis of democracy and a geopolitical shift. None of these developments are inevitable and some of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the Western Balkans can be mitigated. By exploring nine critical fields, this analysis will highlight ways in which the pandemic and government responses pose particular challenges: 1. The Role of the State, 2. Democracy and State Capture, 3. Geopolitical Shifts, 4. New Nationalisms, 5. Social Resilience, 6. Environmental Impact, 7. Migration and Health Care, 8. Health Care and Social Security and 9. Economic Implications.

**December, 2020**

**Policy Brief: Between a rock and a hard place: Public opinion and the EU integration in the Western Balkans**

**Authors: Corina Stratulat, Marko Kmezić, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Matteo Bonomi, Zoran Nechev**

Citizens of countries in the Western Balkans are still, overall, positive about the prospects of their countries joining the European Union. However, the path to EU membership is a long one and at the moment the people in the Balkans are caught between a rock and a hard place. The EU accession process seems endless and current member states are doing little to improve that; indeed some appear to be putting further obstacles in the way. Moreover, the de-politicisation of the accession process is having unintended consequences in that it does not allow voters to properly hold their elected representatives to account. This is the rock. The hard place is made up of the governments, politicians and institutions in the Balkan countries, which are the focal point of people’s dissatisfaction. Publics are sceptical about their governments’ commitment to European integration and this undermines the value of democracy. To move beyond the rock and the hard place, the European Commission must speed up the implementation of the revised enlargement methodology, with more meaningful incentives to continue reform. Western Balkans countries should be invited to contribute to the upcoming exercise in imagining the Future of Europe. The European Union should also reinforce current support for citizens and civil society to hold their governments to account and end the epidemic of state capture in the region.

**December, 2020**

**Policy Brief: The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans**

**Authors: Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, Dejan Jović and Zoran Nechev**

As elsewhere, the Western Balkans have been affected by conspiracy theories, with doubts about government policies and trust in institutions emerging in light of the pandemic. The scale and implications of these theories are particularly strong. While in most of Europe COVID conspiracies are supported by a quarter to a third of the population, more than 75% of WB citizens surveyed believe in one or several of six COVID theories. Education, age and gender do not significantly impact these numbers. Instead, there is a geopolitical pattern, where support for conspiracies often aligns with larger feelings about the USA and China. Minorities, more vulnerable and often less trusting in the state, might be more susceptible to conspiracies. There is a direct link between support for conspiracy theories and scepticism towards vaccination. A majority across the region does not plan to take the vaccine, a ratio considerably lower than elsewhere in Europe, where a majority favours taking the vaccine. Conspiracy theories constitute a risk for public health in the Western Balkans and weaken trust in institutions and states, promoting a populist worldview that undermines democratic development.

**2021**

**January, 2021**

**Policy Brief: No longer voting for the devil you know? Why the Balkans’ collective action problem might be easier to break than we think**

**Authors: Tena Prelec and Jovana Marovic**

Recent electoral outcomes have challenged the notion that elections in the Balkans are not able to bring about change. How has the public responded? It is argued that, in spite of the manifest obstacles for challengers to prevail over incumbents, public opinion is contingent upon the recent experiences in each country. Once shown the way, and in spite of a long period of stasis (or even state capture), citizens start believing that change is possible. The findings of the brief indicate that, in relation to electoral participation, the ‘collective action’ problem in the Balkans – characterised as lack of confidence in the possibility of change, leading to disillusionment with the democratic process and individual unwillingness to act to bring about change – might not be as difficult to break as previous research had indicated.

**June, 2021**

**Policy Brief: Bouncing back: Completing the EU unification process**

**Authors: Zoran Nechev, Srdjan Majstorović, Jovana Marović, Donika Emini, Gjergji Vurmo, Nedim Hogić**

Recent progress in the case of the six Western Balkan countries accession to the European Union seems to be a case of one step forward and two steps back – or to use a soccer metaphor, the goal posts are always moving. The lack of concrete progress and clear recognition of progress made is beginning to have an effect not only on political elites, but also on the public. With other global players on Europe’s doorstep looking to make their own gains in the region, the EU needs a convincing path for the WB6 to enter the Union. The way forward does not need to be radical: with a few tweaks and some creative thinking, existing mechanisms could still work. But this has to be done in the context of treating the countries as future members of the EU. This means more often including them in the processes that the EU uses to appraise current Member States, as well as fi nding ways to make the flow of funding reflect this idea that all six are future Member States. Revisiting the idea of “linearization” of funds to the WB6 would be an excellent place to start, as well as devising a clear tailor-made accession partnership roadmap for each of the Western Balkans countries.